



VICTORIA FAMILY

P. Arthur Stuart

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To *Patricia Lynne* the love of a lifetime.

I'm sorry I'm not the Arthur you deserved.
I did and do love you more than you knew or know.

Preface

I've decided to add a preface, because in speaking to people that have read "Victoria -- Worlds Apart," all seem to have a different view of the characters and the story. So, I would like the reader to understand that this is a **Love Story**—above all else, a **Love Story**.

I've been asked why include the intimate scenes in such detail. I really can't say. All I can tell the reader is that as I wrote the story, particularly in the beginning, the words just flowed out of me. I guess, to some measure, they're there because sex is a part of life—a very normal part of life. Why some have difficulty talking or reading about it escapes me. I suppose it has to do with our upbringing and beliefs. If you have trouble reading about sex, just skip over the intimate scenes. I did attempt to write them in a non-pornographic way, and yet true to life; perhaps erotic? Maybe it's my way of raising your awareness and deepest desires. We all have them.

I'm thinking of changing the title and removing the explicit material, thereby making it a "Hallmark" love story. People that fall in love, enjoy being together, but show little passion. Although these stories are enjoyable to watch or read about, I believe a relationship devoid of passion and its excitement, at least part of the time, will fail.

Throughout the story are details that may not appear relevant, e.g., when Arthur introduces Stacy to Bill. It is my plan to use these characters later in the story. My plans are that many of the secondary characters add to the story, which goes beyond "Victoria -- Worlds Apart." We don't live our lives in isolation. We're all connected to those around us and as such, they somewhat define our lives. Another example of planned use of a character is when Gregg talks to Arthur and Victoria about his wife's passing. Along with future reference to it, it is also my homage to my wife. It's really me and about my struggle; a struggle that's still haunts me. It, I hope, sends a message to the reader about loving and the importance of communications—now before it's too late.

In some cases, I've put some stuff in just to be funny. It's kind of my way of telling a joke. One such, is Arthur's call to KYJ when he returned. It could be left out, however, I have plans to refer to it later in the story. Another example is when Arthur tells Victoria to 'fard herself,' which is part of their future story.

While it may appear that Victoria fell instantly at the kiss, it may not be that simple. I know that one can feel an instant attraction to another. Perhaps, it's a look, their eyes, their body, their smile or frown, who knows why? I certainly don't. I know I was attracted to my wife when we first met. I don't think it was love; that kind of grew as time passed by. However, whenever I was with her, right from the beginning, I felt special, connected, and alive. My son said that Victoria was like Mom. She certainly was a strong wonderful woman.

Most of the discussions Victoria and Arthur have are based on things I failed to talk to my love about and how I would have liked them to go. During our time together, I found it easy to say it was her, the reality, it was me and her, probably more me than her. Either of us could have made the communications happen. Stubbornness and stupidity on my part didn't help. Today I would make it happen, unfortunately it's too late. So, if you take anything away from this, it's the need to communicate.

Victoria is about a man and a woman that meet, struggle to understand, find passion, discover life, and grow together. They play, fight, and love, like every couple. They have strengths and weaknesses like all of us. Their failures occur when communications breakdown for many reasons. Yet, they overcome.

Most of all, I want to reiterate; Victoria is a **Love Story**.

Prologue

2019

March 8, 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 (A Boeing 777-200ER,) with 239 passengers and crew disappeared over the Indian Ocean. The cause is unknown. The limited evidence, last radio report, and flight plan suggests that the plane went down in the Indian Ocean, west of Australia. While some debris is later recovered, the plane is still marked as missing. This disappearance appears to be one of the most baffling.

From 1940 through 2019,¹ roughly, 100 planes have mysteriously disappeared from radar or radio communication. More than 1,500 people are still missing as a result of these disappearances. Some wreckages have been found, yet a few people on the planes were still missing.

Shock, anguish, denial, paralysis, fear, anxiety, and guilt. Yes guilt, guilt that things between were left unsaid or undone. These are some of the initial reactions a person goes through when notified; it could be a phone call, a news report, or an official's visit.

First, are the unanswered questions. What happened? Was it a bomb? Could it be an alien attack? Were they able to land? Could the plane have landed on the ocean long enough to save the passengers, like the plane that landed on the Hudson river in 2009? Could it stay afloat long enough for it to be found? Would there be enough time to deploy life rafts? Was it over quickly? Did they suffer? Are they suffering now? Questions upon questions like this go through their minds.

Along with the complete feeling of helplessness, is the unimaginable pain and suffering.

Then the waiting begins. Waiting for news; any news. As time passes, the flames of hope begin to dim; some go out and others remain in denial.

¹ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_missing_aircraft

Chapter 1

Monday – August 9, 2021

From the ending, Victoria -- Coalescing:

Our house phone rings and Grace answers. I briefly wonder why she's still here. A minute later, she informs me, "There's a Mr. Belton on the phone. He says he's with the FAA."

I jump up, panicked, and run to meet Grace, who hands me the phone. Anxious and scared, I answer nervously, "Hello! Has something happened?" I hold my breath.

In a calm soothing voice, he replies, "Mr. Starfield," I don't correct him; it's not the time or place, "I'm very sorry to inform you," I nearly collapse, "your wife's plane disappeared from radar at Dodge City Airport tower, somewhere over Kansas. We've had search and rescue units dispatch to the general area, and they got there shortly after it was reported. I'm sorry, there was no transmission of an emergency or problem."

I'm barely able to stand and just remain paralyzed. My worst fears. My world, my life, what's happening. I hear, "Mr. Starfield, Mr. Starfield are you still there."

My tears are flowing, but it brings me back. Barely able to speak, I respond, "Yes. Sorry. I lost it; I'm losing it. Should I come there?"

Sounding sympathetic, "I think you should remain where you are until we have some definitive information. I promise, I will call you immediately if anything changes and I will call you periodically to keep you informed of the status, even if nothing changes. I want you to know we're doing everything we can to locate your wife's plane. I know you're worried, so I'm going to give you my number if you have any questions." He gives me his number.

Regaining a modicum of self-control, I say, "Thank you. Please keep me informed. Please call me on my cell." I give him my cell number.

"Yes Sir. I will."

After we disconnect Grace asks, "Mr. Zwyx, what's wrong?"

Through, my tears and sobbing, I manage to tell her, “My wife’s plane has gone missing, somewhere over Kansas. I feel so helpless. I’m angry that I wasn’t with her. I know, if she’s okay, I’m not going to let her go anywhere without me, ever again.”

Grace asks, “Should we call Ms. Starfield’s parents, and perhaps Bill and David?”

“I don’t know. What good would it do. Oh, Bill and David are with them.”

“Mr. Zwyx, I’m sure they would want to know. You need to call and inform them.”

I struggle but acquiesce and call Elizabeth, she answers, “Hi Arthur sweetheart. What can I do for you?”

Choking back my sobbing, I say, “Mom,” then start to cry profusely.

I can sense she’s worried when she asks, “Arthur, what’s wrong?”

I take a couple of deep breaths, then say, “Victoria’s plane has gone missing, somewhere over Kansas. The FAA has sent out search teams. As of ten minutes ago there was no information.”

“We’re coming over.”

“Why?” I know why. What a stupid question. “Sorry, I know why.”

She informs me anyway, “We want to be there when you’re contacted and to comfort the children.”

“Mom, the children don’t know yet. I want to wait a while. I’m just not ready to tell them.”

“I understand. We’re on our way.” She hangs up before I can say anything else.

Several minutes later, my cell phone rings. The ringtone, “Thank You (Mom’s Song)” by Susan G. Acheson lets me know I have a call from my mom. I take a deep breath to compose myself and then answer, “Hi Mom.”

Before I say more, she asks, “Arthur are you alright? Charles and I were out late and heard the news about Victoria’s plane going missing. Do Victoria’s parents know?”

Responding nervously, “Mom, I’m physically fine, emotionally, I’m a wreck. John and Elizabeth know and are on their way over here.”

“Sweetheart, we’re on our way back home. When we get there Charles is going to make arrangements for us to fly back as soon as possible. We should be there early tomorrow.”

I retort, “Mom, please don’t. We have no idea what’s happening. As soon as I know, I’ll inform you and everyone else. I just don’t know what we’ll need to do. I may have to go to Kansas. If that’s the case, you can join us there.”

The line is silent for a few moments, then Mom replies, “Alright! I’ll wait for you to call me before we make plans. Arthur, one more thing, please tell Elizabeth to call me when she arrives.”

“Okay Mom. Bye!”

It’s now past ten and all the kids are in bed. Hopefully, they’re asleep. Elizabeth and John arrive. She takes me in her arms and her crying causes me to cry again. I look at John and his eyes show the signs that he’s been crying. I don’t know if I’m holding Elizabeth for her comfort or she’s holding me for mine. Perhaps it’s both. After five or so minutes pass, she releases me; I do the same. I tell her to please call my mom. She nods her head and takes out her phone.

About thirty minutes later, the rest of the family and friends start to arrive. I find out that Elizabeth called hers and John’s parents. The rest saw it on the news. We inform everyone as they arrive that we have no word; we’re in the dark. They all attempt to offer words of solace.

Since I was notified, I’ve been aimlessly walking about the apartment, while I worry and wait for news; news that I expect will be bad. I suspect that all of us have been in similar situations, where you don’t know what’s happened and have no control; it gives one a feeling of helplessness. I’m in a state of utter depression and fear. Family and friends offer words to comfort and console me, words I don’t think they believe. I stopped crying in the middle of the night, and although the room temperature is normal, I’m freezing and sweating at the same time. I’ve put on a jacket and wrapped a blanket around me. All my worst fears are playing havoc with my thoughts.

I think back to our encounter on the plane and the subsequent meeting when she accosted me. I smile. Then the kiss that changed my life and the tear start to flow, flow unrestrained. The day I met her parents and how angry she was with me. Funny, it warms me. Then the next day when all our world changed forever. The exchanging of our vows, the birth of our children, and building our family, these thoughts cause my heart to palpitate. I feel like I’m going to pass out; that would be good.

Throughout the night the family and friends that have gathered here are attempting to offer me, her parents, and grandparents comfort and reassurance that everything will be okay. I don’t believe they believe that for a moment. They’re as worried as we are.

Chapter 2

Tuesday – August 10, 2021

About four a.m., I get a call from Mr. Belton. He informs me that the search and rescue teams are back at work and that he will call occasionally to keep me informed. And if anything changes, he will call immediately. He has been true to his word. I let everyone know what little I know.

At nine my cell rings. I check the number but it's not the FAA; I put that in my contact list immediately after the first call. Yet this number is from somewhere in Kansas. I decide to take the call considering the situation. Tentatively, I answer, "Hello."

I hear, "Art, it's me." I start to hyperventilate, I know her voice, it's really her. Then she says, "Art, take a deep breath. I'm fine. I'll explain later. Take a deep breath."

I take a couple of deep breaths, while she remains quiet. Now somewhat under control I yell out, "Everyone! Victoria's on the phone. Victoria, the family and all our friends are here. I'm going to put you on speaker." I don't give her a chance to object.

"Hi everyone. Sorry for causing you all to worry. We're all fine, the plane is intact, and we didn't crash-land. We had a problem which required us to land and we were lucky enough to find an isolated runway; where we were able to land safely. We'd have called except there's no cell phone reception here. It's pretty isolated." While she's talking my cell indicates I have a call waiting—I ignore it. I'm not about to chance losing her, while she continues to update us, "We didn't have any means of communicating. The airstrip turned out to be for a private home. No one was home and it was locked. We were going to break in this afternoon if the people that live here hadn't returned. Our thoughts were, they had a land line or perhaps a two-way radio. Anyway, the story gets complicated. Like I've said, I'll tell you all about it later. Turned out they have a landline and that's how I'm calling you. Art, I'll call you later from the hotel I'm staying at for the night in Dodge. Everyone I love you all. Sorry for making you worry."

During her short explanation, our house phone rings and Grace answers. She hands me the phone, and mouths "FAA," I tell Victoria, "Grace just handed me the house phone and indicated it's the FAA. Please call back as soon as you can, when you can talk a while. I'm sure

everyone will stay and want to have a word with you. Bye I love you.” I disconnect and answer the house phone, “Art here. My wife just called.”

“Mr. Starfield,” he laughs, “She beat me to the punch as the saying goes. I’m glad that this is ending well. I’m assuming your wife told you she had an emergency landing on a private airstrip, so I really don’t have much to add, if you have any questions, please call.”

“Thank you I will. And I want you to know that I appreciate your efforts.” We disconnect.

I make an impromptu decision. Speaking to the group, “Family, friends, I’m going to Dodge where Victoria is spending the night. Would anyone like to join me?”

Elizabeth jumps in, “I want to go. I just want to hold her for a few minutes,” she laughs, “then I’ll give her to Art.”

John adds, “Get me a ticket also.”

Jerry adds, “Mr. Zwyx, please get me a ticket also. With the media frenzy, Ms. Starfield could use additional security.” I nod I understand.

The great-grandparents tell me not to worry about the kids, they’ll take care of them and assist the nanny. Helen tells me not to worry about anything at work.

Before I leave, I call my mom, bring her up-to-date, and inform her of my plans. I also tell her that we will likely either fly to Victoria’s planned destination or return home, and I would let her know as soon as we decide.

Chapter 3

A few hours later, as we enter Dodge's most prestigious hotel, I check the time. It's three and I wonder if Victoria is already here. If she isn't, I want to surprise her, so I go to the front desk and ask, "Is there a reservation for a Ms. Starfield?" John and Elizabeth are standing with me. Jerry is standing off to the side. He came along because Victoria would likely be bombarded by the media and he could run interference and provide better protection than me and John.

The clerk, a bit hesitant, states, "Sir, I can't give you that information."

Bluffing I say, pointing to Elizabeth, "This is Mrs. Starfield. Now do we have reservations or not?"

Somewhat fearful, "Mrs. Starfield, do you have identification?"

Elizabeth smiles, "Of course dear." She takes out and shows the clerk her driver's license."

The receptionist informs us, "The sheriff called and made the reservations. He said he would bring her." Now confused she asks, "Where's the sheriff?"

I explain, calmly and softly, "This woman is Ms. Starfield's mother, the man is her father, and I'm her husband." Pointing to Jerry, "He's Mr. Maxum, Ms. Starfield security chief and personal bodyguard. I suspect and hope you know that Ms. Starfield's plane went missing. She told me she was spending the night in Dodge. I want to surprise her. I and her parents would like to be in her room when she arrives. If you can't give us access to her room, is there a manager that we can talk to. If you're worried, you can inform the sheriff, that there are four people waiting for her. Please ask the sheriff not to tell my wife we're here. He, or she, can escort her to the room."

She says, "I need to talk to the manager. Can you wait here?"

I want to say, *Where else would I go?* I just say, "Yes. Thank you for your assistance."

Ten minutes later, an attractive, I estimate, a forty-year-old woman, impeccably dressed approaches us. She states, "Cory, informs me that you have requested to be let into Ms. Starfield's suite. It's a bit irregular. You can just wait here if you like."

Politely I ask, "No offense intended, but I'd like to know whom I'm talking to."

Apologetic, “Sorry, I’m Bonny Wheaton. I’m the hotel manager.”

I respond, “Ms. Wheaton, I’m Ms. Starfield’s husband. My name is Arthur Zwyx. These are her parents. We will show you our identification, which can easily be verified by going to my wife’s corporate internet site or calling her main office. On her website, you will see pictures of us there.” We all show her our IDs. “Please check. We would like to surprise her in private. I suspect that there will be all kinds of news people here when she arrives. Also, unless the suite has more than one bedroom, we’ll need an additional room.”

Although, I sense reluctance, she says, “I’ll check.”

“Ms. Wheaton, if you’re really afraid, have the sheriff escort her. You can inform him or her, while my wife is being bombarded by the media. If you have hotel security, they’re welcome to join us.”

Twenty or so minutes pass when Ms. Wheaton returns with an exceptionally large man. He’s about six-three, muscular, and has the look of a man ready to fight. She introduces him, “Folks this is Rowdy Cartwright, he’s our hotel security. I’d feel more comfortable if he’s stays with you until Ms. Starfield returns. I did check you out on her webpage and I believe you’re who you say you are. Nevertheless, I’d still like Rowdy to go with you.”

John states, “It’s not a problem. Thank you.”

I add, “Even if there are two rooms in the suite, we will need an additional room or rooms for her flight crew. Again, I don’t know if my wife made reservations for them.”

Smiling and I think a bit relieved that we’ve accepted her conditions, “I’ll make sure we fill all your accommodation requirements.”

With Rowdy escorting us, we’re taken to Victoria’s suite. We settle into the suite while we wait for Victoria. Elizabeth, John, and I sit on facing couches. After ten or so minutes the phone rings, Rowdy gives me the signal to answer it. I suppose he’s waiting for me to launch into some devious plan. I answer, “Ms. Starfield’s suite, Arthur Zwyx.”

“Mr. Zwyx, it’s Bonny Wheaton. The sheriff called and informed me that he’s on his way, with Ms. Starfield. They should be here within the hour. He also ask that we have three additional rooms reserved for her staff. Thank you for alerting me.”

“Thank you, Ms. Wheaton. I appreciate it. I fail to tell you another reason why, besides surprising my wife, that I wanted to wait in her room. Imagine what would have happen had the media discovered

that her parents and I were waiting. They would have crashed the hotel before anyone could stop them. As is, they'll be camping outside when my wife arrives. You'd have been driven crazy. I've been there, done that."

"Hmm, You're probably right. I didn't consider that. However, I want to play it safe."

"Ms. Wheaton, if there is anyone that understands that it's me. My family is always quoting me, 'It's better to be safe than sorry.' I know you're going to worry regardless of what I say, until Rowdy and the sheriff return and tell you everything is fine."

"Thank you for understanding."

"You're welcome. Please have the front desk call when my wife is on the way up. I'd like to be standing where she can see me as soon as she enters the room. You can call Rowdy to be sure he's okay and prepared, for whatever. Will that work for you?"

"Yes."

As five approaches the room phone rings. Rowdy answers and he listens. Turning to us and I sense he's preparing himself for action, he states, "Ms. Starfield is on her way up. She's being escorted by the sheriff." I guess he told us that as a warning of sorts. John, Elizabeth, and I make no moves, except I stand about ten feet from the door.

When the door opens, Victoria starts to walk in. When she sees me, she stops for an instant then runs and jumps on me. Wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist, we begin to kiss. She whispers, "Take me in the bedroom and make love to me."

I laugh, she looks perplexed, I tell her, "After your mom and dad get a chance to hug you."

Looking shock, she asks, "Where are they?" I turn her so she can see them. Coquettishly, "Sorry, Mom, Dad, I was so happy to see Art." While she is talking, I let her down and she goes to her parents.

Speaking to Rowdy and the sheriff, "I want to thank you for your concern. I hope you feel you can relax now. Really, thank you." I sense they're both somewhat relieved. I shake their hands and they leave.

After I close the door, I go to Victoria and her parents. Elizabeth is crying and hugging Victoria fiercely, like she's afraid Victoria will vanish. John joins the group hug. I see tears in his eyes also.

Elizabeth laboriously manages to say, "Victoria, I, I, ... was so worried. Don't you ever do this to me again. I've aged a hundred years. If my hair isn't gray in the morning it will be a miracle. I love you so much."

Victoria consoles her, “Mom, I’m fine. I’m sorry, but we didn’t have any way of communicating with anyone. I did learn that I’m going to get a standalone satellite phone.”

Like a typical mother, Elizabeth asks, “Are you hungry?”

Her question strikes a chord and I begin to laugh. They all look at me, with puzzlement written all over their faces. Smiling and with the hope to reduce anxiety, I say, “Mom, maybe you can explain to me why mothers always ask if we’re hungry when we’ve face a difficult situation and survived?”

It takes a moment or two, but Elizabeth is the first to laugh, actually she explodes into a cathartic laughter. Relax and now calm, she informs us, “It’s the only thing we can do, other than just standing there lost and wondering what to do; it’s to provide comfort, comfort food that is.” We all smile.

To further reduce all our stress, I muse, “Mom, John, it looks like I did what Mom said she would for me.”

They all look mystified. Less tense now, Elizabeth asks, “Art, and what might that be?”

“You said you would hold Victoria a few seconds, then give her to me.”

“Yes, I did, didn’t I? However, I’m not disappointed she saw and went to you first. It’s as it should be. I’m glad you’re her first love.” Surprising me, I see John nodding his agreement. Victoria looks to me and gives me her glorious smile. My spirits lift.

Chapter

Tuesday – October 5, 2021

Judith signals me over our intercom. I answer, “Yes Judith, what can I do for you?”

“Nothing for me. You have a call from a client, Mr. Woodbridge.”

Cheerfully I say, “Yes, I know he’s a client, a very large one, of course I’m referring to his company. Per chance did he say what he’s calling about? However, thanks for making sure I was aware that he’s a client.”

“No, he didn’t tell me what it’s about. Are you going to take the call? Would you like me to ask him first?”

“Not necessary, and of course, I’ll take the call. I wonder what we did now?” I hit the phone button, connect, and say, “Hi Mr. Woodbridge, what did we do now?”

Chastising me, “First off, Art, it’s Bob. I called to inform you what your people did.”

I interrupt him, “I’m sorry. Okay it’s Bob, but only while we’re on the phone. What did my people do and what can I do to make it right?”

“To begin with, just shut up and listen.” I don’t respond. He asks, “Are you still there?”

“Yes sir. I am being quiet as you’ve directed.”

“Good boy.” I laugh and he laughs, then he continues, “I can call you boy because I’m quite a bit older than you are. There’s no offence intended.”

“Understand Sir, none taken old man.” We both laugh. I’m puzzled, if he’s calling to chew us out, he’s being very friendly.

“Art, I always enjoy bantering with you. However, on a more serious note, I want to thank you and your staff for saving my life.”

I’m stunned, what does he mean, *Saving his life*? I ask, “Are you serious, how did we, or rather my staff do that. I mean, how did they save your life?”

“Yes, I’m profoundly serious. They literally saved my life, by performing CPR when I had a heart attack. I have since found out that all your people are required to be First Aid and CPR certified. I guess you provide the training.”

“Yes. I require all my company staff to attend training and qualify, and it’s company funded, on company time. They’re also

required to requalify annually. If the training they receive resulted in them saving your life, it was worth every cent. I could give you a myriad of reasons why I do this, but I'll save that for a time I want to bore you."

"I'm sure your reasons aren't boring, but I'll wait for another time. What I want you to know is the doctors told me that the CPR your people performed, literally saved my life, and equally important, prevented brain damage." He starts to laugh. "People think I'm crazy anyway. Now I can pretend to have an excuse. I want you to know that I appreciate and want to somehow reward Janice and Jose for their quick response. They didn't hesitate to evaluate the situation and do what had to be done. In addition to the CPR they directed my staff to call 911, which they should have done without being told. I guess when people panic, they lose sight of what to do. I guess some training is in order. Oh, didn't Janice or Jose tell you?"

"No sir. And it makes me mad, in a good way. Maybe I should say, I'm disappointed that they didn't tell me. Bob, I want you to know I'm not considering using this for company gains or advertising it. These are things we should do because it's the right thing to do. It's more to show all our staff the value of the training and its importance. Does that make sense?"

"Just so you know, I had triple bypass surgery and I'm in the final stages of convalescing. I'll be returning to work in a couple of weeks, thanks to your people. Even if you don't use this as a selling point, you can give me as a reference and I'll use it. In addition, you do save us money by reducing break downs and making quick repairs."

"Enough with the flattery. Who's running the company now?"

"Leslie."

I tease him, "Your son?"

Snippety, "No. My daughter."

"Bob, I was only pulling your leg. I've dealt with her on many occasions. She's easier to talk to and understands more than you. And she's like my wife, shrewd, tough, and take no prisoners when it comes to business."

Cheerfully, "I can believe it."

"Mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"No, I mean I don't mind."

"You're approaching a hundred, old man." He laughs, I go on, "You might consider retiring for at least two reasons I can think of."

"And what might they be?"

I can sense he's really curious. "Number one, it's time to enjoy the fruits of your labor, with your lover and wife. Only don't let them meet." He laughs, "Second, it would be good for Leslie to take over while you're still around to guide her, when and if she needs it. Giving her the roll of CEO will surely be a challenge and let her know you have confidence in her. As I've said you'll still be around to help if needed. Think about it. Oh, I know you'll worry about what to do. You just need to find something you can invest your knowledge and time in. Like becoming a member of SCORE. The point is don't become a couch potato. Sorry! I sometimes get carried away."

"Art," he starts to laugh, "I could always come to work for you."

"Yes, you could, and I have just the broom you could use."

He laughs again, "Art, please let me know what I can do for Janice and Jose. On another serious note, I will consider retiring. I'm 68. Maybe this heart attack was, how does the expression go, *A blessing in disguise*. I'm going to think long and hard about retiring."

"Seriously Bob, if there is anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to call."

"Not at present. Just wanted to extend my thanks."

I have an idea, so I ask, "Bob, is this a number I can reach you at. I read him the number on my caller ID." He acknowledges it's correct. I ask, "Can I call you back in a while, maybe ten minutes or more; perhaps an hour. I've got an idea you might be interested in and I just need to make sure it's okay with the people you'd be dealing with."

Sounding surprised, "People I'd be dealing with?"

Calmly, I tell him, "If it pans out, I'll give you your options. Which will be yea or nay. Bye for now." I hang up before he has a chance to add more.

Chapter

I call Sam and he answers, “Hi Art. What’s up.”

Kidding, I say, “You’ve been watching to many beer commercials.” He laughs. I continue, “Grandpa, one of my clients had a heart attack.”

Attempting to be funny, he cuts me off, “What do you want me to do? Build him a coffin.” He laughs.

Endeavoring to turn the table, I tease him, “As a matter of fact that’s exactly what his widow would like. She has some incredibly unique and special features she would like; regular coffin makers don’t do.”

He stops laughing and sounding somewhat stunned, he says, “Are you serious?”

I laugh, “No, I was just kidding. Seriously. What I like to propose, is that you and Grandpa Marcus meet with him. I think he needs to retire, however, like you and Grandpa Marcus, he needs something to do, that makes him feel productive and useful. Do you have room for one more in your group. I haven’t told him what I have in mind, so if you say no, he’ll never know.”

“Art, let me speak to Marcus. He’s here with me. I’ll call you back.”

“Grandpa, just so you know, he’s a shrewd businessman and very likeable. I’ll ask him if he minds getting his hands dirty, that is working with wood as your apprentice, like Grandpa Marcus.”

“Art, enough already. Let me speak to Marcus. You know we’re not in this for the money. If we can help another lost retired soul, we’ll do it. I just don’t want to make the decision without my partner Marcus.”

“Okay, sorry, call me back.”

About an hour later, Judith notifies me, I have a call from Sam. I tell her to transfer it. I answer, “Hi Grandpa. What did you guys decide?”

“Art, you know we have plenty of work. We could use another member in the good old boys’ club. Old being the operative word. When I spoke with Marcus, we thought it would be a good idea to add more old retirees. After all it won’t be much longer before we’ll really have to cut way back.” He pauses, then asks, “How do you want to do this.”

I inform him, “His name is Robert Woodbridge—”

He cuts me off, “You’re kidding. Marcus and I did some work for him, when one of your people referred us. Yes, I agree, he smart and a nice guy. We’d love to have him join us.”

I tell him, “Grandpa, again I’m going to make sure he’s up for it and willing to do what has to be done. That is, do manual labor.”

Educating me, “Art, the reality is most men like to do things with their hands. The problem is that with most, they don’t know how. I’d bet he’ll be like Marcus and soak it up. The truth is, there’s nothing like seeing something you’ve built well, completed.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. I’d also add, fixing something that was broken and you’ve got it operating again. I’ll call him and if he’s interested, I’ll have him meet with you guys. Any questions? Suggestions?”

“No. Go ahead and give him a call.”

I call Bob, he answers, “Hello, Robert Woodbridge.”

Chiding him, “Mr. Woodbridge how quickly we forget.”

“Oh, hi Art. Your closing comments have me wondering what you have in mind.”

“Before I reveal what I was thinking, I need to know if you’re ambulatory, that is able to get out and if you are willing to work with your hands doing carpentry.”

“The first answer is, yes I’m ambulatory. The second is also yes. I’d be willing and would likely enjoy it, but I know absolutely nothing about working with wood. Why?”

“Good. You know Sam and Marcus, they told me they did some work for you.”

“Yes, and it was spectacular. I’m still lost.”

“Well they have a small company that specializes in unique projects. They work when they want, and it’s mostly for fun. I asked and they agreed that you’re welcome to join them. I can tell you they’re not in it for the money. I’m proposing you join them while you’re recuperating. Speak to your doctor and get the okay. You can tell the doctor there’s no heavy lifting and it won’t be stressful. And further, you can work when you want. There’s no time clock. It’s fun though, I think they work more hours now than when they had to. Are you interested, if so, I’ll set up a meeting?”

He’s silent, then states, “Yes, I’m interested. It sounds quite intriguing. It sounds like a dream job: work when I want, no schedules to meet, no stress, no concerns about profits, and I get to build something.

I'll check with my doctor. If I get a go ahead, you can count me in. I'll call you as soon as I know."

Chapter

Friday – March 18, 2022

Riding into work, I review the past two days, trying to figure out what's wrong. Has Victoria grown tired of me, does she have a lover, does she want a divorce? Is it me? Did I screw up? I don't have a clue. I close my eyes and concentrate. I can see the events like it's happening now. I guess it started Wednesday, just before I'm about to leave, Judith informs me that Barbara has a message for me. I tell her to transfer the call. Answering, "Hi Barbara, what's up?"

"Your wife said for you to go home and not to wait for her. She doesn't know how long she'll be. Let the kids know she loves them. She doesn't think she'll be home before they go to bed. Oh, she said go to bed yourself, she'll wake you when she gets home."

The evening is routine, I check the kids to make sure they did their homework, played a little with them, have them wash and brush, and tucked them in.

Once the kids are in for the night, I settle down with a glass of wine and wait for my love to come home. To pass the time, I practice the piano, and watch some science and nature shows. At eleven, I call Victoria, my call goes directly to voice mail. I conclude she's either very busy and turned her phone off, or it went dead. I leave her a message telling her I miss and love her; please hurry home and I'll reduce your stress. And to wake me when she gets home, although I'm sure I'll know she's there the moment she walks into the room. Of course, I end with, I love you.

I wait fifteen to twenty minutes, wash and brush, and head in. My sleep is restless and troubled, it's usually this way when Victoria isn't home and not on a faraway trip. Her holding me always makes me feel safe and comfortable. Throughout the night I glance at the clock, the time drags by and still, there's no call. I suspect she finished unusually late and decided to sleep in her private room. I consider joining her, but I need to be here to send our kids off to school and pre-school.

The morning comes and goes without incident. In Victoria's reception area at lunch time, Barbara informs me, "Mr. Zwyx, Ms. Starfield had to meet with one of her company's CEO. She said I should let you know there's a major problem she's dealing with and likely will be spending the entire day, and possibly the evening working on it. You

should meet with her father for lunch and that she'll see you tonight at home, if she solves the problem."

I begin to wonder why she didn't just call me; I'll have to ask her?

Since it's not unusual for her to have an impromptu meeting, I don't give her skipping lunch another thought. I've try to imagine what kind of problem she could be dealing with that would keep her from me and the kids. I remember the machinery and *think outside of the box* problem, when she was pregnant. Maybe it's similar. Maybe I need to throw her into the pool again and laugh at that thought. All sorts of thoughts pass through my mind.

Back to reality, it's now been two days since I've seen or spoken to Victoria. I need to find out what the hell is going on. After I arrive, I go straight to Victoria's office and walk past Barbara, before she can stop me. Victoria is sitting at her desk. When she looks up, she doesn't smile, she looks angry, depressed, tired, confused, I can't tell. I stand there and go no closer. I sternly state, "You're going home with me tonight, if for no other reason than to see your children and let them know you love them. You do love them, don't you?"

"Arthur, stop behaving like an imbecile. Of course, I love them. I have a business lunch, so I'll see you at five. Meet me in the front of the building. Now if you please, just go, I'm exceedingly busy and don't have time for this now."

I stand there for several moments, contemplating making a scene, but decide it might be a lose-lose, so I'll wait till this evening, when we're alone at home. I look at her as I turn to leave and see she's glaring at me. I shake my head and roll my eyes; I haven't a clue about what's going on with her. I just hope it's not another man. However, if it were another man, why would she be angry with me? I leave but I am steadfast determined to find out later, regardless of the pain it might cause me.

For the remainder of the day, I focus on developing maintenance checks for a new piece of equipment, one of our clients will be installing. They had the manufacturing company forward us a maintenance manual. Besides the suggested maintenance requirements, I add a few additional ones, that we discovered to be beneficial when servicing similar equipment. I also make a trip to the shop and work with my techs on some equipment. I always find working on machinery relaxing and enjoyable; it takes my mind off of other things. Just before five, Barbara calls and informs me Victoria will meet me at the car, in front of the building. When I get there, I see that Victoria is already inside, so I get

in. She's sitting as far from me as she can; I make no effort to get closer. I know she's mad, so I don't speak. We ride home in silence. When we enter the apartment, she makes straight for the study; I go to our room and change into comfortable attire.

Returning to the living room, I see she's with the children. They're asking her all sorts of questions, while she's hugging and kissing them. She reassures them that her problem has nothing to do with them and that she still loves them. I join the group but don't push Victoria. The kids tell us about their day. Dinner comes and goes. I settle in the living room with a drink; Victoria does the same on a couch facing me. I suspect she's doing it for the children. One by one the kids head off to bed.

Everyone has gone to bed and we're sitting on opposite facing couches, when Victoria gets up and announces, "I'm going to bed. Please sleep in another bedroom. I've got to solve my problem and I won't be able to if you're with me." Then she turns and goes to our room.

I've had it, that's it. I want answers, so I follow her into our room.

When Victoria realizes I've followed her, she glares at me, like she did in Hawaii, and states, "Just what part of sleep in another room don't you understand?"

Calmly, I don't want to exacerbate her anger, I say, "That's not going to happen." Without really thinking I ask, "Do you want a divorce?"

Her look turns to incredulous and surprise, "No! Do you?"

Her answer stuns me and I know my look must reflect dismay and confusion, "No! Why in the hell would you even think I might? You are the center of my universe. If you weren't so serious, I'd be laughing like crazy. Now, dammit, tell me what this is all about?"

"Are you seeing another woman?"

I want to laugh. I look at her incredulously, it just a stupid question to me, but I know she's serious. I can't help it, "Yes I am. In fact, I'm seeing lots of women, even when you're around. Would you like me to go around blindfolded?"

I can see she restrains herself from laughing, "Art, you know that's not what I mean."

"Yes! I do! Again, if you weren't so serious, I'd be laughing hysterically. No! I'm not having an affair or one nightstand with a woman, or for that matter with a man." I can see she wants to laugh. "What would ever lead you to think I was?"

“One of my close friends saw you with an attractive woman. You were laughing, and it appeared you were enthralled with her.”

“Okay, when and where did this liaison happen?”

“Wednesday, last week, lunch time at *The Crown’s Chamber Restaurant*.”

“You got me. Look Victoria it was a business lunch. I deal with lots of women managers and you do the same with men.”

Skeptically she asks, “Was it just lunch.”

“Yes! I knew you were going to be busy, so I met with Zoe Wynoune, to discuss business. She lives and works at Castac Valley for Klyonic Inc. They’re a big conglomerate. She was in town

“Coincidence?”

“No. It was a scheduled meeting, and I asked her to come down, so we could discuss business. You know I frequently meet with business associates over lunch or tennis, just like you do, except with you it’s golf. I usually do it when I know you’re going to be busy, it’s a change of pace. However, I’d rather be with you. And, if I remember correctly, I told you in the morning I was meeting with a business associate for lunch. And told you if you got finished early join us.”

“Yes, I know you meet with women for lunch, but you usually have Helen with you and you tell me you’re meeting with a woman.”

“So, once in seven years I fail to tell you my business meeting is with a woman, leads you to believe I’m having an affair. Wow! And you say I have a wild imagination. Further, Helen isn’t always with me, I like to bring her for major clients and to keep the male clients off guard. She’s an attractive woman.” Victoria’s face forms a half smile; she knows what I’m talking about. “However, you can check with Helen, she had another business commitment.” Since Helen knows what’s going on, I’m not worried that she’ll tell Victoria. “The first chance I get I’ll introduce you to Zoe.” I start to laugh.

Somewhat relaxed, she asks, “What are you laughing at now?”

“Have you checked your Helicopter’s flight time because that’s what I would have needed to have an affair with Zoe. She works and lives about 80 miles away; that’s roughly an hour-and-a-half each way or more. I know she could come to town, but then the likelihood of being discovered increases. So, I had Stacy fly me. I blackmailed her. Told her, she owed me big time for Bill.” She looks at me and laughs. I’m relieved somewhat. I add, “Why would you think I would want to have an affair. Physically, I can’t keep up with you and I’m marginally able to manage my debt, and you never refuse me or have a headache.” I pull her close,

look her in the eyes, and state, “I love you. I am not having an affair, nor do I want to have an affair. It’s you and only you. I love you.”

Responding, “I love you too.”

This ends the talk for a while. For some reason, lovemaking after a contentious misunderstanding seem so intense and stimulating. The frustration and stress of the last few days melts away. We’re in our standard position and I’m still perplexed, I ask, “Why would you consider that I might want to have an affair?”

“One of my friends read an article that stated, long relationships start to have problems around seven years. The article was titled, *The Seven Year Itch*. We’ve been married a little over seven years and I wondered if I was enough for you.”

Snickering, I respond, “Lu, of all the things you said tonight, that has to be the most ridiculous one. You’re everything I could want. If you were only half yourself, it would be enough for me. I cherish every moment I’m with you.”

“I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“I understand. I worry all the time about you meeting someone else. It *‘goes with the territory,’* so to speak.”

We lay there for a while, I’m a bit fidgety when Victoria asks, “What’s bothering you?”

“I’m disappointed that you thought I was so stupid that I would have lunch with a woman, I was having an affair with, at a place where I’m very highly likely to be seen by an army of our friends and associates. What makes me more upset is that you didn’t talk to me, like we promised each other.”

“Again, I’m sorry. You’re right, I should have asked you that evening, instead of behaving like a martyr, and consequently suffering unnecessarily.”

“I need to ask you; do you have any lingering doubts?”

“No. I believe you. Even without your explanation, I’d have believed you when you said you weren’t having an affair.”

“Lu, you should know that every time I look at another woman, I thank providence on how lucky I am that you allow me to share your world. I would never do anything to jeopardize being with you and our family.”

“It’s the same with me. I don’t really know why I jumped to the conclusion you were having an affair. Perhaps, it was my wondering if I was enough.”

This time I laugh. When I stop, I tell her again, “Lu, you’re not only enough, you exceed everything I dream of and wish for. I’m expecting someone to wake me,” I laugh, “like I did, when I had my wet dream about you.” She laughs, I laugh with her. We cuddle, and sleep captures me quickly. My life has righted itself once more.

Chapter

Friday – April 15, 2022

Last night, I convinced Victoria that we should get away for the weekend. I informed her that I've arranged to have her mom watch the kids. I wonder if she'll give them back. I've had the feeling that Victoria might still has some doubt about the woman incident, because I haven't told her what the meeting was about; although she hasn't given me any indication that she does. Maybe, it's just me.

Because it's Friday we gave our office staff off at four, and we left shortly afterward, the trip to Rekal Lodge took us about two-and-a-half hours, as expected, traffic at this time of day is usually heavy. We arrive at 6:45 and check in. Zoe is there to greet us. She introduces herself, "Good evening Mrs. Starfield, I'm Zoe Wynoune, the resort manager. If there is anything you need, please don't hesitate to contact me."

"Thank you, Zoe, we will." It appears that Victoria doesn't recognize the name. Good, I'll tell her later.

The clerk hands me the bungalow key, and has a page show us the way. Inside the room, it doesn't take us long to divest ourselves of our clothing and merge. A couple of encounters later, we're lying in our standard position. I glance at my watch and note it's 7:24, so I suggest, "Lu, let's get up. I need to get something to eat. You should be hungry."

"I am. Want to shower first?" We do, and we do shower. Around 7:55 we're dressed casually and ready to go to dinner.

After entering the main building on our way to the dining room, we walk past the lodge's banquet room. There's some sort of event taking place. I say, "Lu, by the boisterousness of the group, I think they're having a good time. Let's behave badly and crash the party."

"Art, if the news finds out they'd have a field day with it. I can just see the headlines, Starfield crashes party to save money."

I laugh, "So! I take her hand, hold it tightly, and drag her to the entry way, albeit against her resistance."

Angrily, "Art! Stop! Let me go. You're going to embarrass me."

I tease, "Look, if they're celebrating something like a wedding, birthday, or similar event, we could write them a big check. Then the news could say, Starfield crashes event and gives a large gift."

Still slightly reluctant, "Art, it's not right."

I ignore her plea, grin, and drag her along. As I pull her into the banquet room the place goes silent. Victoria is looking at me and I can see her anger building. I say, “Before you get mad and explode, look around.”

She does and her mouth drops open, like mine does when I see her, and before she knows what’s happening our kids swarm her. At this point there is a chorus of, “Surprise, Surprise” from our family and friends. Her anger quickly disappears and is replaced by happiness. She looks at me, while hugging the kids, smiles, and when the crowd noise subsides, says, “Your debt has increased substantially.”

Mystified, I ask, “Why? I thought you would enjoy a weekend away from the city, to be with family and friends. There are all kinds of activities not available in the city.”

Reaching up and pulling my head to hers, she whispers, “Yes, it will be terrific, but the number of times I expected you to fulfill my needs will be missed is large, due to these people.”

“I don’t suppose I can protest?”

“Not a chance, even though this makes me very happy.”

Speaking softly to her, as we make our way to our seats, “Let me change the subject for a moment. Is the friend that ratted me out about cheating on you here?”

She looks around, “Yes. Why? I know you weren’t cheating. The subject is a moot topic.”

“Ask her or him if they’ve seen that woman here. I’ll let you know why later. For me, just do it.”

“Fine! I’ll do it later.” It’s one of those fines, that’s not fine, however, I choose to ignore it.

We’re now seated, the kids have returned to their places, and the lodge staff begins to serve dinner. Throughout dinner, the conversations vary between life, sports, the kids, business, and topics of general interest. After dinner, we mingle and several of the group attempt to line dance. The local group performing is primarily country and western. There’s a session set up for tomorrow and Sunday, to teach line dancing. As eleven approaches, we start to break up and go to our respective accommodations.

In our room Victoria wraps her arms around me, “Now lover it’s time to perform.” I do, twice for me, three for her.

In our standard position, Victoria asks, “Why get everyone together. Did you have a reason or was it just a substitute for one of our monthly get-togethers?”

“Yes and no. It was a substitute for the others. For us, it was our anniversary.”

“Anniversary? Our anniversary is in January, not April.”

“The anniversary I’m referring to is in April. In fact, it’s April 15, today or should I say yesterday because it’s past midnight.”

I can see she’s thinking. Stymied, “I give up. What anniversary is it?”

Chaffingly, “This is the day you beat the crap out of me and I kissed you in retaliation.”

Laughing, “It is, isn’t it? I don’t know why I forget these things. Do the others know?”

“Some, not all. Oh, did you speak to your friend?”

“Yes, she thinks it was the manager.”

“She’s right. It was the manager. I met with Zoe, to discuss the arrangements and get a feel for what types of activities were available. I didn’t tell you what the business was about because it would have spoiled the surprise.” I start to laugh. Victoria asks why. I tell her, “It’s funny, everyone invited knew about it yet they all kept it secret from you.”

“I’m glad they did. I love it when you surprise me.”

“Lu, on a mildly serious note, I know you said, and I believe you, that you had no doubts. I wanted you to know that it was strictly business.”

Shaking her head in what I assume is disbelief at my comments, “Art, I believe you. Drop it already.” I do. Mentally making a note that it’s over. I hug her, and she returns it. I drift off to sleep, happy and content.

Chapter

Saturday -- June 18, 2022

On one of our rare nights out, without family, we're making our way into *The Exchange*, when I notice Leslie, one of my premier clients and friend, is near the front of the line. I whisper to Victoria if it would be okay to have them join us.

Challenging me, "Why?" I suspect her first inclination is a bit of jealousy.

We pause while we discuss this. I tell her, "She's a client. Her dad is working with our grandparents." Confident that I'm not flirting, she gives me the go ahead.

I walk up to Leslie, lean in close, and whisper, "Leslie, would you like to join Victoria and me?"

She laughs, "They won't let you jump line. But if they let you in," she glances at her husband, who nods his okay, "we'd love to join you."

I whisper to her, "My wife has perpetual reservations. We'll get in. Come with us."

She and her husband step out of the line and follow us. I assume it's her husband, I see her wedding ring, and that should signify she's married; in these days you can never be sure."

Taking the lead, Victoria guides us past the gatekeeper and Maitre D, with the standard exchanges. Inside the club, we go to the ultra-reserved area for only, the most influential, wealthy, and prominent people. The area is separated from the main bar by walls and doors, that are made of glass. It's relatively quiet. Besides the glass enclosure, the room is out fitted with monitors to show what's going on in the club. A sound system provides us with the music the band is playing.

Victoria finds us a table, where we settle in. I start the introductions and Leslie finishes them. Her husband is Nathan Crichton. He's an affable guy. The introductions and handshakes done; we begin to share family stories.

At one point. Leslie says, "I like to thank you guys for getting us in. This is a rare occasion, a night out alone. My parents are watching the younger children. The older ones always have something to do."

Victoria tells her, "Our grandparents volunteered, so here we are."

I say, “Thank goodness for parents and grandparents.”

Everyone nods their agreement. We then resume chatting about family. I feel so domesticated. We all brag about the good exploits of our children.

When the conversation begins to wane, I ask Victoria if she would like to dance; after all that’s why we’re here. She agrees, I excuse us, and off we go. Leslie and Nathan follow. We dance on and off for a couple of hours or more, then from time to time, switch partners, take a break, and nurse our drinks.

During one of the dancing hiatuses, Leslie says, “Art, I want to thank you.”

Puzzled, I ask, “For what? Inviting you to join us; you already did.”

Giggling, she replies, “No. Although, thanks again for that. We did have our hearts set on enjoying an evening here,” she looks at Nathan, who nods yes, “and we did. No, I want to thank you for what you did for my dad, my mom, and me.”

Grinning and wondering, I reply, “Your welcome. Okay, what is it I did for you, and your mom and dad?” Victoria and Nathan are also waiting for an answer.

Smirking, she says, “First, I want to thank you for training your staff, which literally led to saving my dad’s life.”

Shaking my head, I say, “Leslie, enough already. Your mom and dad have thanked me enough. And the reality is that no thanks are needed. It was the right thing to do.”

Rolling her eyes, like I haven’t a clue, she retorts, “Fine!” It’s the woman’s fine for it’s not fine, but so what or I don’t want to argue, it’s not worth it; I’ll get you later. She continues, “What I like to thank you for is setting my dad up with Sam and Marcus. About two months after he began working, as he calls it ‘playing,’ with them, he told me he’s retired, not retiring, retired and that the company was now mine. He added, ‘Call me if you need something. Otherwise, kid you’re on your own.’”

When she pauses for a moment, Victoria injects, “We understand. When our grandparents started to work for Art part time, or rather whenever they wanted, everyone benefitted. Our grandmothers were happy to get them out of the house and told us that their libido had improved.” We all laugh at her last comment.

Leslie adds, “Yes, I can say the same for my mom. Since he’s started with them, they get out more and they seem to be happy and relax,

all the time now. Except for a couple of small issues, that I had to ask him for advice, I run the company.” She laughs, “Do you know what Sam and Marcus call him?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Victoria says, “Robert or Bob?”

Nathan informs us, “They call him Kid, and refer to him as The Kid.”

Leslie adds, “In addition, they, all the men and women, hangout and travel together. The funniest thing was when my mom told me she joined the Mile High Club. I guess Sam and Marcus have access to a private jet.” We all laugh.

After she stops laughing, Victoria explains, “Leslie, it’s my jet. If it’s not scheduled, I make it available to my family and close friends.” She bursts out laughing, then informs us, “I think everyone of age, in our family, is now a member of the Mile High Club.” This elicits a round of laughter.

I start to laugh, calm down, and tell her, “Leslie, I want you to do something for me. Tell your dad that, Janice and Jose want me to transfer them to another country or move the ‘Good Old Boys,’ someplace else. They complain that every time your dad gets near them, he offers them lunch, dinner, and thanks them over and over, and over and over, and over and over. They said, the banquet and gifts he’s given them were more, much more than they feel they deserve; a thank you was all they expected. I explained, to them, that in your dad and family’s eyes, there is nothing that could measure up to saving his life. What everyone fails to understand, the reward for saving someone and helping people is so fulfilling and self-worth building; it’s immeasurable and will remain with them for the rest of their lives.” Before Leslie can respond, I add, “Look, I’m sure they’re not really complaining. I’ve found that people like to complain, it has a stress reducing element. In the Navy we used to say, ‘If a sailor is not bitching, they’re not happy.’ Don’t say anything to your dad. If I get a chance, I’ll get him to tone it down.”

Grinning, “Okay, I won’t say anything. Glad you took me off the hook. My dad would adopt them if he could.” We all laugh at that comment.

Victoria adds, “Leslie, thanks for letting us know about your dad and his working with Marcus and Sam. Art and I have been wondering how it was working out. We did know that there weren’t any problems. Why we didn’t ask our grandparents I don’t know. Maybe we felt like we’d be interfering.”

Chapter

Tuesday – August 9, 2022

The last few days I've been working later because Victoria is involved with a deal that requires an extra hour or two of evening work. She's working on a particularly important project with her staff or she would do it at home. Since there is work, I can do, I've decided to stay and wait, and I enjoy going home with her. She called me a few moments ago, said she was finished for the day, and that I should meet her out front.

As I transit the outer office, I see that Judith is still working and I note, it's passed 6:30. It occurs to me that it seems to have become a regular thing. I get angry. I say, "Judith!"

She looks up at me, "Yes Art?"

Calmly, but forcefully, I state, "Save your work, turn the damn computer off, and go home. Now!"

"I only have a few more minutes to do."

Reigning in my anger, "Judith, I'm only going to say this one more time, and if you don't want me to go ballistic on you, you'll do as I say. Save your work, turn the damn computer off, and get out of here. Now! Is that clear enough for you?"

Contrite, "Okay Art." I stay until she does what I want. We leave together.

In the elevator, she says, "Art, I only had a few more minutes of work. Really."

I stare at her and frown. She sees my displeasure. I inform her, "Judith, your position here is secure. You have nothing to worry about. Go home and enjoy your family. Tomorrow we'll discuss it. Do you understand?" I smile as best I can.

"Yes, somewhat. Thanks for telling me I'm not in trouble. Am I?"

"No, you're definitely not in trouble. Quite the opposite. I don't want you to worry. We'll talk tomorrow." I finish just as the elevator reaches the ground floor. I get out; Judith remains on the elevator, which will take her to the garage.

Exiting the building, I see Victoria standing by the car. Her hands are on her hips and she's frowning. As always, she takes my breath away and I'm sure my mouth is open. When I get close enough, smiling, she

berates me, while lifting my chin, “Where the hell were you? What took you so long?”

I take her in my arms and respond, “Personnel problems. You have a lot on your mind right now, so I’ll explain everything some other time.”

“Serious?”

“Yes, somewhat serious. Tomorrow, I’ll get together with Helen and work on them. I don’t think it will be too difficult to resolve. The problems aren’t poor performance or bad behavior. Quite the opposite. I’ve been considering making some changes for a while, so in essence this is forcing me to action. I wish all my problems were like this.”

“Anything I can do?”

I laugh, “As a matter-of-fact, tonight you can take my roll that I have with you, you can relax me later. I can pay my debt down while you do. How was your day?”

“I can certainly do that. While I’m relaxing you, I’ll also be relaxing me.” Then she adds, “I had a good day. We’re getting close to finishing. Things are falling into place and it’s coming together nicely. Actually Art, it’s a fun project. When it’s over, let’s take a few days off. I’ll also give my staff off.”

That sounds like a super idea. I’m sure I can get away for a while,” I laugh, “Let’s give the kids to your parents, then tell their parents where the kids are.”

Laughing, “Concur, that’s a plan. What about your problem?”

“My part will be over when I tell them what I want. They’ll have to do all the work. Let’s just enjoy the evening.” We do and she does relax me, thoroughly.

Chapter

Wednesday – August 10, 2022

I wake to Victoria getting out of bed and before our alarm goes off. Glancing at the clock, I see it's 5:30. I ask, "Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

"Stop being such a worry wart. I'm fine. Sorry, I forgot to tell you, I need to leave a little earlier than usual. I'll send Jerry back for you, if you want or you can drive in and we'll ride home together."

"Why don't I just go with you?"

"Are you jealous. Afraid that I might be meeting my paramour." Her tone indicates she's teasing. At least I hope it does.

I ask myself, *Why are you so insecure? You know she loves you and you give her what she needs.* "Yes, I'm always jealous. However, no, I told you yesterday, I have some personnel problems I need to work on. The additional time this morning will let me prepare my action plan." As I roll out of bed, "Lu, if you don't want me to come with you, I'll drive in."

Mildly annoyed, "Don't be stupid! I just thought you might like to catch a few more Z's. Of course, I want you to come with me and ride to work as well." She giggles at her response. We can be so childish at times. Ain't love grand!

I take her in my arms, "Lu, sleeping without you isn't restful."

After I've seen Victoria to her office, I go to mine. I arrive just before seven and find Judith is already working. It angers me. I ask, my tone I'm sure indicates I'm upset, "What time did you get here?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Dammit," I utter loudly, then state, "Judith, I want to see you, Helen, and Perry in the conference room at nine," I demand, as I storm into my office and softly slam the door, before she can respond. I want her and the others to be worried—I'm trying to make a point.

I see Helen arrive and speak to Judith. During the conversation, she shakes her head, and then looking at me, rolls her eyes. She knocks and enters without my go ahead. Mentally, I acknowledge that's standard procedure, when we're alone in the office. In a challenging tone, "Art! Just what the hell is going on? When I left last night, everything was fine. What happen since then?"

Angrily, I respond, “It wasn’t ‘fine,’” I put emphasis on fine, “when you left. In fact, it hasn’t been ‘fine,’” again, I put emphasis on fine, “for quite a while now.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. We don’t have any problems. So, tell me what’s bothering you?”

“Dammit Helen, we do have problems. I’ll tell you about them later. Be in the conference room at nine and you’ll find out. Right now, I’m busy, so get your butt out of here, now.”

“Fine!” It’s a woman’s angry fine. “You can be such an asshole at times. My assessment when you hired me was correct,” she states, as she marches out and slams the door. It takes all my willpower not to laugh. She’s right, but I want them to worry some. I want them to take what I have to say seriously—now, and for the future.

At 8:58 I enter the conference room and put my papers on the table. They’re all there, seated, and quiet, waiting for my whatever. I stand at the head of the table; it’s a power position when others are seated. I look at their faces, etched on them is concern and maybe worry. Ever the rebel, Helen faces also registers anger, but I can see she’s also concerned. Good, I’ve got their attention. I start, “I’m glad to see you all appear concerned. We have a serious personnel issue to resolve and it started several months ago.” I pause, note they’re paying attention. “As I said, for the past several months, Judith has been working late, coming in early, and making mistakes. Can any of you deny this observation?” I wait. No one challenges my statement. I notice, Judith looks like she’s about to cry. I head it off, “Judith, this is not about you, per se, your work and performance is stellar. If anything, you deserve a raise. Along with the other two in this room, hiring you was a major coup.” Now they’re looking at me in a what the hell is going on expression?

Helen injects, “Why are we here?” Her tone is friendly.

“Before I present my proposal, I want to chew all of us out. That includes me, me more so than any of you. I’m disappointed in us. Distributivity, I’d give Judith 10%, Helen and Perry 20%, each, and myself 50%. Now they’re really confused.

Feeling more confident, Helen asks, “Art, have you lost your mind? I know you’re using your roundabout method to make a point. So, just get on with it. Please.”

“No. I’m having too much fun being an asshole, like you called me. You’re right, I’m trying to make a point. Has anyone got it?”

Perry says, “Not to be a smart ass, but I don’t have a clue. Care to give me a hint?”

To lighten the mood, Helen says, “Okay Art, we screwed up. However, please tell us how we screwed up? And get to the point already.”

“Okay Helen, you all know, at least I hope you all know, that I don’t like our staff, which includes Judith and Perry to work overtime, unless it’s absolutely necessary. I’ve said that I’ve notice Judith leaving late and arriving early. Isn’t that clue enough?”

Judith informs us, “Art, I can handle it. I love working here.”

I inform her, “Yes Judith, you have always been an exceptionally hard worker. You will always have a place here. However, you have too much work and need help. Even with Marcus’s help with purchasing, your still overworked, I’ve told everyone. I don’t like overtime as a routine. Judith is working routinely more than eight, maybe even nine hours. I don’t like it. Further, if it’s done too much, it becomes counterproductive, which leads to diminishing returns. Again, is that clue enough.”

Helen speaks, “Yes. So, you’re saying that we should have noticed it also.”

“Yes, that’s correct. Did you notice? Helen, Perry.”

Contrite they nod. Helen asks, “What do you expect us to do?”

I shake my head in wonder. Somewhat annoyed, I reply, “Are you kidding me. Helen you’re a partner. Perry you’re an upper level manager. What I expect you two, and me to do, is realize we have a problem and then solve it. We should do our jobs.” I look at Judith, “You’re not without a little guilt. Okay, bottom line, Helen, Perry, you should have recognized we had a problem. Namely, Judith had more work than she could handle because of its volume, not associated with her ability. Helen, you could have just hired her an assistant. Perry, you should have demanded we get her help. And you Judith, should have told me or Helen your workload was getting out of hand. Does anyone disagree?” I pause a moment then add, “Look, when it comes to managing our core business, we do exceptionally well. Our earnings and growth reflect it. Sometimes, the best managers fail to see what is under their nose. We’re too close to the problem. I think that’s what happened here.”

Along with the others, Helen, nods her agreement, then asks, “Art, I suspect you have a plan. Do you?”

“Yes. After I left last night, I formulated one, along with this training lesson. Even an experienced manager, like you Perry, can learn. The solution is obvious. We need to give Judith an assistant, at a

minimum. But that would only be, as they say, a stop gap measure—a jury rig fix. We’re growing and need to think long term. So, before I present my plan, I would like all of you to think about what would be best for our company, in the long run. We can meet again after one, when I get back from lunch. Think about it. What do we need? Any problems making the meeting?” All shake their head, no problem. “I’ll see you back here after lunch.”

After an exciting and fulfilling lunch, in a few ways, I return to my office. I ask, “Judith, please call the others and let’s meet in the conference room in 10 minutes.” Assembled in the conference room I ask, “Who wants to go first.”

Perry says, “I will.” I nod okay, he proposes, “I like to have someone at the work facility to do the ordering and scheduling, like Louise does in Poway.”

I look to Helen, “What do you think of Perry’s idea?”

“I think we should have done it long ago. This way the staff doesn’t have to come here or place an order, that is too complicated and usually somewhat confusing over the phone, when Marcus isn’t in or off somewhere else. It would substantially reduce Judith’s workload. She could resume a normal life.”

“Judith, what do you think.”

“I agree. Not only would it reduce my workload, it would make it easier for our crew.”

I look at them, “I agree. Perry, find someone as soon as possible. Judith, I want you to find a temp for our office, while you’re training Perry’s office assistant. Perry, while you’re looking for someone, I want you to contact the temp service we use. Judith and Marcus can train the person. If you find that that person is the one you want. Contact the temp agency and make them a deal. There’s nothing they can really do, but I want us to be ethical. Can you do it?”

“Not a problem. When’s Judith coming over?”

“Probably in a week or so. I want her temp to at least get a feel for things. Don’t wait for her to bring in a temp, just start looking for someone to hire. You can get her started and if she has any questions, she can call Judith. Oh, it might be a he. It’s an unfortunate habit of assuming we’ll hire a woman to do the job. So, from now on whether I, or anyone, say he or she, consider it gender neutral.” They laugh.

Perry states, “That solves the problem I have. Is there anything else.”

I glare at him, “Dammit, I told you all to think long term. We’re growing at a phenomenal rate. Any other thoughts?”

Helen injects, “Even with shifting the ordering and scheduling to the shop, we’re still doing a ton of contracts, project development, and other administrative work. Since we’re the central base now, all the other sites are constantly calling. Much of it is handled by Judith. It’s not going to get smaller. We should add another position here to assist.”

“Judith, care to comment?”

“It would be helpful. It would also offer backup if I’m out.”

“Perry?”

Now relaxed, he informs me, “Boss, you solve my problem. What you do here is Helen and yours. I do agree with Judith. In addition, the assistant could fill in if my assistant is out. Win-win, I’d say.” I look at him angrily. “Boss, what did I do now?”

I wait to carefully phrase what I have to say. “Perry, any problem this company has, is your problem, as well as Helen’s and mine. In fact, it’s everyone’s. All top-level managers should be concerned. What we do here affects you all and what you do affects us here.”

“Sorry, you’re right.”

To move on, I declare, “We’re all in agreement. We’re going to give Judith the task of finding an assistant. Everybody onboard?”

They all agree with head nods. Helen asks, “Is that it?”

I ask, “Anyone else have any ideas?”

Helen looks at the others, they shrug their shoulders. Helen says, “I don’t think so.”

I look at them and shake my head and roll my eyes, “Guys, generically speaking of course, I ask you to think long term. This solution is putting a Band-Aid on, when it needs stitches. You’re all off the hook. I’m making a unilateral decision. To begin, Judith, I’m promoting you to Director of Administrative Services for Pro4ms, company-wide. Beside the assistant you were going to hire, let’s consider hiring another or establish a plan to, when it’s most advantageous. As much as I dislike, adding administrative staff, we really need them. Perry, the person you’ll add will have immediate effect. The techs will get more done.” I stop to let what I’ve just said to sink in. Judith is just staring at me with that, ‘Is this really happening?’ look.

Helen, “Art, we don’t have the room here for more staff. Where are we going to put them? Not that I’m objecting to your decision. I’m totally onboard with it. We do and will need them.”

I inform them, “I spoke to Victoria and the building manager. After she chewed me out, Victoria approved adding space to our current office. A couple of adjacent offices have become available. They’re ours to use.”

Helen asks, “Why’d Victoria chew you out?”

“She was mad that I asked her. She said to quote, ‘We’re married. Everything I have is yours. Why can’t you understand that?’ We had a long talk. In summary, I explained that we share the building, therefore she should be involved with any change to it. Of course, she said bullshit. Anyway, we’re set to rearrange our office here. For a while we’ll have vacant space. The four of us, plus a couple of our maintenance people, will meet and develop a plan. In the plan, I want to include a private room for Helen.” Helen giggles, smiles knowingly, and nods her approval. Continuing, I state, “While it’s being done, Helen and I, will do field work, that is meeting with our clients. Judith can temporarily move to the maintenance facility, which now that I think about it, will also provide easier training of the new people we’ll hire. While we’re remodeling here, Perry, I need you to set up a place where Helen and I can do our work. It doesn’t have to be big and both of us can use it. A table and a couple of chairs is all we’ll need. Monday, we’ll meet, formulate a plan, and start the hiring process. Any questions.” There are none. “Think about what we’ll need to do.” Then I add, “Judith, Helen, let’s meet soon to discuss Judith’s new duties and how we’ll implement them.” Helen and Judith nod that they understand. As they exits, I add, “As I said before, Helen, let’s add a private room to your office, as part of the remodel.”

Grinning, “I like that. Then I won’t have to use yours.”

It’s past two now, so I tell them, “I want all of you to take the rest of the day off. If you have something important, finish it quickly, close it down, then get out of here. It’s not a suggestion.” They smile, we leave, and go our separate ways. Although I’ve sent the others home, I decide to stay and wait for Victoria. I work on the reorganization and expansion plan. My thoughts are to have an outer office staff like Victoria. An assistant to Helen, Judith, and me. When the job becomes overwhelming, we’ll add an assistant for the assistant. I chuckle. I’m so engrossed, I fail to realize it’s past five. My phone rings, *She’s Always a Woman to Me*, alerts me to Victoria’s call. “Hi Sweetheart, what’s up?”

“Where are you? It’s past 5:15, is anything wrong?”

“No. I’m fine. Just lost track of time. Sorry, I’ll be right up to collect you.”

“Not necessary. I’m out front. I was worried.”

“Again, I’m sorry. I’ll be right down. I love you.” She repeats the endearment and we disconnect.

I meet her at the car, take her in my arms and we kiss. While we are embracing, Jerry opens the door. Inside the car, I ask, “How was your day?”

“Absolutely great. We’re working on a deal with a small biomedical company in Singapore. They’re developing a blood analyzer that would produce faster results. It looks promising. We’ve sent over several engineers to assure us, it’s not a swindle. It’s real enough, but there are no guarantees it will work as predicted. We’re going to detail a few of our people over there. If it works, it will shorten several tests, reduce cost, and make a lot of money. It’s one of those deals that is truly a win all around. Worst case for me, is the company loses a few million. For me, it’s exciting to be on the forefront of development. How was your day? Why’d you lose track of time?”

“Not quite as exciting as yours, but still rewarding. After I met with Helen, Perry, and Judith to chew them out, I sent them home. Rather than going home or interrupting you, I decided to work on my expansion plan.”

I can see, she’s confused. She asks, “Why’d you chew them out and then send them home?”

“I’ll try to explain. For the last few, or more, weeks, Judith has been coming in early and leaving later. Not just a few minutes, but thirty minutes to an hour or more. The truth is I’m mad at myself the most, and less so at the others, but still mildly angry at them. I was upset because none of us, including Judith, took any corrective action. After we discussed it and the blame distributed, we decided to hire an administrative person for the work facility. It will have several advantages, one of which, the techs won’t have to come here to order parts and that alone will save lots of time. I’m promoting Judith to be the company’s administrative director. What I need to do now is find someone to take her place as our office assistant.”

“Art, maybe I can help you with your office assistant.”

“How so?”

“Well, Barbara tells me that her assistant Carolyn is ready to move on. Normally, we’ll wait for an opening with an upper level manager, like Harold. If you want, I’ll have Barbara ask her if she’s interested. If she is, you can interview her. If you hire her, I’ll keep her

on our medical and retirement plans. Knowing you, I'll have accounting bill you accordingly."

"I can live with that. I like your idea. Have her come down, meet with Judith, to get an idea of what we expect, and if she's interested, I'll schedule an interview with us. You should know that I want to keep Pro4ms solvent. When our kids take over, I'm sure they'll merge and want to build it into a colossus. If before then it starts to fail, I will ask you for help. There are lots of people counting on me. As long as we continue to grow slowly, we won't need additional funding. I really hope, when I retire that the company is still independently viable." I add as an afterthought, "I need to meet with everyone, or at least key managers and get them thinking about other possible things our company can do, like we did with business and home safety."

Chapter

Thursday -- August 11, 2022

I'm in my office working on a home safety inspection procedure, when Judith knocks on my door, then enters, and closes the door. Sounding worried, she says, "Art, Barbara said she's sending Carolyn down to talk to me about my position. What's going on?"

Playfully I say, "You're being replaced, simple enough. You do have a new job. You can't do both, we need an office assistant for Helen, me, and you. You do remember, you were promoted yesterday?"

Relaxing, she laughs, "Sorry, for a few moments I forgot. Anyway, who's the woman and is this a done deal?"

"Have I ever done anything behind your back?"

"No!"

"Last night, I told Victoria about my plans. She said Barbara's assistant, that would-be Carolyn, is due for promotion to a senior manager assistant, when a position opens. She suggested I interview her as your replacement. I said, have her see you to get the details of the job. If she is interested, we'll interview her. Judith, she's going to be a replacement. You're not competing with her. Actually, she will be working for you, as well as Helen and me. Barbara knows her people and if she recommends her, I think she'll do well with us. Give her a chance."

"Sorry Art, I forgot I needed to find a replacement. I'll give her a comprehensive rundown."

"Don't forget, you can't do both jobs."

"Right! Sorry for bothering you."

"Stop with the sorry. It's not a bother. If she is agreeable and you like her, schedule an interview with the three of us—you, Helen, and me."

"Will do, Art."

Later, as I leave for my pre-lunch exercise, I pass by Judith and Carolyn in deep discussion. The conversation appears friendly and both are smiling. I give Judith a hand signal that I'm going to the gym, she nods. They continue to talk without interruption.

When I return, Judith informs me, "Art, she'll do fine. I found her to be pleasant, knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and she asked relevant questions. I like her. I'll arrange for an interview, if she's interested and you're okay with it."

I make a spur of the moment decision, “I changed my mind about interviewing her. If she wants the job and meets the qualifications, you hire her. It’s within the scope of your job. You know you have hiring authority now. I would suggest you speak to Barbara, assuming Carolyn is interested, about sharing her until Barbara hires a replacement.” I laugh, “I’ll leave her on my wife’s payroll till she’s with us full time.”

“Are you serious. You want me to hire her?”

“No! Judith, I want you to decide, whether to hire her, or not. It’s your choice. It’s your first management decision. You’re a manager now, of a large company department; well it will be someday. It’s your job. Are you afraid?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Well, face your fears and make your choice. Did she leave a résumé?”

“Yes.”

“I like to take a look at it. Just curious. Don’t wait for any response from me. Hire her if she meets your criterion. I expect you to approve or disapprove Perry’s choice for his administrative assistant. I want you to ensure people in this area are qualified and have a good work ethic. Background checks, verification of previous employment, and their references check out. From now on it’s your departments responsibility, to approve and hire all administrative staff. And to ensure technical staff meets requirements, other than technical. Managers and supervisors will still determine their technical staff’s qualifications. As with administrative staff, you’ll just verify their application is truthful and other related data. Helen and I will still interview managers and supervisors. Okay?”

“Okay, Art, I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will. And your best will be just what we need. I do have faith in you. Just don’t over think things. If you like, I’ll arrange for Mr. Troy to mentor you.”

“Who’s Mr. Troy?”

I laugh, “Helen’s husband. He’s just like me, Mr. Starfield.”

She laughs. “That’s sounds like a good idea. I know Mr. Walters has a super reputation for knowing the ins-and-outs of human resources management. I’ll appreciate you or Helen arranging it.

As I turn to go to my office, Helen arrives from lunch, I suspect. She’s smiling, I’m sure she was with Harold. I stop her. “Helen, I’ve been talking with Judith. After she’s hired the new staff and we have them in place, perhaps you can have Mr. Troy mentor Judith.”

She bursts out laughing, “Will do Mr. Starfield. You’ll of course, clear it with Ms. Starfield.”

“Yes, I will. Helen, I think you should know that I’ve given Judith, or rather her position, the authority to hire her replacement, Perry’s assistant, and other administrative staff company wide. As a partner, do you have any issues with her doing it?”

She thinks about it for several minutes, while we stand there. “I can’t think of a single objection. I agree it’s part of her department’s role.” She laughs, “Besides it’s one less thing you and I will have to do.”

In my office, I give Carolyn’s résumé a quick going over. Carolyn Marie Erthym attended high school and some college in Connecticut. She took several administrative and business courses. Worked at two small companies in Indianapolis. Hired by Starfield Inc. a couple of years ago and moved up through the organization. Mentally, I think she’ll do just fine.”

Chapter

Friday – August 12, 2022

While I'm working on a prospective proposal, Judith, knocks on my door and enters. She asks, "Art, do you have a minute?"

Teasing I say, "For you I have at least two. What's on your mind?"

Appearing mildly concerned, she says, "It's about yours and Helen's assistant."

I correct her, "And yours. She or he will be our PA."

Smiling, she retorts, "Got it. Anyway, I've hired Carolyn. She's scheduled to start in two weeks; the 29th. Is that okay with you?"

I smile and as reassuring as I can, I inform her, "Yes it's okay. Just so you know, you didn't need to get my approval, or Helen's. However, thanks for letting me know that you've hired someone. You might also let Helen know."

Relaxing a little, yet somewhat nervously, she says, "I'll let Helen know."

To comfort her, I add, "Look Judith, don't worry. When a person moves into a position they haven't prepared for, there is a learning curve. I know you can do the job. Just don't let it overwhelm you. You have plenty of support." To lighten the mood, I add, "Worst case we shoot you." It draws a mild laugh. I continue, "Just don't worry. Enjoy the journey, it should be fun and exciting. Yes, every once in a while, you'll make a wrong turn; just regroup, find the right route, and continue. Again, just remember it should be challenging and, yes, fun. If you begin to feel stressed, you need to talk to Helen or me. We didn't put you in the position so you'd fail. We put you there because we believe you can do the job."

Happily, she replies, "Art, you can count on me doing the very best I can. I really do appreciate the promotion and your vote of confidence. Thanks." Now relaxed, she gets up and leaves. I feel so lucky to have staff that are really dedicated and hard working.

Chapter

Tuesday – November 8, 2022

We've finished dinner, our guests, Victoria and I are sitting in the living room. Helen asks, "Victoria, do you have a special reason for inviting us over for dinner tonight and requesting we bring our daughters?"

Martin injects, "Yes, this is unusual for a Tuesday?"

Jerry and Margaret also look puzzled.

Victoria informs them, "The girls are old enough, we could have just invited them, but we felt you would be interested in what we're going to propose." Then Victoria looks at me and she signals me to go ahead.

I turned towards Toni, Christine, and Heather, who we have asked to sit together and state, "I have a proposition for you girls."

Being a smart ass, Toni says, "Cousin, don't you think that's a bit inappropriate?"

Giving it right back to her, I say, "Well, we're thinking of opening a local Mustang Ranch. The place could use three gorgeous girls, so I was wondering if you'd be interested?" Everyone is silent.

Toni says, "Touché. What's the real proposition?"

I'm tempted to say, that's it, but I don't. I inform them Victoria and I were discussing starting a business related to parties and romantic pursuits. Our associates and friends keep asking us to give them party ideas, wishing that we'll actually plan it and also assist them in their romantic endeavors."

I look around and everyone is silent. Victoria takes over, "What Art and I are proposing, is that you girls start a business. It would fit right in with what you're studying in college, that is, the business aspect. It would give you girls the opportunity to put what you learn in school and to use your creative abilities. We'll front startup money and help until it either succeeds or fails."

I hand them the business plan, incorporation, partnership papers, and an overview of what the company would provide.

Victoria tells them, "Take these papers home, review them, and meet with the other girls. Your uncle, my dad will advise you on legal issues. Essentially, it's an opportunity to build a business, as they say, from the ground up. Regardless of what happens, it will be a learning experience."

I suggest, “Girls, look over the papers and get together. If you’re interested, let us know. Victoria and I will meet with you and give you more details. You should also look the papers over with your family, as well as discussing it. We chose you three because of your business pursuits and the degrees you’re working on. What you need to know “is not,” is not spoken with finger quotes, “a simple party planning company, it is much more. Some of the other things we’re proposing is helping a man, or woman, be romantic. In most cases we suspect it will be a guy. For example, say a guy wants to propose. You interview him and find they like to scuba dive. You could arrange for an underwater proposal, using an underwater writing board or something else. Use your imagination. The more you do it, the more you’ll come up with novel ways. You would also arrange for his friends. A boat with a glass bottom could be used for non-scuba divers.”

Victoria continues, “You would help clients plan events and for a guy, help him pick a ring.”

Toni laughs and says, “Like that would work. How would we know what the girl likes.”

Helen and Dolores burst out laughing. Helen explains to the girls, “On the pretext, Art was helping a friend out, he asked us to look at rings that we thought a girl might like. I guess he told the jeweler what price range. We were shown all sorts of rings and encouraged to try them on. That’s how they got our ring size. As Art told me, I mooned over this ring and pretended to show it like I was engage. Harold showed me a video he had taken on his cell phone. I’ll show it to you if you like. That’s the ring Harold got for me.”

Heather informs us, “Yes, Mom still brags about how Harold pulled it off; like she’s doing now. So?”

Victoria informs her, “So, you’ll help a guy find the ring his girl would like. You could take them to a jeweler that will give them a break. Provide them with a letter from the BBB on which appraisers they would recommend. You should encourage them to get the ring appraised. If it doesn’t live up to what the jeweler told them, you should help them get their money back. I’ll have my legal staff advise you. You should also know that there will be a lot of issues. For one, if you expect Art and I to help, you will have to be honest and ethical.”

Christine asks, “Backing up a bit, Victoria, I’ve heard you say, many times, how much you love your rings. Did you also pick your own?”

Smiling Victoria responds, “No. What Art did was look at my jewelry to get an idea of what I liked and with the help of a jeweler, by chance, I used, he picked a ring set he believed I’d like. Then he had it modified, by changing the clear diamond to a blue one, my favorite color. Then he added our birthstones. He also had them inscribed with a very special message. The point is, in each case it was personal.” She looks like she’s lost in thought, then she adds, “I’m sure I’d have loved any ring Art would have gotten me, because I was ready to marry him. These rings were from the heart, which makes them extra special. That will be part of your company’s job; to help people make choices, choices that could only come from the heart.”

I inject, “What you would do is coordinate with a couple of associated jewelers. However, you should not receive any commission. Your responsibility would be to ensure the jeweler, and other firms you use, are trustworthy. You would have them offer your clients special pricing. What I’m saying, any commission they would have given you could be used to lower the cost to the client. That is, your fee, that the client pays, is what you get. And your fee won’t be cheap. You will need to continually ensure your clients are getting the best price. Work only with people you trust and you have done a thorough background check on them.”

Victoria tells the girls and the group, “We’ve only touched on the tip of the iceberg. You’ll need to develop contacts and providers, such as, spas, tailors, hotels, restaurants, specialty shops. The list is almost endless.” She stops, then adds, “We’ve given you a lot to think about.”

Toni asks, “Victoria, I’ve just started my job a short while ago. Would I have to quit?”

Victoria informs her, “Toni, you’ll always have a place with us. What Art and I are offering you, is an opportunity to build a business. You’re going to struggle, have failures, and successes. You’ll learn and grow. If this doesn’t excite you, you shouldn’t even consider doing it. Remember, worst case you fail. There’s nothing wrong with failure, if you learn from it. Besides, you will have financial and professional backing. I’m going to say this again, if after you look over the business plan and discuss it among yourselves, you’re not excited, don’t do it.”

Heather, seems a bit unsure, asks, “Just to make sure I understand, you’re proposing that Christine, Toni, and I form a partnership and start an event planning business of sorts?”

Victoria states, “To reiterate, that’s only part of it. It’s going to be much more. You’ll probably also have a gift shop. You’ll need to let

your imagination run wild.”

John ends the discussion with, “Look girls, take a couple of weeks to review and discuss the plan. You should meet several times. When you’ve decided,” he looks at Victoria, “call Barbara, Victoria’s PA,” Victoria nods her approval, “who will set up another meeting with us.”

The girls look at each other and nod their acceptance. Toni says, “Okay! The three of us will review the plans and meet.” This ends the discussion and we move on to general topics.

Chapter

Wednesday --November 23, 2022

We've finished lunch and have assembled in Victoria's office conference room to discuss the party planning company. Victoria states, "What I have to say is not to scare you. If you think you're working hard now, wait till you're in business. For an entrepreneur, work is 24/7 for the first few years. It's like raising a newborn; it needs constant attention. However, it's immensely rewarding. When I started my business, I had no life, well maybe a little, perhaps a few minutes a day. The first year, I had school and work, that is building my company. My spare time was devoted to golf and exercise, which reduced my stress. And boys, which caused me stress and frustration. The next few years were pretty much the same, except no school, just more work." Pausing and looking at the girls, one at a time, she adds, "You need to know that I loved and love the work. I was building," using finger quotes around, "'My company, my baby,' it was like I was an artist working on a masterpiece. To use the quote, 'It was a labor of love.' What I'm telling you, is that you're going to work you're asses off, but because it's for you, you'll love it. The fact is that you'll be disappointed when the day ends; however, you'll be excitedly looking forward to the next day."

John adds, "Look, you're going to get a lot of help in the form of advice and financial resources. It's important that you know, that, those of us that are going to help have agreed that all decisions will be yours; the success of the company is in your hands. Also, the financial assistance will not come with any strings. Financial assistance will be provided until the company becomes self-sufficient or it fails. The point is, it's your company."

Looking at the other girls, they nod okay, Toni speaks for them, "We've decided to do it. So, now the next question is when and how?"

Victoria takes over, "There are several things you will need to do before you open your door to business. I've arranged for you to have an office in this building and until you're making enough money, it will be rent free. Your offices have been equipped with computers, furniture, and communication services—intercom and phones. Toni, you can plan on starting in a couple of weeks. You need to give two weeks notice. And until Heather and Christine graduate, you'll run the company. Heather and Christine will work when they can. You should all meet at

least once a week. During the startup, most of the work is not time dependent.” Turning to Toni, Victoria adds, “Toni, it’s my intention to keep you on my payroll until the company is up and running. Then all of you will be financially on your own. Before we cut you off, we’ll make sure the company is financially sound. Any questions so far?”

Heather says, “I know there’s more. There’s got to be more. I’ll hold my questions till you’re done.”

Victoria signals me to continue, “Ladies, before you open your doors, you can start by contacting possible service providers, that is, spas, hotels, gift shops, travel agents, jewelers, tailors, beauty parlors, the list is endless. Be thorough and tell them what you want and what they can expect in return. I already have a list of a lot of them, and we’ve used them for our events and for us they did a great job. You will need to do this before you can do any planning. After I give you our list, go through the online yellow page index, use Google, Bing, and other search sites. Look for things or ideas that you may want to consider. For example, you see balloon rides. You might think, if a guy comes to us and ask if we have a romantic idea for a proposal. You could suggest a balloon ride proposal and arrange for a video photographer, with a live transmission to others.”

Christine injects, “Art, wow! Did you just come up with that?”

Replying, “Actually yes. But remember I’ve been doing this for a while. Once you’ve done a few, the ideas will start coming to you. Let me challenge you a moment. Someone mentions the word boat. You think, how can I use a boat for a party or proposal? Okay tell me Christine.”

I can see Christine is in thought, as are the other girls, then she says, “We could charter a boat, hire caterers, if the boat doesn’t have a kitchen, and a band. It could be a party for any occasion or a proposal. I see what you mean.”

Teasing her, I say, “Christine, a boat or ship doesn’t have a kitchen, it has a galley. Although I’m teasing you, keep in mind when you deal with people in certain fields and backgrounds, that their vocabulary may be different from yours. Nevertheless, you’re grasping the concept. Another important aspect is the running of the actual business. As you begin, you will need to meet with Uncle John for legal advice and help on developing contracts. Meet with Peter or Victoria for business matters. You’re important to us and we’ll do everything we can to help you be successful. When you start to hire personnel, you should meet with Mr. Troy.” Everyone laughs, they know who I mean. “A very

important person you will need to talk to is Gale Storm. She knows how to make a good record of events and in the beginning, before you have your own staff or provider, she'll probably let one of her people moonlight for you. From what she's done for Victoria, they're really very, very good. Toni, I would suggest you have Victoria introduce you to her when you start working here."

Looking at Victoria, Toni asks, "Is that all right with you cousin?" Victoria nods her acceptance.

I start to laugh, they all look at me, I state, "You have one major problem." I stop.

After several seconds, Victoria glares, then demands, "Knock the teasing crap off Art. What's the major problem?"

I chuckle and inform them, "They need to come up with a company name before the papers are signed and they hang their placard on the door." They all acknowledge with a bit of laughter and head nods.

Heather says, "We need a name. I haven't given it any thought. Has anyone given it any thought?" Everyone shakes their head.

Victoria ends the meeting with, "I know there's a lot more to discuss. For now, ladies, go your separate ways. Make a list of questions. Make a list of names. If any of us think of a name, we'll contact one of you to put on your list, if you like it; otherwise trash can it. Remember it's your decision. You should meet without us and decide things, like the name, who will do what, and other appropriate items. We can meet again, if necessary, in a month or two." We all acknowledge and begin to depart.

Chapter

Thursday – August 25, 2023

I am in my office, busy with developing a maintenance procedure for a central plant air conditioning system, that includes ice making equipment and storage. The ice is made during cheaper off-peak hours and is used for cooling during high usage cost hours. My intercom buzzes.

“Yes, Carolyn. What’s up?”

“Mrs. Townsmith is on the phone for you. I think it’s your grandmother, although her voice sounds younger. Anyway, she would like to talk to you, if you’re not busy.”

I wonder, her voice is younger, and she is giving me an option, that doesn’t sound like Grandma. I quickly debate if I should take the call. That’s all I need right now, a ration of shit from Grandma. To avoid her wrath later, I tell Carolyn, “Okay! I got it.”

I pick it up, “Hi Grandma. What can your humble grandson do for you?” Laughter ensues at the other end.

“Hi Art.” It’s not Grandma, I’m flooded with relief. Then I worry, who the hell is using Grandma’s name and why? I get the answer without asking. “It Sandy. You know Thomas’s wife. You were at our wedding and his best man.”

After I stop laughing, “Yes, of course. I was just caught off guard. How is everything in your household and world going. Is there something I can do for you?”

Noting a happy tone to her response, “Everything is absolutely great. I need to thank you sometime for introducing me to Thomas. Art, maybe, there is something you can do. While Thomas and I were talking, he mentioned that you and Victoria were considering adopting again.”

Wondering what’s coming next, I reply, “Yes, we’ve discussed it. We’re not sure. We don’t know if we’re ready or what age to consider. You know that finance is not an issue. We’re not sure if the other kids would want us to. It’s up in the air, so to speak.”

Sounding concern and caring, “I understand. Adoption has a lot of responsibilities, which I’m sure Victoria and you already know. Let me get to the point. Our agency has just gotten two children, ages two and four, a boy, he’s the older one, and a girl. They need a family that will love them the way your family loves one another. Would you at least meet them? I could arrange for them to be brought to your home, then you could decide.”

“Sandra you’re playing me. You know if I see them, I’m in trouble. I’ll probably accept them immediately, but it will have to be a unanimous decision of all our kids and Victoria. By the way, it’s your family too.”

I can sense a bit of relief in her voice, “I understand. When can I bring them over?”

Very concerned, I respond, “Not so fast. I need to check with Victoria. What are you going to tell them about the visit? I don’t want you to say, ‘we’re considering adopting them.’ I don’t want us manipulated into this, and equally bad, disappointing them.”

She’s quiet for several minutes, “I understand. I’ll tell them I need to make a stop at a friend’s home, for a while. Because I’m going to be there a long time, they’ll come with me and meet the people that live there. I can go off with Grace while you meet them.”

“Makes sense. Okay. Let me meet with Victoria. I’ll call you back. When would you bring them over and where are you going to tell them is their destination?”

“We’ve lined up foster parents. I’ll arrange to take them there afterwards. I promise they won’t know you’re considering them for adoption.”

“Acceptable. Like I said, I don’t want to be pushed into this. I’ll call you back shortly. Use your mobile phone and call me back now on my cell phone.” Why I didn’t add her to my contact list the last time she called, I don’t know. Nevertheless, when she calls, it will register her cell number, and I’ll put it in my contact list, where it should’ve already been. Moments after I disconnect, my phone rings, I answer, “Sandra?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll call you, after I spoken to Victoria. Bye.” I quickly put her into my contact list.

As I walk past Carolyn, I inform her, “I’m going up to see Victoria. I have my cell. Call if anything urgent happens.”

“Got it. Will you be gone long? Is something wrong?”

Cheerfully, I tell her, “Nothing’s wrong. I have no idea how long I’ll be. Depends on what she’s doing and how fast I can get in to see her.” Before I exit, I laugh, “Carolyn, FYI, the caller wasn’t Grandma, it was my Aunt Sandy.”

She laughs, “No wonder she sounded young and gave you a choice. Would you like me to alert Barbara?”

“Good idea. Thanks! Tell her it’s an important family matter, but not a problem. Just a future consideration.”

“Sure thing.”

I leave and head for the elevator. Standing in her office doorway is my love. Her hands are on her hips. “What took you so long?” I can see the administrative staff wants to laugh. It only took me a minute to get here.

Teasingly, I say, “Get someone to soup up your elevator, it so slow.”

Registering a smile, “Come in. What’s so important, that you need to talk to me now?”

As I enter her office and close the door behind me, she turns and wraps her arms around me. We kiss passionately. She informs me, “I’m free for an hour or so. Shall we?”

“Why do you always do this to me?”

“Do what? It simple enough. Either you do or don’t”

“No, it’s not. I want too, but I promised someone, I’d call her, after I spoke to you, and I don’t know how long we will talk. If we finish quickly, I’ll make the call and then take you up on your offer. Otherwise, we’ll have to see if we can.”

“Fine! What is it you need to discuss?”

Baiting her, I say, “Mrs. Townsmith called.” I don’t get to explain.

Responding like I expected, “Oh, you poor boy. What did you do? Why’d she call?”

“You didn’t let me finish. It wasn’t Grandma.” She looks puzzled. I continue, “It was Thomas’s wife, Sandra.”

She starts to laugh, “I keep forgetting there is another Mrs. Townsmith now. Okay, what did she want?”

“She called to ask if we want to adopt again. She has a four-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl—brother and sister. She said she would bring them over on the pretext of visiting Grace, on their way to the foster parents, they’ll be living with. I told her we didn’t want to be manipulated into this and certainly didn’t want to dash the children’s hopes.”

Concerned, Victoria responds, “What about our kids? How would they feel?”

“Exactly! That’s why I made her arrange the visit in this way, if we take it. Our children can get to meet them. After their gone, we can ask them how they would feel about having them joining our family, that is, if you and I decide we’d want them.”

Acknowledging her acceptance, “You’ve thought this out. Go

ahead and set up the meeting. Do it quickly. I want my debt payment time.”

I call Sandra back and make the arrangements for Saturday. Our plans for this weekend is to spend it, extended family free. Grandpa and Grandma Townsmith are spending the weekend in Vegas with Elizabeth’s sister and her husband. That done, we utilize her private room. I pay the debt down. As I leave, Barbara says, “Come again Mr. Zwyx.”

I reply, “I always like to come here.” The girls giggle, I ask, “When are you going to call me Art? You’re like family.”

“In this environment, never, Mr. Zwyx.”

I smile and roll my eyes, “Have it your way.” The elevator arrives, and I depart.

“The End”

Please email comments: victoria@pastuart.com