

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Miriam Elliott sat at a table overlooking the central plaza in the Northern Sicilian town of Taormina. The sun was beginning to sink toward the horizon, and the central plaza was bathed in a reddish light, which reflected off the white-washed church and steeple to the left of her table. The table was located outside a restaurant named La Dolce Viaggi; which looked quite old and was built of stone and mortar the color of sienna. The hibiscus trees, which bordered the church, wafted a heady perfume into the air, and a small band played music on the other side of the piazza.

She and Suzanne Gossett were nearing the end of their cruise; they would be departing tomorrow evening for the port of Calcavecchia, just outside Rome. As they sipped espressos and talked about their stops in Rhodes, Mykonos, Santorini, Athens and Capri, Miriam felt more alive than she had in the past twenty years.

Maybe this trip was what she needed, after all. She felt as if she shed twenty years of care, worry and concern. Somehow, she felt as though she were ready to put aside her previous existence, and start living again. She was suddenly reminded of one of her favorite poems, a poem by William Wordsworth that spoke to her across the years:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in nature that is ours,
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.

The sun and the sea had helped slough off her previous life, and she felt like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. Somewhere on the sea, or maybe up the hillside to Taormina, she'd finally come to realize it was time to say good-bye to Richard.

In Chicago, it was just past mid-day, as Julie Christian sat at her desk preparing schedules for a Board meeting that was called for Tuesday morning. The meeting was unexpected, and Kazmarek, who wanted to be prepared for any eventuality, asked her to prepare a number of schedules, just in case the need arose. Kazmarek was famous for wanting all sorts of schedules prepared at the last minute. Normally, Julie would have delegated this sort of thing to one of the people working for her, but she was concerned about the tight deadlines, and wanted the numbers to be correct.

As she sat assembling the numbers from various sources, Julie remembered that she hadn't been in the office on the weekend for quite some time. It hadn't been that way before, however. When she started working for Kazmarek and Lay, she'd put in countless hours of overtime; sometimes even pulling all-nighters to get things completed on-time. Back then, she wanted to prove to Kazmarek that she was as capable as he was, maybe even better. It bothered her whenever Kazmarek or Lay made dismissive comments about her abilities; after all she was "just a woman" to them. So she worked, and plotted, and out-hustled them all; she learned how to steel herself against the comments, how to intimidate people to get her way, how to sacrifice good people in order to get ahead; in order to show them.

She remembered her ex-husband complaining that she'd become distant and cold, even hard. She originally took this to be a compliment. After months of bickering and fighting, their marriage ended, not with a bang, but with a whimper. He left a note that morning; the last morning she'd seen him. "You've changed so much over the past few years; I didn't want to be married to a competitor any longer." That was it, no more; no fights, no arguments, no good-bye.

She looked out the window to her office; an office that once had an unobstructed view of the city, but was now hemmed-in on all sides by larger, more recent buildings. As she looked out the window, Julie Christian knew that her life was constricted, bound-in by her competitiveness, her desire to show the men at NexGen that she was just as good as they were. Somewhere along the way, the competitiveness turned to hatred, and lately to bitterness as she reflected on her barren life.

Dennis Kazmarek drove his red Ferrari south on Lake Shore Drive, heading into downtown. He was barely going past seventy, which meant that he was still in third gear. Too bad the speed limits were set so ridiculously low; he yearned to open the car up to its full potential. 'That's the trouble with people who think too small; they're afraid to let those of us who think big really open up,' thought Kazmarek as he down-shifted to respond to a slow down ahead.

“Well the meeting on Tuesday ought to be fun; I’ll bet that asshole Wozniak finally steps down as Chairman, so that I can take over. If not, I’ll suggest at the meeting that he step down; he hasn’t done a damn thing in years, and he’s costing the company a fair amount of money in salary and benefits. Well, either way, I’ll be in the catbird’s seat on Tuesday, and I can finally do what I want without having to get approval from him, even if it has been a rubber-stamp approval for the past several years.” Kazmarek up-shifted again, and accelerated past several cars in the right lane. Finally, he’d be able to run his own show, and then he’d demonstrate to all the nay-sayers, what a man of vision and power could accomplish.

He made a mental note to follow-up on the PR piece about that Elliott kid when he arrived at the office on Monday. He guessed that the damned lawyers were holding it up for some reason. “More people with limited vision,” thought Kazmarek as he sped through traffic.

Later that evening, Woz sat at his desk preparing his comments for the NexGen Board meeting that he’d called for Tuesday. He wanted to make sure that he was ready for the meeting, that he presented things properly and said the right things. So much was riding on this meeting; so many people had a stake in the outcome that he wanted to be absolutely prepared. As he rehearsed his speech to himself, he thought back to his days when he was a boy growing up in Southern California, to his mom and dad, and to what they’d taught him about being socially responsible. Somehow over the past few years, he’d forgotten that being responsible wasn’t always easy, and that good things had to be earned. He had some lost time to make up for. When he was finished, he walked outside to find his friend Adam, and review what he’d written.

Jacob Scott sat in his darkened condominium at Lake Point Towers and stared out the window overlooking Lake Michigan. Darkness was falling, and he was able to open the shades and take off his sunglasses. The room was opulently furnished in leather, chrome and exotic woods. The big screen television sat across from the windows, and the stereo set was playing some sort of Musak.

Scott held a .38 caliber revolver in his hand, slowly spinning the barrel, as he looked in horror at his recent purchase. Every so often, he picked up his hand and pointed the barrel of the gun at his face. “Do it,” he thought, “do it, you chicken-shit.” He sat looking at the gun, mired in self-loathing as tears streamed down his face. “Do it,” he repeated over and over again, like some mantra to a deaf pagan god.

Adam Limus sat on the bench by the pond, reading a book; his face serene, as the dying light framed him as if in a painting, and silently read a poem. At some point, he began to read aloud

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
Their sober wishes never learned to stray,
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet ev'n these bones, from insult to protect,
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

As Woz walked toward Adam's house, he stopped and listened as his friend read a poem. He'd known Adam for over fifteen years, and had grown to respect and admire him. Woz alone knew Adam's secrets, and hoped that soon his friend's anguish would come to an end.

As he walked back into the house, Woz heard Adam read the final stanza of the poem.

No further seeks his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(These they alike in trembling hopes repose,
The bosom of His Father and his God.