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An Evening Early in May

Traces of smoke from distant beach bonfires, mingled with the juxtaposed scents of eucalyptus and jasmine, filled the night. A woody aroma rose from the fresh layer of bark chips the groundskeepers put down earlier in the day. If Southern California had a signature scent, this was it.

Seated on a stool at his workbench in the back, Thomas contemplated his next move. The storage unit he sat in was just an old tent, from which they would keep the front booth stocked. Canvas walls stretched back about ten feet, supported by a criss-cross network of sturdy metal poles. The flap opened to a warm canyon breeze.

On the rough surface in front of him lay a thin piece of obsidian, measuring a little more than six inches long. Both sides had been carefully knapped, sloping down to a fine edge on either side. The resulting ultra-sharp blade could easily slice through the bones of the hands that made it. Four completed knives lay to the right. A battery-powered work lamp illuminated the area directly in front of him on the table, providing enough light by which to work.

On a narrow shelf just above the obsidian blade lay several curved pieces of antlers ready to be made into knife handles. Elk, not deer. Customers probably wouldn't know the difference if he used deer antler, but he would. The German collector, on the other hand, knew his stuff. He'd insisted on elk.

Thomas considered each piece.

Just as he started to reach for one, his cell phone rang. Placing his materials down on the table, he wiped his hands on his jeans, reached in his pocket, pulled out the phone and answered.

"Hello...Yes, it's me. Is everything OK?"

He didn't hear the footsteps just outside the open tent flap.

Thomas' voice continued, low, but clear, "Did you get my payment? Good. No, not until you're sure you can clear everything. Until then...yeah...keep me posted. How soon do you think you'll have a progress report? OK. Sunday then."

Thomas disconnected the call and slid the phone back in his pocket. Satisfied there was nothing more he could do for now, he refocused on his work. Looking over the antler pieces one more time, he reached up and selected one, hefted it briefly and placed it on the table. Holding the long, obsidian blade carefully in the other hand, he held it against one end and then the other of the future handle, trying to decide which angle was best.

He loved working at night. No interruptions or customers asking questions. The quiet was deep, but something made him stop, sit up, and listen. Tiny pin-pricks tickled the back of his neck. He reached up and rubbed the skin. Probably nothing.

Still.

Turning slowly, he looked over his left shoulder. This time the pin-pricks ran all the way up his spine. He wasn't alone.

One of the young glassblowers, Elizabeth, arms folded, leaned coolly against the metal post in the doorway. Not a hair out of place, her thin ponytail cut a perfect, white-blond scythe out of the soft, night sky. Oozing confidence, her face looked deceptively soft in the residual light from the lamp. It also looked smug.

You only had to meet Elizabeth once to know she was trouble. Keeping a tight lid on his mouth and his emotions, Thomas wondered how much she had heard.

"Sounds very hush, hush, Thomas. Keeping secrets from the wife? Gambling? Get someone pregnant?" Elizabeth fished, her blue eyes glittering like tiny chunks of Arctic ice.

Thomas decided to wait her out.

When he neither denied nor confirmed, she continued, strolling into the tent, "What's the money for? Let me guess...Abortion? Something worse?"

Thomas crossed his arms and leaned back on the counter, quickly calculating the damage and what he could do about it, careful not to let his face betray his mounting concern. Whatever way this went down, he would protect Lisa. Of that one thing, he was very sure.

Elizabeth paused, looked down at her feet, and straightened her shoulders. With something bordering on an apology, she looked directly into his eyes.

"This isn't personal, Thomas. I didn't plan to overhear your conversation tonight. But I've learned to take luck where I find it.

"So, I don't know who you paid, but as long as you're writing checks, you can send some my way. \$8,000 ought to do it. I need air fare for the competition, and I'm short some

to set up my own studio. When I get back, whether I win or not, I'm out of here. I'm tired of dealing with some of the hot dog, troglodytes, like Matt."

She almost spit out the name. Elizabeth squinted at him, waiting to determine the efficacy of her threat.

Thomas wasn't sure what she was capable of, but she looked dead serious. He'd only met her once before, when he was out visiting Howard at his compound where he and his interns lived and Howard gave classes. She'd half-heartedly hit on him. He'd politely but firmly made it clear he was married, and that had been the end of it. In fact, he thought she was seeing Matt, one of the glassblower guys, but after what she'd just said, that didn't seem likely. He hoped she wasn't the type to hold a grudge.

Apparently that had nothing to do with it, because she didn't act like a woman scorned, just one on a mission, and after overhearing his conversation, an opportunity to fulfill it—with his money.

Thomas had about \$20,000 in the bank, which was why he was burning the midnight oil now, to refill his inventory before the festival after the German collector's big order. Luckily, Elizabeth didn't know this or she'd have asked for more. She didn't seem greedy, though, just practical and without much of a conscience.

\$10,000 was already going to the man on the phone, so \$8,000 was doable. Adopting Elizabeth's pragmatic attitude, he went to the bank in the morning and withdrew that amount. It was from his business account, which Lisa never checked. Until recently, it wouldn't have been worth it if she did, as the balance rarely rose above \$150. If she ever discovered the missing money, he would just have to explain what it was for. Money meant nothing. He'd do anything to protect his wife.

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Friday, May 31

Logan tossed the letter back on her desk. She'd definitely landed in the City of Oz and was in dire need of a pair of ruby slippers.

Not for the first time that year, she wondered why anyone would work in the public school system unless they had a lobotomy or were working off jail time. It all started last October when, as a favor to her friend Bonnie, she'd taken a long-term sub job for a 7th grade teacher at Roosevelt Middle School in Tilcott, CA.

She spent the last two years since her husband Jack died wrapping up and selling the computer business they'd built together. The process had been wrenching. After paying off business debts—Jack had been more charmer than money manager—there wasn't a whole lot left.

Truth be told, she needed the job.

Tilcott was a small community, about 20 minutes up the coast from the even smaller town of Jasper, where she and Bonnie had grown up. Top scores on the entry exam and a double major in Math and Music qualified her for an Emergency Teaching Credential. If she decided to continue, she'd have to enter the internship program next year. They had one that started in June, completing her coursework in the summer.

She quickly discovered that things had changed since she, or even her daughter Amy, had been in school. The focus on test scores had left students burned out, teachers exhausted, and parents frustrated. Music, and Art programs had been eliminated in order to hire test prep coaches. They would have eliminated PE, too, but a few enlightened state legislators had managed to mandate a minimum of 40 minutes a week. Of course, few districts enforced this requirement.

Any subject not specifically tested was given short shrift, so Science and History were pretty much ignored in favor of hours of back-to-basics reading and math lessons, keeping students chained to their desks for hours. Who did they think was going to make the new discoveries for clean energy and find the cure for cancer? Someone who'd never done a science experiment?

Lucky for her students, Logan chose to ignore all that nonsense. She took her students out for PE every day. Her first-day-of-school speech went something like this:

"Here's the deal. I don't give stickers for breathing. I will never lie to you. I can help you learn to write anything from a business plan to a Dear John letter, but I won't write it for you. In five short years, you'll be running this planet, so I expect you to know something about it before June.

"I'll give you the tools and the skills; you'll give yourselves the world. First assignment of the year? Teach me something tomorrow that I don't know. Any questions?"

Thirty-six pairs of wide eyes stared back at her. No alphabet necklace in sight, and none of her jewelry lit up. She was definitely different, but could she be trusted?

By the end of the first month, everyone knew the tall, new teacher with the long, wavy hair said what she meant and meant what she said. Sun glinting off her auburn locks, her trademark boot-and-jeans stride was easily spotted from across campus, usually accompanied by one or more students.

By January, when her down-to-earth teaching started producing results, requests to be in her class started piling up in the office. Not only were her students among the few with smiles on their faces Monday morning and books under their arms on Friday afternoons, but most of them outperformed other students on the mid-year Math and Reading tests.

That was the beginning of the trouble.

Sheila Morell, an 8th grade teacher at the school and one of Principal Metterson's favorites, said nothing but rolled her eyes and sighed audibly in the staff meeting when the results were announced.

Not satisfied with gossip and innuendo, Sheila had gone to Metterson and convinced him to write this pack-of-lies letter on Logan's desk, accusing her of helping her students cheat on the tests in order to "win."

"Win what?!" Logan had vented to Bonnie on the phone at break that morning.

"What exactly do I win? What is wrong with that woman?"

"Too much to mention," Bonnie said.

"And I'd actually considered taking this damn job!" Logan fumed. She wasn't sure she'd take it now if they handed it to her on a silver platter.

"Fly low, OK?" Bonnie said, "You have until August, right? You don't have to make any decisions until then."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Just because they're accusing you doesn't mean the board will believe them."

But hope was dim at best. She knew no one on the school board and had done nothing to ingratiate herself with anyone at district. Why should they fight for her? She was well aware that all five feet eight inches of her was really lousy at office politics. Working for herself, she just hadn't had to deal with it in a long time.

Stuffing the letter into her purse, she focused on the task at hand. Clear green eyes scanned the end-of-the-year checklist given to everyone by the school secretary.

Computers covered and stored? Check.

Bulletin boards stripped? Check.

Textbook inventory complete? Check...Check...Check!

Lesson plans made for the first week back?

"If there's going to be a first week back," she muttered.

Later she would process the year, but right now the only thing she wanted to process was an ice-cold margarita at Juan's. If she left now, she might beat traffic and fit in a beach run before dinner.

"Look on the bright side," Logan told herself as she locked her door for the summer, and maybe for good. "You have 76 white squares on your calendar; you're a free woman until September!"

She was looking forward to a relaxing, uneventful summer.