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Jade Darcy and the Zen Pirates

Polly!

Stephen Goldin

**Darsina
PRESS**


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Dedicated to all the goddesses
—past, present and future—
who've wandered through my life

His own coughing woke him up.

He didn't even know why he was coughing at first, but then the smell penetrated his consciousness. Smoke. The air was thick with smoke. Hot, black smoke. Rolling past him in heavy, ominous waves.

Then there was the sound. It was a roaring, like an oncoming train, only different. Maybe a hurricane or tornado, a rush of air so loud it was nearly deafening. At the same time, his ears hurt. Maybe a change in air pressure.

Then he realized what the sound reminded him of: a roaring furnace, industrial size.

Fire!

His eyes shot all the way open, which was a big mistake. Immediately they were stinging and tears were pouring out. The smoke and soot made it almost impossible to see, and the coughing made it almost impossible to catch his breath.

Fire, the worst possible nightmare for a bookstore owner, especially so when he lived in the upper floor above the store. He didn't see any flames around him, so the fire must still be downstairs at the moment. Eating up all the inventory.

Barbara! Wake up Barbara.

Then he remembered. There was no Barbara to wake up. She'd left a couple days ago. There was just him.

Part of his mind wondered why bother going on; just lie here and die and be done with it. But the part of his brain with an instinct for life won out.

What was the advice they always gave about fires? Smoke rises. Crawl along the floor to avoid smoke inhalation. But was that still valid when the smoke was coming from the floor below him?

He rolled out of bed onto his knees and started crawling. Then he stopped. Which way was the window? He couldn't see anything. He knew which way his bed was oriented relative to the window, but his mental gears jammed. He suddenly couldn't remember which way he'd rolled out of bed. Left or right? Was he moving toward the window or away from it?

There was a smashing of glass in front of him. Good, he was headed in the right direction. A voice called out, "Anyone in here?"

He tried to yell a response, but his throat was so choked with smoke all he could manage was some dry coughing.

That was enough, though, for his would-be rescuer. "I hear you. I'm coming."

A moment later the firefighter grabbed his arm, lifted him gently to his feet and guided him to the window. There was a ladder outside. "Think you can climb down?" the rescuer asked. He nodded.

"Anyone else in here?" was the next question.

He shook his head. "Just me," he said very hoarsely.

There was another fireman on the ladder. The two rescuers helped him climb shakily to the ground. Suddenly he felt cold. Even though it was July, the night was chilly—plus, coming out of the superheated build-

ing, the contrast was even starker.

Plus he was dressed only in his briefs. They were all he slept in, so they were all he had on. One of the fire-fighters saw him shivering, though, and instantly wrapped him in a blanket. Someone else fetched him a large, baggy sweatshirt and sweat pants, and he put those on. Someone else handed him some bottled water.

He turned around to look at the fire. He watched it impassively as it burned. The flames were quite pretty, really, against the darkness of the night. Occasionally he took a sip of water, more from reflex than thirst.

His entire life going up in smoke—at least, everything that hadn't already gone up in smoke metaphorically earlier this week.

He stood there as people bustled around him doing all sorts of frantic things—running with axes, pouring water on the blaze, keeping back the crowd. None of it really seemed to matter much; his mind had gone away. The sights, the sounds, the smells were all a kaleidoscope of sensation happening through the wrong end of a telescope. None of it was real. None of it affected him.

A woman stopped by and talked to him briefly. She said she was from the Red Cross and asked whether he had a place to stay for the night. She gave him the card of a shelter that could take him in for a night or two while he got things together.

The flames slowly died down. Someone told him the first floor was pretty much obliterated, while some things had been saved from the second: his wallet, a small chest of drawers with some clothes, his cell phone. Someone else told him a preliminary assessment looked like the fire had started in some faulty wiring. Nothing looked suspicious.

At some point he must have gone to the shelter, al-

though he didn't remember it. He woke up there and walked dazedly out the door, down the street to an ATM machine, where he took out a little from his meager account so he could have breakfast. The food might as well have been cardboard; he chewed and swallowed it mechanically without even tasting it.

The rest of the day passed in a similar fog. He collected the few clothes he could salvage and put them in a couple of plastic supermarket bags. He talked to his insurance agent, who gave professional condolences and reminded him that while much of the business contents had been insured, he didn't have homeowners insurance to cover his personal losses. He left the agent's office with a thick stack of paperwork to fill out and return at his earliest convenience.

He spent that night at a cheap motel, and remembered nothing about the experience. By daylight, reality was slowly seeping back into the corners of his mind. He would have to do something about a place to stay; he didn't have enough money to keep living in a motel. He had to gather things together, take stock of what resources he did have. Well, that wouldn't take long. There wasn't much left to take stock of.

Where could he go? Well, his brother had a ranch in Nevada and was always inviting him to come for a visit. That would do, he supposed.

He started to call a couple of times to warn his brother he was coming, and each time he hung up before he finished dialing. He couldn't tell this story over the phone; he might break down completely and never move again. Better just go on and surprise his brother. Who knows? By the time he got there, he might even be able to make some sense of it all.

He threw his few belongings into his Toyota and started his eastward drive.

The drive started out okay. Driving through the city streets and onto the freeway—simple enough to manage. The day was warm and the Corolla's air conditioning was broken, but the 460 air conditioning—four windows open at 60 mph—helped make it bearable. The car didn't have a CD player, but there was some good music, classic rock, on the radio. That was good, at least. As long as he was trying to remember the lyrics to sing along, he didn't have to think about things he didn't want to think about.

It was early midmorning, commute hours. There was still a lot of traffic on the other side of the road, but almost none on his. He was going counter-commute, away from town. Nothing to slow him down.

He transferred to another freeway, moving from four lanes on a side to two. What traffic there was was still on the other side, leaving him free to move. He leaned a little heavier on the gas pedal. The wind whipped by, almost drowning out the radio. He cranked up the volume.

The road went eastward over the hills and down into California's hot central valley. This was the place where only the foolhardy dared go in the summer without air conditioning. Well, the foolhardy or the desper-

ate. He supposed he fit into one category or the other.

With the hills now between him and the city, the radio station started to fade. Even cranking up the sound still further wasn't working—there was more static than music. He started pressing the "Seek" button to look for something else. He discarded a couple of talk show stations—one sports, the other some fatuous commentator bent on stirring up the listeners' anger—and a Spanish language station. He tried switching to FM, but there was almost no reception for that at all, so he went back to AM and eventually found a music station that played a range from oldies to classic rock. Listenable, if a bit mild for his mood.

The temperature was climbing rapidly, now. The wind going by was just as hot as the air inside the car, and he was starting to sweat. He pulled into a gas station, filled the tank and bought a pack of water bottles. They ought to keep him going for a while.

He drank the first bottle in half an hour, and it was sweating out of him almost as fast as he could put it in. He opened the second bottle and poured some of it over his head. That seemed to bring the temperature down a bit more into the bearable range.

After forty miles of this, he branched off onto a two-lane highway. There was virtually no traffic here, and he had the road to himself. He checked his watch: Ten-thirty. He was making decent time. If he kept up this pace he might even make it to the ranch before dark—certainly before it got too late.

The land around him was slowly changing from cultivated farmland to scrub and brush. In his rear view mirror, the mountains were shrinking as he moved deeper into the heart of the valley.

This radio station was beginning to fade on him, too, with bleed-over from a more local station. This

new one proudly proclaimed it played both kinds of music, Country *and* Western. For his money, that was just one step above rap, which was one step above static.

So he listened with little interest to the twangy tunes of despair. After the third different male singer sang a woeful tale about his woman leaving him, he angrily shut off the speaker and kept on driving.

Big mistake. For the next fifteen miles or so his mind raced far ahead of his car along the mostly-straight road. The IRS. Barbara. The fire. The store. Barbara. Taxes. Fires. Even country music was better than silence.

The temperature kept rising. He drank the rest of the second bottle of water and poured part of the third over his head again. It had less effect than it did last time. At least he was glad he had cloth seat covers instead of those cheap leatherette ones; having his skin stick to that sizzling fabric would make this drive three times as uncomfortable as it already was.

He looked over at the seat beside him. The stack of insurance forms was sitting there, weighted down by one of the sacks of clothes to keep it from flying all over from the wind. He'd taken a quick look through it when the insurance agent had handed it to him. They wanted all sorts of information, probably even his father's maiden name and his grandfather's astrological sign. He'd had a fire, for God's sake! Most of his records were gone. How was he supposed to give them information about his business finances when all the data burned up?

No. This wasn't the time for those thoughts. This was the time to listen to bad C&W and meditate as he drove through the desert.

His speed crept up past eighty. With no traffic on

the road, there was nothing to hold him back. At least, on a deserted highway, there wasn't much chance of catching the Highway Patrol's attention.

Right on cue, there were flashing lights in his rear view mirror. Cursing, he pulled over to the side of the road. He knew the drill; he got out his license and registration and handed them over to the officer. The officer returned them, along with a speeding ticket. All very polite and businesslike. They were both back on the road in less than fifteen minutes.

The temperature was really climbing now. He poured the rest of the third bottle of water over his head, and could practically feel it turning to steam and evaporating as soon as it touched him. He chugged the fourth bottle, and it did little good.

He stopped and refilled his tank at a small station that claimed to be the last stop for gas for the next fifty miles. The gas was hideously expensive and his resources were running low, but this beat the surprise of the unpleasant alternative, the way his luck was running these days.

A few minutes later he started losing the country station. He began looking desperately for another one. All he could find way out here in the middle of nowhere was a religious program. What was that doing on in the middle of the day? This wasn't Sunday. Weren't those things reserved for late at night when they wouldn't bother decent people?

"These heathen ee-volutionists want to tell you this is all an accident," the preacher was saying. "If you found a watch lying in the middle of a field, would you say, 'What a weird thing, that all these pieces of metal just happened to come together in the middle of a field and assembled themselves in a way to tell time'? What a stupid, ridiculous, nonsensical, asinine, thick-witted,

foolish, silly assumption that would be! Or would you think that some person deliberately made the complicated watch for his own purposes? A watch implies a Watchmaker as surely as night follows day.”

“Yeah,” he answered back to the radio in annoyance. “An imbecilic Watchmaker who either doesn’t know or doesn’t care if he left his watch in the middle of some stupid field. Maybe the owner lost it or threw it away because it kept lousy time. What if you left an iron bar in the field and came back a few months later and found it coated with reddish dust? Would you assume someone came along and painted it? Or would you think it just rusted, jerk-off!”

The radio preacher ignored him. “What these people can’t see is it’s all part of a grand design, a design so big we can’t see all the details. God’s plan is so big that it wraps all the way around us like a large, comforting blanket. God’s plan is vast and it’s for all of us, and we all play our part in it.”

“Does God’s plan include burning down my store?” He was shouting at the radio now. “Does God want me to be homeless and bankrupt? Is the IRS some subtle part of God’s plan? Does God need my eight thousand dollars that badly? Is it God’s plan to give me a speeding ticket? Or make Barbara leave me? What is God’s plan doing for me? Where is this blanket of love, anyway? It’s got some awfully big moth holes!”

He punched at the button furiously to shut off the radio. The moisture on his face was as much tears as sweat, stinging his eyes and making it harder to see where he was driving. If there’d been any more traffic he might have been in trouble, but there was no one around to hit. He at least managed to keep the car on the highway.

Even the silence was better than listening to garbage

like that. Even listening to his own thoughts was better. Even though the thoughts were angry, even though they were confused, even though they were depressing and filled with despair. At least they were *his* thoughts, not some hypocritical con man's.

He went through the rest of the bottled water very quickly, half in his mouth and half over his head. None of it seemed to help. It was still unbearably hot.

At first he thought the object ahead might be a mirage. But it didn't shimmer and it grew in appearance as his car approached, so it was definitely real.

It was a large two-story mansion of shiny white stone, with rows of windows on each story reflecting the early afternoon sun. The front porch was shaded by an overhang supported by a row of gleaming white marble pillars, and in front of the house was a rectangular patch of green lawn sharply delineated from the barren desert around it.

He'd driven this road before and didn't remember seeing anything like this. That had been a few years ago, though, and anything could have happened in the meantime.

The highway ran past the front of the house, about a hundred feet away. The land all around was perfectly flat, devoid of anything of interest but occasional bits of scrub brush and a few lonely cacti scattered here and there. Even the mountains that were always present in California were just a blue smudge on the distant horizon.

He was too absorbed in his own misery to think of the mansion as much more than a curiosity. His depression was a black cloud overwhelming all other con-

cerns, so he ignored the mansion and drove straight ahead.

Or tried to. Without warning his engine suddenly coughed and died, and the old Corolla coasted slowly to a stop almost directly in front of the mansion's driveway. He at least managed to steer it off to the side of the road, so it wouldn't get hit by any other car passing this way. Not that there was much likelihood of that.

The gas gauge showed the tank was half full. He tried the ignition a couple of times, but only got a dismal whirring noise. "Damn!" he screamed at the unheeding machine, pounding the steering wheel with both fists. "Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn! Why me? Why now? I knew I shouldn't have trusted this piece of junk for a trip like this."

He looked disgustedly at the stack of insurance forms on the passenger's seat under the bag of clothes, then got out and slammed the door angrily behind him. He raised the hood to stare at the engine. It was an exercise in futility—he had no idea what to look for, let alone how to fix it.

He looked impatiently at his watch. Twelve thirty-five. The temperature was easily a hundred already, and would only get worse as the afternoon wore on. There wasn't a breath of wind. He'd have to do something if he wanted to make it to the ranch before nightfall.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. That was no help, either—the display showed no signal here. After all, who would put a cell phone tower out here for the jackrabbits and coyotes? He threw the cell phone as far as he could into the desert. "Good riddance!" he shouted after it. "What good are you? What good is anything?" He kicked the car in frustration and shook with a barely suppressed sob. "What good is any-

thing?”

What he wanted to do was get back in the car again. In the back seat. And curl up in a fetal ball, whimpering. Maybe even sucking his thumb. The whole universe could just pass him by. That would probably be better than what it *had* been doing lately.

He looked up and saw the house again. Well, at least he could ask to use their phone to call Triple-A. Of course, with his luck there wouldn't be anyone home.

He looked down at himself. Despite having poured water all over, his clothes were already dry in this desert heat. He ran his fingers through his hair a couple of times in lieu of a comb. Then he started stomping up the asphalt driveway, glad it wasn't a dark, stormy night; then he might be heading into the lair of Dracula or Frank N. Furter or someone ominous like that.

He was so wrapped up in his black cloud of thoughts that he'd gotten more than halfway up the driveway before he saw the snowman out on the lawn near the porch. It had to be one of those plastic Christmas ornaments, he mused. Someone had a weird sense of humor, leaving it out in July. Either that or they were really lazy about putting it away.

As he approached it, though, it looked more and more real. It was a standard three-snowball snowman with the base three feet in diameter, the middle two feet and the head one foot. Its eyes were black plums, its nose was a sweet gherkin pickle and its mouth was a dotted line of cherries curving in a smile. It wore a cheerful yellow and red scarf around where its neck would be. On its head, instead of the traditional top hat, it had an Oakland A's baseball cap. Its arms were disproportionately skinny, just a couple of bare twigs sticking out of its shoulders.

He came up beside it and touched it experimentally.

It was cold. It was made of snow. And it was standing out on this lawn in hundred-degree heat under the blazing desert sun in July.

He backed away from it slowly, not completely willing to take his eyes off it. The snowman just stood there and showed no intention of melting.

Finally, with a fast shake of his head, he tried to put it out of his mind. There were too many other problems of greater concern. He climbed the four steps onto the porch, walked up to the large door and pressed the bell.

A few seconds later the door opened and he found himself looking at the most beautiful young woman he'd ever met. She was short—he was only five-eight, and she barely came up to his nose—but that was about her only feature he might have called substandard. Her body was perfectly proportioned, neither too busty nor too boyish. Her dark brown hair, in a pixie cut, surrounded a perfect face with wide, sparkling brown eyes, a perky nose and a small but expressive mouth.

She was wearing a black one-piece satin pants-dress. The bottom half was pants with gently flaring legs; the top was a harness like two black kerchiefs rising up the front and tying behind her neck. She had ordinary low-heeled black pumps, and her back was bare. She wasn't model-skinny, but there was certainly no fat there. Around her neck she wore a thin gold chain and a large medallion several inches across, with at least a dozen small lights that blinked on and off. She didn't look much more than twenty years old.

"Yes?" she said.

He was so busy admiring the view that he almost forgot why he was here. "Uh, sorry to bother you, but my car broke down on the road over there. I was wondering—"

"Well, don't just stand out there in the heat," she

said, beckoning. “Come on in to the air conditioning and get comfortable. Welcome to the Green House.”

“Thank you,” he said, stepping inside. She closed the door behind him, and he luxuriated in the feeling. He hadn’t felt cool for hours.

They were in a vestibule with a black and white marble tile floor and an enormous cut crystal chandelier suspended from the high ceiling. There was a long hallway leading to the back of the mansion, with several doors to different rooms at intervals along its length. A broad staircase with dark green carpeting led up to the next story.

“I hate to intrude like this—” he began, but she interrupted him again.

“Pish tosh. It’s no intrusion. You can’t help where your car breaks down, can you?”

“No,” he said with a deep sigh. “I was just hoping you’d let me use your phone a moment.”

“I would if I had one.”

“You live all the way out here in the middle of nowhere without a phone?”

“If I had a phone, people would just call me all the time,” she said. “Too many people keep trying to talk to me. I prefer being a little unreachable.”

“But what if you run into trouble?” he pressed her. “What if you needed to get in touch with someone?”

“I have no trouble getting in touch with anyone I want,” she said. “And there’s no trouble my staff and I can’t handle.”

“Oh, you have a staff. I guess that’s a little better.”

“Yup. In fact, I was going to suggest you let my chauffeur take a look at your car. He’ll probably know how to fix it.”

“I don’t want to put you to any trouble—”

“It’s no trouble for me. Fritz will do the work. That’s

what he's here for." She grabbed her medallion and spoke into it. "Fritz, there's a car out front that seems to have stopped working. Can you have a look at it and get it going again?"

"*Ja, meine fraulein,*" came a voice out of the medallion. The accent was so Hollywood German that you could almost hear the clicking of his heels.

"Thank you so much," he said.

She turned back to face him. "I'm Polly, by the way."

"Oh, uh, hi. I'm Rod."

She tilted her head to the left. "You don't look like a 'Rod,'" she said critically.

"What does a 'Rod' look like?"

"Oh, long, cylindrical and stiff." She gave him a wicked grin. "Of course, I can understand if that's a nickname."

He found himself blushing furiously. "It's, uh, for Herodotus," he said quietly. At the same time, he wondered why he said it. He almost never told anyone that—certainly not a complete stranger.

"Oh, the Greek historian," Polly squealed. "How neat."

"You've heard of him?"

"Of course. I loved the ancient Greeks."

"Yeah, so did my father. He was a professor of classical civilizations."

"He must have really loved you to give you such an honored name."

Herodotus snorted with scorn. "Herodotus Shapiro is a horrible name to give a Jewish boy."

"I kinda like it. Mind if I call you 'Hero'?"

"I really prefer Rod."

"You can be my Hero," she said, completely ignoring his complaint. "It's better than 'Her,' ain't it?"

"Whatever," he said resignedly. He had much bigger

problems in his life right now than what some silly rich girl called him. And right now, one of those problems was taking his eyes off the gorgeous body of that silly rich girl and avoiding drooling on the floor.

She slipped her arm under his and pulled him toward the room on his right. "Come on into the parlor and join the party."

"Party?" He felt a sudden constriction in his chest. Parties meant people, usually happy people. Happy people were about the last things he needed in his life at the moment. "Uh, I didn't mean to crash—"

"You couldn't if you wanted to," Polly told him firmly.

He was all too aware that he was sweaty and unkempt. "I'm not sure I'd fit in. I probably don't know anyone—"

"Don't worry. You'll get along fine. They're all good people. I don't invite any other kind."

"But. Uh. I'm not really dressed for a party."

"Don't worry. All my parties are come-as-you-are. Very informal. I think people are more important than their clothes. Come on."

She slid open the pocket doors and led him into a large parlor. The room beyond was filled with people. There was some upbeat instrumental music playing unobtrusively in the background, and people were talking in low, friendly tones. The sounds of laughter could be heard in spots.

The carpet was pale blue, covered by a pair of Persian rugs with royal blue open ground. The wallpaper was a tone-on-tone figured pastel blue with navy strips running horizontally around the top and the wainscoting. There was a long blue brocade Empire couch and five chairs in a lime green jacquard with small bunches of bluebells in a diamond trellis pattern, and a baby-

blue grand piano in the far corner. Small mahogany tables set off the bowfront console under the large beveled plate mirror. All the people were standing and talking; no one was sitting on the fancy furniture.

He looked over the large crowd, but couldn't find any faces he recognized. "How did you get all these people to come all the way out here in the desert?"

"I invited them," Polly said simply. "People like coming to my parties."

She pressed a button on her medallion and a soft but insistent chiming rang out in the room. People stopped their conversations to look over at the door.

"Hi, everyone," she called out. "I hope you're all enjoying yourselves."

Most people nodded, others made noises of approval. "Good," Polly said. "If there's any problem, just let me know. I want to introduce you all to my Hero. Actually, his name's Herodotus Shapiro, but I think Hero suits him. Please make him feel welcome." A small cheer went up from the crowd, which only made Herodotus feel more embarrassed.

Polly turned back to him. "You look like you could use a drink."

"I'm not really a big drinker—"

"Just a glass of wine. Oh Fifi," she called out.

A beautiful and perky young blonde in a black-and-white maid's outfit came over to them, carrying a tray with some filled wine glasses. Her costume was very brief and left little to the imagination, especially the perfectly cantilevered evidence of her mammalian heritage. "*Oui, Mademoiselle?*" she asked.

Polly smoothly slipped a pair of glasses off the tray, giving one to Herodotus and keeping one for herself. "Fifi, I want you to make sure Hero has everything he wants."

The maid looked up at Herodotus's face and smiled. "I will do my best," she promised, her voice suddenly husky. Her shoulders and hips swiveled in counterpoint, as though on separate servos.

Polly raised her glass to Herodotus. "To new friendships," she said, clinking her glass against his.

Herodotus looked at the golden liquid in the glass and sipped it experimentally. It was delicious—sweet but not cloying, smooth on the palette, cooling to the throat, the finish crisp and fruity. He took a second, bigger sip.

She watched him with a smile on her face. "Like it?" she asked.

"It's very good, yes."

"It's from my own vineyard," she bragged. "It's called Contentment, the wine from contented grapes. It grows right next to another of my vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored. I keep this particular wine for special occasions."

"Look, Polly, I—"

"Sorry to desert you temporarily, but I do have to mingle. Hostess duties and all that. Talk to people, enjoy yourself. If you need anything, Fifi or James will be glad to help."

"Who's James?"

"My butler. I'll be back very shortly and then we can talk." She took a sip from her glass and stepped out onto the floor, getting smiles from everyone she met, until she disappeared in the crowd.

Herodotus felt very out of place and alone. The people looked friendly enough, but he was not in a very sociable mood—not today. He edged his way to the couch and sat down gingerly at one end, respecting the furniture's obvious age, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

A few minutes later, a man came and sat down beside him. He looked to be in his late 60s with a weathered, leathery face and a receding hair line topped with pure white hair. He had a thin body with a growing paunch, and his face was wrinkled, but in a nice way. There were many smile lines there.

“How long have you known her?” the man asked conversationally.

“Her? You mean Polly?”

“Is that what she goes by these days? Yeah, Polly.”

“I just met her a couple of minutes ago.”

The old man nodded. “Been five years for me. My wife and I were married forty-three years, and she was never sick a day in her life except a sniffle or two. Then Alice went into the hospital, and three weeks later she died of cancer. My whole world collapsed. I thought I might as well die and join her. Then this nurse came out to me in the visiting room and held my hand. I’m not a guy who goes around crying, but I was bawling like a baby on her shoulder, getting her uniform all damp. She didn’t seem to mind. I told her all about Alice. Geez, we must’ve sat there talking for hours. You know, I had some friends who tried to cheer me up by telling me Alice was going to a better place. Polly never gave me none of that crap. She was just *there*, and that was enough, and soon the rest of the world was there too—a little emptier without Alice, but not nearly as hopeless as I thought.”

He paused. “What’s your story?” he asked.

Herodotus flushed. After a tale like the old man’s, what could he say? “My car broke down outside her house,” he said, almost apologetically.

The old man looked at him for a while, the barest hints of a smile at the corners of his mouth. Finally he stood up. “Sure,” he said, reaching over and slapping

Herodotus on the back. “Remember, like Polly says, things are never hopeless unless you lose all hope.” And he walked away.

Herodotus took another sip of wine and watched the partygoers. After another couple of minutes, a weasely little man in a gray suit with a starched white shirt and red bow tie came over to the couch. Instead of sitting on it, he walked around behind it and bent down to whisper into Herodotus’s ear. “Get out of here while you have a chance,” he said ominously.

“What?”

“You heard me. Get out before it’s too late.” Then he walked away without explaining further.

Herodotus wondered what sort of rabbit hole he’d fallen down as he watched the man go. But he had no choice about staying here unless he wanted to walk fifty or so miles through the desert’s summer heat.

Weaving its way casually through the crowd of people walked a large long-haired black cat with bright golden eyes. It came deliberately over to the couch, looked at Herodotus analytically, then jumped up onto his lap. Herodotus stroked its fur gingerly. The cat made no objection, and started purring, kneading his thigh with velvet paws.

And then Polly was back, now wearing a spangled leotard—red and white vertical stripes, with blue trim with white stars along the top and bottom. Her shoulders, arms and legs were bare, with ballet slippers on her feet.

“Ah, you’ve found Midnight,” Polly said with a smile.

“I think it’s more like he found me,” Herodotus said.

“I see you’re used to thinking of things from a catly perspective.”

“I’ve lived with a few in my life,” he admitted.

“Glad to hear it. Cats are living proof God was only joking when he said you should have no other gods before him.” She bent down and petted the cat too. It purred even louder.

Polly jumped onto the couch beside him, bounced a couple of times with all the decorum of a rambunctious ten-year-old, and ended up seated sideways, legs crossed, facing him. The cat didn’t even twitch. “Now, what shall we talk about?” she asked.

Herodotus shook his head. “I’m not really in a talking mood. I just want to get my car fixed and get out of your way.”

Polly’s voice sounded sympathetic. “Got some problems, huh?”

“I said, I don’t want to talk about it.” His tone came out sharper than he intended.

“Fine,” she said, still stroking the cat. “Then we can talk about my favorite subject—me. Ask me some questions. I know you’ve got some, I can see it in your eyes. Ask me anything. I’m feeling pretty good, so you’ve got a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity some men would die for.”

She obviously was not going to leave him alone, so he might as well humor her. “Do you grow a lot of flowers here?”

She was actually stunned and bemused for several seconds. “I have to admit, that’s not one that comes up often. Usually it’s ‘what’s the meaning of life’ or ‘why did this happen to me’ type questions. Sure, I have a small garden patch out back, but no bigger than Versailles. Why do you ask?”

“Well, when I came in you said ‘Welcome to the greenhouse.’”

Polly laughed. It was a sound like tinkling chimes, a sound that made the whole room glow, a sound that

was enjoyment boiled down to its purest essence. “Not ‘greenhouse,’” she said. “‘Green House.’ Because of its color.”

“Your house is white.”

“Yeah, but ‘White House’ is already taken, ain’t it?”

Herodotus closed his eyes. His brain felt it had suddenly entered a dense fog bank. “I’m not sure that makes any sense.”

“Sense? The contract ain’t got ‘sense’ in it anywhere. Or ‘fair,’ for that matter. Not even in the fine print. I read it all.”

Herodotus was getting the uncomfortable feeling that Polly had been living alone a little too long. He was about to stand up and say he’d be just fine waiting outside when the butler came over to the couch. He was a tall man in a tuxedo, hair slightly balding and gray along the side. He carried himself with a superior bearing, and he carried a silver tray of canapés in his right hand. He lowered the tray elegantly and said in an upper-class British accent, “Refreshments?”

“Thank you, James,” Polly said, taking an unusual-looking hors d’oeuvre from the tray and looking at Herodotus. “Care for something?”

He looked over the assortment. Most of the parties he went to had chips-and-dip, or cheese balls, or bowls of nuts or pretzels. There was nothing familiar-looking on the tray before him. “Uh, what do you recommend?”

“Oh, they’re all great,” Polly said. “I made ’em myself.”

Herodotus looked over the assortment and chose something that looked like a small red and brown flower on a cracker. He bit into it tentatively; it had a hint of sweet and a hint of salt. “This is good,” he said as he finished the rest of it.

“Well, you don’t have to sound so surprised,” Polly

said.

“What is it?”

“After that underwhelming response, I don’t think I’ll tell you. That will do us for now, James.”

“As you will, Madam.” The butler straightened up and went about the parlor to serve the other guests.

Polly watched Herodotus finish chewing the canapé, then said. “Now, where were we?”

“I don’t think we were really anywhere.”

“Oh yes, you were asking me probing, insightful questions. Go on, I can’t wait for the next one.”

Herodotus finished the wine to give himself a moment to compose his thoughts. With a sigh, he decided to say what was puzzling him. Well, one of the things that was puzzling him. Polly didn’t seem offended by bluntness.

“Did you know,” he asked deliberately, “there’s a snowman standing in your front yard?”

“Oh, McCool? I thought he was out back. He must’ve wandered out front ’cause he likes watching the cars go by.”

That froze him. “You’re joking.”

She flashed him a big smile, a smile that lit up the room like an arc light. “Of course I am, silly,” she said, reaching out to put her hand comfotingly on his knee. “McCool can’t wander anywhere—he don’t got no legs. That always made me wonder about Frosty. How could he dance around when snowmen don’t got legs or feet? It’s a cute song, though.”

The touch of her hand on his knee sent a jolt of... *something* through him. It wasn’t warmth, though he was certainly warm despite the air conditioning. It wasn’t electricity, although he felt his entire body tingling. It wasn’t sexuality, although her leotard made him very aware of her nearby femininity. It was just

something, and it was decidedly good.

He began to stammer, "But how—" when she cut him off.

"Q-and-A is over for now. Maybe more later, if you're a good boy. Right now, I'm missing out on my exercise time, which I was about to begin when you showed up. That's why I'm dressed like this. Come on up to the gym and keep me company."

"What about your guests?"

"Oh, they'll be okay on their own for a while. James and Fifi can take care of 'em."

"I don't do a lot of exercising," Herodotus said, not bothering to add that in his opinion the only thing worse than exercising was watching someone else do it. "You go ahead. I'll just sit here and pet your cat and wait for your chauffeur to fix my car."

"Oh no you don't," she said, jumping up from the couch and grabbing his arm. Midnight took that as his cue to jump down from Herodotus's lap and casually wander elsewhere. "I love showing off," Polly continued, "and I can't do that while you're down here." She pulled him up and tugged him along. "Think of it as repayment for my hospitality."

Realizing she was as close to the Irresistible Force as he was ever going to meet, he let her lead him back out to the vestibule and down the central hallway to the back of the house. There were worse ways to spend his time, after all, than watching a beautiful girl get all sweaty.

They reached the end of the long hallway and found an elevator cab standing open for them. Polly pressed number three. Herodotus noticed the buttons went all the way up to thirteen, plus one that said "R."

"I could have sworn your house was only two stories," he said as the elevator doors closed. The cab shot

upward faster than any sane elevator would have dared. Herodotus felt as though his knees were about to pass his chin and come out through the top of his head, and his stomach felt it had been left behind on the ground floor.

“Oh, you must’ve just seen it from the front,” Polly said offhandedly. “It’s much bigger around the back. Here we are.”

The elevator came to an abrupt stop that left Herodotus feeling like a pile of Jell-O on a wobbling spring. The doors opened to reveal what looked like a plush hotel hallway with doors on either side. There were no numbers on the doors, nor any indication of what might be behind them, except that one of the doors further down the corridor was painted bright green.

With a spring in her step, Polly walked briskly down the hallway. She didn’t have to pull Herodotus by the hand now; his nerves were still jangling from the elevator ride and he was afraid of lagging behind, of getting lost in this increasingly confusing mansion.

She paused beside the green door. “You can’t go in here,” she said.

“Why would I want to?”

“Because it’s forbidden,” she said darkly. “They always want to go in when I say it’s forbidden.” She continued on and stopped beside a door on her left about halfway down the hall. “This is the gym,” she said. “Come on in.”

It was a large room, as big as any high school gymnasium. It was not exactly what Herodotus had been expecting. No treadmill, no exercbike, no Nautilus, no Stairmaster—none of the modern appurtenances. Instead, there was a vaulting horse, parallel bars, a trapeze and an eight-foot-high tightrope. A lot of gray

wrestling mats were spread about the floor.

“You’re an acrobat, then?” Herodotus hazarded.

“Onry phirosophicarry,” she said in a mock-Chinese accent.

Herodotus looked confused, and his face must have shown it.

“You *have* seen Tony Randall in *The 7 Faces of Dr. Lao*,” Polly half-asked. When Herodotus shook his head, she continued, “Oh, you must! George Pal directed, Charles Beaumont script. It’s a film that deserves beatification.”

Then she returned to the matter at hand. “Acrobatics gives me a good workout and helps me keep the girl-ish figure you’ve been admiring when you thought I wasn’t looking.”

Herodotus blushed, but there was only pride in Polly’s tone as she said, “Watch this.”

There was a rope beside the trapeze, and Polly climbed a few feet up it until she could reach the bar, then transferred over. She started swinging back and forth, gathering momentum, until with one smooth motion she did a backflip that hooked her knees over the bar. She pulled herself first into a sitting position, then further up until she was standing legs apart on the bar. Herodotus started to clap, but she shushed him. “Oh, that’s nothing,” she said, the faintest touch of testiness to her voice. “Please hold your applause until the end of the act.”

Leaning forward, she started to fall while, at the same time, bending at the waist and gripping the trapeze bar with both hands. Her momentum carried her around the bar one full turn, at which point she spread her legs upward until she was doing a handstand on the bar. She posed there, rock steady, for a good fifteen seconds, then suddenly let go and dropped

straight down until, at the last instant, she caught her ankles at the ends of the trapeze bar where the ropes held it up. Then she slowly moved her left leg to the side, so her entire body was dangling simply by her right ankle.

She maintained that pose for another few seconds, just to prove it wasn't a fluke, then effortlessly bent upward and grasped the bar with her hands again. She leaned forward and back, using her body as a counterweight to start the trapeze swinging. The pendulum swings increased back and forth, higher with each successive arc. Then, at the apex of one swing, she let go and flew through the air. Her body quickly curled in and she did two complete revolutions before straightening out again and landing without a wobble in the center of the nearby tightrope.

"No applause," she reminded him, "but a small gasp of astonishment might be in order."

She didn't wait, though, but started walking back and forth along the length of the wire, moving as surely as though she were on solid ground. She moved to the center of the wire, bent her knees and did a backflip, then a second, then a third—each time landing confidently on her feet.

"Now comes the time for audience participation," she said. "There's a unicycle over there. Could you get it and hand it up to me, please?"

Herodotus went and got the unicycle, then handed it to her. She didn't bother to thank him, just balanced the wheel on the wire and mounted it delicately, then cycled back and forth twice from one end of the wire to the other.

After pedaling back to the center of the wire, she remained balancing there and said, "Now bring me that stick and that plate over there." Herodotus did so.

The stick was about three feet long and half an inch in diameter. She grabbed it about halfway up, put the plate on top of it and started the plate spinning. She pushed the rim with her hand, getting it going faster and faster. When she deemed it was at the proper speed, she grabbed the pole with both hands, leaned her head back, and carefully balanced the stick on her forehead. She took her hands away and held them out at both sides. Then she started cycling forward and back along the wire.

“This is where I impart to you the great secret of the universe,” she said, never taking her eyes from the plate. “All the wisdom of the ancients boiled down to a single word: Balance. Stay in balance and the world’s your oyster. Assuming you like oysters, that is, otherwise the whole metaphor’s worthless.”

She continued with the pole on her forehead for a full minute. Then she grasped the pole with her right hand, removed it from her forehead, and let it clatter to the ground. She caught the plate in her left hand, looked down at Herodotus and said, “Here, catch” as she tossed it to him. She, meanwhile, remained on the unicycle on the tightrope, pedaling back and forth for another minute with effortless ease.

Finally she dismounted the unicycle as easily as she’d gotten on and handed it back down to Herodotus. Then she bent down and gripped the wire, spun around and dropped her legs until she was dangling by her hands, then dropped lightly to the mat below, arms triumphantly over her head.

“Okay, you may applaud now,” she said.

Herodotus was way beyond applause. Despite his personal depression, he said enthusiastically, “That was fantastic! Are you a professional?”

Polly brought down her hands and took a bow. “I’ve

never been paid for it, so I guess that makes me just a talented amateur. But I kinda enjoy it. Are you hungry? I'm always famished after a funambulistic workout."

It had been a long time since breakfast and that one canapé had hardly filled him up, but Herodotus was leery about asking for further generosity. "I hate to put you to any trouble. You've already done so much—"

"No problem. I'll have Mario whip us up a snack."

"Uh, would you mind if I used your bathroom to freshen up first?"

"Not at all. It's better than peeing on the floor. Come on." She led him back out of the gym and into the hallway. "It's the second door on the left down that way. Just don't go through the green door. When you're done, take the elevator back down to the first floor. I'll meet you there."

He went into the bathroom and shut the door behind him, leaned back against it and closed his eyes. It was good to have at least a few minutes of privacy. Polly was very beautiful and very friendly, but she was also very... intense. Yes, that was the word for her. Intense.

He gave a deep sigh and opened his eyes. Then he closed them again. He could have figured that Polly would not have just an ordinary bathroom, but this went beyond his wildest expectations.

He opened his eyes again to take in the sight. The wallpaper on the walls and ceiling were a trompe l'oeil of what appeared to be a vast cathedral, perhaps even Westminster Abbey for all he knew. The room was fairly large for a bathroom anyway, which only added to the effect.

The toilet was, literally, a throne—an elaborately carved construction of dark oak with inlays of ivory and jewels. The sturdy armrests had lions' heads at the end, and the four feet were claws with balls. The back of the

throne was a wine-colored velvet, and a steady light shone down on the seat as though it were coming from a stained glass window above. A roll of toilet paper was attached discreetly to one side.

He walked to the throne and lifted the seat gingerly. To his great relief it looked like an ordinary toilet bowl inside. He relieved himself; then, as his wife—soon to be former wife, he reminded himself—had drilled into him, he lowered the seat again. As he was bent over, he noticed the toilet paper looked a little strange. He reached over to touch it.

It wasn't paper. It was silk.

He walked over to the sink, which looked much like an octagonal baptismal font he'd seen in his tour of old churches. The fittings were all solid gold, and when he turned on the taps the water that flowed out was lightly scented of roses. The soaps were shaped like little swans, and the hand towels were linen origami-folded into swan shapes.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror as he washed his hands. "What have I gotten myself into?" he wondered aloud quietly. "Is this some even more surreal version of Hotel California? Who is this girl, and what is this place?"

His reflection had no answers for him, so he dried his hands and left the room.

The elevator cab was standing open and waiting for him as he walked down the hall. He pressed "1" with some trepidation, and the elevator shot down its shaft as though the cable had snapped, only to come to a sudden but gentle stop. "That could be a thrill ride at any amusement park," he muttered.

He stepped out on the ground floor. No sign of Polly, so he just waited.

A large male lion with a full mane walked casually

out of one doorway. Herodotus instinctively froze and backed slowly away. The elevator doors had closed behind him, but he pressed his back as tightly to them as he could.

The lion glanced at him, and he noticed it was slightly cross-eyed. It looked away again, ignoring him, and simply walked down the hall into another room.

After a few seconds Herodotus realized he wasn't breathing. He started taking deep breaths to try to settle his nerves.

Polly came out of another door. She'd changed her clothes again, this time to tight bluejeans, sneakers and a white T-shirt that said "I believe in me!" in blue letters across the chest. Even such a simple outfit looked immensely sexy on her.

"Uh," he said hesitantly, "you've got a lion wandering through your house."

"Oh, that's just Bert. Don't pay any attention. He's probably more scared of you than you are of him."

Herodotus decided the time for subtlety had passed. He looked her straight in the eye and said, "Who exactly are you, anyway?"

She gave him a quizzical expression. "I already told you. I'm Polly."

"Polly What?"

"Polly What what?"

"What's your last name?"

"No, What's the name of the guy on second."

"I know the routine," he said irritably. "Tell me your last name."

"Do I need one?"

"Everybody has a last name."

"Cher. Madonna. Prince."

"Those are stage names. They were born with last names."

“Maybe Polly’s my stage name.”

“Are you on stage, then?”

“Constantly,” she said, annoyance creeping into her voice.

“All I meant was—”

“Can it, buddy.” Her eyes lit up with a sudden rage. “How dare you come traipsing in here like you owned the world and give me the third degree? Is that a rubber hose in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me? What does it matter to you what my last name is, or whether I even have one? You’re not wanted here any more. Please leave my house at once.”

Herodotus was taken aback by this abrupt change in Polly’s mood. “But—”

“No ‘buts.’ Go. Now!” She gestured angrily to the door at the front of the house.

She stamped her foot.

The ground shook.

There’s a game played by all Californians: guessing the Richter number of the earthquake you just felt. Without consciously thinking about it, he pegged this as a minor quake, probably somewhere between three and four.

Herodotus didn’t have time for reflective thought, though, as Polly started advancing on him with mayhem in her eyes. He turned around and walked quickly to the vestibule, opened the door and went outside onto the porch. Polly followed him down the hall and slammed the door shut behind him.

“Well, that could have gone better,” he muttered.

He stood in the blazing heat and looked up the driveway to where his car had stalled on the highway. He half expected to see Polly’s chauffeur working on it, with the engine dismantled into pieces on the ground around him. But there was nothing. The car was gone.

Herodotus stared outward at the road in disbelief. Then he glanced back over his shoulder at the suddenly-foreboding door. Shaking his head, he walked slowly down the porch steps and walked over to the snowman. It still showed no signs of thawing.

“Hello, McCool,” he said. “My name’s Rod, short for Herodotus. What’s up with Polly, anyhow? She seemed so friendly, then she turns on me and throws me out of the house. And she’s so beautiful I can hardly take my eyes off her. But she acts so damn weird. She’s obviously rich, she’s obviously talented, but she doesn’t seem to have any pretensions. Except about her last name, I guess. What’s with that, I wonder?”

“And she’s so mysterious. Weird things happen all around her and she takes them all for granted. Take you, for instance. No offense meant, but by all rights you shouldn’t be here. Yet here you are. A house that’s bigger in the back than in front. I saw the house as I drove up—it’s *all* two stories. Lions roaming the halls. And now I’m marooned here. I have no car and I can’t walk for miles through the desert. So I’m reduced to talking to snowmen.”

The front door opened and Polly poked her head out. “Were you coming in for lunch?” she asked.

Herodotus looked up at her, startled. “I thought you were mad at me.”

“I was. Now I’m not. That’s the way I am. Changeable. Mercurial. Unpredictable. Besides, McCool likes you. Most people just snub him.”

“You were spying on me?”

“I’ve got microphones all over, sure. Who doesn’t? A girl can’t be too careful these days. But I figure anyone who talks to snowmen can’t be all bad.”

“You don’t think that makes me crazy?”

“If you expected answers, *then* you’d be crazy. Be-

sides, how can I stay mad at a guy who puts the toilet seat down when he's finished?"

"You spied on me *there*, too?"

Polly hesitated. "Not necessarily."

"Then how did you know—"

"Maybe I rigged the room so that if the door opened when the seat was up, it would set off an alarm. Or maybe I simply went in there after you came out. Don't make things more mysterious than they need to be. Did you want to come in or not?"