

*Do the*  
**Math**

A Novel of the Inevitable

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# Prologue

I am standing on a headland overlooking the Hudson River, an hour north of New York City. It is not a palisade. Those dramatic cliffs are to the south. Up here, the sides of the river are more like foothills until High Tor, which introduces you to the ever-rising mountains to come. About twenty minutes north is the most perilous precipice in the world. I once watched a man knowingly step off it. I don't think he had a choice. Fate yanked his chain with a second stab at heaven on earth. All he had to do was play the assassin.

That was in 1978, when I was an eager young graduate student ready to conquer the numbers. Today, I am a tenured professor in mathematics at a fine college in Philadelphia. This is the first time I have viewed the river from this part of the hill in the intervening twenty-five years. I remember that it was much colder on that night when I last stood here.

We are driving north along the Hudson River because my friend Harvey is the best high school math teacher in Canada. It's official. He is getting an award.

I have known Harvey forever. He is among my oldest friends. He must like me too, because he has tolerated me just as long. He is so smart that I am usually nervous talking to him, knowing that he probably regards whatever subject I land upon as lightweight. But I did get one tangible sign of acceptance—and maybe the notion that he didn't think I was a total moron—on his last night in graduate school. I had taken him out to dinner.

“You know what you are?” I observed, sipping one more drink than I needed.

“What is that?” he asked casually, like he always did when he had you under his microscope.

I was used to that. “You are an enigma couched in a riddle wrapped in a fine Cuban cigar.”

“You're OK too,” he responded with a regal nod.

On our way to Canada, the Thruway would have been faster, but I made the detour. I wanted to stand on those heights and remember who I had been and what had happened so many years ago. My wife doesn't mind. She knows the story.

Years before, I had exploited it shamelessly. What else was I supposed to do? She was a great beauty—still is—but I was only a mere young adjunct, lecturing hourly to a mob of napping freshmen. I was desperate to show her that mathematicians have

huge hearts and can act heroically on even larger passions. Suzanne claims that she saw right through my contrivance, but I know that the story captured her as it touches everyone else who hears it.

I skipped the town and turned directly onto Mountain Road. I am not surprised that I remembered every twist and turn of the long climb up the steep hill. Although there are many new homes and some missing landmarks, the large iron gates are right where I expected them to be. I drove past them and parked on the gravel. The bronze plaque on the stone gate read “Mid-Hudson Wellness Center.”

When we stepped out of the car, Suzanne said, “You take in the view. I’m going down to the big house to peek in the windows.”

“Don’t get arrested,” I replied.

She grinned broadly.

“Say hi to the desk sergeant when you bail me out,” she laughed.

She kissed me then skipped down the hill.

From where I stand, I can see her finally able to spy on the mansion that she drooled over in *Architectural Digest*. I think her only jealousy of me is that I had spent so much time inside that house back then.

The sun is getting closer to its good-night kiss upon the distant hilltops. The river has already started to doze. It is hushed and losing color. Only the red and green channel buoys, which still catch the late rays, are standing out.

I turn around to face the town that held such a huge place in my heart. It was the first town I had lived in where I hadn’t been born—where I woke up in the morning and dealt with adults who weren’t my parents, a place that knew me for what I thought and did and not for where I had come from.

But this tale is not about me. It is the account of a man who was developing a mathematical theory about the inevitable. He was my mentor, fifty years old, a grown-up in my eyes. I am that age now. At the time, I did not realize how young he was. But I did learn that there is no retirement age for love and want.

There are few things worse, or more tantalizing, than being one step away from realizing a dream. I was there at the end, observing him, as he balanced on the brink, aware that the only safe move would be to fall backward. Yet he took the step forward, placing his foot firmly onto the air in front of him.

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My first official act as William's intern was to help him pick up six large pies and a case of Cokes at Venice Pizza for the annual math department open house for new and returning graduate students. I didn't mind. At the time, I was determined to make myself indispensable—at least until my stipend was finalized.

"On campus, there are many open houses better than ours," William admitted as he poured sugar into his coffee. "Any one of them, actually."

We were sitting near the counter at a small round table while we waited.

"I am told that we are a punch line for jokes at the engineering school," he added. "That's pretty low."

He stirred his coffee.

"Now the biochemistry crowd—they get wild."

He looked up at me and smiled with amusement.

"They've got a hook." He winked. "They call it experimentation. 'Absorption rates in a controlled environment.' Who can complain about that? It's science, isn't it?"

"Sounds like," I agreed.

He chuckled as he took a sip from his cup.

"The math department did a lot better during the war. But it's easier when you're sexy, isn't it? We had code breakers and radar jocks. Back then there were even some very hush-hush types who did who-knows-what."

He reflected for a moment.

"There was one guy, Hiram Czewitzski. The chancellor told me about him. Got called up to work with Oppenheimer and threw himself a party. Got drunk as a skunk and stood up on a chair. 'The only reason why I'm still a virgin,' he announced to a captivated room, 'is that I haven't had sex yet.'

"Universally loaded by that point, they honored him on the spot by inventing a drink they called the "Vir Gin Fizz." Three parts Beefeater, one part cold shower and a splash of palm oil served in a tall glass garnished with two blue marbles.

"He went on to lose his virginity the same year that he won the Comstock Prize," William said. Then he drifted into a quiet place.

His discomfort made me self-conscious. I awkwardly sat and drank my coffee, studying the gondolier in the wall mural who was having perspective problems reconciling his long oar with the Grand Canal.

William was quiet until he recognized someone entering the restaurant.

“Damn,” he groaned. “It’s Ambrose.”

I turned and saw a large person waddling toward us.

“Billy, thank God. I’ve been looking all over for you. Don’t go away,” he ordered as he turned to the counter.

“Three slices. Extra cheese. Twice,” he requested, holding up two pudgy fingers for emphasis.

“Don’t leave me alone with him,” William instructed me.

“I’ll also have a large orange soda while I wait,” Ambrose added.

He resembled his food, pale and fatty like mozzarella. He tossed the paper plate onto the small table. The pizza slices slid off just inches from our elbows. He dropped the cup of soda with the same lack of care and spatters flew into our coffee cups. Then he dragged his chair across the tile floor and sat on it as if impaled.

“You’ve got to talk to her,” Ambrose said without preamble. Saving time, he didn’t bother putting the food back on the plate and ate it directly off the table, shoveling it into his mouth and chewing noisily.

“I do talk to her,” William answered. “I’m her husband.”

“She’s driving me insane.”

“You *are* insane, Ambrose.”

“You don’t know what it’s like.”

“I do know what it’s like. I’m her husband.”

Ambrose regarded me with distrust.

Then he turned and said to William, “I need to talk to you.”

“Would you like me to leave?” I asked.

William kicked me.

“Ouch,” I groaned and buckled over to rub my shin.

I was down for only a moment, but when I sat up, Ambrose was sobbing into his hands. He must have inhaled the first two slices. They were gone.

“There, there,” William reassured, looking disgusted as he fiddled with a toothpick.

“This is so unlike me,” Ambrose sighed, looking up morosely and pushing the last slice away. “I have no appetite. I must be very depressed.”

Then he looked directly at me and asked, “Got any chocolate? They say it’s good for depression.”

“I understand that she is anxious,” he continued to William. “Lord knows, she has every reason to be anxious. But driving me crazy won’t help, will it?”

William snapped the toothpick in two.

“As you know,” he said as Ambrose took another gulp from his soda, “I don’t like to get involved in either Faye’s career or the creative process.”

Ambrose snorted so violently that twin orange rivulets streamed from his nose. He snatched a napkin and dabbed at his face.

“Creative process?” he started. “Which creative process would that be, Billy? The finger snapping, ‘A book please now, Ambrose.’ The petulance, ‘Where’s my book, Ambrose?’ Or the hissy fits, ‘How dare you call this piece of crap a Virginia Faye Warner original, Ambrose?’”

He stopped and looked at me in a panic. “Does he know?”

“It’s all right, Ambrose,” William said. “He’s with me.”

“Who is he?”

“I’m Roger,” I said, presenting him with an ancient Hershey bar that I had discovered in the lining of my jacket. “I’m nobody.”

He looked skeptical but hungrily accepted the candy bar.

“Don’t worry about Roger,” William reassured him. “He’s a graduate student.”

Ambrose unwrapped the candy bar. I was embarrassed at how old it was.

“Goody,” he delighted. “I love white chocolate.”

He tossed the oxidized squares into his mouth.

“Billy, you know I love her. Talk to her.”

“I do,” William replied. “Often.”

Ambrose finished the chocolate, licked the wrapper and got reflective.

“I do understand why you don’t want to get involved. I really do. But you have to this time. There is only so much I can take.”

“I understand.”

“I mean, it would be a catastrophe if there wasn’t a new Virginia Faye Warner original this season, wouldn’t it?”

Ambrose looked up and stared directly at William. “One has to wonder. Would it be more devastating to her loyal fans,” he mused quietly, “or to the author herself?”

His smile turned sinister as he took another drink of soda.

“Is that extortion?” William asked quietly.

“That’s an ugly word, Billy. I prefer blackmail.”

“Number seventeen,” the cashier paged, “your pie is ready.”

Ambrose pulled himself to his feet.

“Got to run,” he announced. “I phoned it in. You know how slow they are here.”

He retrieved the pizza box at the counter and paused at our table on his way out. He looked at me one more time with suspicion.

“I’m a math student,” I volunteered.

“Oh, well, then,” he said in relief before he turned to William.

“You will want to help me with this. You do remember how bad the bad old days were, don’t you, Billy?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“That would be such a good idea—for both our sakes—but especially yours,” he threatened, then turned and left as the cashier announced our order.

William waited a few minutes to make sure Ambrose was gone for good. Then he looked at me hard and long.

“How are you at keeping secrets?” he asked me.

“Good,” I answered honestly.

He studied me a little longer.

“I think you are,” he finally said. “Which is for the best, because we have a doozy.”

William leaned conspiratorially across the table and spoke into my ear.

“My darling wife is a famous author. She has published over thirty books.”

“Way over thirty,” I corrected him.

“Really?” He was slightly taken aback.

“Really. I read about that in a scrapbook.”

“Where?” William demanded, with a sharp intensity.

“At Mrs. Slocum’s.”

“That makes sense,” he nodded. “So you know about her sophomore slump.”

“You mean that she couldn’t write a word for over two years?” I asked.

“A little longer than that, actually.”

William looked both ways, before he whispered in my ear.

“She’s still in it. For all intents and practical purposes, Ambrose is Virginia Faye Warner.”

My eyebrow rose instinctively in surprise.

“That’s right. Ambrose is the true ‘Queen of Hearts,’” he said. “You certainly wouldn’t want to see that face on a dust jacket.”

“Not on anything you would want to touch,” I said supportively.

“In her defense,” William added, “she did write and sell the first one all by herself. It was after that that she got a little ...”

“I’m blind, deaf and dumb,” I reassured him.

I wanted to add that if it would get me a PhD, I would strangle Ambrose with my bare hands, or sit him down in front of a typewriter at gunpoint—whichever would make William happier.

“Good man,” William replied. “By the way, one peep and her lawyer will take you for every dime you have and ever hoped to have.”

He zoomed in for the eyeball-to-eyeball shot.

“Understood?”

I reflexively cowered, but relaxed as the tone of his voice shifted.

“She’s—fragile,” he said distantly.

For once it was easy to hold my tongue, even though I wanted to ask him about the blonde at the train station. This was when I discovered that having a really deep secret makes it easier to keep your mouth shut. It’s the light gossipy bits that fly from your mouth like crumbs.

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The following Friday morning I was late to William's office because I had to drive the bus to take Mrs. Slocum to the podiatrist. When I got to the math department, I leapt up the staircase taking two and three steps at a time. As I entered the office, I found William rummaging in a packing box. He was not alone. Sitting on a stack of three other boxes, swinging his feet, was a small man who turned out to be Arlen Sheffield from next door.

He was properly proportioned. His head was the right one for his body and his arms and legs were the appropriate sizes, but he was small, perhaps under four foot six. He had narrow eyes and a very tight-lipped mouth. His hair was closely cropped but not a crew cut.

"This man has no scruples," William warned me.

"I told you before, Billy Boy, it wasn't my fault," Sheffield said. "They had to remove them when I ruptured my spleen."

"Why are you such an SOB?"

"That question pertains to a condition or a state, not a decision. In my official capacity, I don't have to answer that."

"I take your point," William conceded.

"Thanks for the stapler," the diminutive man said on his way out. "Just try and get it back."

We heard the door to his office close.

"You are blessed," William informed me. "He teaches the ethics course next semester."

"Science and Obligation," he added with a sinister chuckle. "Required for all master's and PhD candidates."

"Lucky me," I agreed.

William's mirth quickly evaporated. "I can't find them," he said.

"What?"

"The next two. I wrote 'Coincidental Logic' when I was in Boston. I did all the math for 'Inferred Fatalism' when I was at the London School of Economics. The concluding paper was magical. That was the proof that closed the door. I wrote that one during the most productive period of my life." He looked smug for a moment, but then folded up. It was a look I was beginning to recognize.

“Before the deep freeze of winter,” he added cryptically, moving further into himself.

I was curious to know more, but knew better than to ask. He sat in his desk chair and gnawed at the knuckles of his right hand, brooding.

“What is the difference between coincidence and inevitability?” he asked finally.

I went back to looking stupid until William suddenly slapped the desk. I jumped.

“This won’t do,” he said. “We’ve got to find them.”

He was up and out of the chair and his face was quite close to mine.

“Don’t believe that crap about mathematicians. There is life after twenty-four,” he avowed. “It’s not that I can’t do it again. I know I can do it again. I just did it rather well the first time. I don’t like chewing the same meat twice.”

He grabbed my shoulders, whether for emphasis or support I still don’t know.

“We’ll have to go to the house,” he said as he released me.

In the moment that it took me to realize that I was meant to follow, he was out the door. I ran down the stairs in pursuit.

Whenever he moved, William was remarkably swift. I was in the parking lot a scant half-minute behind him, but there was no sign of either him or the van. All was quiet.

Then the stillness was ruptured by a wailing fan belt. I followed my ears and walked toward the screech and found William wrestling with a 1965 Plymouth Valiant. His left arm was buried under the dashboard. His other hand was trying to seduce the ignition with the key. All the while, his right foot was pumping the accelerator.

“Don’t say a word,” he commanded. “These are sacred rites.”

Mutely I stepped back. Never have I observed such a fierce and directed concentration. Holding his breath, he slammed his foot hard against the floor, turned the key even harder to the right and held it over.

I watched and waited. I grew concerned as he stopped all movement as well as breathing. Was he having a heart attack? I was about to break my silence and call for an ambulance when the engine coughed twice, turned over and revved madly.

“Haven’t lost my touch,” he chuckled. He gestured to me. “Get in. Get in. The son of a bitch could stall any second.”

We left through the south gate, on the opposite side of campus from the stunning archway that graced the cover of the annual school bulletin. He turned right, driving away from the town and up the hill. The road was steep and winding as it ascended a dramatic headland.

When the Plymouth was finally up to speed, it inspired some confidence but not a lot. I enjoyed the view as we lurched higher into the hills. The campus fell away and the valley opened up. It was a spectacular display of scenery.

Near the top, the trees thinned and we saw the sunlight glinting off the Tappan Zee. The river looked so good at that moment that it should have been photographed by the state board of tourism. To the north you could see the drooping cables of the Bear Mountain Bridge and to the right were the twin-vaulted containment structures of the nuclear power plant. Since it was a warm Friday in late September, a jumble of sailboats darted and tacked against the changeable winds and petulant currents of Haverstraw Bay.

William made a sharp right turn onto an unmarked gravel drive. We pulled up to massive, embellished, wrought iron gates. Cupids hovered around the gateposts and two large conjoined hearts were fabricated into the metal. Above them, in Gothic filigree, was the motto "*AMOR VERSUS MORTALIS NUMQUAM.*"

"True love never dies," William explained as he punched a series of numbers into a security pad on an adjacent stanchion.

The gates slowly swung open and the hearts slowly parted. We coasted down the drive. Spinning the wheel to the right, William rolled the car off the noisy gravel and onto a quiet bed of pine needles, pulling up next to the van he'd been driving when he had first brought me to Mrs. Slocum's.

"You live here?" I said stupidly.

"Welcome to VFW Hall," he replied as he climbed out of the station wagon.

I followed him. But it was hard not to notice that the car was still running, coughing and occasionally blasting blue clouds of smoke.

"Don't you want to turn it off?" I asked.

He didn't bother to answer. He just straightened his arm behind him and jingled the key ring at me as he walked away from the rampaging automobile, which finally died.

The main house was chiseled into the rocky terrain just under the brow of the hill. You could make out the terra cotta of the roof through the white pine and hemlocks. William loped down brick steps, hidden among large rhododendrons.

"It takes five minutes longer if we go in through the front door," he explained.

The house was very grand, built in a meandering Mediterranean style with sweeping tile roofs contrasting with pale stucco walls. It was well-sited and folded into the environs so gracefully that it did not appear as vast as it was. Following the ridgeline to deliver a breathtaking panorama of the bay below, the architecture had the dignified demeanor and implied history of an ancestral home.

The landscaping surrounding this classic Italianate villa was exquisite, even though it would be more at home behind an English manor house. There was a grid of low walls made up of ancient brick, marking out a series of gardens in varying degrees of formality. Sprinkled among them there were romantic follies. A crumbling

Gothic ruin graced a small lawn behind the roses. More gardens were terraced into the hillside below.

We turned left at the lily pond and approached the back of the structure. William opened a door near the back of a greenhouse. Working our way through a sequence of utility rooms, we ended up in a pantry.

“Over there,” he motioned.

He led me up a back stairway, then through a door into a wide hallway. The floor was covered with an array of sumptuous Persian rugs. Rich walnut paneled the dado. Above, the cream-colored wall was home to a magnificent gallery of artwork.

I gawked. I had never seen anything like this. Each painting was displayed in an ornately carved gold-leafed frame. The colors were vibrant. The technique was voluptuous and garish. Despite a wide range of characters and settings, they were all strangely similar. In each, a man and a woman embraced dramatically. Both were superb physical specimens: he, muscular and handsome; she, ravishing and shapely. Only the clothes and the backgrounds differed from picture to picture.

“Book covers,” William explained. “From the neo-bordello revival school.”

We continued on. It was a long hallway. Although the paintings seemed to merge into a deadening repetition, a few distinctive themes could be identified.

Midway, the men in the paintings became more dashing. There was a sudden glut of pirates, bullfighters and the occasional buckskinned pioneer. Then, in another transition, there was a run of young and manly business executives in gray flannel suits that were almost torn apart by the powerful pectoral muscles constrained within them. Each was sweeping a beautiful career woman off her high heels in a passionate embrace across a wide desk in a corner office.

We arrived at a double door. A dramatic column framed each side. Above the Corinthian capitals, the lintels were populated with more cupids, but this time they were reading books.

Above the doorway in the pediment were carved satyrs. One was standing, playing his pipes. Another was lying on the ground writing in a large volume with a quill pen, his hairy legs and hooves kicking idly behind him.

*Over here*, William signaled from the other end of the corridor.

He stood on the threshold of a door that would be invisible in the paneling when closed. By the time I caught up with him, he held a finger to his lips. “Shh.”

We tiptoed up a long, narrow staircase. William opened the door at the top. I stepped out, suddenly speechless.

When you come into a great space, there is a special feeling. I had felt that way at the Spectrum in Philadelphia, when I passed through the final portal and the full scope of the arena was revealed. I am sure that when a gladiator stepped into the ring, the open expanse of the Coliseum was equally breathtaking. It was like that, albeit on

a lesser scale, when you passed through a door opening into Virginia Faye Warner's personal library.

Floor to ceiling, it was three stories high and totally open. There were two mezzanines. Both ran the length of the west wing. The railings were wrought iron with polished mahogany handgrips. Built-in bookcases ran along the wall. Library stacks jutted out from them. Glorious sculptures and paintings, depicting famous lovers of all time, were artfully arranged throughout the room. The most dramatic was a Victorian marble reproduction of a Renaissance Aphrodite and Adonis, positioned and spotlighted in a deep niche over the main entrance. William and I were standing on the top level.

The place was so sumptuous that it could drive the illiterate to love books. Only with time would I appreciate the depth of its catalog: all the classics, as well as contemporary literature, comprehensive science and history collections and a complete reference desk.

Then I looked at the opposite wall. Raising my eyes, I was awestruck.

"Over a thousand window panes," William whispered to me. The view was only river and sky. Man-made splendor shrank to insignificance behind it.

After a breathless moment, I pulled away from the grip of the vista and continued my survey below. To the left of the main reading room was an alcove that jutted out over the great lawn. It contained a huge desk. Behind it were a leather desk chair and a dramatic flower arrangement in an urn, which was so spectacular and large that it looked as if it belonged in the lobby of a grand hotel. I had certainly never seen anything like it in a private home. Of course, I had never seen a private house like this either.

William slipped off his shoes and signaled me to do the same. He also warned me to keep away from the railing. I could hear the low murmur of unintelligible voices two floors below.

Then he disappeared from view. I glimpsed him moving up and down the aisles pushing a shelving cart, which slowly filled as he pulled volumes off the stacks.

I waited, unsure what to do, where to stand. The drone of the voices downstairs lulled me. I settled into a comfortable chair facing west and lost myself in the spectacle that was the Hudson River.

Every one of the panes was sparkling clean and without a streak. I felt myself drawn into the deep blue sky on the other side. Higher up, a swirling mob of Canada geese shuffled and reshuffled until it emerged in an organized v-formation, heading south.

When they had disappeared across the river, the sky was empty, cloudless.

Suddenly there was a brittle explosion of shattering glass. My head snapped upright and I looked frantically for William.

But he was gone. All that remained was a pile of books and papers on the floor next to the book cart. My curiosity overpowered my discretion. I went to the railing and peered down at the scene below.

From the many dust jackets I had seen at Mrs. Slocum's, I knew immediately that I was looking at William's wife. She was perfectly coiffed and made up just like she was in the photos. However, unlike in her publicity stills, she was wearing a baby blue quilted housecoat with pink fluffies on her feet.

Glowering across from her was Ambrose. Even though his face was red with outrage, it retained its pasty complexion. He was wearing a "Kiss me, I'm Irish" baseball cap and a sweatshirt that read "Chaste Makes Waste."

"You are so right," Ambrose snarled at her. "That was completely out of line. This one is so much more apropos."

He grabbed a book from the shelf and referred to the spine. "*Love Has Wings*."

Then he crouched like a discus thrower, wound up and let go. In a perfect parabola, the book sailed up through the room and found a fresh windowpane, quickly reducing it to flying shards.

"Whee!" he exulted. "Love flies."

"You'll pay for that," Virginia Faye Warner snapped.

"Take it out of my check," he barked.

"First, you need to earn it," she replied icily. "I'm not running a charity here."

"A home for wayward ghouls," he muttered.

"I heard that."

"Now hear this: I'm leaving."

"Good riddance. You're a burnt-out, worthless hack."

"I know you are, but what am I?" Ambrose sneered back at her.

They were toe-to-toe when William suddenly inserted himself between them. Now they had to lean over behind his back to trade barbs.

"You can't quit. Nobody will hire you," she continued. "You're gross and stupid."

"You hired me, Stupid."

William picked up *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and slammed it down hard on the tabletop. The loud report made them both jump.

"Enough. Both of you," William ordered. "Faye, sit down. Ambrose, go to your corner."

Ambrose stomped to the other side of the room and stuffed himself into a small antique school desk. He sulked for a while, but then he discovered a bag of unshelled peanuts under the lid. He ripped it open with his teeth and started cracking and chewing. The pile of husks grew as he jawed like a cow and his eyes stared vacantly ahead.

"Disgusting," she mumbled in a bad stage whisper. "Look at him!"

“Behave yourself,” William admonished before looking for me on the mezzanine. “Roger,” he directed to me, “pick up the pages I dropped and put them in order.” When William’s wife saw me standing at the rail, her eyes seemed guided by laser beams.

“Who is that?” she demanded.

“Say hello to Roger,” William said. “He’s my new intern.”

“Hello, Miss Warner,” I called down. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Don’t pretend that you know who I am,” she snapped as she disappeared into her handbag. “You haven’t read any of my books, have you?”

“No. I’m afraid I haven’t.”

There was no reason why I would have ever read a “girl” book like she wrote. Nevertheless, I felt inexplicably sheepish.

“But I want to.”

She looked up at me again and a red tide of color spread across my face.

“At least we know he can’t lie,” she noted, as she lit a cigarette before turning her attention to her husband.

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

I realized then that this unfamiliar level of society would take some getting used to. I had never set foot in a mansion before that morning. I certainly hadn’t met anyone famous before. But what struck me the most was the nature of my mentor’s relationship with his wife. For being married, they seemed cool and formal, nothing like any of my relatives.

“I’m looking for some papers,” William replied.

The chill was drifting toward frosty as they looked at each other until the telephone on her desk rang. He seemed relieved by the distraction. She ignored it.

It rang a second time. She had an idea of who it was because she began to mimic the caller even as it continued to ring.

“Virginia, Aloha,” she parodied. “It’s me, Frederick. How’s my favorite writer?”

“I’m fine, Freddy.” She continued her little *theatricale*. “How’s my favorite agent?”

“Fabulous, darling,” she answered herself, in insincere West Coast banter. “So how’s every little thing?”

“Equally fab, sweetmeat,” she went on. “Thinking of flying out to the coast and walking into water off the Golden Gate.”

“Sounds like a fantastic weekend, sweetie. How’s the book coming?”

The phone stopped ringing. The room got still. She lit yet another cigarette. We watched her smoke it down to the nub. It didn’t take long. She was a pro.

Glaring at Ambrose, Virginia Faye Warner said, “I hope you’re satisfied.”

Then she sank down into a chair.

"I must be the only one in the world to have a ghostwriter with writer's block," she announced loudly with an exasperated sigh. "Rich. Really, really rich."

Surprised that William took time out from his domestic crisis to toss me a scowl, I returned to my job of gathering up the books and papers. I temporarily loaded them onto the shelving cart and wheeled it to the end of the stacks near the staircase.

More interesting than the books were the papers and articles still strewn all over the floor. A few had been clipped out of journals, but most of them were original manuscripts. When I read the abstracts, I knew that these were what he was hunting for.

"'A Logical Sequence toward a Proof of Inevitability' by William E. Teale, Professor of Mathematics and Philosophy," read the title page of one article.

I was eager to read that one, but there was no page two. The typescripts were old and seemed to have all given out at the same moment. The floor was covered with crumbly fragments that fell apart when you touched them.

I knew that I could never accurately collate the pile in front of me, but I did my best to preserve it. I isolated the title pages. There were four. That was exciting in itself. Then I carefully tamped the rest into the neatest stack possible and returned to the railing wondering what I should do now.

Down below, the argument had taken a new turn.

"Oaters?" Miss Warner sneered at Ambrose. "You want to write westerns? You?"

"You are in no position to demean," Ambrose answered defensively. "The western genre has a rich history in publishing. That will be my next book. Read my contract."

"I've read your contract, Tex," she answered. "Your spurs are mine."

Then, overcome with curiosity, Faye asked, "What's it called?"

"*Bad Day at Fort Meade*," Ambrose answered proudly.

At that, she laughed so hard that she segued into a coughing jag.

"What's so funny?" the ghostwriter demanded once she was breathing regularly.

"Fort Meade is in Maryland, idiot," she explained. "Everyone knows that."

"Big deal," Ambrose said defensively. "I'll go back to *Boots in Yuma*."

"You can get the boot after you write the next book," Faye explained. "It's in the contract."

"I've been waiting for that contract for seventeen years," Ambrose spat back.

"Don't blame me. Blame the post office."

William pulled his head out of the book he was studying. He was aglow. "This is logical," he announced. "Even I could make it work."

Faye and Ambrose both looked at him with scorn.

William slapped the book closed and read the spine. "*Muriel Meekham's Practical Guide for the Romance Novelist*."

"Don't say anything that you'll regret later," Faye warned.

“Nothing but professional admiration, my dear. She seems to know what she’s talking about and she covers it all. Did she ever write anything?”

“Of course.”

“*That.*” Ambrose pointed to the book in William’s hand.

“Ah.” William scanned the manual as he read chapter titles, “Planning the plot ... Picking the place ... Setting the scene.”

He flipped ahead.

“Oh I like this. ‘Comic relief is more than just for laughs.’”

Ambrose rose to his mentor’s defense. “You can make fun of it all you want,” he argued. “But Meekham has been the manual of choice for writers in our trade for over fifty years.”

“I’m not making fun of anything,” William answered.

“You never do,” Faye pointed out. “But that doesn’t mean you are innocent.”

He didn’t seem to hear her. He read aloud, “When choosing names for central characters, especially the lovers, avoid employing the exotic or unfamiliar.”

He closed the book.

“Too bad,” he sighed. “I guess you can’t use Sanjoop Chatterji for the hero.”

Ambrose was visibly distressed.

“It’s all well and good for you to be sarcastic and cynical and carry on about something you know nothing about.”

“That’s all right,” his boss interrupted him. “I’ll take it from here.”

Faye looked at her husband. “Mrs. Meekham’s manual built this house, Billy. We have followed it chapter and verse on every book we’ve written, and she has never let us down.”

“My point exactly,” William said. “It is a formula.”

They both started to protest contentiously, until William held up his hand. I was surprised to see them both quiet down.

“Don’t let the technical words scare you,” he explained. “You both employ formulas every day in your life.”

He looked at his wife. “Three parts gin, one part vermouth,” he said.

Turning to Ambrose, he added, “Two chocolate wafers and a creamy center.”

Then he chuckled.

“If it can be formulated, it can be a mathematical model. All I need is a computer.”

## 21

The sudden buzz of the front gate intercom jarred the entire room.

William walked over to the box and pushed the button.

“Yes,” he said into the intercom.

“Taxi.”

“We didn’t call a taxi.” He glanced at us and raised an eyebrow.

“Dropping off,” the box squawked.

“Thank God,” Faye said in relief as she rushed over and pushed the button that opened the gate.

“I’ve got to get dressed,” she added as she flew from the room.

William scratched his head for a few moments, standing and staring at the clouds outside. A rising wind and occasional gusts rattled the windows. It made me feel only more comfortable, curled up as I was in a plush and comfy sofa. I watched William watch the sky.

Soon he was back at the writing table. With the steady and sonorous scratching of his pencil point against the legal pad, I was once again mesmerized and floated off into the space between the balconies and the painkillers.

But not for long. “What on earth are you doing here?” I heard William’s voice ask sharply in genuine shock.

“I was asked?” replied a woman’s voice in a vaguely familiar English accent.

“You could have said ‘no.’”

“Lovely to see you again, by the way,” she added.

There was a silence. The wind kicked up a bit more, and it sounded like rain or light sleet against the windows. I stretched.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said with finality.

I was shocked that he could be so tactless to such a charming woman.

“Of course I shouldn’t, but here I am.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to see you one more time. Sorry.”

“No,” William corrected her. “I’m sorry.”

Marshaling every resource, I stood up slowly, but it could never have been slow enough. All the blood that wasn’t yet clotted on my forehead drained from my brain in an instant. The light in the room went flat. I staggered toward the voices, waving

my arms in front of me, and my gashed and bruised face like Dr. Frankenstein's monster. Overcome by a wave of dizziness, I grabbed at the nearest chair and fell onto the floor beside it.

As the shimmering mist drifted off from my clearing vision, I saw both of them looking down at me with concern.

"Still beating your students, William?" she asked.

"You should see the other guy," he answered.

I struggled to my feet but went immediately wobbly. Claire lunged forward and caught me.

"Roger," she said. "We can't go on meeting like this."

She was remarkably strong. She raised me back upright and held me still so that I could collect myself. I was in no hurry. It was dreamy in her arms.

I wanted this moment to go on forever. I played possum, but I feigned the faint a moment too long. She caught on, but she didn't expose me. She started to hum in my ear—Strauss.

As "The Blue Danube" began to build in tempo, she slowly waltzed me across the room. I'm a lousy dancer, but she made me feel like I was Fred Astaire. Then she delicately lowered me onto my couch. She lingered, eyeing me, making certain that I didn't need more serious attention.

As she came into focus, I noticed she was dressed with a lot more formality this time. She wore a black suit, and her skirt was medium length with dark stockings and pumps. Her shirt was white broadcloth, set off by a striped club tie. The colors were green, red and gold against a navy blue field.

Her hair was under control, but just barely. It was in a random swirl and clipped in back by a heavy piece of metal. In spite of the outfit, she looked anything but conservative.

"Do you feel as bad as you look?" they both asked simultaneously.

"Water," I croaked.

"Of course!"

"Just the thing."

They practically knocked each other over as they rushed to the pitcher. On their return, which took a few minutes because of the constant editorializing between them in low voices, she handed him the glass and he handed it to me.

"Thank you," I said.

I lay back down, ready to take another spin on my enchanted rug. After she covered me with a blanket, they moved away so as not to disturb me.

"Did he hear anything?" Claire asked with a concerned voice.

"Not to worry, he's a good scout," William reassured her. "Besides, she dosed him up good. He can barely remember his own name."

“What happened to him?”

“It is lovely to see you again too,” he confessed. “Even though I dread every minute of it.”

“Especially since this is absolutely the absolute last time.”

“Exactly.”

With difficulty, I lifted my head. They were sitting at opposite ends of the especially wide window seat, so far apart that they could not have touched finger tips if they held their arms straight out.

“I do have a plan, you know.”

“I did not know that,” he replied. “But I assumed.”

“I brought a writing sample. It’s horrible.”

“I would expect no less,” he said.

“After she reads it, there will be an awkward moment. Then she will say, ‘Thank you for coming in today, we will be in touch’ and imply ‘don’t let the door hit you on the arse on your way out.’”

“How could I ever doubt you?”

“And then, after that, it’s good-bye. The final farewell.”

When I didn’t hear a peep for a significant interval, I raised my battered head up once more. This time they were standing even farther apart and staring out the windows over the choppy wintry river.

“What’s it about?”

“What?”

“Your writing sample.”

“It’s a little something I whipped up for a power plant in Tennessee.”

“What’s it called?”

She pulled a file folder out of her satchel and handed it to him. Pulling his reading glasses out of the top pocket of his tweed jacket, he read, “Hot-swapping a tertiary-level subordinated cooling pump from a side-mounted bivalve housing unit.”

“When does it come out in paperback?” he asked, then smiled. “This should be a very short interview.”

“I hope so.”

William started to read, “Due to rivet failure, apparatus name plate might be either missing or unreadable (refer to Technical Note: 49/SCP5F). Warning: following these procedures on a misnamed or unnamed cooling pump may result in personal injury, temporary system failure, or catastrophic damage to reactor core. Read all documentation before continuing.”

Looking up, William said, “Oh, that’s lovely.”

“Keep going, it gets better.” She smiled.

“If name plate is unreadable, damaged or missing, pump type can be determined by identifying flange at top of housing. Inductive cooling pump has a rigid pressure release vent hanging down perpendicularly on flange centerline. Whereas action release coil pump is unique because of the two nipples protruding from either side directly above the emergency bleed valve.”

As William thumbed through the rest of the manual, he said, “Just as long as there aren’t any pirates.”

“No pirates,” she reassured. “Just safety issues and procedures.”

He handed the booklet back to her.

“Well done,” he said.

“We added them up. If you followed all the regulations in here,” she pointed out, “the average worker would have to take thirty-seven showers a day.”

“Sounds like clean energy,” he answered.