

Future Perfect

A Novel

by Michael Delving

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For Boomer, pure and simple.

Future Perfect

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"Good-bye And Keep Cold" by Carl Sandburg © 1946. "At Last," BMI Records © 1955.

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This saying good-bye on the edge of the dark
And the cold, to an orchard so young in the bark
Reminds me of all that can happen to harm
An orchard away at the end of the farm
All winter, cut off by a hill from the house.
I don't want it girdled by rabbit and mouse,
I don't want it dreamily nibbled for browse
By deer, and I don't want it budded by grouse.
(If certain it wouldn't be idle to call
I'd summon grouse, rabbit, and deer to the wall
And warn them away with a stick for a gun.)
I don't want it stirred by the heat of the sun.
(We made it secure against being, I hope,
By setting it out on a northerly slope.)
No orchard's the worse for the wintriest storm;
But one thing about it, it mustn't get warm.
"How often already you've had to be told,
Keep cold, young orchard. Goodbye and keep cold..."

– Carl Sandburg

The couple was breathing hard, Sarah more than Peter. With a shared glance, they knew what they had to do. Dangerous, yes, even foolhardy, but it had to be done. They gathered their wits about them, inhaled deeply and like a single entity, they did it: they pedaled their bikes out into the angry Chicago traffic.

Both of them preferred biking over driving, especially in the city. There were no parking hassles, they received exercise instead of creating pollution, and most days they even made better time. But biking presented its own set of challenges, its own unique risks.

They easily dodged the ancient broken baby carriage resting half in, half out of the gutter. They temporarily went airborne from a split in the asphalt formed by the blazing summer heat, and dodged an angry Checker cab, horn blaring. Even with all the dangers, the road was safer than the sidewalk. If you brushed against the wrong pedestrian, you might find yourself trying to outrace a hail of lead. In the street, you only had to watch out for the more militant drivers, those for whom road rage was a permanent way of life.

Like that milk truck just ahead. Straying purposefully across the center line, he deliberately forced oncoming traffic over with a decidedly urban rudeness. The couple slowed, zig zagging back and forth, looking for a way around the rolling obstruction. Left was too close to the already-squeezed oncoming traffic; right was the only way. Peter pulled smoothly in front of Sarah and led the way. He drew parallel to the truck's

chapter ONE

At Last

spinning rear wheel, then up to the open passenger side door. He glanced inside and got a momentary glimpse of the driver: twenty-ish, tattoos of the same indescribable shade as the stains on his t-shirt, buzz cut around the temples, five dangling earrings (that Peter could see), and a butt hanging from his lips.

Great, Peter thought to himself. *De-evolution is possible. I must send a letter to the Smithsonian.*

They passed the truck with a burst of speed, Peter leading, Sarah following. Their biking order wasn't a fair indication of all their life together. Theirs was a comfortably equal relationship, although they laughed whenever any of their friends used the 'R' word within range of their hearing. They recognized the balance that was their life together, and thoroughly enjoyed it. Peter was the energy, but Sarah had the drive. Sarah was creative, but Peter had that bubbling desire. Peter looked towards their long-term future, but Sarah kept them focused on the right path.

"How 'bout a tune?" she shouted to him as the wind whipped past their faces.

"Swell," he yelled back. He pulled his right hand off the hand grip and fumbled with a black bag that hung by velcro straps from his handlebars. He carefully slipped out a cd disk from the holder and plopped it into a player that was fastened around his waist. They both wore the players, and an odd-looking contraption the players were connected to. The contraption looked like a single huge spaghetti noodle, laid across their shoulders and allowed to droop down on their chest. Peter had called it the 'Bone Phone,' an idea he came up with when he'd first started bicycling. He figured, to insure biker safety, you should always be able to hear the traffic around you. But the Walkman craze had been well underway, and bikers and other outdoors folk wanted their music with them. So he invented the 'Bone Phone,' a simple resonating tube that rested across the body and played music through the vibrations created from it. The idea got patented by a mega-corporation first (after Peter had talked with them on the phone about it), but their release never picked up steam.

Peter still kept his, still used it regularly, had even made modifications to it to keep it current. The addition of the cd player was simple, but what amazed Sarah was when he had built one for her, just after they'd met. He'd installed another simple device that displayed his brilliance even better.

He adjusted the volume of the controls from the cd player as he surveyed the rode ahead, then called over his shoulder, "Channel three!" She switched on her own 'Phone and adjusted the receiver to the correct channel, and immediately, the same music that his 'Phone played emanated from hers. "A simple radio link," he'd explained to her, one that allowed them both to hear the same music, which was currently "Tumbling Bones" by local bluesman Lonnie Brooks. The drivers with their windows down and many of the pedestrians, too, all looked their way as they rolled past the congestion, blues music vibrating from their very souls.

The man sure can come up with ideas, even if I do have to fill out the paperwork for him. That had been something of a problem for him, before they met. Other ideas of his had been appropriated by those 'patent mills' that regularly ripped people off for their inventions, and charged them while they were doing it.

Two of his beam-communication ideas had even been appropriated by the government, deemed “too close to Vital National Interests” to allow them to remain in the public sector. The government even had the audacity to write Peter and ask for more detailed instructions. Peter would have gone ahead and supplied them, but Sarah put her foot down. “They stole it. Let them figure it out.”

He hadn't seen any real money from most of his ideas, but then, that wasn't why he invented.

He'd made the 'Bone Phone' from what he saw as necessity. Peter thought it was great that they could play music and still hear the traffic around them. That was Peter: always thinking about making the environment respond to his needs. Sarah was just happy that she and Pete could talk while they rode.

But right now, they were heading for serious trouble. A garbage hauler, what Peter called a 'ten-ton bike swatter,' was backing out across both lanes, its warning siren beeping aggressively. Another couple would have slowed down, waited until the hauler was safely moving forward. But Sarah and Peter weren't that kind of couple. They had an appointment with destiny, and they weren't going to be stopped.

With Peter slowing in the lead, they both appraised the situation in a heartbeat. *No room to maneuver behind the truck, especially with him backing up. He's too close to that parked car on the right; he'll be lucky he doesn't take off the bumper. He's so wide, we won't have room enough to pass him on the left, and once he starts forward, it'll be diesel fumes and stinking refuse trailing behind him. Only one thing to do.*

With a series of subtle hand gestures to his partner, Pete dropped his head down closer to his handlebars. Sarah did likewise. Without peddling, using only the inertia they had built up, they leaned right and hopped the curb between two parked cars. They both slammed back down onto the sidewalk, dodged under a pair of low-hanging branches, then deftly whisked between a sitting baby stroller and the nearby parking meter. Without approaching the crowded sidewalk, they rolled fast down the no-man's land of parkway trees and meters for about twenty yards, until they passed the front bumper of the slowing garbage truck. Then they both took three quick pedals and launched their bikes off the curb into the empty southbound lane.

Pete hit the pavement and showed off by squealing his back tire as he landed, but Sarah took the asphalt gracefully and used her momentum to pull up alongside him.

Sarah smiled. Peter smiled back, and let out a whoop of joy. They sped up to about thirty-five as they sailed untroubled down the empty half of Broadway.

She watched the world of the North Side flash past as they sped down the street. Groceries, laundromats, telephone outlets, t-shirt dealers, all the 'necessities' of modern human life, flashed by as they rode south. The North Side was a yuppie bastion these days, far removed in style and substance from the area's original construction by immigrants from the Old World. The last endearing traces left from the Polish and German settlers had all been wiped away. *There used to be a great pirogi delicatessen there, she recalled, looking at the store front where the 'Angry Clown' cd shop now held sway. Over there was the best little book*

dealer, just filled with one-of-a-kind titles, she mused, as her reflection wheeled by a coffee shop window whose words read 'Rock Around the Clock.' *I still say they're selling crack undercover there now.*

She remembered the night Peter and she had heard about a drug shooting not far from his apartment, near Clark and Montrose. A kindly older woman, an icon in their neighborhood, had gotten fed up with the dealers on her corner, and went out and told them what for. She got sprayed with automatic gunfire for her efforts, though with the talent level in gangs being what it is, they missed her with every shot. The commotion, the police and all the sirens, alerted the neighborhood before any newscast, and when Peter heard about it, he went out and stood on their corner. That's all, he just stood there. He looked up and down the street, said hello to their friends, greeted those he hadn't met before, commiserated with the worried.

A few others got the idea, and after a couple of hours, there were other 'watchers' on every street corner in the neighborhood. When Sarah had come outside to ask him why he was doing that, he replied, "Should have done this a long time ago, when the problem first started." He instigated a community watch program from that first night's vigil, though he knew it wouldn't last. Still, it kept any further violence down, and forced the street dealers to move their operation almost half a mile away.

Maybe Peter's right, she heard herself say. Maybe it is time to leave this city.

But she loved Chicago. They both did. It was like a little city that had hit the big time. The crowds at the summer fests, the home town teams and their too-often disappointed fans, the blues clubs, the Lakefront, the theatres, the restaurants. Oh, the restaurants! But on the other hand, she weighed the negatives: the crowds (*wasn't that one of my positives?*), the traffic, the pollution, the violence, the crime, the overall cheapening of life. *What was it that some pundit had said? I like humans, it's people I can't stand? Something like that. Too many people all crowded together always seem to ruin a good thing.*

At 2841 North, they slowed. They hopped off their bikes and rolled to a running stop on the sidewalk. They hurriedly balanced their bikes against a nearby 'No Parking' sign, after Peter checked to make sure it wasn't a 'sleeper' (a pole you could pick up and steal the bikes locked to it). All the stores in this section of town butted up against each other, like books on a library shelf. Above this particular shop hung a wooden sign, a weathered, hand-lettered affair, spelling out 'Blue Horizon' in old English script. Sarah approached the window-front almost like it was a dangerous animal. She removed her helmet and gloves and shook out her long cinnamon-red hair. She moved her face so close that her rounded nose almost touched the glass. Her green eyes blinked twice, trying to peer into the darkened store, then she shaded her eyes with one hand and squinted.

Was it there? she wondered. It had to be there!

She whirled about to ask Peter's opinion, but she took pause at the sight of his bending body. As he kneeled to lock the bikes, she affectionately appraised his cycling-toned buns, which occupied her gaze. She appraised his tan, half-bearded face visible in profile, and the way his brown-black hair complemented his Milk

Dud-colored eyes. He was tall, almost a foot more than her five-seven frame. His was an athlete's physique, though he rarely worked out; "a present from my ancestors," he'd always tell the curious. He really did spend more time at the local bookstores than at any gym, and more time on the Mac than the Nautilus. But the hours he spent every week on his mountain bike kept any fat at bay.

Her attention zeroed in on his oddly handsome face. His lean, chiselled features made him look much darker and more intimidating than he really was. *At least, most of the time*, she thought. She smiled as she walked up behind him and whispered in his ear. "Hey mister, you're kinda cute. Why don't you and I go out slow-dancing some night?"

"Oh, I can't do that," Peter replied, still concentrating on the lock. "My fiancé wouldn't like that." He glanced momentarily across the street. "She's kind of funny that way."

Smiling at his own joke, he raised up and was ready to follow her, when the store next door caught his attention. The letters plastered across the wide plate glass window read 'Inter-Netch.' Though the joke was lost on him, the view inside told him everything: pale-skinned computer operators, coffee at hand, living their lives vicariously through the one-way machines in front of them. *Might as well just have an espresso IV in the arm and another in the brain*, he thought. *Is that what our technology is doing to us? Turning us into electronic automatons? Better when we just had TVs*, he thought, dragging his eyes away, *but only barely so*.

"C'mon, slow poke," Sarah said, and bounded across the sidewalk to the store next door. Pete caught up to her and they stumbled inside, doing a Moe-and-Curly in the doorway.

Inside, the Blue Horizon was filled with an amazing collection of antiques, throw-aways and certifiably odd bric-a-brac. One wall was festooned with old hats, both men's and women's, plus bows and scarves of every variety. More old clothes hung from racks in the back of the store. Four or five glass-fronted display cases contained jewelry, rare wooden chests, a few select first editions, some interesting glassware. Here and there, well worn overstuffed chairs sprawled about the room, waiting for derrieres to descend upon them.

The middle-aged lady behind the counter laughed at their comical entrance, then turned semi-serious. "I'm so sorry, but it's not here."

Their faces instantly turned ashen. "What? What do you mean it's not here?" Sarah asked quickly.

The woman's frown transformed into a sly smile. "It's *here*." She stooped behind the counter and her hands reappeared cradling a small cardboard box.

Sarah let out her breath with a mixture of relief and good humor. "Tina, I could just *tickle* you!"

"Don't tickle me until you see it. I hope it's what you were looking for." She carefully placed the box on the glass countertop. The couple gingerly handled the box and began opening it, four hands crowding the work. "I know how long you've been looking, how tough a decision it's been. I hope it works for you."

The couple's eyes went round as bottlecaps as they peered inside the box. Carefully, they cradled the object with their fingertips as they removed the object and placed it on the counter in front of them.

Four twinkling eyes shown back at them from the small ceramic statuette. A young boy, maybe six or seven, leaned forward to kiss an equally young girl. Behind the boy's back he grasped a hidden rose. Shyness radiated from the girl in the gesture of a single index finger placed cautiously up to her mouth. The statuette was hand-painted in soft colors, grays and tans mostly, but the spare use of red on the girl's cheeks and on the petals of the rose contrasted perfectly.

Sarah sighed. "Oh Tina, it works, it *works!*"

Peter laughed. "It works better than a Teamster!" All three laughed together, then they all began yammering about the little statuette, praising it simultaneously.

All the while, the little girl still shied away from the boy's kiss. But the boy was insistent, and after all, he did have the rose to fall back on.

Outside the store, Peter packed away the statuette in a green pannier that hung beside the rear wheel. He wrapped the box carefully in a towel, then placed that within a plastic bag, "Just in case," he said to Sarah, who he knew was watching over his shoulder.

Sarah didn't argue. She knew that Peter had a knack about knowing when to be cautious and when to take risks. On their first date together in the city, he had spotted a running man near the Hancock (a thief by the very sight of a gaudy purple clutch purse in one hand and a wicked knife in the other), and gave chase, along with three other good samaritans. When they caught the man, Peter and one of the others (a linebacker, from his size) had tackled the man and dropped him to the sidewalk. The linebacker and two of his buddies then took turns kicking the downed man into near-unconsciousness. "Hey, leave the poor guy alone! He's down, all right?" Peter had yelled.

The linebacker's reply, between kicks, was, "He's still holding the knife."

So Peter calmly stepped forward, bent down and pried the knife out of the dazed thief's hand. He tossed it aside and turned on the other three samaritans. "There, he's unarmed. Now leave him alone."

She watched him tenderly packing the statuette and smiled. He knew when to attack and when to defend. She had loved him from the very beginning, and never harbored so much as a doubt. Just as long as his instincts for recognizing the mood of the situation held, they'd be okay.

She cocked her head sideways, a question on her lips. She camouflaged it by asking an innocuous one first. "You like it, Hutch? The cake topper, I mean?"

Peter stood up and zippered the bike bag closed. "I think it'll make a great cake topper, Starsky," he replied. He turned around and looked her square in the eye. "There's something else, isn't there? What's on

your mind, girl? You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No, of course not." If the sincerity in her words hadn't convinced him, then the tender way she wrapped her arms around him would have. "It's...it's the honeymoon."

"Oh, that," he replied, serious. He smiled and tried to defuse the moment. "I promise I'll be gentle?"

"Stop it. You know what I mean." She held him close and pressed her mouth against his neck. "It's such a long trip. I'm worried we might not want to come back."

"I know what you mean." He held still while she grabbed him as tight as she could, which she did for a long moment. When she loosened her grip, he added, "If it helps any, I don't care where I am, as long as it's you and me together."

"Thanks. That helps, a little," she said. She leaned away and just like that, the moment was passed. She shook her hair back as she placed her helmet on and snugged the neckstrap closed. She pulled her bike away from his and swung it in the air to point it back north, up Broadway. "Race you home?"

"Hey, wait!" he yelled, but she was already off, laughter echoing back over her shoulder.

He struggled to get his gear on and swing his bike around, and before too long, he was pumping to catch up with her. He watched her slim, strong frame push the bicycle faster, and though he was in excellent shape himself, catching her was no easy task. He'd get close, then she'd notice and laughingly pull away. Her long hair swept out from under her helmet like a crimson scarf. Her lycra bike shorts displayed her long, beautiful legs and her compact butt. Peter shook his head in appreciation as he watched her bounce up and down on the pedals. Her face seemed to be framed in a perpetual smile, lighting up everyone around her, and her voice was smooth and deep, like a refreshing country stream. Her eyes were bright orbs within a high cheekboned setting, her small mouth a half-circle underline.

He wanted to be with her always, no matter what. He knew that the second he had first seen her face, and was able to match an image with the picture in his mind.

He recalled the first time he stopped by her office, such as it was. They had met through a Reader ad, a dating service provided by the Northside free weekly paper. He had caught her eye with a surprisingly humorous paragraph, what he called his 'Hemingway haiku,' something catchy about "the lone cyclist paused, poised atop the hill, considered the sharp descent, then took a swig of Chianti from his beaten water bottle. Refreshed, he pedaled his way down." They had talked and laughed on the phone for hours that first week. She seemed like such a nice sweet girl, he was almost hesitant to meet her at the Labs, her nickname for the privately-funded research facility she headed. He sweated out the next fifteen hours, worried that anyone that nice on the phone couldn't be as attractive as he hoped for.

He strained on the pedals to catch her, but she was really racing. She paused at a red light, letting

two cars go through, before she stomped on it and pedaled furiously across the busy intersection. That first meeting at her office, after they laughed off the nervousness of seeing each other in the flesh, was really an eye opener. Some experiment in cold fusion had gone terribly wrong, and she had raced into the main lab to shut down the project without destroying the equipment or ruining the data collected. As she spun knobs and rapped on five different keyboards, punched buttons and ripped out power cords, Peter stood back and smiled. He quickly pulled out the ubiquitous notepad that he carried in his back pocket wherever he went, and scribbled a note, two short words, then ripped the page out and folded it in half. In the time it took him to put his notepad away, Sarah had quelled the storm, and the three men in the room were thanking her for her quick action in saving their work.

She tried apologizing to Peter, began haltingly an explanation that her workplace wasn't always so chaotic. He cut her off in mid-sentence. "Excuse me, Miss Chardonne, but do you have an envelope?"

His manner was so sweet and his little-boy face so charming, she didn't know what to say. She led him back to her office, where she ducked her hand into a drawer to retrieve a number 10. But as she did, his hand touched hers. A spark snapped between their fingers, or did they just imagine it? He wrapped up her fingers in his, uttered no words, but that one gentle moment spoke volumes. Without taking his eyes away from hers, he accepted the envelope, slipped the folded note inside and licked the flap, sliding his tongue as slowly and as sensually as he ever had across a piece of paper. She smiled, then laughed, a short burp of noise, and Peter joined in. He handed her the envelope and said, "Don't open this, until..." His voice trailed off.

"Until when?" she prompted him.

"Until later. I'll let you know."

It was perhaps three weeks later that they first made love, a long evening of deep passion and unexpected intimacy. It was another three weeks before she blurted out one night, as they lay in his apartment, naked on the couch, bathed in the streetglow of the artificially bright city, those three world-changing words. She hadn't meant to voice her love so quickly; she was afraid she might scare him away. But his reaction really puzzled her. He leaned forward on the couch, pushing himself into an upright position. Staring straight ahead, he asked, "You still carry that envelope I gave you, the day we first met?"

"You know I do. It's in my purse, always."

"Get it."

The oak floors in the hallway were cold and the chill raced up her spine, forming goosebumps all over her body. *What have I done? What does his reaction mean?* Her hand shook as she removed the now-worn envelope, folded and re-folded over and over in those six quick weeks, but never opened. It had been the subject of her girlfriends' heated debates, but she had never succumbed to the temptation of opening it. Her fingers trembled as she drew it out, then got worse as she carried it back down that long hallway,

seemingly a hundred feet long now, back to his waiting figure, hunched forward on the couch.

She sat down gingerly next to him, wondering what the problem was. She looked at him, her quick mind racing ahead, wondering if their time together was already at an end simply because she'd told him how much she cared. She wanted to put him at ease, but he spoke two words in a sharp command: "Open it."

Her trembling flared up before she got control of it. An eternity flashed past as she tried not to rip the envelope as she opened it. Inside was a single folded page, torn from his notebook, she recognized. She slid the page out and unfolded it. Only two words were scrawled there. She stared at them for a long minute, trying to comprehend their meaning. They weren't that hard to digest, especially for someone of her education. But though they were in English, her brain couldn't grasp their full significance or what they were doing on a page that Peter had written and folded that first time at her office, when all hell had broken loose and she was barely able to contain an explosive situation.

She stared at the two words. She couldn't believe he had written that note way back then, had folded it calmly and tucked it into the envelope as if it was nothing, as if it were only a bill from Deleece's restaurant down the street, or a grocery reminder, or a check. It was none of those things, and that fact made her heart skip a beat. Their life would never be the same after this.

She didn't know whether to hit him or scream. Instead, she dropped the note from her hand and threw her arms around him, hugging him, squeezing him, planting kisses on every inch of his exposed skin, which was all of it.

The note fluttered to the floor. As he laughingly accepted her response, the note landed face up in the yellow-gold light of the sodium vapor sentinels outside. Two words were visible: 'Marry me?'

"I take it that's a yes?"

Sarah convinced him by doubling her affection, and they sprawled all over the couch.

Peter smiled at the memory, as he raced to catch up with her. Her legs were much more well-muscled than most of the Twiggy-wannabes that filled the North Side these days. She stayed ahead of him all the way back to his apartment on Dover.

He let her win the race back to the apartment. He let her gain the shower first, scattering clothes every which way, scaring the cat. He let her have her way in the shower, then on top in the waterbed.

He let her. At least, that's what he told her in bed afterwards, half-jokingly. That led to some spirited tickling and good-natured wrestling, which progressed to more tickling and more wrestling. They wound up making love three times that night, with the statuette that would become their wedding cake topper simultaneously kissing and shyly smiling down at them from atop the nearby dresser.



The doorbell rang, an old-fashioned chime that sounded like a miniature Big Ben had been planted within the old limestone walls just the other side of the oak door. Presently, the sound of women's heels resounded on stone floors. Peter and Sarah could feel the vibrations outside on the stone landing where they stood. The door unlatched with a heavy, reassuring feel, and then swung inward. On the other side of the threshold stood a short, elderly woman with eyes that glittered like a third-grader's.

"Mrs. Jenkins?" Peter inquired politely.

"Yes! Why, you must be Peter and Sarah! I'm so glad you could make it!" Her words came out a little raspy from decades of wear on her vocal cords, but the energy behind them seemed as fresh as morning blossoms. Her dress, a navy blue cotton, ran from her neck down to her ankles, where her old-fashioned button-down shoes poked out as she walked. Her throat was enclosed by a simple pearl necklace, from which suspended an oval cameo. Her yellow-white hair was done up in a simple bun at the back, and a few wisps of loose strands hung to either side. She looked like she might have lived in the old house a hundred years ago, when it was first built. But then, that was the idea.

"Come in, please." She opened the door wide and backed up. Sarah entered the cool house first, followed closely by Peter, who tugged at the back of her blouse in jest. Sarah swished his hand away before their host noticed. "The interior of the Willis House, constructed in 1896," she intoned in her well-practiced manner, "has been preserved just as you see it here. All the furnishings are authentic and date back at least to the early 20's, when the last owners lived here."

The couple let their eyes sweep about the interior. Waist-high woodwork, expensive quarter-sawn cherry, filled the hallway and the short stairwell ahead, and led further into the house. Above the woodwork hung dozens of old photographs, tintypes and other hand-colored shots. The lighting fixtures that jutted from the walls or hung low from the ceiling were all hundred-year-old electric pieces, instead of the expected gas fixtures. The ceilings were white-coated tin, etched in deep geometric patterns popular at the turn of the century. The hallway held a pair of matching butlers, narrow wooden seats with raised lids for boots, supporting great lead-glass mirrors that stood poised like guardians before some ancient shrine.

Mrs. Jenkins led them up the small stairway and turned around on the higher level, just about level with Peter's eyes. "You two are interested in a wedding, yes?"

"No, thank you. We've got one of our own planned," Peter said drily.

"Hush," Sarah quipped. "Yes, Mrs. Jenkins, we're thinking of having our reception here."

"Well, that would be splendid. The Willis is very popular with people who are exchanging their vows. It's almost like we're a marriage factory." She giggled her confidence to them, and they smiled right back. "This

room in here," she indicated to the left with a wave of her hand, "is often used for the bar, or if you're having a buffet, for the appetizers and what not. Over here," she said, leading them down an angled hallway to the back of the house, "contains the modern kitchen, complete with chef's stove and professional-sized refrigerators."

Something in the arrangement of the three intersecting hallways they walked through struck Peter as odd. Snapping his fingers, he got Sarah's and Mrs. Jenkins' attention immediately. Sheepishly, he announced, "The house is laid out in a 'Y' shape."

"Yes, it is. How observant of you!" She stepped into a large room that opened off to the right of the intersection. "Mr. Willis was something of a Renaissance man. He designed the layout of the house himself, and planned much of the furnishings you see, too." She stopped in the middle of the room and turned about. Peter and Sarah followed closely. "This is what he called the Ballroom, although there isn't much evidence that they ever held any balls here." The room was open to the second floor roof, which was supported by deeply weathered dark oak beams. The walls were faced with pale plaster down to the cherrywood, which contrasted wonderfully with the yellow-oak flooring. A massive fireplace occupied the angle adjacent to the hallway entrance behind them, and a pair of matching windows sat in the two long walls, half-bays that jutted out from the main room. The end of the room was completely filled with an early version of French doors, only these were made of wrought iron and held small hand-blown glass panels.

"Let me show you around the outside." She stepped out through the glass doors, waited for them to exit, then softly pulled the doors partially closed behind them. She walked between them and headed straight away from the house. "The builder of the Willis House, Mr. Johnson Willis, acquired his fortune just before the turn of the century. Mr. Willis foresaw the advent of electricity and got in on the ground floor, working with the famous Mr. Westinghouse out of Long Island."

"Not with Mr. Edison?" Sarah asked politely, as she and Peter fell into step behind their tour guide.

Mrs. Jenkins turned her head with mock horror. "Oh my, no. Mr. Willis knew Edison had it all wrong. You see, Edison wanted to wire up New York with direct current, while Westinghouse and his partner – oh, now, what was his name?" She may have given the tour a thousand times, but Mrs. Jenkins always had trouble with that one name. Peter bowed his tall frame down to lean his head closer to hers.

"Tesla," he offered simply.

"That's right, Tesla!" She smiled back up at the man who towered over her. "You certainly know your inventors, Peter. Anyway, Mr. Tesla and Mr. Westinghouse knew that the right way to do it was with alternating current. So Mr. Willis and Mr. Westinghouse became partners, and that's how Mr. Willis got to stringing lights all across Manhattan, then the Midwest." They had progressed some distance down a path through a section of ornamental gardens, when Mrs. Jenkins stopped in the shade of a large old maple and turned about. "Now, isn't that a pretty picture?"

She indicated with wide-spread arms the house behind them, and the couple obliged her by turning around. Indeed, the old house looked like the subject of a Monet painting. The exterior was composed of large blocks of native limestone, which had weathered over the years to a soft yellow, though they still retained their straight, crisp edges. The wide downstairs windows were bordered by decorative shutters of deep chocolate brown. The floorplan was creatively strange, and the house bent in a 'Y' in front of them, so that the front door sat in the lee between two almost-facing walls. On the right, the roofline sloped gently down from a soaring stone chimney, enclosing the Ballroom, capped by the wide French doors at one end. To the left, the second floor headed straight across, dotted by smaller windows set with more hand-blown glass. Below that was a screened-in porch, as large as the Ballroom, that was colloquially termed a Florida room. Another wing swept off unseen on the opposite side of the house, where the new kitchen and a fabulously carved library lay.

Wonderfully preserved elms soared above the roof on either side, and the bright colors of the garden rolled forward with beds of tall ornamentals hugging the two facing walls. The house bore all the earmarks of a Long Island castle upgraded with peculiar Midwestern improvements, an elegant design taken a little left of normal. It looked like the mansion of an imaginative millionaire, or the retreat of an industrious fruitcake. Mr. Willis, apparently, was a little of both.

"Isn't it lovely?" Mrs. Jenkins said again. "And the rest of the house that you haven't seen is only more of the same." Peter and Sarah could only nod in agreement.

To prolong the moment, Mrs. Jenkins tried to make small talk. "So, what do you two do for a living?"

The couple looked at each other and smiled, Peter gesturing that Sarah should go first. Clearing her throat a little noticeably and taking a deep breath, Sarah began, "I'm the Administrator of Research and Dynamic Flow at the Glashow Meson and Boson Detection and Collision Experiment at a privately funded particle physics installation, just outside Chicago."

After a few moments of admiring approval, where the only sound came from the bees working the garden around them, Peter said, "She's very good, at it, too." He watched Mrs. Jenkins' expression shift as she tried to get her mind around that long title. When he thought she had finally finished conjugating it, he added whimsically, "I'm a not-half-bad writer, and a sometime inventor." He waited for the inevitable reply.

"Well, that's all right," Mrs. Jenkins replied sympathetically. Everyone did, after hearing her lofty, near-incomprehensible title and comparing that with his.

Sarah asked softly, "We understand the house was built above an active fault line?"

Mrs. Jenkins cocked her head, as if she'd heard a far-off wild animal, now a stranger in these parts. "Why, yes, that's correct, but very few people have ever heard that story. There aren't many fault lines in the Midwest, other than the New Madrid, and that's hundreds of miles away. Still, there are a few weak faults around here. The Hinsdale south of here is a good example. Mr. Willis apparently knew this location had a

semi-active fault when he purchased the property, but he built the house anyway.” She pointed to the left of the main building, near the screened-in porch. “Over there, by those two tall elms, you can see a dip in the ground. That’s the surface appearance of the fault line. The dip wanders into a little creek further away from the house.”

She turned to face the couple. “Oh, but the fault hasn’t been active in over a hundred and fifty years. I hope you won’t let that worry you.”

“Rest assured,” Sarah said warmly, “we aren’t worried in the least.”

“Good!” She led them down the path back to the house again. “Over there’s the old Carriage House, which has since been converted into the Conference Center.”

“Most businessmen belong in a barn anyway,” Peter said with a trace of sincerity.

“Yes, don’t they?” Mrs. Jenkins answered agreeably. “Over that way is the original kitchen, which was built away from the main house in case of fire. They would bring the food in through the glass doors of the Ballroom, which was also used as a dining room for major occasions.” They paused before the main door. “On the other side of the house, down the drive a ways, is the Guest House.” She added in a confiding tone, “Mr. Willis liked his guests, but didn’t like them too close. Couldn’t stand any snoring.”

The couple smiled appreciatively at this tidbit of knowledge. Sarah grabbed Peter’s hand in hers and smiled up at him. “I think this would be just the perfect place to have our reception. Don’t you?”

“Absolutely.” Peter turned to face Mrs. Jenkins. “Can we sign the paperwork now?”

“Why don’t you take a stroll around the estate, just to be sure. The trees are beginning to turn, and they’re so lovely just now. Have you seen the gazebo yet?” she asked expectantly. When the couple shook their heads together, she became appalled. “Oh, but most people go and see that before they ever make a decision on the House.”

“We’re not most people, Mrs. Jenkins. We’re definitely sure we want to have our reception here.”

“Trust me, you’ll want to see the gazebo before you make your decision.” She turned Peter bodily around, and Peter didn’t fight her. “Take that path there, and when it splits to cross the creek, stay to the left and follow it up the hill.” Without waiting for an argument, she backed through the doorway and closed the door rather resoundingly upon them.

Peter blinked twice, then looked down at Sarah, wearing a rather bemused smile. “Well, my dear,” he said, “shall we go and examine the outbuildings?” His stilted manner drew a hearty laugh from her. Arm in arm, they swung off the landing and followed the flagstones around the left side of the house.

The grounds about the old Willis House were indeed gorgeous. Small patches of daffodils, pansies and daylilies bordered the various walkways that spread out like a peacock’s tail from the main house. A vast yard fronted this side of the estate, with small benches nestled here and there among tended groves of spruce

and pine. The early September chill and steadily declining sunshine had tinted the surrounding deciduous trees in wondrous shades of orange and yellow. Most of the branches had retained a sizeable percentage of their leaves, and many of them were still green. As Sarah and Peter strolled hand in hand through the carpet of dry leaves, they breathed in the fresh smells and exhaled contentment.

“Oh, Peter, this is the place! I just love that old building.”

“Yes, but is there enough room inside? If we send out a hundred and twenty-five invitations –”

Sarah smiled as she corrected him. “A hundred and fifty.”

Peters rolled his eyes back in their sockets. “Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph! What if everyone accepts? I can’t see how we’ll get them all inside.”

Their stroll took them to a narrow dirt path, worn by a century and a half’s worth of visitors. They headed deeper into the trees along the edge of the grounds. “We can always have tables set up outside,” Sarah replied. “And besides, not everyone invited can ever make it to a wedding.”

“With our luck, we’ll get everyone plus a few dozen more.” They crossed an old stone bridge, built just wide enough for a carriage, though no ruts were visible in the grass and dirt path. “But you’re right. If we put up maybe ten or twelve tables, that could handle the overflow. What did the pamphlet say the Willis House could hold indoors? Eighty-five?”

“Eighty-five downstairs, another twenty upstairs, if we want to use those rooms, too.”

“And that’s including the ball room, but that’ll have to be cleared before the band starts.”

The narrow path curved around to the right, following a lazy, stone-choked stream. The gurgling watter chuckled along with their conversation, taking everything they said for a joke. “By the way,” Sarah asked, snuggling her body closer, “what did Mike say about the band? Are their wife’s coming?”

Peter chuckled. “Mike’s wife said she wouldn’t miss Clara’s food for all the soccer games in Grayslake.”

Sarah joined in with her own laughter. “So she’s been to her restaurant before?”

“Apparently. Dave’s wife is coming too, but Gary and Rob’s probably won’t be able to.”

“That’s a shame. Dave’s wife is always the first out on the dance floor.”

“With our friends, I doubt that’ll be a problem.”

Their walking took on a slight degree of difficulty as they climbed a low rise and pushed past the thicker undergrowth that clogged this section of the woods. They said little, content to let the sounds of the forest serenade them. They entered a long clearing where the air was warm and birds sang in the branches above them, substituting their happy music for the gurgling of the stream, quickly being left behind. The path split and they stayed to the left, heading away from the sunny clearing into a deeper glen. After a dozen paces, the canopy overhead opened into a high green roof, soaring above them like the vault of a great cathedral.

Peter and Sarah saw it at the same time. “Oh, Peter, this is where I want to say our vows.”

“Our vows? Heck, this’d be a decent place to live!”

Ahead of them, at the end of the path, was an ancient gazebo, built up from the forest floor about a foot or two. The foundation was concrete faced with river stones, so it appeared to have been built upon a leveled mound of large boulders. Six massive pillars supported a roof of weathered beams that met in a point some twelve feet above the floor of the pavilion. There was no roofing material of any kind; it was open on the top all the way to the branches high overhead. A low railing encircled the pillars, designed perhaps for rustic seating, or maybe just to provide the illusion of low walls.

The couple approached the gazebo as if in a trance. They stopped about three paces away and simply took in the sight without comment. The pamphlet that had been mailed to them mentioned the gazebo specifically as one of the key sights of the estate, and it was right. According to the story Mrs. Jenkins later told them, it wasn’t part of the original grounds that bright Mr. Willis established back in 1896, which included the Main House, the Guest House, the Kitchen and the Stable, now home to the Conference Center. But when the estate was sold after the turn of the century, the new owners (a reclusive old couple that few visitors ever saw) insisted on building the gazebo right in this particular spot, despite the recommendations of the architect they had hired, who thought a location closer to the main house would have been more appropriate. As far as historians could tell, nothing significant was done with the gazebo, at least not until the new owners left the Willis Estate, as it would forever be called, to the county back in 1928.

The old couple had specified in their will that the gazebo and the grounds around it should be maintained just as it was, and that it would be made available to the public for any sort of function for only a nominal fee. They suggested that the gazebo would be an ideal location for weddings, and since that day, the Willis Estate had hosted four weddings almost every weekend, two each Saturday and Sunday, even deep into the depths of winter.

The couple stepped softly up the three treads through the archway of the gazebo and looked around. The six arches framed the view of the forest around them perfectly. Every direction they looked, the beauty of the woods was breathtaking. They settled down on the low bench to the left of the stairs and soaked in the magnificence of the place.

Their wedding plans were progressing so quickly, with so few snags, that it seemed they had some sort of guardian angel watching out for them. They had agreed that the emphasis for the day would focus on old and quaint, which is why they had wanted to see the Willis House. Prowling estate sales and checking out every antique clothing store in the metropolitan area had netted Sarah her turn-of-the-century wedding dress, and Peter his black Preacher’s coat and matching gray trousers, along with an exceptional bowler to top off his outfit. A favorite flower shop of a coworker of Sarah’s yielded the bouquets that would grace the reception area, and they had chosen Clara’s for the caterer the first night Peter had taken Sarah there.

Locating the rings, however, took a little more effort. They had scoured jewelry stores from Michigan Avenue to Foster, looking for something they both could live with. Neither wanted anything gaudy, yet they wanted something special that would symbolize their unique love for each other. It wasn't until they found themselves in a little family-owned jewelry store in a quiet rural county that they discovered the perfect set.

Peter had been complimenting Sarah on her taste. Right in the middle of looking at three large diamond-set bands, he declared out loud, "I like the fact that you're not the kind of woman who lets the size of a stone measure her man's love for her."

"You know I'm different," she had responded. "Just don't drop me off half way down the road."

"I promise. We're in this together 'till the end."

It was when the clerk moved aside a tray of rings to get to some with larger settings, that they had spotted them: a pair of silver Celtic-knot bands, interlocking, designed to split apart and become a separate band for man and woman. The concept of two-as-one won them over instantly, though the clerk was less thrilled.

"But sir, madam," the clerk intoned drily, "these are engagement bands. Surely you don't want these?"

"Surely we do," Sarah responded. They bought them then and there, and paid cash. They slipped the rings out of their cases every day and gazed at them, biding the day when they could put them on for real.

A *snap* of twigs sounded off to the left of the gazebo, startling the couple. They both turned to look, and were greeted by a set of three rising heads, one adorned with antlers. It was only a family of deer, a large male followed by his mate and their young offspring. They paused by the edge of the forest proper, some twenty yards away, and studied the two seated humans. Deciding that they posed no threat, the family continued their silent browsing.

"Three," Sarah noted. "That must be a good omen."

"That so?" Peter took her right hand in his and stared down at it for a good long while. Finally, he found the right words to say. "You know where we're going. You know what we'll be doing."

"Yes? And?" she responded.

He didn't want to have to say the words, but they needed saying. "We can't have children along with us. It's too dangerous. And I can't say for certain when it'll be safe for us to settle down, or to assume our former identities." He couldn't look at her eyes; he knew the power in them, and was sure they would persuade him to change his mind. "I want to have children with you, you know that. But we're committed to a higher goal. There are a lot of others depending on us. We can't let them down."

She could have complained, or argued. She could have used logic on him, or her feminine wiles. There were a dozen things she could have said to get him to rethink his position. But she didn't. She knew he was right. His wasn't a reticence born out of fear, but a decision arrived at by cautious evaluation. She

honored that, which is why they got along so well. When she was right, he supported her without hesitation. She did the same. It was the right thing to do.

She shook her head silently up and down. Her eyes followed the trio of deer as they moseyed back into the woods, deeper into the brush, then out of sight. She sighed once, then pulled herself back together. “But this would make a lovely place to say our vows, wouldn’t it?”

Peter looked up and stared deep into her eyes. He was grateful that she agreed so easily. “It sure would. Are you sure you don’t mind not getting married in a church?”

She snuggled closer to his warm frame, the extra heat useful here in the cooler shade of the woods. “If I minded, I would say something.”

“What do you think about the fault line? Think we can adapt the equipment to it?”

“I think we should,” she said, “although we may have to recalibrate once it’s all set up. Anyway, it seems worth a try. We haven’t got a patent for it yet, but it works safely in all my tests.”

“Oh, the patent office won’t get around to figuring this one out ‘till we’re both long gone,” Peter said with energetic fatalism. “But if all goes well, the Willis Estate should still be here in another hundred years.”

She silently nodded her assent. The wind took the nearest bundle of branches and set them whistling. The warm air bore the scent of hollyhocks and green pastures, sun-grown flowers and mossy-covered waters. On every side of the gazebo, dark trunks of trees stood like unspeaking sentinels, guarding their precious privacy. The couple reveled in the serenity of the place, only minutes from the bustle of the city.

They sat a few minutes longer, loath to return to their preparations, their plans, their mission. Finally, Peter slapped his hands on the tops of his thighs and stood. “Well, lets get back to Mrs. Jenkins. See what other juicy stories she’s collected since we came out here.”



Sarah had her hands full with a large crate marked ‘Party Favors,’ followed closely by Peter who grappled with another parcel, the word ‘Noisemakers’ prominently scrawled on three sides. They struggled to maneuver their heavy boxes down the narrow stairs of the old house. All around them, in the main floor above and spread out across the lawn, the post-service celebration was in full swing.

Their ceremony had taken place with the gazebo in the center, festooned with swards of white silk and surrounded by flowers, yellow gladiolas, pink mums and a few tall purple iris, bunched around the six thick pillars. Their friends and relatives were gathered in the clearing around the gazebo, forming an expectant half-circle. At exactly six o’clock, as the sun began setting in the west, a shrill, high-pitched whine began shrieking from deep in the woods. Those who knew that the couple had hired a bagpiper weren’t

nearly as surprised as those who hadn't been warned. Some of the latter were actually startled.

As the piper commenced with "When O'er the Loning Valley," the procession began. The two ministers strolled slowly up the narrow path (they engaged two; the couple figured they weren't in a church, so they'd better have all their religious bases covered). Next came Sarah's mom and dad, followed by the ring bearer, which raised another gasp from the crowd. On the end of a long silver leash trotted her dog Lightning, a small long-haired chihuahua with eyes full of merriment. Next came Peter, decked out in his long black Preacher's coat, gray vest and pants, with a sporty black bowler on top of his head, set at a rakish angle.

Last, walking a few steps further back than the rest, came Sarah. She'd never looked so radiant. Her uncle Jim stood on the outside of the crowd, and remarked under his breath (though almost everyone heard), "What is it about weddings that brings out the loveliest in a bride?" Her ivory gown had been done in a style popular in the Twenties, with tight sleeves, long flowing trails of fabric hanging from her arms, a high neckline edged with exquisite embroidery, and delicate white beadwork throughout. On her head perched a small half-moon of a hat, with a tiny trail of material and beadwork that matched her dress. She carried a bouquet of bright flowers with which, in her timorousness, she hid her face, avoiding the lofty compliments aimed at her.

When she passed a wide oak tree beside the path and everyone had a good look at her, it was if the wind had instantly picked up and sent the entire forest sighing.

She stepped slowly up to the gazebo, to stand beside her beaming husband-to-be. The ministers began the service, a short, sincere ceremony. There was no mention of 'till death do us' anything, nor of either party 'obeying' anyone. Instead, the words that the couple had chosen declared their happiness at finding their soul mate at long last, and the desire to stay together and enjoy those things that brought them together. The ringbearer, the little dog Lightning, trotted forward with the rings. The clouds actually parted for the briefest of moments, just as Peter and Sarah exchanged rings. A sliver of radiant sunlight fell across their smiling faces, an element neither could have planned but both heartily appreciated.

In fifteen minutes, it was over. The crowd, at the urging of the ministers, greeted the kissing couple with a shout of joy, then the piper piped them back down the path, to the oddly chosen tune of "Amazing Grace." The unseen piper's melody wafted through the trees, a haunting, memorable piece, as the couple, arm in arm, strolled slowly back the way they'd come. A few women in attendance weeped at the simple beauty of the moment; to be honest, a few of the men wiped tears away, too.

The entourage gathered around the happy couple outside the Willis House's front door, where Peter's brother-in-law (a self-professed comedian and school principal) gave a short speech, regaling the crowd with the story of how Peter and Sarah had serenaded he and his wife (Pete's sister) at their own wedding only a year before. Zippy (that was his nickname) and Pete's sister Kate had decided on an outdoor

wedding also, on the banks of the swift-flowing Illinois. In honor of the occasion, Peter and Sarah sung “Red River Valley,” with words written specially for the occasion. The song brought giggles of appreciation, and the retelling of the event brought hoots of laughter. Zippy, of course, added his own little touches to the tale.

And then, the food! On tables set up both outside and within the House, trays of appetizers circulated. Clara’s family recipes were well known to the handful of people familiar with her restaurant, recipes whose maturity and precise attention to detail matched the fine old House step for step. Exceptional *bruscetta* came out of the aromatic kitchen first, a butter-crusting biscuit topped with diced chunks of tomatoes, garlic, spices, and a sauce made from red wine vinegar and virgin olive oil. Next came *insulata*, large sections of tender sliced tomatoes spread with more spices and layered in cheese. And of course, Clara’s famous stuffed mushrooms made an appearance, portabello caps filled with garlic and more cheese.

Then the soup. Tureens of authentic *pasta fazhoul* made the rounds, wheeled on large silver carts from which it was ladled into the upheld bowls of appreciative celebrants. There were racks of petite salads, created small to leave room for all the rest to follow. For there were stuffed shells filled with an incredible blend of mozzarella and ricotta, and Shrimp Ursillia, fettuccini spread with heaps of shrimp and covered with a delectable white-wine-and-cheese sauce. And there was spinach tortellini and mushroom lasagna and artichoke manicotti. There were no meat dishes served, but no one complained – no one noticed.

Lastly, settled into one of the bay windows in the ballroom, upon an ancient mahogany table just about the size of an old sewing machine, stood the wedding cake. It was a round cake about two feet in diameter, and consisted of a single deep layer, but oh, what a layer! The base was *tiramisu*, a delicate chocolate sponge cake tinged with a hint of coffee and a splash of liqueur, edged all about with halves of strawberries as large as tennis balls. On top rode a cloud of real whipped cream dusted with chocolate, sprinkled here and there with blueberries, cherries and miniature grapes. In the middle of the cloud floated the caketopper, the statuette of the rose-holding boy and the shyly grateful girl.

Throughout this culinary spectacle, the couple were surprisingly absent. They had not reserved a head table, and they were only glimpsed now and again ferrying boxes into the basement, into a storeroom directly under the Ballroom. Friends and relatives had offered to help, but all offers of assistance were happily, politely refused. When pressed, the couple claimed it was for a special moment following the couple’s first dance.

But the festivities couldn’t wait. As soon as the last plate of pasta was appreciatively consumed, to the pleasing serenade of barely restrained burps, the tables in the Ballroom were picked up and rolled away, opening up the dance floor for more active celebrations. Above the arched hallway door, a wide balcony was tucked into the second floor, near the roof beams. That was where Mike’s band was set up, and they proceeded to whip up a blues set that drew people outside to the edge of the windows to hear better.

“Mustang Sally,” “Ask Me Down to Texas” and “Ever’body Wants to Go to Heaven but Nobody Wants to Die” roared from their instruments. Cries of “Where’s the bride and groom?” filled the air, followed quickly by strident demands for the cutting of the cake and the couple’s first dance.

Down below the rollicking ballroom floor, the couple laughed. Peter walked past the set-up of electrical equipment and power cords. He checked the terminal boxes, hoping that their complex apparatus wouldn’t blow out the fuses in the hundred-year-old house.

“Darn! We should have checked their wiring before hand!” he said, noting the heat that emanated from the nearby fuse box with his bare palm. He moved to a stack of amplifiers and turned down a set of dials. “I’m bringing down the levels on the Gell-Mann modulators to four-oh-seven.”

“Fine,” Sarah replied. She twisted another set of dials and typed in new commands on a portable computer resting on top of four heavy black boxes that hummed like washing machines. “I can have the program compensate by spinning the boson generator over a longer build-up sequence.”

Their old-fashioned wedding outfits contrasted so greatly with their high-tech equipment, it was like watching a pair of Roman centurions trying to do a tune-up on a Ferrari. A dozen compact monitors displayed the output of twice their number of highly specialized contrivances, none of which would have been recognizable outside of Batavia or Lawrence-Livermore. The battleship gray and jet black boxes hummed in orderly series, linked together with inch-thick insulated cables, feeding off a power conditioner plugged into the old house’s antiquated electric outlet.

“I’m all set here,” Peter said, finishing a subtle adjustment on the back of one of the boxes that held what appeared to be a video camera on its front, then checking the fire detector right above it. “How’re you doing?”

“Almost,” she replied, typing a last line of text into the control program. She clicked the mouse twice, then added, “Done! Do you have the control box?”

Peter held up his left hand. In his palm rested a small red box about the size of a tiny calculator. The diodes in its display read, ‘STAND BY.’ He tapped a short series of key commands and slipped the box into the outer pocket of his Preacher’s coat, then slid the coat on. “I’m ready to dance. How ‘bout you?”

She approached him, said nothing but put her arms around his waist and held him close. He kissed her hair and rubbed his cheek against the side of her face. “Scared?”

“A little. I’ve done this experiment a hundred times in the laboratory, but always on test bricks and inanimate material. Doing it for real, on us no less, that’s grounds for a little fear, don’t you think?”

“Sure do.” He kissed her hair again. “But I have faith in you. If I didn’t... heck, I’d let you go first.” He looked around the darkened room at the glowing monitors and the humming machines, all primed and ready to go. “Too bad we never received a patent on all this. Somehow I feel there’s a boodle of money to be made

on this set-up when we're gone."

"Not on this set-up," Sarah replied. "Soon as we hit the other side, the program will send a backfire of energy through all the chips and most of the wiring. The only thing they'll find is a bunch of burned-out boxes and ruined motherboards."

"Oh, well. At least, I'm glad we're using PCs."

She looked up at his dreamy face in surprise. "Why's that?"

"I don't mind frying PCs. In fact, I rather enjoy it. Now, if these were Macs —"

She pushed him in the direction of the stairs, grabbed up her hat and followed his laughing form up and out of the basement. The door closed softly on their murmuring gear.

Upstairs, the place was packed. It seemed like Mike's band could be felt playing throughout the entire house, and every room was filled with dancing celebrants. The couple tried mightily to make their way through the crowded hallway and into the Ballroom, but the handshakes, hugs and claps on the back slowed them to a veritable standstill.

Peter's Aunt Joanne and Uncle Jamey caught up with them on the landing just before the Ballroom. Aunt Joanne had to yell to be heard. "I'm so glad you pulled out of that bleak depression you fell in a few years back. When was that, Petey?"

"I think you mean '91," he answered, slowly.

"Yes. Oh, what a terrible year. Has he mentioned that awful year to you, honey?" she asked of Sarah.

"Yes, I think it's come up in conversation," Sarah replied cryptically.

"But you seem so much happier now, Petey."

"Perhaps that's because I am." He grabbed Sarah closer. "And I think this woman has something to do with it, too."

"You look so beautiful, darling," Peter's Uncle Jamie complimented. He touched her right arm, and picked up the edge of the dress, where a dark stain had marred the silk. "Oh, honey, what's this? Pasta sauce?"

She glanced down and smiled. "No. Motor oil."

A wave of voices calling from the next room washed over them, rescuing her from further explanations. "Um, would you excuse us? I think we've made them wait just about long enough."

They entered the Ballroom in time to hear a knot of celebrants finishing a boisterous version of "Blues Before I Go," with emphasis added on the 'going' for the happy occasion. They pointed at the archway just as Peter and Sarah appeared, and the crowd of dancers and singers parted just enough to allow them access. Cheering and congratulations assailed them from every direction. Eventually, they made their way to the cake, which was pulled a few feet out from the bay where it waited.

Peter bent down to open the doors on the front of the cabinet and withdrew a long silver knife-and-fork set. As Sarah called Clara forward to take her bows for the fabulous food, Peter turned around, looked over the area where they'd be dancing, and turned back to the little table, adjusting it so that it faced a few degrees more to the right, taking in the open French doors. He bent down and fiddled with an unseen device in the shadows of the open cabinet doors, then straightened back up. Knife and fork in hand, he clanged them together to get the room's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen!" When the room failed to respond, he yelled heartily, "Hey, you guys!" After a round of laughter, the room settled down to a moderate rumble. "That's better. Now's the time you've all been waiting for, where the bride and groom make complete asses of each other by cramming cake all over each other's face. My darling?" He proffered the knife, handle forward, aimed at the cake. Sarah smiled up at him and placed her hand over his, on the handle. Together they sliced through the whipped cream and tiramasu down to the strawberries, to the applause of the crowd and the flashes of those with cameras.

Sarah got first crack at covering her new husband's face with frosting. At first, she looked like she was just going to get a dollop on his nose, but as he opened his mouth to receive the piece, she smushed it all over his beard and mustache. Peter laughed along with the observers, and when he grabbed a massively large piece, the crowd doubled its laughter.

"Not on my dress!" Sarah shrieked, giggling.

"Oh, so that's how you play it, eh?" Peter swooped down threateningly with the brick of cake, then lightly brushed her cheek with it. Everyone applauded as the couple kissed, then commented among themselves as they grabbed towels to clean off with.

"Now, for the most romantic moment of the evening's festivities: the couple's first dance," said Sarah. She noticed a number of people watching from the lawn, just beyond the French doors. With a wave of her hand, she said, "You'll have a better view from in here, I think."

They headed, arm in arm, for the open French doors. They waited as people filed in from outside, cramming the room almost to capacity. From the back of the room, someone yelled, "You two been practicing?"

The couple looked deeply into each other's eyes. Sarah responded softly, her words barely whispered. "You have no idea." Then with a last lingering look over the crowd of well-wishers, they both stepped to the side of the doorway, hidden momentarily from the view of the crowd.

Up in the balcony, Mike saw his cue. He tapped the play button on the cd player, hooked in through the speakers of their equipment, and stood back. A slow, deliberate string intro murmured across the room, melodious violins and cellos, deep and soothing. It repeated twice before the sweet soulful voice of Etta James rose up with the anthem for the evening:

*“At last,
My love has come along...”*

Simultaneous with the singer’s opening words, Peter and Sarah danced stately into view. They held each other close and spun around, framed by the open doors.

*“My lonely days are over.
And love is like a song...”*

Peter and Sarah looked like a couple from another time. They saw only each other’s eyes, their hands tightly clasped, their bodies held close. They swayed rhythmically to the beat of the music, slow and sensual.

*“At last,
The skies above are blue,
My heart was wrapped up in clover,
The night I
Looked at you...”*

Their practice was evident, for they danced across the flagstone patio with the grace of Astair and Rodgers. No one in the crowded ballroom dared speak, afraid of bursting that bubble of perfection.

*“I found a dream that I could speak to,
A dream that I can call my own.
I found a thrill to rest my cheek to,
A thrill that I’ve never known...”*

The movement of their bodies spoke of love, desire, completion. If they had never said those three little words before, in all that they had done and said for each other, then that languid, elegant progression as they floated across the patio would have said it all for them.

*“Oh, yeah, yeah,
You smiled,*

*Oh, and then, the spell was cast,
And here we are
In heaven..."*

They paused at that spot. Peter gazed down upon her beauty, Sarah looked up into his eyes. Then he swept her down and forward in a dip that seemed to defy gravity. They held that pose for an instant that lasted forever, then he drew her back up and they embraced tightly.

*"For you are mine,
At last."*

They swung away from each other, still holding hands but at arm's length. They began a slow walk away from the doors, into the room, towards the crowded mass of humanity. People pushed backwards, trying to clear the way, as the recorded violins and cellos continued their passionate denouement. But there was no place to go. The people backed up against the walls, their eyes still focused on the slowly striding couple that danced regally into their midst.

And as the melody reached its final notes, with the crowd swept up in the romance of the moment, the couple came together one last time, spinning slowly in place, gracefully twirling, Peter's hands holding Sarah's waist, Sarah's hands in his hair, spinning, spinning...

Until they vanished like a cloud of fog upon the morning sun's rise.

No one moved. No one spoke. They were hypnotized, spellbound. One minute the couple had been their reason for living, content just to watch their magnificent motion, secretly hoping would never end. The next minute, the couple had mysteriously disappeared, in the midst of the crowded room.

A hundred jaws hung open. Two hundred eyes glazed over. An equal number of hands waited for the mental command to applaud, or pick up a plate of wedding cake, or do something.

Down below, in the basement directly beneath the dance floor, the couple held each other in a passionate embrace that neither wanted to break. Sarah's head rested on Peter's shoulder. His cheek brushing her tightly compressed hair. They swayed to a music that only they could hear.

Eventually, the sound of blues music played somewhat confusedly rolled down to them, and the mesmerized crowd upstairs began shuffling their feet, as if their minds were preoccupied.

"I guess we can patent at least part of the machine now. The Tri-D box worked just fine."

Sarah hummed her reply, not wanting to break the mood. Peter stroked her hair with his fingertips and looked down at her with an odd smile. "Anyone tell you today how beautiful you look?"

“Mmmmmm, a few.”

“Any of them men?”

She laughed lightly. “Yes.”

He considered his response. “Any of those not related to you?”

She laughed again. “I’m afraid so.”

He drew her closer again. “Well, give me their names and numbers. I’ll have a talk with them, when we get back.”

They continued swaying there, not at all in time with the beat of the blues song rumbling down around them, totally lost in their own moment. Slowly, Peter reached one hand down to his coat pocket and drew out the red control box. The diodes on its screen illuminated the words, ‘Stage Two Ready.’ He held Sarah close and whispered, “All set?”

She kissed the lobe of his ear. “Be gentle with me?”

They laughed softly together, and Peter pressed three buttons. He slipped the box back into his pocket, and they twirled slowly, as the machines around them hummed louder, vibrated heavily. A faint light sprayed out from one of the large boxes and bathed them in its amber radiance.

And this time, the couple vanished for real.