

Except from...

**THE RISE AND THE FALL AND THE RISE  
OF A REDHEADED WITCH**

Volume One

**“THE SCENT OF DELILAH “**

By J. A. McMullen

Preface

*NOTE: The original title of this novel was “The Penis Thief.”  
However, I found I could not purchase advertising with such a title, and  
more than one person suggested I change it.  
I haven’t changed any other words. Enjoy “The Scent of Delilah.”*

**Koro** is a culture-bound delusional disorder in which individuals have an overpowering belief that their sex organs are retracting and will disappear, despite the lack of any true longstanding changes to the genitals. Koro is also known as “shrinking penis,” and it is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. (*Wikipedia*)

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From “*Malleus Maleficarum*” written in 1486 by Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, a Dominican monk:

*“We have already shown that they [i.e., witches] can take away the male organ, not indeed by actually despoiling the human body of it, but by concealing it in some glamour. In the town of Ratisbon, a certain young man had an intrigue with a girl—and then wished to leave her—and*

*immediately thereafter lost his penis. It was as if some spell was cast over it so that he could see or touch nothing but his smooth body. He approached a witch who he suspected of giving the girl a spell to cast upon him. He threatened to kill the witch unless she restored it. The witch touched him between his thighs, and it was restored by her mere touch. For it has been shown that they can remove the male organ, not by destroying the human body itself, but by hiding it in some brightness."*

*Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches") elevated sorcery to the criminal status of heresy and recommended that secular courts seek confessions by torture and then execute the accused. The year after its publication, Pope Innocent VIII issued a papal bull empowering the Inquisition to prosecute witches and sorcerers explicitly using *Malleus* as an instruction manual.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, an estimated 50,000 women were hanged or burned alive at the stake.

(NOTE: The trial of Helena Scheuberin on charges of witchcraft was suspended because of Kramer's obsession with her sexuality. The year after, Kramer wrote the *Malleus*.)

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## Prologue A SPECK IN THE OCEAN

It had been three days since he killed Mackie.

Mackie's dried blood was all over his clothes, all over the deck.

The typhoon hit five days ago. He had been talking to himself for the last 48 hours.

It was as if his mind resided outside of his body, and looked down on himself. It saw a wretched man who had murdered his first mate and led to death the other 11 of the ship's crew. The face it saw was blistered and raw, the body rail-thin.

Only two gallons of water remained. In his madness, Ulysses Odets laughed himself to sleep.

His laughing ceased when he awoke with the taste of saltwater in his mouth. Half his body was immersed in brackish water. There was a leak. Through the typhoon, the hull had held, but there must be a crack in the bilge. A slow, ever-enlarging leak had developed. The urgency of imminent sinking and the prospect of becoming shark chum shot adrenaline through him. Instantly his mind cleared. He grabbed a piss pot and began to bail as quickly as he could. The leak was slow, and he was making headway. His arms gave out, so he rested and napped. When he awoke again, there was as much of the fatal surprise as there had been before. It became a zero-sum game between the leak and the bailing that he knew he would inevitably lose.

Like a general in war or a quarterback in the playoffs who tune out artillery shells and linemen, Ulysses Odets, CEO of Odysseus Corporation, could tune out the anxiety of any situation. It helped enormously in business negotiations.

The toolbox had been bolted down. In it, he found some plastic sheeting and hyper-sticky tape that might hold out saltwater. He jumped in the water, ducked under the stern, and taped the plastic over the hole. The water pressure sucked the patch up against the hull and immediately sealed the leak. It held. If only he could hold on.

The stars were bright when he ran out of water. He slipped and banged his head on the rotting wood of the bunk. It was the second time he'd banged his head on the voyage. The first time, he'd been out for a while. This time he lay there stunned, trying to clear his head, not quite conscious. He might have laid there longer if he hadn't heard a very loud beeping. He accepted that this auditory hallucination was from sunstroke or dehydration, or a concussion, and the end stages were setting in. When he saw the flashing light from under the bunk, he assumed that seeing visions was the next phase.

To imitate the sea journeys of old, Odets had banned any electronics on board. One of the crew had been sensible enough to ignore his edict. He looked under the bunk and found the blinding light and a deafening sound from a device taped there. He turned it on and saw that it was equipped with a GPS tracking application. Next to it was a cell phone which was turned off. Half-daft and mesmerized from staring at the stars, he was startled by a small jet plane overhead. He held the light above his head and turned it in a circle. Though the beeping was earsplitting, he would gladly trade deafness for survival. He turned on the cell phone and dialed 911. Nothing rang, but there was a different beeping from the phone. The plane flew past.

He let the devices run until they ran out of power. No one came. No ships, no helicopters, no circling airplanes. He drank the last of the water with the two fentanyl he kept in a pill case in his ditty bag. He curled up in a fetal position under a sweaty, fetid mattress, and went to sleep.

When he awoke, he was in a helicopter. An Air Force medic was taking his vitals, a dextrose/saline IV was stuck in his right arm and a blood pressure cuff was on his left.

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## Book One

### CORPORATIONS ARE PEOPLE, TOO

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#### Chapter 1 HOMECOMING

Delilah Kirke sat in the 8:00 a.m. meeting of Odysseus, Inc. She'd brought her delicious pastries. She used butter like a French chef, much to the detriment of the waistlines and health of the middle-aged men who sat at that table.

The subject of the meeting was the return of Ulysses Odets, the CEO and major stockholder. The order of business was the PR roll-out for the grand reception of their photogenic leader with his eye-catching red hair and beard.

He'd taken two years to sail around the world on a small ship with only wind power and a crew of twelve. They were thought to be lost at sea.

The voyage had taken three times longer than planned. They had made port—if you could call it that—at many uncharted islands and battled some extreme weather. Satellite imagery and Air Force rescue helicopters could not find this important man. Luckily, a private jet noticed a speck in the ocean below and called it in. The crew had perished; only Odets survived. Now he came home to a hero's welcome. The company was going to make the most of it.

Penny Odets and her son Telly had refused to give up hope. Board members lobbied to declare Ulysses dead, and appoint a new leader. His wife, his only son, and their battalion of lawyers held them off.

Penelope Beaulieu Odets was an astonishingly beautiful woman. She had a figure that drew men's gaze. They did well to avert their eyes when Odets was in the room. He had been violent more than once with oglers.

She was a true Southern Belle from New Orleans from a wealthy family, and, true to her training, she was active in many charities. She held grand parties even in her husband's absence; she never had any doubt of his return. Some thought she was heavily in denial. They suggested counseling, and, perhaps, pharmaceuticals. She remained steadfast. Many men pursued her, trying to convince her she should start to live her life again—with them. She laughed them

off. More than once, Telly had taken men aside who attempted to court his mother over what they imagined to be his father's beached corpse.

Delilah had not yet met Ulysses Odets. She was fascinated that he, too, had red hair. She had read that only one or two percent of all the people in the world had it. "We should start our own society," she mused.

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## Chapter 2 MASTER OF HIS FATE

News crews. News crews. News crews. Odets softly murmured the rhyme like it was a mantra. It calmed him.

The procession of cars passed the cheering crowds and white news vans with satellite dishes on top. There were big video cameras, and everyone in the crowd had their cell phones aimed in his direction.

They were nearing the 32-story, corporate office building with "Odysseus" emblazoned in gold. Anyone who called their offices that morning was routed to voicemail. Every employee was outside to receive their long-lost leader. It got them out of work, broke the boredom, and gave them the rush that comes from cheering the home team.

Fans and curiosity seekers extended for a dozen city blocks. The cheering moved like a wave down those blocks. It was a conquering hero's return, the kind reserved for astronauts and winning sports teams. The crowd went mad for the chance to applaud this adventurer and his glorious rescue.

Odets sat on the back of his Bentley Silver Cloud convertible like a politician or an MVP. His son Telly drove, and his adoring wife Penny sat on the back passenger seat instead of up beside him. She

knew it was important for him to be the sole attraction. She held his hand and looked up at him adoringly. A couple of times, she kissed his hand; when she did, the crowd roared.

He hadn't conquered the sea like he set out to. His triumph was escaping Neptune's wrath. He had come within days of being a victim of his own hubris. His penchant for risk-taking, the characteristic that had made him billions, proved to be very costly. Things had happened. Things had captivated him. Things that had compelled him to put everything at risk. All because he wanted to swagger through the club and hear them whisper, "There goes Ulysses Odets! He did it as the ancients had. He risked it all. Flying without a net. He is the lone man against the storm. Indeed, Ulysses Odets is by far the most intrepid."

Twelve men had followed him. They bet their lives on him and lost. Remorse dogged him. The parade made regret bite at him with even sharper teeth.

He had objected to this ostentatious display, but the board was adamant. He owed it to the company, they said. They said that the employees needed festivities. They needed to witness the homecoming of the man whose name was on their paychecks. Revering him, and cheering him would be good for morale, they said. Mainly because, the board was personally overjoyed at his resurrection, and they wanted to honor him. This band of sycophants had many knives at the ready. Those knives had been stayed by Penny's shield and sharp maneuvering. Ulysses' long record of infidelity notwithstanding, he idolized her, and there was never a woman who loved her husband more. Loyalty was in her genes.

Maybe the grief over his sailors made him relent to the insistent voices begging for a public spectacle. The old Odets would have said no and not permitted another word or argument. When the board left, they exchanged looks of astonishment at getting their way, but knew not to utter a word about this new vulnerability they just witnessed, not even to each other.

Guilt was a new experience for Ulysses. Chief Executive Officers, builders of empires, as well as the heads of more unseemly organizations, often lack that soul-crushing emotion of guilt or bury it deep in their psyches. Some are wholly devoid of it. As astute as he was in assessing others' vulnerabilities, Odets' psychiatrist had to point out he may feel guilty because he had survived.

He descended from his "chariot" into the arms of his people as security guards cleared the path. The oversized glass double doors parted, and he entered his kingdom. This palace of commerce he had built was replete with a gymnasium, gourmet food courts, and even a movie theater and bowling alley to keep the troops amused. The objective was to make them feel beholden and made it so they had little need to ever leave.

The executives lined up on the grand, curved, double staircase. Halfway up the left staircase, a saturated, red-copper color caught his eye. Even with Penny on his arm, his eye would often wander. But now he quickly looked away and kept his eyes on his wife and the crowd. Though only a glimpse, the glimpse stuck. A familiar longing made him catch his breath. With that transient glance, fear and curiosity were once again at war inside him. Mr. Ulysses Odets was admonished by the reminder that though he may be master of all he now surveyed, he was certainly not master of his fate.

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### Chapter 3 KISMET

She saw him, too.

"Redhead, pissed the bed, blamed it on a cabbage head."

That childhood taunt came loud and clear into her memory. It came to mind every time she passed a "ginger," which was another name that made her cringe.



She knew he had seen her.

She was sad for the beautiful woman beside him. Delilah knew what would happen between her and that fellow “ginger.” There was no stopping it, even if she wanted to. Kismet, kiss me, fate, fatal, destiny, chemistry, helpless, mess, breathless, jealousy, devilry — she saw the words lined up like a crossword puzzle.

When and how she could not reckon, but she was eager to watch it unravel.

She wished she were on speaking terms with her mother so that she could ask her about what this might hold — and how dangerous it could turn out to be.

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THE NEXT SIX PAGES ARE THOSE ON THE WEBSITE.  
IF YOU HAVE READ THEM, SCROLL TO CHAPTER 8, PAGE 16.

#### Chapter 4 INTRODUCING MS. D. KIRKE

Delilah Kirke was not your average witch. She had an MBA and worked in several different corporate environments. She charmed everyone in each of them. Lateral moves rapidly turned into vertical moves in the short time since she graduated from Wharton.

Not bad for a girl raised in a “clothing optional” commune in Humboldt County, California.

She dressed in corporate fashion and spent lavishly on her apparel. For evenings and special occasions, she wore haute couture.

Delilah’s red hair was that classic shade that was notoriously exciting to the eye. Many remarked in amazement that in some lighting it became flame-red.

When she was a child, her hair fell in ringlets. Now she kept it short to be taken seriously in the businessman’s world. Her skin had no freckles and went beyond fair toward pearlescent. Her eyes were a somber blue which gave her a formidable poker face, perfect for business. Her figure was slim. Her bustline was small, and there was not much of a ratio between her hips and waist. She was 5’1,

but she compensated with 4-inch Jimmy Choo heels which shaped her calves so that they captured men's attention as they watched her walk away.

Delilah's lips were full and voluptuous. When she gave a presentation, executives had their eyes glued to her mouth. If you looked closely, their eyes betrayed lecherous fantasies brewing.

With those features, you'd expect great beauty or at least prettiness. She possessed neither. They were mesmerized by the way she moved, the ways she gestured, and by her dulcet voice that beguiled all ears like the sweetness of a cello.

But it was the way she smelled that made those below her and those above her smile whenever she passed.

The corporate world uses the term "meteoric" for such a swift ascent through the ranks. She was Odysseus Corporation's new *wunderkind*. They knew they were lucky to have her, and wanted to keep her, so her compensation was in the high six figures. There were other non-cash bonuses and perks

After she had been to her gym and eaten a protein-filled breakfast from her blender, she met the Odysseus corporate car outside her high-rise at 5:45 am six days a week, regardless of the weather. Executives of her station did not have to ride the IRT. She never caught a cold, never been sick. She often wondered about her immune system.

Delilah dated often and nearly always those above her in the vertical positions on the organizational chart, and often in positions to which she aspired. However, when horizontal, she was superior in all ways. Occasionally, she would allow herself to be romanced by a colleague of the same station, but only if he—or she—was a competitor with similar ambition. She liked the opportunity to disarm them.

What was it about Ms. D. Kirke that made her so special? Ask the men who dated her. Most likely, they would be reluctant to disclose what had occurred.

Ms. Kirke stole penises.

And she turned men into pigs.

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## Chapter 5 DILLY

Little Delilah had fair skin that did not get on well with the sun. She also did not get on well with the naked, California sun-kissed, blonde children she was raised with. She preferred the company of the adults who worked in the gardens

with sunscreen slathered all over their bodies. Even SPF 50 applied hourly could hardly rescue Dilly from blisters and burns.

Dilly was what the commune had diminished her name to. This took a toll on her spirit. It started when her father tagged with it at one of their weekly Saturday get-togethers.

It was an unseasonably hot Northern California night for this Summer Solstice. In other countries, they celebrate the longest day and call it Midsummer's Eve.

The closest thing to air conditioning the yurt dwellers had were icy cans of beer applied to the armpits or between the thighs or poured down the throat. A vinyl disk played "Sugar Magnolia" on the battered stereo. It sat under an old poster of a red and blue skull split with a white lightning bolt. The women were dancing in that wavy way people do after they drank a brew of Lilith, Delilah's mother. She used almonds, fennel seeds, watermelon kernels, rose petals, cardamom, saffron, milk, sugar, and, finally, coriander -- a special coriander. Coriander was always used in love potions. She ground edible grasses and sugar, to make a green paste. To finish, she added her own lightly baked hybrid cannabis.

Six-year-old Delilah sneaked sips from a few of the hand-thrown ceramic mugs that held the delectable concoction. After her third serious sip, little Delilah took a Rubik's cube from the coffee table next to the bong. She twisted it a few times to take its measure. In a flurry of turns and clicks, she got all the colors to align.

Her father's buddy was bug-eyed. "Fuck, man! Am I high, or did your little girl just blow our minds?"

"Both, dude. That's my girl. She is a dilly!"

When they use that phrase, "...and the name stuck," they don't take into account how that stickiness can hold a person back. It did not matter that it meant, "an excellent example of a particular type of person or thing." Delilah wanted her name back.

Her mother, however, never used Dilly, but always her full name. Never "sweetheart," or "darling," or any of those names by which mothers everywhere address their daughters. Sometimes she would call her "Daughter." Some mothers in the commune thought Lilith was cold because she addressed her daughter so formally. The name Delilah was biblical and foreboding, not at all like Sunshine or Sequoia. Every time her mother called her name, Delilah treasured the sound and came. She was her mother's daughter, more than daddy's little girl. She loved him, but it was only her mother's lap she curled up on to take a nap.

Her mother, Lilith, had a name somehow like hers. It made them on the same side against the world

That night did not end when her mother put her to bed. It was a significant night in the life of an impressionable and sensitive girl.

That night did not end when her mother put her to bed. It was a significant night in the life of an impressionable and sensitive girl.

Delilah lay awake listening to the voices. She liked to hear each person or couple depart and say their goodnights. Her bedroom window looked out on the little house where the meetings took place. When it got quiet, she would look out the window till the lights went off, and she heard her mother and dad downstairs.

The sips from the cup made her feel light and happy. It made the colors around her shimmer, and the world look like something out of a storybook. She was hyper-aware of the world and every sound.

Tonight, she heard none of the goodbyes. Instead, a hush came over the group, and she heard many footsteps crunching through the twigs and stones.

It was the night of the yearly orgy, a rite as old as time for those from the northern climes. Lilith led them into the woods to celebrate.

Delilah crawled out of her bedroom window and lowered herself to the ground. She walked softly and kept out of sight as she followed the hushed voices. Their volume increased when they got deeper into the woods.

She hid behind a tree and watched them build a bonfire. Lilith gave a signal, and they all disrobed. It was a clothing-optional commune, so this was not the traumatic moment that it would have been for any other eight-year-old.

They laid many blankets on the ground. She heard a panpipe. Tambourines appeared, and the woman danced for the men. The men knelt and leaned forward, entranced by their dancing. They changed places, and the women laughed and would touch the men between their legs when they danced close.

To get a better view, Delilah climbed a tall tree. Quite a feat for an eight-year-old, but Delilah was not your typical child.

All the adults began to kiss and touch, some couples who were not the husbands or wives or partners of the other, sometimes in threes and fours. They were touching each other in places that she touched herself when she couldn't sleep. A woman got on her knees and put the man's "thing" in her mouth. Soon, they were all lying on the blankets with limbs wrapped around one another, making noises that she heard sometimes from her mother's bedroom--but to hear them all make the noise, particularly the women, was shocking.

She saw her mother riding on top of her dad.

What shocked her as much as the act was how stunningly beautiful her mother was with her red hair reflected in the light of the bonfire. She raised her arms, and with both hands, she piled her hair on top of her head. A moment later, she let it drop, threw her head back, and made a noise that sounded for all the world like the howl of a wolf. Several couples stopped to watch and applauded afterward.

The next moment made Delilah catch her breath and hold it. Lilith dismounted her dad and climbed on top of the next man. Women around her gathered and touched her all over. This continued until she had been with all twelve men. Lilith rode each one until he jerked and bucked and shouted her name, then she moved on to the next.

Lilith stood, and the women gathered around her with towels and water to wash her between her thighs. She looked up at the tree; she felt something watching, but Delilah had shimmied down, run back to their house, and climbed in through the bedroom window. She lay in bed shaking with the vision still vivid in her brain, the vision that was enhanced by the sips from the cup she'd had earlier. It made her sweat, it made her afraid, and it made her want to rub herself down there more than ever.

The orgiasts rested until dawn when Lilith awakened them. They chanted prayers and paeans to the Sun, naming him the life-giving Consort and Brother of the Goddess who appears as the Moon.

The bonfire had burned down to ash, just like the longing and curiosity for their neighbor's partner had been satisfied.

When Delilah heard her mother and father downstairs, she awoke from what she thought was a dream. Between her bed and the bathroom, the memory of what she had seen faded away as dreams do.

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## Chapter 6 "WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, JOHNNY WEISMULLER?"

On those solitary Saturdays, she plopped herself down on the futon in front of the black and white 17" screen, the sole TV set in the commune. She was enthralled with watching the former Olympian-turned-actor living in a tree with a chimp, fighting off wild animals armed only with a knife and his bare hands, or bathing in the lake with Jane. They were nearly naked when they bathed or swam in the river. Naked like she was. She didn't yet know the words erotic, romantic, or primitive. She lived in a safe, rural California where you could scare away a coyote with a shout and a flashlight. There was little worry about having to kill a monster crocodile with a knife. Plus, the security detail of men on dirt bikes with automatic rifles to guard the crop was reassuring.

“Dilly is a monkey! Dilly is a monkey!”

The children would point up at the big live oak Delilah was climbing like she was in one of the Tarzan movies

Delilah was one of those children who had a high tolerance for fear and needed danger to get her blood up.

She was fearless and would scale the tree until she was almost out of sight. “Dilly” would walk out onto the limbs like a tightrope walker. She would descend in a sort of free fall, catching branches like Tarzan.

The adults gathered around the tree to urge her to come down, some crying and begging, some chanting and praying for the protection of the small figure three stories or more above the ground--whereas the children cheered her on.

It was a turnabout from the taunting she had endured from them. Though they were cheering her now, she never forgot their jeering, so she did not seek to make friends with them. They had two names for her. Dilly, which she hated. or “The Ginger Singe” because she burned so quickly in the sun. But if one of her peers challenged her, they soon backed down. A boy two years older said, “Man, the way she looked at me scared the shit out of me. It’s like she saw right through me.” A girl her age agreed. “Oh, boy, I know. I saw my cat look at a mouse that way.” They weren’t embarrassed to admit it, because they weren’t the only ones. Everybody knew to stay the fuck out of her way. They didn’t exactly know why, because there had never been a real confrontation of playground fight. But they knew.

Her daddy tried to talk to her about how he worried, and how he would be crushed if anything happened to her. Lilith never said a word. When her husband asked her to speak to her daughter, Lilith just gently shook her head and with a shrug said, “It’s better to die doing what y’ love than t’ live in fear.” His jaw dropped. He found his wife both fascinating and disturbing.

The way she thought and spoke often mystified him. She was impossible to persuade, quietly convinced that she knew the way. It made him respect her. She never argued, just smiled. Her husband always kidded her that there was more cat in her than Scot.

More than once, he’d heard her words, “That’s my way. It might not be y’rs, but that’s what I think, and I know what’s good fer me...and what’s good fer m’ daughter.”

Like her mother, Dilly was never sick, never vaccinated, and never broke a bone. The other commune members marveled, but there was an unspoken rule not to speak of it. In some subconscious way, Lilith’s unnaturally hardy immune system moved the inhabitants of the illegal cannabis farm to be in awe of Lilith.

Lilith was love and warmth. You had to restrain yourself from spontaneously hugging her. You got the feeling that she would hug your back.

Her daughter — not so much.

## Chapter 7 INITIATION

The women would dance under the full moon every month, even in the chilly, wet winter. It rains a lot in that renowned county.

Teenage Delilah had grown peevish and rebellious, and her relationship with her mother had taken that typical turn from duckling love to ferocious malice. She snarled the word “Fine!” whenever her mother asked her to do something or told her she couldn’t.

Menarche can make a girl crazy. Lilith knew this well. In her role as the commune’s pharmacologist, she helped many girls with cramps and mood swings. When it was her own exceptional, red-headed daughter, she had to repress a phrase she had heard more than once back in the Kentucky hill country: “Beat her like a red-headed step-child.”

The third time Delilah asked her mother for the homemade Kotex, Lilith decided it was time.

“Tonight is th’ full moon, and y’re comin’ with us t’ dance. Y’re a woman now, and there are some thangs y’ should know.” It was not an invitation so much as a directive.

“Are you crazy? It’s 58 degrees and raining. I’m not going out in that!”

Lilith did not respond. When it came time to go and dance and pray, she told her daughter, “Alright, it’s time.” Delilah replied, “No, fuck you, I’m not going.”

Delilah had never spoken to her mother like that before, and a cold rush went through both of them. Though Lilith was seen as stern compared to the other mothers, she had never laid hands on Delilah. She went over to her daughter, bent down, and kissed her on the forehead. When she stood up, in her right hand she had Delilah by her thick, red hair. She did not speak but walked out with Delilah in tow. She did not even pause for her to put on a sweater or a slicker but hauled her out into the wet night. Delilah protested vehemently with a burst of profanities. Lilith stopped and looked at her in a way that made all resistance cease.

The ceremony began with passing a ceramic goblet that held a different potion tonight, an acrid mushroom brew. Delilah took a sip and spit it out. The chanting stopped and a dozen women stared aghast at the sacrilege.

“Drink.” That one word from her mother resonated and echoed like it was amplified. Later, Delilah wondered how anyone could speak that loud and not shout.

She drank.

One by one, the women went into the bushes to vomit up the residue, while the others continued the worshipful singing. When Delilah returned from her turn, the women saw the wonder in her eyes and smiled at one another knowingly, each remembering her first time.

Her mother took her into the middle of the circle and announced her installation into their ranks. The women droned her name, which was easy to make melodious. Lilith kissed her daughter on both cheeks. Delilah looked at her mother again with that love that comes from first imprint and years of nurture.

Her mother slapped her hard, hard enough to knock her down, and hollered, “Wake up, bitch! Y’re one of us now!”

The coven cheered and gathered around Delilah. They boosted her onto their shoulders and, still chanting her name, carried her deeper into the woods.

No one in the commune ever called her Dilly again

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HERE BEGINS THE REST OF THE EXCERPT

## Chapter 8

### 9:00 A.M. MEETING

The morning after the Odets’ restoration celebration, the meeting commenced at 9:00 a.m.

The croissants were hot and buttery, just begging to be slathered with more butter and apricot jam. Paired with crisp bacon and washed down with triple-shot lattes. How Delilah kept it all hot and fresh was her secret.

Delilah sat in the middle of the long table, so she could serve. Chief Operating Officer Randall Cunningham-Blake sat at the head. The middle seat on the opposite side of the table from Delilah was reserved for Odets.



Randall Cunningham-Blake was the “executor” type of COO. He oversaw the day-to-day administrative and operational functions, that is, he kept things on track. He was a first-class analyst, a good manager, and kept internal affairs from bothering his boss. In fact, he installed a firewall between Ulysses and the upstarts and whiners that clamor for an audience with the king.

Randall was second in command, but there was no doubt who the boss was, and Randall reported to him daily—or had, until Odysseus sailed over the horizon. Randall was not the heir apparent, but he was beyond loyal, and moving to another company would never occur to him. Ulysses was the face of the company, but in his absence, Randall had hired a man who was one of their lobbyists to speak to the outside world. He knew that his own presence would not reflect well on the corporation. He could have played the dormouse in Alice, as long as it was a fat dormouse.

Innovation was not his forte. He liked a well-oiled machine and drove the same Mercedes he bought ten years ago. But he kept the business running for two years, never knowing when he would be replaced since he would never be promoted, so he doubled down to keep the company solvent by streamlining a lot of things that Ulysses might have hemmed-and-hawed about if he were around. He was also a great friend of Penny’s and backed her resistance against some board members’ desires to sell off the corporation and take the money and run.

He considered Delilah Kirke to be a godsend, and Randall believed in God. She was everything he was not, and she had some incredible insights which helped him keep the ship afloat while, some beyond the horizon, Ulysses’ was sinking.

At the same time, he smelled ambition on her—along with another fragrance that made him feel some things he thought were long gone. He was very uncomfortable that the balance had been disturbed, but still very proud that he had hired her.

Cunningham-Blake asked for another croissant while he reached under the table to loosen his belt a notch. Fifteen pounds in the last

three months. Twelve points added to his cholesterol, the bad kind. It was worth every bite, he told himself. Mrs. Cunningham-Blake did not like fatties. Her time was taken up with the shirtless pool boy with a six-pack who lately arrived from Chihuahua. Mr. Cunningham-Blake would rather eat than fuck anyway.

At 9:09 a.m., Odets entered. They stood and applauded until he sat and slid his hand across his throat to cut it out.

“Good morning. Thanks for the outlandish greeting. Now let’s get to work.”

No bullshit, back in the saddle, Odets in fine fettle, the same as before. Almost.

Odets did not look at Delilah.

Cunningham-Blake piped up, “Ulysses, we have some new faces here. May I introduce—”

“I’m sure I’ll meet them all in due time. Let’s start with the financials. How much have we lost in my absence, and what is our stock price? I haven’t had the cojones to look for fear it would kill me when the ocean couldn’t.”

Abuse and sarcasm was his style. It kept all the underlings in line. Men who spoke too loudly and insistently were gone the same day. Once, one disrespected him. He walked to where the upstart sat, pulled him out of his chair by the collar, grasped the seat of his pants, and bum-rushed him to the door. A security officer opened it so that Odets could give the objector a swift kick to facilitate his exit. Once a woman had objected to an “inappropriate” joke he’d told. He walked around to her, humming a waltz. He extended his hand in a bow as if he was asking her to dance. She looked around, confused, and he caught her up in a swirling dance worthy of any ballroom. With a final twirl, he spun her out the doors which closed behind her.

Cunningham-Blake beamed, “I am happy to report that profits are up. Stock prices rose 2.5% in the last quarter and 4.5% since you embarked. Other subsidiaries have more than made up for any

losses. Everyone has put in long hours figuring out how to do things better, so you would be pleased upon your return—”

“Thanks, everyone. I appreciate your hard work. I don’t think anyone here thought I was coming back; I know I didn’t. So, let’s cut the apple polishing.”

“Absolutely, Ulysses. Business-mode only. Just wanted to finish my kudos to a particular individual who has been an extraordinary asset to the company. Her insight into the market and her prognostication of where the economy would be even when there were no discernible markers are remarkable. She out-guesses the economists regularly, guides a lot of our strategies and investments, and is a bit of a marketing genius on top of it. Everyone at this table acknowledges that. Let me introduce you to De--”

--Delilah Kirke. Of course. How could I not know your name? Congratulations, and happy to have you aboard.”

His ever-assessing blue eyes did not land on Delilah. His gaze was all around her. To the others, it seemed like he was looking at her. He looked at her shoulder, just above her head, but past her.

Delilah’s thoughts sounded the alarm. *He’s afraid of me. That’s terrible. Why would he be afraid of little old me?* How could she get to a man who wouldn’t look at her?

“So nice to meet you, Mr. Odets. I’m glad we both lived to see the day. They say I make a mean croissant. Can I tempt you, sir?”

The timbre of her voice made his insides churn.

Without giving him time to answer, which was good because Odets was frozen and unable to reply, she continued to tell him how she made this ambrosial puff pastry. She prepared him a plate with some tart, sweet apricot preserves on top, and poured him a cup. He was looking down at the table, but because she stole the show no one noticed. She set the plate down in front of him. *If you won’t look at me, look at my delicacies.*

When he bit into it, the only sound was an extended “Mmm.” The sound continued through the last bite and his licking his fingers. He drank the latte like mother’s milk.

The execs around the table were speechless at this scene played out before them at 9:22 a.m. on this Monday morning.

He finished and said nothing. But, as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, he looked Delilah straight in the eye and smiled.

## Chapter 9 THANKS FOR THE MEETING

The uncomfortable moment of the Great Leader and Man-of-the-Hour grinning like a schoolboy at the pastries of the brilliant, young executive was cut short when Odets abruptly rose from his chair.

“Thanks for the meeting. Good to see you all. I’ll have my assistant make appointments with each of you. That way you can tell me what you really think instead of worrying about groupthink.” He stood up and marched out.

A pen dropped, and everyone looked at it. Cunningham-Blake dropped it at his astonishment at being blindsided by Odets’ imperious dismissal of the meeting for which the COO had long prepared. The pen’s clatter was Cunningham-Blake’s only show of exasperation with the man who had abandoned his responsibilities to flaunt his bravado to the world so that he could parade it before members of his social class and other CEOs. Odets had pitched the seafaring as a great publicity stunt, but there was never any inquiry into what the board thought; he just told them what he was going to do. Stockholders be damned. Executive Board be damned. Probably his Penelope would be—well, not damned—but very likely not consulted.

At the next Monday morning meeting, matters got worse. As the meeting was concluding, Delilah cleared her throat.

“I have some questions.”

Her questions were incisive and aimed at Odets about the decision to close the Argos dog food factory, a “shoot from the hip” decision that was his first action being “back in the saddle.” Her marketing skills were exacting, as were her powers of persuasion, and her talking points were peppered with many “all due respects,” as she projected spreadsheets and charts which made an overwhelmingly convincing case for why it should stay open. Which implied that his decision was hasty and unfounded. At one point, it smelled of a lecture.

The reason to keep the dog food company open was that it gave the world pictures of cute puppies on the side of the bag and handsome hounds on the label of the can. That Odets Corp. made it would soften the world’s heart toward the company. Given the other divisions--military, industrial, and often complex--would convince shoppers and voters that Odysseus Corporation were good guys. The division's closure had been announced, but Delilah spun it so that they would announce, “By popular demand, we have reversed our decision to close our pet goods section. Thanks so much to our loyal dog-owning customers.” A big corporation that is responsive to its customers was a marketing coup. She reeled off the rationales while she showed pictures of puppies on the screen with the company’s logo at the top. Then she recounted them to drive her points home.

COO Cunningham-Blake tried twice to move on from Delilah's spiel, but she continued as if he hadn't spoken. Everyone's attention was so focused on Delilah, that none seemed to hear him. Half of them could likely not tell you what she said; they were high on her sublime tones. Those sitting near her were spellbound by her smell.

Odets said nothing but just stared at her. He had named the company after his dog. The day Ulysses returned, his dog of 14 years limped over to him and licked his hand for minutes. In the morning, he found him lying outside their bedroom door, guarding it as always. He had died in the night doing his duty. Which added to his heartbreak and cast another pall over his homecoming. When he

told his psychiatrist that he was closing the company. his psychiatrist suggested he may be trying to distance himself from tender emotions.

One function of some Chief Operating Officers is mentoring.

On her way out, Cunningham-Blake took her aside and chided her. "Are you out of your mind? He's just back, he doesn't have his land legs yet, you're new, he doesn't know you from Adam, and I don't care how good a baker you are or how much revenue you've brought in, I'll be surprised if you're not gone by the end of business!"

She smiled, put her hand on Randall Cunningham-Blake's chest, and replied, "I'm so glad you look after me." She adjusted his tie, saying, "By the way, were any of those poor decisions I pointed out your idea? It will make him feel better to have someone to share the blame with. Or just to blame." She patted his ever-expanding belly, and said, "And I am a good baker, aren't I?" She winked at him and walked away.

Randall Cunningham-Blake took a quick look left and right to make sure no one was watching, or if they had been, that they had the good sense to look away. He surreptitiously reached down and adjusted his erection so it was not pointing outward, but tucked up in his tighty-whities, and he buttoned his coat over it. When he did, he noticed that the button was about to pop.

Delilah only had one mentor, and he was the daddy of all mentors.

When Delilah passed Odets in the cafeteria, he glanced up at her and smirked. He admired her boldness, and could not wait to find out what end game she had in mind.

## Chapter 10

### THE SECRETARIES' HEROINE

The secretaries loved Delilah. She was no beauty, so there was no cause for jealousy. She treated them as colleagues.

Women who reach the corporate heights often behave like men or else have a faux sweetness about them. Delilah overheard a secretary expound on the differences. "A male boss will say, 'I need this done today.' He means that he expects you to stay until it's on his desk. A woman boss will say, 'If you can get this done today, that would be great, but whenever you can do it...' Which in female-boss-code means the same thing. But, if you don't know the code, you might think, 'Well, okay, it doesn't sound like it's that urgent. I'll do it first thing tomorrow.' When you come in the next morning, she'll be all pissy and tell you, 'I needed that done yesterday.' Or, worse yet, she won't say anything, and you won't know what the peeved look is about. Until review time."

They admired Delilah's taste in clothes, which was never to turn a man's head, but made "the girls" — as they called the pool — want to reach out and touch the fabric.

When she started to bring them goodies from her kitchen, the younger ones and the ones who hadn't given up and were still counting calories, had mixed emotions. "Are you trying to get us fat?" one of them piped up. "I'm only kidding."

Delilah always paid attention to the underlying message. She had anticipated this one. "Not to worry. I eat them. Enjoy them, and if you put on more than a pound or two, let me know, and I can adjust the recipe." None of them gained much weight. Delilah had been taught how to use sweet roots which, when mixed together, didn't add calories, yet tasted like butter. This was the version of her baked goods that she fed to them. She could have made a fortune by starting her own baked goods company, but that would mean she'd have to put up with the troubles of starting up and running her own company.

She fed the men a version with more melted butter than a French chef's wet dream.

The secretaries begged for the recipe, but Delilah said, "I swore to my momma I'd keep this recipe a secret. It's one of those family things, passed down and all." She said it in a Kentucky accent, the way her momma talked, which softened it, and they laughed at how well she did it. It made them wonder if she had a little hillbilly in her background and rose despite it. She was something of a mystery to them, but she soon became their hero. Her pastries became their heroin.

To get access to Odets, one had to go through Randall Cunningham-Blake who served as his chief of staff. Randall Cunningham-Blake had an Irish secretary named Marjorie who served as his Cerberus. She was a no-nonsense woman who was extremely proficient at her job and took no "bollocks" —which everyone soon found out was what they called "bullshit" in Ireland. If one tried to schedule an appointment for that day, she would look up at them as if they were asking something ridiculous, and say, "Ask me bollocks!" which everyone came to understand stood for "Not a chance." Behind her back, she was known as Marjorie Bollocks. She knew it, and waited for the day someone's tongue slipped and they said those words out loud.

Cunningham-Blake, who she referred to as "CB," prized her candor and let her be. He liked her nickname for him because it sounded like one of those old-time movie producers. Marjorie was not the kind of person who could easily be charmed. When Freud said the Irish were impervious to psychoanalysis, he was talking about Marjorie; outside of irascibility, she seldom revealed true feelings.

Soon after beginning at Odysseus, Delilah went to Marjorie and introduced herself with respect and without any ingratiating smiles. She called her Missus Halloran rather than Ms. because Delilah had heard her correct another secretary on the title, telling her, "I'm married thirty years, and I've earned the Missus."



Whenever Delilah went to her to schedule an appointment, she brought something. The first time, it was Irish soda bread. Like the rest of her breadstuffs, it was extraordinary. She warmed it in the small convection oven she'd brought to the break room. She came in to make the appointment just before Marjorie's lunch break with the soda bread wrapped in a white cloth napkin and smelling grand.

The week before Christmas, she'd given her a \$100 bottle of Redbreast 15-year-old Irish Whiskey. Not too expensive, but top-shelf. The card read, "From one Gael to another."

By late January, Marjorie took to asking when Delilah would like to see him instead of dictating the time of the appointment as she did to all others.

For Valentine's Day, Delilah brought a devil's food cake and told her, "Just between us? I've moved around a lot from job to job, but I like it here, and I plan to stay. When Mr. Cunningham-Blake retires, I'll be shooting for his job. Some new executives like to use the 'new broom sweeps clean' approach, but they're fools. If I'm ever lucky enough to sit in that office, and if you would consent to it, I'd like you here to advise me on the things I'd need to learn that only you could tutor me on. I hope your husband likes the cake."

Delilah turned to leave but looked back and saw her wipe her eye with the same Irish linen napkin Delilah had wrapped the soda bread.

Delilah had sealed the deal.

## Chapter 11 AMENDS

She realized she had behaved badly with Mr. Cunningham-Blake that morning, and knew she had to make amends. Her first stop was Marjorie's desk.

At 4:45, Delilah stood outside the glass door so Marjorie could see her. Delilah stood there for a few minutes. She got out a handkerchief which could easily have been interpreted as blotting away tears.

Finally, Marjorie gestured for her to come in. Delilah's lip quivered, but she stood erect to regain her composure and faced Marjorie.

"Oh, darlin'. Not a smart move. He's fumin'. What in God's name did you say to him?"

Delilah's hard work was paying off. Marjorie, if not on her side, was being kind to her. Anyone else who had crossed her boss would be *persona non grata* until CB specified otherwise.

"I need to see him to straighten things out, to make amends."

"My advice is to let it rest a bit. I'll feel him out and call you tomorrow. He's going to Atlanta tomorrow night, so it'll give him a chance to cool down. Go home, pour yourself a whiskey, and have a hot bath. Worry is interest paid on trouble." Delilah had a friend on the inside for sure.

The next day, Marjorie rang her.

"No need to see him, he says. But not in a bad way. He mentioned that you might be right. I t'ink he just didn't want to hear it from someone who had only been here for as short a time as you have been. Comin' from a woman, too. But in my opinion, and I've been around him a lot, just don't bring it up; no apologies, and bygones will be just that. These men see an apology as a weakness. Just carry on like whatever donnybrook you two had never happened."

"Don't know what I'd do without you, Marjorie."

On Wednesday, Delilah phoned Marjorie and said, "I got a note that Mr. Odets wants to see me. I know the protocol is to go through Mr. Cunningham-Blake"—Delilah always used his full name to show proper respect—"but he's in Atlanta. Should I wait till he gets back? Will Mr. Odets think I'm putting him off? I need your advice."

Marjorie thought for a moment. "I can't ask for an appointment with The Man behind the Great Wooden Doors without Mr. CB's approval. But I do know that Himself stays late on Fridays. His secretary tells me he exercises at the gym downstairs, after which he sits in his office and has a gargle. My advice would be to wander t'rough the office after his secretary is gone. She told me that when she's not there, he leaves the door open to see if anyone's approachin'. Seems he's still up to high doh from his ordeal, de poor man. Maybe bring him some of that pie, or whatever you fed him that caused such a stir. About 7:30, after everyone has left to get a pint and wash away the week."

Delilah went to her computer and searched for "up to high doh." In a millisecond or so, the result came back, Northern Irish or Scottish expression meaning that "a person is very stressed or nervous." Why would a man who was that rich and powerful be nervous? Did it come with the territory? Did something happen on the voyage?

She dismissed her speculation. She could find out on her own.

Delilah sat back in her chair and smiled. Her months of strategy had paid off. She had entrée to the "Great Wooden Doors" and the chamber of "Himself."

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## Chapter 12 COLLECT CALL

This is the California State Correctional Center calling with a collect call from Percival Davis. Will you accep--"

"I accept, operator," Delilah interrupted. "Hi, Dad! How's it going?"

"I'm good, honey. Nothing bad. Reading a lot of Thich Nhat Hanh. Got into mythology, too, which is very illuminatin'. You?"

"I'm good. I work a lot. The guy who runs the company --"

"Yeah, yeah, I saw that big parade on TV. I was goin' to ask you about that."

"I met him, but haven't really spoken to him yet. I started after he went off on the expedition, or cruise, or journey, or whatever."

"We're all on a journey, honey."

"Right, dad."

"On the TV it looked like he had red hair, too, pretty much the same color as yours. Freaky, huh? But that was on TV. and the colors could be different."

"No, you're right. I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. It is just like mine. Huh." Sometimes Delilah lied just to keep in practice.

"Be careful, though. Guys like that don't have much of a conscience. Are you happy, honey?"

"Sure, dad. I'm good at my job, I'm healthy, I'm not lonely."

"Are you gettin' laid?"

"Dad! How inappropriate!"

"That's the new word, huh? I hear that word a lot on TV. Dilly, it's a natural thing that keeps the hormones flowin'. It keeps you young and balanced."

"Dilly, huh?"

"Sorry, I'll never remember. Delilah. I love you, Delilah."

"I love you, too, Dad. Shall we do it?"

They had a ritual. It kept him sane and her hopeful.

"Six years, 10 months, 12 days down."

"Three years, 1 month, 28 days to go."

Together they said, "Or sooner for good behavior!"

After they laughed at it together, Delilah repeated, "I love you, Dad."

"Delilah?"

"I know what you're going to ask, and no. No reply, no contact. She doesn't want to talk to me, Dad."

“She can be a hard woman, honey. Kentucky redneck raw-bone redhead hard, and hill-country proud. Stubbornest woman ever, and the best. I miss her, Delilah. She comes to visit less, but still some.”

“Have you talked to her lately?”

“Yeah, sure. Every week. When I ask her to call you, the line goes quiet, so I stopped trying. She got her midwife license. She’s got a little shop in Santa Rosa where she sells her potions and lotions, so she gets along.”

“Dad, it is fucking crazy that you are in prison when it’s now legal. Please let me hire a lawyer to see what he can do about early release”

“Honey, if you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime. As you now know, we made a shitload of money sellin’ weed, and that’s not allowed no how. When I get out. I’ll come up to New York City, and you can show me around. That’s why I want to do it the whole time. I don’t want some parole officer comin’ round to break into my place and roust me or tell me I can’t leave the state to visit my Delilah in the Big Apple. Sounds tempting. Hell, it sounds biblical!”

“I love you, dad. Next week.”

“Same bat time, same bat channel.”

“I still don’t know what that means, but I love to hear you say it.”

“Good night, honey. Keep the faith.”

“Good night, Dad.”

Lilith would not answer her calls, her emails, nothing. Radio silence ever since Delilah transferred from astrophysics to business. Ever since she gave up The Faith. Ever since she stopped worshiping, and had no “group.” Ever since she used what she knew and what she was given for her own advancement, her own aggrandizement, and her own profit, instead of healing and trying to help.

Delilah had gone from hurt to anger to numb to accepting.

## Chapter 13

### A GOING-AWAY PRESENT

It was 8:00 p.m., Wednesday, and time to play. Nothing like hot sex to make you forget your heartache.

John Braxton Mann was 32, GQ handsome, and from old Virginia stock who had the good sense to invest in Northern factories when they saw the “War of Northern Aggression” coming. He had a marvelous cock, seven and a half inches in length. Delilah kept stats. Ultimately, it was the girth that matters, and his was a pleasingly snug fit. If only he knew how to use it. No matter; she did.

It was time to sign off with Mr. Mann. One Last Time. There were bigger fish to fry. Much bigger.

He was a pretentious Yalie snot, Skull, and Bones, who thought he had a treasure in his pants, His attitude reminded her of that old Pompeii fresco she’d seen where the man has his enormous member laid on one side of the scales, and the other side is balanced with gold.

He admired her work, he said. He said he was surprised that a woman could be so savvy. He had married a Tri-Delt from Duke, a simpering, size 00 blonde whose world was the Junior League and Spin Cycling. He couldn’t make her come, he whined. Delilah was tempted to show him how, but she met her at a cocktail party and found her to be snotty and supercilious, too, so she decided to leave her to her rabbit.

John Braxton Mann had succeeded Delilah in the previous three positions from which she had been promoted. Thus, she was the one who oriented him all three times in her nearly two-year rise within the ranks of Odysseus. Always a rung behind. Though he always tried to work her with his upper-class charm, it was plain that he resented it.

The last time they were together, he had overpowered her and tried to sodomize her. She always suspected his intentions were not

just to do her, but to undo her, and that confirmed it. Getting ass-fucked against your will is not about sex, it's about power. She did a little maneuvering to slip it into the proper orifice, and from there she had control.

She had been vacillating about leaving him a going-away present, but after that little episode, there was no question. Hers would be a memorable gift, utterly unforgettable, as hard as one might try.

She prepped the ingredients from memory. It was one recipe she did not have to consult the book for. Saltpeter was a myth from summer camp that was reputed to be added to the pudding so boys wouldn't get erections. However, if combined with other herbs in the correct proportions, there was some truth to it. Sort of an anti-Viagra. Her going-away present would present him with a lifetime of responding to ED medication ads and trips to the psychiatrist. That he and Mrs. Tri-Delt were trying to get pregnant made Delilah relish it even more.

She soaked green olives in the brew. The tartness of the olives would mask the taste.

"I want you to fuck me hard tonight. Just do it, and do it, and do it, and see how many times you can make me come. I need that exquisite prize you carry around between your legs. I've never had anything in me that can do what it does to me. I'm so lucky that you fuck me."

Thus, Delilah's improvisation began. After two martinis and two bong hits, she opened the little lacquered box that sat on the coffee table and extracted a small glassine envelope, a single-edged razor blade, and a hundred-dollar bill. She unwrapped the bundle, tipped out the cocaine on the marble coffee table, divided it into four lines, and handed the bill to John.

He waved off her invitation. She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. It was a loud and clear non-verbal communication that if he wanted this evening to turn carnal, he had better play nice and get down and snort it up asap. It only took him a deep breath's time

to weigh the alternative, and, of course, he accepted her offer and whiffed away.

Afterward, Delilah sat next to him with her knees curled up under her, and whispered those "fuck-me-make-me-come" words into his ear, punctuating them with little audible kisses. Every time she gave him one of those little kisses, she could feel the soft shafts of the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end.

She plucked olives from the bowl, put them into her mouth, and slid them into his. The warm, sensual slipperiness of olives and mouths was lovely, and she was almost swept away with it until he opened his mouth wide like a Baby Bird as if begging Mama Bird to plop the food in. It was laughable, pathetic, and had just the chilling effect that Delilah needed to remind her of what the mission was, and not get seduced by her own scheme.

She slipped off his pants, pushed a little on the inside of his thighs to get him to spread them, and began the performance others had actually applauded. Slow. With eye-contact. Ravenous. Dirty.

Alas, Mr. J. Braxton Mann—thanks to that little potion in the olives—was not up to the task. It had never happened to him before, he protested. She consoled him, with a "don't worry about it." She snuggled up to him, and they turned on the TV.

She tried to arouse him again, and though his mind was all for it, the flesh failed him.

The third time, she giggled.

"What the hell is so funny?"

"Nothing. Nothing." The irrepressible giggling continued.

"What the fuck, Delilah, are you laughing at me?"

"No, no, John. I just think it's funny that, well, that, oh, I don't know, you wanting to get your wife pregnant, and spending your seed on me, and now you're all up in your head or something, and you can't...oh, God, I'm horrible, but...."

Delilah was laughing so hard that she had to hold her belly. If she didn't have the corporate bent, she could have been an Oscar winner



“Why is that so fucking funny to you?”

“I’m just too high, honey. Here, let’s try again.”

“No. No. Don’t laugh at me.”

“I’m sorry. Really. Here, give me a hug.” He’d crossed his arms and turned away from her like a cartoon of a little boy pouting. She hugged him from behind.

“Come on, sweetie. I’m so sorry I hurt your feelings. Have another hit, and I’ll do something special that I bet will fix this little temporary problem. You refill the bong, and I’ll be right back.”

Delilah went to the bathroom, ran the hot water, and got two washcloths, one wet and one dry. A warm, wet cloth makes everything fresh and relaxes all the muscles around the sphincter. She had read about prostate massage and watched a porn video of it. She’d read that a man could have an orgasm without an erection this way.

She kissed and licked the inside of his thighs. She ran her fingernails up and down his belly, and around his nipples. She took off his socks and massaged between the bones in the ball of his foot, dug her fingers into the heel, and ran her thumbnail across the arch. She had his legs bent back like he was going to get fucked. She kept kissing and licking closer to the little star. She languidly stroked the top of his foot, running up the outside of his thigh to behind the knee. When she tickled there, she was afraid he’d jerk away, but he stayed motionless, trembling for fear she might stop. She used her thumbs to massage under his buttocks, up into the muscles and tendons between his legs. She dug her fingernails into his buttocks in little grabbing motions. She took her hands away completely, and he raised his ass in the air, begging for more. From between the cushions of the couch, she retrieved a small bottle of Astroglide--she smirked at the name--and a plastic ring with a vibrator in it. She poured a little lubrication on her fingers and circled the target she was aiming for. She dipped her finger in about a half-inch and made a little circle inside of him. She tugged her finger back and forth, and his muscles inside hung on, sucking the tip of her finger. She

dropped a tad more lube onto her finger and, bit by bit, worked her finger further in, first to one side, then the other, then in the smallest of circles. She began to lick the place between his balls and his ass that some laughingly refer to as the “taint.” When she asked a friend why it was called the taint, she told her, “‘Tain’t one place and ‘taint the other.” Everything combined would have given most men a raging erection, but nothing happened.

She got more aggressive, with more lube. She started fucking him with her petite index finger all the way in and out more quickly. She found his prostate. She put the ring on her index finger and re-inserted that digit; the ring vibrated, and she moved it back and forth, up and down, rolling it over and over.

She could feel the bulb of his prostate swell, and felt it pulse and twitch. His breath came more quickly, the little moans growing louder, and, without a sign of an erection, he ejaculated. For coming out of a flaccid penis, it was more than she expected. Delilah caught it in the washcloth so it wouldn’t stain the couch. John flopped over on the couch, and, a moment later, was snoring. She washed her hands and turned on the television.

He awoke at about 3 am. She pulled him up, and they toddled down the hall to the bedroom.

Cuddling in her oversized bed, Delilah continued her devious little plan with a simple inquiry. “John, can I ask you something.”

“Sure,” he muttered.

“When you were in prep school, did you ever, you know, fool around, like with other boys, maybe your roommate? I mean, like when you were drunk and horny?”

His eyes popped open. “What? No, fuck no. I’m no faggot!”

“Calm down, sweetie. I did.”

“Yeah. That’s cool. But it’s different with girls. You see two girls doing it in all the skin mags. But the idea of two dudes going at each other’s hairy assholes is just beyond disgusting. Puke, gag, blah!”

A beat. A long beat.

“Why did you ask me that?”

"It's just, well, the way you came. Like never before. You liked it so much in your ass, and I was just wondering, I mean, I think bisexuality is cool, it's the thing now, and —"

"Wait, you think because you...because I.. that makes me queer?"

"No, no, no, I know for sure you're not queer—I mean gay. It's just that the guys I've been with who like that kind of stuff, are—most of the time—bi. That's all I'm saying. But it's no big deal. Forget it."

"Hard to forget."

"Hey, not to worry. You came so much. You are a super-duper stud. Your other half should be knocked up in a twinkling now that you guys are trying, right?"

"Yeah. Right. Thanks. I came a lot, huh?"

"Yeah. Like more than ever before. More than I can ever remember anything squirting like that! Now, go to sleep, super-stud."

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## Chapter 14 STEP TWO

His wife was at a spa in the Caribbean, so he stayed over.

Delilah handed him his coffee, and inquired, "What are you doing for lunch?"

"I was supposed to meet with marketing, but I got a text that their main guy has the flu, so they had to cancel. Why?"

"I want a rematch. I'll get a room at the Carlton. Meet me there at 12:30. I'll order room service, and we'll be back by two. Cool?"

"Uh. Ok. Sure. You randy little thing, you!"

"Wait a second, Mr. Mann! You were the one who got off last night—and without an erection, which is really cool. I never saw that before! But I had to DIY it to get to sleep, so you owe me one."

“Ok. Deal.”

“I’m out of here. Lock up, ok?”

“Delilah?”

“In a hurry, in a hurry!” She was putting on her coat and gathering her keys, phone, and purse. She didn’t have anything to rush for. It was part of the improv.

“You never had a guy come without an erection?”

“Darling, that would be something I would have remembered. It was brilliant; I’m impressed. See you at 12:30. I’ll text you what room. Don’t you cancel on me, stud!”

She was out the door. Mann stared into his coffee and felt a dark heat surround him.

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## Chapter 15 COUP DE GRÂCE

Delilah waited in the coffee shop until she saw him exit her building. She hurried back to her apartment to retrieve the zucchini bread from the fridge. She baked it with more “preparation” in it. A longer-lasting mixture. She was amused by the symbolism of the zucchini.

In the hotel room, they ate before getting down to business. He wolfed down all the zucchini bread. As expected, things failed to function. Delilah began to feign frustration. She noticed that, even in this limp state, his substantial member had shrunk a bit, as if it were shy and embarrassed.

She decreed, “Listen here. I want you at my place at 8:30 tonight. I’ll make dinner. If we keep trying, we’ll have a breakthrough. If I don’t feel your dick inside me soon, I’m going to kill something.”

“But I have to...”

“Don’t give me any grief, John. If you ever want to get any of this ass again, have YOUR ass there at half-past eight!”

As an executive, she knew how to command.

At 8:32, she met him at the door in a raincoat and nothing else, flashed him, then ran into the bedroom. He did not give chase. She came out a few minutes later in a silky Japanese robe.

“You didn’t follow.”

“I don’t know, I...”

“Forget it, let’s eat.”

Fettuccine alfredo with crispy garlic bread. Garlic covered the stronger taste of the larger, final dose.

Afterward, when he failed for the third time, her charm dissolved. She went from ridicule to disgust and back again. She ordered him out.

When John Braxton Mann got up to urinate the next morning, he practically had to reach up inside to bring it out. He sat down on the toilet to pee and cried like the little boy he’d never grown out of being.

A week later, there was a memo on the company’s intranet that J. Braxton Mann had taken a position at another corporation. Through a backchannel, she checked the salary. Delilah snickered when she found out that his new position came with a substantial cut in pay.

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## Chapter 16 FRIDAY CAME

She approached the office with the large oak doors at 7:32. Delilah scanned the other executives' office on the way there to make sure everyone else had departed. In her bag was a \$3,500 bottle of vintage Elijah Craig 22-Year-Old Single Barrel Kentucky Bourbon. She loved the description: “butter popcorn, citrus zest, toasted

honey, cocoa, and warm, sweet pipe tobacco, with an aftertaste of a sprig of fresh mint." She thought of her momma when she drank Kentucky bourbon. She thought of what her momma would think of this indulgence. She wiped away that hurt by concentrating on where she was headed.

Even in high heels, she made no noise when she walked on the expensive flooring in the halls and cubicles. She did not wobble on the lush, plush carpet in the CEO suite.

He was sitting behind his glass desk, leaning back in his wide leather chair, just staring at the ceiling. Ulysses felt her there and jerked up in alarm. They didn't speak. She held the bottle by the neck and let the bag fall away to the floor. She walked around his desk, breaching the divide between the master and his minions. She twisted the cap to break the seal, popped the cork, took a big swig, and handed it to him. He sniffed it, inspected the bottle, looked up at Delilah, and took a long swallow. It was instant camaraderie, like sweaty sailors cracking open a fifth after they'd soogeed down the portside.

He passed it back to her. She took another long drink, banged in the cork with the palm of her hand, put it on the glass table, swung around, and lowered herself onto his lap in the roomy chair.

Still silent, she ran her fingers through his beard as if she had never seen one before, and she had never seen one of such perfect auburn and so exquisitely trimmed. He smelled of Bay Rum. Clove, pimento oil, cinnamon. Their eyes met and latched. She edged toward his lips, backed off a half-inch to tease, and delicately touched her lips to his. All this with eyes wide open and still locked. Like melting, like the first taste of soft ice cream, their mouths joined, and their eyes closed.

It had begun.

On the desk, over the desk, on the leather couch, and on the Afghani carpet. After they'd worn each other out, they lay in one another's arms on the carpet with a soft Afghan covering them. They

had not spoken a word, except for crying out in nearly religious and very profane ecstasy.

With his head on her belly, he wept. The naked man with his body pressed up against hers and his limbs wrapped around her was in deep grief. What was he grieving?

Even Ulysses wasn't sure.

Finally, he sat up, wiped his wet face and leaking nose with his palm, and broke the silence with a big sigh and a "Well!" He reached over to his discarded trousers and got out his handkerchief. When he blew his nose, it sounded like a goose's honk which sent Delilah into a fit of giggles. He laughed with her, lay down facing her, and they just took in each other's face for a full minute.

Delilah kissed him on the nose, arose, and picked up the bottle. She took two glasses from the bar, squatted on the carpet, poured a splash of bourbon into each, and handed him one. In the glass, the nose was fuller. Scotch was his drink, but this sweeter, homier smell was warmer. She clinked her glass against his to toast their wordless, abandoned, inevitable fucking all over this magnificent office. Or was it a toast to the success their combined wits and acumen would to the company? Unconsciously, they may have been toasting to the predictable, disastrous finale that anyone could see coming.

At 9:00 p.m., the phone rang. Ulysses moved to see if it was Penny calling. Delilah jumped up, got between him and the phone, sat on the desk, lifted her legs, clutched his rump with both hands and pulled him into her. He had not been hard, but in the moment that it took from her grabbing his ass to the tip of his cock touching her, he swelled to full size and more. The metaphor of her getting between him and the wife was not lost on him. The wife he adored, the beauty queen wife who defended him with fierce loyalty, whose constancy and faith in him had never waned. Much like the faith of the crew whose skeletons rested at the bottom of the sea or in the belly of a shark. These thoughts, however, didn't retard his encore performance on the edge of the glass desk.

She used his used handkerchief to wipe between her legs. He reached for another in his desk drawer, gesturing for her to wait till he got her a clean one, but she shook her head and smiled. She kept wiping their mixed fluids, and her lascivious smile got him half-hard again.

She dressed. She put her cheek next to his. She whispered one word, "Friday." He nodded his head.

He would always watch women as they exited the room to admire their derrieres. This woman, who was equal to the most entrancing and exuberant partners he'd had (and he'd had among the hundreds –or could there have been a thousand?) had no ass at all and could have been, with the right clothing and a ball cap, mistaken for a boy.

He took a hot shower to wash off her smell. He intended to knock back a quick energy drink and get to Penelope with a loving expression and a big kiss. As he sat to put his shoes on, he laid back for just a moment, and, exhausted, fell asleep in the chair. And he dreamed.

*They'd hit a fog bank, and were just coming out of it when the helmsman called down, "Captain, you've got to see this!"*

*When he came topside, the men were gazing at it.*

*"What an incredible mansion," one sailor said.*

*"That's too big for a mansion. Maybe a hotel?"*

*"Who would put a hotel out here?"*

*Odets' baritone always got their attention. "Friends, that is a palace. Make for there, and find their dock. We are out of the fog, and the moon is full. This looks like the start of the adventure I promised you."*

*"Captain?"*

*"For the island, man. Sail!"*

*"Captain, please come up here. Something's wrong."*

*"For God's sake, man, what?" he said, climbing up to the cabin.*

*"The compass, sir. It's spinning."*

*"Did you break it? Did someone drain the alcohol from it? Men, line up! Let me smell all your breaths."*



*The stench of each of their breath was wretched, but none smelled of alcohol.*

*"I see a dock, sir."*

*"Tie up there. We'll see if we can raise the inhabitants."*

*They must have hit a shoal. It knocked Ulysses backward. He fell and banged his head, and--*

*His phone binged with a message from Penny, "Are you on your way?"*

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