

Award-Winning Best-Selling Author

*P.S.  
I've  
Taken  
A  
Lover*



**Patricia  
Lucas White**

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For Mary Jo Hannah,  
who is not Mary Alice Cassidy Bates  
but is a Forever Friend



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## Prologue



“Zounds! Gadzooks! And a wicker basket scupper-full of scummy balderdash!”

Silly as they sound, archaic oaths, a melodramatic scream or two, or even a bit of hair-tearing and woe-is-me-ing seem singularly appropriate right now. Far more appropriate than the rattle of typewriter keys—a manual, of course: madwomen aren’t allowed to have electrical cords, or belts, or shoelaces. Almost too appropriate now that I’m embroiled, up to my naked earlobes, in what has to be the ultimate in clichés.

It still doesn’t seem quite possible.

But, nevertheless, here I am. Me, Elizabeth Gilmartin, ersatz writer, cast in the role of hapless-heroine-waiting-to-be-ravished; a role straight out of Poe, or perhaps one of the other more erotic and terribly decadent Romantics. Incarcerated in a madhouse, at her husband’s behest, her protests of sanity ignored; the heroine, chained and weeping, is totally at the mercy of her cruel and

sex-mad attendants.

And then, just when she thinks she has plumbed the depths, she is forced, by her mild-mannered but sadistic doctor, to submit (horror of horrors) mind, memory, and slim white fingers, to participate in a hackneyed plot device.

And so it is that I, darling of the talkshow circuits, critically acclaimed author of sophisticated sexual romps, have fallen to this. Now I am that empty-eyed lunatic, crouching at my poorly lit table, authoring this sad tale of my plunge into murky madness.

A tale to be embellished, or so I'd guess, with lurid accounts of lecherous orderlies, incestuous fantasies, and bed-crawling fellow inmates. And, in the end, if this tale follows the formula, will be my complete cure by my devoted doctor and a heart-rending reunion with my estranged, but still adoring, husband.



I have just been chided, in warm-honey tones, but chided nevertheless, for my unseemly lapse into levity. My keeper, Nurse Chatsworth, smelling of dawn-picked rectitude and eternal morality, slipped up behind me and read what I had typed.

She was not amused.

It seems I have approached the writing of my “Life-Notes” with not only what she termed “an

improper attitude,” but also with a universe of misinformation oozing from the tips of my fingers. However, Miss Chatsworth, armored against the vileness of recalcitrant patients by a full suit of shining humorlessness, decorated here and there with swaths of doctor-worship, was sure I could not only mend my ways, but would, just as soon as she pointed out my flaws and fallacies.

“Harmony House,” she said, looking at me with eyes of deep, reproachful blue, “was established by Dr. Abernathy to be a haven for you poor unfortunate creatures who are troubled in mind and spirit and need a helping hand. Doctor is a very sensitive man, and I can assure you he would be terribly hurt if he heard you call this beautiful facility a *madhouse*.”

“And, as for your other nonsense, you have to know Doctor is very progressive in his treatment of the mentally ill. You won’t find any bars or chains. Mrs. Gilmartin, our orderlies are under strict orders. They do not fraternize, in any way, with our patients. Indeed not!”

She glanced at the double-spaced sheet in the typewriter, and compressed her lips. “I’ll have you know, Dr. Abernathy is a highly respected man. He utilizes every mode and method of modern diagnostic testing and evaluation, and that, my dear Mrs. Gilmartin, includes patient-written ‘Life-Notes.’ That particular evaluation tool is Doctor’s contribution to the scientific

community. ‘Life-Notes’ have been read and commented on at a multitude of prestigious symposiums. All I can tell you is, you should be honored to have even a small part in a such a great man’s work.” She smiled then, but not at me.

She glanced at the typewriter again. Her smile faded and her sweetness hardened, just a little. “And, as for you, Mrs. Gilmartin, Doctor wants us to remind you, as often as is necessary, that you are not a writer, ersatz or otherwise. You would be very wise if you try to remember that.”

Nurse Chatsworth paused, waiting for me to perjure myself, to admit to duplicity. But all I could say was, “I am Lolly Horn.”

“Mrs. Gilmartin, Doctor Abernathy has, to my certain knowledge, told you, at least seven times, that your belief that you are Lolly Horn is a delusion. And I would also add, from seeing her on TV and looking at you, that the idea is totally preposterous.”

I squirmed in the chair, trying to ease myself back and away from her. But she reached out, took my hand in hers, and patted it while she said, “Now, dear, I want you to remember that you are Mrs. Edgar Gilmartin of Cragshome. You, Elizabeth Gilmartin, have never been a guest on a national TV talkshow, have never held an autograph party, have never, and I repeat, *never*, written a book of any kind, especially the kind Lolly Horn writes.

“You are a nice person. The mother of two grown, married sons. You are a dedicated homemaker, an occasional volunteer at the Cragshome Historical Society and at the Cragshome Library, and nothing more.”

I tried to protest, to straighten out some of her misconceptions, but she waved me back into silence.

“You are here, Mrs. Gilmartin, because your husband signed you in for thirty days of observation and evaluation. He had to get a court order to do that, but no one, absolutely no one, has said you are a lunatic. Delusional, yes, but....”

I snorted.

“Please, Mrs. Gilmartin, try to understand that we are not your enemies. We want only the best for you. Dr. Abernathy says the delusional-writer-you is nothing more than a leftover dream from your childhood.”

She glanced around to see if anyone were close enough to overhear and lowered her voice, and her eyelids, as if she were speaking of some incredibly delicate, or else some incredibly filthy, condition. “My dear, you are at that age when... ah... when your life seems over... ah... your body has... well, it is at that stage of your life when all of the bright dreams and wishes of your productive womanhood come back to fill all the empty spaces in your barren....”



I was still convulsed with laughter when Nurse Chatsworth came storming back, handed me two yellow pills and a small paper cup of tepid water. “Here,” she snapped. “Take this medication immediately. It will enable you to regain your self-control.”

Her rubber-soled shoe tapped the polished floor and blue eyes were narrowed, gun-fighter mean. She reached across my shoulder, grabbed the top of the typed page, jerked it out of the typewriter, and squeezed it into a tight, wrinkled ball.

“And, Mrs. Gilmartin,” she said coldly, “you were told how these should be written. Even an ersatz writer should be able to put her ‘Life-Notes’ in the proper form, the form Doctor has told you he prefers.”

It came out as a gusting giggle, but I found enough breath to ask, “Which is?”

“Third person, past tense,” she said, and then she clamped her mouth shut, either because she had forgotten the rest, or because she was waiting for me to betray my ignorance by asking unwriterly questions.

Laughter bubbles exploded in my throat, but my voice sounded suspiciously meek, even to me, when I asked, “Is limited omniscient the doctor’s choice also? In this case, do I get to be God, telling the whole thing from my...?”

Her fingers closed around my wrist, thumb pressed against the pulse point. She nodded. “That’s right. Use your point of view and you can begin right after your nap. And, Mrs. Gilmartin, please start at the beginning. Doctor does, on occasion, publish some of the more interesting ‘Life-Notes’ in book form. It saves him time and trouble if the notes are in proper sequence—no flashbacks—and as complete as you can make them.”

My tongue felt slightly prickly and it was hard to push the words past the laughter that still hid within me. “Oh, I see. From the moment I was born.”

“No, dear,” she said as she pulled me up from the chair and led me like a mother leads a wobbly-legged child, across the dayroom and into my cell. “Just from the time you started having your delusions. You know, when you began to believe you were a writer. That, I’m sure, will suit Doctor’s purpose admirably.”

“Okay,” I mumbled through a mighty yawn. “It isn’t a delusion, but I know when I... I know exactly when it all began. It was a sunny, warm morning in early September.”

I chuckled as I added, “It was just over a year ago, and summer. The day when I was still *just* Mrs. Edgar Gilmartin. Mrs. Edgar Gilmartin, Edgar’s trainee house mouse.”

## Chapter One



*If I, Elizabeth Gilmartin, an incarcerated madwoman afflicted with a terminal case of whimsical hyperbole, can be believed, it all began thusly:*

“It sounds wonderful, but I... Oh, Cass, you know I can’t go. You know how Edgar feels about me going anywhere without...”

The caller interrupted forcefully.

The white telephone vibrated in Elizabeth Gilmartin’s hand. She held it away from her ear, trying to protect herself from the ear-blasting sound of Cass’ unrestrained response; but even as she winced, Elizabeth smiled.

Cass—Mary Alice Cassidy Bates—had been Elizabeth’s dearest friend in grammar school, and their friendship hadn’t lessened through the years. Cass knew, or thought she knew, what was best for Elizabeth in any and all instances, and she wasn’t adverse to saying so.

But Cass knew where Elizabeth’s dreams were

buried also, and had shared Elizabeth's unvoiced grief at each small, silent funeral. Perhaps, in one case, at least, the burial had been a tad premature. Even as the slim, nondescript woman listened, with Cass' eager plans overriding her own feeble denying noises, Elizabeth could feel something like excitement, for a dream that still lived, stirring in her stomach, moving like the quickening pangs of an unborn child. Small, prenatal still, the dream was real.

"It isn't too late, Elizabeth," the dream wheedled, using Cass' hoarse, breathy voice. "You're only fifty. Lots of women start new careers when.... Oh, Elizabeth, listen to me. You don't actually have to write anything, just come with me. We could have such fun. It would be like.... Honey, if Edgar won't give you the money, I'll pay for the..." The voice went on and on, outlining the plan, tempting, pleading.

And when there was a moment of silence on the other end of the telephone line, Elizabeth heard her own voice whisper, "I'll ask Edgar."

Before Elizabeth could waffle or hedge, Cass asked, "Promise?"

"Promise." Elizabeth's echoing response was a vow given to a friend, the ritual of years renewed and perpetuated. It was a promise Elizabeth had to keep, could never weasel out of. She knew that, and a tingle of unease joined the excitement that hiccupped and kicked inside her flat stomach.

Cass' victory chuckle and breathy farewell were almost lost in the chime of the microwave oven. Elizabeth held the receiver for a fleeting moment before she dropped it back into its cradle and exchanged a shimmer of dreamscape for the task at hand. Edgar's oat bran muffins were hot, and Edgar Allen Gilmartin, successful investment counselor and husband of thirty-three years, waited.

The woman knew just exactly how he waited. The morning paper, still neatly folded, was at his left elbow. A cut-glass bowl of whole-grain cereal, topped with five slices of banana and a quarter of a cup of skimmed milk, was setting squarely in front of him. A bone china cup of steaming decaffeinated coffee, still untouched, sat within easy reach of his right hand. His breakfast was four minutes late, because she had forgotten to heat the muffins, and Edgar was waiting, probably not even tapping his forefinger on the edge of the table, with well-concealed, well-mannered impatience.

Elizabeth picked up the designer muffin basket, a gift from Edgar's secretary, Karoline Marshall, the previous Christmas, and took a shallow breath.

She wasn't afraid of her husband, but he always made her feel so... so.... She refused to entertain the rest of the thought, but was too late to block it out completely.

The nip and surge of her excitement turned to a sour taste in her mouth. Old, unshed tears, like

furry mice, with sharp, hot claws, scabbled up from her stomach, filling her throat too full. Her hand had a slight tremor as she brushed back a straying wisp of her blunt-cut hair, hair that was neither glossy with youth nor shimmering silver.

As she turned, Elizabeth caught a single glimpse of a distorted reflection in the gleaming black glass of the oven door. Her own bland, colorless face peered back at her. Her lips twisted into a wry smile. "Elizabeth Gilmartin," she whispered, "resident rug."

The smile was gone when she slipped quietly, and with no apparent grace, into the long, narrow dining room. Edgar's polished and perfect dining room, with its wall of east-facing windows, limed-oak furniture, and grass-papered walls. Or, rather, Edgar's decorator's polished and perfect dining room—glossy-magazine perfect and expected to stay that way.

Setting the basket of napkin-wrapped muffins three inches to the right of his ice-nested glass of fresh orange juice, Elizabeth saw the back of Edgar's neck and felt an emotion she thought was stone-dead which made her want to reach out and caress him. Instead, she pushed absently, with a gesture Edgar deplored, at the nosepiece of her gray-rimmed glasses, and looked away. She didn't see anything but her own need, a need that made her feel selfish and obscurely ashamed.

The wiggling worm of guilt attached itself to

the underside of her promise to Cass, went chrysalis, and fluttered out as a gilt-hued butterfly. It swooped through her thoughts, her fraying resolve, coloring everything guilt gray, ugly.

*Edgar worked hard, worked long hours. Maybe he was right, maybe she should be happy to stay home and take care of his house. It truly was a beautiful house. The house he had dreamed of owning all their married life. Everything in it was perfect; just the way Edgar wanted it. It was the realization of his dream, and he was certain no one could maintain its perfection like she could.*

*She wanted to be able to give him this small thing, this gift of service, freely, lovingly. But why did she have to feel...? Why did she have to need more, need...?*

“Elizabeth, I asked you a question.”

The exasperation in his deep, rather precise tones cut through her interior monologue, a monologue that had replayed too many times in the past year, the year since James’s wedding, since....

Hurriedly, she pushed that thought away, tried to concentrate on what Edgar was saying, but the meaning of his words still wandered aimlessly, and unrecognized, through the haze of guilt and growing remorse that filled her. Guilt for her disloyalty, her discontent in Edgar’s house, remorse for a promise made in haste, a promise she felt

honor-bound to keep—just as she had kept all her promises to Cass through the years.

With pale eyes, almost colorless and oddly blank within their fringe of stubby lashes, she looked at him. She saw the deeply tanned face (from every Wednesday afternoon, five to six, spent in a tanning booth) the eyes of sparkling blue, the almost black hair with its distinguished frosting of silver.

The guilts she had nurtured and tended over the years struck again, wounding her. *Edgar Allen Gilmartin was still a lean and handsome man, a successful man, a man who had too much to do. He didn't have time to worry about her needs, her wants, her frustrated desires....* She pushed that line of thought away, and turned, almost too quickly, to other, less hurting, guilts.

*People looked up to Edgar, sought him out, took from him, and begged for more. He came home from the office so worn, so weary he could scarcely.... Maybe he was right, maybe she should be there when he came home, waiting for him in his spotless house, a hot meal ready to go on the table. Maybe. Could he be expected, on top of everything else he had to do, to worry about her unimportant little angers, her need to.... He had always given her....*

*And he had always taken away....* The last thought crept in unbidden.

“Elizabeth, have you been taking your estrogen?”

Shame, and a tiny flare of resentment, set up a crimson clamor on her high cheekbones and the tip of her slim nose. She smothered the resentment with a practiced hand, and then, more like a chastised child than a grown woman, she nodded mutely.

“Well, in that case, perhaps you should make another appointment with Dr. Swart. Your present dosage is obviously too weak.” His thin lips smiled, but not his eyes. “You’re still wandering around like you’re in your dotage. It seems to me like you should be more careful, especially considering what happened before. I do not want you getting ill again, particularly now.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, but she wasn’t, not really. The placating response was automatic, a habitual apology, soft words intended to soothe his ire, to fend off criticism of her many flaws. Flaws that seemed more manifest since he had found her hot flashes and night sweats so distasteful and moved out of their shared bedroom. And completely out of her bed.

Sighing heavily, Edgar said, “Elizabeth, I asked you who was on the phone. Surely you can answer a simple question like that.”

Her tongue flicked palely across her bare lips. She felt rather than heard the sting of his carefully controlled irritation at this new example of her total incompetence. Her own resentment combined with her guilt made her almost inarticulate. Her voice was reduced to a sliver of sound. “It was

only Cass,” she said.

Elizabeth saw the little moue that twisted his lips. She bowed her head, refusing to see the disapproval in his eyes, of her continuing friendship with Cass.

“What did she want?”

Elizabeth could only shake her head in reply.

“She must have wanted something, Elizabeth. Not even *Cass* would be rude enough to call at this hour of the morning unless it was for something that *she*, at least, considered to be of some importance.” Edgar picked up his glass of orange juice, held it midway between the table and his mouth, and waited, looking at her expectantly.

“She... one of Cass’ ladies when she...” The words stumbled across Elizabeth’s tongue and died of oxygen deprivation on her lips.

Sounding as phony-tolerant as a long-suffering but liberal parent, Edgar said, “Oh, for God’s sake, Elizabeth, speak up. I’m not going to spank you or send you to your room. Just tell me what your rich friend...” his voice coarsened, took on the rasp-tones of a sneer, “the Widow Bates, wanted at this time of the morning.” His hand jerked on his last word and droplets of yellow juice splashed up and out of the glass, flashing like pure gold in the sunlight that lay aslant the gleaming tabletop.

Fingers pressed to her mouth, Elizabeth watched the drops of juice fall, splatter, and

although she didn't really want to look at him, she saw the annoyance that darkened the blue of her husband's eyes, deepened the furrow between his brows. "I'll get a cloth and clean it up," she said hurriedly.

"Not yet, Elizabeth. Tell me what Cass wanted," he said tightly. A little muscle jumped at the corner of his mouth, but his voice was under rigid control, each syllable weighed, measured, and chilled for the most effective decibel content.

"She wants me to go to a writers' conference with her." The words came out in a single strand, stark and ugly as cheap plastic beads molded together on a plastic string. And then, without waiting to hear his response, Elizabeth turned and scurried out of the room.

Edgar followed her into the kitchen, put his hand on her wrist as she reached for a tea towel. "My dear," he said, sounding a good deal like a saint about to be martyred, "I cannot believe that after all these years you are bringing up that silliness again. You are my wife, *Mrs.* Edgar Gilmartin, that should be enough. There's no need for you to go out and grub, to degrade yourself, and *me*, by...."

She had to stop him. "I know. I know. It's just.... Cass asked me to go, I didn't tell her I... Edgar, she thought I might enjoy meeting some famous writers. She thinks I should get out more and.... She wants me to stop moping.... Now that I'm staying home.... I did not tell her I would go

with her. I just promised to ask you if I could go. That's all."

"And that's enough. It seems to me that we agreed, last year when you.... Right after James got married, that you would...." Smiling ruefully, Edgar shook his head. "My dear, I thought it would be enough for you to be my wife. I truly did."

"Edgar, I..." Elizabeth started, but Edgar seemed not to hear her and went on, "I've worked day and night to give you everything any woman could possibly want, but it's not enough. You have this fine house, one of the most beautiful homes in Cragshome. You have credit cards, as many clothes as you want. Not only that, but you get to stay home, surrounded by the finest artwork, furniture, with nothing to do but a little housework and.... I truly don't know what more I can give you, Elizabeth. What do you want from me?"

He was singing the theme song of their marriage, a love song turned to dry and bitter ash. Elizabeth's chin came up, and there was only the faintest of quivers in her voice when she said, "I don't know what I want now, Edgar. I did once, but.... At this moment, all I know is: Cass' friend invited Cass and me to keep Cass company, to that big conference they have every year at Seaview on the Oregon Coast. The woman is a writer and she used to be one of Cass' hairdressing customers when Cass worked at the beauty shop."

"I'm truly sorry, Elizabeth, but it is absolutely

out of the question. And, what's more, Cass knew it before she even asked you. The woman's a home wrecker. She gets her kicks out of upsetting me, making my life miserable."

Elizabeth couldn't argue; it was partly true. But neither could she tell him that Cass thought he was a "selfish bastard" who hadn't a thought for anyone but himself.

"You aren't a rich widow like the estimable *Mrs. Bates*. You can't just drop everything and go rushing off like a goose. You have certain obligations and duties, as most responsible people do. After all, you are a volunteer at the library, and they're counting on you. And what about this house, would you trust anyone else to care for it in the proper manner?"

He paused for a moment, smiled down at her, and asked, almost coyly, "And me, Elizabeth? Who will take care of me if you go off with Cass?"

His unexpected cuteness jangled her nerves, set up a disharmony in her mind. Elizabeth wanted to jerk loose from his hand, scream like a fishwife, "What about me, Edgar? Do I even exist?"

But she didn't. She couldn't stop her muscles from stiffening, but her voice was completely calm when she said, "Excuse me, Edgar. I have to clean the table before the juice spots the wood."

Her husband was less than two steps behind her when she reentered the dining room, and still talking. "But it's true, Elizabeth. Whether you

want to admit it or not, you do have obligations. It isn't like it was when you and Cass were girls and could run off and.... Elizabeth, do you still want to be a writer?"

The abrupt question surprised her, touched the small channel of love that still ran somewhere deep within her. She wanted to comfort him, to hold him in her arms and take away the undertone of hurt in his voice. Her hands came up, reached out, slowly, involuntarily, but she couldn't, in all truth, answer his question. Neither could she actually touch him.

She didn't know if she still wanted to write, or even if she could. Not now. Not after all the years of pushing the dream aside, letting everything and everyone come first. Nor could she tell him, or anyone else, including Cass, of the pages written since her younger son's wedding. Written and hidden away. Pages written in secret to relieve the pain of loneliness, of depression, of feeling so tired, so useless.

No, she couldn't explain the black despair that wracked her, made her yearn desperately for something more than what she had, something that had no name, yet. She couldn't tell him, couldn't expose her fragile need to the killing cold of his lack of understanding. Could not abort the unborn dream.

She just shook her head, and it could have meant anything.

It was the only answer he needed. Edgar's smile was warm, like his voice when he said, "That's my good girl."

He took a quick sip of cool coffee, set the cup back onto the saucer with a decisive click. "Elizabeth, you really do understand why I thought it best that you stopped writing, don't you? Your working was the only way I could get my degree and we both wanted that. Now, if I thought you had any talent, even the smallest amount, I would insist you go out to the university and sign up for some writing classes. But, my dear, I see no reason why you should embarrass yourself, embarrass us both, by pursuing...."

He chuckled softly, inviting her to join his mirth. "But going to this writers' conference would be pure craziness."

He shook his head and his voice was still jovial when he said, "Well, Elizabeth, when you make that appointment with your gynecologist, you'd better make one for the Widow Bates at the same time. I honestly can't believe she's taking any estrogen at all. Sometimes I think she's gone over the edge, is as mad as a hatter."

Anger, sudden but impotent, spread like acid in her chest, burned in her throat. Elizabeth bent her head, scrubbed at the drops of juice that marred the lustrous perfection of the tabletop, holding back the bitter words that wanted to be said, sharp words she wanted to hurl at his head like knives,

words that she swallowed adding to the iron weight in her stomach.

Realizing he had gone too far, he tried to make amends. "I'm sorry, my dear. I shouldn't have made fun of your friend like that, it wasn't kind."

Edgar's voice got lower. "I realize you are sensitive right now, that The Change is.... But, my dear, I ask that you remember that I'm only trying to take care of you, to insure that you do not fall ill again."

After a moment of silence, he said, "You should thank me. Women do go mad, you know. I've heard... it's the hormones or something. I.... Elizabeth, look at me." The last was an order.

Heat surged, boiled through her veins, oozed through her pores, turned to sweat on her brow. Red mottled the pale skin of her face and neck. Tears of anger threatened to spill from her eyes, but her voice was rock steady and totally without inflection when she said, "You'd better hurry. You're going to be late for your first appointment."

He glanced at the futuristic clock that opened like a golden fan against the papered wall, stifled an exclamation of dismay, and looked back at her. "We'll discuss this later," he said quickly, but not quickly enough to hide the relief in his eyes, the easing of tension in his jaw.

"There's really nothing more to discuss, is there?"

Ever the proper wife, Elizabeth walked before

him to the tiled entry, opened the spacious guest closet, took out his lizard attaché case, and, when he was standing in the open doorway, handed it to him without a word.

When he tried to kiss her, she turned her head. Edgar's ritual kiss, an empty rite no longer holding either love or meaning, landed somewhere in the neighborhood of her left ear.

"Elizabeth," he snapped, ire raising his voice, "you make me so.... You're acting like a spoiled child."

"Am I?" she asked evenly.

"You know damned well you are. This conference can't mean a single, blasted thing to you. *You* aren't a writer. You don't even know any writers, so why are you making it so important, blowing it out of all reason? You always do this. Every time you disagree with what I decide, you...."

"Good-bye, Edgar," she said as she gently closed the door, forcing him to step back, cutting off his recriminations. Holding her breath for a long count of three, Elizabeth waited for him to pound on the door, to demand she hear him out. But there was no sound from without.

Her pent breath came out softly, almost a sigh. Elizabeth turned and walked away, turning left instead of right, going toward the bedroom wing, a faraway look in her eyes. The look made her blind to dirty dishes and the other duties assigned to the day, Monday's duties.

Anger was still driving her, goading her forward with jabbing prods of memory, memory of other anger, other pain. She grabbed the brass knob of her white-painted bedroom door, jerking the door open with a wide, sweeping gesture and letting it bang shut behind her with a muffled crash.

She stood for a moment, a slim shaft of cornflower blue in a smothering dazzle of pinks and white. White carpet. Pink draperies. White satin spread on a white bed. Pink pillows, like a clutch of satin eggs, in shades of pink and froths of lace. The pinks and white echoed and re-echoed in the mirrored wardrobe, the cheval glass, the lighted makeup mirror over the white dressing table. Pink, white, ruffles, and lace. A little girl's room.

Taking another deep breath, Elizabeth held it for an instant and then expelled it through her nose as she dragged a white satin chair to the far end of the room-length closet. Sliding the mirrored door aside, she climbed up on the chair, carelessly disregarding the marks her slippers were making on the cushion.

Her touch was gentle, reassuring as her fingers brushed the thin sheaf of papers that rested at the back of the shelf. Forty-three pages that pretended to be the first two chapters of a novel, her novel.

She couldn't make her fingers close around the pages, couldn't drag them out into the light. "Damn! Damn and blast!" she muttered. "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Heat and fury raced through her again, fury that couldn't be expressed, fury that had no roots in today's minor upset. "Edgar hasn't changed," she said. "He's still the same: pompous, conceited, thinking only of.... It's me that's at fault. I let him.... It's all me. I can't... I can't go on like this. I can't pretend.... Dear God, what am I going to do?"

The chair teetered, fell backward with a hushed thud. She jumped down. She didn't even look at it. Tearing off the dressing gown, two buttons flying loose, skittering across the thick rug, the silk ripping under her vicious fingers, she let it drop to the floor. Clad only in a lacy bra and bikini panties, Elizabeth stood for a moment, but she had no time to look at her reflected body, no wish to admire the tight, smooth muscles of her hips, thighs, and waist, the generous length of her legs, the full curve of her well-shaped breasts.

Pulling on a long, full, gray and tan shirt, loose-legged tan pants, canvas walking shoes, and adding a large hat for shade, Elizabeth walked out of the bedroom the decorator had said was "truly her" and out of her husband's house, leaving obligations and unmade beds behind her without a single twinge of guilt.

The telephone rang just as she opened the front door. "Shut up," she snarled. "I don't want to talk to you or anybody else." The heavy door whispered closed behind her and she walked away, taking only her blind rage as a companion. The

rage, as it had done so often in the past year, made her step out like a marathon walker—a walker who would win the race or die.

The telephone was still ringing, or ringing again, two hours later when she returned from her walk in the sun. The anger was hidden deep, out of sight, out of mind, and calmness hung around her like a sweet-scented cloud.

She walked to the den, a tiny room tucked in between the guest powder room and Edgar's imposing library-office suite. It was the only one in the house that had, thus far, escaped the decorator's hand, surrounding her with the familiar, the comfortable. It was her room, her haven in Edgar's sleek house. Her calmness deepened as she reached for the phone, an old black rotary phone, sitting amidst the papers and books on top of her scarred maple desk.

Elizabeth thought she knew who was calling, who had been calling when she left, and now she was ready to refuse Cass' hoarse-voiced demands that she tell Edgar she was going to the conference with or without his permission.

She was smiling when she said, "Hello, Cass."

It wasn't Cass' familiar voice that answered.

Her eyes wide, Elizabeth's voice was almost as husky as Cass' when she said, "What did you say? What are you...? There has to be some mistake. Who...?"

## Chapter Two



“No. No, I don’t understand what you’re saying. I can’t....” Elizabeth pressed the receiver a little closer to her ear, trying to hear words through the buzz and whir of electronic noise that almost drowned out the polite, but firm, voice of a total stranger, whose disquieting words were dissipating Elizabeth’s hard-won calmness.

Frowning with concentration, she listened for a moment longer and then said, “Yes, I am Mrs. Gilmartin. Yes, that’s my address and telephone number, but I didn’t....”

The voice interrupted, patiently explained the reason for the call, and then at Elizabeth’s insistence, explained it once again.

Elizabeth’s free hand reached behind her, fumbled for the chair that should have been there, patted empty air until her groping fingers found and seized a rounded expanse of nubby material. Without being consciously aware of the act, she recognized the contour of the chair arm and

tugged hard, sliding the chair forward until it touched the backs of her legs.

The phone gripped in her right hand, Elizabeth forced her tense body down, perched, like a frightened bird too weary for further flight, on the front three inches of the chair.

“Yes, I’ll write them down, but...” She fumbled through the desk drawer for a pencil and a pad, found them both, pressed too hard on the pencil, snapped the point off the lead, and finally wrote down the numbers she heard.

“I still think you’ve made a mistake,” she said when she was done, but the polite voice laughed in her ear and assured her no mistake had been made. Elizabeth was still unconvinced as she returned the phone to the hook and stared at the numbers, flight numbers for a trip to Seaview, Oregon.

“Who would do...? It has to be a mistake. Edgar said I couldn’t go; he wouldn’t do something like this. He just wouldn’t,” she told the empty room. “And Cass wouldn’t. Not without...”

Even as she said the words, realization swooped through her and Elizabeth knew she was wrong. Cass would, and probably had. Cass would do almost anything to get her own way, anything to force Elizabeth down the path Cass thought she should follow. Any path that would lead Elizabeth away from Edgar.

Anger, mixed with a touch of throat-aching

love, pushed up inside her, made her grab the phone, dial Cass' number with sharp, jabbing strokes. Anger was in her mouth when she held the phone to her ear, listened to the distant ringing. When it rang for the nineteenth time, Elizabeth slammed the phone down.

But the anger was still hot within her when she stalked down the hall, stormed into her pink and white bedroom, and went to the closet. Righting the fallen chair, she climbed up, reached into the back of the closet. There was no gentleness in her now, no love. Her fingers were savage, destroying, when they closed around the cherished sheets, crumpling the crisp paper like so many soiled dinner napkins as she pulled them out of their hiding place on the high shelf.

Elizabeth didn't even look at the typewritten pages she held in her fist, but a mist of tears blinded her and a wave of bitter grief made her cling to the back of the chair for a moment before she climbed down with slow, careful steps.

The tears were a passing thing, soon dried by her anger. Anger at them both, her husband and her friend, but mostly anger at herself for daring to dream again.

"Edgar's right," she said. "It is all nonsense. All of it. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do...." The papers seemed alive in her fingers, twisting and turning, trying to escape the cruel hand that squeezed them. Perhaps trying to tell her she

could if she'd only try, the dream could be real if she cared enough to reach out and take it and make it come true with her own labor.

“No,” she said. Setting her jaw, stiffening her spine, she strode determinedly down the hall to the kitchen. She stopped in front of the trash compactor, pulled it open. Hesitating only the barest of instants, Elizabeth tore each sheet in half lengthwise before she dropped it into the waiting maw. Her finger trembled, but it jabbed the button forcefully, turning the mutilated dream into a hard-packed memory.

The machine growled like a feral beast, rending the flesh, grinding the bones of her poor murdered dream. The woman shuddered. Her hand went to her chest, pressed against the ache of loss that had taken up lodging in her heart. She turned away.

The perfection of the house didn't intimidate her today, didn't make her want to tiptoe from room to room, slink about like a timid beggar in a king's palace. With the broad-brimmed hat on her head forgotten, Elizabeth stomped through the house, slamming doors, opening draperies that were supposed to be closed, jerking bedding straight and smooth, washing, dusting, waxing, completing the chores assigned to Monday (by one of the decorator's hirelings) in record time.

But even the rapidity of her anger-fueled labor had taken time. The afternoon was far advanced when she folded the last of the fresh-scented,

static-free laundry and returned towels, linens, and garments to their designated shelf or drawer.

Stretching the kinks out of her muscles, she walked out into the back garden to cut some flowers. They were in one of the laundry trays when Elizabeth allowed herself to sigh.

“Time to start dinner,” she said to the flowers. “A cozy dinner for two, replete with candles, you, and Edgar’s tirade.”

Salad crisping, wine breathing, the table carefully laid, silver-banded china, heavy sterling, and ruby stemware ranked on place mats that matched the shaggy white chrysanthemums, Elizabeth was pouring mountain spring water into the coffee maker when the doorbell rang.

“Cass,” Elizabeth said, feeling a small blaze of anger, willing it to grow strong enough to help her say what had to be said.

But her anger had already been spent on household tasks and wasteful sighs. It was only strong enough to send Elizabeth to the door with its dying embers in her eyes and acrid ashes bitter on her tongue. She had no flaming words to hurl at Cass when the opened door revealed her friend’s face, smiling brightly over a mountain of gaily packaged purchases.

“Oh, Liz, just wait until you see what I got for you,” Cass almost shouted, excitement in her hoarse voice. “You won’t dare get mad at me when you see how great you look in spangles and beads.”

She took a quick step forward, and thrust the toppling mound toward Elizabeth. "Quick, take some of these before I drop the whole...."

Elizabeth caught a shower of rainbow-hued bags and moved to one side, allowing Cass room to come into the entry. She looked at her smiling friend, but there was no welcoming smile on her own lips, and her voice was soft, sorrowful, when she asked, "Why, Cass? Why did you do it?"

"Oh, damn! I didn't mean to make you cry, Lizzie. I just wanted you to have something spiffy. I know what kind of clothes you buy for yourself and.... Well, you need something with sparkle and dash." She dropped the rest of her packages on the gleaming teak table that flanked the door and looked at Elizabeth quizzically. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Of course I'm not. Don't change the subject," Elizabeth snapped.

"I'm not." Cass looked at her again, tried to keep a straight face and tittered. "It was a natural mistake. Take a look." She pulled Elizabeth two steps to the left, turned her so she faced the gilt-framed mirror over the dark table.

Elizabeth's frown vanished. She felt a giggle start at the base of her throat, bubble up like an Italian fountain, turning the thin, smudged-faced apparition in the glass into a laughing woman, an absurd woman, dirty-faced and young-looking beneath the wide-brim of a floppy, pink straw hat.

Dropping the bags she held in a heap on the table, she reached up and removed the hat, looked at it for an instant as if she didn't quite recognize it. Then she tossed it on top of Cass' packages.

"Maybe Edgar is right, Cass," she said slowly. "Maybe menopause really has made me nuttier than your black walnut tree."

Cass hooted, her loud, uninhibited amusement swelled, filled the shadowy emptiness of the large house with a flood of honest laughter. It gave lie to Elizabeth's words. When the flood ebbed and died to a trickle, Cass tried to compose herself, wiped the laughter-tears from her brown eyes, smearing mascara and eyeliner, and chuckled again.

"If anybody's nuts, it's got to be Edgar," she said, and then she added, in a voice devoid of everything except total seriousness, "Elizabeth, I don't know what's going on between you and Edgar, and I don't want to know. But I do know if you go on letting him boss you around, getting you in states like this, it won't be long until you really are crazy."

It was then that Elizabeth remembered her anger, searched out the remaining bits and pieces, tried to make it whole and strong. It was damaged beyond repair. Nonetheless, she had to try and make Cass see that Edgar had his rights and privileges and that she, Elizabeth Gilmartin, wife and friend, had obligations and loyalties to them

both. That between them they were tearing her apart.

She was choosing the words she had to say, readying her defenses for Cass' retaliation when Cass asked plaintively, "Elizabeth, have you heard a single word I've said?"

Guilt making her smile lopsided and tentative, Elizabeth shook her head and said, with more bare truth than she had intended, "No, I was trying to figure out how to tell you you're every bit as bad as Edgar. Cass, you shouldn't have...."

Cass misunderstood and dismissed her objection with an airy, "Oh, don't be such a spoil sport. What's the good of being a rich widow if you can't buy a few things for your best friend?"

Then, before Elizabeth could correct the misunderstanding, Cass added, "I asked you if you didn't just about drop your cookies when Edgar said you could go with me to the conference?"

"He didn't, Cass."

"Now, stop acting silly. Of course he did. But forget Edgar, we have lots to do before we leave on Wednesday morning. Now, if you will just grab a few of these sacks, we can go to...."

"Cass," Elizabeth said with a sigh, "I don't have the faintest idea what's going on in that mind of yours, but Edgar didn't say.... I'm not going to the conference, and you know it."

"Do I?" Cass made a mournful face. "Poor baby."

“Stop it, Cass.”

“Okay, but if you know so much about it, Lizzie, why did Edgar, or rather that sexy secretary of his, the marvelous Karoline.... But you know all about that. Come on now, help me with these packages. You’ll have to try some of the things on. If they don’t fit, we can exchange them in the morning while we shop for the rest of what we need.”

Memory of Edgar’s morning rage made Elizabeth strong enough to say, “Cass, listen to me. I’m not going with you.”

“Of course you are. It’s all arranged. Now, look at what I bought.” Cass rummaged through the sliding stack, knocking some of the bags off the table, tearing others open, talking huskily and breathlessly the whole time.

“We’ll have so much fun. The ocean and all the famous writers and.... Oh, Elizabeth, just imagine. Maybe the next conference we go to you’ll be the famous writer everyone is going to see. Wouldn’t that be something?”

Holding back the tears that rose up from the grief locked in her heart, Elizabeth put her hand on Cass’ shoulder, felt the warm flesh beneath her palm, the smooth padding of fat that gave Cass the look of plump lushness. “Please, Cass,” she said quietly. “Don’t say anything more. I’m not a writer, not now, not ever, and you know perfectly well I can’t go with you. Edgar was.... He hates the

idea of me even thinking about.... He was furious when he left this morning and he's going to...."

"Well, all I can say is: He changed his mind pretty damned quick."

"No, I don't think he did, and when he finds out about the plane reservations you made in my name, he's going to have a fit. Oh, Cass, I told you I'd ask. Couldn't you wait that long? Couldn't you talk to me first?"

"Wow! Reservations? I never even thought of.... I'd better call the airline right away and...."

"Don't Cass. The airline clerk called me, confirmed my reservation to Seaview on Wednesday—that was two reservations, Cass. I have the flight numbers, the layover times, everything all written down, so don't try to...."

Cass laughed again. "Why that sneaky son-of-a..." she grinned at Elizabeth and finished, "gun." Her voice almost admiring, she added, "Boy, when old Edgar gets his... in gear, he dusts up the whole damned track."

"Edgar? You think he did.... No, Cass, you really can't expect me to believe that."

The plump woman turned, faced Elizabeth squarely, and there was no laughter in her voice when she said, "Elizabeth, we both know I go off half-cocked some of the time, lots of the time, and I know I've managed to get you in trouble more times than I can count, but I've never deliberately lied to you. Have I?"

Feeling the red creep up to dye her cheeks, Elizabeth looked down, away from Cass' face, but only after she had shaken her head, affirming the truth in Cass' statement. "But Edgar was furious when he left," she said slowly. "He wouldn't...."

"Well, it was probably the marvelous Karoline who actually did the dastardly deed, but she wouldn't have dialed a digit if old Edgar hadn't given her the nod. You can bet your wisdom teeth on that."

Confusion bound Elizabeth's tongue.

Cass was under no such restraint. She continued, "That's why I thought it was all settled, that your great lord and master had patted you on the head and given his kind permission for you to go out and mingle with the lesser folk."

"You're rambling, Cass."

Her good nature restored, Cass wrinkled her nose and winked at Elizabeth. "I guess I am," she said, "but the marvelous Karoline wasn't when she called me this morning, before I was even up, and asked a thousand and three questions about my friend, Caress Love, the conference, time, location, costs, you name it."

"Karoline called you? Cass, are you sure?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, I'm sure. And very brisk and businesslike she was, too."

"She always is," Elizabeth said absently. "But that doesn't mean Edgar changed his mind. Why would he?"

She started to say, “He hates you, and the whole idea of me even thinking about writing, why would he send me off with a whole pack of them?” But all she said aloud was, “Why?”

“Lordy, Liz, how would I know? Edgar is your husband.” It wasn’t an envious statement. But then the jeering, cynical tones dropped out of her voice, leaving it soft, almost gentle, when she asked, “Elizabeth, you aren’t getting sick again, are you? I’ve been worrying about you for months. Are you really okay now? I know I don’t have the right to pry, but I... I mean, is he.... Is it worse now, since the wedding and... and everything? Have I made it worse?”

“Oh, no, Cass,” Elizabeth whispered, giving her friend a quick hug. “You could never.... I need you, Cass. Sometimes I couldn’t go on without....”

Elizabeth was on the verge, as she had been several times before, of confessing her confusion, her depression, her loneliness, her frustration. She wanted to tell Cass she had not been intimate with her own husband for over two years, but she couldn’t. Loyalty to her marriage, and her growing sense that it was all her own fault, that she was so unattractive and worthless no man would want her, kept her silent. Instead, because she felt the need to say something, and because, as far as it went, it was absolutely true, she said, “It’s this house. Edgar’s house. I hate it. I don’t know how much longer I....”

Cass' arms reached out to hold her, to give her comfort, but Elizabeth stepped back, withdrew behind her wall of social smiles and surface chat. "I'm sorry, Cass. Forget I said that. It seems that lately all I've done is complain about nothing."

Cass' dark eyes looked grave with worry, but she smiled as she brushed Elizabeth's thin cheek with chubby fingers. "Think nothing of it. Everybody's got the need to bitch sometime," she said in a singsong. "Even the skinny Mrs. Gilmartin. Skinny? My God, you really are skinny. Oh, my bald Aunt Tilly, I'll bet you three dimes the clothes I bought for you are all eight sizes too big."

Elizabeth didn't say anything, and Cass turned away from whatever she saw, and probably pitied, in Elizabeth's colorless face and grabbed one of the packages. "Come on, Liz," she said, her voice straining for animation, the rebirth of its former lilting joy. "You'll have to try some of...."

"I can't take...." The almost inaudible protest broke, fell away when she saw the pointing hands on Cass' oversized wristwatch and exclaimed, half in panic, "Oh, no! It's time for Edgar to come home and.... After what happened this morning, he'll be.... Oh, hurry, Cass, we have to get this stuff back in your car before he...."

"Take it easy. He's not going to give a care. I told you, Edgar changed his mind. He wants you to go." Cass spoke soothingly, but even as she

spoke, she imitated Elizabeth's actions and began piling her day's purchases like cordwood on her crooked arm.

Cass tried again, looking at Elizabeth's frenzied movements with real worry written in broad strokes across her face. "Liz, this is really silly. Why don't we wait and show Edgar everything. He would enjoy...."

The nondescript woman shook her head with almost sullen stubbornness and continued to add slippery, plastic-bagged bangles, beads, and other shimmering fripperies to the growing stack on her own arm.

Nothing but one shiny yellow bag and the pink straw hat remained on the table when Edgar's key entered the lock and he pushed open the door in almost the same instant, catching the two women in frozen postures of guilty departure, waiting silently for his scathing disapproval.

They waited in vain.

Smiling affably, Edgar glanced at them both, his eyes narrowing only a trifle when he saw his wife's stained, rumpled garments, the dusty smudges on her face. "Been shopping for the conference?" he asked as he placed his attaché case and a large, gold-colored box on the closet floor.

Cass looked at Elizabeth, grinned an I-told-you-so smile, and answered his question. "Just me. Elizabeth's been cleaning house, I think. I caught her before she could make herself decent."

She started to say something more, but Elizabeth shook her head in warning. Taking the hint, Cass said brightly, “Well, I’d like to stay and visit, but I do have a lot...”

Edgar didn’t try to detain her, but he did say, “Here, let me help you with those bundles.” Suiting his action to his offer, he took Elizabeth’s packages and followed Cass to the open doorway. There, he paused, went back to the table, picked up the pink hat with the barest tips of his well-manicured fingers. “I’m sure you wouldn’t want to forget this... ah... this,” he said with a grimace of distaste.

Elizabeth added the last yellow bag to his load, but neither woman corrected his mistaken assumption that the offensive headgear belonged to Cass. Instead, Cass flung a breezy, “See you tomorrow,” to the silent Elizabeth and rushed Edgar out to her car.

Tears lurking just behind her pale eyes, Elizabeth only nodded before she turned and crept away to the kitchen. She stood, hands hanging limply at her sides, shoulders bowed, staring at the trash compactor. She was still there when Edgar, a drink in one hand, a gold box only partially concealed behind his back, found her.

Her hand came up, brushed ineffectually at the smudges on her shirt, but she didn’t apologize for not being freshly attired for his homecoming, or for anything else. When she finally spoke, all she

said was, "Dinner will be a few minutes late."

"No rush," Edgar said with a wave of his gin-and-tonic and a convivial smile. He took another deep swallow, set the glass in the sink, and looked at her searchingly before he slid the box onto the counter in front of her. Slightly flushed, sounding boyish and shy, he said, "I.... This is for.... I'm truly sorry, Elizabeth."

So much had occurred that day, Elizabeth had no idea which one thing he was sorry for, sorry enough to bring her a gift from the most expensive boutique in Cragshome, a shop so over-priced it didn't even use a logo on its golden boxes. Afraid something new was afoot, something that was bound to be painful, she stood, stiff as a department store dummy, and waited for him to provide the clues, bludgeon her with the whatever. She was afraid, but she didn't want to guess, dreaded knowing what new torture he had planned.

"Aren't you even going to open it?" Edgar asked with a hurt little smile.

She tried to do what he wanted, but her hands were lumps of ice, too numb to do more than fumble with the lid. He shook his head, but Edgar was still smiling when he came to her rescue, flinging the lid aside, lifting out a long, wide-shouldered jacket of golden tweed, turning it this way and that, so she could admire the butter-colored leather elbow patches that covered half the sleeves.

Still not knowing what he wanted from her, Elizabeth looked at the jacket, the calf-length A-line skirt of matching tweed, and the shimmering blouse of golden silk, with its double row of tiny pearl buttons and an enormous bow centered on the high collar, and then she nodded slowly.

“You’ll need it for the writers’ conference,” he said.

“But....”

“Karoline... ah... Miss Marshall picked it out for you. She said they told her at SHRADER’S—that’s where it’s from, you know—anyway, the clerk told her it was perfect for where you’re going. It’s the kind of thing all writers wear. And I... Elizabeth, you know how I feel about you dressing appropriately.”

“The writers’ conference,” she whispered, and there might have been a sob in her voice as she remembered the treasured pages, the novel that had died in her hands, the dream that was still too battered to even stir.

Staring at his golden gift, Elizabeth felt her numb indifference lift. She didn’t say gold made her look jaundiced and old, she just looked at the heavy material and felt love, sweet love, gentle love, forgiving love. It closed her throat, hurt in her chest, dazzled her eyes with moisture. Her grief for the dream merged with the love-ache in her heart and was gone. The dream didn’t seem to matter much, not now.

“Did you say something?” Edgar asked.

“Only foolishness,” she said.

“Not about the conference,” he asked quickly, too quickly. “I mean, you still want to go, don’t you?” Before she could answer, he said, “You have to go. I have gone to considerable trouble to.... The arrangements are all made. I must insist you go.”

Almost oblivious to his sudden anxiety, his agitation, she asked, “What about the house? Who will take care of it, and of you? Fix your meals? Do the laundry?” She raised her hands, palms up, stared down at them with sightless eyes. “Edgar, the conference doesn’t mean anything to me. I don’t want to go off somewhere and leave you alone for five days.”

“You’re being silly, Elizabeth. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself,” he said hurriedly, trying to forestall any more argument.

Watching her warily, he rubbed his left forefinger down the side of his nose nervously before he felt inside the golden box, pushing aside silk and tweed to pull out a large, leather-bound notebook. He showed it to her, proudly demonstrating its many clever features, all, according to him, perfectly suited to the needs of a professional writer. “There wasn’t time for Karoline to get your name put on it,” he said, “but when you get back, you can have it done.”

A doubt too nebulous to be given credence

shadowed her love, but only for an instant, only long enough to make her ask, “Why, Edgar? Why are you so eager for me to go to the conference?”

He looked down, ran his finger across the edge of the notebook, but he didn’t answer.

Elizabeth’s voice was soft, gentle, but it held something far stronger than steel when she asked again, asked her husband, “Why, Edgar? Are you trying to get rid of me?”

## Chapter Three



Her question seemed to hang in the air, separating them like a wall of ice, thick ice that pushed them back and back, farther and farther apart, destroying any common ground they had left—if indeed there were any.

Elizabeth, caught in the enormity of what she had done, wanted to snatch the words back, cram them deep into some hidden place, slam down the lid, make them unthought, unsaid. But wishing and wanting changed nothing. The words had been said. They had cast a tall, dark shadow of doubt, an ugly stain on the purity of her trust. Suddenly, she was afraid her husband would tell her the truth, would confess to some horror too great to forgive. And the heart-puckering fear was as shadowy and as large as her doubt.

Perhaps he felt her fear, or perhaps Edgar, too, had doubts, a taste of his own fear. “I can’t tell... Elizabeth, I wouldn’t want to do anything that would....” He spoke slowly, haltingly, choosing

each word with care. “You’ve been.... Things haven’t been good between us for a long time. I tried, but you.... The Change has made you.... There have been times when I thought you were actually crazy. Maybe I haven’t been.... I want you to be like you used to be. Years ago, when we first got married, you were happy being my wife, the mistress of my house. I want that again. I deserve it again.”

“Edgar, I....”

“I want us both to be happy,” he said, ignoring her attempt to speak. “Except at the very beginning, those years when I was finishing college and getting started, you’ve never *had* to work, and you don’t have to now. This writing thing is only a.... You should know it isn’t an easy thing. Your education isn’t.... Well, I decided I wanted you to go to this conference, listen to the real writers talk, and get all this nonsense out of your system once and for all.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to—”

He held up his hand for silence and continued, “Please, Elizabeth, trust me in this. I want you to go. I want you to have a good time with Mrs. Bates and her friend and not give me a single thought. Can’t you do that for me?”

“Oh, Edgar, I....” Trust rushed back, almost choked her. Guilt, for all her own shortcomings, for the fading moment of doubt, for the morning’s anger, for all petty resentments that demeaned

him in her mind, was a heavy weight on her breastbone. Confused feelings tangled her thoughts. She wanted, more than anything in the world, for him to hold her, to let her weep out her love and guilt in the shelter of his arms.

His hands reached out, but they didn't pull her into a warm embrace. Rather, they fastened on her shoulders and turned her around until she faced the door.

"Now! Now!" he said gruffly. "Just run and wash your face. That's my good girl."

"Edgar," she whispered, "I love...."

"My dear," he said quickly, perhaps too quickly, "I realize you're happy about this, but there's no need to get maudlin." His deep voice was firm, but it held an undertone of sadness; sadness and something else she couldn't quite identify, but it sounded very much like guilt.

"No, I suppose not. Thank you, Edgar."

"There's nothing to thank me for."

Her smile was soft, misty with love, with gratitude, and, at that particular moment, she loved him more than life itself. If he had pointed and told her to jump, she would have thrown herself into a blazing funeral pyre. "I think there is something to thank you for," she said as she walked through the door. "A lot."

"Elizabeth!"

Her name, on his lips, was sharp, and clearly a reprimand. She stopped instantly, whirled around.

Fearful she had committed some new sin, she looked at him pleadingly, wanting nothing more than to bring the gentleness back to his voice, the smile to his face.

He did smile; smiled and shook his head in mild reproof. “My dear Elizabeth,” he said, “maybe I was wrong. Maybe I should reconsider letting you go wandering off into the wilds of Oregon.”

Her dry mouth opened. Her lips framed a question, but all that came out was a whimper of sound.

“It’s your memory again. What if I let you go and you forget to come back. It might not be safe.” He shook his head again, but he didn’t mention menopause or estrogen. He just bowed, every so slightly, and handed her his golden gift and the notebook. “You’ll want to pack these, I think.”

Red flooded her face, stood out in ugly blotches on her neck. “I’m sorry, Edgar. I.... It’s a lovely suit. I.... Thank you.”

And then she fled. Her heart was drumming rapidly, but the woman thought she heard him say, “I’m doing this for your own good, Elizabeth.”



She spun her love and gratitude well, wrapped it around herself in an intricate weave, made a strong glue of her guilt, and hid inside the resulting

cocoon, letting it blind her to the world. The cocoon stayed with her through the next thirty-nine hours, making her clean house frantically, shop for all Edgar's favorite foods, cook sumptuous meals, freeze them in microwave dishes, printing careful instructions for heating and serving each one.

And with each task, her guilt mounted, rode her with spurs and whip, took all the joyful anticipation away from the forthcoming trip. It prodded her with her selfishness, her insensitivity to his needs, made her see herself as an uncaring woman, going off to have a good time while her poor husband was at home, alone, lonely, having to fend for himself after working all day.

The chores filled the day, left no time for Elizabeth to get her hair done or go shopping with Cass. Reluctantly, Cass agreed to return the clothes and things she had purchased for Elizabeth, but as she was leaving Edgar's house, she asked, "Liz, did Edgar tell you why he changed his mind and decided to let you go with me?"

"I know you think he's a.... But he.... Cass, Edgar really wants me to be happy, it's just that sometimes he gets so busy he...."

"Hog puddles!" Cass said with a snort of disbelief. "He doesn't give a feather in a... in a fireplace for anything but Edgar Gilmartin. And he never will." She looked at Elizabeth consideringly and added, "He's got you right where he wants you and he's planning on—" her tone

became carefully neutral, “I know you’re pretty trusting and I don’t want to.... Ah... Liz, that secretary of his, the marvelous Miss Marshall, is.... They might be....”

“Don’t say it, Cass. Don’t even think it. Edgar isn’t having an affair with Miss Marshall, or with anyone else,” Elizabeth said, and there wasn’t a whisper of uncertainty in her voice or on her face.

“How can you be so sure?”

Without giving away her own secret, Elizabeth couldn’t tell her friend how she knew Edgar was faithful—that Edgar was too fastidious, too power-driven to need casual sex, or even married sex. All she could say was, “I just am, that’s all.”

“Well, maybe you’re right, for now at least, but remember I said this. The sexy Karoline has got the hots for Edgar, and she’ll do a roll-over quicker than a mink. She’ll try every twitchy trick in her book to get him to give her lessons in body-language.”

“What an awful thing to say!”

“Open your eyes, Lizzie. Watch her. She hangs on his every word like a limpet on a.... What’s a limpet?”

Elizabeth laughed. “I don’t know.” She pushed Cass gently but firmly toward the front door. “Go do your shopping.”

“I suppose it’s going to be like this all the time when you’re a famous writer,” Cass said mournfully. She tried to pull the corners of her mouth down,

but the laugh lines pulled them back up. She grinned impishly. "I'll see you in the morning."

When Elizabeth didn't answer, Cass sobered and asked quietly, "You are going, aren't you?"

"I don't know. Edgar insists but...."

"But nothing! You've been hanging around this house for the past year. I'll pick you up at nine, and you'd better be wide-eyed and kicking. You hear me?"

The slim woman laughed. "Yes, Cass."

"Lizzie, I don't know what happened to make you like this, but even if you've forgotten, you're still a person, too. You have needs. Do you still want to be a writer?"

"I don't know, Cass. I don't know much of anything any more."

"Liz, you don't have to worry about it right now." Cass gave Elizabeth's elbow a quick squeeze. "See you in the morning?"

Elizabeth nodded, but when the door closed behind Cass' ample back, Elizabeth leaned her face against the cool wood. "What do I want?" she asked the emptiness around her. "I used to know, but now I just...."

A faint mental whispering, a weak stirring told her a part of the truth, told her the dream, her childhood dream of being a novelist, was still alive. Alive and growing.

The knowledge added new girth and bulk to her self-imposed burden of guilt. She backed

away from the mahogany door, fled back into Edgar's house, flung herself into body-wearying labor, but it quieted neither guilt nor dream. They clamored at her, and she knew she could not live with them both. One would have to die.



Pale eyes bruised by sleeplessness and feeling like a well-used rag doll, Elizabeth sank into the passenger seat of Cass' blue Fiat, let Edgar kiss her cheek before he closed the door beside her, and then she sat, huddled into her own indecision.

“Have a good time, my dear. I'll see you Sunday afternoon,” Edgar said as he stepped back and stood watching as Cass roared out of the circular drive.

Elizabeth nodded then looked back and saw him standing alone, straight back slumped a little, his handsome face shadowed by sadness. Her heart felt withered and thumped painfully, sending up hot, salty tears she could neither swallow nor shed. She looked at him, felt his loneliness like a knife in her own chest. Her lips opened to tell Cass to stop, to take her back to Edgar, but her tongue was too dry and her mouth was empty of words.

Cass glanced at her several times, but said nothing. Elizabeth endured the pain, tried to banish the guilt, but no matter what she did, Edgar's

tired, lonely face haunted her. It even invaded her dreams when she fell into a fitful slumber on the plane to Portland, Oregon.



Muzzy-headed from the airsickness medication Cass had insisted she take, Elizabeth followed her friend out of the plane and through the crowded terminal.

“Three hours,” Cass said.

“What?”

“We have a three hour layover here. The plane for Seaview doesn’t leave....” Cass smiled at Elizabeth. “Boy, you’re really out of it. Come on. Let’s go get a drink. That’ll make you feel better, and besides, I promised Emma we’d meet her in the lounge.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her brow, tried to follow thoughts that vanished into the fog that beclouded her brain. “Emma?”

“You know. Emma Lawler. My friend. The writer.”

“Oh. I thought her name was Desire or Caress or something like that.”

“It is. I mean, they are.” Cass took Elizabeth’s arm and steered her into the bar. “She writes romances and uses—”

“A *nom de plume*,” said a laughter-filled voice from behind them. “Or maybe, considering how

I've been getting on with my editor, *nom de guerre* is better."

Cass shrieked, turned and threw her arms around a woman as well-endowed as herself. She interrupted the embrace to introduce Elizabeth, and then, even before Elizabeth could murmur, "Hello," whisked them into a large booth, and ordered drinks around, all the time talking like an auctioneer, fast and loud. Emma Lawler, beige hair topping her round face like toasted coconut on a custard pie, talked every bit as fast, and almost as loud.

The buzz of talk stumbled and crawled through Elizabeth's haze. Time seemed distorted. She sipped at her foamy pink drink, and then at another without fully realizing the first had been emptied and removed.

Two middle-aged women, writers heading for the conference, crowded into the booth with them. Elizabeth slid to the outside edge of the seat, giving the chattering, laughing group as much room as possible. Someone pulled the adjoining table up to the booth. Four more writers, three men and one woman, sat down. Another round of drinks appeared. The noise level was almost unbearable.

Elizabeth rubbed her temples with her fingertips, trying to push out the dull nothingness that lingered inside her skull. But she couldn't force herself to join the carefree laughter that exploded around her, couldn't feel less than totally alone.

Edgar's face floated before her. His sad eyes begged her to come home. Guilt pushed her up and away from the crowded table. As she rose and walked away, placing her feet with exaggerated care, Elizabeth heard Cass call something about the restroom and nodded a reply.

But as soon as she was out of her friend's sight, Elizabeth hurried to the rank of telephone booths she had seen on the concourse earlier. A smile of love softened the lines of her face as she dialed the operator, reversed the charges, and waited for Edgar's receptionist to answer.

Humming a wee tune, she tried to imagine Edgar's surprise when she told him she was coming home on the next plane, told him she no longer wanted to be a writer, that she would be home in time to cook his dinner.

Lost in her daydream of Edgar's joy, their happy reunion, she jumped when a voice in her ear said, "Gilmartin and Associates. May I help you?" But the woman could hardly wait for the girl to accept the charges before she said, "Thank you, Betsy. May I speak to my husband, please?"

"Oh, Mrs. Gilmartin, I'm sorry. You just missed them. They left for Las Vegas not more than twenty minutes ago. You might call the airport," the girl said doubtfully.

Elizabeth heard the girl's words, mundane, information-giving words, but her sudden foreboding turned the words into clods of dirt

thudding on the closed lid of a coffin, her own coffin. Although she was smothering, almost gasping for air, Elizabeth tried to say good-bye graciously and hang up the phone before she screamed, or fainted, or swore viciously, but she was horrified to hear herself ask, “They?”

Surprise was in the girl’s tinny-sounding voice when she said, “Miss Marshall and Mr. Gilmartin.” And then pity was added to the faraway voice when it asked, “Mrs. Gilmartin, you haven’t forgotten, have you? I mean this is that big financial symposium, the one where Mr. Gilmartin is going to sit on a panel. It’s a real honor, and it’s been on our calendar for over two months.”

*Had she forgotten? Was she really going mad? How else could she account for forgetting something that was so important in Edgar’s life?*

Holding the receiver against her ear, Elizabeth sat, trying to remember, and then knew with a pain that pierced her like a crooked ice pick, knew for absolute certain sure she had never been told of the symposium. Edgar had deliberately lied to her, had made her feel dirty, guilty, worthless, all for nothing. Edgar had lied to her. Had lied. Lied.

The word echoed in her mind, sickened her, but, somehow, she forced her voice to sound calm, unconcerned as she uttered her own lie. “Oh, no,” she said with a little laugh. “I haven’t forgotten. I just thought I could catch him before he left and.... Oh, well, it wasn’t important. I

forgot to wish him luck before I left this morning and.... Well, you know.”

She exchanged a few more social noises with the girl, laughed a little tinkly laugh, and said her farewell with an unconcern that would have fooled a lie detector. But when she tried to slip the phone back on the hook, her hand shook wildly, just like the rest of her body. Resting her head against the back of the booth, she fought back the shock waves that battered her, threatened to destroy her, bury her in grief for a marriage that had died. Died after a very long and lingering illness.

“I never thought it would come to this,” she said wonderingly. “I never thought he would actually kill it. Not like this. Not like some worn-out useless thing.” She sighed.



Elizabeth didn't know how long she sat in the booth, never remembered finding her way to the blue-tiled restroom. But she was there, her glasses sitting on the shelf beneath the mirror, cold water gushing into the sink, hands splashing water onto her flushed face, a face that held no trace of tears (if any tears had been shed) when Cass found her, caught her by the gray-clad shoulders and turned her around.

“You look like hell,” Cass said. Her voice was

hoarse, rasping, but there was real concern in her eyes and tenderness in her hands when she guided Elizabeth to the sofa and forced her to lie down.

“You’ve been gone a long time. I looked everywhere. Are you sick?”

Voicing another lie, because she couldn’t yet expose the truth to her friend’s eyes, couldn’t tell Cass how little Edgar cared for his wife, their marriage, she said, and it was almost the truth, “No, I just can’t seem to wake up. My head feels like it’s full of oatmeal—the kind you used to make, slimy and full of lumps.”

“It’s those damned motion sickness pills. I should have had better sense. They do make some people feel like that.” She stood, looking down at Elizabeth for a long silent moment and then she stooped, brushed back her friend’s hair and placed her palm flat on Elizabeth’s forehead.

“Liz,” she said slowly, “look, if you want to go back home now, I’ll understand.”

“No!” Elizabeth wiggled away from Cass’ hand and sat up. “No,” she said again. “I do *not* want to go home.”

“There’s no need to get huffy. I just thought.... Liz, you looked so sad when we left, I just thought you might be missing Edgar.”

“Edgar,” Elizabeth said bitterly, and then she laughed, a harsh, savage sound. “Who the bloody hell is Edgar?”

Cass laughed, too, a little belatedly, but the

laughter didn't reach her eyes, didn't dislodge the worry line on her forehead that stayed during the short flight to Seaview.

Elizabeth saw the worry, but she was entangled in her own bed of thorns and couldn't make Cass' way any easier. The scotch and water seemed even less potent than its prior foamy pink partner. Her legs were steady, her voice unslurred, her brain rerunning Edgar's misdeeds, when Cass told her their luggage had been lost in flight. It was the crowning irony. The final straw.

Laughing with good, honest mirth, Elizabeth said, referring to Edgar's lost gift, "Fool's gold. Only I didn't know I was the fool."

"What?"

"Private joke," Elizabeth said. "Anyway, I'm glad. Gold isn't my color. It makes me look as yellow as... as... as yuk."

"Maybe you'd feel better if you had some coffee," Cass said. "I've never seen you—"

"Mary Alice Cassidy Bates, I'm ashamed of you. You think I'm drunk! Me, Elizabeth Gilmartin, Edgar's tame rug? Drunk? Impossible! Edgar would never allow...." She turned away, quickly, before Cass could see the naked grief in her eyes, grief that was undiluted by tears.

"Honey, I don't know what's wrong, but if you need me, I'm here. If you need to talk or...."

Perhaps Elizabeth would have told her then, but there was no time. Emma hustled them into

the Seaview Inn's crowded courtesy car—a van, actually. Talk swirled over and around them. Writer talk. Gossip about markets, other writers, editors, agents, about themselves, their newest project, the critics, books. Writer talk.

When she walked into the inn, Elizabeth's mood had shifted from grieving to reckless uncaring. "You register for us," she told Cass. "I'm going to spend money, lots of money." Without waiting for an answer, Elizabeth strolled across the lobby and into a small, beautifully appointed shop.

The clerk smiled and looked at her expectantly.

"The airline lost my luggage," Elizabeth said as she dropped a handful of credit cards onto the counter. "All my luggage."

The clerk's smile grew wider. "Size nine?" she asked.

"Size nine," Elizabeth agreed.

Her metamorphosis had begun.

When Cass and Emma followed her into the shop, Elizabeth Gilmartin was already slightly more than one person.

Buying almost wildly, she had stepped beyond mouse-gray and housewife drab, had bought a deep-rose chiffon dress with a low neckline and sequins aglitter on bodice and skirt; matching thigh-high nylons and high-heeled sandals; several filmy teddies; French bras; lace panties; a flannel gown in Day-glo red, with a robe to match; white

silk pants and a pink velour tunic; a sweet-scented hodge-podge of other garments and sundries, including a Garfield pencil tablet and two Bic pens.

“For a writer?” Cass asked quietly.

“For me,” Elizabeth answered, just as quietly, “whoever I am.”

But there was no time for soul searching, identity crises, or tearing grief for a dead marriage. There was only time to grab her purchases and credit cards and follow Cass, Emma, and the inn manager as he led them out a side door and down a covered path to the VIP annex and into a very large, bright, filled-with-flowers living room.

“A suite?” Emma asked, looking like a bewildered grandmother lost in a stranger’s flower garden.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Nothing but the best for Caress Love, America’s Queen of Romance.” He smiled, pointed to the wet bar, and said, “Champagne’s chilling. There’s wine from most of the Oregon wineries.”

He turned slightly, indicated a wall of drapery-covered glass. “The deck is through there and the beach is just beyond.” Turning back, he said, “Your bedroom suite is on the fireplace wall, Miss Love, and there are two smaller bedrooms on the opposite walls for your guests.”

“I had no idea,” Emma said. “I’m sure we don’t need....”

“Oh, but you do. It was planned early on.

There's an open house for all the writers tonight. You are the hostess, so naturally it will be held here. Tomorrow there are the television interviews, several small gatherings for fans, a reception for local dignitaries and so on. I'm sure you understand."

Emma obviously didn't, but she shrugged. "Why not," she said. She was still talking to the man when Elizabeth and Cass went to their adjoining bedrooms—each with its own private bath.

Cass inspected her room and then came into Elizabeth's. She was admiring Elizabeth's purchases when Elizabeth realized Cass had lost her luggage too and the small shop had had nothing in Cass' size. "Oh, Cass," she said contritely, "I'm sorry. What are you going to wear?"

She sounded so much like the old Elizabeth, Cass' face brightened with relief. "Oh, don't worry about that," she said airily. "The famous Caress Love travels heavy. She's got enough clothes, all from New York, too, to outfit me and three other economy-sized orphans of the airways."



Perhaps she sounded like the old Elizabeth, but the woman, painted and curled by Cass' expert hand, who slipped out of the bedroom two hours later didn't look like the old Elizabeth. But she was still only a single step away, only just beginning to twin.

The rose dress clung to her breasts and waist, floated around her long legs. Her hair was streaked with glitter and had been pulled back and up with a rhinestone clip; foundation and blush gave her face a healthy glow. Elizabeth Gilmartin left her glasses in her room and wandered out into the world. Her shadowed eyes large and bright, and somehow innocent without their shield of glass, showed no sign of grief.

She laughed and nodded as she sipped wine, listened to the babble of party voices, but she made no effort to separate the shifting blur into individual people, didn't try to see or feel. Edging through the crowd, she heard bits and parts of conversations. Someone pushed a card into her hand, explained how to fill it out if she were planning on entering the contest for new writers, a contest with a ten thousand-dollar prize and publication by a major publishing house.

She smiled, listened, agreed to enter, and, only a moment later, laid the card on the mantle of the fireplace and forgot it even existed. Then she accepted another glass of wine.

After her fourth, or maybe fifth drink, memory tried to drag out the evidence of Edgar's sin, but she fought it away and stepped out onto the deck. It was crowded, too crowded, too many strangers, too much noise. Elizabeth had to get away.

In an agony of haste, she pushed between talking groups, heard someone say, "What did she expect?"

All she did was lollygag around the house....” And then from a different group, “Oh, she’s one of those women who wait at home, hoping her husband will come home horny and say a few nice....”

She didn’t know whom either group was talking about, but the words hit home. The pain came roaring back as a black, ravening beast, ripping and tearing at her, clawing, killing, ugly as sin—Edgar’s sin.

Tears started in her eyes. Her hand groped for support, brushed down the smooth, chilled side of a wine bottle. She hefted it, knew it was nearly full before she stepped off the redwood deck and walked into the night. She headed toward the sea. It was only a blur, a dark-sheened blur that moved restlessly under a bank of white that trailed long streamers as it moved slowly toward the shore.

Elizabeth couldn’t see the fog, didn’t know the menace in the changing tide. She pulled off the high-heeled sandals, let them lay where they fell, and walked down the hard-packed sand at the edge of the water. Walked. And walked. Walked and drank from the cool bottle. Drank wine and cried for yesterday, all the yesterdays. The yesterdays that were gone beyond recall; gone, taking love with them.

When the bottle was empty and the tears only salt marks on her cheeks, she turned her back on the crashing tide that crawled farther and farther up the shore.

“Damn you, Edgar,” she said hoarsely. “Damn you! Damn you!”

She stumbled, fell to her knees. A wave roared in, ran cold across her rose-nyloned feet. Gasping, Elizabeth scrambled up, took four running steps and ran solidly into something—something warm, something male.

His arms closed around her, held her.

Wine had lowered her defenses. Her starved body betrayed her, lusted mightily. She snuggled against the stranger’s chest. But only for an instant.

And then, horrified, ashamed of her own reaction, she jerked free, took a stumbling step back, looked up at the looming shadow, a dark, faceless shadow whose arms still reached for her.

The back of her hand against her mouth, she took another step away from him.

He came toward her.

“No,” she moaned deep in her throat. “Oh, please, no.”

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# Patricia Lucas White

Patricia lives with her husband and mentally challenged daughter in the majestic Cascade Mountains of Southern Oregon. The richness and diversity of her surroundings serve as a constant inspiration, tickling her imagination, feeding her creativity, making her want to find the words to express not just what her eyes see, but also the emotional response to the snow-shrouded volcanic cinder cones and the deeply mysterious blue lakes.

She writes full-time now, but after graduating from college in 1972, she taught high school English, was a telephone operator, a grocery store clerk, and a reader for college English instructors, among other short-term jobs. An avid reader, she considers a week lost if she hasn't read at least two books—and her book shelves, where folk tales rub shoulders with histories and philosophies, give ample evidence of her far-ranging interests.

She has won several awards for her best selling novels, poetry and news writing and has been published in a wide assortment of publications but is now concentrating on fiction.

Her husband, Bill, encourages her endeavors—as do her grown sons, John and Greg and her three grandkids, Jennifer, Kelly, and Rylee. Her daughter, Terry, always “does the dishes so Mom can write on the computer.” And with three unicorns perched on her monitor and a basket of teddy bears at her elbow, she does just that. Contact her at [PLWhite@prodigy.net](mailto:PLWhite@prodigy.net).



# Patricia Lucas White

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