



***The Marriage of True Minds* by Stephen Evans**

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THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS

by

Stephen Evans

He laughed to free his mind from his mind's bondage.

James Joyce

Chapter 1. Alteration

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

June 11th, 2005

Local barrister Nicholas Ward was arrested yesterday for releasing more than 100 live lobsters into the indoor pool at the Mayor's Mansion in Minneapolis.

Mr. Ward, formerly a prominent environmental attorney and founding partner of the local firm Ward and Grant, allegedly persuaded twelve Minneapolis grocery stores to donate the lobsters by claiming that the crustaceans were the rightful property of endangered Hawaiian Monk Seals. The seals, Mr. Ward reportedly explained, are

currently on the endangered species list because humans are stealing their lobsters.

At Mr. Ward's request, Department of Public Works employees filled the Mayor's pool with non-chlorinated salt water. Unnamed sources at the Department confirmed that Mr. Ward convinced them the Mayor was having a beach party.

Once the lobsters were safely deposited in the Mayor's pool, Mr. Ward summoned the media. During the ensuing lecture, he defended his actions by quoting at length numerous judicial precedents. He then made his getaway in a chauffeured stretch limousine, accompanied by a grey and white sheepdog puppet.

No charges have been filed, pending a psychiatric evaluation.

Chapter 2. Impediments

After the divorce, Lena had thought Nick was just going through an understandable period of mourning. She had been certain he would snap out of it eventually. And he had, just not in the way anyone expected.

Lena stepped alone an elevator in the Wells-Fargo building in downtown Minneapolis. For forty-four floors, visions of ambulances, fire departments, and SWAT teams danced in her head. She had been out of town for three days. That was more than enough time for disaster to strike again.

On the forty-fifth floor, Lena rushed out of the elevator and sped down the corridor. At the end of the hallway, she stopped and

performed her ritual invocation, running her fingers across the raised letters on the sign:

Ward and Grant

Attorneys at Law

She dashed past the reception area and fled quickly into her private office without speaking to her assistant, Sharon. Wise to the evasive tactic, Sharon quickly followed her in.

The office furniture was a cool mixture of glass and steel, with several small exceptions: on the shelves behind the desk, stuffed animals roamed a law book jungle. Most were elephants, ranging from just a few inches in height to nearly a foot.

Lena moved defensively behind her desk and sat gripping the cool edge with both hands, steadying herself for the news.

"Welcome back," Sharon began.

"Just tell me," Lena replied.

"How was the conference?"

"Just tell me," Lena repeated.

"I'm glad to see you too."

Though she was avoiding Sharon's eyes, Lena noted the amused glint in the all-encompassing violet orbs reflected on her desk, which was made entirely of glass. The desktop surface was one of a kind: six feet long, three feet wide, and one inch thick of antique Veronese

crystal, strong enough to hold two people (the table had sung like a glass harmonium in sympathetic vibration). Clear glass pillars six inches in diameter supported each corner. At sunset on high-summer evenings, the light swept through the floor-to-ceiling windows at just the right angle, refracting inside the crystal edge, spectral shards blossoming across the office walls and ceiling.

Lena never kept anything on the desk.

"Just tell me," she pleaded.

Sharon consulted her notes for dramatic effect.

"You got calls from a chauffeur, twelve grocery stores, CNN, and the mayor."

Lena paused for a moment, evaluating the news, correlating the results. At least it wasn't an ambulance or the Fire Department or the SWAT team. She marshaled her energy, closed her eyes, then exhaled her mantra: WhyMe.

"Anything business-related?"

"Harrison Cross and the Luria gang confirmed for 1:00."

"Good. Call the grocery stores and give them my credit card number. Get me the Mayor now."

As Sharon exited, Lena pulled a worn notebook from the credenza behind her and flipped back in the quest for a blank page. To a stranger, the scribbled notes would have communicated only haste

and emotional duress. Not even Sharon could decipher them. But the doodles in the margins comprised a hieroglyphic record of post-marital dissolution:

Page 1: A heart with an arrow through it.

Page 10: A heart with two arrows through it.

Page 50: No heart. Lots of arrows.

Page 100: A hairy dog-like creature.

Page 150: AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

She had turned a few more pages, found a blank one, but had not yet begun to write when the phone rang. She swung around in her chair, stared at the device on the credenza behind her. Again and again the noise tingled in her brain like a sweet electrocution. Finally it stopped.

Sharon poked her head into the office.

"The Mayor's office is on line one."

Lena donned the wireless headset like a tiara of thorns, then punched a button.

"This is Lena Grant for the Mayor. Yes, I'll hold."

Lena could not imagine a sequence of events that connected a chauffeur, twelve grocery stores, a cable news network and the Mayor. But she knew who could.

"Hello, Mayor, it's Lena, I'm surprised to—."

Lena stopped. Her eyes widened, then narrowed.

"He dumped what in your swimming pool? How many? That's a lot. Where did he get that much salt? Oh. Yes, I suppose it does look bad when road salt intended for public safety ends up in the swimming pool of an elected official. I promise I will talk to him. Thank you, Mayor. I'll definitely see you at the fundraiser next week."

Lena had to talk to Nick.

Which meant she had to find him.

She could try his cell phone. But either he didn't remember to carry it or he didn't remember how to retrieve messages or he did remember but wouldn't. Or maybe it was just her messages he ignored.

Lena paced in front of her office windows. If she looked straight down, the height still made her uneasy. If she looked out over the city, her eyes were inevitably drawn to the southwestern part of Minneapolis, where Lake of the Isles lay hidden behind neighborhood hills. The lake also made her uneasy. The area was Nick's favorite haunt; she wasn't sure why. But when she had to find Nick, it was always her first stop.

If Nick wasn't at the lake, holding vigil with the squirrels or marshalling the geese or communing with the Norway pines or whatever it was that he did there, she could try his condo about two

blocks up in a triplex on Humboldt Avenue. She had bought the place for him after the divorce, hoping that he would enjoy having a home near the lake. She had liked the feel of the place, the streaky light morning and afternoon, the old white-washed stucco walls and the bright burnished wooden floor. It seemed healthy, and that was what he needed, she thought. But the neighbors informed her that he mostly used the apartment for storage. What he had to store she didn't want to know.

If he wasn't there at the condo, then the bank on Lake Street would be her next stop. Nick ventured into the branch at unpredictable intervals, drawing out large amounts of cash that apparently lasted him for months.

She had opened the account after the divorce, when she borrowed enough to buy out Nick's share of the law firm. Nick had more or less absconded from life during that period, so Lena and Nick's sister Grace, a real estate broker who lived in Phoenix, were also listed on the account, just in case. Lena visited the bank every once in a while to educate a new branch manager about Nick. When she last checked, there was still a quarter of a million dollars in the account.

Sharon interrupted the planning for Lena's expedition.

"You have a call."

it to make sure it possessed the proper density), and strode briskly into the office corridor. Sharon was playing a noisy game on her computer.

“You know, this Luria game is fun.”

For a few seconds, Lena was caught up in the game. Sharon’s electronic alter ego struggled alone across a treacherous moat while battling demon slime rats to reach a haunted castle where a legendary treasure was hidden. It all seemed vaguely familiar.

“I’m going to hell,” Lena announced.

Sharon didn’t lift her head from the screen.

“I’ll forward your messages.”

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Lena’s red Porsche convertible flared into the parking lot of the Golden Valley Psychiatric Institute, halting just before impaling the Visitor’s Only sign. She thrust the car door too wide, grabbed her briefcase and hugged it to her breast like an umpire’s chest guard.

She closed her eyes and took two long breaths.

When she opened them again, her focus drifted up to the top floor of the nine-story white building, then down the long row of barred windows.

Lena marched up the daisy-lined path and through the revolving glass doors of the Institute. She entered the reception area in fullback mode, swinging her aluminum briefcase when necessary like a mirrored wrecking ball. The receptionist greeted her with "Please Sign", but didn't quite get the 'In' out before Lena was in the elevator.

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On the ninth floor, an attendant sat reading a comic book, his orange-sneakered feet contrasting with the tiny white desk on which they rested. As Lena approached, he jammed the book into the pocket of his white lab coat and stood, apparently aiming for cool but willing to settle for official. Lena guessed that he'd been on the job only a few weeks.

She stared at the attendant expectantly. Under her implacable yet marginally amused gaze, he fiddled with his bright orange Tweety Bird tie, reminding her of a beagle bravely wagging its tail at the veterinarian. After deciding that nothing was likely to happen in the near future without some form of communication, Lena gave in.

"Nicholas Ward."

"Oscar," replied Oscar.

Lena had a daily threshold of vexation beyond which any additional exasperation began to seem funny. In the face of enormous irritation, she would sometimes begin to giggle uncontrollably. She had already passed the vexation threshold but was successfully suppressing the nervous response, which made her face turn brittle and her eyes squint slightly. Oscar began to puddle under her stare. Lena came to his rescue.

"I'm here to see Nick Ward. He's in room 9021."

"And you are?" Oscar asked.

"Busier than you."

"That's a broad category."

Lena's smile burst through but was quickly withdrawn.

"Follow me," Oscar said, more question than command.

He unlocked the double steel doors, and she followed him through and down a long white corridor in which only the numbers differentiated one room from another.

"Why is everything white?" Lena asked.

"Don't know. Maybe it shows the clean better," Oscar replied.

"I think people would prefer some color."

"This place has been here for a hundred years. Maybe back then they didn't think of patients as people."

Lena glanced at the comic book hanging out of his pocket. The cover was torn in half, and the staples holding the pages together were gone.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your reading," she said.

Oscar reached down and drew out the rumpled book.

"Doctor Strange has just entered the mystical dimension and is battling his arch-nemesis Baron Mordo with the All-Seeing Eye of Agamotto."

"That one looks like someone slept on it," Lena noted.

"A comic book in mint condition is an offense against the multiverse. I only collect damaged comics with torn covers and missing pages."

Lena thought for a moment.

"Me too," she replied.

Oscar gently turned a few pages.

"There's no telling what you can learn from comics."

"No telling," Lena agreed.

Oscar halted at a door at the end of the corridor and raised up on tiptoe to look in the window. Then he unlocked the door, braced his weight on the handles, and, lifting his feet, rode the door open.

Quickly filling the open passage, Lena scanned the tiny enclosure. The room was small and rectangular. A neatly made single

bed lined the wall to the left. A tiny dull white table and upright wooden chair stood against the right wall, leaving a small space in front of the barred shatterproof window. There was no mirror, no decoration, no place for personal items.

At first, Lena didn't see the puppet sitting on the bed, braced upright by a pillow, almost invisible on the bland bed coverings. When she had first seen him years before, twenty-four inches of soft fake fur had gleamed white amid patches of grey. Now he reminded her of a disheveled furry Buddha, his grey coat matted, wisps of ash-colored hair spilling over his forehead. Well, it happened to everyone else, she thought, why not him?

Finally she looked at Nick. As usual, she had the odd sensation that she was seeing him for the first time, as if she had never met him before. He was always taller than she remembered. And thinner, she thought. He always looked thinner. Of course the straitjacket he was wearing emphasized his lanky frame, rough cloth tapering from broad shoulders to slim waist, reminding her of a human cyclone, as though at any minute he might sweep the room into chaos. She noted the effect, wondering how she could recreate it in her own wardrobe.

Nick wheeled his entire taut body around in baby steps.

"Quick! Hide!" he warned the reclining moppet.

Lena was not amused.

"Take it off," Lena ordered. Oscar jumped.

"Excuse me?"

"The jacket," she said. "Take it off."

Oscar started to peel off his lab coat. Lena, patience not quite working into a smile, explained:

"Not yours. His."

Oscar glanced at Nick and assumed a worried expression. Lena guessed that removing straitjackets was beyond his charter.

"Restraints are hospital policy with new patients who are potentially violent," Oscar contended.

Lena swung her briefcase in a blurry arc into the steel door. An ominous thud reverberated down the white-tiled hall.

"The question is not," Lena informed Oscar without taking her eyes from Nick, "whether he is going to hurt me."

Convinced, Oscar walked quickly over to Nick and removed the straitjacket. Then he took off his own coat just in case.

Nick tilted his head, a look that no one but Lena could decode. She flashed her dark lashes in mock Morse code response.

"You want me to stay just in case?" Oscar asked with concern.

"That won't be necessary," Lena assured him.

"Actually, I was talking to him."

Lena turned to Oscar with renewed appreciation, which he appeared to (correctly) interpret as a mild threat.

"I'll leave now," Oscar added quickly.

Lena smiled her approval. Oscar mouthed the word SORRY to Nick as he closed the door.

Lena laid her briefcase on the small table and sat on the bed. She waited without speaking.

Lena always waited for Nick to speak first. It was her only way of knowing which Nick she would be dealing with. She had come to think of his pantheon of moods as different people, in the tactical rather than psycho-social sense. She had in her mind isolated twelve different Nicks, all undeniably Nickish though she could never quite determine what core element linked them all together. Like a shattered mirror that retained in the shards the final image before the catastrophe, bits and pieces of Nick flashed out but the whole was chaos.

"Well," said Nick finally. "Look what the sharks dragged in."

She sighed internally with relief, hoping she recognized ironic slightly acrimonious ex-husband Nick. She could at least talk with him, maybe even convince him of the trouble he was in.

"I told you I'd always be there for you," Lena responded.

"Yeah, but then you threw me out."

"I meant I'd be there for you as long as you weren't there for me."

Nick rubbed his arms and wrists to restore the circulation.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Why aren't you out defrauding the rich?"

"That's defending," corrected Lena.

"If you say so."

"Your sister called me."

"Grace from Grace."

"I'm defending you."

Nick picked up the puppet and held him close.

"And me without my belt and shoelaces," he lamented.

"Want mine?"

"Always the humanitarian. Say hi to Sancho," Nick said, holding the puppet out to her.

"Hello, Sancho," Lena said with more genuine sweetness than she intended. "We need to get him cleaned up. He's gotten a little dingy."

"Manufacturer's instructions: Clean with a mild soap and damp cloth. Do not dry clean—the fumes make him sneeze. Do not microwave—he is not zucchini. Do not blow dry—he looks like he just stuck his head out of a speeding car."

Lena readjusted the atmosphere by opening her briefcase and shielding herself with papers.

"Nick, you do understand how serious this is?"

"You're just after my money."

"I have money."

"Can you lend me some?"

"Do you know where you are?" Lena asked.

Nick countered with Irving Berlin.

"Heaven, I'm in heaven," he crooned.

He pulled a reluctant Lena to her feet, wove his arm around her waist, and began waltzing around the room.

"And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak," he sang in a throaty baritone she remembered well.

"This is not a waltz," Lena admonished.

"And I seem to find the happiness I seek," Nick crooned.

"It's in four-four time."

"When we're out together dancing cheek to cheek to cheek."

Lena stepped back.

"Why do I do this?" she asked Sancho.

"I'm magnetic," Nick explained. "Exotic. Quixotic!"

Lena stuffed the papers back in her briefcase.

"And what do those words have in common?"

Nick pondered, then ventured "Ic?"

"Exactly."

Lena knocked loudly on the door.

"Let me out," she pleaded.

"Practice makes perfect," Nick explained to Sancho.

Lena swung around. Nick ducked.

"Why did you dump lobsters in the mayor's pool?" she asked, curiosity overcoming her urge to flee.

"Two reasons," Nick replied, morphing into the persona Lena had nicknamed the Thin Man, the detective elucidating the modis operandi in the final reel. The persona had often been an advantage in a law partner, but was a disadvantage in a husband, and extremely frustrating in an ex.

"No politician will condemn animals to death on national television."

"National television?"

"Lobsters in the mayor's pool make for exceptional video. I have CNN on speed dial."

"Why lobsters?" Lena asked.

"They were depressed. The blank antennae. The listless mandibles. The lack of interest in everyday scuttling."

Lena sighed.

"Do you want to see the secret sign of the International Brotherhood of Crustaceans?" he asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he placed his fist to his forehead, extended his index and middle fingers, and wiggled them back and forth.

Lena ran a hand through her Porsche-blown hair.

"What is the mayor supposed to do with a hundred lobsters?" she asked, certain she did not want to know the answer, or at least not Nick's answer.

"One hundred and forty-four," Nick corrected. "I have it all taken care of. I donated two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to the Marine Education Center at the Minnesota Zoo to fund a lobster exhibit. The tanks will be ready in a week and the mayor will reap loads of publicity at the opening. We just need to send lots of ice in the meantime."

Lena's eyes flared. That was all of the money he had. All of which she had borrowed to pay him. All of which she had struggled to finally pay off only a few months before.

"Nick! Are you nuts?"

"Hmmm. Let's examine the evidence," he said, picking up the straitjacket.

"No. I mean. You can't afford that! What are you going to do? This is a very bad plan."

Nick looked at her and smiled.

"I don't make plans. I have visions."

Lena paused, struggling to catch up.

"Why ice?"

"Lobsters prefer a water temperature of forty to forty-five degrees Fahrenheit."

"But."

"If only you had seen the facets of relief, even hope, reflected in their grateful eyestalks."

Lena shook her head.

"Nick. How do you expect to live?"

He paused. She hated when he paused because it gave her time to hope. Then he started singing.

"E come vivo? Vivo!"

Lena growled inwardly. His familiar mélange of mysterious amusement and ironic compassion always forced her into momentary doubt, no matter how certain she was that she was right. Yet she smiled in spite of herself that he remembered her favorite opera.

"Tu sol comandi, amor," she replied.

Oscar swung open the door.

"It's good to see you again," Nick whispered as Lena brushed by him. A breathtaking plummet into heartsickness stopped her, turned her slowly back to him.

"It's good to see you too, Nick. But you have to understand. I can't do this anymore."

Nick glanced past her at Oscar.

"Actually, I was talking to him."

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Lena and Oscar walked in silence down the hospital corridor, until Oscar finally asked:

"So what's the deal with him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is he dangerous?"

"Are you planning to marry him?"

"No."

"Then you're safe."

They began to walk again, the only sound Lena's heels tip-clacking down the spotted white linoleum that had been all the rage in asylum corridors fifty years earlier.

"Who is his doctor?" Lena asked.

"Richardson. Second floor. Good guy."

"Thanks."

"So what's wrong with him?"

Lena paused, replaying as she did each night the years of turbulence to see if the possibility of a conclusion could be found.

Finally, she dangled a set of keys before Oscar's eyes.

"You figure that out, you can have my Porsche."

"Deal," Oscar agreed.

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The plain comfort of the second floor contrasted with the forced courtesy of the first and the blank efficiency of the ninth. Lena wandered down the unpretentious hallway for a few moments before locating the office of Doctor Henry Richardson. She knocked on the door and entered.

A heavysset man of medium height sat, eyes closed, behind an uncluttered desk. Music was playing. Piano. Chopin. A nocturne.

"Doctor Richardson?"

"Yes?" replied the man, not moving or even opening his eyes. His hands were lightly clasped, as if he were meditating or praying or making a pronouncement from the bench.

"My name is Lena Grant. I'm an attorney representing Nicholas Ward. He is being held here."

The doctor opened his eyes and focused on her for the first time.

"Mr. Ward has been admitted," the doctor corrected her. "I spoke to his sister yesterday."

Lena glanced around at the furnishings. Something was missing, something she expected to see but didn't. She couldn't put her finger on what it might be.

"Grace called me."

"Please sit down," said the doctor, indicating two chairs in front of his desk. Lena sat in one of them. The doctor came around the desk and sat in the other.

"He was brought in last night," the doctor continued. "Someone at the precinct knew him—"

"He's an attorney also," Lena stated. "I mean he was."

"We administered one hundred milligrams of Thorazine, which kept him sedated most of the night."

"Thorazine?"

"An anti-psychotic drug. We administer Thorazine to inhibit delusions or hallucinations. Right now, he seems relatively functional, so we are giving him lithium for mood stabilization."

"He wouldn't hurt anyone," she stated.

"He may not intend to hurt anyone," the doctor corrected her.

Lena took a moment to absorb the information.

"Have you known him long?" the doctor asked.

"He was one of my professors in law school. And we were partners in a law firm."

"I see."

"And we were married."

The doctor looked up, moved back around to the other side of the desk and began taking notes.

"How long ago was the divorce?"

"Almost two years ago."

"Any kids?"

"No. We. No."

"May I ask why you got divorced?"

"Why? I mean. Why are you asking why?"

"Don't worry. I don't date lawyers," the doctor assured her.

"You're smart."

"Yes. I am. Is there any family history of mental illness?"

"He drove me crazy. Does that count?"

The doctor smiled. Lena shook her head.

"No," she continued. "Not that I know of. I mean. No. Doctor, are you telling me that there's something seriously wrong with him?"

Doctor Richardson got up, walked back around the desk, and sat again in the chair next to Lena.

"Do you mind?" he asked, pulling out a cigar. Lena shook her head. "It's against the law and hospital rules. But sometimes..."

She nodded, but his need for it made her nervous. He clipped one end of the cigar, lit the other, inhaled, and blew the smoke away from her. Then he extinguished it and chewed the smoldering cylinder.

"You know what a delusion is?" he asked.

"I told you I was married," Lena replied.

The doctor's smile flashed again, then faded quickly.

"From a psychiatric perspective, a delusion is a false belief that the patient maintains in spite of substantial contrary evidence. While it's too soon yet for a definitive diagnosis, I believe Mr. Ward has what we would call Delusional Disorder."

"Is that serious?"

"It can be. The neural activity or brain function, in these cases is extraordinary. The French philosopher Rene Descartes once said: I think therefore I am. In a sense, your ex-husband thinks too much, so he isn't who he is."

Lena felt her heart beat rapidly, as the fears that had grown slowly over the last few years coalesced inside her.

"Can it be treated?"

"Treatment can be effective in some cases. A combination of medication and therapy."

"You don't sound too encouraging"

The doctor relit the cigar, took a puff, and then put it out again.

"As I said, it's too soon. But there are unusual symptoms in your husband's case. The puppet, for instance. It's not uncommon for delusional patients to see an inanimate object as human. We call that anthropomorphosis."

Lena parsed the word: anthropos, Greek for human; morphosis, Greek for the form beneath the change, the essence. The human essence, or the changing man.

The doctor continued.

"In most cases, when you challenge a delusion, the patient will be insistent, even to the point of violence. The unusual aspect of Mr. Ward's illness is that when you challenge his delusions, he readily acknowledges that they are fantasy. Yet out in the world, he behaves as if they were real. That's a conundrum."

Lena made a professional effort to smile. The result was brittle and unconvincing.

"Did the divorce cause this?" she asked.

The doctor's expression smoothed over.

"No. The biochemical and genetic mechanisms of the disorder would already have been in place. Most likely the illness would have manifested in time regardless. Did the stress of the divorce affect the progress of the disorder? Possibly. The resulting disruption could have precipitated the initial episode. But that does not mean that you were at fault."

"Doctor, I'm a litigator. My business is identifying who's at fault. I know where the blame goes."

Doctor Richardson saluted her.

"I'm going to start sending my patients to you."

Lena sat up straight.

"There are no books here," she stated.

The doctor smiled.

"No books," he agreed.

"I expected books. Shelves and shelves of books. Is there a reason that you don't have books?"

"Yes," he said, adding nothing more.

"Okay. Well. I'm glad there's a reason."

The doctor leaned back in his chair.

"It must be nice to be in a job where you win once in a while," he said. "The best I ever seem to do is tie."

"The only victory in life is being a good loser," Lena replied.

"Who said that?"

"Somebody dead."

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Preston Winter's desk always reminded Lena of a Bavarian castle. Case files stacked around the perimeter formed uneven battlements. A coffee stain moat spread across the faded grey rug, evidence of sieges past. Lena entered the office without knocking and sat by the northwest turret.

"I hate paperwork," Preston.

"Then you picked the right job," Lena responded. "Assistant States Attorneys never do paperwork."

Preston emitted a quasi-amused blurt.

"You're early," he said. "I thought we were meeting at the gym."

"I've got a problem."

Preston peered at her.

"You divorced him."

"It's serious."

Preston leaned forward.

"Is he dead?" he asked.

"Don't."

"Sorry. Injured?"

Lena folded her arms, at the same time defending and enhancing her breasts, a masterwork of effective communication she had perfected in junior high.

"He's in Golden Valley," she continued.

"Psychiatric Institute," Preston completed. "And the problem is— what?"

Lena leaned in, slipped off his glasses, and held his eyes with hers.

"I need a favor."

Preston jumped up, almost tumbling Lena into the Northeast spire, and gathered a stack of papers.

"I have a meeting."

Lena beat Preston to the door.

"It's Nick," she pleaded.

"Exactly," he answered harshly. "It's Nick. Stay out of it."

Preston brushed past her.

"I told him," Lena announced.

Preston froze in the doorway but didn't turn back.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him," Lena said slowly, pulling him back to her, "that this is the last time. After this, he's out of my life for good."

Preston sighed.

"I'll do what I can," he said.

"See you at the gym," she said. "Dinner afterwards?"

"What are friends for?"

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Sharon was standing outside the conference room doorway, holding a folder.

"Harrison Cross and his entourage are inside," she said.

Lena's eyes brightened. Eager to confront an adversary on whom she could profitably focus her frustration, she accepted the folder, constructed a smile, and strolled confidently into the room.

The décor in the conference room was casual but professional. Even the toy giraffe that poked its head through the silk tree in the corner wore thick horn-rimmed glasses.

Lena sat on the near side of the table. Across from her, a team of four attorneys conferred with quiet confidence. Sharon took her usual seat beside Lena.

Lena carefully laid the folder down on the conference table, then covered it with her hand. From across the polished mahogany divide,

eight suspicious eyes peered down at the folder as the smug atmosphere cracked just a bit.

"I apologize for the delay," Lena began pleasantly.

"Ms. Grant, we have a flight to catch."

"Certainly, Mr. Cross."

Lena mentally reviewed Sharon's research on the man who sat across from her. Harrison Cross had been Lead Internal Counsel for Luria Corporation since its formation in the early eighties. He had guided the transformation of the company into a megamonster of entertainment software, pocketing not only a substantial corporate salary but also millions in stock options. He seemed quite sure that neither he nor Luria had anything to fear from a tiny boutique firm like Ward and Grant.

"This won't take long," Lena reassured him. "The Luria Corporation illegally appropriated software designed by my client. All we are asking for is fair compensation."

Cross leered back at Lena.

"Ms. Grant, I think our settlement offer of fifty thousand dollars is more than generous, considering. Surely your client could use that money for her college education."

Cross leaned back in his chair. The other three Luria minions followed suit. Lena sensed their confidence: they were going to be able

to buy their way out of this cheaply. Even if Luria had appropriated the code illegally, they reckoned the court proceedings would bankrupt the tiny opposition firm long before a final verdict was rendered.

Cross explained:

“Even if you win in court, I remind you that the appeals process alone could take ten years. Is your client prepared to wait that long? Are you?”

Lena didn't answer. She stood up hesitantly and moved to the corner, shielding her expression from the Luria team. She knew that Cross would presume she did so to hide the defeat in her eyes.

Lena petted the giraffe, then straightened the eyeglasses that had fallen down over its elongated snout. Facing out the window, she said:

“My client can wait as long as necessary. But as for me...”

Lena turned and smiled again. As she moved gracefully back to the conference table, something crystallized in her eyes. She leaned across the table and added in her most pleasant voice:

“I hate waiting. Sharon?”

Sharon thrust the folder toward Cross, who stared at it but didn't move to touch it, as if the folder had magically, disturbingly, transformed into the equivalent of legal toxic waste.

"This is a motion for a temporary injunction preventing your company from selling any electronic gaming software in the United States. I plan to file this injunction in Federal Court today."

Cross stared hard at the folder, then responded dismissively:

"You can't win."

"I don't have to win. I just have to file."

Cross did not respond. Lena positioned her hands palms down over the folder.

"Once this motion is filed, the market will conclude that your software might not be on the shelves at Christmas."

Cross still did not respond. Lena sighed, her eyes narrowed.

"Your stock price will fall to its knees like a two-dollar whore," she continued. "And I have an acquisitions consortium in place to make sure you get fucked. This morning we filed with the SEC a Notice of Intent to purchase a majority interest in Luria. Your CEO is probably trying to reach you right now."

On the opposite side of the conference table, babble erupted from four alarmed faces.

Lena sat down next to Sharon.

"Once my consortium controls your company, I will..."

She consulted her notes.

"(1) Replace your Board of Directors.

(2) Settle generously with my client.

(3) Personally terminate each of you for gross incompetence."

For a moment, there was no sound, though Lena imagined the flutter of evaporating stock options. Then Cross said:

"That's stock manipulation. It's illegal."

"I'm just defending the innocent. Can I help it if I get rich and you get fired?"

"Is this supposed to intimidate me?"

"Now you could sue," Lena reminded him. "However, the appeals process alone could take ten years."

Lena set her watch on the table. Eight anxious eyes followed the leisurely yet jubilant progression of the second hand:

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine.

Lena observed the minions pass Three in anger, Five in denial, Seven in bargaining, and Nine in a fusion of acceptance and financial exhaustion. Lena released them.

"Are you prepared to wait that long?" she added with concern.

Cross hid behind his legal pad.

"What do you want?" he blurted out finally.

"Two point five million plus future royalties."

The minions consulted silently.

"We'll have to talk to our Board of Directors."

"Talk fast," Lena said.

The Luria gang filed out of the room, arguing with one another while contemplating discrete messages to their brokers. Sharon closed the door behind them and turned to Lena.

"I've never heard you use that kind of language before."

"It's a matter of fairness," Lena replied. "We have a responsibility to communicate in a way they will understand."

Sharon pondered the concept as they left the conference room.

"Does it work with boyfriends?" she asked.

"You didn't tell me you have a new boyfriend," Lena replied.

"I'm speaking hypothetically."

Lena offered the mysterious folder to Sharon.

"What's really in that?" Sharon asked.

Lena balanced the folder carefully in her hand.

"My guess is two million plus."

Sharon accepted the precious repository.

"Is this my bonus?"

Lena's smile didn't fade until she was midway into her office, when she saw the waiting stack of messages. The elephants saluted her with upraised trunks.

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Lena lay on her back with her legs splayed wide. The fact that she was doing this in public was slightly embarrassing, abnormally irritating, and numbingly familiar.

She stared at the gym ceiling, forcing the weights up over and over, while pondering Greek mythology. The names Sisyphus and Tantalus hovered in her sweat-induced haze. She couldn't remember which was which, which annoyed her.

One of them was always thirsty, bound in a lake from which he couldn't drink. The other was always weary, condemned to push a boulder up a mountain forever; when he got almost to the top, down again it would roll. It occurred to her that if the one on the mountain

freed the one in the lake, they could roll the boulder up together then both go down and get a drink.

Men, she thought with facetious contempt wasted amid the ocean of endorphins: Never knew when to ask for help.

Lena closed her eyes and listened to the noises around her. Grunting, groaning, sighing, and puffing merged into a purgatory of uneasy flesh. And then she saw that it was not just in this room, but all through the city, the country, the world, every activity performed day in day out was just a variant of lying on your back with your legs spread wide, mindlessly pumping up and down. Then the ultimate solution flashed into her mind:

Juice.

My blood sugar must be low, she thought.

Suddenly Preston Winter's face loomed over her.

"Hello Presssston," she grunted as she pressed the bar as high as she could.

Preston grunted in response, which made her laugh and almost lose control of the bar. He was standing at her head, looking down at her from behind, which her visual orientation converted into hanging from the ceiling.

"Get down from there," she said crossly.

"The Mayor?"

She had never looked at his face upside down before. Somehow the hemispheric perfection that anointed his Ronald Reagan football hero looks in the everyday world was not sustained when that world was topsy-turvy. His eyebrows were crooked. Or was that because he was frowning?

"Preston?"

"The Mayor!"

Lena reached up and centered his face over hers. It was bad enough that he was hanging from the ceiling, but did he have to be a bobblehead too?

"It's my case now. I hope you're happy," he said.

Lena grabbed his hand.

"Drop the charges. We'll agree to counseling and community service."

"He's nuts," Preston muttered. Lena wrangled out from under the bar and sat up.

"I can't let him go to jail."

Preston moved in front of her and sat on the bench between her legs, his back to her. Lena put her arms around him and sighed.

"When the choice is, I mean, what do you do?"

Preston covered her sweaty arms with his and inhaled deeply, pressing his polyester-plaited back into the spandex-delimited cushion of her chest, interrupting her sigh with his own.

"Counseling and community service. And he stays on medication. The arraignment is tomorrow."

She kissed his neck.

"Thank you. I'll tell him tonight."

She rested her head against his shoulder.

"This is a nightmare," she said.

Preston twisted around.

"He is a nightmare. You need to wake up."

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Lena and Oscar stood outside the door to Nick's hospital room, rapt in a silent fascination that hovered just this side of distress. Inside the room, Nick was marching around the tiny space with Sancho on his arm.

Down and back.

Over the bed.

Up the chair.

Across the table.

It was better than a treadmill, Lena decided.

Given the specific choreography of leaps and gyrations, Lena guessed that they were parading to Nick's favorite: the Liberty Bell March by John Phillip Sousa. He knew by heart each piccolo trill and trumpet flourish. Actual music was superfluous apparently, since the only sound in the room was the patter of Nick's bare feet.

Oscar moved close to Lena.

"They're good."

Lena sighed.

"Practice makes perfect."

As Oscar opened the door, Nick crashed down on the bed as though playing fantasy musical chairs.

"At ease, soldier," Lena said as she stepped warily through the opening.

"Your husband is a very lucky man," Nick announced proudly.

"I don't have a husband."

"Then he's a very lucky man," Oscar muttered.

Lena turned to Oscar, able to summon irritation but not anger.

"I heard that," she said.

Nick looked around her, smiling at Oscar.

"She did, too," Nick confirmed. "Don't ask me how."

Oscar tried to stumble to recovery.

"I meant that he's a very lucky man to ever have had the remarkable good fortune of..."

"Leave now," Lena said, inserting a practiced chill into her tone.

"While you can," Nick added.

Oscar took their advice. Lena waited until the door closed, then walked to the window. It was late, only a few cars left in the parking lot. Her car was visible from the window. She wondered if Nick had seen her arrive, whether the marching was for her benefit.

She had seen him march before. Once even, after a few glasses of champagne, she had marched with him. To her surprise, it had been exhilarating. But then it had been play. Now it seemed disturbed. Had the activity changed, or the context?

"Okay, here's the deal," she announced to cut off her own endless speculation on unanswerable questions.

"How is Preston?" he asked.

"Preston is fine. The deal is they drop the charges without prejudice, which means—"

"I know what it means."

"Which means, if you violate the terms of the agreement, they can reinstate the charges. In return, in addition to general good behavior, you agree to medication, counseling—"

"Who do they want me to counsel?"

"And community service."

"Who do they want me to service?"

Lena glared. Nick shrugged.

"And if I refuse?"

"You know exactly what will happen. They'll order a psychiatric evaluation."

Sancho shuddered.

"Have a hearing."

A bigger shudder.

"And then make a determination as to whether you get committed to a psychiatric ward or go to prison."

Sancho hid his head in Nick's shoulder.

"Can I think about it?" Nick asked. Lena ignored the request.

"The arraignment is tomorrow. No puppets."

Sancho looked around at her.

"He prefers 'Imaginary American'," Nick explained.

"Sorry, I forgot," she said to Sancho, genuinely apologetic for half a second.

Lena turned to leave, then felt a furry nudge on her shoulder. She turned back and found Sancho close enough to tickle her nose. Sancho's face moved aside to reveal Nick's unusually somber and genuine expression, like a souvenir of a lost adventure.

"We just wanted to say thanks," he said.

Her heart flashed. Lena had tamed her sadness, given it a home, taught it tricks (roll over, fetch, play dead), and made sure that it would never run away. But occasionally it bounced up and surprised her.

"Amazing," she commented after a few seconds of intense interpretive effort convinced her that he was sincere. "You learned a new word."

As she reached for the door, Oscar swept it open from the outside.

"Everybody's learning," she said. "See you in court."

She did not look back.

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Lena walked confidently into the hearing room. Her arrangement with Preston was approved. The paperwork was in perfect order. Nothing can go wrong, she thought, knowing that something would, and why.

The courtroom was small, with the judge's chambers directly behind the large wooden panel flanking the bench. To the right was the jury box (which was empty), to the left was the room where

defendants were held before trial. About five feet in front of the bench, two long tables were set, one for the defense and one for the prosecution. A short wooden railing divided the court from the small gallery.

Nick was already sitting at the Defendant's table playing tic-tac-toe with Sancho. His restraints had been removed. Oscar was in the first row of the gallery, draped over the railing, alternately observing the game and reading a vintage Iron Man comic book that might once have been the innersole of someone's shoe.

Lena laid her briefcase on the table and stood looking down at the game, which had ended in a tie.

"I said no puppets," Lena reminded Nick.

"Puppets? Where?" Nick asked as he and Sancho scanned the room.

Oscar leaned forward.

"Good luck in court today," he said.

"You should say 'Break a Leg'," Nick replied.

"That's for the theater."

"Wherever I go, it's always theater."

"Ha!" Lena interjected with terse eloquence.

"People always tell me I look like Brad Pitt," Oscar continued.

Both Nick and Lena swiveled to look at Oscar.

"It's the eyes," Oscar explained.

Preston Winter entered the courtroom and took his place at the Prosecutor's table. Nick and Sancho regarded him closely. Preston returned the dual stare for a few seconds, then shook his head at the pair. Sancho hid behind Lena, occasionally peeking around to see if Preston was watching, then ducking quickly out of sight.

Lena, still standing, faced Nick, laid her hand lightly on his shoulder, then dug her fingernails into his back as hard as she could.

"Cut it. Out," she commanded under a smile.

She sat down next to Nick at the table, spreading out her documents, noting peripherally that Nick was wearing his cherished dark blue suit with the nearly invisible pinstripe that complemented the noirish scarlet of her outfit. Suddenly and unexpectedly, she was engulfed by successive tidal waves of déjà vu and nostalgia and panic.

When they had decided to work together, Lena had not known what to expect, or how the dual aspect of their partnership (law and love) would work. What she had not anticipated was the sense of transcendence, of gaining a context within which she did not lose herself but found meaning as herself. She had learned to treasure that context. And to mourn its loss.

Sitting next to Nick again alarmed Lena. She had not been in a courtroom with him since the last case they had tried as partners. He

had neither contested nor acknowledged the divorce, except to sign the papers.

Fear seeped into her consciousness, an augury, a vision: Love was irrelevant; marriage a formality; only with Nick could she achieve that lost preternatural consonance. Lena was overwhelmed, captive to an immediate and irresistible compulsion to collaborate, to revive the coherence, to rejuvenate the context, to have and to be a partner.

She knew, or she hoped she knew, that the compulsion was a product of guilt and loss and longing not yet extinguished. Yet like an addict on the prowl, she ransacked her litigation case for an extra copy of the plea agreement and handed it to Nick.

"You might want to glance at this," she said, the document trembling in her hand.

Nick smiled and settled down.

"Sure," he said and began to peruse the document.

The bailiff stood.

"All rise."

The judge walked briskly in and sat.

"Sit sit sit," she said.

Lena had never met Judge Anne Ritchfield, though they had attended some of the same political functions. Preston had filled her in.

Ritchfield was a rarity, a judge who had never practiced law. Annie Ritchfield had started as a psychiatric social worker, gotten her Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Emory University, and then attended law school at the University of St. Thomas while working as a child advocate. She had been appointed to a seat on the Family Court for Hennepin County, then elected to a seat on the Fourth Judicial District court for the State of Minnesota. She knew Preston well. Nick was unknown to her.

The judge scanned the courtroom quickly and gestured for the bailiff to approach.

"There is a stuffed animal on the Defendant's table."

"Yes, your Honor. I tried to take him away, Judge," the bailiff explained. "But he claimed he's a material witness."

"And you just left it at that?"

"Yes, your Honor."

The judge leaned over the bench and whispered.

"What's the pool up to?"

The bailiff stuttered.

"Uh. I. Twenty bucks."

"What was your guess?"

"You'd confiscate it in under a minute."

"You lose. Call the case."

The bailiff paid the court reporter twenty dollars and declared:

"State versus Nicholas Ward."

To which Nick replied, holding up the puppet:

"Et al."

The judge ignored him. Lena glared at Nick, then stood.

"Elena Grant for the Defense, your Honor,"

"Preston Winter for the State," Preston said, also standing.

Nick stood as well.

"Your Honor," he said, "If it please the court, we cite TAHOE-SIERRA PRESERVATION COUNCIL, INC., etal. V. TAHOE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY etal., in which the court held that a regulation temporarily denying an owner all use of her property might not constitute a taking if the denial is part of the States authority to enact safety regulations."

"What are you doing?" Lena interrupted.

"We have a responsibility to communicate in a way they will understand," Nick explained.

"I remember when you taught me that. Now will you let me do my job?"

Nick sat back down.

"Thank you, Mr. Ward," said the judge, "for that cogent yet completely irrelevant piece of information. I understand there is an agreement here," she continued, shuffling through documents.

"Yes, your Honor," Preston and Lena said together, then smiled at each other.

The judge picked up the plea document and read for a few seconds.

"This agreement specifies one hundred sixty hours of community service."

"That is correct, your Honor," Preston agreed.

"Plus mandatory counseling."

"That's also correct, your Honor."

The judge flipped a page and threw Lena a quizzical glance.

"You're his ex-wife?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"And his ex-law partner?"

"Yes."

Nick stood.

"Your Honor, the Defense stipulates that counsel is Ex-rated. I'd like to introduce these Polaroids as evidence..."

He started to search his pockets when Lena ordered:

"Sit down and shut up!"

Nick sat.

"What is going on?" said the judge.

"I'm representing the defendant today," Lena explained. "Only. Today only."

"Sounds like a sale at K-Mart," Nick whispered to Sancho.

"Will you shut up?" said Lena and Preston together.

Nick stood again.

"Your Honor, may I have a minute to confer with counsel?"

"Does the State object?" asked the judge.

"Yes, but go ahead." Preston said in a sulk, so the judge said to make it fast.

Nick turned to Lena and got down on one knee.

"I imagine that I will love you for as long as we both shall live."

"Don't—" was all Lena got out before Nick bent her back over the table and kissed her.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine.

Lena passed Three in shock, Five in panic, Seven in memory, and Nine in a fusion of hormonal response and oxygen depletion. Nick released her.

"Thank you, your Honor. No more questions," he announced, sitting back down.

Lena leapt up off the table, wobbling like a child's punching bag. The judge hefted the gavel as though contemplating whether to use it or toss it at someone.

"Ms. Grant," she ordered in her sternest voice. "Please control the defendant."

"Your Honor," said Lena, "You have no idea."

Nick stood again.

"Your Honor, for the record, I'd just like to point out that technically I am not the defendant, since I have not yet been arraigned on the charges."

"Thank you, Mr. Ward," said the judge. "And I would like to point out that technically I am the one who decides whether you will be a defendant."

Nick considered.

"Your point is better than mine."

He sat down again. Lena muttered to him:

"What are you—"

Again Nick stood.

"However, since I am still an Officer of the Court, I feel it's my responsibility to point out that there is no provision in this agreement for supervision."

Lena and Preston exchanged expressions of chagrin. He was right. They hadn't thought of it.

The judge glared at Preston.

"Is that correct, Mr. Winter?"

"No, your Honor. I mean, yes, that is correct."

"Is the state ready to accept responsibility for the unsupervised actions of this def...of the accused?"

Preston glanced at Lena as if to say "you owe me", then:

"Yes, your Honor."

The judge nodded, then shook her head.

"Well this is an election year and you are braver than I am. Is there a responsible party who can take charge of the accused and oversee the counseling and community service?"

Preston and Lena both spoke at once:

"Your Honor."

Then Preston continued:

"I really don't think that supervision will be necessary in this case."

"Well, I do. Is there a responsible party or not?"

"Your Honor, the defendant is—"

Lena glared at Nick, searching frantically for options that would keep him out of a psych ward or a jail.

Then she saw it.

She had seen it so often before. Yet the moment of recognition still captivated her.

Events simplified.

Intentions clarified.

And out of the frantic chaotic mystery, the hidden objective was achieved.

In the courtroom, she had seen it time and again. Always it was magical, when Nick's rambling antics stood revealed—too late to act but not too late to appreciate—as reality unfolded at his command, the World according to Nick. All that was left to her, to anyone, was to play the destined part: Kismet, Fate, Fortune.

Lena stood and announced:

"I'll do it."

"No fucking way!" Preston shouted. Then he covered his mouth, remembering where he was. Lena looked back at him, shrugging while asking for sympathy she knew she would not get.

"There isn't anyone else," she explained. "No local relatives. No human friends."

She turned back to Nick.

"I'm all he has."

His innocent eyes infuriated her.

"And he knows it."

The judge turned her attention to Lena.

"Ms. Grant, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Yes, your Honor. But I'm going to do it anyway."

The judge nodded.

"Very well. He's all yours. Amend the order and I'll sign it. Next case."

Lena ran over to Preston to try and explain. Nick, impassive, watched them argue on the other side of the courtroom. Oscar walked up behind Nick and picked up the puppet.

"I see what you mean about breaking a leg. I think she's going to break yours."

Preston cut off his conversation with Lena and stomped over to Nick.

"If you even breathe on her improperly, I will make it my life's mission to put you away permanently."

Then he stormed up the aisle and out of the courtroom. Nick whispered to Oscar:

"Now she's going to say the six little words every man longs to hear."

Lena flashed up to him. The words snapped out with chilling precision:

"Wait. Till. I. Get. You. Home."

Lena whirled away and marched out of the courtroom.

Hand in hand with Sancho, Nick followed her through the polished swinging doors.