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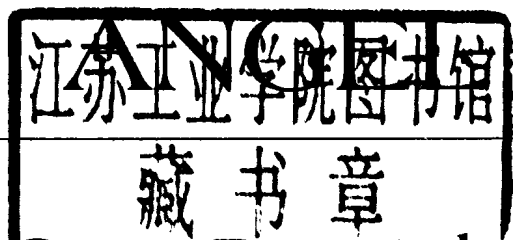
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For Matt and Eve
(Eva Maria, that is, the once and future princess)

“Tread softly, because you tread on [their] dreams.”
—*W. B. Yeats*

Thanks

Dan Paretsky, *World's Greatest Vet*, provided valuable information on Peppy's condition. Norma Singer and Loretta Lim, both registered nurses at Cook County Hospital, used one of their rare days off to give me a tour of the hospital. They explained its intricate workings in detail and showed me the pride they have in their own very difficult jobs. Norma Singer helped solve the problems that beset Mrs. Frizell in this novel.

Madelyn Iris, from Northwestern University's Center on Aging, was most helpful on questions of guardianship, city and county emergency services, and the procedure used to appoint someone as an elderly person's guardian. This book accelerates the timetable for that procedure, but the process described here is depressingly close to reality.

Rob Flater showed me where to start research so I could grapple with the skullduggery this novel discusses. Jay Topkis killed an impertinent dragon that was trying to spray fire in my direction.

An expert on mechanics—both quantum and otherwise—worked out the technical problems in Chapter Fifty.

This novel is a work of fiction. As is always the case, none of the people or events detailed here is based on anything except the distortions of reality caused by an overheated, morbid imagination. And as is also always true, any mistakes

in the text are due to my ignorance, sloth, or stupidity, not to the advice of the experts I consulted.

Bonnie Alexander and Mary Ellen Modica made it possible for me to return to work. Without their help I might never have been able to do so again. Diann Smith made the connections for me, as she has done for Chicago women for thirty years. Professor Wright and Dr. Cardhu supported my spirits through long months of pain.

Chicago
May 1991

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1

Sex and the Single Girl

Hot kisses covered my face, dragging me from deep sleep to the rim of consciousness. I groaned and slid deeper under the covers, hoping to sink back into the well of dreams. My companion wasn't in the humor for rest; she burrowed under the blankets and continued to lavish urgent affection on me.

When I covered my head with a pillow she started to mew piteously. Now thoroughly awake, I rolled over and glared at her. "It's not even five-thirty. You can't possibly want to get up."

She paid no attention, either to my words or my efforts to dislodge her from my chest, but looked at me intently, her brown eyes opened wide, her mouth parted slightly to show the tip of her pink tongue.

I bared my teeth at her. She licked my nose anxiously. I sat up, pushing her head away from my face. "It was this indiscriminate distribution of your kisses that got you into this fix to begin with."

Happy to see me awake, Peppy lumbered down from the bed and headed for the door. She turned to see if I was following, making little whimpering noises in her impatience. I pulled a sweatshirt and shorts from the heap of clothes near the bed and padded on sleep-thickened legs to the back door. I fumbled with the triple locks. By that time Peppy was whimpering in earnest, but she managed to con-

trol herself while I got the door open. Breeding shows, I guess.

I watched her down the three flights of stairs. Pregnancy had distended her sides and slowed her progress, but she made it to her spot by the back gate before relieving herself. When she was finished she didn't take her usual tour of the yard to drive away cats and other marauders. Instead she waddled back to the stairs. She stopped outside the ground-floor door and let out a sharp bark.

Fine. Let Mr. Contreras have her. He was my first-floor neighbor, part owner of the dog, and wholly responsible for her condition. Well, not wholly—that had been the work of a black Lab four doors up the street.

Peppy had come into season the week I left town on the trail of an industrial sabotage problem. I arranged for a friend of mine, a furniture hauler with steel thews, to run her twice a day—on a short leash. When I told Mr. Contreras to expect Tim Streeter he was deeply wounded, although not, unfortunately, beyond words. Peppy was a perfectly trained dog who came when she was called, didn't need to be on a leash; and anyway, who did I think I was, arranging for people to come walk her? If not for him she wouldn't get any care at all, me being gone twenty hours out of twenty-four, I was leaving town, wasn't I? Just another example of my neglect. And besides that, he was fitter than ninety percent of the young jerks I brought around.

In a hurry to take off I hadn't heard him out, just agreed that he was in terrific shape for seventy-seven, but asking him to humor me in the matter. It was only ten days later that I learned that Mr. Contreras had dismissed Tim the first time he showed up. The results, if disastrous, were utterly predictable.

The old man met me dolefully when I returned from Kankakee for the weekend. "I just don't know how it happened, doll. She's always so good, always comes when she's called, and this time she just tore away from me and headed down the street. My heart was in my throat, I thought my God,

what if she gets hit, what if she gets lost or kidnapped, you know, you read about these labs that hire people to steal dogs off the streets or out of the yard, you never see your dog again and you don't know what happened to her. I was so relieved when I caught up with her, my goodness, what could I ever have said to make you understand—”

I snarled unsympathetically. “And what are you going to say to me about this business? You haven't wanted to spay her, but you can't control her when she's in season. If you weren't so bullheaded you would've admitted it and let Tim run her. I'll tell you this much: I'm not going to spend my time looking for good homes for her damned offspring.”

That brought a spurt of his own temper, which sent him back to his apartment with an angry slam of the door. I avoided him all day Saturday, but I knew we had to make up before I left town again—I couldn't leave him in sole charge of a litter. Anyway, I'm too old myself to enjoy bearing a grudge. Sunday morning I went down to patch things up. I even stayed over on Monday so we could go to the vet together.

We brought the dog in with the angry tension of the ill-assorted parents of a wayward teenager. The vet cheered me no end by telling me that goldens sometimes have as many as twelve puppies.

“But since it's her first litter it probably won't be quite that large,” he added with a jolly laugh.

I could tell that Mr. Contreras was delighted at the prospect of twelve little black-and-gold fur balls; I did eighty-five all the way back to Kankakee, dragging out my business there as long as possible.

That had been two months ago. Now I was more or less resigned to Peppy's fate, but I was much relieved that she seemed to be doing her nesting on the first floor. Mr. Contreras grumbled about the newspapers she shredded in her chosen spot behind his couch, but I knew he would have

been unbearably hurt if she'd decided her den was in my apartment.

This close to her due date she was spending almost all her time inside with him, but yesterday Mr. Contreras had gone to a Las Vegas Night that his old parish was running. He'd been involved in the planning for six months and didn't want to miss it, but he called me twice to make sure Peppy hadn't started into labor, and a third time at midnight to check whether I'd written down the phone number at the hall they'd rented. That third call was what was giving me malicious pleasure at her trying to wake him before six.

The June sunshine was bright, but the early morning air was still chilly enough that my bare feet grew too cold to feel the porch floor. I went back inside without waiting for the old man to get up. I could hear Peppy's muffled barks continuing as I kicked my shorts off and stumbled back into bed. My bare leg slid over a wet spot on the sheet. Blood. It couldn't be mine so it had to be the dog's.

I pulled my shorts back on and dialed Mr. Contreras's number. I had my knee socks and running shoes on before he answered, his voice hoarse beyond recognition.

"You guys must have had a good old time last night," I said brightly. "But you'd better get up and face the day—you're about to become a grandfather again."

"Who is this?" he rasped. "If this is some kind of joke you oughtta know better than to call people at this time of morning and—"

"It's me," I interrupted him. "V. I. Warshawski. Your upstairs neighbor, remember? Well, your little dog Peppy has been barking her head off outside your door for the last ten minutes. I believe she wants to come inside and have some puppies."

"Oh. Oh. It's you, doll. What's that about the dog? She's barking at my back door. How long have you left her outside? She shouldn't hang around out there barking when she's this close to her time—she could catch a chill, you know."

I bit back various sarcastic remarks. "I found some blood spots in my bed just now. She may be getting ready to whelp. I'll be right down to help you get things in order."

Mr. Contreras started in on a complicated set of instructions about what I should wear. These seemed so pointless that I hung up without ceremony and headed back outside.

The vet had stressed that Peppy didn't need any help with her delivery. If we got involved with her while she was in labor or picked up the firstborn puppies it could cause her enough anxiety that she might not be able to handle the rest on her own. I didn't trust Mr. Contreras to remember in the excitement of the moment.

The old man was just shutting the back door on Peppy when I got down to the landing. He gave me a harassed look through the glass and disappeared for a minute. When he finally opened the door he held an old workshirt out to me.

"Put this on before you come inside."

I waved the shirt away. "This is my old sweatshirt; I'm not worried about what I may get on it."

"And I ain't worried about your stupid wardrobe. It's what you've got underneath it I care about. Or what you ain't got underneath it."

I stared at him, astounded. "Since when do I need to put on a bra to look after the dog?"

His leathery face turned a dull crimson. The very thought of female undergarments embarrasses him, let alone hearing their names spoken out loud.

"It's not because of the dog," he said, agitated. "I tried telling you on the phone, but you hung up on me. I know how you like to go traipsing around the house, and it don't bother me any as long as you're decent, which generally speaking you are, but not everybody feels the same way. That's a fact."

"You think the dog cares?" My voice went up half a register. "Who the hell else— Oh. You brought someone home with you last night from the gambling den. Well, well. Quite an evening for you, huh?" Normally I wouldn't be so vulgar

about someone's private life, but I felt I owed the old man a lick or two after all the snooping he'd done on my male visitors during the last three years.

He turned a deeper mahogany. "It ain't what you think, doll. It ain't like that at all. Fact is, it's an old buddy of mine. Mitch Kruger. It's been a real struggle for him, making ends meet since him and me retired, and now he's been tossed out on his rear end, so he come home crying on my shoulder last night. Course, like I told him, he wouldn't have to worry about his rent if he didn't drink it first. But that's neither here nor there. Point is, he's never exactly kept his hands to himself, if you know what I mean."

"I know just what you mean," I said. "And I promise that if the guy feels inflamed by my charms I will put him off without breaking his arm—in deference to our friendship and his age. Now, put your jacket away and let me see how Her Serene Dogginess is."

He wasn't happy about it, but he grudgingly let me into the apartment. Like mine, it had four rooms arranged boxcar style. From the kitchen you went into the dining room and then into a little hall that fed the bedroom, bath, and living room.

Mitch Kruger was snoring loudly on the living room couch, his mouth hanging open under his bulbous nose. One arm was flung over the side so that his fingertips trailed the floor. The top row of his thick gray chest hairs peeped out from the edge of the blanket.

Ignoring him as best I could, I crouched next to the sofa, under the shadow of his malodorous socks, and peered around the back to look at Peppy. She was lying on her side in the middle of a heap of newspapers. She'd spent most of the last few days shredding these, building a nest over the stack of blankets Mr. Contreras had folded for her. When she saw me she turned her head away, but thumped her tail once, feebly, to show there were no hard feelings.

I got back to my feet. "I guess she's okay. I'm going upstairs to make some coffee. I'll come back in a little while.

Remember, though, you've got to leave her alone—no going back there and trying to stroke her or anything."

"You don't have to tell me how to manage the dog," the old man huffed. "I guess I heard the vet as good as you; better, since I took her in for a checkup while you was out doing God knows what."

I grinned at him. "Right. Got it. I don't know what she makes of your pal's buzz saw, but it would put me off my feed."

"She ain't eating," he began, then his face cleared. "Oh, I get you. Yeah, I'll move him into the bedroom. But I don't want you in here looking on while I do it."

I made a face. "Me, neither." I didn't think I could stomach the sight of what might lie below the fringe of greasy chest hair.

Back in my own place I suddenly felt too tired to cope with making coffee, let alone assuaging Mr. Contreras's expectant-father anxiety. I pulled the bloodied sheet from the bed, kicked off my running shoes, and lay down.

It was almost nine when I woke again. Except for the twittering of birds anxious to join Peppy in maternity, the world was quiet beyond my walls, one of those rare wells of urban silence that give the city dweller a sense of peace. I basked in it until a squeal of brakes and furious honking broke the spell. Angry shouts—another collision on Racine.

I got up and went into the kitchen to make coffee. When I moved here five years ago this was a quiet blue-collar neighborhood—which meant I could afford it. Now rehab mania had hit. While housing prices trebled the traffic quadrupled as cute shops sprang up to feed the gentry's delicate appetites. I only hoped it was a BMW that had been hit, not my own beloved Pontiac.

I skipped my exercise program—I wouldn't have time to run this morning, anyway. Conscientiously donning a bra, I put my cutoffs and sweatshirt back on and returned to the maternity ward.

Mr. Contreras came to the door faster than I'd expected.

His worried face made me wonder if I should go back up for my car keys and license.

"She ain't done nothing, doll. I just don't know—I called over to the vet, but the doc don't come in till ten on Saturdays and they told me it wasn't an emergency, they couldn't give me his home number. You think you should call and see if you can make 'em?"

I grinned to myself. A real concession, if the old man thought there was a situation I could handle better than he. "Let me look at her first."

When we passed through the dining room to the hall I could hear Kruger's snores coming through the bedroom door.

"You have any trouble moving him?" A major altercation could have gotten the dog too agitated for easy delivery.

"My first thought was for the princess, if that's what you mean. I don't need any criticism from you; it don't help me right now."

I swallowed my tongue and followed him to the living room. The dog was lying much as she had been when I went upstairs, but I could see a dark pool spreading around her tail. I hoped that meant progress. Peppy saw me watching but made no sign. Instead she tucked her head underneath her body and started washing herself.

Was she all right? It was all very well to say not to interfere with her, but what if we let her hemorrhage because we didn't realize she was in trouble?

"What do you think?" Mr. Contreras asked anxiously, mirroring my own worries.

"I think I don't know anything about birthing puppies. It's twenty of ten now. Let's wait till the guy comes in—I'll go get my keys just in case."

We had just decided to make a pallet for her in the car so we could rush her to the clinic when the first puppy slid out, smooth as silk. Peppy attacked it urgently, washing away the afterbirth, using her jaws and her forepaws to settle it next to her. It was eleven before the next one appeared, but then

they started coming every half hour or so. I was beginning to wonder if she would fulfill the vet's prophecy and have a dozen. But around three o'clock, after the eighth little creature squirmed its way to a nipple, she decided to stop.

I stretched and headed to the kitchen to watch Mr. Contreras fix her a big bowl of dry dog food mixed with scrambled eggs and vitamins. His absorption in the process was so complete that he didn't respond to any of my questions either about his Las Vegas Night or Mitch Kruger.

I figured I was an unneeded third at this point. Some friends were playing softball and making a picnic over by Montrose harbor and I'd told them I'd try to join them. I undid the bolts to the back door.

"What's up, doll? You going someplace?" Mr. Contreras paused briefly in his stirring. "You run along. You can be sure I'll look after the princess a-okay. Eight"—he beamed to himself—"Eight and she did it just like a champ. My, oh my."

As I closed the back door a horrible noise came from the old man. I was halfway up to my apartment before it hit me: he was singing. I think the song was "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning."