

To Catch The Wind

By

Jasmine Cresswell

vain the ambition of kings
Who seek by trophies and dead things
To leave a living name behind,
And weave but nets to catch the wind.

—from *vanitas vanitatum*
by
John Webster (c.1580-c.1630)

Prologue

A hungry pack of reporters lay in wait for him outside the White House pressroom. Andrew Macdonald cursed silently. He should have expected this, but he wasn't prepared. A microphone was shoved into his face before he could escape.

"How do you feel about the President's pardon, Mr. Macdonald?"

"Great. My mother and I are both very happy that our work to prove my father's innocen—"

"Who framed your father, Mr. Macdonald? Was it a government cover-up?"

On another day, Andrew might have appreciated the irony of the question. But not today. Right now, the wounds of his new knowledge were still too raw. Yes, his father had been framed. Yes, his father had been chosen as the fall guy. Yes, his father had been executed to conceal half-assed plans screwed up in high places. But that, unfortunately, wasn't the whole story. Andrew managed a tight smile.

"No. The people in the State Department who accused my father of treason honestly believed he was guilty. "A true answer as far as it went. The frame-up had been concocted at the highest levels of government.

The reporters would have preferred a different answer, and they gave a collective grunt of disappointment. The presidential pardon of James Edward Macdonald was a journalist's dream, a story that had almost everything: an execution, spies, traitors, the launch of the first space satellite, even a princess. A government conspiracy would have made the package perfect. Still, this was a slow week, and the President's pardon of a convicted traitor sure beat the Middle East or Japanese trade negotiations as a lead for the evening news.

A woman thrust her microphone forward. "Is your mother, the Princess Erika, going to come back to the States now that her former husband has been pardoned?"

Andrew's voice was very dry. "Unfortunately, my mother's memories of her time in the States are not very happy. And the President's edict doesn't bring my father back to life, it merely restores his reputation and his honor. As far as I know, my mother plans to remain at my stepfather's ranch in Brazil."

"And what about you, Mr. Macdonald? What are your plans?"

A damn good question. What the hell was he going to do now? For the past twenty-one years, ever since he'd been old enough to realize that his father's life ended in the execution chamber of a federal prison, Andrew's days had been shaped by the compulsion to prove that the American system of justice had failed. And today he had finally succeeded. The President of the United States had declared James Edward Macdonald innocent of all crimes.

It was, beyond question, a triumph to be savored.

Except that, last night, Grigori Ivanovitch has shown Andrew irrefutable proof that his father had been guilty. James Edward Macdonald had spent nineteen years stealing American military secrets and selling them to the Soviet Union.

Chapter 1

Jeffrey came straight from the hospital to meet Noelle and drive her to the party. She was waiting for him in the precise spot he'd instructed, and he rewarded her punctuality with a pleased smile and a quick kiss.

He smelled even more antiseptic than usual. His pink, just-scrubbed look made Noelle think about the perfumed, lace-swathed courtiers of the past. She got into the car, wondering what those long-ago gallants would have smelled like at this time of year, when cold weather had discouraged them from bathing for a month or two. In bed, behind thick curtains designed to keep out winter drafts, the stench of sweat and dirt must have been overwhelming. Grimy flannel nightshirts and heads shaved to avoid lice, topped with tasseled woolen nightcaps—surely not a sight to inspire sexual raptures.

Did courtiers take off their nightcaps when they made love to their wives? she wondered. Or were naked heads a sight reserved strictly for mistresses? Noelle smiled. For a professional historian, she really didn't know much about history's more intriguing questions.

Jeffrey stopped at a red light on Shaker Boulevard. Noelle glanced out of the car window and watched a shower of icy raindrops trickle through the bare branches of a maple tree, scattering over the wet pavement. *The incidence of nightcap removal during sexual intercourse in seventeenth-century Europe.* Now that would be an eye-catching title for a scholarly monograph, she thought.

"What are you grinning about?" Jeffrey demanded. "I don't see anything funny in the fact that old Hayes has decided not to retire. If he stays on, I have no chance of getting a partnership this year."

"I'm sorry, I was daydreaming. Mentally sketching out some ideas for an article." No point in mentioning the tasseled nightcaps. Jeffrey had an extremely literal mind and would spend the next fifteen minutes explaining to her why she shouldn't waste time researching such a trivial subject. With only a little reluctance, Noelle turned her attention from unwashed courtiers to the more important topic of Jeffrey's career.

"I'm sorry your promotion's been put on hold. But you're a brilliant surgeon, and I'm sure you'll get a partnership soon."

He scowled. "I'm the best damn heart surgeon in this town, why should I be forced to wait? Damn! I really thought Hayes had decided to retire."

"Maybe next year. He'll be sixty by then."

"Huh! I bet the old geezer's planning to celebrate his hundredth birthday in the operating room."

"Puffing out the candles between pulling gallstones?"

Jeffrey didn't smile. "Heart surgeons don't operate on gallstones," he explained patiently. "That's what internists do."

"Yes, I know." Noelle quelled a spurt of irritation. After four years of marriage, she ought to be used to Jeffrey's literal mind. She wondered if this would be a good moment to tell him that she'd been turned down for the professorship at Yale. At least they wouldn't now be burdening their marriage with the problem of careers in two different cities. She could stay on at Case Western Reserve University right here in Cleveland. Nothing in their lives would change. For some reason, that prospect left her feeling deeply depressed.

"I heard back from the search committee today," she told him, trying not to sound as gloomy as she felt.

"At Yale? Great! Did you get the job?"

"No, they turned me down." Despite her best efforts, putting the rejection into words hurt, and she swallowed over a hard lump of disappointment before continuing. "They said I had an excellent teaching record, but that my publishing credits were on the light side."

Jeffrey appeared far more upset than she had expected. "Damn, I really hoped you were going to get that job. It would have made everything so much easier."

She looked at him in surprise. "Not easier, surely? You would have needed to move, or I would have had to commute. I thought the only good thing about Yale turning me down was that it made things easier for us personally. For our marriage."

"You're right, of course." Jeffrey reached across and patted her knee. "Well, I guess there's always next year." He gave her knee another encouraging squeeze, then put both hands back on the wheel and turned the car into the huge circular driveway of his aunt's Shaker Heights mansion. "I hope this isn't going to be one of Aunt Marilyn's dotty parties," he said. "I haven't recovered yet from the dress designer who brought his pet snakes."

"I think we're safe. Your aunt is in a political mood at the moment."

"What does that mean?"

"I forgot to tell you. She called last week to say she's supporting Ernie Weaver's run for the Senate. She hopes this dinner will drum up some financial backing."

"Ernie's a Republican, so I suppose that's fairly harmless. Provided we can talk her out of giving him too big a campaign contribution." Jeffrey parked his Mercedes neatly behind a maroon Buick Regal and pocketed the keys. "Come on, Noelle, don't hang around. We're late."

The door to Marilyn van Bredin's house was opened before they had a chance to ring the bell. A waiter from the catering service took their coats and indicated they should proceed into the living room. "Most of Mrs. van Bredin's guests are already here, sir. We'll be serving dinner shortly."

Jeffrey's aunt was holding forth from her favorite position in front of the huge marble fireplace, but she broke off her monologue as soon as she spotted Noelle and Jeffrey.

"My dears! Welcome!" She trotted across the antique Persian carpet, a flutter of lavender silk scarfs accenting the exquisite lines of her cashmere dinner dress. She held out her hand to Jeffrey, a familiar, imperious gesture that Noelle always thought merited at least a sharp click of the heels and an obsequious bow over Aunt Marilyn's fingertips. Jeffrey managed no more than a fumbled handshake and an awkward kiss on his aunt's cheek.

"I'm sorry we're late, Marilyn. I was in surgery longer than I expected."

"My dear boy, saving a life takes precedence over being punctual for an old lady's dinner party."

"Are you sure you mean that?" Noelle inquired, eyes twinkling.

Marilyn gave her a kiss that seemed considerably more sincere than the one she had given Jeffrey. "Noelle, my dear, your manners haven't improved a scrap since the last time we were together."

Noelle grinned. "I had too much education, Auntie. It ruined me."

"Ha! You should remember, my girl, that many a true word is spoken in jest. By the way, you look stunning. I bitterly resent you tall, thin beanpoles who look fabulous in any old rag you drag out of the closet. God made a serious design error when He created me. A soul as large as mine can't possibly be expected to fit comfortably into a five-foot frame. And by what cosmic miscalculation did He decide that I should be blond? I deserve to be dark and interesting like you."

Noelle, who was grateful she didn't need to diet, but thought her face pallid and too angular, merely laughed. She twitched the soft folds of her green dress. "This is not an old rag, Marilyn, it's my very best outfit. I changed in the office restroom in your honor. And you're not five feet tall. If you're a millimeter over four feet eleven, I'll eat my—"

"Don't say it, dear child. I loathe cliches, and besides, I'm sure you don't have one worth eating. In my day, a hat was a Hat. Nowadays, they're simply something limp and woolen to keep one's ears warm. Jeffrey, I heard Doctor Hayes is annoyed with you. You tried to undercut him with the grants committee at the hospital. A foolish move, my boy, unless you could be sure of winning. Have some champagne."

She took two flutes from the tray of a hovering waiter and thrust one at each of them, then—almost without pausing for breath—turned her back in order to harangue the lieutenant governor, who happened to be passing.

Noelle looked at her husband, understanding a great deal more than she had earlier about his stalled career. "What happened with the hospital grants committee, Jeffrey? What did Marilyn mean about undercutting Doctor Hayes?"

Jeffrey evaded a direct answer. "My aunt is an interfering busybody," he muttered.

"You underestimate her. She's a fascinating lady if you'd only let yourself relax around her."

"Fascinating? She's crazy. And getting crazier by the week. If Ernie Weaver doesn't rip off her entire fortune, some other charlatan will. She's obsessive about her height. Did you hear her? She really means all that stuff about God making a cosmic error, you know. Mark my words, Noelle. She'll leave all her money to a foundation that provides growth hormones for senior citizens if we're not careful."

"It's her money, I guess. If that's what she chooses to spend it on . . ."

Jeffrey's pink face froze into fury. "It's not her money, it's *my inheritance*," he said. "It's family money, every cent of it." He glared at his aunt's petite spine, his mouth tight with dislike. "I'm beginning to think she has Alzheimer's."

As if to confirm Jeffrey's worst suspicions, Marilyn returned moments later with one of her definite oddities in tow. The middle-aged man was round-faced but incongruously thin, wearing a tie-dyed shirt and faded denims that gave him the look of a superannuated hippie. The sixties impression was reinforced by his gold-rimmed wire spectacles and shaggy John Lennon haircut.

"This is Brian Defew," Marilyn announced with an air of triumph. "He's a channel from Los Angeles."

Jeffrey looked blank and Noelle groaned inwardly. Aunt Marilyn couldn't be planning a séance as part of the night's entertainment, could she? "A channel?" she said politely. "How . . . um . . . interesting. How long have you been . . . um . . . channeling, Mr. Defew?"

"Brian, you must call me Brian." The channel seized her hands. "Oh yes," he murmured. "We connect. At once we connect. Do you feel the electric shock of our souls connecting?"

"Actually not. Not even a faint tingle."

Tight-lipped, Jeffrey removed Noelle's hands from the channel's clasp. "That's *my wife* you're connecting with, Mr. Defew."

"But of course. I see that from your aura—"

"Where did you and Mr. Defew meet up, Marilyn?" Anxious to keep the peace, Noelle interjected the first question that came into her head.

"In L.A.," Marilyn replied, her voice vague. "But Brian's thinking of moving back here to Cleveland." Eyes gleaming with mischief, she peered at Noelle through fluttering lashes. "We're going to have a séance after dinner, won't that be fun?"

Brian corrected her gently. "Not a séance, dear lady. A channeling experience. We don't indulge in silliness like darkened rooms and rattling tables. I conduct all my experiments in the blaze of normal light."

The channel, undaunted by a look from Jeffrey that would have slain a lesser man, seized Noelle's hands once again and stroked them softly, almost caressingly. "Indeed, Noelle, I can see that you're a very special woman. Very special. You have a unique aura. The resonance of your purple ambience suggests you have a past of vital importance."

He closed his eyes and pressed his fingertips to his brow, looking alarmingly like Johnny Carson playing the swami. "Yes, I can see it in my mind's eye. Your actions have swayed nations. Your destiny has affected the path of millions of lesser souls."

Jeffrey muttered something unrepeatable. Noelle sympathized with his exasperation. Brian Defew was too silly to be amusing. The channel continued to stroke her fingers. He had sweaty hands and as he bent to peer at the lines on her palm, Noelle saw that the wisps of his brown hair didn't quite cover the ring of a premature bald spot. Suddenly revolted, she jerked her hands away and wiped them on her dress.

"You have a pretty nifty aura yourself, Brian," she said, not attempting to mask her sarcasm. "Or is that the glow from Marilyn's hot toddy?"

"You can see my aura?" he exclaimed, moistening his lips with a fat, pink tongue. "I knew that you were One of Us. I recognized our compatibility instantly, even across the room! As soon as I saw you, I found Marilyn and demanded that she should introduce us."

"Of course, one can't help wondering why you always spot unique auras on the most attractive woman in the room," Marilyn commented dryly.

"Coincidence." Brian brushed the comment away, setting his neck crystals jangling. "By the way, don't waste your money on Ernie Deaver's campaign. He's going to lose. "

"Weaver. His name's Weaver."

Brian shrugged. "Deaver, Weaver, what's the difference? He's going to lose. His aura's gray and gloomy."

A strangled gasp from Jeffrey warned Noelle that this would be an excellent moment to break off the conversation. "It's been nice meeting you, Brian," she said just as a waiter announced that dinner was served in the dining room. Noelle sighed with relief. She grabbed Jeffrey's arm and propelled him in the direction of the loaded buffet table before the channel could say another word.

Jeffrey shook his head. "My God, Marilyn's totally lost her marbles if she can't see that guy for the fraud he is."

"Your aunt's as sharp as a tack and you know it. But I must say her crazies are usually more entertaining than Brian Defew. "

"Only Aunt Marilyn would invite the cream of Cleveland society and then subject them to a damn séance. Let's hope he doesn't embarrass everyone with his show after dinner." Jeffrey eyed the rich spread of food with a distinct lack of favor. He helped himself to a thin slice of Dover sole, added a serving of spinach, and a crust of bread, then turned to inspect Noelle's plate.

"You shouldn't eat all that butter," he warned her. "If you saw the inside of people's arteries every day, like I do, you'd change your eating habits."

"Then I'm glad I don't see people's arteries. I like butter." Defiantly, she dumped a slice of beef onto her plate, then surrendered to virtue with a selection of raw vegetables. As far as Noelle was concerned, raw vegetables, even when they were sliced thin and called crudités, still tasted like chilled cardboard.

Jeffrey winced. "Don't blame me if you have a heart attack before you're thirty." He stalked off, indifferent to the cholesterol temptations of the buffet.

A man with exceptionally dark hair and rather attractive brown eyes grinned sympathetically at Noelle. "Here," he said, holding out a silver bowl of béarnaise sauce. "If you're going to die at thirty you may as well die happy."

His smile was irresistible, and Noelle smiled back. "I suppose I can eat nothing but oat bran all next week."

The man leaned toward her, eyes laughing. "My spies in the kitchen tell me there's chocolate cheesecake for dessert."

"Uh-oh. Oat bran for a month, maybe?"

A stunning redhead came up to the table and took the man's arm possessively. "Ready, Andrew darling? We saved you a place by the fire."

"Coming." The man turned to Noelle. "Would you like to join us? I'm Andrew Macdonald, by the way."

"Oh no, thank you. I'm sure my husband's waiting for me."

Andrew gave her another easy smile. "Talk to you later, then. Enjoy your meal."

Noelle did just that, even though she wanted to hide her plate of dietary sins from Jeffrey. Fortunately, his attention wasn't really on her. A relentlessly well-preserved couple engaged him in a passionate discussion of the benefits to be derived from walking five miles a day, eating seaweed, and drinking only distilled water. Noelle left them to the joys of their free-flowing arteries and returned to the buffet table to sneak some chocolate cheesecake. There was nothing like living with a health freak to make a person think that caffeine and cholesterol had lots to recommend them.

Aunt Marilyn didn't allow her guests to linger over dessert. She herded them into the library where Brian had been busy transforming the spacious room into a warm, intimate bower. The overhead lights were not switched on, and the corner lamps were dimmed. Chairs had been grouped in a comfortable semicircle around the mahogany reading table, leaving a space in front of the fireplace to serve as Brian's stage. Despite his earlier protestations, Noelle decided the scene could have come straight out of a Victorian guide on how to plan a séance.

Waiters circulated with cups of coffee and chocolate truffles. Sipping a fragrant espresso brew, Noelle seated herself as near the door as possible and decided she could probably endure twenty minutes of Brian's efforts to contact the spirit world before she took refuge in the bathroom. The dark-haired man from the buffet table, Andrew Something-or-other, sat on one side of her. Jeffrey, armed with nothing more fortifying than a cup of mint tea, was sunk in silent gloom on the other.

Oddly enough, once Brian started his spiel, Noelle found his show rather compelling. His smooth, rich voice seemed too powerful, too self-confident, to come out of such a weedy body. He projected his words easily to the far corners of the room, and the deep, resonant tones commanded attention even though he mouthed the typical mumbo jumbo of his trade.

His sense of timing was too good for most of the audience to get bored. Brian's glib tongue converted Einstein's theory of the space-time continuum into a two-minute chat that seemed to suggest half the people in the library might well be their own grandmothers. Two more minutes followed on recent scientific experiments proving conclusively the continued existence of the soul after death. The *National Enquirer* would love Brian's brand of proof, Noelle decided. Then, just when his audience started to wriggle, he gestured for silence.

"But you people want to know what will happen here tonight. Am I going to be able to summon my alter ego, the Emperor Sargon of Akkad? Well, ladies and gentlemen, I certainly hope so. Sargon is an interesting man. The records show that he ruled over four thousand years ago, in the region known as Mesopotamia. The imperial dynasty he founded survived for two hundred years and included territories from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. He is, as you might expect, a very forceful gentleman, not always in the best of tempers when we make contact."

Brian waited for the ripple of laughter to die down. "Ladies and gentlemen, I hope very much to communicate tonight with Sargon of Akkad. But my success depends upon you. I am simply the channel for your psychic energy, the energy that will put us in touch with the Beyond."

Jeffrey gave a snort of disgust and would have left the library there and then if his gaze hadn't been caught by his aunt. She frowned, her chin lifting imperiously, and Jeffrey sank back into his chair.

"Remember what it felt like the first time you fell in love?" Brian asked the audience, his voice low and intimate, reestablishing the link Jeffrey had broken. "Remember how intense you felt? How vivid the world seemed?" A few heads nodded, and Brian continued. "Do you remember holding hands with the person you loved? You felt relaxed, didn't you? Tranquil, and yet more powerfully alive than you'd ever felt before."

His audience was captivated, struck by the memories he evoked. Noelle admired his technique, although she herself remained untouched by the man's rhetoric. She glanced around the circle of faces. A few of Marilyn's guests looked amused, or embarrassed, but most of them looked eager to be led into the spirit world.

Brian smiled, and somehow his overlarge head and chubby cheeks no longer appeared quite so incongruous. Instead his eyes compelled attention, dark pools in the subdued glow of the light. His thin body hovered, a shadow obscuring the leaping flames in the fireplace. His voice grew quieter than before. Noelle found herself straining to listen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the psychic energy felt when you hold hands with your beloved represents no more than a tiny fraction of the psychic energy all of us have locked inside our souls. Tonight, we're going to try and release some of that energy, harness it to our group purpose, and channel it through me."

His words were met with silence. He allowed the moment of silence to stretch out, an excellent theatrical effect. When the stillness had become profound, almost uncomfortable, he broke it.

"Now, take the hands of the people sitting on either side of you. Are you all linked together? Good, that's very good. Now close your eyes and concentrate all your thoughts on a mental picture of the night sky. Can you see the stars? It doesn't matter if you can't remember how the constellations are grouped. Invent your own pattern, your own personal galaxy. If you keep very quiet, if you screen all the everyday clutter out of your minds, you'll see that the stars are growing brighter. They glitter like crystal in the velvet blackness of your universe. Can you find your special star, the one that shines most brightly in your sky? What color is it? The other stars are merely bright dots, but your star has depth and a unique brilliance. Is it pink? Blue? Green like an emerald? I know you've all found your personal stars, because I can feel the energy starting to vibrate around me. Focus your thoughts on your star. Concentrate. Let your energy flow towards the star. Good. Excellent. Marilyn and I are going to join hands and complete the circle of psychic energy now."

The hiss of Brian's expelled breath seemed to provoke a communal sigh. "Yes," he murmured softly. "The universe invites me into its vastness. Please don't open your eyes until Sargon has joined us."

Noelle closed her eyes. It had been a tough day, and Brian's version of channeling seemed like a less exhausting way to end the dinner party than chitchat over coffee. Maybe Aunt Marilyn would set a new fashion in political fundraisers. Brian didn't seem to be dishing up any greater nonsense than the average campaign chairman. She opened her eyes and sneaked a look at Ernie Weaver. He appeared to be snoozing peacefully. A smart man, getting in practice for his Senate days. Andrew caught her gaze and winked, before closing his eyes and appearing to drift with the flow.

Jeffrey didn't share the general mood of relaxation. She could feel him squirming beside her, the touch of his hand exuding impatience rather than psychic energy. Noelle removed her fingers from his grasp, but kept her eyes closed, letting her thoughts wander. Lord, but she hadn't realized just how tired she was. She hoped Brian started his impersonation of Sargon soon, or she might follow Ernie Weaver's example and doze off before the show reached its high spot.

Someone had put on a tape of baroque music. Weaving in with the sounds of lute and mandolin, she could hear the soft, sweet notes of the viola da gamba, a seventeenth-century ancestor of the 'cello.

Sorry, Brian, you've got your epochs and your continents mixed up, Noelle thought in silent amusement. *You need panpipes or maybe a primitive flute if you want this music to sound even halfway authentic..*

Abruptly, the music ceased as a deep, harsh voice filled the room. "Yea, I am here, the mighty Emperor Sargon, master of a hundred cities, lord of a thousand times a hundred people. Why have you called me at this most inconvenient hour?"

As if poor old Sargon had been interrupted at breakfast, Noelle thought, but her skepticism felt a little forced. Her eyes flew open, and her gaze settled on Brian Defew. The fire had died down, and the outline of the channel's body seemed blurred. She had thought earlier that Brian's pleasant baritone sounded incongruously powerful, but that incongruity was nothing in comparison to the contrast between "Sargon's" voice, and the channel's scraggy body. It was almost impossible to believe that Sargon's deep, throbbing bass could be produced by Brian's narrow rib cage.

Sargon, it seemed, had been indulging in a spot of sexual foreplay with one of his youngest and most favored wives. He was not amused at Brian's untimely interruption. The audience, titillated by Sargon's graphic descriptions, listened for the most part with rapt attention, although Noelle was relieved to see healthy signs of suspicion in several faces. Perhaps she wasn't the only one of Marilyn's guests to wonder why the four-thousand-year-old Sargon chose to reveal himself in the English idiom of a bad 1920s musical comedy.

She turned out Sargon's description of his playmate's bosom and allowed her thoughts to drift. She was paying so little attention to the silly proceedings that she was startled when she realized Jeffrey had pushed back his chair, and was glaring angrily at the channel.

"Look, this has gone far enough. The man's not going to involve my wife in his silly performance. Hypnosis shouldn't be used as a parlor game."

"Jeffrey, don't shout!" Marilyn sounded genuinely horrified, even a little scared. "We mustn't do anything to disturb Brian's trance. I'm sure it could be dangerous for him."

Trance? Noelle blinked, shaking off the remnants of her own daydream. She looked at Brian, who was swaying to and fro, his face blank.

"I wait the presence of the soul my friend seeks," Sargon's voice intoned. "Why does she not touch the void and join us?" His body stiff, ungainly, Brian swung around until he faced Noelle directly, although his eyes seemed to stare at her with unnerving sightlessness. "We await you, Princess. Why do you tarry?"

"Why indeed?" Noelle joked, trying to regain her equilibrium. "I've always wanted to be a princess."

"You look just right for the part, honey." Ernie Weaver had woken up, and he gave her an encouraging grin. Like her, he clearly didn't take Brian's performance seriously.

Jeffrey, of course, was still determined to make a grand drama out of nothing, so she bent down and spoke quietly into his ear. "Don't worry, Jeff. I'm the last person in the world Brian should have picked for this bit of nonsense."

She walked around the table and stood in front of the fire, between Brian and Marilyn. Up close, she could see that Brian's face was deathly pale, and that sweat streamed in rivulets from his forehead. He certainly put his heart and soul into his performance, Noelle conceded.

"I've never seen him like this," Marilyn murmured, her hands clasping and unclasping with nervous tension. "Do you think we should wake him up?"

"How can we? He looks pretty far gone to me. Noelle snapped her fingers beneath Brian's nose. He glared at her, his gaze still oddly blind. "Sit yourself, woman. A humble princess does not intrude her presence thus lightly before the Emperor of Akkad. Do you forget that you are a mere woman? A virtuous woman understands her place. Do you lack virtue?"

Noelle didn't attempt to sit down. "Your ignorance is showing, Sargon, old chap. Your dialogue's out of character. The Mesopotamians were pretty respectful toward their women. It was the Ancient Greeks who did the female sex in."

Some of Marilyn's guests tittered, but to give Brian his due, Noelle's remarks didn't seem to worry him. "I do not argue with a woman," he said, continuing to use Sargon's voice. "You are a chattel, a vessel for my seed." Brian's face contorted in a painful grimace. "Except, that you are not of my time. I cannot use you as a woman should be used."

"That's a relief."

Brian's face once again seemed wiped clean of all expression, and it was Sargon's voice that said, "I do not care that you are not of my time. You are not beautiful. I do not desire you."

"Terrific, then at least we're agreed on one thing," Noelle sat down to a little round of laughter. *Hey, what do you know, she thought with a silent giggle, I'm playing second banana to an emperor.* "Have I finished my part in your show, Sargon?"

"Not at all. You must look at me, and enter my state of being, before you can contact the soul who seeks you. "

Hypnotism, Noelle thought at once. *Brian wants to hypnotize me.* She grinned, silently wishing him luck. A couple of years earlier, she had undergone a series of experiments with a friend from the psychology department at the university. Noelle had proved an interesting subject, since she fell into the small percentage of human beings who seem totally immune to any form of hypnotism.

"You won't be able to put me into a trance," she warned.

Brian merely stared through her. "Look deep into my eyes," Sargon's voice commanded, and with a shrug, Noelle obliged. As she had noticed before, Brian had compelling, rather beautiful eyes. A useful feature for a would-be channel, she reflected.

"Ah, that's great. At last you're looking at me with your mental shields down. This is wonderful. Your inner being finally flies free." Surprisingly, Brian spoke in his own voice. Noelle knew she ought to ask why Sargon had decamped with such unseemly speed, but it didn't seem worth making the effort to talk.

The tape of baroque chamber music had started to play again. It was an outstanding recording, using authentic seventeenth-century instruments, and she didn't want to spoil the beauty of it by pointing out to the guests how inappropriate Brian's choice of music was. In fact, she decided, lounging back in her chair, there was no reason to contribute anything to Brian's absurd little show. Noelle folded her hands neatly in her lap and stared into Brian's eyes, saying nothing. Let him come up with his own line of patter, she thought.

Brian spoke again, but she didn't hear what he said because she was suddenly seized by the most acute stomach cramp. Dear God, she had never felt anything like this! The pain started in her spine, then surged through her pelvic muscles until it seized her lower abdomen in a vicious grip that made speech impossible.

It must be food poisoning, Noelle decided. *I thought the sour cream tasted a bit funny. Damn! Now Jeffrey will spend the entire journey home lecturing me because I didn't stick to plain old veggies.*

The pain eased for a moment, and she leaned back in the chair, too exhausted to move even though she could see that some of Marilyn's guests were looking worried. Poor Brian, he certainly hadn't expected to have his show interrupted by something as unglamorous as an attack of food poisoning.

Just as she worked up the energy to stand, the pain returned, a wave of agony building all too fast to its excruciating crescendo. Noelle felt sweat break out on her upper lip, and she moaned with the unbearable intensity of the pain. *Why doesn't anyone help me,* she thought miserably. *Can't they see I need help?*

"Pray tell the musicians to cease their playing!" she groaned. "My head throbs with their noise."

The tape stopped, thank heaven. Brian was saying something to her, but it seemed almost as if he spoke in a foreign language, and she couldn't make out the meaning of his words. He suddenly abandoned his imperious Sargon pose and knelt beside her, clasping her hands. Jeffrey, not to be outdone, came storming up to the front of the room. She closed her eyes, too tired to speak to them, too tired to listen to anything they might have to say.

As soon as she closed her eyes, darkness overwhelmed her, a blackness that invaded the very depths of her being. Despair swept through her, a bitter companion to the pain. The grief was more than she could bear, and it welled up, gushing out in a heartbroken cry. She cradled her abdomen. "Ah, dear sweet Jesu, not again. Holy Mother of God, *please not again.*"

Noelle pressed her hands to her head. Not again? Why had she thought that? She had never in her life suffered from food poisoning as far as she could recall. The strange feeling of despair abruptly lifted, to be replaced by bewilderment. Noelle bit her lip, waiting for the next wave of pain, but nothing came. Tentatively, she pressed her stomach and felt not even a mild twinge of discomfort.

"Noelle, my dear, what's happened? My God, she's whiter than a ghost." Aunt Marilyn's voice, Noelle thought. Why did she sound so terrified?

Noelle forced her eyes to open. "I think I have a touch of food poisoning," she said. She looked down and realized she was kneeling on the floor, facing the chair, her arms spread out as if in desperate supplication. Marilyn's guests had all left their seats, and stood in worried groups clustered around her.

Embarrassed, she sprang quickly to her feet. Good grief, she seemed to have made a total ass of herself. "I'm sorry to have ruined everyone's fun. Something I ate tonight must have disagreed with me." She turned to Brian. "I'm sorry, but I had an attack of the most dreadful stomach cramps."

Jeffrey put his arm around her waist and ushered her determinedly toward the library door. "I'll take care of my wife." He tossed his car keys onto the table. "Marilyn, send someone out to the car for my medical kit, will you?"

"Of course, right away."

"I'll go—" Brian started to say.

Jeffrey whirled around. "You damn well won't! Keep yourself and your blasted mumbo jumbo away from my wife, do you hear?"

Brian's chubby cheeks turned a dark, mottled pink. "I didn't cause your wife any harm, Doctor van Bredin."

"You'd better hope that's true." Jeffrey swung Noelle into his arms and started for the stairs. "Marilyn, which bedroom should we use?"

"Mine. First door at the head of the stairs."

Jeffrey carried Noelle up the stairs. "What happened, Noelle? You still look ghastly."

"To be honest, I don't feel too great, either." She shuddered with remembered pain. "At least those dreadful stomach cramps have stopped."

He slipped off her shoes and lay her on the bed, then lifted her skirt and gently palpated her abdomen. "Feel tender?" he inquired. "Do you feel nauseated?"

"Actually not at all. In fact, I never felt sick." Noelle sat up and pushed a heavy swath of hair off her forehead. "I'm beginning to feel like a total fraud."

Jeffrey lifted her wrist and searched out her pulse. "You looked as if you were on the brink of an epileptic fit. Do you remember what happened?"

"My stomach cramped with violent pain. That's about it. "

"You flung your arms about like a maniac, then crumpled onto the floor shrieking some sort of foreign-sounding gibberish. You made a total spectacle of yourself, if you want the truth."

Noelle flushed. "I'm sorry. The pain was so bad, I guess I lost control for a moment."

"Brian wouldn't let me near you at first. He claimed you were possessed by one of his damn spirits."

Noelle's laughter was entirely genuine. "Honey, I was possessed by a severe case of stomach cramps, nothing more. I was completely aware of all the guests around the table all the time. I knew Aunt Marilyn was behind me. I could hear Brian's tape bleating out that darn music—"

Jeffrey's hand stilled. "What music?"

"The baroque chamber music Brian was playing. You know the tape I mean. Purcell, or maybe Telemann, played on authentic seventeenth-century instruments."

Jeffrey avoided her gaze. "Brian didn't play any music. There was no tape."

"But of course there was! I heard it!"

Marilyn van Bredin came into the bedroom. "Here's your medical bag, Jeffrey. Do you still need it?"

"Yes," he said, his voice grim. "I think I do."

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