

Room From the Top

A novel by Maggi Carstairs and Bob Taylor

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The Beginning:

It was time to die. I have done everything I could have done, and now other people are dying. I have killed enough. It seems like it was me who was doing the killing. Each death has agonized me to the core of my heart. When I die, the rest, or what is left of the rest, will be able to go on living.

Seven deaths in as many as seven weeks

Each week he has seen me handle far more than I can handle.

I walk out to the edge of the balcony and peer down. The glass doors slide open, and I have to push at the clasp, which has started to lock into place with salt and air. I wonder why as the windows are never opened because of the air-conditioning, and no outside air would ever get inside to tarnish anything.

With Marilyn gone it was different. Maybe some defiant breeze seeing her lying there dead, would have crept indoors to gloat.

Concentrating hard, I opened the windows, and let them slide to the end.

I opened the screen doors and laughed.

What insects would be up this high. The only insects here would be the men and women in their patently shining grey suits, walking with unpolished fake Armani, thinking the Administration would see their cheap, upmarket elegance. I was always intrigued by the fresh faced arrogance of those on the upward mobility track, with their attitude to what they felt were their lesser peers.

Owning the business meant that I was expected to appreciate their subsequent back scratching.

It had become more and more repellent since I had lost both Gretchen and Marilyn who had kept the vultures from my presence.

I opened the doors to feel the slight wind on my face, and took one step forward onto the ledge.

I remembered that Thursday...

That was the day she'd first spotted them, or to be exact, thought she recognized his distinctive brown head bobbing in the mill of the crowd. She had glanced at her costly jewelled watch just to assure herself of the time and like an amateur pick-pocket or thief- followed him.

His direction was straight forward and he seemed oblivious of her shadowing his steps. But, to

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insure her invisibility, she had stopped and made a show of studying several of the shop windows, while still keeping him in her rear vision. It was a trick she'd learned from watching those grainy black and white detective videos he was so fond of. Who would think they would come in handy?

Several times she almost came close to calling his name, just to see his look of surprise. But, for some unknown reason, she hadn't. Now, looking back, she knew why. Back then, she'd convinced herself it was just a silly and harmless game. Sure, with herself the loser...

Finally, he arrived, entered and took a seat, sliding into the far booth of a favourite restaurant they had eaten at several occasions. She ducked her head as the owner approached in her direction but he ignored her, turned and walked toward the back. He stopped at Tom's table.

She stood on the busy sidewalk and peered into the darkened eatery. Tom had nodded a reply. His mouth formed some words, but from her location outside, she couldn't understand their meaning. But, the owner comprehended and much to her amazement made motions to the waiters to set another place setting. Who, she wondered was Tom meeting for lunch?

Why the clandestine location and secrecy?

Suddenly, to Marilee's surprise, her view to Tom was suddenly blocked. Crowds of people gathered to surround the spot where Tom was. In the huddle of the masses she'd lost sight of Tom.

She dared not move towards the crowd, after all she'd shadowed him, and did not yet want to give herself away. She saw a messenger push herself through and rode off on a bike. It struck Marilee funny that someone was leaving when the crowd itself all rushed in.

While this happened, Marilee leaned back with the sudden thought, that something was not OK. Instinctively she knew something was wrong and something life shattering was about to happen.

She tried to gather these strange feelings that were suddenly coming over her, as a wail of sirens slowly sounded in her mind.

As the sirens grew louder, Merilee watched for the emergency vehicles to appear. Judging by the amount of wailing, there must be several approaching. She soon saw them in the twilight, their flashing beacons casting a blue hue across the scene below. They were police cars, several of them, and they were moving fast, in pursuit of something. At first she could see nothing of their quarry but as they came closer, she could make out a speeding black Porsche.

To her left she could see the chase unfolding, five police cars and one insanely driven Porsche, rocketing towards the square. To her right, around the corner of the building, she could see the Pop Star Norman, surrounded by his fans, casually signing autographs for his adoring fans, and Gretchen close by like she always was, and her lover, Tom still in the restaurant sitting by the window..

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Chapter 2 Tom

Tom stood there looking at the Poster on the wall of his small study. Marilee was standing there looking straight at him and he could feel the smile that poured out of her eyes as she laughed into his face.

What happened and why? He had repeated this to himself over and over again. He was in his final year and had so much to do before the end of the Semester. What happened to them and why were they separated. Neither of them had a real answer.

He was young and still at University doing his finals, and she was hovering between his career and his lust. One memorable night flashed through his mind, as he saw her walking across the campus carrying her funny little rug and a picnic basket which he knew contained some food and a bottle of red.

The Worlds were separating and the worlds were linking, and he was walking across green grass in a mist, and she was still trailing along, her eyes wide with love and wonder. Then they were on yellow sand and the waves were flowing over their bodies as they lay in the moonlight. They were walking hand in hand in the snow and the moonlight was playing tricks with his eyes and her hair.

It was all rolling across him like psychedelic images over a white balloon that had transfixed them at Libby's Opening....

His green eyes crinkled as he smiled and he scratched his head and gave a wry grin. He would always love this woman and God was his witness.

Again the memories rolled across.....

They were eighteen when they met. He was a holiday folk singer, and she was a waitress. They worked together in this seaside resort, and they were friends and lovers from the moment they met.

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She was a shy little thing with and so dependent on him and from the first moment they met, she had loved him, and he had returned the love with a matching passion. They were both virgins, both naive, both highly intelligent and ambitious, and both so very full of the joys of being young.

"Tommy!!!!" she would cry, and his heart would melt. 'Tommy!!!'

"Do people who are eighteen know where life is about?" thundered the lecturer from his pedestal up on the stage, and Tom turned away from the poster and wondered how that big break came....

It was later that same year that Greatchen came into his life. Somehow he managed to keep Marilee happy, and keep his friendship with Greatchen.

She was the complete opposite of Marilee. She was dark; bubbly and easy going, and he felt an instant comradeship with her amazing strength and vigour. From her University days, Greatchen was an athlete. She had skied with him whilst Marilee sketched in their apartment. She trudged behind him in the snow, whilst he carried Marilee's belongings. Both were a part of his life and both were his happiness.

For one he felt the warm rush of affection that always caressed him each time she came to mind, and the other was a mate, dressed in the body of a female muscleman. Greatchen was always muscled and sharply cut, and always looking for a physical challenge. She could drink everyone she met under the table, and beat everyone at every sport she played, and she played everything, or appeared to. Tom found her strangely comforting and comfortable, like the solid horse hair armchair his grandmother had on her back porch, and unlike her armchair, Greatchen was gorgeous.

He could see her smilingly knowing she challenged him, and he smiled back.

Then his eyes liquefied into trailing ribbons of softness, as he smiled at the memory of Marilee's smile. His eyes slanted into green orbs of fire, and his very soul and body went into straight delight, as he remembered her hazel eyes, slanting, and laughing, as she teased him with her never ending delighted joy of being his love.

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Whoever expected the talent scout to be at the cafe?

He was singing his last song with the band when he felt the probing eyes. Serena was tall, taller than he was and smart. She was wearing a white dress that did not leave anything to the imagination, and why would a man want to imagine, when reality was smiling at him across the room.

Of course Marilee would understand, but she didn't.

She took her pencils and vanished into the distance leaving him to be wooed and enticed by Serena into almost instant stardom, financed by Marilee, but he hadn't known that for most of the early years.

Overnight he became not only her ex-lover, but the dream fantasy of half the teenage teeny boppers in the world. That was when he was drafted, and two years Military service in the Australian Army with six months in Vietnam, and he graduated an officer and a gentleman.

His Valet was Norman, a digger with a fantastic range of musical talent and the worst personality problem Tom had ever seen anywhere, but despite all this, he did exactly what he was told and was one of the best valets Tom had ever had. One night Tom had introduced Norm to Serena and she took him to the screaming fans and also into her bed and overnight made him an even bigger star than she had made him, and he really didn't care. He was fond of Norman in the strange way males have of bonding, when they know they are on opposite sides, and yet not.

Tom was already there now, and on his own journey, made possible by the huge investment into his career when Marilee won all that money and was approached, nay conned, by Serena. She thought he did not know, but his pride would not let him say thank you, but inside he knew that it was Serena's investments into both him and Norm that created this huge industry they were both now a part of.

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Norman fascinated him in his greed for worship. For someone who came from the slums, and had had very little, Norman developed a voracious appetite for little girls and screams. He never seemed to get enough of their screaming frenzy when they came near, and he just shut off when he was alone. Tom had never seen anything like that ever before. He was neither a paedophile nor a child molester, but he took in ordinary interest and strength from his hordes of screaming girl fans. They doted on him, and he fed on their obsession.

It was only a few years ago that Marilee had come back into his life. It was a torrid affair, spanning three years and two continents, but in the final analysis it had been that ever present, deeply ingrained lust, as well as an incredible love and lifelong affection, that had drawn the pair together, now that his first wife had gone into body guarding, and traipsing around the country dressed like a thug, when she wasn't flaunting her muscles and brawn.

It was money, and her morbid fascination for him, that kept them together. She had taken him when Marilee left, and had never let him forget that she had saved him from deject misery, or so she thought.

Norman on the other hand married first Marilee's friend Libby, and sired one son, and then Serena, the blonde. After a few years, their pairings in bed became fewer and fewer, as the months passed, while his escapades with young adoring groupies became infamous. He bedded a different girl in every town usually as a pair couple or group, often every night, sometimes more than once a night, but when he made love to them, it was never the face in front that he saw. Every morning, it was the face of an unhappy man that looked back at him out of the mirror. Yes, Norman had a secret longing that he had never fully faced or understood ever, and was never going to.

Finally even Serena had tired of the young rock star, and moved on to new interests. That had been her style since the beginning. Find a promising young entertainer and make him into a star, while enjoying a goodly amount of carnal pleasure in the bargain. She had found out early that her svelte body was her second best tool, right after her razor sharp mind. She could have been Norm's permanent wife had she wanted that. She had him so wrapped around her finger that he would have done anything for her, but she grew bored with their games. It was she who brought the first groupies to his room one night, after giving the girls explicit instructions on how to please him.

Oh, she acted hurt and angry the next morning, when she conveniently found them in bed together, but as she turned her back on them and stormed out, she had a twisted grin on her face. She had already found her next target. Besides, Norm didn't need her anymore. She had set a machine in motion that couldn't be stopped.

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Norm went to pieces after Serena left him and soon after Libby took Matt and went away too. He was devastated at first, and his performance suffered when he looked into the wings and didn't see her standing there encouraging him, but he was a professional, and he had a following, and he was soon back on top of his game. Within days, he had moved on, quickly realizing the truth about their relationship and going back to his smorgasbord of young flesh.

His life was a blur of girls, clubs, gigs and music, until the day he spotted Madeline, walking into an office building in Sydney. He had been in Australia for two weeks on a whirlwind tour, but after that night's show he would board a plane for the U.S. Knowing he should see her again, Norm walked into the building and approached the security desk.

A sombre guard stared at him through weary eyes. It was clearly nearing the end of his shift. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," said Norm "Does a Madeline . . ." he trailed off. He didn't know what her last name was. Had she been married since they parted ways, thanks to the evil Serina? If so had she even taken her husband's name?

"Are you looking for her?" the guard pointed at a beautiful woman exiting the elevator. "I don't know her last name, but she comes in here every morning then leaves again."

Norm didn't hear the last of the statement. He had already taken off across the lobby at a dead run. His long rock-star-hair billowed behind him, as he ran. "Madeline," he shouted, "Wait!"

She didn't hear him. She continued out the doors and headed down the street, her long legs carrying her away from Norm once more, but he ran as hard as he could. He caught up with her outside the building.

"Madeline," he gasped grabbing her arm, "Wait!"

At his touch she whirled to face him, a can of mace raised, pointed directly at his face, but before she didn't spray. They stood there facing each other, the can of mace still raised between them.

"Don't you recognize me," Norm finally asked?

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“That’s why I haven’t put this away” Madeline answered, indicating the small spray can in her hand.
“I should . . .”

“But you won’t.”

She put the can back in her bag. “No I won’t. Actually it’s good to see you Norm. I was not expecting to see you at all. What are you doing down under and why are you here?”

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Libby sat by the window and wondered when he would give her the money he owed her. Their small son was with a neighbour while she stayed home to work at another canvas. She was getting tired of these tantrums her Agent had started to throw lately.

Behind her, the studio was neatly ordered, with shelving and catalogues, and cupboards holding her precious drawings and collections. She had recently started with digital, and her photographs were in high demand, and if the Agent paid her properly, she knew she would not have to wait for Norm's miserable support, which was what she and Matt mostly survived on these days. After her marriage failed with Norm, she was working in a discotheque when Tom found her waiting on tables. Stunned by her loneliness and despondency, Tom started taking her out mostly to cheer her up. He also started to form a close attachment with her son Matt. It was inevitable that they should marry.

Tom and Libby were legally married, not that it mattered.

Norm and Libby's life together was different. There had never really been a proper marriage with Norm, just a justice of the peace and an arrangement, one of convenience, designed to give their son a name, but that did not excuse him from paying his fair share.

"Ha," she laughed out loud. If he was to pay his fair share they wouldn't be living here in this dump. They would have a house, with a yard for Matt to play in, maybe even a car, so they didn't have to ride the filthy bus all of the time.

The checks came regularly, for the first year, while she was pregnant and when Matt was first born, and then they began to come later and later. She didn't complain. She had her art to keep food on the table and the rent paid, on her miserable ghetto flat. Then one month there wasn't a check at all. The next month the check came again, and then two failed to come. Soon there were no checks coming at all, but still somehow Libby managed, until Matt began to take up more and more of her time each day and her work began to suffer. Now Norm's checks seldom came at all. As a freelance commercial artist, there was no money if there was no work. It was tough making ends meet this way.

The work began to dry up soon after she began missing deadlines. Her work was as good as it had ever been, but her friend Merilee, couldn't continue to send work her way, if she constantly held up important projects. Soon the calls had all but stopped coming.

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Libby didn't blame Merilee. She knew that her friend's career depended on having the best and the brightest people on her team. Merilee had a network of artists, writers and musicians that circled the globe. She proudly claimed that she had connections on every continent but Antarctica, and she knew a couple of penguins there that should soon be coming on board. Libby had been a part of that network, until her son became more important to her than her work.

She finally took to working at The Grosvenor Hotel, a slightly seedy hotel with a dubious clientele. It was here that Tom had found her one evening.

No, Libby, had no regrets and she only blamed one person. It wasn't the beautiful, globe-trotting Merilee, or the famous Rock Star she had married so long ago. It was Libby Carter-Thompson, she blamed. She was the one who, in a moment of passion, with stars in her eyes, had climbed into bed with Norm. She was the one who was sure she wouldn't get pregnant, so refused the protection he offered to use, and she was the one who had insisted on keeping the child, when his manager had suggested adoption as the reasonable course of action. She wondered how many of the children playing in the street down there had been conceived under circumstances, not unlike hers.

Marrying Tom was the stupidest thing she had ever done, but she had always had a thing for him too.

She left the window and moved to the bare canvas, on the easel nearby. Tubes of paint, brushes, and rags covered the small table beside it. Reaching down, she took up her palette, and squeezed some blue onto its paint stained surface, she added a dab of yellow, then mixed them together until she had just the right shade of green. Taking up a brush she put a stroke on the canvas, then another and another. Hours passed, with Libby lost in a world of color and hues, as the blank white canvas took on a life of its own. It was the first time in months she had really felt alive.

She was drawn back into the here and now, by the sound of the door opening and the tap, tap, tap of little feet running down the hallway. "Mommy, Mommy, we went to the park and I sawed a pigeon."

"You saw a pigeon," Libby corrected her son.

"I know, Mommy, an' Grace buyed me some nuts an' I played in the sand, an' I sawed, I mean saw, a doggie with a powder puff for a tail."

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“Ok Honey,” laughed Libby, “Slow down, you can tell me all about it over dinner. Now go wash your hands.”

“Ok, Mommy,” Matt happily trotted off down the hall, to the bathroom.

Libby turned to Grace, “It looks like he had a little bit of sugar today too”

“He was being so good, I bought him some cotton candy,” explained her neighbour. “Is that alright?”

“Yes, yes, it’s fine. He’ll just be bouncing off the walls for a couple of hours. Thanks for watching Matt for me. You don’t know how much it means to me. I really got something accomplished today.”

Grace smiled, “Any time Sweetie I enjoy spending time with Matt. Did that check come today?”

“Not today, maybe tomorrow. If not maybe I can sell a painting. We’ll manage somehow.”

“I know you will, Sweetie. Well, say goodbye to Matt for me. Would you like me to take him again tomorrow?”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that Grace.”

“Sure you can. I’ll pick him up around nine. I’m off to my sister’s tomorrow, for a family thing. Her grandkids will be there. Matt will love it. You can finish that painting.”

With that Grace turned on her heel, and moving like a woman half her age trotted out the door. Libby looked down the hall to where she could hear water splashing, as Matt washed his hands.

She looked at the unfinished painting taking shape on the easel. “We’ll make it Matty,” she whispered. “We’ll be fine.”

No matter what happened, no matter how hard it was to make ends meet, the little boy down that hall was all Libby needed. He was her life, her everything and she would raise him the best way she knew how. He should be so lucky. He didn’t know what he was missing. Even with a stack of unpaid

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bills on the fridge, even though she didn't know where the money would come from, she wouldn't trade her son for all the money in the world. Norm and Tom could both go to hell.

She hugged herself and the old worry came niggling back into her mind. What if Matt was not really Norm's?

She remembered how much she wanted him, and seeing him at Marilee's door was more than she could bear. Marilee was away at the time, and instead of giving him the message she had been sent to give, she dressed herself in her most alluring outfit, and sidled out of the white Porsche, knowing he was watching her.

He could never refuse a woman. It was common knowledge on all the tabloids, and also the joke amongst her friends. Some were even counting the times they had stayed with him. Lilibelle had a chain designed like a cowboy's belt but in gold, and added another diamond each time she claimed she had spent the night with Tom. Everybody knew Lilibelle liked diamonds more than men, but it was no big issue. Others had told her the same too.

She knew exactly what he wanted and how. She saw the black Porsche pull up, and drove up alongside it and bent forward to open the door.

"It is dinner Honey Pie,' she cooed, 'Marilee has asked me to provide for your every need, and baby, I have planned exactly that."

Tom did not even remember he had a meeting with Marilee, seeing the promise Libby was offering, and never said a word, as he clutch spun the Porsche around fast and headed for the shack. That was the only night she had had with him, but she had also been with Norm who was her husband then, and Matt was born and Norm had claimed her, as now Tom had disappeared. She wondered whether she had really been fair to Norm when she married him for the sake of their child. Should she have waited and had him alone like so many other women have done?

"Mummy, Are you alright?' and Matt was standing there tugging at her hand.

With a sigh, she bent down and put her arms around him breathing in his freshly washed softness and feeling the warmth as he put his arms around her too. They stayed like that for a short while, rocking gently, each finding consolation in the warmth of the others love.

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He was the first to break away, and he looked at her, his tiny little boy eyes, so warm and loving, that she shivered with a sense of precognition that whatever was happening, she was also part of the stream and so was he, and they could only ride along as they were doing, having each other was only temporary. She knew that, as she rocked herself closer to him for a final touch, and stood up. She wondered what he would do to her next and how she would manage.

She knew one thing....Norm would never get Matt. Never!!!! She also wondered what he wanted with the boy he had so little time for.

Promptly at nine, the next morning there was knock on the door. It was, of course, Grace. She was right on time. You could set your watch, by that woman, thought Libby, as she paddled to the door in a pair of fluffy pink slippers.

“Did I get you up?” Grace was smiling, but Libby knew she was joking anyway.

“Not really,” she giggled, “Matty got me up at six-thirty. Apparently he heard us talking yesterday. He’s been ready to go since seven.”

“Oh, dear me!” Grace walked over to the kitchen sink and turned the water on. “Not much gets by that little fella does it?”

“No it doesn’t. What are you doing?”

“I’ll just wash up these few dishes for you while I wait for Matty, dear.”

“Matty’s ready, I’m surprised he’s not pulling you out the door already, he’s so excited, and you don’t have to do that, Grace.”

Grace was tucking a dish towel into the top of her white slacks to act as a makeshift apron. “I don’t mind,” she chuckled. “We don’t have to catch the bus for another forty-five minutes.”

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It was always the same with Grace. She could never get enough of helping people out. She was always doing dishes or sweeping the floor, or scrubbing up the kitchen, for Libby and Matt. Her family was grown and gone. Her husband of forty years had passed away suddenly a few years ago and last year, she had been required to take a mandatory retirement from the plant where she had worked for more than thirty years. All those things combined, left Grace with lot of time on her hands. Time she used to do good deeds for everyone in the building, but Libby was right across the hall, so she reaped the most benefit.

Grace was like a grandmother to Matt. Her own grandchildren all lived half a continent away, so she seldom saw them. Matt and Libby were right there, and she had adopted them as family. When her oldest son had last come to visit, she had introduced Libby as the daughter she never had.

When Grace's Son thanked Libby privately for taking care of his mother, she said, "Nobody needs to take care of your mother. She takes care of everyone in the building."

Grace was finishing up the last of the dishes, when Libby stepped up behind her and gave her a big bear hug. "My check didn't come in the mail this morning," she said.

Grace knew what was coming next, but she didn't mind. "How much do you need dear?"

"It's just till the check, from Norm, comes. I need to pay the power bill. They're threatening to shut us off."

"Give it to me. I'll take care of it for you. Pay me back when you can. Oh, and bring me my purse there on the table. I need you to do me a favour."

Libby fetched the purse. Grace poked around in it for a minute, before pulling out an instant lottery ticket. It was already scratched off. She handed it to Libby. "If you'll take this down to the market and check it for me, I'll split anything I've won with you. I can never figure these tickets out."

Libby looked at the ticket. It was a hundred dollar winner, but she kept quiet. She knew it was Grace's way of giving her some badly needed cash, without making it seem like charity. She stuffed the ticket into her own purse just as Matt came bursting out of his bedroom.

"Auntie Grace, Auntie Grace, I'm ready to go. I got clean underwear on and I am ready." He grabbed Grace's hand and began dragging her toward the door.

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Laughing so hard she could hardly speak, Grace tried to appear stern, "You have to say goodbye to Mommy first."

"Oh sure, Bye Mommy." Re replied. His face breaking into smiles.

"Libby was laughing too. "Be good for Auntie Grace, or she won't take you again."

"I will, Mommy. Can we go now, Auntie Grace?"

Grace grabbed he purse, "Yes we can go now. Libby Dear, we'll see you around eight this evening, I expect."

As she watched them walk out the door, Libby smiled to herself. No I know you Grace. I'll see you promptly at eight, she thought.

The painting was waiting exactly as she had left it the previous afternoon. She spent most of the day painting, not stopping for lunch. By three the painting was nearly finished and by five it was a work of art. This is the best one I've ever done, she thought, gazing at the picture of Matt, standing hand in hand with Grace in field of trees and flowers. "I wish I didn't have to sell this," she mused out loud.

"You don't," rumbled a masculine voice from behind her. "You could give it to me."

Before she spun to face him she recognized Norm's voice. Even when he spoke it had a melodic ring to it. "Norm? What, what are you doing here?"

"I have to leave the country for a while," he said. "I was hoping you'd let me see Matty, before I go."

"He's not here," snapped Libby, fixing him with an acrimonious stare.

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“Oh . . . Can I wait?”

“No. He won’t be home for hours.” Libby was surprised at the anger in her voice.

“Look,” said Norm timidly, “That wasn’t my only reason for coming. I think . . . No; I know I owe you a big apology.”

“You think so?” her eyes were flashing with indignant rage.

“I guess I can’t expect you to make this easy for me,” he continued, “but please just listen.”

“I’m listening!” Libby couldn’t believe how angry she was feeling.

“I made a big mistake, Lib. I left it up to my people to see that you and Matt were looked after. I thought I could trust them, but I found out the other day that I was wrong.

They treated you, like just another bill that had to be paid. I didn’t know the checks weren’t coming regularly, and I didn’t know you were living in a dump like this, so here.” He reached into his pocket, withdrew a check and laid it on the table, face down.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a check, Lib.”

She left it right where it was lying. “So then, let me get this straight. You think you can forget about your son for nearly four years, then march right back into his life and buy our forgiveness with the money that you rightly owed us anyway. I don’t think so, Pal.”

“I never forgot either of you. They told me you wouldn’t let me see him.”

“Who’s they. What the hell are you talking about? I never once told anybody that you couldn’t see Matty.” She was so angry now that she was spitting when she talked.

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"My agent, my handlers, my accountant, all of them, said the same thing. It was a conspiracy to keep the world from finding out that I had a wife and son. They thought I'd lose my sex symbol status, if the word got out, so they lied to me. They lied to me Lib."

"They did?" she was beginning to calm down a little bit.

"Yes, they did. I've laid awake nights thinking about you two, wondering what Matty's like, hoping you'd let me see him someday. I only found out the truth yesterday and I fired them all right there, on the spot."

Now it was Libby's turn to say, "Oh!"

Libby had retreated, putting the kitchen table between them when she saw Norm.

Now he pushed the check across to her side of the table. "Look Lib, I have to catch a plane for Australia at seven-thirty tonight, but I'll call you when I get back. Would that be alright?"

"No strings attached" he said, "I promise. Just think about it, and I'll call. Now I have got to go, or I'll miss my flight. Please believe me when I say, 'I'm sorry.'"

He was out the door before she could speak. Grabbing the painting, she ran after him, down four flights of stairs, catching him just before he made it to the waiting limo.

"Here," she said, thrusting the still wet painting at him. "You can have it. I have the boy and you can have his image. I give it to you."

Norm looked at her carefully. "What's up Old Girl?" He asked with a touch of the old affection.

It was then that she chose to collapse into tears.

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