



# TALES OF THE STORAGE SPACE

*The saga of a Brooklyn building, down on its luck, who was once so much more...  
Originally told in short, weekly blog posts.*

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**BELOW ARE PARTS (POSTS) 1-30 OF A TOTAL OF 150.**



## PART 1

The Storage Space would have yawned, rattling each of its individual storage units, if only a building could yawn. Really it was just too tiresome. Here was yet another twenty-something girl with as much grace as a wild boar, clanging those horrid metal walls they'd installed all over the place when the poor, long-suffering Storage Space had become a storage space. Going on and on about what the utterly inarticulate thing could only refer to as her "stuff" and how she couldn't possibly leave it in a storage unit. Snibbling on the shoulder of the scrawny youth next to her who held a box neatly labeled...you guessed it..."stuff." The poor Storage Space was utterly overcome by the excruciating tedium of it all. Really it was too, too much! How on earth was a truly ancient old building supposed to get its sleep?

To sleep. To dream. Dream of a time when all the young people didn't look so damn...generic. These two? The idiot youth with a countenance as well animated as a mannequin's? Snibbler Girl, glued to his shoulder? Their clothes... Could be from any decade whatsoever in either the 20th or the 21st centuries. Any decade at all when boring people who didn't know any better wore such "stuff." Previously those who did know better would have held such people in the utter contempt they deserved. But now, deep into the 21st Century, people who knew better no longer existed, and everybody looked like this.

The Storage Space hadn't always been a storage space. Oh, no. When first built...at a time when ladies in long, elegant gowns promenaded down Brooklyn's wide walkways...the Storage Space had been Brooklyn's grandest old theatre. People knew how to dress then! Not just the audience but most especially those precious darlings on the Storage Space's grand old, mahogany stage. But there was something about that time, something left over. Never mind. The Storage Space wouldn't think about it.

The Snibbler was banging those horrid metal walls again, this time with her fists. Wearily, having little choice, the Storage Space listened in...

"Couldn't we try a little longer? I promise not to be so needy this time," whined the Snibbler.

Oh, no, it couldn't be, thought the Storage Space. That sexless mannequin had been...her lover?

"It's for the best, Jennifer," said the Mannequin.



## PART 2

"For the best." Jennifer hated those words. In the three years she'd known Martin, she'd never, ever heard him use them unless it was really for the worst. Like the first of many times he said their going out separately and maintaining their relationships with their friends was "for the best." Or when he said he needed time to himself to prepare for his next day at work, even though they were living together, was "for the best." Or that she should develop some...separate...interests of her own. The list was endless.

It was all just like her parents' terrible abuse. They'd had absolutely no time for Jennifer, even though she was an only child. Sure, they'd done a lot with her, but they always wanted to do other things away from her too. For no reason. And they were always going on about how they'd spoiled her. Ridiculous. People were so unreasonable.

Like Martin. How could she possibly live without him? Or all her stuff she'd be forced to keep in this miserable storage unit if she had to move out of Martin's place. Her stuff...her precious, precious stuff! Martin was so unreasonable.

Jennifer stopped crying on his shoulder and looked up at Martin. Nothing. No emotion whatsoever. If she jumped off the roof would his expression remain the same?

"Let's finish sorting you here," he said. "Shall we?"

That British accent. It was yet another thing about Martin that Jennifer hated. If she thought about it, there wasn't anything about Martin that she didn't hate. But that wasn't the point.

How could she get him back?

She stood apart from him.

The idiot started putting her precious stuff in the damned storage unit!

"Martin..." She said it slow and sexy. "There is one last little thing we didn't do, something we really should have thought of before leaving your apartment..."

Martin rearranged the stuff of Jennifer's he'd already put in the dark little cubicle of a room that was her storage unit. Then he looked back at Jennifer.

Jennifer bit her lip and hooked a thumb into the hem of her T-shirt, slowly tugging it downward till her breasts started to pop out of the top.

Martin said, "I think we'll be able to fit more boxes in if we rearrange them like I just did." Turning away from her, he tossed the magnificent vintage chair she'd found on the street back out of the unit. "This piece of junk you can just bin somewhere on your way out." He went back to cramming more of her precious stuff into what she had hoped he'd convert into a private little love nest...

God! He wasn't any good in bed anyway, never had been. Sex had always felt like something he checked off a stupid to-do list, right up there with brushing his teeth...or moving all her stuff into a damned storage unit.

She'd have to think of something else.



## PART 3

Martin checked getting rid of Jennifer's "stuff" off his trusty to-do list. Of course she'd tried everything possible to stop him: tears, sex, even blackmailing him about that business at work he should never have told her about. But he'd gotten all her "stuff" out anyway. In the end, when he left her in front of her new storage unit, it had reminded him of having sex with her. He'd always had to leave her with that same stupid-hungry look on her face, since there was no satisfying her, and he had to brush his teeth and get some sleep. Was there a chance in hell that she'd make good on her threat to rat him out at work? He didn't think so.

He looked up from his phone when the light changed and stepped into the crosswalk.

Intersection of Flatbush and Atlantic. Hours since his last vanilla latte; in that regard he was way off schedule. Couldn't see it, but knew there was a Starbucks hidden in the Atlantic Center/Terminal shopping complex. Martin knew the location of every Starbucks in Brooklyn.

That business at work... He'd only taken a little money.

Chap in Starbucks... "guy," Martin corrected himself... looked at Martin like he had two heads when he ordered his vanilla latte. Never heard a Brit speak? What was the big deal with pronouncing every "r"?

That business at work... So what if it was a charitable organization?

Martin thumbed his phone back to life while the idiot who'd apparently never heard a British accent struggled with his vanilla latte order. Next on Martin's trusty to-do list was calling Karen to see if she could come over Saturday night now that he'd gotten the keys back from Jennifer. He didn't need sex as often as Jennifer did, but every Saturday night he did like to be able to check it off his list. Karen, a long-time friend-with-benefits, was perfect. Martin had only gotten involved with Jennifer because Karen had gotten married, but that had broken up a week ago. That's when he'd told Jennifer she had to move out.



## PART 4

Karen ran her fingers over ancient wooden carvings, which had lost all the finish that once protected them. They surrounded the entrance to the storage space building she stood in front of. Karen couldn't bring herself to go inside. Every time she started, she stroked the naked wood instead. The way Karen ran her fingers over the storage space building reminded her of how her husband, Frank, ran his fingers over her naked body.

But no more.

Karen looked down at the few boxes stacked in and on top of her shopping cart. That and her luggage were all she'd been able to get out of the apartment she'd shared with her soon-to-be ex-husband, Frank. At least in a single trip.

And she wasn't going back.

In those few boxes were the few physical objects Karen held dear, only because they reminded her of people, now dead, who she still held dear. Things like a small metal horse on wheels with almost all its paint chipped off that had been her grandfather's. And her parents' high-school yearbook that Karen had dog-eared since their fatal car accident on the way to a high school reunion. And, very carefully wrapped because it could so easily shatter into a million pieces, the glass "friends forever" plaque with which she hoped to preserve the memory of what had been the greatest friendship of her life, with Marie.

Though Marie wasn't technically dead.

Karen gulped back the pain and looked back up at the storage space building. She caressed another ancient carving next to its entrance. What had this grand old building been before? Clearly it hadn't always been a storage space. The worn wood was somehow soft, almost like flannel, and warm from the sun. Poor old building. Hundreds of years old. So many tales to tell.

If only it could speak.

And suddenly, at the thought of all this old building had seen but couldn't possibly tell anyone, Karen cried. It was the first time she'd cried since she'd burst in on Frank and her "friends forever" Marie in bed. And what was she crying for? Her soon-to-be ex-husband, Frank? Her never-to-be-friends-again

Marie? Her own utterly broken heart? No. Instead, however crazily, Karen sank down until she sat on the sidewalk, sobbing for a building that couldn't speak.

She tried to analyze her feelings. Did she, like the building, feel she could never speak again since Frank would no longer be there to hear anything she had to say?

Karen got back to her feet, dusted herself off, and shook her head. Nonsense. And anyway it didn't matter. She dried her eyes with her shirt sleeves and plowed through the entrance with her shopping cart full of boxes and her luggage.

Beady eyes glittered in the gloom behind the reception counter. Karen immediately thought of a rat. A very big rat. Still, feeling she had little choice, she pushed and pulled her things toward the counter.

The rat seemed to ooze over the reception counter to meet her, only coming up to her eye level after he snatched the top box from Karen's shopping cart, fumbled, and dropped it.

Karen could hear Marie's "friends forever" plaque shatter into a million pieces.

"That'll be extra for my cleaning up the mess," said the rat.

Karen looked at a floor that obviously hadn't been cleaned anytime recently, but showed no signs of the pieces of that plaque he'd broken.

The rat's eyes opened wide as he looked her over before asking the obvious: "Need a unit?"

Karen fought back the urge to respond with several comments, including, "My, my, what big eyes you now have." Instead she simply said, "Yes."



## PART 5

Irwin smiled at "Karen," as he read her name while she filled out the forms for a storage unit. Irwin figured he was one smart cookie, and reading the paperwork upside down was just one of his many smart moves. But he had other tricks up his sleeve. Karen had already fallen for the one about his charging extra to clean up the mess when he appeared to be helpful so he could drop a box. Irwin sneaked another look at her titties. It was all he could do to keep from giggling aloud. That damn Spook would be so jealous if he knew what Irwin was going to be able to do to Karen if Irwin played his cards right. After all, there were some things smart-ass spooks just couldn't do because they just didn't have real bodies.

And Irwin always played his cards right.

Like right now: this was a chance to touch them titties "accidentally" when he grabbed her arms, which he did, and con her out of more money besides. "Now hold on a minute, there."

She jerked back from him. Frigid bitch. He muttered something about being sorry, but secretly noted that her reaction proved she deserved what he was going to do to her eventually. "I just wanted to point out," he went on, "that you'll need a much bigger unit for all this."

Karen looked like she was going to bolt. Some did. Irwin had seen this. But Irwin had learned. He knew exactly what to do. "Again, sorry. I...I don't like to mention this but..." He gave his best, well-practiced, sheepish, innocent smile. "...you see I have this disability. It explains my dropping your box and what I just did completely by accident when I grabbed your arms to keep you from filling out the forms all wrong and having to start over again."

Suddenly, instead of watching him like a goddamned hawk, Karen seemed to be looking through him. "What got broken..." Irwin couldn't figure out why she trailed off. She looked like she'd gotten some food caught in her throat. "What got broken was...really...already broken. Already...and forever... gone."

There was a silence. A rat scurried along a floorboard till it found a hole it could slither through. Karen still seemed to be looking through Irwin. He tested it by letting his gaze drop to her titties again. No reaction.



Then, suddenly, she went back to watching poor Irwin like a goddamned hawk and asking all kinds of questions about if she'd ever have to come back into the storage space in person, except when she took her boxes out, and could she pay her monthly bill for her unit online and all kinds of other stupid shit.



## PART 6

The Storage Space was appalled...simply appalled. It would have stormed off in a huff, if only a building could storm off in a huff.

If only, the Storage Space thought sadly, a building could storm off at all...or walk off...or even somehow manage to crawl away, no matter how deplorably undignified...rather than suffer one more second of all this.

If a building could have shuddered, the Storage Space would have shuddered.

Still, it finally conceded, all buildings...even those who were, unlike the Storage Space, still grand,...had rats. But the size of this one!

Most unfortunately, the Storage Space had noticed Le Grand Rat before, but chose not to think about it. Really it was beneath its dignity to even notice, let alone recognize the existence of, such a creature.

But this time was different. Because of the woman who was so close to Le Grand Rat and in real danger.

If it had been The Snibbler, that horrible twenty-something named Jennifer, or her ex-lover, The Mannequin Martin, the Storage Space wouldn't have cared one bit.

But this woman was different. Not only had she seen, but she had caressed the once-grand carvings around the once-grand entrance from when the Storage Space had been a magnificent old theatre till, if a building could cry, it would have cried with gratitude. This Karen knew it hadn't always been a storage space!

Suddenly Le Grand Rat touched Karen.

Again the Storage Space would have shuddered if it only could.

Karen jumped back.

The rat spoke: "I just wanted to give you the keys to your new storage unit. I can't help it if I have this disability."

But the Storage Space wasn't really paying attention to it anymore. Because when Le Grand Rat touched Karen and the Storage Space had wanted to shudder...something else had shuddered, something left over from long, long ago.

The Storage Space could see him now, resplendent in his Elizabethan finery, the consummate Shakespearean actor. Until...

Karen had a lot more to worry about than Le Grand Rat.



## PART 7

Jennifer peeked around the corner of the Starbucks closest to Martin's apartment. No, not yet. She could only hope this ambush went better than the one at work the day before. At least she could dress as she pleased for this one. But, while she waited for Martin to stop by on the way home from the gym for yet another fucking vanilla latte, all Jennifer could do was fume about the day before.

Her cubicle at the charitable organization gave her a perfect view of Martin leaving his cubicle on one side of her...and Ms. Morales, their boss, leaving her office from the other side. Jennifer had waited all week, but finally they'd both headed toward each other. She had intercepted Ms. Morales and told her she had something very important to tell her about the misconduct of a fellow employee...just before Martin came within earshot. Jennifer was sure Martin would have stopped her from telling their boss about all the money he had stolen...and, later, agreed to let her move back in to shut her up...if only Ms. Morales had been at all reasonable.

But no, their boss, that antique who wouldn't even let them call her by her first name, had completely ignored what Jennifer said. Instead of responding appropriately she'd asked, just as Martin came within earshot, if Jennifer had managed to take any time out of her busy day to do anything for the children starving in Africa. As if she had any time to do her job in the midst of worrying about all her precious stuff left in that miserable storage unit!

If Ms. Morales was going to be so unreasonably selfish, she didn't even deserve to know about the gobs of money Martin had stolen.

Martin. At last. On his way back from the gym. Jennifer snapped back into the present, made sure she wasn't visible to him as she hid behind the Starbucks, and fussed with the bottom of the skintight skirt that just barely covered her butt. No, she wasn't fool enough to intercept him before he got his fucking vanilla latte. Yes, it was true that sex hadn't worked at the storage unit, but this was Saturday night...when even Martin wanted to be able to check getting laid off his to-do list.

She waited.

But when he came out he was on the phone. Better not to interrupt him. She'd have to circle around the block and "accidentally" run in to him right in front of his apartment. She ducked down a side street.

But not before hearing Martin saying into his phone, "Maybe it was for the best. I can't wait to see you!"

"For the best." God, how she hated Martin. But that wasn't the point. She had to get him back.

Jennifer hurried, worried she wouldn't make it around the block before he disappeared into his garden apartment. Every second was critical. She looked over her shoulder through a vacant lot, straining to see if Martin was off the phone yet...and fell on her face.

"Sorry. Looking for someone and didn't see you." The guy who'd bumped into her was the hottest she'd ever seen. Though he did have a nasty-looking scar on one cheek. After he helped Jennifer to her feet he sat on the curb, put his head in his hands, and started to sob.

Jennifer rushed on. But as she swung around the corner she saw Martin close the door of his garden apartment behind him.

So much for the "accidental" meeting. She'd have to ring his bell. She'd tell him that she'd rat him out to Ms. Morales if he didn't let her in...though she'd decided she would never talk to that bitch again if she could help it.

While rehearsing her lie and brushing some dirt off from her fall, she spotted the hottest looking woman she'd ever seen. But, as the woman got closer, Jennifer saw tears streaming down her otherwise perfectly beautiful face, and noticed she was lugging luggage behind her.

If a woman like that could get dumped...and on a Saturday night? Jennifer felt smug. But she was still worried about whether Martin would let her in.

The woman stopped in front of Martin's building. She straightened herself forcibly and blinked back her tears. Then she walked to Martin's door and rang the bell. Martin let her right in.

First thing Monday morning, Jennifer decided, she'd demand an appointment to talk to Ms. Morales.



## PART 8

Martin's once-lost, now-reclaimed, friend-with-benefits...and oh what benefits! As he ushered her in through the front door of his garden apartment, Martin mentally checked getting laid Saturday night off his list. But when he saw the luggage Karen was pulling in behind her, he almost dropped his vanilla latte.

Damn Yankees! With all he owed that loan shark who funded his gambling, he couldn't afford to replace a single dropped vanilla latte.

Still startled, but having saved the vanilla latte, he helped Karen with her luggage. "Lots of...sex toys? Skimpy lingerie?"

She looked down.

Dirty enough to embarrass a sensuous bae like Karen?

Martin grinned.

Karen collapsed into the mustard-colored cushions of one of his vintage Danish Modern armchairs. He would have preferred the matching sofa; it could have all started with him "comforting" her, assuring her that he wouldn't think less of her because she'd never resorted...no, wrong word...never had the great idea of bringing sex toys and skimpy lingerie before.

She looked up at him. Were those tears in her eyes? Was she that glad to see him?

He dropped the luggage on the other side of the room, actually ran toward Karen, then slid across the floor till he was seated by her knees. It reminded him of the American custom of sliding into home plate. But this was one Americanism a "cold Brit" like Martin could pull off. It also reminded him yet again of those damn Yankees and how much he owed that dangerous loan shark. But he brushed that thought aside as he stroked Karen's thigh, starting with outer but planning to move quickly to inner. "Gobsmacked to see me again, is it?"

She smiled, though a little weakly, and took his hand. "Martin, Martin. It was so easy between us, wasn't it?"

Martin was distracted for a moment when he thought he heard a moan. Fearing Jennifer, he looked at the little window next to the door. Yup, he'd forgotten to close the curtain after letting Karen in. But what he thought he saw instead of Jennifer was the face of a man with a scar on one cheek. A moment later it was gone. He figured he must be imagining things and turned back to Karen.

Karen squeezed his hand. Then she looked down again. The "stuff," to use Jennifer's pet term, in her luggage? Funny, Karen in bed was anything but shy. He used the hand she wasn't holding to stroke her other thigh, planning to move upwards this time.

But Karen grabbed that hand too and squeezed both. "I...owe you an apology."

Now he started to worry. That's exactly what she'd said the night he'd thought he was going to get laid as usual, but she'd only come over to tell him in person that she was marrying some guy named Frank. Some guy Martin had never even met. Now he squeezed her hands back but knew it was a bit too hard. "You're going back to Frank?"

"No. Not that. Not ever." But she teared up, choked up, and bit her lip. Finally she squeezed his hands, almost as hard as he'd just squeezed hers. "I was apologizing to you for my luggage. I had no right..."

"Your cases? What's in them?"

"Everything I have left that I didn't put in storage."

"You're..."

"Moving in, just...for a little while. I'll find someplace else. Obviously I should have asked you first but..."

Martin, fearing Jennifer again, thought he heard a faint shrieking outside, but dismissed it.

"I'll contribute toward the rent. I just couldn't stand to be completely alone and don't have any place else to go. I...know it's pathetic."

Bollocks! Right after getting rid of Jennifer? This he wasn't prepared for. Then again... Karen... And some more money coming in...

Something else he was trying to remember... In all these years he'd only met that loan shark in person once...but hadn't he had a scar on his face?



## PART 9

Karen knew where Martin was headed. Finally she released his hands. One immediately shot up to her breasts; the other snaked between her legs and headed toward her clit.

Whore, she thought of herself. You'd do this just to delay being alone?

Martin's hands trembled; Frank's never had. She could hear Martin catch his breath, then inhale deeply. Frank would never have been so obvious, so transparent.

Martin found her clit.

Yet... She and Martin had been friends, good friends. Having sex with him was a little shallow, perhaps. But why not?

What a mixture of feelings. She remembered the first time with Martin, like two giggling kids who'd just discovered a whole new dimension to playing doctor. But then she remembered the first time with Frank. The strength of his voice. The passion in his hands. Crying when she came. Looking deep into Frank's eyes and thinking she could see infinity.

Sex with Frank made sex with Martin a shallow joke. But sex with Frank had a power that was dangerous and made her feel vulnerable, like some highly addictive drug. Sex with Martin was even a little bit funny, something that she had to admit she could feel a bit smug and aloof about. It was the absolute, the ultimate, in safe sex.

Karen moaned as Martin got her on the floor and started taking both of their clothes off.

Vanilla latte kisses. Karen smiled; she'd almost forgotten. Playful, she ruffled his hair. He smiled, but then took the opening her raised arm gave him to bury his face in her breasts, so he didn't see her smile turn into a wince of pain. She'd seen Frank do that when she caught him in bed with her forever-lost friend Marie.

Martin got his pants off. He was beautiful; Karen had to give him that. But the real beauty about being with him? Karen tested herself, envisioning walking in on Martin in bed with her ex-friend Marie. The real beauty about being with him was that she could walk in on him in bed with Marie, six orangutans, and the odd kangaroo. Really and truly she wouldn't care. For that alone Karen grabbed his face and gave him a kiss that threatened to remove his tongue.



Was that Martin's long, almost agonized groan? But he was stopping and pulling away, giving the front door a sharp look.

Greedy now, Karen knew where to touch him to make him forget about the front door, the back door, or any other kind of door.

There was a sharp thud at the front door.

Martin, though naked, leapt to his feet.

Another even sharper thud.

Karen pulled some clothing over herself without thinking.

The front door swung open and hit the wall so hard Karen could feel the reverberations in her bones. But she didn't turn toward it, because she was transfixed by the look of sheer, unadulterated terror on Martin's face.

"Frank?" Martin choked out.

Her Frank, thought Karen. No, that was impossible. Martin never met her Frank.

Then she heard a voice there was no mistaking, its roar belying its eloquent anguish: "Karen, how could you?"



## PART 10

Frank's shoulder and right foot hurt real bad from kicking that fuckin' door in. Hadn't been as fuckin' easy as William Hurt had made it look in *Body Heat*. And Kathleen Turner wasn't standing by the stairs, waiting for him. Instead Karen had bolted out the back door.

That final kick had made everything he ever did in professional football feel like nothing. Might have broken something, but even that pain was fuck all compared to what he felt in his heart.

Karen with another man, suckin' face like that? How would she have put it? It was a sight he simply couldn't bear. Sure, he'd let that witch Marie pour enough booze down his throat to sink a fuckin' ship and seduce him, but Karen was...elegant, fine, pure. Like his grandma's china that he'd loved as a kid, but broken.

Karen. How the fuck was he supposed to live without Karen?

Tortured, it took him awhile to notice that the guy, who was shaking like a little kid, was also backing toward the rear door. Pretty boy. Unlike Frank, this guy had no scar on his face. But he was scrawny so fugettaboutit. Frank knew he could tackle him easy. Naked pretty boy. Frank found himself comparing dick sizes. No contest. But somethin' about that pretty-boy face. Did Frank know this guy? Yet he knew he'd never met Karen's "friend" Martin. She'd told him about him, sure. Karen was like that, totally honest. She'd even told him where Martin lived. Not the exact address, but close enough that Frank could tail her to it.

Karen...

Frank took a giant step toward the rear door.

Martin froze. "I can explain!"

"Explain?"

"Yeah, and I'll have it to you by the end of the week."

Frank scratched his head. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I know. I know it was due before but....very special circumstances!"

Fuckin' guy looked like he was about to break out in tears. Something about that voice, that British accent. Frank recognized this guy from somewhere.



## PART 11

The Storage Space would have sighed with pleasure, titillating each of its individual storage units, if only a building could sigh with pleasure. That wonderful Karen was there again, caressing the once-grand carvings around the once-grand entrance from when the Storage Space had been a magnificent old theatre. She was dressed a little strangely, half-dressed really, but she was there.

Ah, when those grand old carvings were new. Many had touched them with wonder then, though they didn't linger as lovingly as Karen. Still, it took the Storage Space back to when La Grande Troupe cavorted upon its mahogany stage. When an equally wonderful woman, an actress, sensitive and sweet like Karen, but a lot more frail, graced its stage. The sparkle of love in that actress' eye, whenever the one the Storage Space would prefer not to think about any more appeared on stage at her side. The touching sincerity most often expressed in the unconscious tremolo of her tone. But, alas, ravished one night. Never the same. Especially after... Never mind. It couldn't bear to think about that.

It was most rudely jolted back to the present anyway, when Le Grand Rat, that Irwin, that...what did they call them now?... "employee" left for the night.

Karen stopped caressing the grand-old carvings and hid behind them instead. Le Grand Rat was so busy muttering to himself about being one smart cookie that always played his cards right that he didn't even notice her, though he walked right past her.

What was she doing there at that hour anyway, and half-dressed?

Karen waited, then used the front-door key Irwin gave out so he didn't have to keep regular hours, clutching the precious little she wore about her, poor dear, and hurrying in so fast that she left the front door ajar.



## PART 12

Jennifer looked up from compulsively flipping open and shut her first-ever phone, a Motorola Razr, when she heard someone else clang through the storage space building's front door. At this hour? Jennifer tossed her old phone back into its box. She could hear the other person on the stairs. Some complete idiot had nothing better to do than to visit their storage unit on a Saturday night? Ridiculous. People were so unreasonable.

Like Martin. His letting that woman with the suitcases in had forced Jennifer to go to her stupid storage unit and search for that big fluffy bear from when she was six.

She started rifling through another box of her precious stuff.

Bunch of Beanie Babies?

No.

Weird Barbies of one sort of another?

No.

Different box?

That big fluffy bear had to be somewhere in her storage unit. She was sure of this because she never threw anything out, not even stuff she didn't want anymore.

A wild-haired Troll Doll. Perfect example. She remembered begging her parents for it, even though she never wanted it.

She thought of other things. Her childhood.

Then she remembered Brittany.

They'd both been ten years old. Fifth grade. Nobody at school liked Jennifer, though she never understood why. There was no reason. People were so unreasonable.

Brittany. Just thinking the name of the most popular girl in her fifth-grade class made Jennifer twitch with the envy she still felt. She would have given anything to be Brittany's friend, but she didn't have a chance. Then one day it happened. She found Brittany sobbing in the bathroom, clinging to something.

"Please," Brittany choked out. "Help me!"

"Help you?" Jennifer asked. It was the first time Brittany had ever spoken to her. She was so mesmerized she drew closer, almost knocking over Brittany's bottle of Coco by Chanel.

"My 'friends'..." Brittany trailed off, the word "friends" full of bitterness and pain. "The ones that are always bumming my Coco by Chanel." Then she opened up her hands so Jennifer could see what she'd been clinging to. It was a ratty old Doodle Bear. Jennifer recognized Brittany's writing on it, even though it had obviously been written years ago when Brittany had been much younger. It said, "I'll always love Kevin Adams."

If Jennifer was the most unpopular girl in her class, Kevin Adams was the most unpopular boy.

"I can't get it off, but I can't give up my precious Doodle Bear, and I'll be ruined if anyone sees it. I'm having a sleepover and can't risk anyone finding it." She stuffed the Doodle Bear inside Jennifer's jacket. "Promise you won't let anyone see it, and that you'll give it back after the sleepover? Solemnly swear?"

Brittany's precious stuff. In her care. Jennifer felt something swelling up inside her, something she'd never felt before. She wrapped an arm around Brittany and said, "I solemnly swear."

A scream outside the storage space building snapped Jennifer back to the present. It sounded like Martin! She went back to searching for that big fluffy bear from when she was six with a vengeance.

Another ratty, wild-haired Troll Doll she talked her parents into buying for her.

No.

Brittany's old bottle of Coco by Chanel, even though Jennifer always hated the stuff.

No.

The Doodle Bear she'd showed everyone in her fifth grade, making her the most popular girl in her fifth grade.

No.

Her big fluffy bear!

Jennifer sank her face into a teeny bit of fur that she hadn't plucked off.



## PART 13

Martin screamed for help again.

But the cop ignored him again.

How could an officer of the law ignore a naked man running down the middle of the street toward him when stopped in his patrol car with the window rolled down? Especially at this hour, with nobody else around. Bloody fool. Too damn busy with... Oh, the cruelty of it all; Martin would have recognized that smell a lightyear away! The cop was too busy stirring his vanilla latte.

Martin's bare feet, slapping the rough, uneven pavement, were killing him. Every sharp intake of air sounded like a hurricane. Knackered, he was totally, completely knackered. How was he to know that his friend-with-benefits Karen's husband Frank was the same Frank as Martin's murderous loan shark?

He could hear Frank thundering after him like an overweight T-rex, gaining on him. Could he make it to the police car in time? He screamed for help yet again.

The cop ignored him yet again, taking a long, leisurely guzzle of his vanilla latte while rolling up the patrol car window. Then Martin heard the one sound on earth even more terrifying than Frank's approach: the cop starting the engine. Just as Martin reached it, the patrol car pulled out from the curb and sped away.

Martin ducked down a familiar street. He had to disappear. Somehow he had to disappear before Frank got to the corner and could see where he had gone. Familiar... What did he know this street from? Oh yeah, Jennifer's storage unit. He could see the door to its building just ahead. Ajar? Wishful thinking? He barreled into it with his shoulder, and through it. Had he been in time? Had Frank seen?

Unfortunately he was halfway up the stairs before he realized he shouldn't have left the front door ajar. He started back down but froze when he heard a sound even more sickening than the sound of that cop car taking off: The front door slamming open sounded like his apartment door when Frank kicked it in. Martin headed back up the stairs again but quietly now, thankful at last for his bare feet.



## PART 14

Karen shivered. No reason to heat a storage unit much, especially this late at night. Shame she hadn't grabbed more of her clothing before bolting out through Martin's back door.

Frank...

But no more. She mustn't think about Frank, not now, not ever again.

"Karen, how could you?" Frank's startlingly formal words when he kicked the front door open at Martin's. His words that seemed to ricochet endlessly off the corrugated metal walls inside a space where no human was ever meant to spend the night. Karen couldn't even stand up in it. How high was her storage unit? What had that horrible rodent of a man at the front desk said when she first rented it and he'd broken the glass "friends forever" plaque Marie had given her? Didn't matter. Where else could she go at this hour with little money and fewer clothes. She checked again to be sure. And no phone.

Frank...

She'd actually managed to imagine she heard him kicking a door in again. Karen's stomach clenched remembering the first time. It had been just like when she'd come in on Frank in bed with her best friend Marie! But Karen had ended her relationship with Frank, who didn't even know Marie. So why did she feel so damn...cheap...that she wanted to cry?

Frank...

Karen was sure she heard a footstep. But it was so soft it didn't seem quite real. She moved toward the door of her unit, which she'd left open a little for light and air, and felt a yearning. Frank! She realized with disgust that she actually wanted it to be Frank and backed away into the darkness of her unit. She thought she'd glimpsed something, but it was more like a mist than anything physically solid, a trick of the street lights glaring through the windows, no doubt. She shivered in the dark.

Then she remembered. In her boxes. Hadn't she wrapped her grandmother's warm shawl around her grandfather's little metal horse with all its paint chipped off? Still shivering, Karen dived into her boxes in the dark, but she couldn't find it. Just as she remembered she hadn't included it after all, because there wasn't enough room, she heard the telltale clanking of glass. A huge piece of Marie's shattered "friends forever" plaque stabbed her hand.



It might as well have been her heart. She had to take off most of the little she was wearing and use it to staunch the bleeding. Sobbing and shivering even more violently, she finally began to lose consciousness, half hoping that, rather than falling asleep, she was bleeding to death.

Was it minutes, hours or days later? Or a century earlier occurred to her for some strange reason. Half asleep, Karen's eyes flickered open briefly. That mist she'd thought she saw before seemed to be seeping ever so slowly into her unit. Perhaps it was just moonlight. She dozed.

A speech in some ancient, far-more-formal English that she knew was terribly familiar teased at the corners of her consciousness. She barely caught the sense of it, but it was something about comparing her to a summer's day.



## PART 15

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate...”

Edward, most thoroughly enraptured, beheld the lovely maiden slumbering all but naked. She was in one of those wretched metal boxes with which they had utterly destroyed any lingering vestige of his grand old theatre. Edward pondered, not for the first time in the last one hundred and fifty odd years, the marked advantages of being dead. How else could he have hoped to slip into this maiden’s chamber so quietly?

Could this be love? A feeling he hadn’t felt since...

The darkness closed on Edward again, as familiar as a moth-eaten old cloak. Love was something he hadn't felt for a very long time. He had sworn...when he'd first found himself floating about in the high rafters, nothing more than smoke, looking down at the twisted, broken mess that used to be his magnificent body...that love was something he would never feel again.

Stage Right! A step upon the stair! Who would disturb this fair maiden’s slumber at such an hour? Lo... A wisp of a man, with a body almost as insubstantial as Edward’s. Foppish really. The sort who, in Edward’s day, would have donned all manner of absurd apparel in an attempt to disguise his own lack of substance. Slinking in the shadows, like that horrid creature Irwin, the insufferable servant. Edward loathed Irwin, and Edward also loathed this man, on sight. His name was... Edward had to struggle to remember from seeing him here with that equally horrid woman...Jennifer. His name was Martin.

Martin darted to a metal door and clanged it, risking disturbing yon fair maiden’s repose for no good reason. The huge padlock should have made it all too obvious to even the dullest wit that he wasn’t going to get in. Next, Martin spotted the fair maiden’s partially open chamber. Certainly not, thought Edward, pulling what little there was left of himself together. He flowed into the part of the maiden's door that was open, twisting himself into the most terrifyingly visible shape he could muster. It turned out to be a rather absurdly inelegant and utterly illogical mix of mythological sea monster and bulldog, but it was the best he could think of on short notice. Edward could tell by Martin's quick halt and widening eyes that he could at least see the dead; not everyone could.

"Martin!" Stage Right again. The voice of a big man, confirmed by the clatter as he ran up the stairs.

"Martin?" That horrid Jennifer, somewhere off in the distance.

And finally, just as a thoroughly terrified Martin jumped right through Edward-The-Sea-Monster-Bulldog into the fair maiden's chamber, the fair maiden stirred and asked softly, "Frank?"

The big man...Frank?...dove through Edward too, wrapping huge hands around Martin's neck. Martin struggled and even made a pathetic attempt to throw a punch, but the outcome would have been obvious to anyone. It was a fight scene no dramatist would have choreographed...far too boring. But Edward found he wasn't bored at all. Why?

The fair maiden. *Her* name? Karen. *That* Edward had no trouble remembering. He'd committed her name to memory the first day she walked into the old theatre, and that rodent Irwin had so odiously attempted to win her affections. Karen... The sweetest flower of all the field. Edward watched her lovely face, thinking she should have been on the stage for her ability to show two so contradictory emotions: Clearly she was madly, desperately in love with this Frank, which...Edward found to his horror...cut him to the quick. Yet as it became all too obvious that this was not merely a fight, but a fight to the death, her face flickered between love and horror as she looked at Frank.

Martin was losing consciousness. He wouldn't last long. But...what was that on the floor behind Frank's foot? It looked like a sliver of ice but with something dark on it that looked like dry blood.

Frank slipped on the ice, loosening his grip on Martin's neck.

Martin's terrified eyes snapped open.

Karen pushed between them, holding a bleeding hand up to shelter Martin.

Frank couldn't stop the lethal-looking punch he'd aimed at Martin.

Karen took the punch, first in her bleeding hand, then her lovely face, which immediately knocked her unconscious.

Then Martin stabbed Frank in the neck with what Edward now realized wasn't ice, but rather a shard of glass.

Karen's hand had spouted blood as she fell limp into the back corner of her chamber. It had been a blow Edward was all too sure no maiden could survive. "But thy eternal summer shall not fade!"

Frank fell much closer to the door, the stab to his jugular all too obviously fatal. But he turned toward her with an agony that seemed greater than his own dying. "Karen, how could I?"

Karen lay still, blood pulsing out of her hand.

Frank was bleeding at a even more fearsome rate. His eyes glittered with agony as he beheld Karen, then dimmed with death till they, like the thing buried in his jugular, appeared to be made of glass.

Martin only had eyes for Frank, looking from him to his own blood-stained hands.

Jennifer, previously unnoticed just outside the chamber, was actually...smiling. She put her hand firmly, possessively, on Martin's shoulder. "So...no one except me will ever know...if you're ready to get all my precious stuff out of its stupid storage unit tonight and take it...and me...all back to your apartment where we belong."

Edward felt a new, smoke-like wisp at his side, who shared his reaction to Jennifer. But Frank, new to all this, looked surprised when recoiling from Jennifer resulted in his flowing out of the building through a vent.

Edward looked back at Karen and promptly forgot about all others. She wasn't going anywhere. And neither was Edward.



## PART 16

The Storage Space was more than appalled. It was... It was...

This was serious. Not since that night long ago that...

But never mind. The Storage Space had decided never to think of that again.

Edward!

No, the Storage Space simply would not deign to think of such things.

Karen!

Alas, alas... But buildings simply could not cry. First, and foremost really, it was so undignified. But it was also impossible.

Besides another woman was caressing the magnificent old wood carvings surrounding the Storage Space's entrance, though this one was... The Storage Space would have wrinkled its nose in distaste if only it had a nose. This woman was old, very old. Still there was a fineness about her features, or at least what could be seen of them with that...rag wrapped around her head. And what on earth was she wearing? It looked like a whole collection of rags, accented by what appeared to be a...tablecloth. What did they call bums now? Homeless? Really. The "modern" world. All that "politically correct" verbiage when it came to the riff raff. It was just too tiresome.

Talking to herself now. How dreadfully typical. Some youths across the street had stopped to laugh and point at her. The poor, long-suffering Storage Space tried to ignore her, but the rich timbre of her voice was startlingly familiar: Strong, without ever being harsh or crass. Pure. Sweet, but not cloying or mopishly sentimental. Lyrical wording. Artfully controlled rhythm. Almost as if she didn't speak her words but sang them. The Storage Space couldn't help but listen, only to discover that, as this deplorable ragamuffin caressed the wooden carvings, she was reciting random lines from what the Storage Space recognized as a poem by William Butler Yeats:

"When you are old and grey and full of sleep."

One of the youths on the opposite sidewalk threw something at her, but it missed.

"How many loved your moments of glad grace."

Another youth approached her, catlike.

"But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you."

A few more, whispering, crossed the street.

She gazed up at the stars with a winsome, enigmatic, Mona-Lisa smile. The rag around her head fell back, revealing all her face. The Storage Space would have gasped in recognition, if only a building could gasp in recognition. It was the face of someone long dead. Beautifully sculpted still, despite her being something like 70 years old.

But just then all the youths reached her. Snickering, they formed a ring around her and started to kick.



## PART 17

Storming back to the storage space from Martin's apartment the morning after Martin killed that hunk with the scar, Jennifer tripped. Jennifer was so thoroughly annoyed that she gave whatever she'd tripped on a vicious kick. It felt soft...floppy. Only then did she remember she was still wearing her sexy shoes from when she'd thought she'd have to seduce Martin to get him to let her move back in with him. Rather than just agree not to tell about Martin killing "Scarface," or "Frank," or whatever Martin had called him.

So had whatever she'd just kicked gotten her sexy shoes...her *expensive* sexy shoes...dirty? She looked down. It was just some old homeless woman sprawled all over the sidewalk with her eyes closed...probably dead, judging from her failure to react to that vicious kick. Relieved, Jennifer started to move on past all those ratty old carvings to the storage space building's front door. But then she noticed something on her shoe after all, something red.

She looked back at the homeless woman. Red. Reddish brown, really. Disgusting old woman was covered with it. Jennifer turned up her nose and sniffed, catching a metallic scent. Then she noted all the woman's fresh wounds. Blood! And blood, Jennifer knew, could stain her cloth shoe!

Horrified, she sat right down next to the homeless woman and snatched the bloody shoe off her foot. The sweatpants she was wearing didn't matter; she'd borrowed them from Martin. But she did avoid a pool of blood that would have soaked through and gotten her butt all icky.

What to use to clean her shoe? Jennifer looked around and noticed a tablecloth. Most of it, like the sidewalk and everything else, was soaked in blood. But there was one clean corner. The only problem was that the homeless woman was wearing it. Jennifer stamped her other foot with annoyance, then yanked the tablecloth super hard.

The homeless woman flopped all over the place, then came to rest next to Jennifer again with a thud and what almost sounded like a very soft moan. "Success!" yelled Jennifer aloud; she had the tablecloth. But now the question was, how exactly to use it to clean her shoe.

She had a dreamlike memory from long ago. Her father had died. People were so unreasonable.

To make matters worse, her mother started talking about her stupid dead father all the time, instead of paying enough attention to Jennifer, who was, after all, still alive. When she complained for the umpteenth time, her mother finally said she was going to show her something very special.

Jennifer got all excited. Her mother led her up to the attic. Soft light from a window slanted across the floor, spotlighting a big box.

Her mother kneeled before the box and reached out to stroke Jennifer's arm. "I wasn't ever going to open this," she said. "Just keep it where I knew it would be safe because I couldn't bear for anything to happen to it. Especially now." She started crying again. "But I know how much you like pretty clothes." Her mother broke the seal on the box and carefully set aside a ton of tissue paper, one piece at a time. It took forever. Finally she pulled out a beautiful dress. It was all white.

But then her mother started talking about, of all things, Jennifer's father!

"I'm sorry!" her mother said, turning away to sob.

Jennifer took advantage of her mother's having turned away to punish her for talking about her father yet again. She poured the grape juice she'd been drinking all over the wedding dress.

It was so long ago. Why had she remembered about pouring grape juice all over her mother's wedding dress just then? Something her mother said afterwards, when trying to rescue the dress... But what?

Jennifer snapped back to the present, looking at the homeless woman's blood all over her sexy, expensive shoe.

What had her mother said?

She noticed the homeless woman's eyes had flickered open and that she looked from Jennifer's raised arm with the stolen tablecloth to Jennifer's blood-besmirched shoe.

"Gently dab," said the homeless woman in the most beautiful speaking voice Jennifer had ever heard. "Don't smear or grind it in."





## PART 18

Martin was running from Frank through rows and rows of storage units. But as fast as he ran he was hardly moving at all, and the storage space building's halls kept growing longer and longer. Finally he found what he somehow already knew was there, a partially open unit. He even knew Karen was inside, and he didn't have any way of knowing that either. But he could hear Frank clattering up the stairs, so he tried to get in there with Karen anyway.

He knew that if Frank found him with her again, Frank's killing him wouldn't just be about all the money Martin owed him. But maybe Frank wouldn't find him this time.

This time?

Martin didn't have a chance to think about that because he'd just spotted the thing that had tried to stop him last time. Again it oozed into the opening to Karen's storage unit. Again it was some hideous mixture of a vicious dog and a sea serpent. But Martin dove right at it, remembering he'd passed right through it before.

This time, though, it wasn't a bloody hallucination. Martin collided with the serpent dog with a sickening thud. A green, serpentine hand grabbed his throat. Another green hand, dripping seaweed, raised something that caught the light and sparkled high over Martin's head.

He made out the shape of the sparkly thing as it descended to puncture his throat.

It was that shard of glass.

For the third time since Jennifer'd left that morning, Martin woke up screaming.

This time he stumbled out of bed in a cold sweat, tripped over some of her clothing, and sprawled across the floor like some broken and discarded doll.

But it was just a dream. Right? Then the memories from the previous night washed over him with all the subtlety of a tsunami.

Shaking, wracked by dry sobs, he staggered to his feet.

Memories...

He yelped in pain, then shook himself like a wet dog.

That spurting blood...

Frank's face...

Martin hit a wall and screamed in pain. He couldn't believe he'd let himself fall asleep again. There was something he had to do. What was it? It was important.

Jennifer! He'd told her he'd left one of her boxes of precious stuff in the storage space by mistake and sent her off to retrieve it as soon as he'd been able to wake her up. This after the consummate job of acting the previous night, when he'd actually managed to get it up and fuck the stupid, annoying bitch...while babbling about how much he loved her and how big a mistake it had been to ever let her go. Fortunately she hadn't stopped to check or she would have seen that all her bloody boxes were already there in Martin's apartment.

But he had to act fast since it wouldn't take long for Jennifer to figure it out.

Martin grabbed the phone he'd taken from Jennifer's purse and punched in the number. At least he could let his voice shake all it wanted to for this conversation. But what he did need to do was to remember to speak in as close to a pure American accent as he could...no bloody British-isms. "Yo, is this the number to call to report a violent crime? Ya know, anonymously? Like, I think the perp is still at the scene a' the crime, but I got ahold of her phone when she dropped it."



## PART 19

Was it minutes, hours or days later? Or...what an odd thought...a century earlier? Karen shivered, but felt no cold. She didn't feel her own shiver either; it was strictly metaphorical. Was she standing, sitting, or lying down? Karen didn't know. Were her eyes open or closed? She didn't know that either; she only knew she wasn't seeing anything, not even light or darkness. It was as if she was struggling to peer through an infinity of glass windows with nothing behind them. The good news, she figured, was that she no longer felt any pain. Not from her bleeding hand. Not from Frank's powerhouse punch. The bad news, she figured, was that she must be dead.

It was then that the screaming started, but of course it wasn't really screaming and was as silent as the absolute silence that would have been ringing in her ears...if she still had ears that functioned. How welcome even that ringing would have been.

Dead. Next the crying that wasn't crying started. For Karen could neither scream nor cry about it...or anything, she figured...ever again. But wasn't the one, the only goddamn advantage of being dead supposed to be that you wouldn't even know it?

Frank...

He'd fucking killed her, she was dead, and she *still* couldn't stop thinking about him?

Suddenly she felt something, and to feel anything was divine, and what she felt was Frank. His presence. That voice. His surprisingly formal words, saying... Saying not "Karen, how could you?" but "Karen, how could I?" over and over again.

But then she felt something else, like a mist somehow, and she suddenly remembered a color: green.

A summer's day...

Where'd that come from? Light! Bright light! Karen had never yearned for anything more than she did for that light. She strained to reach it. Lights, more than one. Illuminating a stage. A magnificent man on that stage, dressed like a Shakespearean actor. Reaching out to her. His words, elegant and melodic. She could hear...

"Again, sorry, officer..."

No, not *that* voice. It was that creepy, rat-like guy who managed the storage space...that Irwin. Karen could feel herself shiver this time.

"I...I don't like to mention this but..." Irwin's voice oozed through Karen's consciousness. "But you see, officer, I have this disability. It's how come I didn't exactly get all of this mess in the hall cleaned up from last night. But, officer, whoever told you someone got murdered here last night musta' had one too many..."

Murdered? Karen's mind screamed again. So, she really was dead? Or...

Frank must have succeeded in killing Martin. After all, she hadn't succeeded in stopping him.

Or was this all a last dream of the dead? Like the fingernails that still grow in the morgue.

Dimly, Karen thought she heard another voice, farther away. Something about an anonymous tip from their violent-crime hotline.

"Oh, no, officer!" oozed Irwin, who seemed to be closer. "I can absolutely, positively assure you there's nobody here, dead or alive, this early in the morning!"



## PART 20

Amelia could only open one eye to see the young woman seated beside her. Amelia's other eye was swollen shut.

Though not beautiful, the young woman's straight dark hair and high cheekbones could have achieved elegance. But the small dark eyes had no depth. Most damning of all, a nervous tic forever twitched the thin lips into endless expressions of petulance.

"So unreasonable!" the young woman blurted out while grinding Amelia's blood into her shoe in a fit of temper.

"Gently dab," Amelia reminded her. "Don't smear or grind it in."

Amelia hurt all over. Still, gently moving this and that, she felt pretty sure nothing was broken.

To escape her pain, she struggled to see the carvings from the night before. Soft morning light caressed what she believed was Hamlet delivering his "To be or not to be" soliloquy but failed to clean Lady Macbeth's hands. Still it glittered over the riot of Rococo curlicues that framed the entrance to the building behind them, reminding Amelia of the fascination with the theatre she had shared with her mother.

The theatre. She smiled faintly. Why they'd been so fascinated with it they never knew.

Amelia looked farther down the brownstone-lined street. An empty lot allowed great shafts of light to slant low through the mighty oaks and sycamores that encroached on the sidewalk. A breeze ruffled their branches, shifting the shafts of light about till they danced across the street to the rustling of the wind. The air was sweet, delicately scented with the freshness of morning, and peaceful.

Suddenly the storage space's door burst open. Amelia saw a cop emerge amid its carvings. Like most cops, he took one look at her homeless rags and looked away, but then he zeroed in on the young woman still seated beside her.

"Hey," he shouted at the young woman. "You there!"

Petulance spasmed the young woman's lips as she ignored this interruption and continued dabbing her shoe, her back to the cop.

"Young lady," persisted the cop, "is your name Jennifer and were you in this storage space last night?"

Shock wiped all the petulance off the young woman's face, though the cop behind her couldn't see this. Realization replaced the shock. Finally a terror took over that broke Amelia's heart. Plus Amelia could read lips. The words the young woman mouthed silently were, "First-degree murder. And I didn't do it!"

"Officer," said Amelia, which cost her a stab of pain as her lip started to bleed again.

He ignored her.

Amelia struggled to think of some lie that would spare him having to take her injuries seriously. "Officer, I got really drunk last night, really knocked myself around good, didn't I? Got here yesterday afternoon. Guess that's what happens when you drink too much too long."

The cop guffawed. Amelia figured she'd done right not to burden him with having to do his job by telling him she'd been assaulted.

"But I can tell you this young woman, who only showed up this morning, never went into that storage space last night. Hell, it was night and it was locked anyway. Otherwise I could have gotten inside. As it was, all I could do was call out to people passing by to report my murder. Like I say, I was drunk. Probably confused a lot of people and got them thinking all kinds of things."



## PART 21

The Storage Space was simply desolated by the whole affair. It would have languished for months, failing to find consolation in cognac and cigars, if only a building could drink. If only a building could smoke. Or, better yet, if only a building could book even third-class passage on even the lowliest tramp steamer and leave this appallingly savage country forever.

But, alas, all the poor Storage Space could do was languish without even a peasant's mean pipe and tankard of warm ale! All it could do was stand. Stand while the centuries rolled by. Stand while the green mists of that thing left over from so long ago swirled about inside that poor Karen's storage unit and recited his Shakespeare. Going on and on forever about a summer's day.

Stand while the cockroaches scurried and the rats gnawed. Still...

Le Grand Rat was appalling to be sure, but the hideous creature *had* spotted the hand of the corpse sticking out of that poor Karen's storage unit. And, most remarkably, had had the presence of mind to stand between the hand of the corpse and that officer of the law. It was true that that officer had been decidedly simple-looking anyway. But with so many centuries...so many more secrets than one mere corpse to hid...the thought of any kind of criminal investigation was simply not to be borne.

Now Le Grand Rat, this Irwin, was returning with...what was that?...some kind of machinery. And...what did he have in his other hand? His...lunch? Of course... After all, all thoughts of delicacy and proper feeling would be quite wasted on a rat.

Irwin put both the machine and his lunch down just inside Karen's storage unit, right next to the corpse already there.

With one hand Irwin took the corpse's hand, which was covered with red blood. With his other hand Irwin grabbed some French fries, which were covered with red ketchup and stuffed them in his mouth. Then he yanked at the corpse, which fell out into the hall with a thud. Next he plugged the machine, apparently some kind of saw, into an outlet.

Frank, the Storage Space recalled. Frank was the name of the corpse with that piece of glass embedded in his neck. His head had been twisted sideways as he died, his mouth open as if speaking to someone next to him on the floor. But it was the expression of indescribable horror on that corpse's face that left the Storage Space aching for that tramp steamer to anywhere, even the Amazonian wilds of South America.

And it imagined it could see the Amazon, a great green river of mist, flowing rapidly back in through the window.

Irwin picked up the saw, raising it over the corpse...but pausing for another handful of fries. These he washed down with water from a bottle he returned to just inside Karen's storage unit. Then he turned the saw on and lowered it toward the corpse's neck.

The Storage Space would have recoiled sharply, if only a building could recoil at all. But just as it thought that, it realized two other entities had recoiled. Both were quivering, horrified rivers of green mist. One was that Shakespearean actor Edward from long ago that it so desperately wanted to forget. The other, newly returned through the window, was from the corpse...Frank.

Irwin's saw hit bone. The motor whined. Blood splattered everywhere. The head, then the limbs, and finally the trunk were reduced to pieces Irwin could fit into the trash bags he now pulled out from the voluminous folds of his clothing. The Storage Space watched in horror as he hauled these bags full of body parts out back, still chewing on some sandwich. Did Le Grand Rat make any attempt to conceal these particular garbage bags behind all the others he'd let accumulate since his last trip to the dump? No, instead he carefully arranged the body-part bags so as to conceal some other bags. The Storage Space refrained from any attempt to even imagine what could possibly be in *those* bags...

Returning to the hall outside Karen's storage unit with bleach and a mop, Irwin did do an at least passable job of cleaning the massive amounts of blood in the hall...in between bites of his sandwich. However, Le Grand Rat apparently wouldn't bestir himself to clean that poor, unfortunate Karen's unit. Just as well, lest he spot that poor Karen in the back and use that saw on her.

When Le Grand Rat was done, he finally made a mistake. He looked up. They were waiting for him.

One angry, outraged green mist had formed itself into a grotesque caricature of Irwin, complete with a rat's beady eyes, whiskers, and humped back. The other angry, outraged green mist had formed itself into the most hideous monster imaginable, which was in the process of eating the Irwin caricature alive.

Irwin looked at this unspeakable horror for a while. The Storage Space would have held its breath, if only a building could breathe.

Finally Le Grand Rat shrugged. Then he left. But, the Storage Space noted, not with a total want of proper feeling.

He had forgotten to retrieve the rest of his lunch.





## PART 22

Jennifer was still shaking, and it wasn't from sitting outside for so long.

"The officer is gone, Jennifer. And I think I convinced him you hadn't been in that building." The homeless woman's voice...already the most beautiful, melodic stuff Jennifer had ever heard...was even prettier when she lowered her voice. "Not even last night."

Not even last night? Jennifer darted a look at the homeless woman before returning to the seemingly endless job of cleaning the blood off her shoe. But Jennifer *was* in the storage-space building then; it was only this morning that she hadn't made it into the building because she'd tripped over this blood-covered homeless woman.

Was this woman so out of it that she thought she'd been awake all night to vouch for Jennifer instead of passed out in what was undoubtedly a drunken stupor? Or... Was that why she'd dropped her voice before saying, "not even last night," because that was her way of letting Jennifer know that she knew that part wasn't true?

Jennifer shifted uncomfortably on the hard sidewalk, looking at the bloody woman lying beside her. Horrible.

Why had this woman protected her?

What did she want?

Jennifer opened and closed her mouth a few times, struggling to find the right words. Finally they came to her. It was hard to do, since her expensive shoe still wasn't free of the blood that would undoubtedly now dry hard and fast, ruining it forever, but she made a point of setting her shoe aside and addressing the homeless woman. "Thank you." The words almost hurt. But she smiled after saying them, quite proud of herself.

The homeless woman started to smile too, but stretching her lip cracked open a wound that started to bleed.

Jennifer sighed. This was really, really hard, but she sacrificed the only remaining clean piece of the tablecloth...that could have been used to finish cleaning her shoe...and used it instead to dab at the homeless woman's cracked lip. "What's your name?"

"Amelia." Miraculously the name sounded absolutely gorgeous, even half-muffled by the tablecloth. It was that voice again. Like a whole symphony orchestra.

Jennifer spotted a twig under Amelia. Would that help get the blood off her shoe? She was about to snatch it up. Oddly, something stopped her. She looked at the twig more closely. It had wedged itself into a cut on Amelia's arm.

Jennifer had an epiphany: that twig wedged into that cut on Amelia's arm must be hurting Amelia!

Gently...very carefully...Jennifer removed the twig.

"Thank you." That beautiful voice again.

Jennifer refrained from using the stick on her shoe, carefully setting it aside for the time being. Instead she frowned, concentrated, and then asked, "How did you get to be homeless?" Too late, it occurred to her that maybe she should have asked about Amelia's current injuries first, but Jennifer was still delighted by her own kindness.

"Do...you really want to know?"

"Yes," Jennifer said. "I...actually...really do!"

"Would that I could provide a rich and entertaining history of a great family gone to ruin. But what's great is the mystery, because nothing is known of my family before the birth of my mother in 1898."

"1898?"

"Yes. My poor, frail, delicately-wrought mother gave birth to her only child in 1948, at the age of 50."

"Your father?"

"I was born out of wedlock. My mother never deigned to mention him. And she never knew her own parents, or anything about them or any other family members. She was raised in a nunnery in Switzerland where all, apparently, had been sworn to secrecy."

Jennifer struggled to remember the original question. "So...you became homeless because?"

"Possibly my own just desserts for being an incurable romantic." Amelia's injured lip warped her rueful smile. "But my excuse is my mother's medical bills."

"Aren't there social service agencies that cover those kinds of things?"

"They try. And they do a lot. But there are limits." Amelia stiffened her jaw. "My mother's health was never good. After my birth it was a disaster. She once told me our roles had all but reversed by the time I was two. Prior to her death, at which point I'd already declared bankruptcy, I couldn't remember a time when my life wasn't devoted to taking care of her."

Now Jennifer really didn't know what to say. "Well...your injuries...I should get you some help." With that she fished into her purse for her phone, but it wasn't there. She darted another look at Amelia.

People were so unreasonable. Somehow, when she wasn't looking, this stupid homeless woman had stolen her phone. Jennifer should have just kicked her again. Repeatedly and hard enough to silence her forever. Instead she'd tried to make friends so this woman would stick to her story about where Jennifer was the night before.

What a fool Jennifer had been. All this time wasted... All this time that could have been spent cleaning her shoe.



## PART 23

Martin was sweating, slobbering, begging. Bloody hell. Bloody fucking hell. Was it another dream? Bollocks. No dream could be as realistic as this.

He watched the fountain of blood twist and turn. Insanely, its motion triggered a memory of how the water had gurgled out of his father's garden hose when he watered the flowers back in Kent. Until a twist sent the blood splattering all over Martin's face and into his screaming mouth.

He awoke to find he was drenched in sweat and his phone was ringing...somewhere in the distance. His starburst wall clock said it was 10 o'clock, but it was still light. Funny, this wasn't Scotland.

He found a phone under his thigh. It wasn't ringing. It wasn't even vibrating. It wasn't his phone.

Broad daylight...

Shit! It was 10 o'clock in the morning and they were calling because he was late to work! He must have dozed off again. But why that literally bloody nightmare and whose phone...

Then he remembered Karen and Frank.

It was Jennifer's phone. Had the cops responded to the anonymous tip he'd called in on it? How would he know when or if they'd picked Jennifer up for the murders he'd committed? Or at least caused indirectly in Karen's case. But what matter? One murder was enough. Martin broke out in another sweat, shuddered, shivered, and finally cried.

His phone again. Wherever it was. Then a short pause. Then Jennifer's phone, still in his hand. He jumped, dropping it as if it was the murder weapon. It must have hit something just right. It answered.

"Jennifer, pick up. Pick up!"

Martin didn't even breathe, hoping the silence would convince the caller the phone hadn't answered. But his own phone started to ring again in the background.

"Jennifer! Pick up!"

Martin knew who it was: Ms. Morales, their boss from work.

"Jennifer! Dios mio! We have to find Martin..."

Ms. Morales trailed off. Martin could hear a man screaming something in the background.

"Jennifer," Ms. Morales whispered, "there's a tall man with a goatee here looking for Martin, and some guy named Frank. Do you know who he is? He's got a gun!"



## PART 24

Karen felt something.

It was a weak fluttering under cool, clammy skin. Fast. Was that...her pulse?

Karen wasn't sure, but her eyes seemed to be open. Through swirls of green mist, she thought she saw the fingers of one of her hands resting on the inside wrist of her other.

What was that rasping noise? Her breathing? Or the hypnotic green mist, which added to her dizziness and nausea. Still, weakly, her stomach also grumbled with hunger and she smelled something. French fries.

And ketchup? And something else, something metallic...

Her hand... Had the bleeding finally slowed?

Karen tried to flip her hand over to check, only to be met with waves of wooziness. She held her breath.

Silence. She was alone in the back of her storage unit with no phone. She opened her mouth and screamed for help but couldn't even hear it herself.

Was it already too late? Even if the hand she was too weak to flip over had finally stopped bleeding?

A summer's day...

Some green mist swirled around Karen's face. Sunlight sparkled through it. Karen's eyes closed. She saw a summer's day with flowers starting to bloom as a man's elegant voice spoke of "the darling buds of May."

Light! The light became so bright, and Karen longed for it. She strained to reach it, to reach the sun, her feet seeming to leave the earth behind her.

"No, Karen, no!"

Frank's voice pulled her back. Her eyes fluttered open. Two green mists seemed to be at war with each other. Karen struggled for breath.

French fries.

Karen's fingers twitched. It seemed all she could do.

Ketchup.

Her stomach heaved with nausea, but then it grumbled. One green mist highlit...French fries! Ever so slowly, Karen slid her arm across the floor toward them.



## PART 25

Atta' girl!

Frank pulled his misty-green punch, intended for the guy with the misty-green sword that was only a stage prop. Instead he used his now-luminescent fist to highlight the open water bottle that fuckin' butcher Irwin had left behind. Karen should probably get some fluids in her first after all that blood loss, before she went for the French fries.

The other misty-green guy took advantage. Fuckin' A! His only-a-stage-prop sword, blunt and inexpertly swung, still hurt like hell. Fugettaboutit...

How could that be? Frank knew he was dead. Nothing could have made that clearer than watching that butcher Irwin carve his body up with a fuckin' chainsaw. Frank looked down. The only-a-stage-prop sword had cut him in half at the waist.

How was that possible? What the fuck were the physics of being a green mist?

Frank headbutted the other guy, but his head just passed through the other guy's skull...

A crumpled letter, held in front of him in a gloved hand that wasn't his own. From Switzerland. Dated 1898. A yearning he heard in his own head, although it was expressed in Shakespearean English. For a woman. The pain cut like the wind when he found himself in a flurry of men in top hats, women in long skirts, and horses whinnying and clamoring over cobblestones. Couldn't find the woman. Again. Withering, unendurable agony.

Frank's head came out behind the other guy's. The other guy seemed to wither and finally slither out of Karen's storage unit like a green snake struggling with its death throes.

Karen...

Frank swirled around Irwin's open water bottle again, doing all he could to attract Karen's attention to it.

No fan of that fuck Irwin. Had appreciated the other green mist's sharing his outrage when Irwin cut up Frank's body. But Irwin had done two things right. He hadn't noticed Karen wedged in the back of her storage unit, or who the fuck knows what he would have done with her. Good thing he hadn't bothered



to clean up Frank's blood inside her unit, just the hall. And he'd left his water and lunch almost within her reach.

Karen's outstretched hand shook and dropped. She couldn't reach the water.

The physics of being a green mist... Could Frank move it closer? He balled himself up and tried. Nothing happened.

Karen's eyes closed again. Frank knew what he was looking at. She was going to die.

He had to. He had to move that water bottle.

A huge truck rumbled over a monster pothole outside, reminding Frank of how his crazy partner Alex drove.

Karen's eyes fluttered open as the water bottle moved an inch closer to her. Had Frank done it or the truck?

Karen reached, shaking fingertips threatening to knock the bottle over when she made contact, then passed out again.

A thought cut through Frank that hurt much worse than that blunt sword: *Karen, how could I?* He had to move that water bottle.

Something happened Frank didn't understand at all. For a moment he wasn't in Brooklyn anymore. He was home in Sausalito, inside her the first time they made love. Thrusting. Then he was back in Brooklyn.

The water bottle, the French fries, and even Irwin's sandwich were within Karen's reach. Slowly, very slowly, she managed to eat and drink some. Woozy, she got confused and dipped a French fry not into the ketchup but into a huge glob of Frank's blood that Irwin hadn't cleaned off the floor.

Frank wasn't sure what to think, watching her struggle to get that French fry dripping with clumps of his blood into her mouth. Much-needed protein? What the fuck. Wasn't doing him any good any more. He swallowed heavily and thought, *Eat up, baby. It's the very least I can do for you.*

She wrinkled her nose and licked her lips thoughtfully, before her eyes widened in horror.

*Uh oh*, thought Frank. She's fuckin' figured it out. *It's okay*, he thought at her desperately. *It's okay*. He had trouble with the next words; they weren't words he thought often, no matter what he felt. But they burst out of him: "I love you!"

The word he saw burst out of her, however, was the only word capable of destroying a love even death hadn't killed. It was, "Martin!"



## PART 26

The Storage Space simply couldn't tolerate Irwin Le Grand Rat a moment longer. It would have screamed at the top of its lungs, if only a building could...

An intruder!

Out back with the all the trash that appallingly inadequate Irwin hadn't taken to the dump yet. Including the bags with that Frank's body parts in them, which Irwin had actually used to conceal some other bags that presumably contained something even more dreadful or incriminating.

No one but Irwin was ever out back; it wasn't possible for anyone else to gain access. Yet this man wasn't Le Grand Rat! Perhaps...were it even possible...this intruder was an even grander rat.

Tall, clad quite literally in rags that whirled around him like a thick fog. Tattered hood concealing most of his face. The poor long-suffering Storage Space strongly suspected he smelled even worse than all the garbage combined.

But there was something peculiar about what little was visible of his face. That goatee was rather impeccably groomed for a bum.

He was going through the garbage bags, one by one.

Again it was strange that when he found a veritable smorgasbord of fresh food, he tossed it aside. Any self-respecting bum should have been delighted!

He started opening the bags that contained Frank's body parts. The Storage Space would have held its breath, if only a building could...

What? The bum tossed what was obviously part of a human leg aside without the slightest reaction. Other body parts got the same treatment until he got to Frank's head. The bum was about to toss that aside too. But suddenly he caught sight of Frank's face and did a double take. Completely ignoring the gore and garbage, he sank into a seated position, still holding Frank's head.

"How could I?" the bum asked aloud, addressing Frank's head. "How could I have thought that you'd betrayed me?" With a shaking hand he pushed his hood back, revealing the tears in his eyes.

At last he got to his feet, putting everything back the way he'd found it. Checking it over, though, he frowned at the bags with Frank's body parts shielding some other garbage and started going through those other bags. From deep within one of these he fished out some ripped up paper he carefully pieced back together. His first reaction was dumbfounded shock. His second was a huge, evil grin.



## PART 27

Jennifer couldn't stand it. Simply couldn't stand it. She could have screamed at the top of her lungs. She had wasted her time being nice to another person.

She had actually given up the last clean edge of that miserable tablecloth to clean one of this Amelia's wounds, when it could have been put to much more important use cleaning Jennifer's shoe.

Only, of course, to keep a ratty old homeless person from correcting a lie that provided an alibi in a murder case. But the smug bitch had already paid herself for supplying that lie, by stealing a phone she knew the beneficiary of that alibi didn't dare complain about!

People were so unreasonable.

Still... A charge against her credit card for a new phone or a charge against her for first-degree murder. It was one of the hardest things she had ever done, but she managed to twist her lips into a smile. "I'm going to have to leave now, Amelia...but I'll come back...and help you later...if you still need it."

Bitch looked even more smug, as if she pitied Jennifer for stuttering through her last speech. But how was she supposed to know what to say when pretending to be nice? Meanwhile Amelia even had the nerve to reach up and touch her lips, as if trying to straighten them out. "Relax, Sweetheart. You need not trouble yourself. I'll be okay." And, speaking of smug, there it was again, that beautiful voice. "You need not come back."

*Oh, so that's it, she thought. Afraid that if I come back I'll have worked up the nerve to ask you to give me back my phone?*

But no helping it. She had no choice but to put her inadequately-cleaned shoe back on, get to her feet, and head back to Martin's where all her precious stuff was. Including all her boxes from the storage space except the one Martin had sent her back for because he said he'd left it.

Martin... She was so proud of herself for persuading him to take her back. Good thing he'd killed that Frank so she'd had something to work with. Maybe things weren't so bad: It would be nice to upgrade her phone, and Martin would pay for it.

Phone... She was halfway down the block before she remembered just what she had on her phone. Stuff she absolutely, positively couldn't let anyone else see. She wheeled, not even caring that she scraped her shoe in the process, and started back to get her phone from Amelia after all.

Another homeless person... Out of thin air... Judging from his head-to-toe layer of garbage, she guessed he'd been dumpster diving out back somewhere. Tall, not at all humble, somehow very menacing... Standing between her and Amelia... Staring straight at Jennifer...

A cold shudder went up her spine. She pretended to check her scraped shoe, not even caring anymore when she discovered it was ruined. But she was trying to look casual, unafraid, while she strained to watch this tall guy in her peripheral vision. *Go away*, she thought at him. *Go away so I can get my phone!*

But he didn't. He just stared at her, starting to approach.

Another shudder went up her spine.

"Excuse me." It was that beautiful voice again. Amelia.

The tall man spun on a dime, arms positioned funny, like he was trying to be The Karate Kid or something, then squatted at Amelia's side. "How could I? How could I have failed to notice you and your need?"

Jennifer risked looking straight at them.

The homeless man gently examined Amelia's injuries with an expertise that suggested medical training, then scooped her up in his arms and started to carry her away. But he paused to look down at her. "Whoever did this to you will be forced to eat several dinners consisting of their own body parts before I allow them to die."

She could see that even Amelia shuddered at that one. But, again, Jennifer had no choice. She followed them. She just had to get that phone back. At least, she consoled herself for the time-being, it was password protected.



## PART 28

Martin was starving. He'd had bugger all to eat. Rifling through the fridge, he was finding a lot more meat than he remembered buying, but the real question was what he could cook fastest.

Meat... Meat... Finally he grabbed the thinnest piece. Canola oil in the frying pan. Didn't even bother to wash the meat, just tossed it in the pan to sizzle. In so much of a hurry that he dropped some on the floor.

Hands shaking, Martin leaned over to pick it up. Funny, the floor was solid black, not the vintage linoleum he'd paid so much for online. And he couldn't find the meat he'd dropped until he reached under the stove and pulled out a slab of Karen's face.

Martin sat up on his mustard-colored, vintage Danish Modern sofa and screamed at the top of his lungs. How could he have allowed himself to fall asleep again?

Jennifer's phone. He remembered the ringtone. Somewhere on the sofa. Ringing again. Maybe it was Ms. Morales from work again. Maybe calling to say the tall man with the gun, looking for him...and Frank, who he'd killed...was gone. Maybe they'd had him arrested.

Martin scrambled to find Jennifer's phone, wondering why Ms. Morales hadn't called him on his own phone. Found Jennifer's phone between the cushions just as it stopped ringing.

Bloody hell!

Maybe Ms. Morales had called Jennifer because she couldn't reach him. He checked his own phone for voicemail. Battery was dead.

A beep from Jennifer's phone. Martin picked it back up and saw a message about new voicemail. But how could he get it without her bloody password?

He called her voicemail and tried "Jennifer" for her password, and all possible permutations of her birthday, without success. Then inspiration hit. He typed in "Martin."

"You have six unheard messages."

None of them indicated that the tall man with a gun had been arrested. The second to last message was from a dry cleaner complaining that he, Martin, hadn't picked up Jennifer's dry cleaning...which she hadn't yet asked him to pick up. The message that had just come in was from a collection agency. It said they had tried, and failed, to reach Martin about paying her bill...which she hadn't told him about either.

Bloody fucking hell!

Martin sat on his expensive Danish Modern sofa, stained with the sweat of his nightmares, and stared down the endless road of what his life imprisonment by Jennifer was going to be like. Could serving the time in a real prison really be worse? Tortured by frustration and helplessness, he clicked around in her apps, idly noting the stupid games she played. Really by mistake, because his shaking finger hit the wrong thing, he clicked into "Notes," then started reading...eyes widening. Suddenly he heard something he hadn't thought he'd ever hear again: his own laughter.



## PART 29

Karen sat up with a jolt. Frank was furious with her! She could feel it in her bone marrow. It reminded her of sitting on a hill above Sausalito at sunset and feeling the mist that seemed to swirl about not just around but inside her.

Frank inside her...

She blinked, trying to take in her surroundings. They were at Frank's place, weren't they? Hadn't they just made love for the first time? Hadn't her climax been so thunderous that she both screamed and wept? And even started to laugh, manic, until he pulled back and locked eyes. Then, transfixed, she imagined new dimensions opening before her, one after another, like flower petals. A fourth dimension. A fifth. A sixth.

Martin. That shallow nobody. No, that wasn't fair. Martin was a nice guy and her friend. But Frank was furious at her because of Martin. So furious that he must have killed Martin.

That thought was like a bucket of cold water dumped over her head. Her eyes had been open already, but now she saw. No, they weren't together in Frank's apartment in Sausalito, looking through his huge windows at San Francisco across the bay. She was alone in a tiny storage unit in Brooklyn with no windows at all.

Karen whimpered and started to sob as she looked down at herself then, insanely, started to laugh.

She was sitting up.

She was alive.

She laughed and laughed as a whole lifetime of memories washed over her. She was alive. Whatever her present circumstances, she would find joy...and beauty...again.

She started to scramble out of her storage unit but almost fainted.

*Not that alive, she amended. Not yet.*

She sat back, surveying her surroundings. Her stomach clenched when she remembered mistakenly dipping the French fries in Martin's blood.



Poor, poor Martin. Who was she to think him shallow or to use him for sex that would be free of emotional pain because, truth be told, she couldn't love him. Poor, dear Martin. He had been her friend. More importantly, he had been alive and was no longer. Karen was so very sorry.



## PART 30

Alex managed to kiss the forehead of the bloody old homeless woman he was carrying back to his place, where he had all the medical supplies needed to attend to her wounds the right way. He dropped his voice an octave, to the gentlest purr. "You have nothing to fear from me." Then he pulled his head back slowly, not wanting to alarm her with any sudden motions...as if she were the bird with a broken wing Alex had rescued the week before. Studying her, he looked deeply into her still beautiful eyes, hoping his words had had the desired effect.

They hadn't. She still looked at him warily. It cut Alex to the quick, and he had to fight back a flash of what other people called his irrational rage. Why didn't any one understand him? Why didn't any one see the kind of person he really was?

But he caught himself this time, able to appreciate that with all this poor woman had undoubtedly suffered being homeless, it was understandable that it might take a while for her to believe in Alex. Eventually, though, she would. Alex would see to that. "How could I?" he whispered to her. "How could I have failed to notice your need immediately? I'll take care of you. Don't worry."

He reached his trick corner, where he could always lose anyone following him...and he knew he was being followed. That young woman with the twitchy lips and straight, dark hair. In shoes too dressy for daytime but with heels that clattered over the sidewalk...making it easy to gauge her distance and rate of approach.

Alex listened to those shoes and slowed down. He wanted just enough time for her to think he must have disappeared into one of the buildings on the first block when he turned the corner.

Instead, as soon as he made that left, he ducked behind a tall shrub that seemed to stand in front of a solid building. Actually it concealed a tunnel that, combined with a hole in the backyard's rear fence, allowed access to the next street. A little power walking and he'd backtracked to a different block. Through all of this the homeless woman he carried looked puzzled, but Alex was gratified by her visible wonder when he carried her inside the brownstone that was his alone.

"All that stained glass...original Tiffany, is it not?"

Her voice was even more beautiful than all the sunlight streaming through his helter-skelter collection of stained glass that was, in fact, original Tiffany. Alex beamed, his heart leaping when he saw her

astonishment replaced by a huge smile of sheer delight. "I'm a bit...Nouveau Victorian," he demurred, "as you're about to see from my library."

With a bit of flourish, he swept her into a dark-paneled room with a huge stone fireplace and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. But the expected leather-bound books were not there. Instead, his eclectic found-object sculpture exploded from the shelves, along with such an extensive collection of high-tech gadgetry that he liked to think he put James Bond's Q to shame.

"You'll be comfortable here," he purred, laying her out gently on a huge chaise longue. "I'll be right back."

In moments he returned with water, a collection of delicacies for her to eat, and his medical supplies.

The homeless woman looked him up and down. "Clearly, you're not really homeless."

"No," he acknowledged with a laugh.

She looked puzzled again when he brushed some feathers aside from his medical supplies.

"A bird with a broken wing that I rescued last week."

She smiled broadly. "May I see it?"

"Sure." He retrieved the bird's shoebox, meticulously lined with soft cloth.

"But..." She seemed troubled. "It's dead."

Now it was his turn to be puzzled. "Of course it's dead. I had to kill it when it pecked me."

**NEXT 30 PARTS IN A SEPARATE DOCUMENT**