

Miles Apart

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Writers Club Press
San Jose New York Lincoln Shanghai

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Writers Club Press
an imprint of iUniverse.com, Inc.

For information address:
iUniverse.com, Inc.
5220 S 16th, Ste. 200
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com

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ISBN: 0-595-17044-7

Printed in the United States of America

This one—and all to come—for my one true love.

CHAPTER ONE

Despite his wintry blue-gray eyes, it was California's summer sun that reflected wildly off sunglasses wedged in the stranger's hair. This picture froze in Molly's mind as she watched the whistle that had first signaled his approach now change to slack-jawed astonishment. "What's going on here?" His voice reverberated around her temporary prison.

The words jolted Molly out of her stunned assessment of the tanned face that had suddenly appeared over a grimy rim. Self-consciously, she shook off the debris he had deposited around her. Embarrassment replaced her shock, quickly followed by a flash-flood of anger at being caught in such ridiculous circumstances.

"Well? You're in a dumpster, and I'm wondering why," he prompted. His laugh yanked her back to reality.

With a last slap across a faded denim knee, she turned a stony glare toward the lean face. A carefully trimmed moustache formed an awning over those lips that spouted words as he attempted to carry on a conversation. She bit her answer off and spat the words out like twigs, "I don't owe you any explanations." Fresh-cut grass fell from her sun-streaked blonde hair as she raked her fingers through its tangles.

Molly mentally retreated into her usual method for handling stress, listing-making. *1) get rid of this man, 2) get out of this literal mess, and 3) call the dumpster company.* She took a deep breath and floundered as she realized that the first step on her list for success loomed before her like an unquenchable foe.

Oblivious to Molly's distress, this Adversary dropped his bushel basket and let it bounce off the step stool beside the metal bin. Their gazes

locked, her brown eyes held captive by two blue ones fringed with lashes darker than the maple-syrup hair that brushed his neck. “How’d you get in there?”

Wisps of leaves clung to the mass of curly hair that crept out like moss around the edges of his shirt. “It should be obvious enough. The stool’s right beside you,” she snapped. Exasperation buzzed in her head like the flies circling them. Then self-rebuke sprung up. Why was she yelling at this guy? Anyone finding her here would ask questions.

He gave the stool only a cursory glance. “So you climbed in. But why?” His glance flitted from the Volvo visible through her open garage door and then to Vinnie’s Pool Repair van outside a neighbor’s wrought-iron fence. “In this ritzy part of town, a person doesn’t expect to find folks hanging out in...” Her paralyzing stare finally penetrated. “Never mind; grab hold and I’ll help you out.” He extended a muscular hair-matted forearm.

A memory flashed like a neon sign, the memory of her ancient jeans ripping as she had climbed in. As if stung, she backed away from him and forced a smile to reshape her stiff lips. “No. I’m looking for something I lost. I need to find it.”

“Most people,” the moustache quivered suspiciously, “*deposit* garbage in these monsters. Besides, I’m sure the rules are quite clear, right here in this bright yellow paint.” He recited dramatically without giving the sign even the slightest glance, “‘Danger. Stay Out.’ Seems plain enough to me.”

Molly leaned closer in a futile attempt to read upside-down over the edge. He continued staring at her, reducing her to the unfamiliar role of air-headed blonde instead of the in-control, take-charge professional woman she was, the librarian with the reputation for being counted on to handle difficult situations with tact and dignity. “So you say.”

“Who are you, anyway? A hardened criminal, breaking just one more law?” he asked as a dimple in his left cheek quivered and deepened.

“I didn’t...I’m not...”

He interrupted, "Looks like I have to report you! After all, I'm the model citizen, putting trash in its proper place, only to discover," he stepped closer, biting his lower lip as he studied her, "...someone hiding out like a fugitive."

This hyena, Molly fumed, *has the nerve to laugh at me*. She retorted coldly, "Until you showed up, I was just fine."

"*Fine?* You call hiding in here 'fine'? What's a bad day like for you, anyway? Or do you view-of-the-mountains yuppie-types always hit the alley for excitement?"

This clown has never had a serious thought. Zero. He's just a play-in-the-sun guy who should not be allowed to run loose. "Not that it's any of your business, but I was looking for a watch and I heard you whistling and I didn't want..."

"Wait just one minute!" His hand a sword, he sliced the air. "Oops, that's right. No more personal questions from a total stranger!" Clapping dust off his hands, he stuck the right one across the wall of her mold-green prison. "Jordan's the name. Concerned, involved, caring citizen, and native of this great state of California."

His grin was bewitching, but she ignored his hand. "So I gathered. Unless valid birth certificates aren't required to buy one of those shirts," she said with wilting energy.

"You noticed, huh?" He stuck his thumbs in the armholes of a faded tanktop and held it away from an enticingly hair-crowned chest for her to read the inscription *Welcome to California. Now go home* which blazed across the front in fluorescent green letters. "The shirt for genuine natives. Are you one of our rare breed, too?" His hand, again, crossed the dirt-caked rim.

Invisible cords lifted her hand. "No, I'm from Minnesota."

Wow, what a strong hand...shake. Suddenly flustered, she realized that all motion had stopped. *A handshake, by all definitions, Molly, is an activity involving motion.*

She slid her palm free of his grasp, knocking an orange peel of questionable age loose from the dumpster's edge. "Nice to meet you, I'm sure. Now, will you please hand me the stool?"

He shrugged. "Not yet. You're still looking for a watch. Tell me, how did you intend to get back out?" Somewhere in the neighborhood a lawn mower revved into action. He reached out and gently flicked a stray leaf from a strand hair dangerously close to her mouth.

Mesmerized, she watched as the leaf float gracefully down to join others beneath her. "I'm not sure." *Less than five minutes with this man and I've become a blithering idiot.* Sobered, she added feebly, "I guess I acted on impulse."

She watched, dismayed, as he perched one foot atop the stool, settling in for a chat. "My impulses lean more toward chocolate! What did you lose?"

Mister, conversation, even with a pulse-stopper like you, is not a priority right now. Molly sighed, sneezed, and squirmed as a stream of perspiration ran along her spine. "I already told you. My watch. The clasp broke when I threw a bag in here."

"Do you always carry a step stool when you take out the trash?"

The laugh that bubbled up in her throat was a total surprise. "Not usually, no. I repeat: I took out my garbage, my watch fell off, I got the stool from the garage...am I going too fast for you?" she quizzed him, suddenly feeling impish.

"No, no, go on; this is fascinating."

Why did this loquacious hunk of eyes, hair, and grins have to choose today to wander by? "Someone, obviously you, whistled. That truck blocked my view," his eyes followed her hand when she gestured at the guilty vehicle, "so I hid."

"You know, this story just gets better and better."

Pointedly ignoring him, she shuffled her now-filthy dock-siders to signal dismissal, "Well, I don't want to keep you from your work..."

“Funny lady, Minnesota! Nope, you find that watch, and I’ll wait around.” He continued before she could shape a protest into words. “After all, the reputation of California men rests on me! I really am the culprit in this drama. I whistled...” The lips twitched suspiciously. Oblivious to her stare, he continued, “...and it’s my truck...” He nodded in the general direction.

She had to remind herself to swallow. *Molly! Get a grip!*

“...I threw messy junk over you. They should lock me up! I’m a regular menace.” He slapped his wrists together and clicked his tongue like a giant handcuff.

“You rarely stop talking, do you?” She snapped back to reality, giving him what her family teasingly called her teacher-stare.

“You really don’t laugh much, do you?” he shot back. She bit her cheek to stifle a retort.

Resting his chest against the dumpster’s outer wall, he leaned over and dangled an arm into the dumpster. “Pull up the brown bag on top of that big branch. Check under that heap and a couple more and you could be out of this stink-hole in seconds.”

No way, buddy! If I bend over enough to move any of these bags, you will get a view that one friendly handshake doesn’t license you to have. “Oh, it could be anywhere and take forever.” She waved her arms in an all-encompassing swoop.

“Time, I’ve got lots of. Patience with you, Minnesota, I’m running a little thin on.” He could produce a pretty chilly stare, himself. “Why you’re so confounded stubborn about leaving this mess is beyond me. If you’re afraid I’ll drop you, forget it! From what I see,” he subjected her to a painfully thorough review, “lifting you is child’s play. What are you, 115 pounds?” He flexed his sun-bronzed arms dramatically. His eyes were pools of laughter despite the stubborn set of his chin.

She backed up against the opposite wall and shielded her exposed backside from his scrutiny. “Now *that* really is none of your business. I’ll get out. On my own. When I’m ready. Which I’m not. You might as well

go.” She jutted an equally firm chin in his direction. Anger marched through her veins. *So I don’t laugh much, huh?*

“Not ready? What is this, some new millennium hobby I’ve missed hearing about, this dumpster diving?” He effortlessly snagged the stool and suddenly he was a man in charge, ordering, “Climb up on that and swing yourself up on the rim. Then I’ll catch you.” Stepping back, he demonstrated how his arms would engulf her when she made the leap he intended.

“Thanks a lot; you probably just smashed my watch when you dropped the stool down here.” She poked around in the mess with her foot, flinching as wafts of foul air rose with each movement. “I don’t know what you’re doing here anyway; you don’t live around here.”

Any short-lived charm she had mustered now gave way to outrage that sputtered beneath his unwavering grin. Her growing list of complaints against this nervy stranger began with his uninvited presence in her previously well-ordered world and ended with his uncanny ability to bring out the worst in her with every word and grin. In amongst these grievous offenses, trouble rumbled like a distant thunderstorm.

“Begging your pardon! But I think any jury would agree that I was using this container,” he pounded the side for emphasis, “more appropriately than the defendant.” He snared his bushel basket and brandished his evidence. “I present Exhibit A. Now take you, Minnesota; what do you have to show as proof of your innocence?” He turned and addressed the tree, “Members of the jury, I see only a lady who I’m sure is normally breathtakingly exquisite, who is now knee-deep in gunk and apparently loving it.”

They waited, he in triumphant silence, she with narrowed eyes.

“Aha! I rest my case. She produces zilch in her own defense!” He muttered to the leafy jury box, “This sort always manages to land in California.”

“My watch *is* in here, and I *will* find it.” A lopsided grin released the tension in her body. “Has anyone ever mentioned that you’re certifiably crazy? You could be committed to a home!”

“How many clues do you need to guess who would be in the room next to me?” he hooted. “I give the highest compliment I’ve ever mustered up for a lady in a dumpster, and this is my thanks? I take it all back. Here’s my revised version: You look better in dirt and litter than anyone else I know.” He shrugged carelessly. “Meanwhile, back at the ranch. Keep searching, Minnesota.”

Subdued and chastened, she knelt, keeping her back against the opposite side, and gingerly shook large clumps of garbage. “It’s here. Despite your theatrics. Whew, it stinks in here!” *Why did I get up this morning? I could have hired a yard man, but ho-no, old Molly decides raking is such good exercise...*

“Must be an expensive watch. Good Lord, you can get watches so cheap these days. Come on,” he grabbed at her T-shirt, “quit being so independent. I’ll buy you a dozen watches.”

“Can’t you understand some things have sentimental value?” She jerked away from him; the sudden movement set the rubble in motion and she fell backwards. She glared up at him from her hole in the debris and felt unwanted tears well up. *Don’t cry, you ninny.* She ducked her head from his view.

He howled with laughter that echoed throughout the dumpster. “Hey, I’m the innocent bystander, you’re the maiden in distress.” Stretching to put a finger under her chin, he tipped her head and grinned into her glistening eyes; his mood changed instantly. “Whoa, Minnesota, I’m sorry. I never meant to make you cry,” he said softly.

“You didn’t make me do anything. Just go away.” She rolled to one side to push herself up.

And there it was.

“Hey! I found it! Now do you believe me?” She blew dirt away, waving the watch triumphantly between puffs.

Stumbling up the step stool, she unwittingly followed his earlier instructions to the letter. Strong arms caught her up, swung her over, and held her a second longer than necessary before releasing her on the

ground. "Are you okay?" He bent to peer up into her face and her breath caught on her heart as their eyes met. "You can borrow my shirt if you want to blow your nose. I'm going to burn it anyway."

Defenseless, she burst out laughing. "You know, that's a pretty hard offer to turn down! Thanks, but no thanks. Keep your shirt. It would be a pity to burn it. After all, you natives may only get one per lifetime!" On level ground with him, she realized that he topped her five feet, eight inches by nearly half a foot.

"Let's see this winner of a watch." Hands on his knees, he bent his lanky frame at the waist. "Unless it's a gift from a male brute, I would never dive for this; it's nice enough, but it's a pretty basic watch."

He straightened up and arched his back. Muscles rolled like waves under his skin, her pulse responding like the tide to the moon. Molly bent and gave particular attention to brushing off her jeans.

Diverted, he dropped to his knees to help. "You landed in coffee grounds and some very scrambled eggs." He spun her around; a deep male chuckle erupted as he brushed his way up the back of her legs. "It's suddenly clear why you fought me off like a tiger! What a magnificent rip!" He whistled seductively.

She twisted out of his reach. "Okay, you've played the role of Rescuer to the hilt. Thank you and good-bye. If you get paid by the hour to trim and weed, you're not a very honest worker."

"I'm not a gardener." He struggled to rein in his laughter.

This guy probably laughs hysterically at earthquakes. She seethed inwardly. "Then what are you doing dumping clippings here? Huh? This is a neighborhood dumpster, not one for the whole Valley to use, you know?"

"I'm just helping a friend who lives over there." He waved vaguely across the alley, his eyes cruising her face. "Let me at least get the step stool out. Unless you're planning another trip back in! If so," he grabbed her hand and opened her fingers to expose the watch, "I'm not available for my part in the adventure for another couple hours." He wiggled his eyebrows and she looked away from his thinly disguised amusement.

What an infuriating man. “You’re a regular homing pigeon, aren’t you, once you get going on something you find funny?” Lightning flashed in her eyes and her words sizzled like the first drops of rain hitting hot pavement. “Can we drop the subject and get on with our lives?”

“You never did answer me. Is the watch from a Mafia-type?”

“End of discussion, okay?” she commanded sharply.

“Have the jeweler clean it when he fixes the clasp again, then Brutus will never be the wiser that his special gift has been places you don’t want to talk about.” His moustache twitched.

“Your assistance and advice are deeply appreciated. I’ll add that trip to the jeweler to my list for next week. Thanks so much; I never would have thought to go without your suggestion.” He appeared unscathed by her sarcasm.

One final amused sputter echoed inside the bin as he hiked himself up enough to balance on the wall of the dumpster, reach in and effortlessly swing the stool out. He bowed dramatically as he presented her with his gift. “For you, Minnesota.”

She pulled her eyes away from the greasy line that now marked his chest and focused her attention on a point just beyond his head.

“I guess Minnesotans don’t exactly find life amusing. Must be that nippy weather just freezes your humor like an icicle. Brrrrrrrrrr!” He shivered dramatically.

“*What* are you talking about?”

“You need to relax. In the short time I have been with you, you have managed only one chuckle, and maybe two giggles. No, they were more like noisy smiles.”

She pursed her lips in and out, in and out.

“I thought *I* was tense, but at least I laugh.” She continued to stare off into space, tapping her foot, marking each second he was wasting. With a good-natured shrug, he backed away, waved a casual farewell, and hooked a thumb in the back pocket of his jeans.

He had the trimmest backside she had seen in years. “Wait!”

He looked back over one shoulder and stopped.

“Your basket.” She picked it up and walked toward him.

“Oh, yeah.” He met her in three strides, retrieved the basket with one finger and slung it over his shoulder to bounce against his brawny back with each step he took away from her. Stray leaves fluttered down that ugly shirt and rounded the bend of that tight denim temptation to the ground behind him.

Molly rocked back on her heels, chewing her bottom lip while chiding thoughts rumbled through her head. *He really is leaving. And I behaved like a petulant child.* An apology bubbled inside but didn’t spill out. “See ya.” *Oh yeah, classy way to make amends, Mol. You make Emily Post proud.*

He glanced pointedly at the dumpster, then back at her jeans with unabashed amusement in his eyes. Loping back, he gently rubbed a smudge of dirt off her nose, smiling as if he sensed that his light touch sent shivers rippling through her body despite the afternoon’s heat. “I doubt it,” he said softly. He walked away; his whistle again spun a web between them, a fragile cord floating on the afternoon breeze.

Molly’s chin tightened as the unseen gate clanged shut behind him. She kicked at a piece of bramble caught in the legs of the step stool. Overhead, a bird chirped and broke into song. “Oh shut up, will you?”

She choked the stool’s leg until her nails dug into her palms, and then stormed across the alley to her gate, crossing the yard in long, pounding strides. “You did it again, Molly. You met a man who piques your interest and then you pretty much destroyed any chance of ever seeing him again.” *Seeing him again? Where did that absurd thought come from? Why on earth would I even want to see him again?*

With an energy born of frustration, she heaved the stool across the patio; it bounced over the bricks in cacophonous rebuke. Before the sound had faded, the kitchen door banged shut behind her, closing all whistlers, feathered or tanned, out of her life.

CHAPTER TWO

Molly stripped to the skin in her laundry room, flung the filthy jeans and shirt into the washer, and stomped upstairs to her bedroom shower. Beneath the steady pulsating stream, she scrubbed her body and hair vigorously in an attempt to send both dumpster dirt and memories of a most unnerving man swirling down the drain.

It worked. She even hummed as she retraced her steps to the laundry room. But the calm was short-lived; as water rose in the washer, she knew it would take more than a shower to clear her head.

Uninvited reminders of the unsettling afternoon popped up without warning, like the chipped nail polish on her index finger when she punched a familiar number on the kitchen phone. Two rings.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Brynn. This is Molly. Are you busy?”

“No, or I should say, not with anything that beats talking to you.”

“If it interests you, I will make two significant sandwiches and break out a cold six-pack of diet stuff and tell you a story.”

“Molly, it’s four o’clock. Which meal is this for you?”

“Well, I’m not sure.”

“Ah, which is more significant, the sandwiches or the story?”

“I’m buttering bread as we speak. Time’s a-wasting. Are you coming, or do I stop with two slices?”

“Nope, do four. I can promise you one good buddy, namely, Brynn Hilton, sitting in your kitchen in fifteen minutes. I’ll be the one with mouth and ears wide open.” The dial tone droned an end to the conversation.

Molly whistled as she headed for the refrigerator. This would do it for sure. She and Brynn would laugh the whole thing off and life would resume its predictable, safe pace. Deliberately, she crossed another item off her Saturday list: yard work. *Done. The End. Life now leaves this unplanned, disruptive moment behind and resumes its safe and measured pace.*

Slicing, chopping and spreading filled the minutes until a car door slammed, announcing the arrival of her guest. She rinsed mayonnaise off her fingers and balanced the last slice of bread on a crown of sprouts before racing to the door.

Propping the screen door open, she tapped one foot impatiently while Brynn jogged up the sidewalk. “Are we to expect a visit from the police, if they ever catch up with you?” she teased.

“It’s my standard time, fifteen minutes on the dot!”

Molly lifted her wrist with a grimace. “Oh. Well, you can’t expect me to know that with no watch. But that’s getting ahead of my story.”

“I came tearing across town for sandwiches in the middle of the afternoon and a story about your watch? You must be desperate for company. Everything all right?”

“Yes! I’m perfectly fine! I wish everyone would...”

Brynn’s eyes widened with a quick flick of concern as she craned her neck to look into the empty kitchen. “We are alone, right? Uh, what’s with this ‘everyone’ stuff?”

Molly grinned ruefully and threw an arm around her friend’s shoulders, bringing her into the kitchen. “I’ll fill you in on my life soon enough. But first, I’m starving. Let’s eat. I’m sure glad you could come on such short notice.” She missed Brynn’s arched eyebrow as she tightened the lid on the pickle jar and stuck it back in the refrigerator.

Balancing sandwich plates, frosty soft drink cans, and fresh peaches, they maneuvered from the kitchen counter to the oval oak table. Without ceremony, Brynn plopped onto her usual chair and opened her mouth for the first bite.

“Mmmm. As promised, most significant sandwiches. Let the story begin, Bard.” Brynn sighed with obvious pleasure as she licked a hint of Mendocino mustard off her lips, and pushed an escaping piece of avocado back under the top slice of bread. “If your story is half as good as all this stuff dripping down my chin, you’re not the only one who’s glad I came!”

Molly grinned and took her own first bite before she began. “Now that you’re here, I feel kind of silly about the whole thing.”

“The story, please.”

“Okay. Today the major project on my list was the lawn; I accumulated bags and bags of clippings...for the dumpster.” She snapped open a can and stared at it, unseeing.

“And?” Brynn prompted.

“Well, at this point it gets a little crazy.”

“So soon? I’ll be the judge. Keep talking. Skip to the good stuff. I know about dumpsters in alleys.” She wrinkled her nose.

“That’s what you think! When I took the bags out, my watch fell off into the trash. The clasp must have loosened when I was raking. Anyway, I looked over the edge and couldn’t even see it.”

“This would be your sixteenth birthday watch, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve managed to keep track of it for over ten years, and now this.” Her shoulders sagged briefly.

“Gee. I’m sorry, Molly. Hey, let’s finish our sandwiches and then I’ll help. Gum on a broom handle or something ought to do the trick.”

“Don’t worry. I got it out. And that’s really my story.”

“There’s more?”

“More? Yeah! You call that a story? I haven’t even begun. After my watch fell off, all I could think of was getting it back; for once I wasn’t even thinking about consequences, which was my first mistake. Even with a step stool, it was too far down to reach. So, I climbed in.”

Everything on the table rattled as Brynn jerked upright, hitting the table with her knee. “You did what?” She shuddered. “Molly, there could be rats in there!”

“Lighten up, Goofus! This isn’t that kind of neighborhood. Now, quit interrupting. Anyway, whether you approve or not,” a penetrating glance paralyzed further comment, “I had just gotten started looking when I heard a whistle.”

Brynn dropped her sandwich back on her plate, oblivious to the sprouts that landed in her lap. “Whose whistle? Was it what’s-his-name, the old guy next door with the bad toupee?”

“That would be too easy, and actually would have been much better. No, this was another guy; I’ve never seen him before.” She traced shapeless patterns in the wet circle forming around the freshly washed fruit.

“So, tell me about him. Hey, come back to me!” Brynn snapped her fingers under Molly’s nose.

“Well, using the standard classification system,” Molly paused pensively as she brushed the hair back from her face, “he was beyond a ten; he created a new division: walking advertisement for the human race.”

Brynn stared. “You mean to tell me this...whistler-guy was nothing short of exceptional?”

Molly nodded. “Off the charts,” she said and took a bite of her sandwich.

“And you’re in the dumpster. So! He whistled. Go on.” She pushed back from the table and giggled. “I love it!” Her shoes plopped softly to the floor as she hugged her knees to her chest, attentive as a child.

“Naturally, I didn’t want to be discovered, so I pulled the cover down and hid inside to wait.” She slid her plate to one side and brushed crumbs from the table into one palm.

“You know how much I hate these pauses of yours. Would you just keep talking?”

“He didn’t walk past. He was coming closer because he had a load of stuff to dump.”

Brynn groaned empathetically and let her head sink back onto her shoulders. “I think I know why I’m eating mid-afternoon sandwiches. Oh, Mol! What did you do?”

“What could I do?” Molly shrugged. “There I was, crouching in a filthy dumpster, when the lid opened and all I could see was a bushel basket full of branches and leaves and stuff, and then two very nice arms...”

“Slow down. Nice? Define nice.”

“Strong, muscular, with just the perfect amount of curly hair, tanned, the kind of arms men have who are hired to advertise something where they only show the arms, not the rest of the body. Need I go on?”

Brynn sighed dreamily, “No, I can fantasize the rest.”

“He dumped the load of clippings on top of me. And that’s when it got real confusing.” Her voice stopped abruptly as she bit her lower lip.

Brynn pounded the table once with her fist and sputtered, “When you read for the children’s story hour, you do fine, but when you’re just plain telling a story, believe me, your style leaves a lot to be desired. Am I going to live long enough to ever hear the end of this one?”

“Hey, it’s not like I practiced it! You’re hearing the first edition, so shut up,” she ordered amiably. “Anyway, we talked some, and then, well...”

“*We talked some?* This is hardly the time to start editing the script, Molly Winstead! Details; every little detail. Now.”

“I’m not editing. I wasn’t memorizing every word, you know! The main problem was that he wanted to help me get out, but I, uh, couldn’t with him standing there, because my pants ripped when I climbed in and...” Her voice faded away.

Brynn, good friend that she was, fought nobly to hide a smile; finally, she gave up. The dam monitoring her emotional control broke; she buried her face in her arms which barely muffled her hooting. When she finally lifted her head to speak, tears sprouted from her eyes. “I’m

sorry, Mol, really.” She wiped her eyes dry with her napkin. “Where was the rip?”

Molly shook her head in disbelief. “I should know better than to expect sympathy from you! Come on, it’s past time to put them in the dryer, anyway, so you can see for yourself.” They left the table and headed for the laundry room, each step punctuated with Brynn’s giggles. Molly pulled the wet jeans out of the washer and shook them out to their full length.

Brynn stared at the jeans, pressed her fist against her lips, and looked at Molly with wide glistening eyes. Both gawked at the jeans and laughter ricocheted off the walls as they clung, weak-kneed, to each other. “Why are you even bothering to wash these, let alone dry them? You’d be arrested if you ever wore them again! They sure don’t match the public’s image of a librarian. Besides, your personal image pretty much steers clear of ratty jeans. And I do mean ratty!”

“Brynn, I’m sure they weren’t this bad when he saw me. Washing them has probably made the rip much worse.”

“Well, if they looked even half this, uh, interesting, it would certainly explain why a red-blooded American guy couldn’t tear himself away from your alley! Which reminds me, you’ve got more story to tell.” Brynn tossed the still wet jeans on the counter, spun her friend around by the shoulders and half pushed, half led the way back to the table.

“Want anything else to eat, Brynn?”

“Forget hostessing. I know my way around if I need anything. Talk.”

Suddenly restless, Molly cleared the table as she continued. “It was a confusing mixture of emotions. Sometimes I wanted to yell at him, several times he made me just want to laugh, and at the end I felt almost sad to see him go. It was like riding an emotional roller coaster. Very bewildering.”

“Back up a little, to the yelling part. If he is God’s commercial for the male gender, what did you do that...”

“Well, good grief, Brynn,” Molly sputtered, “he seemed to think it was all hysterically funny. I think the proper thing to do would have been to go away when I told him to.”

“My etiquette book doesn’t include dumpster manners, but it seems that when someone finds another person in a mess, and this episode would be indexed under ‘Mess, comma, Literal Interpretation,’ that someone helps the other person out.”

“But I didn’t want him to see my, uh, posterior, and from the beginning he seemed to think it was all a big joke. He’s so...well, what more can I say?”

Brynn rolled her eyes. “Plenty! You could lose a ship in all the holes in your story, woman. How *did* you get out?”

“He finally got around to dropping the step stool inside and then he helped me climb out.” Her hands crept up to follow the remembered trail of his hands on her body.

Brynn scrutinized her friend silently for a moment before she said, “Uh, does this story turn R-rated at this point?”

“What?” Molly jerked back to the present. “No, no way. It was just a very unusual experience. When he lifted me over the edge, I was...”

“If you fade out on me anymore, Molly, I swear I’ll shake the rest of the story out of you.”

“Sorry. He made quite an impression on me, I guess.”

“So I see,” Brynn said softly. “But you did find your watch?”

“Yeah, Didn’t I mention that? Then I climbed out and he went back to trim bushes or whatever.”

“And that’s that.” Brynn peered into Molly’s face.

“Yeah.” Molly puckered her lips.

“Do I detect a note of sadness?” Brynn teased gently.

“Perhaps. You probably think I’m losing it,” she tapped her forehead in the ageless gesture, “but despite everything, he was a pretty decent guy. And I behaved like a miserable, spoiled brat. I didn’t even say thanks.”

“Hey, don’t look so dejected! The dude could have spun on his heels when you told him to go, so don’t be too hard on yourself. He must not have minded the whole episode too much.”

“Call it pride, I guess, but I hate to think that he’s running around town telling everyone about this deranged bimbo he met in an alley.”

“Even if he told fifty people, they’d never know who it was. It’s not like you handed out business cards!”

“He knows where I live, or at least the general vicinity.”

“Pooh. It’s not likely to hurt your reputation. In fact, it could help. Busloads will probably come our public library now to get their reference questions answered by a person with such an exciting past. Not only are you a librarian, you have now experienced Trash. This could be big!”

Molly groaned and dropped her head into her hands. “Oh, Brynn, if *anybody* besides you ever says anything about this afternoon, I swear—I’ll find that guy and wring his neck!”

“And how would you find him? You don’t even know his name.”

“Jordan. And he has a blue truck, darker blue than his eyes.”

Brynn threw her hands up, addressing the ceiling. “Silly me; here I thought the story was over! You know his name? What’s this about blue eyes? And how does the truck fit in?”

Molly waited until Brynn sputtered to a stop and then answered, “At one point he introduced himself. He said his name is Jordan. I wonder what his last name is?”

“Maybe that *is* his last name.”

“Ooh, I hadn’t thought of that. Anyway, his truck was what kept me from seeing him when I could hear him whistling. It was a blue truck; some kind of pickup. Do you remember that picture of me building a snowman when I was a kid in Minnesota? His eyes are the same color as the sky on that kind of day.”

Brynn nodded as her friend lapsed into silence again. “You always have had a thing for blue-eyed men. As long as they don’t interfere with The Plan.”

“I had better snap out of this ‘thing,’ right? Thanks, Brynn, for letting me ramble on about nothing. How ‘bout some coffee? It’s a sad day that’s too warm for coffee, as your friend and mine, ole Royce, would say.”

Brynn checked the clock on the wall. “Grind decaf beans, and I’m very interested. Anyway, what are friends for, if not to listen? Seems to me we’ve both taken our turns at rambling and listening over the years. Besides, lots of folks would pay big bucks for this kind of entertainment!” Brynn dodged her friend’s feigned punch. “Speaking of Royce. Now there’s a man who would love to learn the secret of how to entice you. Maybe I should encourage him to hang out in alleys!”

“Royce? Nah, he’s safe. You’re the only one of the three of us who refused to accept that he and I aren’t destined to date each other. We’re too much alike.”

“Yeah, both stubborn, both organized to a fault. And worst of all, you’re both content to take whatever waking moments you can grab from your busy schedules and spend them *together*, which sure doesn’t leave either of you with any time to find anyone else!”

“Pffft! Like there’s a line of eligible men who desire me waiting impatiently for me to say ‘Next!’”

“Sometimes I cannot believe how dense you can be, Mol. Maybe if your reading tastes ran to something besides mysteries, true crime, and biographies, you’d catch a few signals from time to time. And maybe if you weren’t always with good-ole-safety-net Royce, you could see what’s going on around you.”

“Royce and I enjoy being friends. I’ll leave the romance section of the library, and the rest of the male population, for you to pursue. Until I turn thirty, and then I’ll join the search party.”

Brynn sighed. “I’ve got to hand it to you, even though I don’t agree with the way you plot out your life like an architect. What if these plans backfire, Molly, and you find yourself at age thirty with your education behind you, several years of working at a secure job, living in this fantastic house...and no man looks good then?”

Molly rolled her eyes playfully. “Is that so bad? After all, I’m enjoying life right now. If I find this man you think I need later on, great; if not, that’s okay with me, too. I kinda like the days busy with work, the nights quiet with me, myself, and I—unless I choose otherwise.”

“But maybe there’s a guy out there somewhere who would have enjoyed sharing these years with you?”

“And what part of those years do you think this mythical man is missing the most, the peanut butter sandwiches the week I ordered carpet, or the three years of studying every single weekend?” Ceramic mugs of fresh brewed coffee in hand, the two friends grinned an unspoken truce in their frequent dispute and headed out to the patio.

The vivid hues of late afternoon gave way to the subtle pallet of early evening. “Have you got a full week, Molly?” Brynn asked lazily from her lounge chair.

“Until Wednesday. Thursday morning is pretty open. I work the late shift at the Desk that day. Why? Want to do something?”

“Maybe we can get in a swim or something before you leave on vacation.”

“What’s your day off this week?”

“Friday.”

“Sounds good to me. I’m done at four on Friday, but I work a half-day Saturday. Let me know what and when.”

Brynn yawned and pressed her head against the lawn chair, “I wish I could check off the days faster until my vacation. I envy you escaping our world of summer reading clubs and bored tourists. I’m stuck here until August.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it; especially the drive. The more I think about it, the happier I am that the enticement of boxloads of old books from my grandmother made me decide to drive back home this time. It will be quiet, no phones, no meetings. For three whole weeks I won’t have to answer questions about antique cars, or what gerbils eat, or find a biography of Lincoln that Mrs. Aaronstein hasn’t read yet. Yup,

I'm ready for vacation. But I can't let myself think about it too much—there's still one week to go.”

“I hear you.” Brynn stood and stretched. “Well, kiddo, time for me to hit the road. It's my turn to help the bookmobile driver load up bright and early, so I'm going to make tonight an early one in hopes of being able to read small print at the ungodly hour of 6:00 AM.”

“Been there, done that!”

“Hey, I see you have a step stool! How handy that must be for you!”

Molly rolled her eyes and swatted at her friend as they left the shadowed quiet of the backyard and walked slowly to the driveway. “Talk to you later this week about swimming, or maybe an evening bike ride,” she said through Brynn's car window.

“Either one.” She turned the engine key.

“Hey, thanks, again, for your speedy service as my sounding board.”

Brynn nodded and grinned. “Anytime, Molly. Excellent company, always great food, and what a story! Keep me posted, okay?”

“Posted? On what? Storytime is over.”

“You never know,” Brynn chimed in a sing-song voice.

“You, my friend, are a dreamer! Go home!” Molly grinned as Brynn backed her car out of the driveway.

At the curb, she braked and called back, “Good stories often have sequels; remember that, Madam Librarian!”

Molly groaned, stuck out her tongue, and headed back to the house.

Minutes later, sipping a glass of herbal iced tea, she opened the door to her home office and flicked the light switch. Even after a year of living under the red clay tile roof, she still savored the first moments when light filled the corners of her home.

Magazines fanned across a low oak coffee table between a long couch and the window and formed several stacks under the table, as well. Shaded ceramic lamps cast halos above several easy chairs. Opposite the door, a bay window opened to a screened patio with more inviting chairs and a hammock.

After making quick work of paying a few bills, Molly was soon lost in a crossword puzzle. When she finally noticed the time, street lights were on and the evening had evaporated, as had her concerns over the embarrassment of the afternoon. She watered her pride-and-joy jade plant and headed upstairs to end the night reading in bed.