

LETTER
↳ **FROM** ↳
WONDER

✧ By the Author ✧

FICTION:

Almost Perfect

My Thomas

Letter from Freedom

Letter from Money

Letter from Wonder

NONFICTION:

The Fun of Dying – Find Out What Really Happens Next!

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES
BOOK THREE

LETTER
— FROM —
WONDER

ROBERTA GRIMES

Letter from Wonder

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This story is lovingly dedicated to all those who struggled and sacrificed to pass down to us their American dream, and to our grandchildren, for whom it is our legacy.

❧ 1 ❧

The swelling stress that Rex always felt as he waited for these gates to open was eased a bit by his fresh awareness that he would not be living here much longer. All the complexities of his eagerness to see Cathy and their children after a week away, his need to deal with his parents' issues, and the plain shock of this real estate would generally produce in him a feeling that mixed eager butterflies with nauseous dread.

And this car! Rex hated limousines. Before he began what had become half a decade of commuting to Texas, Rex had happily driven himself around Connecticut in an off-the-lot Hummer. Now, though, all his local trips were back and forth to the airport in Cathy's limousine, which was seven years old but so lightly used that its cherry-wood and dark-blue leather interior still looked and smelled brand-new. Cathy had fallen into this car when the conversion company that Rex thought of as his father's limo-pusher had convinced Jack that mere armor-plating was insufficient in these uncertain times, and he had to have a car that was vacuum-sealed against a possible chemical attack. The new one was cranberry red with an ivory interior. Rex could not imagine what Jack had been thinking. So now the gorgeous stainless-steel model that had been Jack's first million-dollar car was being used to transport Rex's children.

In Texas, Rex drove an F-250 crew cab that he had bought lightly

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

used at the Free the People facility ten miles from his east Texas ranch. He hated riding in limousines, the boredom and the lack of control and the fact that his family's cars were the only stretch Bentleys he ever saw on the highway. He kept the partition down because Clark was a friend, but Rex's father forbade conversations while chauffeurs were driving family members, so if Rex said anything, Clark would bring the car to a stop before answering him. On some of these rides he used to text with Cathy, and he routinely texted "I luv u" to let her know he had landed, but lately she was too busy with the baby even to check her phone.

Just as Rex was having that thought, his cellphone rang. Bobby Ingersoll was Rex's cousin, and he had obligingly taken Rex's place in learning to manage a forty-billion-dollar financial empire. In recent years Bobby had become what amounted to Rex's dutiful and indulgent older brother.

"Be there in a minute," Rex said into his phone.

"Thought you should know you're in the shitter again. Not that you care. Papa's new bag is –"

"Tell him I'm sorry, but I got a great story for him out of it. Just coming through the gates now."

"We've gotta lower the axe, twinkles. Your punishment is you're getting your own plane. I'm ordering it as we speak. Any preference as to trim colors? Shit. Says here it doesn't qualify for Amazon Prime."

Bobby had lately begun calling Rex some variant of "twinkletoes." Rex had no interest in knowing why. The three of them spent their weekday mornings working in Jack's sitting room, so Bobby was playing this for Rex's parents. Rex could envision Jack's face, grim with his resolve to maintain his anger until Rex could get there and be chewed out, but now smiling a little at Bobby's joke. Liz sitting on the sofa, smiling with Jack, wanting him to go easy on their son but always siding with her husband.

Rex knew that his mother loved him and loved his children, but what mattered most to her was his father. And it had occurred to him two weeks

LETTER FROM WONDER

ago as Liz blew out her sixty-four candles that Jack would be turning seventy-one in January. Atlanticans interacted so easily with their dead that death seemed not to matter there, but in this benighted place death was an ending. Rex had realized as he watched his parents, alone even in the midst of family, smiling covertly at one another as they enjoyed their private world, that he ought to start teaching his mother how to converse with the dead, just in case.

Rex said to Bobby now, "Tell him I'm fine and I'll be there in three." Then he added under his breath for what was probably the millionth time, "Thanks, bro. Put it on my tab." Rex and his father loved one another, but each found the other so inexplicable that adding Bobby between them as a translator had immensely improved their relationship.

Beyond those wrought-iron gates was the whole expansive vista of Sea Haven, with the house at the end of its long driveway. That house was five hundred feet from end to end and three and a half stories tall, so massive that it blocked the ocean view that dimly sparkled beyond the edge of its roof.

This property was two hundred acres in size, with a quarter of a mile of frontage on Long Island Sound. It had recently been appraised for gift purposes at two hundred and twenty-one million dollars. The family was being advised to buy up at least another hundred acres and demolish all the buildings, including all of Sea Haven, the thirty thousand square feet of main house and office, the staff buildings, the garage, the greenhouse, and the pony stable. Once it was fully permitted as an exclusive golf and boating resort, three hundred acres of land in this spot could be worth as much as half a billion dollars.

Rex had lived until he was twenty-three on a private island in the South Atlantic because his billionaire father had wanted him to have a carefree childhood. So until he was grown, Rex had been so completely isolated from American life that he had come to the States nine years

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

ago with no notion of time, no understanding of money, not even any concept of ownership. He had come from a place where people lived in absolute freedom of mind, and in such fundamental spiritual unity that the society on that tiny island had been joyously stable for four hundred years. Atlantica was twenty miles from end to end and eight miles wide at its widest point. Rex was reluctantly coming to see that it was the only place on earth where there were truly happy people.

The accident of his having been born to a reclusive billionaire and a woman intimidated by her husband's wealth had bought Rex the gift of spending the first twenty-three years of his life in what he saw as perfection. But then, nine years ago, New York had suffered a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center towers. Atlantica had long been well-protected by a mercenary navy, and for a couple of decades that had been enough to make Rex's father feel safe when he was there. But Jack was becoming more security-conscious, and that terrorist attack had been his wake-up call. So Rex and his mother had joined Jack here, and Rex had suffered the shock of learning that Atlantica was not the entire world. Soon thereafter had come his realization that unless he could elevate all the people on earth to the Atlanticans' level of mental development, the home that he loved could not long survive. So that was when Rex had embarked upon this urgent quest to fix the world while somehow maintaining who he was, which was a daily battle even nine years later.

The Labor Day weekend was only beginning, but already gardeners in dark-green jumpsuits were ripping out the multicolored floral borders along both sides of the driveway and planting thousands of yellow chrysanthemums. Rex's father loved yellow chrysanthemums.

There were always between fifty and a hundred people working at Sea Haven, day and night, not including the staff of Free the People, which was Rex's auto services company that his father had hoped would inspire

LETTER FROM WONDER

him to become a next-generation business mogul. Rex wanted to give Free the People to Bobby. So far, Jack was nixing that idea.

Half of those on staff here were security, wearing brown jumpsuits as they patrolled the woods at both sides of the estate or piloted seven white cabin cruisers. Rex traveled with security, too. Their plain black Cadillac peeled off to the right as soon as it cleared the gates, since the security break-room was attached to the garage. Rex didn't need bodyguards here because the whole estate was double-fenced, with ten-foot-high black wrought iron to the inside and chain link topped with razor wire to the outside. Toward the ocean the estate was open, but those white boats were always patrolling. Jack had gradually come to feel that the patrol boats were not enough, however, so a set of motion detectors had lately been installed along the whole beach frontage, and now they had to be disabled whenever Rex's children wanted to swim.

In front of the house's main portico there was a circular formal garden. This house was so vastly oversized that its front door and the fountain that was centered in the garden seemed to be only nicely proportioned until your car entered the driveway loop. Then you realized that the dark-green raised-panel door and the fountain were enormous. The door measured twelve feet tall by six feet wide, and the graceful marble maiden who was most of the fountain had to be fifteen feet tall. She was a Grecian lady who was awkwardly draped: one breast and one leg to the waist were bare. She was gesturing with palm upraised toward the children's riding park while her classical face seemed to be deep in a thoughtful conversation. Her left hand held an urn that had tipped while her attention was diverted, so water was endlessly spilling out. It didn't seem to Rex to be much of a fountain, but it was an eighteenth-century French masterpiece so fragile that the cost to move it was going to be more than a million dollars.

Rex's family had its own apartment and its own entrance. Normally

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

Clark would proceed around the circle and open Rex's door by the walk that led to his family's elevator lobby. By the time they were rounding the fountain, Rex would be suppressing a grin, almost already feeling Cathy in his arms as Clark opened his car door. Now, though, Rex was sulkily texting, "Dad but home asap" to his wife.

This house's front door was so heavily armored that it weighed more than a ton. It had to be moved hydraulically, and the lever that did that was on the inside. Over time, Rex had become so irritated about having to ring the doorbell of what was theoretically his own home that whenever he was planning to use the front door, Clark would phone the house as their car passed the gates. He must have overheard Rex on the phone. As Rex glanced at it, the front door was opening.



Rex had meant to bound up the east staircase and jolly his father out of his annoyance so he could hurry over to be with his family, but even before he was through the door he could hear the Silvestris drumming in the ballroom. And they were doing an appalling job. Without thinking, Rex began to stride briskly, and then he half-ran down the west first-floor hallway.

On Atlantica, drumming nicely filled every entertainment niche. It was major league baseball, movies and rock music, symphonies and television and Broadway plays: in that tiny world it was an obsession, and those who could do it well were stars. Jack listened only to classical music, but he had come to love Atlantan drumming. The fact that seven drummers could play together pieces as complex and engaging as a symphony had fascinated him. That they did it by melding their minds intrigued him. He had encouraged his son to learn to be a drummer, and by the time Rex abruptly left that world he had become the leader of what was said to be the best team of Atlantan drummers in memory.

"You're thinking, little bud! Stop thinking!" Rex called as he rounded

LETTER FROM WONDER

the corner through the ballroom doorway, grabbed up his gloves from the table by the door, and hopped up onto his own drum's platform.

Atlantican drumming was work. Dennis and Sissy were red-faced and sweating; Sissy's hair lay in strands against her cheeks. They both stopped drumming in mid-stroke and grinned at Rex.

"Show us how, buddy," Dennis called to him indulgently.

But these were such crappy drums! On Atlantica, drums were five or six feet tall. They were slow-burned out of hardwood logs that were typically three feet across. Their ponyskin leathers were precisely stretched and cured: just making the drum-skins was an art. These little two-foot-thick pine logs had been burned out with a blowtorch, and commercially-tanned horsehide was not Atlantican ponyskin. No attempt had been made to tune these drums, which meant that playing real music was impossible. Rex pulled on his gloves. He couldn't drum without gloves now because back home he had developed the appropriate calluses, so here when his hands and body just automatically did what they always had done, he found drumming painful.

The gold-leafed walls and ceiling of this ballroom had been padded to muffle sounds and to protect the murals so Rex's children could play in here, but still Rex knew that his parents would hear him drumming. Cathy, above them, would hear him, too. He could really drum, while Dennis and Sissy made noise. Cathy would patiently understand, but Jack was going to see Rex's need to spend a few minutes with his friends as an irritating show of disrespect. However, this was important to Rex. He had only lately realized that one of the best mind-strengthening exercises that existed in all the earth was the deep connection among minds that was essential to Atlantican drumming.

Rex tried a quick finger-trill. One problem with horsehide was that it couldn't hold its tension like Atlantican ponyskin, and this skin already needed tightening. He played a quick range, knuckles and palms and heels. It would have to do. The drums that they were building in Texas using

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

California redwood logs and ponyskins that Rex was preparing himself were going to be whole worlds better than these.

He said, "Okay. Sis, you were leading, right? Now I'm leading." He paused. "I'm thinking a tune." He paused again. "Can you feel it? Sis?"

Sissy had developed considerably more Atlantican mind-sensitivity than her husband. While sometimes Dennis was able to drum, he had trouble sufficiently quieting his thoughts.

Sissy's eyes were closed. Her face was tranquil. She was five-foot-three at best, a pert little woman with fake-blond hair, but the higher platform on her middle drum made her almost as tall as Rex. Dennis was five-foot-ten, so his drum had a lower platform than hers; Rex was six-foot-five, so his drum had the least platform height of all. Before Rex had taken up drumming back home, drummers had stood on whatever tables or benches were near whichever drums they happened to be playing at the moment. Rex had figured out what was the precise relationship between the top of the drum and the drummer's waist that produced the most effective sound, so now nearly all Atlantican drums had platforms tailored to the heights of their drummers. Rex was pleased that he had left them that gift.

Sissy was starting to smile. She said, "Go."

Atlantican drumming required such arm-strength that very few women were drummers back home, and Atlantican women were tall and lean and robust from living outdoor lives. That this little mite of an American woman could drum at all was amazing to Rex. That she had developed sufficient mind-sensitivity to yield her body to him was astounding.

He began. It was just a little easy tune of the sort they used to play while people were eating supper, before they moved on to the complex and glorious dancing drum-work that had been Rex's bliss. At home he had been able to play seven pairs of hands at once, but even playing two pairs was thrilling. He began to grin as he heard her hands doing what

LETTER FROM WONDER

his mind was directing them to do, even despite the crappiness of these drums.

“Can you feel it, little bud?” Rex called to Dennis.

Rex had been a drum-leader for so long that he was used to keeping the tune going while a part of his mind let him speak to one drummer. Dennis was tentatively starting in, but he was doing it himself; he was a full beat behind. “Don’t think! Feel!” Rex called to Dennis as he spotted Carlson in the doorway.

Jack’s butler was a good friend of Rex’s who had spent many hours drinking beers and telling stories and opining about life at Rex’s kitchen table. Like Clark, he became a different man when on duty, and now there he stood in the ballroom doorway in his black-tie uniform, looking solemn. Rex sighed as he stepped back off his drum. He went to grab Dennis into a hug, touched Sissy’s arm as he came back past her, called over his shoulder to Dennis, “Don’t think!” and followed Carlson out the door.

2

Liz was in her morning place, curled on Jack's sofa with her feet tucked up, pretending to be busy on her laptop while she enjoyed the interplay between Jack and Bobby. The older man sat at his ornate desk set at right angles to the inner wall, and the younger man did what she thought of as a thinking-dance at his standing-desk, also perpendicular to the wall and facing Jack's. They both had twin monitors in front of them, and they were glancing at one another and back at their monitors, play-arguing, teasing, Jack even chuckling. She gathered that they were comparing computerized options trading results, each having championed a different system and each now claiming to have been right.

Jack had lately made Bobby Ingersoll the chairman of his primary holding company, so now Bobby did most of the talking with the presidents of Larkin International's affiliates. Now Bobby was the primary one who fussed over getting better returns on Jack's worldwide real estate portfolio and on his tens of billions of dollars held mostly in non-dollar trading accounts. Liz was enjoying Jack's enjoyment of his contest with Bobby. But Jack had been cranking about Rex all morning, and now out of nowhere he did it again. He interrupted himself to say, "He's going right to Cathy. You watch."

"Don't think so. He'll stop and show the Denman how to drum. I'll call him."

LETTER FROM WONDER

While Jack spent his mornings seated at his desk, Bobby seldom ever sat down, but he spent his mornings at that standing-desk a few feet from Jack's and parallel to it. They made Liz think of a pair of longstanding partners at an old partners' desk, working smoothly in a half-teasing shorthand. Bobby was almost thirty-six now, no longer quite so physically restless, but still lean and flexible and graceful. His habitual facial expression remained a kind of complex and above-it-all bemusement. Jack preferred to hire the relatives of staff, and in Bobby he had hired his own relative, his mother's great-nephew, an Ingersoll cousin with an M.B.A. whose ambition growing up had been to work for Jack Richardson. Liz had thought at first that Bobby was too smart-alecky and frenetic to work with Jack, but he had burned in, somehow. He had turned out to be so perfectly the son that Jack would have wanted that the fact that Jack's actual son had no interest whatsoever in business but instead was trying to fix the world had become no more than an inconvenience.

Jack was about to turn seventy-one, but to Liz he looked no older than fifty-five. His hair was a reddish iron-gray, less severe than the dark mahogany that had been its color for most of his life. His pale eyes remained his most arresting feature, large and wide-set under long lashes. Beautiful. Even thirty-five years after Liz first saw those eyes, the unexpected sight of them could make her breath catch.

Bobby had Rex on the phone. He was making some joke about buying him a Gulfstream using Amazon Prime, and Jack was smiling a little for Bobby's sake but Liz could see how irritated he was. Since Rex had arrived here nine years ago, he had knocked so many pins out from under his father's obsessively maintained security that increasingly now Liz was seeing her husband feeling driven to the edge of frustration by his need to protect his sense of safety from Rex's oblivious encroachments.

They had been dimly hearing Dennis and Sissy drumming. The Silvestris were here to finish cleaning out their apartment in the west wing of the house as they completed their move to Texas, so the nuisance of hearing

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

muffled drumming was going to be short-lived. But then in a moment the Silvestris' noise changed to a louder, coordinated rhythm, and Jack met Liz's eyes. Bobby was almost immediately saying something into his phone about the prodigal son, likely talking to Carlson.

Rex had returned to drumming three years ago after randomly coming upon his parents listening to Atlantican drumming. They were just then beginning to talk about the possibility of visiting Atlantica again, now that what had been Jack's private island had been accepted by the United States as a private protectorate of cultural interest to be studied under the auspices of its new foundation. As Jack had been wryly telling Liz, this country was happy to take over his island so long as he still paid for everything.

There were lots of worries associated with ceding Atlantica to the United States, but they had felt that they really had no choice. After having been comfortably maintained in private hands since the Civil War, Atlantica had become sufficiently famous as Rex began his efforts to fix the world that Jack's longstanding mercenary navy, carrying just rifles and flying no flag, had been finding it harder to keep boats away. Negotiating the private protectorate deal had taken tens of millions of dollars, but by that early-fall morning in 2007 when Rex rediscovered Atlantican drumming the bill had been passed and President Bush had signed it. So now the island's naval defense was flying the American flag, and as part of the deal it had begun to send Jack MP3 recordings of its surveillance circuits.

Rex had already bought his Texas ranch and taken options on the land around it. He was constructing an initial thousand-acre enclosure while he worked with Wilding University in Houston to establish the protocols for what was becoming his great long-term experiment in freedom.

On that summer morning three years ago, Bobby was at his standing-desk and Liz was reading emails while Jack worked at his computer

LETTER FROM WONDER

with his glasses halfway down his nose. He was absently listened to something. Then he grabbed off his earphones and yanked the jack from his computer, and there it was. Above the rhythmic slap of what was probably water against a ship's hull, Liz could hear the wonder of Atlantican drumming, the complex magic of fourteen hands making music at one mind's direction.

"Can you hear it? Bobby?" But it was already receding as the ship continued to move along the shore. Jack flipped the MP3 back to its beginning. The three of them listened raptly as he played over and over those seventy seconds of beautiful, complex music that was unlike anything else on earth.

"That's native drums? Really?"

"No sheet music. The leader makes it up as he goes along." Jack flipped it back to the start yet again as he added, "Six men back their minds out of the way so the leader can play all their hands at once."

"No shit," Bobby said softly.

"Hear that? The riff? That's the drum on the high end. The leader's in the middle of seven drums. He's using someone else's hands to do that riff, and the guy's not even next to him!"

Then Liz noticed their beautiful son standing in the doorway to Jack's sitting room, just back from Texas and wearing the jeans and tweed jacket and cowboy boots that had become his uniform. His eyes were filling. Liz was someone who cried by nature, but Rex hadn't cried even as a child. She set aside her computer and rushed to hug him. Jack stopped the recording.

Rex said, "No. I want to hear it. I think I know who that is."

So Jack played it again, over and over, while all of them watched Rex's face. Slowly he began to smile. "He's in Darakan, right? He's getting better. Hear that – wait – hear the little three-beat there? That's his signature."

By then Rex had been away from drumming for a good six years.

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

Right away he had set in happily to building drums and teaching the Silvestris how to yield their bodies and thinking through how learning how to drum might help Americans to better develop their minds.



There was a time when Rex would have charged with agitation down the hallway into Jack's suite, probably griping that he had a right to fly commercial and just how old did you have to be in this benighted place to be considered a man? Today, though, he strode in confidently, smiling at Liz and then at Bobby, and he went to stand behind his father and slipped his arms around Jack's shoulders and gave him a kiss on the top of his head.

Rex had been in Texas for nearly a week. Seeing him again made Liz freshly thrill to see him as such a confident adult, his body filled out at thirty-two, his reddish-blond hair the color of gold metal and his pale eyes so much like his father's eyes. He was coming to look more and more like Jack. Liz knew that the man she adored was beginning to see their son as his own better self, which was one reason why Rex's increasing sense of independence was such an irritation. Jack had just one child. He had such an aversion to intercourse that if he hadn't briefly indulged Liz's wish in the joy of their first falling in love, he would be childless now.

"You can't fly commercial!"

"But it was a high point, Dad –"

"You can't do it! If it ever becomes known that you –"

"We worked it out with Bergstrom and JFK. I always had someone with a gun. And I had the greatest experience! I sat next to Trayvone Jackson."

"Obscure rapper?" Bobby said, not looking up from his computer screen. "Long-lost Jackson brother?"

"Symington dad! That's what he called himself. A Symington dad. He asked me about my children, so then of course I asked about his. He said,

LETTER FROM WONDER

'I've got three on Symington scholarships. Too bad you're so blond.' And he gave me a grin."

The Steven S. Symington Foundation, now five years old, was Jack's way of honoring his childhood friend who had lost his life on Atlantica. The Symington Foundation was paying to educate every descendant of American slavery born between 1990 and 2020. For Jack it was a tribute to Steve, while for Rex it was an attempt to heal America's racial divisions so he could spiritually unite the country as a first step toward uniting the world.

"Did you tell him who you were?" Bobby didn't look up.

Rex began to pace the room cheerily. He was wearing his usual blue ranch shirt and jeans and cowboy boots. The way Liz was able to tell there was a minor rivalry between them now was that when Bobby was standing, Rex wouldn't sit down.

Rex was saying to Bobby, "I just said, 'Yeah, public schools are rough,' and let him talk. He's got a son born in 1991 who's starting college with a full-time tutor. All his children are in boarding schools. Mr. Jackson said, 'my Symington guy advised me to let them board.' He was a talker! He said there were years when he couldn't support his family. He had to move out and let their mother take welfare. He kept losing jobs, so 'my Symington guy' offered to support the family and pay for him to learn a trade. Now he's an electrician. I didn't know we even did that!"

"Pilot program," Bobby said, briefly standing still while he typed an email. "His Symington guy had to nominate him."

"Let's do it across the board. If the counselor recommends it, we'll do it!"

"We're working out the logistics." Liz heard Bobby add under his breath, "It's a foundation, twinkle. We can't just do whatever we want."

Jack was muttering, "What happened to your plane?"

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

“India needed it. Spades arranged through JetBlue and the airports for me to get home, so I let it go.”

“Spades” was code for whoever was Rex’s or Bobby’s current head of security. Each always had four bodyguards, and for security reasons they were rotated, so Bobby had taken to calling his team the Aces and had assigned a role to each. Now Rex did that, too. It was easier.

Liz said, “Just get India its own Gulfstream, darling. Rex can keep this one.”

“We’ll get him a newer one, honey. Your own plane!” he said to Rex, sounding grim. “Nobody uses it but you. Bobby, see if you can find a nearly-new one. They take too long to build.” To Rex, Jack muttered, “It’s worth a billion dollars to grab you. Someone with a gun? That’s all you had? I forbid you to fly commercial! Ever!”

Rex ignored that. He was gazing out the window beyond the fireplace with his arms crossed on the window frame, apparently studying the view of Long Island Sound. Late-morning sunshine glittered in his hair. Clay, Jack’s valet, would give Rex a haircut whenever Liz could get him to sit for it, but his hair was several inches long now and randomly curling. He said, sounding distracted, “Sorry about the noise. We’re planning to play drums when we send them home at the end of September, but it may be just Sis and me. Dennis is hopeless.”

Bobby looked at Rex then and said, “You’re really locking up two thousand Americans for the rest of their lives? That’s legal?”

“They won’t be locked in.” Rex was still looking out the window. “They always can leave. They just can’t come back.” His face was thoughtful.

“Even the Denman? And his whole family?”

Rex stepped back from the window then and looked at Liz across the room.

“Can you talk to Sis? We’ve built them a house. I never meant to enclose them. Now suddenly they’re saying they’re going in and I can’t talk them

LETTER FROM WONDER

out of it. Their children are my children's friends. How do I tell Milly and Jon they'll never see Sunny and Peter again?"

Liz murmured, "We'll work it out, baby."

"And will you do me a favor, bro?" Rex said, pacing again, glancing at Bobby. "Will you please get married before you move in? Cathy's just found out you're taking the Silvestris' apartment. Do me a favor. She says Milly's already confused by all the different girls you bring to dinner. We don't want –"

"What?" Bobby said with a grin in his voice. "Why would I pluck a single flower when I might enjoy the garden? Isn't that what she said? Jacko? A woman said that! Read it to Rex."

Rex looked at Jack, who picked up a book from the corner of his desk and handed it to him. "No flying commercial! Am I making myself clear?"

"I'm going back on Tuesday. We're still in final screening."

"No –!"

"I'll lease a Gulfstream," Bobby said hurriedly. "He'll have a plane, cuz. He'll be fine."

Rex was flipping through the pages of what Liz knew was an obscure seventeen-year-old novel. He said, "*My Thomas?*"

"That's your author. We're going to put her name on your mother's books. Make them novels."

"What? They're memoirs! I want to put them on the project's website. Memoirs!"

"No."

Liz shrank deeper into the corner of her sofa and bent more intently to her laptop. This back-and-forth about the memoir she had written on Atlantica thirty-five years ago, and the second memoir that she and Rex had written together five years ago, had been turning bitter as Rex's date for enclosing his Texas project came closer. Rex wanted to post their manuscripts as personal statements about the place that his experiment in

freedom was trying to emulate. His father, though, was refusing to allow them to be posted, even if the names were changed.

“They’ll still know it’s us! It’s your project,” he would rant at Rex whenever his son pressed too hard. Finally Jack had conceived the notion of turning the manuscripts into novels, and he had found an independent publisher and commissioned the publisher to find what Jack was defining to Liz as a failed novelist who plausibly could have written them. “Another you, honey.” He had lately been given the name of a woman who had been at Smith College when Liz was there, and whose last novel, sixteen years out of print, had been about Thomas Jefferson’s marriage. As a Jefferson descendant who had developed what Liz thought of as a crush on his famous ancestor, Jack was entranced. He had bought a used copy of her novel on Amazon, and in the four days since it had arrived he had devoured it and begun to quote it.

“I want her to rewrite that one, too,” he was telling Rex now as he read emails down the length of his nose to better see them through his glasses while Rex held the book cradled in his hand and idly flipped its pages. “It’s in funny old English.” Jack paused to type briefly, then said, “‘Fain.’ When was the last time you said ‘fain’? Or ‘naught’?” He was typing. “What was that other word, honey?”

Liz murmured, “Withal.”

“‘Withal’! That’s it. What does ‘withal’ even mean?”

“But if they’re fiction they’re no good to me. Take the personal stuff out, Dad. Change the names. I don’t care. Just let me post the parts about Atlantica.”

“No.” Then Jack added, “‘Aught’. There’s another one.”

“Dad, he’s just your ancestor. He’s got nothing to do with Atlantica.”

Jack looked up sharply. “Jefferson? He’s got everything to do with Atlantica! You’re trying to connect with Americans, right? You need a bridge. Thomas Jefferson’s your bridge. His whole life was *about* human

LETTER FROM WONDER

unity and freedom of mind! That's what he founded this country to be. We forgot that. Make people remember that first, then they'll listen to you about how to get there."

Liz knew that Rex thought of Thomas Jefferson as just an oddly-dressed ancestor at whose eccentric house in Virginia the Ingersolls held their biannual reunions. Rex knew nothing about American history. She wanted to step in now and explain to him Thomas Jefferson's importance, but there was no shorthand way to impart to him all the wisdom so painfully gleaned from millennia of misbegotten world history.

Rex was saying, "You'll just confuse people – "

"Freedom of mind! He even uses your term in that book. You're another Jefferson, son. You're trying to free the people, too. The only difference is you can show them why it's so important to be free. Read that book!"

Rex muttered, "Damn," but softly. He still had the increased mind-powers that were a commonplace on Atlantica, so he easily read other people's emotions. Liz knew by the way Rex was backing off that Jack was likely more upset than he seemed to be.

Rex said to Liz, changing the subject, "*Joyride* is in the port of New York. They say provisioning will take a week, and then our lease starts. The team from Wilding will be here – "

Jack said calmly, "We're not going."

Rex spun. "What do you mean you're not going?"

Liz shrank further. She had feared this might be happening. Jack had been fretting in the past few days about security and all the other risks that he saw in going so far away.

Rex was ranting, "We've leased a yacht. We've got twenty researchers going for a year. Some are already in New York. You have to go!"

Jack looked at Rex over his glasses. He said calmly, "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

You could not bully Jack. Only lately, Liz had come to see that the

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

core reason why he trusted her was likely the fact that never in thirty-five years had she tried to force him to do anything. For a long time she had been so intimidated by his overwhelming presence that she never would have dreamed of getting in his way. Then as she had fallen ever more deeply in love with the man behind the money, she had become so eager for his happiness that she truly wanted only what he wanted. She was lately coming to see that amid all the stresses of a life so complex that it tired her just to live at its edge, she had long since become his island of peace. And at nearly seventy-one, he highly valued that peace.

Rex had once tried to bully Jack. Not long after he had moved into this house, having been wrenched away from the life he had known and confused and frightened by the fact that the Atlantican grid of dense connections among human minds didn't exist in this outer place at all, Rex had begun one evening at dinner to insist that electric lighting was the root of all evil. He hadn't used that term, but Liz recalled that to have been the gist of his complaint. Jack had tried to ignore him. He had muttered to Liz as the next course was served that perhaps she should try to shut him up. So she had gone around Jack's seat at the head of that twenty-place table and put her arms around Rex from behind and tried to calm him just as he began shouting, demanding that the lights go away. Jack had taken that for a minute longer. Then he had stood up, thrown his napkin down and shouted, "This won't work! Get him a car! Get him out of here!" And he had meant it.

Liz had rushed then to put her arms around Jack and managed to calm him and sit him down, so when Carlson had come a few minutes later and announced that the car for Rex was waiting, Jack had told him it wasn't needed. But those few minutes so early in his tenure here seemed to have made such an impression on Rex that although he had a robust temper, never again had he shown Jack anything more forceful than a sullen crankiness.

LETTER FROM WONDER

Now Rex was pacing, running his fingers back through his hair in the habit he had acquired from his father-in-law, glaring at each of them in turn.

“When were you going to tell me, Mom?”

“Leave your mother alone. It’s my decision.”

“But you’ve made it so nobody goes to Atlantica except with you. Now we’re dead in the water!”

“I’m not taking boys there with summer just starting. Do you know what it’s like in the summer?” Then Jack muttered, “Yes, well, I suppose you do.” He sounded angry now, which relieved Liz to see that he was letting out some of the pressures that she knew had been building in him for weeks. “Steve and I spent the summer there between Andover and Dartmouth. It was unbelievable! Everybody’s naked. Everybody! And all these teenage girls were after us. Steve had – how many did I tell you, honey? Was it ten? Steve had at least ten children from that experience. God, sometimes he had five girls a day!”

Rex was glaring at Liz. She said softly, “We’re talking about maybe going in March, darling. When it’s fall there. That way the men on your team will have the winter to – ”

“The operative word being ‘maybe,’” Jack muttered, going back to his emails.

“But the move is set to happen while you’re gone – !”

“I’m also not moving.”

Rex sputtered, “You can’t – Then Cathy won’t move! You agreed five years ago to move to Texas!”

In early 2006 Jack’s tax attorneys had asked for a meeting with the family in the wake of their settlement of an IRS audit of all Jack’s business interests. They had shown the three of them at that meeting how much the family would be able to save by moving from Connecticut and New York to Texas, a state that imposed no income or estate tax.

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

Jack had studied the numbers, sighed, and looked at Liz. When she had nodded, he had said to Rex, “We’ll move. Get it done.”

So Rex had set out to get it done. The family’s residential complex in Texas had cost a hundred million dollars to build, its security systems and armoring made it the safest home in the United States, and it would be completed by the end of the year. Liz knew that Rex had planned his project’s enclosure around the family’s move to Texas. She had lived on Atlantica for twenty-five years, and he wanted her there to offer advice as people who had been American all their lives began the adventure of trying to live as Atlanticans. And with his family there, Rex could stop all this commuting. Liz believed that by spring she would be able to turn Jack’s mind on both the Atlantica trip and the move, but Rex looked devastated.

“Let’s try for the spring, baby,” she said softly.

Rex said to Bobby in a voice like ice under velvet, “I want you to write down for me every reason he has for not wanting to go to Atlantica and every reason he has for not wanting to move.” Then he lifted his chin, said to all of them, “I’m going to see my wife now,” and left the room.