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Watching him walk from his desk to his wall of windows overlooking Central Park captivated Liz. It was something about the way he walked, lightly but with an air of certainty that anything that he stepped on, he owned. He spoke that way too. His voice was surprisingly mild and soft for a man more than six and a half feet tall, as if those around him listened so closely that for him to speak louder would be a waste of effort.

“The Symingtons bought it in 1862 from the Empire of Brazil,” he was telling her while gazing down on Fifth Avenue. “At one time we thought they used the island to replicate antebellum South Carolina, but we’ve never found any evidence of that. We’ve since learned that while the people there are mostly African, they long predate the Civil War.”

He walked back toward his desk. It was a polished block of gargoyles peering through foliage, each panel of which, he just had said, had been carved from a single three-foot-wide board of Venezuelan mahogany. He had added, “I’m not sure it’s right for this office. I may send it to San Francisco.”

“Good place for it! Looks like California!” Liz had been so overwhelmed by this man and his office that she was babbling. But that had been half an hour ago. By now she had adjusted. The private elevator to the triplex

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penthouse; the two majordomos dressed as if they were guarding Sleeping Beauty's castle; the Picassos, Cezannes, Rembrandts and Titians: she was past all that now.

He took from his desk a substantial pipe, a burl of wood so highly polished that it glittered. He peered into the bowl, then knocked its contents into an ashtray. Liz was so entertained just watching him living this bit of his life that she wasn't much listening to what he was saying. What was supposed to be a job interview felt more like a visit to a wealth museum.

"In the '30s Great Britain tried to claim it as part of the Falkland Islands, but it's thousands of miles away from the Falklands. It's at least a thousand miles from anything. It's important you know that," he said with a look at her that showed her again his most arresting feature, his enormous wide-set pale-blue eyes. Meeting his eyes was such an electric connection that Liz felt as if he were holding her gaze in order to force her to flinch away, so she wouldn't flinch. He looked down at his desk for a pipetool. As he began to scrape the bowl of his pipe, he said, "It may surprise you to know that more than five hundred people applied for this job." He knocked the bowl's contents into an ashtray, peered into it, then scraped it some more.

"Not surprising. You're paying twice the going rate."

An ad placed in the classifieds of *Today's Teacher* that offered a five-year contract at twenty-five thousand dollars a year should have brought applications from every elementary-school teacher in the United States, especially considering the bad job market.

"I pay my staff well," was all he said. He stuck the pipe stem into his mouth and sucked air moistly through it.

Liz was only interested in the money. The last thing she wanted to do was keep teaching. She had gone to Smith College on scholarship, and unlike the wealthy girls dating Ivy League boys, she had needed to learn a

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trade in college. Her surest bet for stable work had seemed at the time to be elementary-school teaching, since Smith had a great education department and all those little kids were cute. But after five years of teaching first grade, Liz had felt as if her mind was shriveling. The thought of spending the rest of her days wiping noses and conversing with six-year-olds had made even clerical work look good, so a year ago Liz had taken a job as a bank teller. Then in March she had spotted this amazing job that promised to pay her a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars over the next five years, and with living expenses and travel besides. How was that even possible?

“You, um, you have it down to me?”

“Staffing has given me three names,” he said around the pipe stem gritted in his teeth. He took his pipe from his mouth and added, “Your tragic history argues in your favor.”

Liz didn't know what might have argued in her favor. She couldn't believe she had made it this far. She had been put through a week of interviews and written tests, two physical exams, and even a polite but probing sort of congeniality testing over dinner by two different male-and-female pairs, none of whom would tell her anything beyond, “This is routine.” “You're doing fine.” “We'll get back to you.”

“I feel as if I kind of went through the mill to get this far,” she said.

He was packing his pipe from a leather pouch, still standing and not sitting at his desk. It occurred to Liz that a lightweight interview might constitute a break for him.

“They screened as they would for my personal staff. I'm sorry. Perhaps it's excessive.”

That “I'm sorry” delivered from financial Olympus charmed Liz so much that she was babbling again.

“Everyone falls in love with you, right?”

He flicked a look at her. What she liked about his half-smile was the fact that one tooth was not perfectly straight.

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“I bought the island two years ago. We’re trying to determine how to manage it. I haven’t been able to give it much time.”

He looked at Liz again. What she had said about falling in love with him should have put him off. Instead, it seemed to interest him. So she recklessly added, “I bet you’re married, right?”

She knew he wasn’t married. And he was—let me think—maybe thirty-six. He had inherited a fortune at the age of twenty-six, a fact that had been big news at Smith when Liz was a junior and he made the cover of *Time* magazine as the richest American under the age of forty. Liz’s classmates had gleefully figured out that Jack Richardson was only six years older, so his eventual wife might be someone their age. He soon became famous for being rich. Liz had seen him most recently on *Time’s* list of Ten Americans Who Are Making a Bicentennial Difference, noted there for having built a fertilizer plant in Appalachia meant to minimize river pollution by making use of the waste from family pig farms. Liz had been unable to believe that Jack Richardson was her prospective employer until she saw him in person. There was no mistaking that face. So asking if he were married was such a big overstep that she could feel a slow blush rising. Stupid, stupid. But to her surprise—amazement, really—he said after a pause, “No, I’m not married.”

She almost cheekily said, “Then how about it?” She came so close to saying it that she had to clench her jaw until the impulse passed.

He was lighting his pipe with a gold lighter shaped like a chess-piece knight, sucking flame down into its bowl with tense little puffs. Warm rope-and-molasses smoke was on the air. He was as oversized as his pipe, but he used his hands with feminine grace. He took the pipe from his mouth and said, “Is there anything so outrageous you won’t say it?”

This horrible habit dated from high school, when being one of three white students in a class of more than a hundred had made Liz fall back

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on wisecracking as a way to get respect. It had worked so well that by her junior year she was generally the center of a group of friends who were waiting to hear whatever Liz might say next. She even could play with racial cracks successfully. That was how expert she eventually became. So all she could say now was, “I was hoping you hadn’t noticed.” Then, “Um, no. Apparently not.”

Another small smile.

“But, you know, I can tame it. I didn’t, for example, say, ‘How about it?’ when you said you weren’t married. But I came pretty close,” she stumbled as she realized that, shit, she had said it after all.

His smile faded. He briefly withdrew into quiet puffing. He glanced down at something on his desk. To change the subject, Liz babbled, “So tell me the bad things.”

He looked at her.

“You know, great climate and all, but there’s a troll in a cave that eats little children? Tell me that part.”

“No trolls. It’s a primitive lifestyle. Five years would be a lot. The staff who stay learn to love it. Those who don’t, leave quickly.”

“Primitive. Great.”

To him, “primitive” must mean domestic champagne. Maybe unheated towel racks.

“Does this job interest you?”

“They said it was an ocean trip?”

“We go by yacht. It takes about two weeks.”

Liz didn’t know what to say. A doubling of her salary, a trip on a yacht, more time spent in this man’s company: all of that did have some appeal. Putting her ex-husband even farther behind and getting herself out of the known world had even more.

“I—sure, okay. I think so. I think I’m interested. Sure.”

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But then she had to add, “Too bad about the lack of a troll.” She had to go on to say, “I actually prefer domestic champagne.” To shut herself up, she said finally, “You won’t hire me. I talk too much.”

“On the contrary.” He was puffing his pipe again, talking through his teeth. “I am pleased to hire you.”

“What?”

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Three weeks later, Liz stood on the teak-and-fiberglass deck of a yacht that a passing crewman told her was two hundred and eighty-five feet long. He didn't know the beam, he said when she asked, "Wide? How wide is it?" He guessed forty feet. New York was a smudge of bad air on the horizon. Here beyond the shadow of land the wind was blowing Liz's hair in every direction, and she was shivering a little despite the blue-denim parka that her mother had insisted she bring along, even though the printed list of Suggested Wardrobe hadn't mentioned a heavy jacket. The italicized message at the bottom of it had said *Staff Uniforms Are Provided*. Liz was wandering toward the bow of the yacht. The only people she saw on the promenade deck were crewmen hustling by on un-guessable errands. The wind was slowing as she neared the bow; it felt like greasy washcloths slapping her face.

Leaving her family behind for what she assumed was going to be five years had turned out to be wrenching for Liz. Her sister Carol had died two years before and left Liz's mother with two little girls, but losing Liz's help with Flower and Rain didn't seem to bother Myra at all. She worked nights doing piecework in the garment district so she could be with the girls all day, and with Liz about to leave, she arranged with neighbors to let the girls alternate nights in their apartments. Myra really wanted Liz to go.

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“You think I like you moping around? Not getting any younger, Lizzie. Get off with you. Get a husband already!”

Bossing was how Myra did love. And Liz knew her mother was worried that Liz was going to be single forever, now that she had lost her baby and divorced her husband. Myra thought her daughter just needed encouragement. The reality was somewhat different, though. Having settled for Brad, who himself was settling, Liz had learned that settling in marriage means a lifetime of bickering and petty slights. So she was no longer willing to settle. And a woman too tall and not very pretty and overweight by more than a little has to settle. So Liz was considering the possibility that she might be giving up altogether.

She stood for awhile at the forward rail, repeatedly swiping at her face to clear it of the sticky hairs that the wind put right back again. It was close to six-thirty by the time she went below. She thought about taking a shower, but there wasn't time to dry her hair before she had to show up for the cocktail hour. Liz's stateroom was, she guessed, maybe ten feet square, but everything was built into the walls so a lot of that space was open floor. Liz had felt relieved when she first saw this room and got a better sense of what he meant by roughing it.

The printed schedule on the dresser in her stateroom said 7:00 Cocktails-Dress and below that 8:00 Dinner-Dress. The Suggested Wardrobe list had included Evening Dress, so Liz had brought along her brown silk shirtwaist, something she loved for the way it could be dressed up or dressed down with the right accessories. For tonight she added her thin gold chain and the gold hoop earrings that Brad had given her. She liked the earrings. She was glad she didn't blame them personally.

A uniformed maid Liz encountered in the hallway told her that the salon where Mr. Richardson had cocktails was toward the stern of the yacht, two decks above. “Use the main stairs and not the staff stairs, Madam. Go aft to the vestibule.” Liz discovered that the hallway took a

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dogleg to the left just two doors astern of her stateroom, and there the whole complexion of her experience changed. She confronted an ornate gold-trimmed foyer with a pair of staircases curling upward, gossamer light-tubes and fine etched glass. The carpet was a red-and-gold print. Liz stood briefly at the spot where the perfectly acceptable wood-paneled staff corridor met Fantasyland. Then she turned and walked all the way back to the narrow stairs that she had used to enter this ship, and later had used to get to the promenade deck. She went up there—it was close to sunset now, and cold—and all the way back to the stern, where she found a doorway into the pink-lit salon.

The salon was also white and gold and crystal with accents of cranberry red, all delicate chairs and big white sofas. But what got Liz were the people. There were seven of them standing inside in conversational groups with drinks in hand. The men wore dinner jackets in various shades of dark brocade, and the women wore actual evening gowns and glittering cascades of diamonds. From the doorway, Liz watched them enjoying one another and listened to the intermittent soft laughter of women who were obviously loved and cared for.

It was then that Liz completely understood what a stupid mistake she had made. “Evening Dress” on the wardrobe list had meant actual gowns, for heaven’s sake? What ever had possessed her to take this job? It had been that damn penthouse office and all that foolish illusion that she was connecting with a man who bought and sold whole continents. He had come to meet her at the doorway to his office, and before inviting her to sit down he had taken her on a little art tour. Perhaps she had remarked about the paintings. So he had politely shown her the Remington bucking horse with the Calder mobile turning above it, and the Picasso and Rembrandt hung side by side. “It’s investment art,” he had said to her. “The best things I save to hang at home. Here, I’ll show you one.” And he had stepped toward several paintings stacked against a chair and casually tipped against his leg

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a wonderful landscape—Turner, she thought—to reveal a trio of Degas dancers so lovely that just the flow of their bodies one to another made the whole room seem to be in motion. They had made her think of little girls dressed for a party with their hair up in buns, leaving tender, heart-tugging wisps.

Liz had thought after that thrilling interview that if she turned this job down she would hate herself forever. Even taking the job and being unhappy with it had seemed at the time to be more palatable than giving herself a permanent wound of regret.

Jack Richardson was in the salon with the others, half a foot taller than any of them, standing with his head cocked toward one of the women. He noticed Liz in the doorway and fixed her with his eyes while he disengaged himself with a polite backward step. Just his looking at her was a command that she stay there, but still it took every bit of her will not to hustle away while she still could. He came to the doorway in his teal-blue dinner jacket with black satin lapels, his hair combed damp from the shower. He said, “I’m glad you could join us.” She could tell he didn’t like the way she was dressed.

The man had lovely coloring, hair so red-brown that it looked maroon and skin so pale that it seemed translucent. Liz stood looking up at him looking down at her, and she realized that what must have hooked her was this air of intimate kindness that seemed to waft about him like perfume. You don’t expect powerful people to be nice. When they are very nice, it disarms you so completely that you are inclined to trust them too much.

“Is this required? I’ve got to go in there?” Her teeth gave an unexpected chatter.

He put an arm around her shoulders when he heard her teeth chatter. She didn’t know how to keep him from doing that. He drew her inside as he murmured to her, “The girls will share their dresses with you.”

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“The rocks, too?”

He may not have heard that. He guided her into the larger of the two groups of elegant people she had seen from the doorway. His hand was so warm and amazing on her shoulder that most of her sensory awareness was concentrated in those few square inches.

“This is Elizabeth Lyons.” At his first soft syllable, the room went silent. “She’ll be teaching in the childhouse. We’re delighted to have her with us.” Then he said, “Does anyone have a nice dress to fit her?”

Liz was six-foot-one and two hundred pounds. She was bigger, even, than one of the men there; she was twice the size of any of the women. She very often felt in the world like Alice in her giant phase, hunched a little and testing chairs. Never in her life had she had a man put his arm around her without making her feel like a horse, but this one made her feel small.

He was telling her who all the people were. She wasn’t listening very well. All she could see were the dresses, Vivian in yellow chiffon, and Monica—was it Monica?—in deep-green satin that gleamed in the room’s soft indirect lighting. Rosette was, unsurprisingly, wearing pink; she was short, but she had remarkable cleavage. Their jewelry was on the cusp between being so gaudy that it had to be fake, and being just tasteful enough to be real. One of them wore no jewelry. Louise, tall and thin and amazingly pretty, wore her hair simply piled in coils on her head and a narrow blue satin tube of a dress.

“What would you like to drink, honey?”

His calling her “honey” flustered Liz. She babbled, “Ah, nothing. Water. Mr. Richardson, could I speak to you for a minute, please?”

“Call me Jack.”

“I—Jack?”

His arm was still around her shoulders. The calm, proprietary weight of it had gone past thrilling toward becoming annoying.

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“I’ve got to—excuse us, please,” she said generally. She tried to edge him away from the group, but he was so unused to being moved by someone else that she had actually to put her arm around his waist and tug in order to get him to budge. He wasn’t happy about it, either. Liz got him as far as the first white sofa. He stopped there and squared off with her.

“What is wrong?” he said crisply.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’ve made a mistake. I mean, look at me. I feel like an idiot!”

“You look fine. You’re simply nervous. Have something alcoholic.”

“But doesn’t this ship have a reverse?”

“You’re asking me to turn back?”

“I—Please. I’m allergic to opulence.”

There was his little smile again.

“It’s like marzipan. It tastes good at first, but then it makes you throw up,” she recklessly added.

“What size dress do you wear?”

“Four. Why?”

He gave a little gotcha wince and said, “I’ll have dresses flown out if you’ll tell me your size.”

It was absolutely none of his business that Liz’s dress size was sixteen. Oh, okay, maybe eighteen. She refused to wear some enormous gown that made her look like a draft horse trying to be a circus pony. But she said just, “They don’t make that in my size.”

“We have a tailor aboard. Perhaps he can—”

“You would have a tailor aboard.”

Another pained look. Jack mildly said, “That’s enough.”

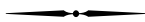
“But I haven’t even started!”

This was getting away from her. She was going to say something really bad if she couldn’t shut up. What she said was, “How tall are you, anyway?”

“Behave yourself now.”

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“Oh, sure. You already know you’re too rich. I don’t plan to rub your nose in it.”



Liz was seated at the far end of the table at dinner. There is nothing quite so singular as a wealthy man surrounded by his retainers: even the walls seem to move when he does in order to keep him properly centered in the room. So Jack’s was the only table conversation, and Liz tried politely to listen to whatever he was saying through the appetizer and soup and fish. She was seated next to Jack’s attorney, Ted, a thin and fidgety fellow smelling strongly of Old Spice who ignored her altogether. Across from her was Jack’s assistant, David, who looked to be only in his mid-twenties. David was a Harvard graduate, as he had made a point of telling Liz during cocktails. He was in full possession of all the handsome arrogance that phrase conjured in her mind, and he was talking intently with the woman next to him. Liz saw no hope of conversation there, either.

Then the entree came. It looked to Liz like either squab or underfed chicken. “It’s pheasant,” Ted said when she asked him about it, for something to say. “We raise it for the table.” Then that was all he said. He went back to eating and listening to whatever Jack was saying.

Yet conversations that Liz heard from the head of the table made her think of a one-sided game of ping-pong. Jack would say something, and someone would add or elaborate or simply agree, then someone else would do that, each bounce a little lower, until the conversational ball came to rest. Then he would say something else, and the same thing would happen.

“I’m getting really bored now,” Liz said under her breath. She tried just to eat and listen to whatever Jack was saying, but she couldn’t stand it. Finally she said to no one, “I talk too much.” Then she added, “I get it from my uncle Ephraim. He died at Belsen. Before he died, I’m told he was kind of a pain in the neck.”

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Jack stopped talking in mid-sentence. He looked at her down the length of the table, so everyone else also looked at her.

“Sorry,” she said. “Sorry.”

Jack said something brief to Monica, and he gestured to one of the half-dozen staff ranged along the walls behind the chairs. Soon Liz was seated next to Jack, and Monica had gone to the outer darkness.

Jack said, “Tell me about Ephraim.”

“These are truffles, right? This isn’t dirt?”

“Those are truffles.”

The sauce looked a little like snot. Liz caught herself before she said that.

“You had an uncle who died in a concentration camp?”

“I never knew him. I’m twenty-nine.”

“Tell me about it.”

“He was just—he was a yeshiva boy. My grandfather thought that was more important than getting him out. The rest of the family got out through Denmark. Then they sealed the borders. The whole yeshiva got shipped to Belsen. He died of starvation. He was eighteen years old.”

Liz had grown up always knowing that story, and with the cheerful self-obsession of childhood, she had focused on just the fact that her mother thought she took after Ephraim. She realized uneasily that the horror of the story was dawning on her only now, as she sat next to a man who expected her to entertain him.

“But I’m not, you know, even Jewish,” she said hurriedly. “My mother—she married a German she met in a resettlement camp on the way to America. Her parents sat shiva. That—do you know what that is?”

“They disowned her.”

“Did they ever.”

Any thoughts Liz might have had that her boss could be available were dispelled for her in the salon after dinner, where Monica cuddled in the circle of his arm while Liz sat across from them and talked with him. She

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didn't mind seeing the cuddling. A match here was so far beyond likely that she barely noticed the way his hand played with Monica's hair and mindlessly stroked her bare arm.

"But freedom doesn't mean no laws at all," she was saying. "Freedom is structure. That's what gives you the freedom."

They had picked up this thread at the end of dessert, when the conversation that Ephraim had started had run its course through the Allies' culpability for the Holocaust and the use of small wars to prevent bigger wars to whether Vietnam could have been won.

She was discovering that he loved to argue. He seemed to want her to raise objections to whatever he said. She remarked, "cute flag," about the rhinestone American flag that was part of the table's floral centerpiece.

He said, "I gave to the Bicentennial Commission."

So then she had to say something like, "They're going about it all wrong! They're celebrating like it's just an event, but the big thing about the American Revolution is what it meant. For the first time, people were claiming their personal freedom. Even the idea of personal freedom was new!"

Freedom turned out to be a big concept for him. It lasted through their final bites of peach souffle and walking back into the salon after dinner, and even through all of his first pipe. He was chewing on the stem of his pipe now, probably thinking about reloading and relighting it, but there was one of his hands so thoroughly occupied with Monica's dress.

He was saying, "The only way to be free is to have no laws at all."

"No, you can set up freedom. If freedom is your goal, that gives you a kind of standard to go by. You just—"

"Yes, but how do you define the standard?" (He also liked interrupting.) "Someone might think—I don't know—making everyone obtain a liberal arts degree enhances freedom by expanding people's choices. Who's to say he's wrong?"

"He's wrong! It's just common sense that—"

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“Common sense is irrelevant. That’s the point. There is no sense that’s common to everyone. So unless you have no laws whatsoever, freedom is going to be whatever I say it is.”

“But what about minimal laws? Any law not essential for safety and order should go off the books. Right, Monica? What do you think?”

Liz had been trying to include Monica. It seemed impolite not to include her. And Liz was becoming uncomfortable with the way he was toying with Monica’s hair and clothes and skin and she was permitting it. At the moment, Monica was fingering the buttons on Jack’s sleeve while his hand was busy doing something in the satin folds of her skirt. Not near anything significant, Liz thought, but embarrassing to watch nonetheless.

Liz loved the atmosphere of this salon. Everything in it was silky or soft or it glittered in the room’s pinkish light. Classical music filled it just at audible level. And it even smelled wonderful, something like sandalwood with an accent of Jack’s pipe smoke.

Jack leaned a little and knocked out his pipe into an ashtray. He said with a new, milder tone, “Did I ever tell you the story of the island where you’ll be teaching? No?”

He took his arm from around Monica and reached for a pipe tool on the table beside him as he said, “Steve Symington was my roommate at Andover and Dartmouth. He was the best friend I ever had. His family owned Atlantica. They used to go out once a year. I often went along.” Jack was working with his pipe tool. He paused to knock out his pipe and suck air through its stem and then added, “Steve became obsessed with the island. I went into business with my father, but Steve went native. Twelve years ago he started living there. He was killed there three years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Liz said automatically.

Jack was finding his tobacco pouch, patting the pockets of his dinner jacket.

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“Steve became convinced the people there had found a way to live that did away with laws. Absolute freedom! He was drunk on the concept. He was so convinced it was a better way to live that he hired flower children to try it out. Hippies. They were already breaking the rules, so he invited them to go all the way. And the experiment is ongoing.”

“That—um, that’s why you bought it? The island?”

“Steve’s death just about killed his parents. They were going to sell it to Argentina. I promised them if they sold it to me, I would carry on Steve’s legacy there.”

“But how was he killed? What happened?”

Jack was repacking his pipe with tobacco that looked in this light like forest loam.

“He had a compound leg fracture. He died of infection.”

Jack paused to suck flame down into his pipe. He puffed comfortably, removed the pipe from his mouth, and added, “The first thing I did was send them a turnkey clinic. It’s state of the art. Then last year I built myself an office there. I leased a transponder. I bought this yacht. It’s a promise I feel that I’ve made to Steve. If anyone can make it work, I’ll make it work.”