

Chapter One

Monica stared at the account numbers on her computer screen, wondering for the third time in the past hour why she had to review them. Were they taking part in fraudulent matters, or perhaps they needed to be sent to another department? She sighed then leafed through her small stack of papers on her desk, trying to find anything remotely related to the accounts on her screen. After a few minutes of rustling and drawn out sighs, she finally realized that the accounts on her screen had nothing to do with the pile of papers. She stared at the accounts again and realized that she had pulled them up for the purpose of answering a question her supervisor had posed to her over an hour ago. She reviewed her e-mail on her other monitor screen, located the question and then reviewed the accounts once more to find the answer. Thankfully, her supervisor was lenient on work matters and did not feel the need to be a hovering manager; someone else would have sent her a string of e-mails five minutes after sending the initial one, asking her when she anticipated completing the project. As she typed out her answer for her supervisor, she sighed again; today was Monday and already it was going to be a long week.

Monica had no face; she easily blended into the wallpaper of Life while staring out at the world that she was not a part of. She had very few friends, no significant other and her relationship with her parents was simply there with nothing more. She lived day by day in a blank haze, filled to the brim with junk of the ordinary, the mundane and the simple. It wasn't what she wanted, but it was what she got and kept close to herself for no other reason than for comfort. However, there was another side to her, the side that no one knew about. She was a wild child, yearning for things that had no name and desiring something better than what she had. She wanted to listen to the inner voice that told her of things that could be hers if only she took the time to seek them out. She refused to

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show this side to others and played the wallpaper girl to its full effect; that was what people could understand. Anything outside of that would simply terrify them. Monica also enjoyed her closet title of a bibliophile. She spent most of her free time away from work at a bookstore or library, pouring through different genres while seeking out new authors and titles. She attended book signings, literary festivals and even tried her hand at some poetry that she later put in a box for fear of anyone wanting to read it. Her poems were her way of trying to express emotions that she normally kept bottled up from society. On paper, she could scream to the world that she hated her life and wanted out of it, but did not know how to do such an act in her world. Monica was a walking conflict; she wanted something different and could even feel that difference, but had no clue as to get to said difference. A Catch-22 beyond scope and reason yet strangely enough it suited her in her unraveling madness.

She sent off her e-mail and relaxed for a moment in her chair, wondering what to tackle next on her desk. The past weekend of reading her books and enjoying the quiet of her apartment quickly fizzled to nothing when she reached her office that morning; to this day, she still wondered why she took the job at Indigo Trident, an accounting firm. Although the pay and benefits were very good, the constant dredge of the work made her feel like a small cog lost in a machine that did not care about its parts nor did it want to. To them, she was only a social security number, but at least she got weekends and major holidays off.

Monica stared at the clock on one of her computer screens; the time read 11:15am. She took a deep breath and exhaled it through her nose; only an hour and 45 minutes until her lunch break that consisted of going to a secluded area outside and finishing off her latest novel, *The Beautiful and Damned* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. She tried to read some of it last night, but her eyes kept closing due to fatigue and her comfortable bed. She pulled out her book from her messenger bag and thumbed through it, feeling the cool and musty smelling breeze wafting from the pages while the smell of the paper rushed through her senses. She closed her eyes and smiled, wanting right then and there to read. She opened her eyes when the new e-mail sound alarmed on her computer, the daydream of her book quickly fizzling away.

Monica opened the e-mail and began to read; her mouth went dry as soon as she read it. It was from her supervisor, asking her to come into his office for a moment regarding the e-mail she just sent. She grabbed her pen and pad of paper in case she needed to take notes and walked over to his office located at the end of the hallway. When she reached his half opened door, she lightly knocked then let herself in. Morgan, her supervisor, sat at his desk while clacking away on the keyboard and his face half turned away from her. He wore a crisp white Oxford shirt with a muted orange and blue tie and black slacks. His bald head reflected the fluorescent glow of the lights overhead; Monica named him Mr. Clean in her mind the first time she met him. When he saw Monica sit down across from him, he stopped his furious typing then turned fully to face her while placing his arms on his desk, immediately assuming the role of a high school supervisor who had better things to do, but had to be there for the sake of “the kids”.

“Monica,” he said in a nice voice that held an undercurrent of steel, “I wanted to talk to you about your e-mail from this morning.”

“Yes?”

“Well . . . it’s not what I was asking for. I wanted information from the past six weeks. You gave me something completely different.”

“Oh, really? Sorry about that.”

“Yes, I know you are.” He made a steeple with his hands and rested his chin there. His face carried a look of concern tinged with bitterness. “Is everything okay with you? I mean, I know you’ve been busy and all lately, but I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Monica shook her head. “Sure, I’m fine.” Yeah, right. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, I’m just concerned because, well, you’ve let the ball drop on several matters, things that had a certain deadline on them.”

“Oh, well, I am really sorry-”

“And,” he said without giving her a chance to explain, “I have had to correct mistakes from your work these past two weeks. You’ve never been like this before in the four years you’ve been here. That’s why I wanted to know if everything was okay with you.” Monica wanted to just get up and walk away from this conversation; how could she tell him what was truly going on? How

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could she even put it into words that the life she currently lived was a boldfaced lie? Her life needed more than a 401K, light conversations at the coffeemaker with people she did not like and work that honestly did not matter to her.

“Sorry, I’ve had some things on my mind lately, but they should be working themselves out shortly. I do not want to become the weak link in our chain.” She smiled, but wanted to retch instead. She did not give a shit what this company did or how much they wanted to protect the concerns of people whom she did not know. What one does in order to keep up the appearance of a cog simply amazed her. However, it must have been the correct thing to say; Morgan’s eyes widened with overbearing joy with his wide fake smile. He leaned back in his chair, the sign that he was feeling better and that the meeting was soon over.

“Well, good! I am so happy to hear that. I really do appreciate you and your work and I want you to continue with that good trend. I have faith in you, you know that.”

“Well, thank you for the note of concern.” Yeah, right. Monica got up and walked out of his office while her stomach growled with hunger and the need for a Jazz Age book.

Anthony Patch was a deeply troubled man, she thought as she finished her book and took another bite of her turkey sandwich, enjoying the myriad of tastes that hit her tongue: the honey baked slices of turkey, the sharp Swiss cheese, the crisp flavor of the lettuce leaf and freshly cut tomatoes. Rather than sit at her desk, she decided to spend her lunch hour outside at Stone Park, located only two minutes away from her office, surrounding herself with the blue sky and slightly warm breezes that still held hints of Summer’s lingering caresses competing with Autumn’s cold yet still tender embrace. Once she reached the end of *The Beautiful and Damned*, she reread the last paragraph, making sure she read it correctly. She did not expect such an ending and such an action from the main male character. He seemed to be weak and troubled, but she could not help, but feel sorry for him and his tragic wife, Gloria. The Jazz Age obviously had a darker side; shame no one realized it until it was too late. Monica checked her watch as she finished her sandwich and realized that she still had half an hour left. Grinning

to herself, she pulled out another book from her messenger bag and began to read, immediately getting lost within the words.

“Hey, Monica, do you mind if I sit here with you?”

Thanking the gods she wore her shades so that no one could see her eyes roll with exasperation, she looked up and saw one of her co-workers, Erica, standing in front of her while holding her lunch bag with baited breath. Of the ten people in Monica’s department, Erica was the one that got on her nerves the least; she knew that Monica liked being alone and did not interact too much with the others simply because she had nothing remotely in common with them. As far as Monica was concerned, she worked from 8 to 4:30 and that was that. There was no need for any social interaction with people that would deem her strange anyway, so why bother? Erica knew this to a point and gave Monica her space, but deep inside she wanted to get to know her better. Erica’s life consisted of her husband, their five-year-old girl and her job. She reveled in listening to others talk about their lives, secretly wishing to do what they did, but never getting the gumption to do it. She lived because Death was too easy.

Monica was an enigma to Erica; she very rarely talked about herself and what she did for fun outside of work. Aside from *Good Morning* and *Have a Good Night*, Erica never heard Monica utter another word during the day. She talked to others on their floor, casually asking if they knew anything about her, to which they replied no and why ask? It wasn’t so much that Erica wanted to be friends with Monica; all she wanted was to know something about her so as to add to her woulda coulda shoulda pile in her life.

Erica stood over Monica, blocking out the sun from her face, smiling and holding her lunch bag while Monica just sat there, trying to find a way to get rid of her.

“Hey Erica,” she said in a monotone voice. “What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. Just saw you out here and thought you might want the company.” She shook her bag as though snakes were inside. “Trying to brown bag it this week until we get paid. Roger and I decided to cut our overspending for this month and save for our kid’s education.”

Like I really care about this, thought Monica, but instead she said, “Oh, cool.” Erica beamed even more so, as if she received approval of the highest level. “Yeah, well, we’re trying!” She stared

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at the empty spot again and said, "So, do you mind?" while shaking her bag towards the empty spot next to Monica.

"I just began reading this book and-"

"Oh hey, no worries! You won't bother me in the slightest!" Erica then sat down next to her, her slender frame taking up half the space on the bench. Monica groaned inwardly, but picked up her book and continued to read, trying hard not to let this distraction deter her from reading.

"So, what are you reading?" Monica lowered her book and turned to face Erica's smiling face. "Any good?"

"I just started reading it, so I don't know yet." Erica then grabbed the book from her hands and began flipping through it while Monica stared at her in absolute shock.

"Huh," she said while flipping through it, "print's too small for my taste. Do they make it in a larger print?"

"Uh, may I please have my book back? I just bought it." Erica continued flipping through it for a moment then handed it back to Monica with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Could never get into reading," she said thoughtfully. "Too much time spent on reading something that didn't happen, although I do like those romance books. You like those? I like the ones that are full of smut and stuff; I try to read them when Roger is at work or when he's out with the boys." Monica sat listening to her co-worker prattle on and on, not really caring what she had to say. Her lunch hour was her time to unwind and relax with a good book away from everyone, but today's lunch was not to be.

"Erica, I need to get back to my desk," said Monica in the middle of Erica's prattling while getting up from the bench. "Sorry."

"Oh hey, no worries, I'll walk in with you, okay?" Monica sighed with a tired resignation as Erica led the way back to their building.

The rest of the day proved to not be any better; although she only had two hours left of work time, it seemed to drag on forever. The work that continued to pile up on her desk was the same. The co-workers that chattered on about the latest news of movie stars were the same. Everything was the same with no changes in sight. It

was all the same and Monica hated every minute of it. As she drank from her white office coffee mug while reviewing the new slew of e-mails received during her lunch, she felt dead inside. Monica did not feel even a modicum of love or care for what she did; it paid her bills and that was that. When she took the position four years ago, her supervisor stated that he wanted only people who wanted to make their job a career in life and not those who were planning to move on to something else. Monica, while she agreed with Morgan just to get the job, wanted something entirely different inside. The only problem lay in trying to get to that something else. Sometimes at night, she imagined herself in an empty house, staring out of a solitary window to a verdant valley filled with flowers of every colour and majestic trees that seemed to touch the sky. She could smell the air, tasting its flavours of cotton, lemons and honeysuckle and felt the breezes against her dry yet wanting skin. She wanted to be a part of that paradise. It lay on the other side of the window, showing her what she truly desired with no plan in trying to get there. She yearned to be free and alive, awakened to something different than what others felt in their own life.

Monica always knew that she was different, but did not know how or why. People used to comment on her eccentric ways as far back as she could remember; even other kids during her grade and high school years would remark on her strangeness and how there was no label for her.

“I think you’re blatantly trying to be different than everyone else,” a girl in her high school once told her. Monica remembered how those words stung even though she knew it was not true; how could someone be strange on purpose? “You don’t know what you want in life because you refuse to label yourself,” said one boyfriend from her past. He wanted her to find a niche and stick with it, but how could one do such an action if they belonged to more than one niche? People like Monica were full of stuff that did not make any sense, not even to them. Some, once they released their inner stuff to the world, became different people almost overnight without any regrets. Others went completely insane, having lost their grip on reality and slipping too fast and far into their true world. Still others, like Monica, buried it deep inside themselves due to not wanting to show how unique they were to the world for fear of rejection, hatred and alienation. Monica was miserable because she

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wanted to explore her inner world, sampling everything from the buffet, but she did not know how to take the first step. It was truly painful to see others eating from the buffet and all she had was a stale and hard roll that someone threw away. She deserved better than that.

Finally, 4:30pm arrived, a large thumbs up for Monica to leave. She logged off her computer and left, not saying a word to her co-workers who stayed behind to chatter among themselves. It took her only two minutes to get from her building to her car and soon she drove home.

When she reached the front door of her apartment, the tears rolled down her face, spotting her shirt and landing on her hands as she opened the door. Once she closed it behind her, Monica leaned against the door and gave in to her sorrow, frustration and fear for ten minutes. When she had no more tears to cry, she went into her bedroom to change clothes then sat on the couch in her living room with her book and began to read. Her body sagged into the cushions and yet she felt as though there was nothing left inside of her. Something soon had to be done about her situation; crying every day was getting old even for her. There had to be a solution, but what? She could not go to her family; they would only claim that her worries were trivial and that there were worse problems out there and aren't you glad you're still alive and blessed by the Lord? She was not involved with anyone and her small number of friends were scattered all over the country so she couldn't just meet up with someone for tea. It was up to her to figure out a way to get out of this mental mire. But one step at a time; she snuggled deeper into the couch and allowed herself to travel back in time to help Sherlock Holmes solve another mystery.

Three solid hours later, she finished the book and with it, a possible plan for her own quandary. After placing her book back on the shelf, she rummaged through her messenger bag and found her journal. Thumbing through it, she realized that she had only written on two pages; it was still new and barely used. Grabbing a pen from her tea tin that sat on her computer desk, Monica opened to the third page and wrote whatever came out of her head:

**Two eyes, one of blue,
See backward like Janus**

Mabon

Except I got a better deal.
Past reflections are seen
Across the orb, milky undertones
Surfacing like an oil slick
That smells of rose petals.
Two eyes, one of blue,
Are used to pour through ancient tomes
That tells of Mankind's history
From hard earned intellect
To widely practiced hedonism. I count myself
Among the less fortunate, those who
See while using their own will.
My frequently worn glasses
Humble me.
Two eyes, one of nothing.

When she finished writing, she read over her words to see if they made a modicum of sense to her; to her satisfaction, they did. Feeling somewhat better, she turned to the next page and poured out more of the putrid black ink that internally corroded her; four hours later, she placed her pen and journal on her coffee table, walked to her bed in a haze and fell into a deep and satisfying sleep once her head hit her pillows.

“This is NPR, National Public Radio.”

Monica rolled one eye open to check the time on her clock; 6am glared back at her in red LED lights. She blinked twice then rolled out of bed, feeling better than she had in several weeks. Walking to her kitchen to make a pot of tea, she noticed her journal. For a moment, she wondered if last night even occurred, that her four hours of writing were only in her creatively starving mind. She prepared her pot then walked back to her couch and flipped through her journal. Instantly the words blazed on the page as her eyes made contact with them; poems and flash stories created from ideas and frustrations that had been bottled up for so long. Her release into the journal soothed her and made her feel confident; this was her help, her life preserver in the dark sea of

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melancholy and wasted time. Monica grinned and hugged her journal close to her body. Finally, a form of salvation had arrived.

At 8:01am, Monica stared at her computer screens at work, trying to figure out the best way to fix her current snag without it getting too hairy. She fumbled through her stack of papers, wondering if this was some twisted form of déjà vu. Thankfully her supervisor did not need her results until tomorrow yet she wanted to tackle the problem before anything else cropped up. After sorting through more documents, she found what she had been searching for and typed her response in the blank spaces on the electronic form. As she typed, her eyes casually glanced over to her journal lying on the desk, ready and waiting for her next outpouring of words and thoughts. For the first time in quite a while, she could breathe.

That night after finishing off yet another book while tucked in her bed, Monica dreamt of sitting in front of a massive blank canvas that stood in the middle of a warehouse. She wore a pair of baggy green pants with the legs rolled up to her ankles and a paint splattered men's Oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She was barefoot with an ankle bracelet that jingled when she moved. Her hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail while two paintbrushes stuck out from it. A white paint smudge stained her left cheek, but she paid it no attention; her entire focus was on the canvas. She held a thick paintbrush in her left hand that dripped cerulean blue paint; it tingled with anticipation of being used by her. It wanted to convey her thoughts into shapes on the blank canvas. Outside, the sun beamed with pleasure, sending its streams through the many windows of the room, warming it just right. Monica scraped her bare feet along the canvas-covered floor, feeling the roughness against her soft skin and she shivered with pleasure. While John Coltrane performed Blue Train on her CD player, Monica thought and thought and thought some more, then dove into the canvas with a bold strike of her cerulean blue. She stepped back, eyeing her first mark then, with a slow and satisfying smile she dove in again, only letting up to change brushes and colours. First blue followed by viridian green that later complimented a blood red mixed with gold. The myriad of colours made her dizzy, but she continued on; whatever lay behind the blank canvas had to come out. It was up to her to coax it out from its shell.

Her strokes were bold and curvy, uneven and taut, but she refused to stop even if she made a mistake on the canvas. Art was something not to be restrained or held back just to please the masses; Art lived to dazzle and inspire others, inflaming passions and dares into their own creative worlds. What she had to offer was no less than others' attempts. She painted as if her life depended on it, giving up every morsel of herself so the painting could come out. She painted all day and all night, never realizing that the sun had gone down, giving up its reign on the sky to the moon. Her CD was on constant loop so that she would not have to keep walking back and forth to the CD player. She wanted John with her during this time; his playing helped ease the cramps in her hands as she painted. Where there was once a blank canvas now showed a chaotic blend of stripes and lines, zigzags and curves, all made with many colours. The myriad of shapes and designs had a somewhat orderly look to it, as if the chaos was truly planned. There was a method to her madness and Monica was proud of it. When she awoke at 6am the next day, she felt even better than before. She woke up with a plan.

"I still don't understand why you're doing this. I mean, you're making great strides with the company, the department loves you, and you have proven yourself to be one of our better employees. I just don't get it," said Morgan while sitting at his desk and shaking his head in denial. Monica sat across from him with a determined look in her eye. "I just don't get. Was it something we did?"

"No, nothing like that, but I feel that this is right for me," she replied with a calm voice. "I have been unhappy for several months and this was my only option."

"I can look into raising your salary!" protested Morgan as he gripped his empty coffee mug in frustration. "How does \$50,000 sound to you? \$60,000?"

"I'm sorry, but my two week notice stands. I will begin clearing out my desk today. Thank you for all you've done." Monica got up and walked out the door without a backward glance, leaving Morgan in a state of frustration, anxiety and worry. While staring at the chair once occupied by Monica, he reached into a side drawer and pulled out his trusty bottle of antacid tablets. He popped three

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large tablets in his mouth and chewed them as if they were pieces of candy. Two-week notice, he thought as he chewed. He never thought that Monica was unhappy with her job, not even in the slightest. He had always prided himself on making sure he took care of his employees; Morgan made sure that they steadily received signs of appreciation. His face drew a blank while his mind replayed Monica's speech over and over.

When Monica reached her desk, she released the breath she had forgotten she held inside of her. At once, all of the stress, confusion and frustrations rolled away from her body, leaving her limp like overcooked pasta. She was free and while her rash action was terrifying, it also liberated her. Monica sat at her desk facing her monitors, but nothing on them made any sense to her. The new e-mail alert sounded through her speakers and, glancing down at the bottom right corner, noticed that Morgan sent an e-mail titled ON A SAD NOTE. She rolled her eyes in exasperation then clicked it open.

IT IS WITH GREAT REGRET, began the e-mail, THAT I MAKE THE FOLLOWING ANNOUNCEMENT; MONICA BURTON JUST TURNED IN HER TWO-WEEK NOTICE. I AM VERY SORRY TO BE LOSING ONE OF MY BEST EMPLOYEES IN THIS DEPARTMENT. THEREFORE, THE ENTIRE DEPARTMENT WILL BE TAKING MS. BURTON OUT TO LUNCH IN TWO WEEKS AS A FOND FAREWELL. PLEASE SCHEDULE ACCORDINGLY. THANK YOU.

Monica read the e-mail then deleted it from her account. She glanced around to her co-workers at their desk, trying to read their faces while they too read the e-mail. Well, it's Sydney or the Bush, she thought, bracing herself for their reactions. Five seconds later, Erica jumped up from her desk and ran over to Monica's with a look of profound sadness on her face.

"I just can't believe it!" she said while wringing her hands in nervous exasperation, "I just can't believe it. Why would you quit your job, Monica? I thought you liked it here!"

"I'm just ready to move on," she replied with a ghost of a smile on her face as she tried to turn back towards her monitors. Of course, that action was now near to impossible, for everyone else

had gathered around her desk, each with the same look of sadness on their faces. Monica couldn't believe it; you guys did not care for me when I was an employee and NOW you act as though you care, she thought while a slow smile spread across her face. It was too much and yet humorous at the same time.

"Oh Monica, we are so going to miss you!"

"We always liked working with you, Monica!"

"So, what are your plans?"

"Is your husband going to be the breadwinner now?"

Monica just smiled at their questioning faces. "I just decided to change my life," was all she said, much to the disappointment of her co-workers who persisted in asking more questions. They asked their questions not out of concern, but simply to be nosy and pry whatever information they could gather from her life. Since she was the secretive one in the department, they had to know something about her and what she did after work. Monica, however, would not give them an inch. Much to their disappointment, she turned back to her monitors and resumed working, ignoring them completely. After several minutes passed, they gave up their futile questioning and went back to their own desks, some angry at Monica's attitude towards them. In Monica's mind, work had already become a distant memory of the past. She worked in a mindless state, her thoughts focused on the time to go home and the other half of her "plan".

4:30pm finally arrived just as she lifted her head from reviewing some papers. She yawned and stretched then looked around; everyone else was gone for the day. They did not even say good night to her, but then again, did they ever in the past? She placed her papers in a neat stack then pulled out a pad of paper and one of her purple pens. Thinking for a moment, she placed pen to paper and began to write.

MORGAN,

ALTHOUGH I GAVE MY TWO WEEKS NOTICE TO YOU TODAY, I HAVE DECIDED TO MAKE TODAY MY LAST DAY. PLEASE FIND MY PASS CARD NEXT TO MY PHONE AND ALL PERSONAL ITEMS REMOVED FROM MY DESK. THANK YOU.

MONICA BURTON

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She signed her name to the letter, tore it off the pad and reviewed it, placed it in an envelope under Morgan's closed door and then walked back to her desk and cleaned it out. 20 minutes later, the dirty job was over and Monica walked out of the company's doors with box in hand for the last time.

Monica stood in the main hallway of a massive library that held books of every genre and subject; books were also stacked from the floor to the ceiling or in messy piles that one could spend hours sorting through just for the sheer fact of taking on such a task. She closed her eyes and smelled the scents of the place: glue, paper, leather, musty dreams and archaic words, all mingled together that made her head swoon. She wanted to bathe in such tempting scents for she knew that it would only aid her in her search for something greater, something that explained just who and what she was with regards to the rest of the world. After sniffing the main hallway for a time, she opened her eyes and walked while noticing the gigantic windows that revealed a verdant valley that stretched on for miles, mingled with a sky so blue that one would be moved to tears just catching a glimpse of it. Her bare feet made no noise as she walked on the cold marble floor. As far as she could tell, there was no one else in the library, but just her and the thousands of books.

Sunlight beamed through the windows and landed on some of the piles and stacks, giving the books an eerie yet pleasing glow to them. She stopped at one point and ran her hand along a weathered brown leather book with gold letters embossed on top that read *THE HISTORY OF TEA*. She thumbed through the tome, causing a flurry of dust to fly straight into her eyes and nose. She sneezed once then laughed as the sound traveled through the library, echoing through the many cases that she had not even begun to peruse. She looked behind her in curiosity, wondering if anyone had heard her sneeze then remembered that she was the only person there. Satisfied, she continued reading about the history of her favourite beverage. After some time had passed, she pulled the book from the pile and sat down in one of the comfortable wingback chairs to give her legs a rest while reading. She snuggled into the chair, feeling it enfold her, and then opened the book to where her

finger held the page and continued to read. The sounds of her turning the pages echoed down the hall, but she did not care for she was in heaven. Unfortunately for her, she woke up.

It took her five days to pack all of her belongings and move them into her car and a U-Haul, while taking off an hour each day to do research towards her next step. She wanted out of her current city, ready to wipe the slate clean and move to a new town. During one day of research, she decided on a small artistic town four hours away that spoke of promise and a chance to really live the life she so desperately wanted. After making a couple of phone calls to inquire about a place to live, she confirmed a two-bedroom apartment near the library, ready and waiting for her to move in. Once everything was done towards the apartment, she contacted her former place of employment and told them of her new home address and to please forward any future mail there. She also discovered a bookstore that was currently looking for an assistant manager in the new town. She faxed off her resume in the morning, spoke with owner in the afternoon and had the job before the sun set. Monica couldn't believe how easy her transition had been, but it was. This was yet another good sign that she was making the right choice.

On the last day, she stood in the middle of her empty living room, looking around at the bare walls with a slight sense of wonder.

"As soon as I move into my new place, I am going to play one of my Frank Sinatra CDs while drinking a glass of raspberry lemonade," she said to herself then walked out of her old life for good.

The trip was amazingly simple; her old and new lives were connected by one reasonably well paved four-lane highway. Monica left at the crack of dawn, hoping to get her new life started on the right foot. When she pulled out of her old parking lot, she took a deep breath and released it through her nose, only looking ahead and never back. She drove by her old place of employment and waved to the menacing building with its tinted windows. The sights and sounds of her old place seemed to lose their colour as she drove by them, but not once did she look back. When she and her car named Pierre hit the highway, Monica began to laugh while tears rolled down her face. It felt good to have the tears come not due to sadness, but because of happiness. After her eyes finished their

watery sacrifice and her face felt tight due to the dried tear streaks, she thumbed through her music to see what would begin her one-way trip. She had her CD cases splayed on the passenger seat, ranging from soulful jazz vocals to French chanson to Goth/Industrial to folk to her Vocal Muses, Tori Amos and Kate Bush, as she enjoyed the sunny day with a bottle of iced green tea and mojito mint gum.

Monica's eyes focused on anything that looked interesting on the highway, including a tree with shoes of all shapes and colours tied to the branches. It fascinated her so much that she stopped the car on the side and took several pictures of it with a promise to increase their size once exposed and hang them in her new living room. In her past place, she barely had any art hanging on the walls due to a lack of time. Now she would make the time for art no matter what. Suddenly, she felt lightheaded and began to giggle.

"Time for a little Tori, I think," she said while opening the case with one hand. She popped the CD in her player and gave in to Tori's words that made no sense and yet did at the same time, coloured with images and thoughts too personal to be shared yet shared anyway. While Tori sang, Monica's mind wandered to an incident that occurred several days ago between herself and her mother. While Monica desired to live a life of one's own choosing no matter the cost, Diane, her mother, thought otherwise. Her father, Charles, had died five years ago due to a stroke so Diane did everything she could to fill up the gap left by him. Unfortunately, Diane's life was filled with trying to please others and worrying what others thought of her, even if they mattered or not. She also craved control over anyone as a tactic to fill up her void due to low self-esteem. Creativity, while a cute hobby, did not pay the bills in her mind, so when she received the phone call that her daughter turned in her two-week notice at her high paying employer, she was more than just a little concerned.

"I thought you liked your job, Monica," her mother said with a worried tone on the phone. "I thought everything was going okay."

"It was for a time, but then I realized that it was not for me anymore. It's time for me to move on."

"So, do you have a new job set up?"

"I'll be working in a bookstore."

“So, you mean to tell me,” said Diane with rising anger, “that you gave up your \$40,000 job just so you can float around with some damn bookstore? Is that what I’m hearing?!”

“No, not float around, but work more on myself, to which I’ve not been able to do. I want to explore and find out more about myself and-”

“You know, you really disappoint me, Monica. I thought I had raised you better than that. Why in the world would you want to do something that foolish? I kept telling you to save your money just in case if you ever lost your job!”

“And, I did, too.” Monica tried hard to keep calm, but found it increasingly hard to do so while listening to her mother prattle on about matters that simply no longer interested her.

“No you didn’t! I know you didn’t!”

“So, why did you ask me if you already knew the answer?”

“Don’t get arrogant with me.”

“Not trying to, but I simply wanted to know why you would ask me a question, only to decide that I must be lying. Explain that to me, please.”

“I am just so disappointed in you right now. I spent so much money sending you to the right schools, only to watch you fail like this. I . . . just don’t know what to say.”

“Well, let me put it to you like this,” said Monica, relieved that she found her spine again. “My life is my life and no one else’s. You, as a parent, did a good job in raising me, even after Dad’s death. Am I pregnant? Am I doing drugs? Was I ever disrespectful towards you or Dad? No, I was not. The only problem you have had with me was my spending habits when it came to books and when I forgot to send Dad a birthday card last year when he was out of town even though I called him. Honestly, Mom, if that is all you’ve been worried about, then consider yourself lucky.” Monica went quiet after her speech, satisfied that she had done the right thing even if her mother thought otherwise. “I am only four hours away; you can come by and visit anytime-”

“You never invited me to your current apartment!” Monica sighed; this was not over yet. She tightened her grip on the phone and continued her defense.

“Yes, I did. Many times, in fact. Yet, how many of those times did you accept?”

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“Well, there was that one time I came over and you did not want me upstairs because you had company.”

“Okay, and what was wrong with that? You weren’t even staying long, remember?” Monica took a deep breath, feeling the air whoosh out of her lungs. “Why are you insistent on people not being perfect? Why do you try to measure others according to your scale? People are not going to measure up as long as you do that. We, as humans, are not perfect. Never have been and never will. However, why do you spend time focusing on what people don’t do as opposed to what they do? Also, why do you always focus on the past? The past is gone; let it go. The incident you just spoke of happened over a year ago. Why do you do that?”

Diane was quiet; Monica wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing so she went on. “I am moving to a smaller town. I have already picked up a job as an assistant manager at their bookstore. The pay is less, but it suits me. Anyway, I have no outside bills and I have been saving my money. You always said that everything happens for a reason; I know it is true now.” Diane was still quiet on the phone, leaving Monica to wonder if she hung up on her or not. Finally, Monica said, “I love you even if you hate my guts or not-”

“I don’t hate your guts, Monica. I just worry about you, that’s all.”

“I appreciate that very much. It shows you love me. However, I am 35 years old; time for me to strike out on my own. If I fail, then I fail. If I succeed, then I succeed. But the point is that I go on after learning whatever lesson I received.”

“I know, I know . . . I just wish you could have told me this sooner.”

“It was going to happen sooner or later.”

The two met up later that night for a celebratory dinner at Diane’s small yet comfortable home. After her husband died, she moved out of her larger home and into something that would give her enough room without it being too much or too cramped. The dinner was light and pleasant and afterwards, the two shared a bottle of wine and talked of the good ol’ days when Charles was alive. They laughed, cried a little, and then Monica got up to leave. Her mother opened the door for her then hugged her as if she would never see her only child again. When they pulled away,

Monica saw tears on her mother's face. She wiped them off with her hand, smiled then left. Diane watched her daughter's car drive off until she could no longer see her lights.

Four hours of smooth driving later, Monica saw a red and orange coloured wooden sign welcoming her to Mabon. She smiled as she drove by then her eyes focused on the upcoming scenery: massive trees loomed on either side of the main road, their branches hanging over just enough so as to provide comfortable shade for the pedestrians who walked on the rather wide bricked sidewalks. Stores with colourful awnings and signs faced her on both sides of the street; several people sat under bright blue umbrellas in front of what looked to be a café named J.A.V.A. Monica made a mental note to check it out later today if she had time while her new place of employment named Wenchang Books stood next to it. She pulled her car into a close parking spot and got out, stretching her legs and arms as she smiled, feeling the filtered sun's rays on her face. She closed her eyes in a moment of triumph; she was actually here.

"Are you applying for our resident scarecrow position?" Monica opened her eyes and, realizing that her stretched out body was indeed ready for troublesome birds, brought in her arms and legs and turned to find the source of the voice while her face turned redder than a tomato. A man sat at one of the tables in front of the café with a cup of what looked to be tea and a book face down on the table. Monica grinned as she walked up to the commenter.

"Thanks," she said in a jovial mood, "but I have already accepted another position in this town, one that has far better benefits."

"Ah, and that would be-"

"Assistant manager for Wenchang Books." The man's eyes widened for a moment then relaxed as a grin crept on his face as he took a sip of his tea.

"Assistant manager, huh? Well, so you're the one everyone's been talking about. Welcome to Mabon," he said as he took another sip. He placed the cup back on the table and sighed. "Ah, there is nothing better than a good book and a cup of tea, wouldn't you agree?"

"Oh yes, I agree most heartedly. There's nothing like a good cup of tea-"

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“Or chai.”

Monica grinned. “Or chai.”

The man finished off his cup then got up while placing his book in his worn leather satchel. “Well,” he said while stretching and yawning, “it’s time for me to get back to work. But still, welcome to Mabon.” He walked around the table towards her and held out his hand. “My name is Benjamin Algren and I’m the English Literature professor at Janus, the liberal arts college here in town.” Monica took his hand and gripped it tightly.

“I’m Monica Burton. Nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure is all mine, Monica.”

Benjamin released his hand from her grip and walked to his navy blue car, waved again then drove off, leaving Monica still on the sidewalk, still waving, still grinning like a schoolgirl.

“I see our Lit prof has introduced himself to our new resident,” said a warm voice behind her. Monica turned without any surprise to face a 50-ish tall and slender woman dressed in black sandals, black yoga pants, purple short sleeve shirt and funky coloured jewelry that accentuated her short and spiky grey hair. The woman pushed her glasses up her crinkled nose. “So, you’re Monica, huh,” she said with a genuine smile on her face. “Name’s Miranda Cole, owner of Wenchang Books and your boss.” Miranda walked over to Monica and gave her a big hug, releasing scents of lemon verbena from her clothing. Monica closed her eyes and fell into the hug; it felt just right. When she pulled away, Miranda’s eyes sparkled with a fire she had never seen before as she stared at Monica. “I’m so glad you finally made it!” she said. “We’ve been hit with a rush of orders and lately our shelves had to be restocked several times a day. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for profits and whatnot, but lately it has just been ridiculous!”

“Well, if you want me to start today, I can. Just let me find my apartment, try to unload most of my stuff and then I can come back later, if that’s okay?”

Miranda patted her shoulder tenderly then said in a softer tone, “No, you just got here. Take your time in getting moved in. The work will be here whenever you’re ready. Go find your new home and relax tonight. In fact, may I suggest a place for dinner? Try Stingrays; it is two streets over by the fountain. They have great food and the prices aren’t too bad, plus the servers there are really

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cool folks. Tell them who you are and perhaps they'll make your first dinner there for free." Miranda patted her shoulder again then walked back to the bookstore. Before she opened the door, she turned around and said to a still standing Monica, "Welcome to Mabon," with a beaming smile then opened the door and let herself in. Monica stared at the storefront for several seconds then got in her car and drove off in search of her new home.

After getting lost twice, Monica finally found her new home named Siren Court Apartments. She grinned; it seemed as though everything in the town had a special name. She turned into the main driveway of the complex and looked around, her head going back and forth in trying to take in as much as possible. Oak trees dotted the landscape of the place while pictures of mermaids were located everywhere and in different medias: paint, mosaic, even brick. A fountain made of blue and green coloured tile with stone mermaid statues holding vases from which the water came from stood in the middle of the complex. Monica drove by and whistled at the master craftsmanship of the statue then drove on to find her place.

She found her building, #36, and pulled into the parking lot with U-Haul in tow. She stretched and yawned as she got out of the car then rubbed her hands together with glee. Monica locked her car then walked to the leasing office located in the garden area across the road. As she walked, she noticed there were several brightly coloured mermaid statues dotted through the area. The leasing office stood by the swimming pool where several people either sat in beach chairs or made use of the pool. She found the front door and let herself in, jingling the front door chimes shaped like mermaids. A young woman with long bright red hair sat at a desk to the right of the front door, typing furiously on her keyboard while staring at her monitor with a serious expression. When she heard the chimes, she glanced up, noticed Monica and then broke into a bright smile.

"Greetings!" she said while getting up from her chair. Monica noticed she wore jeans with thick black sandals, a black shirt that said ARTIST in tie dye colours, and small silver hoop earrings to accommodate the six silver rings on her hands and small silver ring

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in her left nostril. She walked over to Monica and shook her hand with an almost bone crushing grip, causing Monica to wince slightly. The woman, realizing her strength, released her grip and blushed slightly. "Sorry about that, but I've been taking grip classes in addition to my yoga classes lately; looks like they've paid off." She stared at her hand for a moment then brightened up again. "Sorry about that; I tend to go off on tangents. Anyway, I'm Gina, the leasing manager. Are you a new tenant or just looking?"

Monica decided she liked her already. "I'm Monica Burton. I called several days ago about moving here."

Gina beamed. "Good to finally put a face with a name, Monica."

"Good to finally be here," she said with obvious relief.

"Sure! Anyway, I have your keys and new resident packet ready for you." She walked back to her desk, picked up two silver keys and an ocean blue coloured thick folder, then handed the lot to her. "Inside the folder you'll find the history of the town, maps, coupons to several of the restaurants and cafés here, your lease, and other goodies for you to read whenever. You have two keys with one of them being a spare. Well, shall we go to your place?" Monica nodded and Gina led the way. As they walked through the garden back to Building 36, Gina asked, "So, what brings you to our neck of the woods?"

"Well, it's kind of hard to explain."

"Try me; you would not believe the things I have heard in the past ten years here."

"Well, I came here because . . . I wanted to be around other creative people. Other people who live outside of the box, so to speak. I needed a change in my life and it was not going to happen while I lived in my old city. I hated my job, did not care for my co-workers, and felt my life stifling. I've wanted to explore my creative side, if I had one at all, and see what I had been possibly denying myself for the longest time." Suddenly, Gina stopped just as they reached the door to Monica's apartment. Her face held a solemn look as she turned to Monica and placed a hand on her arm.

"Dear, I know exactly what you're talking about. I came here for those same reasons. It is hard to live around people who can't and won't understand you. My old home sounded just like yours; I felt like an outsider most of my life. Even my own family, although

they loved me, never really understood just why I needed to paint at three in the morning while listening to blues music. When I tried to show them my work, they either patted me on the head like I was an obedient dog that did a trick, or they asked me when I was going to give up my little hobby so I could settle down with a man and have kids.” Gina unlocked the door to let them in. Monica walked into her new living room with awe; soft blues and greens occupied the room with enough space for her furniture and art while the neutral oatmeal carpet balanced out the colours. The entire apartment had an ocean/beach house feel to it; each of the rooms held either the blue or green colour from the living room with gracious spaces that gave rise to the imagination. Monica walked through the place twice, her wide eyes taking in as much as possible, while Gina remained in the living room with a knowing smile on her face.

When Monica returned to the living room, she said, “This place is amazing, Gina!”

“That’s usually the first reaction people give when they move in. Glad you like it, though. That’s how I felt when I moved here as well.”

“Oh yeah, go on with your story.”

“Sure, but how about if we sit on the floor? Do you mind?”

“Hey, it’s my place and you’re my first guest! Why not?” The two women sat on the floor while the white noise of the air conditioner buzzed over them.

“So where was I? Oh yeah – I had no problems with wanting to get married and all of that, but I wanted my art to be an important part of my life as well. My family and friends could not understand that. So, I did some research and discovered Mabon. After spending the weekend here, I made up my mind to move here. My family was against it yet they still sent me off with their blessing. Ten years later, I’m happy I made the decision to move. Do you know,” she said as she scratched her left elbow in an absent minded way, “that not one of my family members has visited me since I moved here? They’ll call from time to time, but none have visited.”

“Even though they live an hour away?”

“Funny, huh? They would actually enjoy visiting here; everyone is pretty friendly, especially to newcomers.”

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“Oh yeah, speaking of which, I met this guy while I was parked outside of Wenchang Books. Really nice guy, too.”

“Oh really?” said Gina as she moved closer to Monica in anticipation for any secrets. “What did he look like?”

“Taller than me, slender build, brown hair, green eyes. He’s a professor at-”

“Janus, right? Yeah, that’s Benjamin. Dr. Benjamin Algren. He really is a nice guy. Single too, ya know.” Gina stared at Monica for a moment then said, “He has a sister living with him, ya know. Did he mention her?”

“No, we just talked for a brief moment and then he left to go back to school. What’s she like?”

“Ophelia? Pretty cool. She’ll remind you of a hip and funky librarian, but she’s sweet just like him. She does have her ‘colourful’ moments to say the least, ya know. I’ve known the two of them for a while now; they’ve been here for quite some time. She’s quite a bookworm, just like Benjamin. If you’re into books, you’ll get along with them famously.”

“Well, I am going to be the new assistant manager for Wenchang Books.”

Suddenly, Gina squealed as she hugged Monica like a long lost sister. “Oh, so you’re the one Miranda was talking about! Now it makes sense! Dear, you must come and hang with us; we’ve got a small group of folks that throw literary dinner parties every week. Once you get settled in, let me know and I’ll introduce you to the rest of the gang.”

“Wow,” said Monica in shock, “thanks!” Gina then got up and helped Monica up as well.

“Well, gotta run, but hey, call me if you need anything. In fact, I live in the same building as you so drop by 36-A anytime after five for scones and tea. I make my own, ya know?” With that, she let herself out while humming a song, leaving Monica in better spirits than she had felt in a long time.

Monica spent the remainder of her day unpacking as much as possible, trying to make use of the daylight while she had it. The first thing she unpacked was her CD player; five minutes later, the sounds of Frank Sinatra could be heard through the entire

apartment as she walked back and forth between the U-Haul and her place. By the time the sun had set, her clothes and most of the kitchen were unpacked and settled in. She found her tin of instant raspberry lemonade, made a cup of it and drank it down while sitting on the floor. She looked around at her new surroundings and sighed. Already off to a good start, she thought as she got up to take a shower. Afterwards, she unhooked the U-haul from her car then drove off in search of a good first dinner in town. She decided to try Stingrays at the recommendation of Miranda as well as walk around to get a better idea of the town's layout. She parked the car on a side street then got out and began her initial trek through her new home. The streetlights were designed to look like gas lamps from the Victorian period, dotting the streets while giving off enough light for the folks who enjoyed a good nightly stroll. Once Monica found the main street, she felt at home; people were out either with others or by themselves, enjoying the night just like her. The two cafes were busy with patrons either sitting inside or people watching outside while Wenchang Books' front was wide open and well lit. Monica saw Miranda walking to and fro while helping customers yet she looked far from stressed or fatigued; she enjoyed her job knowing it was not a job, but her livelihood. Monica walked on, leaving her new place of employment behind and onward to the next visual delight.

Couples strolled arm in arm all around her and for a moment she felt lonely. Her last boyfriend five years ago proved to be quite a piece of work; after getting off work late one night, he proceeded to get very drunk, take her car keys and drive around in her car before running it straight into the poles that held up a flight of stairs at her old apartment complex. Her car was totaled, but he survived with barely a scratch, a \$500 fine and one night in jail. After that fiasco, she swore off men completely, wanting to spend more time in developing herself. Only problem was that she did the opposite; she squelched anything that looked to be remotely interesting inside of her and tried to fit in with the rest of the world, of which proved to be disastrous.

However, she thought as she strolled along, things seemed to be in the process of changing and for the better; her times of self denial of her creative side were over, giving way to a life filled with eccentric ways and likes. She was ready for it. Monica continued to

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walk down the street, taking in as much as possible with her eyes. The colours seemed to be too bright, too unreal for her to imagine and yet she walked among them while the townsfolk delved into this town with no shame or fear; it was a part of them after all so why hide it? She grinned to herself then hid it for a moment; she did not want people thinking she was crazy or off her rocker. Suddenly she stopped in mid stride in both walking and in thought: why would she want to hide her smiles? Everyone else was engaged in their own colourful lives and smiles were abundant. People here did not have a problem with her smiling. Satisfied, she grinned again and continued on her way till she reached Stingrays on the corner. She peered through the windows to stare at the small wooden tables in the restaurant with a minimal amount of light given by a single white candle on each table. Several single people were either eating their food, reading a book while waiting for their food, or talking to passersby at their own tables. She went in and was immediately greeted by a young man who led the way to a table, produced a menu for her to look over then dashed off to the next new patron.

Monica looked over the menu's choices and began to salivate; everything sounded good to her since she had not eaten all day. The menu held an array of choices minimally priced, followed by a wine list and a dessert listing that was to die for.

"I highly recommend the chicken paprika unless if you don't like poultry or paprika." Monica lowered her menu to reveal Dr. Algren standing at her table with a smirk on his face. "I try to come here at least once a week; the food's just that good."

"Uh, thanks," she stammered, "I wanted to treat myself to a good dinner tonight and my boss said this was the place to do it." She stared at him half wanting to invite him to her table and half wanting him to go to his own. She wanted the peace and serenity, but at the same time wanted to make new friends as well. Mabon seemed to be the kind of place where the norm was to not be the norm, a fact that Monica purely enjoyed. However, she still held onto her loner status that required her to shun people and alienate herself from the rest of the world. It was her protective wall that served as a defense mechanism when things got to be too hot or too weird. Benjamin stood at her table with expectant eyes; she could tell that he wanted to sit at her table, but was unsure if he could just

make himself at home at her table or give her room. After all, they had just met today yet she had something that he wanted to get to know on a deeper level. He decided to take the plunge first and see if she would follow.

“Hey, do you mind if I sit with you? I don’t really want to be alone tonight for dinner.” He made as if to pull the chair from the table while his eyes still focused on her uncertain ones. She struggled inside between saying yes or no to his question, but the sudden light in her eyes gave him his answer.

“Sure, I would love it if you sat with me.” Monica did everything she could from coming close to fainting in making that decision; she really wanted to be alone tonight, but knew that if she wanted to truly be a part of this town, she had to swallow her nervousness and take the plunge. Benjamin smiled as she pulled the chair out and sat down. He took the white cloth napkin from the table and placed it in his lap with fluidity, something she had never seen before in a man.

“So, aside from the chicken paprika, what else is good on the menu?” she asked in what seemed to be a logical opening to a possible conversation. She had to start somewhere.

“Hmmm, well, pretty much everything. I think I’ve tried it all and have had no complaints thus far. Are you allergic to anything?”

“No, not really, at least, I don’t think so.”

“Well, that settles that, then. Seriously though, try the chicken paprika. You won’t be disappointed.” At that moment, the waiter came up, talked to Benjamin for a bit (he was one of his students), then took their orders and walked off, leaving the two in silence. Monica fiddled with the napkin in her lap while her eyes focused on everything else, but Benjamin’s face. The last time she had dinner with a man was her dad a month before he died. Benjamin, clearly amused and awed by her nervousness, stared right at her face and grinned. She was an attractive woman both inside and out. He wondered, however, if she knew that as well.

“So, how long will you be in Mabon?” he asked just as her eyes focused back on his. “You do realize, however, that once you move here, you’re here for good? The townspeople tend to stay here until they become part of the winds that blow through the trees, or something along those lines.”

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“Well, I don’t know how long I’ll be here, but I do like it so far. It seems to be what I have been looking for all my life. A place where people can be themselves.”

“The eccentricity pours out of Mabon like a waterfall, if you haven’t figured that out yet. All of us are quirky in one way or another. Gina over at Siren’s Court is an artist, sculptor and violinist, while Arabella, owner of Bergamot Tea, is our resident tealeaf reader and psychic. Have you met her yet?”

“No, not yet, but she seems interesting already.”

“Oh yeah she is, but I’ll let you make that determination. She moved to Mabon about six years ago after recovering from a serious mental breakdown. She lived in a mental institution for three years before finally channeling her frustrations and problems into growing herbs in their gardens. Soon, she was making homemade teas for the staff and showing signs of improvement. Anyway, go by Bergamot when you have a chance; it’s on Changer Street, about five blocks from here. Just follow your nose and you’ll find it soon enough.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. So anyway, that’s her and then there’s me. Aside from teaching, I am also a writer. Have one book already out and currently working on my second one.” He paused for a moment. “If you’d like, I’d like to give you a copy of my work. Are you a reader?” He slapped his forehead with his hand. “Duh! You’d have to be, seeing as how you’re working at Wenchang. Sorry for the dumb question.”

“Hey no worries and to answer it; books have been my friends for most of my life. I don’t know where I would be without them. Yes, I would be more than delighted to have a copy of your book.”

“Cool!” Just then, their food arrived and soon the conversation gave way to eating. From the first bite of her dinner, Monica knew Benjamin was right. The chicken paprika was delicious.

“So, I understand you have a twin sister,” she said while they sipped on their coffees after dinner. Stingrays had nearly cleared out except for the two of them and one other couple, but they did not notice anything; after dinner they struck up conversation on different subjects and neither one wanted to go home just yet.

Benjamin took a small sip then gently placed the cup on the saucer without making a sound while his blank face stared at her. Monica, for a moment, thought she had made a mistake in talking about her until Benjamin replied.

“Yes, her name is Ophelia. She’s kind of like me; we both like to read voraciously, we are both quite eccentric, and we are both a bit on the shy side.”

“Gina told me that she’s like a funky librarian.”

Benjamin laughed. “Yeah, that’s her, all right. She even dresses like one. Hey, if that’s what she likes, then who am I to complain or change her ways? She’s being herself and that makes me happy.”

“You truly do care for her. So, when do I get to meet her?”

“Oh, she drops by your bookstore from time to time. I’ll tell her to stop by to make herself known to you.”

“Great!” Monica took another sip of her lukewarm coffee then took a look at her watch. Benjamin caught the act and said, “Am I keeping you?”

“No, not at all,” she replied while blushing, “but I do need to get back to my place and clean up some more. Thank goodness I don’t start work tomorrow.”

“Well hey, do you mind if I come over and help you out some? My class is not until 11am tomorrow and I am a bit of a night owl . . .” Monica, although touched by the act of kindness, wanted to be alone tonight. However, the almost pleading look in his eyes made it hard for the words to come out of her mouth. She sighed inwardly then said, “Sure, why not?”

Benjamin grunted as he picked up one of her book filled boxes while Monica opened up a box in her kitchen and took out her purple and black coloured coffee maker and matching toaster. Since he so readily volunteered to assist her, she made sure he worked his ass off just to see him sweat and possibly regret his decision. However, he did not complain and cleaned out every box he touched, opening far many more than Monica, in addition to unloading the couch, loveseat, bed set and a couple of tables. They stopped around midnight even though Benjamin opened two more

boxes while she sat on the floor. Several minutes later, Benjamin joined her and stretched his arms.

“Wow, now I’ll know why I’ll feel so crappy tomorrow morning,” he said with a tired grin. “I hope I helped out somewhat.”

“You did and thanks. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Monica got up and made her way into the kitchen to grab a cold bottle of water. She turned around and saw Benjamin standing at the doorway with a grin on his face. Monica, not knowing what to do, grinned back. “So,” he said as he leaned against the doorframe, “is there anything else I can help you with tonight? Like I said, I tend to be a night owl and my class is not until 11am. I really don’t mind helping with any other heavy stuff you might have put off.”

“Actually, I’m good with everything; you helped knock out some parts of unpacking that I was not looking forward to. I really appreciate your help; let me take you out to dinner or lunch sometime this week, okay? It’s the least I can do.”

“I’ll take you up on it. How about if I stop by the store later this week and we’ll take it from there?”

“Sounds good to me.” Monica walked by him and into the living room towards the front door. Benjamin watched her movements and picked up immediately that she was ready for him to leave. However, he planned to go against her mental wishes and instead stick around for a bit, just to watch her squirm and because he was intrigued by her. Ever since they met earlier that day, he could think of nothing else, but her; something about her triggered a desire to know more about her and her reasons for moving to Mabon. He wanted to know if perhaps her reasons were the same as his. He walked back into the living room and sat down on the floor, causing Monica to frown somewhat then quickly recover into a tired smile. She joined him on the floor with distance between them; she did not want to give him any ideas of further actions just because of her sitting next to him. At this point, she wanted to make new friends and nothing more; relationships were out of the question. She wanted to spend more time with herself, discovering what made her tick.

“So, why did you come here?” asked Benjamin, wanting to get right to the point. “Was it because of a breakup, did you lose your

job, or was it something deeper than that?” Monica visibly tensed so Benjamin smiled, trying to let her know that whatever she had inside of her, it was okay to bring it out into the open. She had nothing to worry about. Monica, however, felt quite the opposite; at that point, she was not really in a mood to reveal her past to a man she just met. He was a stranger, albeit friendly one, but still a stranger to her.

Her eyes focused on his slightly eager ones and said in a calm voice, “Perhaps another time. Too tired right now.” Benjamin’s face fell a bit in disappointment so she quickly added, “It’s been a long day. I would love to tell you my reasons for coming here, but just not now. Maybe during our lunch or dinner?”

“Sure, I would love that,” he said brightening up once more. The two got up from the floor and walked to the front door. Monica opened it for him, revealing the night sky that held a cool whisper of Autumn’s arrival to the town.

“Well, thanks again,” she said, “and hopefully tomorrow will be a good day for you.” Benjamin gave her a hug that lasted longer than necessary then said as he pulled back, “It is tomorrow.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek then turned and walked to his car and drove off, leaving Monica still standing by the open door, clearly intrigued by her visitor. A hand went up to her cheek and she rubbed it tenderly, not realizing her actions. She could still feel his lips, causing a tingling sensation on her cheek.