

J Bennington

LOVE BOAT, LIFE BOAT



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It was a hot and muggy September day in Chester, Missouri, and it seemed to make the argument hotter. She watched as her husband, Ralph, stomped down the drive and got into his truck. He was 34 and he walked with the same ambling gait as when she first met him in college. He combed his thick brown hair in a nearly identical style, with the wave in front. He was not overweight. However, he had high blood pressure, which was controlled through medication. Outwardly, he was fine, but inwardly, she knew he suffered a great deal of stress. She knew she was the cause of some unnecessary stress, but she could not care less at the moment.

"I don't care if you ever come back!" Joyce shouted through the closed screen door. "Why should I? You can go to die somewhere and make us both happy!"

He slammed the truck door and squealed the tires as he pulled from the curb. She turned away, glared at the sink full of dishes, gave them an obscene gesture and walked to the living room. She sat on the sofa with folded arms and stared at the wall over the stereo.

"Why do I let him get to me?" she muttered.

"After so many years, why can't I stop it from happening? Why? Mom never liked him. Maybe she had more vision than I, or possibly mine was blurred by lust and rebellion." She sighed and leaned back "Why try? Why don't we simply walk away? That would stop the arguments. Kill them before they start."

With her head tilted back she could see a cobweb at the top of the curtains in her picture window. She closed her eyes and reminded herself to clean it, when she felt like it. "I haven't got this frustrated for a long time. What ails you? Besides Ralph? When was the last time we made love? That seems to quiet the disputes for a time." She thought hard and could not remember the last time. "Was it three or four months? Is that the problem? Why hasn't he bothered me? Does he have another woman on the side? Do I care? Maybe I like it this way."

A brief thought of Dave, the new network manager at work, crossed her mind. She built a solid mental picture of his face and body and let herself fantasize about a liaison with him. She let the reverie run through to the end and watched him dress to leave. The elevated feeling surprised her and she shivered as she cast a furtive glance around the empty living room.

"That would be so great," she whispered.

"Get over it, Joyce, she said, and trudged back to the kitchen. You're married, and it will stay that way. Unless today the first-ever freshwater shark appears and eats Ralph for lunch. We could live with that. Headlines. Shark eats fisherman. Widow nets a network manager.

The hot water hit the dishwashing liquid and stirred up a mountain of bubbles. Another thought of Dave arose, like the suds. How about Dave and I in a bubble bath? I could deal with that also. However, stop this course, like now. Why hasn't Ralph bothered me for sex?"

A sigh escaped her when her hands slipped into the water. It's *nearly as hot as I am*.

She washed one plate and placed it in the next sink bowl. "A man would have to be crazy, not wanting me. I could drive him wild with all this energy. He'd be my love slave."

She stuck her hands back in the water and raised them to touch her face. She sniffed the fragrance and let some of the bubbles tickle her nose, and a flash of heated conversation leapt from the depths of her mind. I stopped him. Too quick for me to enjoy it. The blood pressure medication reduced his penis also. Too frustrating and, really, pointless in our situation. I'm the one who stopped it. Not four months, but seven months ago. I could let Dave fill in for him. It fits nicely and works well.

She groaned and continued her dishwashing task. No. Get over it, Joyce. I'll continue as I am, enjoying the aggravation of this celibacy. But if the fresh water shark appears, that'll be the first thing that changes.

Ralph calmed down long before he stopped the truck by the Fishers' Paradise, a boat dock and bait shop on Smokey River in western Missouri. He transferred his tackle box, his cooler that was half filled with ice, and poles to his boat, Joy Ride, and walked to the bait shop to purchase some worms. After a brief conversation with Keith Sullivan, the dock master, and some ribald jokes, he set off, upriver to his favorite spot.

The sun was not at full peak yet, but it blazed down from the east. He kept the

boat near the right shore line, enjoying the splotches of shade the overhanging tree limbs afforded.

He knew that boats often had problems being caught in the roots and weeds near the bank. However, he felt he knew the lay of the river banks better than he knew Joyce and the delight of the shade made it worth the risk. He did notice that the boat traffic was lighter than normal, and he figured that the day might be even greater than he anticipated. At the moment, though, the isolation and quiet were what he needed most.

This is such a relaxing day. Too bad it can't be like this at home. Imagine Joyce peaceful, her badger mouth quiet, barefoot and pregnant. Forget it. That's one more thing to put in the pile of unfulfilled dreams. Don't dredge up the misery. You came here to relax.

The river split six miles north of the dock. The left-hand branch went northwest and the other due east. He steered the boat across the river and headed toward the left branch.

"If she'd make love with the same fervor that she does with her yapping complaints, I think we'd be much better off." He nodded and throttled back to a slower pace.

"Still, she wasn't this bad when we dated and married. I'm glad now that the children never came to be. That would only complicate the matter. No need of inflicting them with our fights, because she always wants to be right, and she won't give up on anything, like when she stopped the lovemaking. She wasn't right about that. It's not my fault that the medication has interfered with my performance. It still works, just not as well as before. And she has to get more involved. He considered that briefly. And, if I stop the medication, I'd be in a lot of trouble. Maybe that's what she wants, huh? Stop the medication and let the blood pressure kill me. That would stop the arguments."

He shook his head. "Wonder if she gets excited? Does she want to sleep with other men? Does she take care of herself? Is she doing that now? Is that why she doesn't care if I go back home? Does it matter? Yes, it matters. But don't make the mistake of asking her about it. Remember the last time? Three days of lectures on her right to privacy."

What he dreaded the most was the nagging suspicion that a divorce was imminent. For him, he was still committed to living with her, with or without sex, with or without her negative attitude, and with or without her badger mouth.

"I think I've adjusted rather well. I've stopped everything she wanted me to. I haven't touched her body in many months, and I stay out of the way as much as possible."

He angled the boat to the shore at his favorite spot and tugged the bow onto land. With the first hook baited; he cast it into the water and sat down in his folding chair.

"I agree that we could stand some changes, but until she decides to stop her mouth and realize she's not the only person in the world, I guess I'll just have to bide my time and hope for the best."

Two hours later he caught three fish. They were in his cooler of ice and his hook was in the water again. His mood mellowed farther, and he let himself enjoy some of the memories of the honeymoon. He could even remember Joyce's taste and smell. It was maddening to remember and be able to do nothing about it. He longed to see her naked again, to kiss her, but seeing without fulfillment left much to be desired. So he avoided that also.

The drone of another boat approaching interrupted his reverie. The occupant appeared to be elderly, with a white beard and milky wisps of hair protruding from under his light-blue baseball cap with GK embroidered in black on the front panel. The sleeves of his red plaid shirt were rolled up and Ralph wondered if he were not hot in the warm weather. The man waved and Ralph returned it as the motor stopped and the boat drifted toward the shore.

What's he up to? Ralph asked himself. The spot where he sat was by no means private, but he considered the old man an intrusion on his own turf. He reeled in his line and recast the hook as he watched the man stop his boat beside the *Joy Ride*.

The old man took a baseball bat from the boat and picked up a rock from the ground. He tossed the rock into the air and hit it, sending it out across the river. He repeated his action three times and shaded his eyes to see how far they went before he made his way to Ralph.

"When I was younger, I could put one all the way across to the other bank," he said. "Now I'm lucky to get one half way. Old age I guess."

"Still that's not bad," Ralph said.

"How's the fishing today?"

"Not too bad at all. "Got three trout, about six pounds each so far."

"Commendable. You from these parts?"

"Chester, just about 15 miles south."

"That's a good place to be from."

"What brings you here today?" Ralph asked. The man's voice was smooth, and very strong in spite of the age his weathered face displayed. And from the close range, he thought the face possessed a vague Oriental ambience.

"You do," the man replied, and chuckled at the wrinkles in Ralph's forehead. "I've seen you before, fishing by yourself. And I've got this curious nature about me. I like people and I enjoy talking with people. You that way?"

"Not when I'm fishing. I do a lot of talking in my line of business."

"Do you talk at home?"

"Not much. We don't talk. We debate and argue."

"That why you spend so much time here?"

"That's right."

"What about work? What's your job?"

"I'm into network marketing. I've got a thriving business, and I need only devote some part-time work to keep up the income stream."

"Good. Is it established enough to keep going, even if you're not around?"

Ralph hesitated before he made a reply. Something in the tone of voice triggered his need for caution. "Why would you ask a stranger a question like that? That's rather personal."

"I ask any question that comes to mind, sir." His face broke into a friendly smile. "That's my job. I don't work unless I know what's going on. Do you have a mistress?"

"Certainly not! That question was unnecessary. Why don't you look for someone else to interrogate?"

"Where's Joyce? Why isn't she here with you?"

"She's at home." He turned his attention to the fishing pole that alerted him. He reeled in his fourth bass, the largest of the day and placed it into the cooler of ice with the rest. "She doesn't like this part of fishing. She likes to eat them, but she doesn't

like to catch them. Waste of time for her."

He paused and shivered. "How did you know her name was Joyce?"

"Because it's part of my job. What about children? Are children a waste of time for her?"

"No. She'd like one, or two. She wanted three, at least she did when we first got married."

"But you don't have any. Why?"

"Because we can't have them. I guess that's one more reason for not making love. Why do it if it's not going to produce children? She's into celibacy and abstinence, or so she says."

"The problem with you or her?"

"Wait. How do you know her name, and that we're childless? This is getting mighty strange. I think you'd better move on, or else I will. I don't like this conversation."

"I know Joyce the best, but I also know you. You'll figure it out soon. Now, who's the problem?"

"Her. It's something that can't be fixed. I want this conversation to end! I already told you I didn't like talking while I'm fishing."

"If you could have it, if it were possible, what would you want most from your marriage?"

Ralph considered the question and then why he even considered it a moment. "I'd like to have a return of the love we shared when we first married. The initial five years were filled with hope, love, and joy. I'd like to finish the rest of my life, with Joyce; in the same way we started."

The man nodded with a pleased countenance. "That's praiseworthy. I like that."

Ralph realized he did not know the man's name, and suddenly it was important for him to learn. "What's your name?"

"Genghis Kahn."

Ralph stood swiftly, dropping the pole and focusing solely on the man. "What?"

"You heard right." He pointed to his cap. GK. Genghis Kahn."

"You can't be!"

"Oh, I'm real. I come back, when I'm needed. People like me, because I do as I'm

told and have no mercy. I never learned that emotion growing up like I did."

"What do you do?" He felt chilled and stared at his unblinking eyes. "What's your job?"

"I'm a murderer, a thief, a teacher, and a healer. I give solutions to people when their backs are against the wall. I work for wives, or husbands who are disenchanted with their marriage or life. Whatever turns a buck is fine with me." He shrugged slightly. "vagabonds can't be too picky."

"That can't be right?" For the first time he noticed a large knife hanging from the man's belt.

"I speak the truth. No reason for me to lie." He had hefted the bat and rested it on his shoulder.

"I don't have much money on me," Ralph said and backed up a step.

"Don't need that much. You know that Joyce has a boyfriend?"

"What?" Ralph's mouth went slack.

"Yep. Name's Dave. A new guy in the office. She has a strong crush on him. She fantasizes about him a lot when she's not with him. He boinked her once already, in the warehouse where they work. She enjoyed it and the pleasure she felt is working on her. Made her feel like a woman. She wants it again, and she wants it to continue."

The pain of the revelation swirled around in Ralph's mind, like a sudden rush of morning fog from a creek. His eyes met and locked on Genghis', so intently that he failed to see anything else. He screamed and collapsed to the ground when his leg broke. He twisted around to hold it and look at Genghis also.

"Why'd you do that? How much did she pay you? I can't believe she did this."

"A broken leg makes everything else easier. She paid me nothing. I work free for the people I love." He pulled the knife from its sheath.

"Hey, man!" pleaded Ralph. "Let's discuss this!"

"Discuss? What's to discuss? I've got a job to do, and I must complete it. That's part of the contract."

The pain in Ralph's leg increased and he could feel the sweat breaking out all over his body. *"I'm going into shock,"* he thought. *"This isn't a good situation."* He tried to come up with excuses but his harried mind was too confused.

"I don't want to die," he said. "I'd like to share the rest of my life with Joyce, as I did in the first five years, WITH a child."

Genghis backhanded him. "That's too bad. You don't have that long left. Don't worry. This could be the best day of your life. You won't hear any more badgering tongue, only peace and contentment. See ya, dude."

He plunged the knife into Ralph's heart and squatted beside him and waited until the final twitching had stopped to make sure he was dead. Then he stood, stretched, and glanced to the sky. "There are still a few hours before darkness. Let's see what else we can instigate in this flea bag state." He whistled a tune as he walked back to his boat.

Melanie, Joyce's oldest sister, waved good-bye to the tiny figure in the rear bus window at noon. Her last and youngest child was on his way to afternoon kindergarten.

"See ya," she waved and blew him a kiss. "Sometimes I wish I were that young and carefree. I'd have far fewer problems and someone would take care of me. Right on!"

She went to the bathroom and when she exited, the front doorbell rang. A quick glance through the dining room window revealed a large dilapidated car parked under the tree by the curb across the street.

"That was fast. Glad you waited for a few moments for the bathroom break."

She pulled open the inside door in the living room and left the outer door locked. She stared at the elderly gentleman in a red plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up and a light-blue baseball cap with GK on the front panel.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"I certainly hope so." He removed his cap and wiped his brow. "I'm looking for Joyce Korgan. Have you seen her recently?"

Melanie felt the hair on her arms get excited and stand erect. "Why do you ask? Who are you? What do you want with her?"

"I'm Genghis Kahn." He smiled and watched her back away from him, gripping the inner door tightly, ready to slam it.

"Yeah, right. What do you do?"

"I'm a murderer, a thief, a teacher, and a healer."

Her eyes narrowed. "And you want Joyce? Why?"

"I've written to her, called her, left messages on her answering machine, but she won't contact me. I'm worried about her. The last time we did talk, she was very depressed. I'd hate to find her grave, you know? Especially if I could do something to prevent it."

The questioning and revelation of his name had startled her. "Who are you, really? If I don't get some honesty soon, you'll get 911 all over your ass."

His laughter caused her to jerk. "Genghis Kahn. I'm a professor from Temple University. Students call me Genghis Kahn because of my difficult tests and tough standards in history."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"I went by her house earlier this morning. She wasn't home." He shrugged.

"Then why did you come here?"

"Because she has your address on her Temple enrollment application. Look, I'm really worried about her. Depressed people bother me. And I thought I might check on her while I was in the area."

"I'm sorry if I seem harsh, but I dislike strangers asking about my sister. Especially when they're Genghis Kahn and a murderer, etcetera. When I see her next, I'll ask if she knows you and ask her to get in touch." Without waiting for a reply, she closed the door and leaned against it. She raised an arm to eye-level and stared at the hair standing on end amidst the goose flesh.

"This is strange," she thought. "This hasn't happened for quite a while. Was he a man, demon, angel, or what?" She hurried to the window and watched him get into the car and drive away.

She turned and shivered until she calmed down and picked up her sewing basket, and a shirt from the mend pile.

"Well, that was very strange," she considered. "I do realize Joyce has some problems, but I don't see them as all that bad. Or am I just being a typical big sister, complacent and overlooking something important? She checked the time, turned on the stereo with the remote control and began to mend the shirt.

"Finish this one and then start dinner," she whispered. "Such is your lot in

life."

A moment later she jerked again. "Wait a minute! I never lived here while Joyce was in college. That happened after the graduation and my marriage. What's going on here? Glad I didn't tell him where she lives."

Two minutes later, the phone rang. "Hi, Mel. What's up?" asked Tina.

"Mending shirts, pants and such. The stock market's up, along with the temperature and humidity. My libido's down, but that's okay for the moment."

"Funny girl." Tina was the second oldest of the Donaldson family sisters who remained. "Do you want me to bring anything for supper tonight? While I'm on the way to the mall, I figured I'd ask."

Melanie did a mental inventory of her fridge. "A loaf of bread and a gallon of milk would be nice."

"Joyce coming?"

"Ralph's having a product demonstration this evening. Think Joyce will stay for that? She'll be here, even if she's not invited."

"What's up her butt anyway? She's getting really annoying lately."

"You too? I don't know." The hair on her arms stood erect again, and chills ran down her spine.

"Hold on, sis." She laid the shirt aside and turned on the sofa to look out the window.

Across the street, she saw the man, Genghis Kahn, sitting on his car hood, looking at her picture window. She closed her eyes and shook her head. When she opened them, he and the car were gone.

"That's weird! Something must be dreadfully wrong."

"What's that? What's going on?"

"Never mind. I'd rather tell you in person. So Joyce's on your nerves too?"

"Yeah. Sometimes I feel like telling her she's not welcome to my house, and she can't go near Rachel anymore. Can't see or talk with her."

"That's harsh."

"I'd never do that, even if I've thought it, but what's wrong with her? I never wanted to kick her ass so bad in my life."

"Do you believe in omens?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I think one was here a short while ago, worried about Joyce. I think something serious is wrong with our young sister." She shivered and watched the goose bumps disappear once more.

"I think the Donaldson Squaws need to have a Powwow."

Tina sighed. "Wow! That's very serious. She won't like it."

"Does it matter? Would you like to deal with another Elizabeth? Have you forgotten?"

No! Once in a lifetime is enough for me When?

"W do it tonight. After the groceries, can you handle another assignment?"

"You name it."

"Stop at Knight's Hardware and get a wedge security lock for doors, and since they have everything under the sun, pick up a circle of foam. Everything else we need; I have."

"You got it, Sis. Catch you at dinner."

Joyce finished the dishes and went upstairs. She fluffed her curly blonde hair and paused before her bedroom mirror to check herself. She had on denim cutoff shorts and a pink T-shirt. She stood sideways and as she viewed herself, she ran both hands across her stomach and moved them to her breasts. She toyed with her nipples until they hardened.

"Your breasts are still good. Not sagging and you've got a healthy body. . Of course, you're not like Tina or Melanie. They've both had children, and their tummies are stretched. Tha would b She closed her hands as if she held a baby against her breast and sighed forlornly. "That won't happen to you. Just run that train on another track, Self. stop."

She shook her mood off and cleaned the house, leaving everything like Ralph wanted it for his meeting, and at 5:00 p.m. she went to visit Melanie. Tina arrived

and brought her children. She vented once more about Ralph and complained of her wasted life. The relationship between Melanie and her husband George, and Tina and her husband John, was what she craved. It would be warm and loving and filled with children.

The dinner progressed normally, noisily and boisterous, and Tina's daughter, Rachel, had to eat with Aunt Joyce. At home the 2 1/2 year old, was very independent, and would give little and accept fleeting moments of affection from Tina. However, let her get around Joyce, and she was a puppy, a teddy bear, an affectionate bundle of joy that HAD to sit on Aunt Joyce's lap and HAD to be fed from her plate. It aggravated Tina and endeared the other family members

It was considered cute and charming, much to Tina's chagrin.

Tina watched them and shook her head. "You're spoiling her," she protested. "I'm not spoiling her. I'm loving her," Joyce said and pressed her face into Rachel's soft black hair. She inhaled deeply, savoring the smell of baby shampoo and sweaty skin. When her lips touched the back of Rachel's neck, she blew noisily.

Rachel shuddered and giggled. "Stop, Aunt Joyce! That tickles! Do it again?"

"You need to grow up," Tina said.

"You need to leave us alone. We're hurting no one Joyce said.

"You could have a child of your own to play with!" Tina snapped.

Joyce jerked her head up and fired an angry glance across the table, one that Melanie caught also. She said nothing, but she knew both sisters saw the anger and that embarrassed her.

Tina went toward the basement door and called both George and John to come upstairs.

She waited and the first one to appear was George. She stepped down one step and hugged him.

"Move to the living room door and stand there," she whispered. "If she tries to escape, stop her."

"Huh?"

She simply smiled and shoved him toward the living room. "Just do it. Ask questions later."

Tina moved to the kitchen door and waited for John.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Do me a favor, please? Round up the children and take them to the park for a romp. This might be the last time they can enjoy it this year. Anyway, the Donaldson Squaws need to have a private Powwow."

Joyce blanched and hastily slid Rachel from her knees to the floor as she stood. "Not tonight. I really have to go."

Tina bristled instantly. "No deal! Sit down on the chair! If you try to leave, I'll knock your brains loose before you reach the door."

Joyce whirled only to see George in the doorway, shaking his head. She turned to Tina with an agonized expression. "I can't do this tonight, Tina! Really."

"You'll have to find a way. I've invoked the ritual and you're here. You must abide by it. Sit!"

George caught Tina's attention after viewing Joyce's gruesome countenance. "Don't you think you're being a little harsh?"

"Just get the children and go! Don't get me started on you. You won't like it!"

Melanie appeared and handed George the lock. "Put this wedge lock in the living room door and take the key with you. Be quick about leaving, but slow in returning."

"What's going on, honey?" he whispered.

"Just do it and go. Talk to you later."

He held the lock against the frame and slammed the door. He turned the lock and dropped the key into his pocket.

Tina stood by the kitchen door and inventoried the people as they left. She patted Rachel on her bottom, assuring her that Aunt Joyce could not go with her, because she was hurting and Tina and Melanie wanted to help her. When the house was empty, except for the three women, she closed the kitchen door, locked it and twisted the dead bolt.

Melanie went to the living room, and returned with the foam circle with 4 sewing

machine needles stuck in it. One had a length of bright red yarn. Tina met her at the table with a cutting board and a meat cleaver. Melanie placed the ring on top of the board and she took her seat to Joyce's right hand.

Joyce winced as Tina picked up the meat cleaver and hit the circle twice, severing a wedge with the needle and red yarn.

Tina lay the cleaver down and picked up the wedge, holding it before Joyce's face. "This is Elizabeth," she said. "She left us while we were distracted. No one noticed and no one said a word. She fell in love with Ramon, her half-Jamaican stud who operated a hot dog stand on the beach, and she was gone. She ended as a \$5 hooker in Lake Worth, Florida, turning tricks anywhere and everywhere she could, so she could feed her heroin addiction, dying a slow death from aids, by herself, in a room unfit for animals. That's the only sister I care to lose from totally preventable stupidity.

"We love you, Joyce, and we're not going to stand by and let you follow the same route. Something's disintegrating your life and marriage, and it's bothering us, hon. Tonight's the night that you're going to get a lot of tough love from the Donaldson Squaws. We're not going to let you slip away."

Joyce protested. "I'm not lying, Tina. I can't handle this tonight."

Tina patted her back and rubbed her shoulders. "You'll have to."

"I can't. I'm sorry." She started crying. The memories of the pact flashed back in vivid detail. After their mother died, the four sisters chose to have the ritual. They went to the forest behind the family home and took Mom's sewing needles. They pricked thumbs, crossed hands and vowed never to let each other slip away. If one tried, any one would gather the rest and actively interfere. The rules were simple. Tough love. All questions must be answered with brutal honesty. No lies. Nothing withheld regardless of pain felt or inflicted. Then Elizabeth, the youngest sister fell in love, and was gone, never to return alive.

"Do you remember the rules?" Tina asked.

"Yes. Brutal honesty and every question must be answered, regardless of pain felt or given."

"Great," Tina replied and sat on her left. "Let's start with that drop-dead look you gave me at dinner."

"That's not what it was."

Tina was not dissuaded. "Spare me your denial! What's your plan? I know you've asked me, jokingly I thought, for me to leave Rachel to you in my will. Is that your plan? Wish me death and then claim Rachel for your own?"

"No! It's just a deep love for her. I don't want to take her from you, or for you to die. We both live in families, but we're alone, and we're the same, and we give each other what we need."

"Then why not have one of your own?"

Joyce's face twisted and she bowed her head. "We can't have children, otherwise we would have already."

Tina and Melanie gazed solemnly at each other a moment before continuing.

"Well, I guess the next question is, who's the problem, or does it matter?" asked Melanie.

"I'm the problem. I'm ALWAYS the problem!" Joyce said.

"Is the problem operable?"

"No. We've spent a lot of money testing that. My tubes are deformed and that could be repaired, but there's something wrong with the ovaries that can't be fixed, so, I'm out of luck."

Tina picked it up. "How about adoption?"

The question brought a moan and another flood of tears. "No! Ralph won't hear of it. That's what instigated the argument this morning. I can't keep my mouth shut about it. I suggested adopting a baby from somewhere in South America, like a few people here have done. It ended in him walking out. Don't want to hear the word baby unless it's his, delivered through me. A surrogate mother? Nix. An embryo transplant? Nix. Adoption? Nix. Everything has to be his. I don't know why he has to be so damned stubborn about it!"

"And you argue about it a lot?" asked Tina.

"Yes. It's like a badger lives in my stomach and when I get pissed off, it claws, chews, and scratches it way out, through my mouth and I won't stop the insults until I drive him away. I don't really mean what I say, but I just can't seem to stop myself."

Melanie recalled her low libido at the moment. "What about sex? Wouldn't that

possibly defuse the situation and stop some of the bitterness. It's hard to argue when you're naked and horny."

Joyce shook her head. "Out of the question. He has high blood pressure, and after about a year, the medication interfered with that."

Tina's face grew thoughtful. "John has high blood pressure and I understand. It's softer, but it still works. You're bonding friend, Rachel, is proof of that. So what gives in that statement?"

"My badger mouth again. I learned quickly that I could help it happen, by keeping pressure on it with my fingers. Works very well. But about seven months ago, I wanted it, he didn't, and it was a most difficult time. He got frustrated and I got pissed off. So, since my fingers were there, I jerked it out. And I insulted him. Told him what he could do with his limp dick, and what he wouldn't do with me again."

"That was rather stupid," Tina said.

"I know! I know! I've apologized many times, invited him to have sex with me, tried to tempt him, but he won't touch me. Won't even try. Won't even be in the same room with me when I change clothes or shower. It's nerve racking, but I guess I got what I deserved."

"So you keep up the arguments," said Tina. "Do you think Ralph's got another woman? I mean that's a bit much to imagine. You're a very attractive woman. Not wanting to see you naked, or touch you, or have sex with you. That don't jive, hon."

"I don't think he does. Of course, with network marketing, he's all over the place, all the time. He could be getting laid somewhere and I'd never know it."

Melanie spoke up then. "If you're not doing anything with Ralph, how about you? After seven months, you've got to be frustrated and horny enough to climb the walls by now. Unless you've got a relationship with a vibrator. Are you messing around with men at all?"

"No," she replied, but she hesitated far too long to reply.

Melanie slapped the table. "Don't give me that! Give me the truth! You got a stud somewhere?"

"Well, there is one guy at work that's interested in me. We've been on one lunch date, but that's about all."

"Not good enough. Can you clearly define, 'that's about all'?"

"Must we do this?" She took a deep breath. "Okay, we've had a few after work drinks in a bar, done a movie, hugged and kissed a little, when we can, kissed and did some petting at the next movie. Then we had sex once, on top of a pallet of paper towels in the warehouse at work. However, it didn't last long. We were both too horny."

The confession amused Melanie. "Oh, my gosh! This is unreal. Did you tell Ralph about it?"

"Of course not. That would be rather dumb."

"About as dumb as having sex with another man," Melanie said. "And I'd be willing to bet there was no protection. Right?"

Joyce nodded. "You're right. There was no time to even think of it. After seven months, the pleasure just whonked me and I never asked. Or the second time either."

Joyce's face turned to the table once more, and she remained silent.

"Is he married?" Tina asked.

She did not move.

"Children?"

No response.

"How many children, Joyce?" Tina repeated the question.

She sighed morosely. "There are two! One's 1½ and one's 3."

Silence ruled the table a few seconds. "Joyce, I can't believe you. That's wacked," Tina said.

Melanie elevated it. "Wacked isn't the word for it. Bizarre and psychotic is more appropriate. How could you possibly think he'd leave his wife and take the children?" Melanie asked.

"I didn't think that!"

"Come on, Joyce!" Melanie shouted. "Don't tell me that thought never crossed your mind?"

Joyce slapped the table with both hands. "Okay! Okay! It crossed my mind, but . . ."

"No woman would simply say, 'Poor Joyce. Here, take my husband and babies. I'll go and start over again.' She'd run you through a shredder so fast, you'd never

know what hit you!"

"I know," Joyce muttered.

"Anything else?" Melanie asked. "Raise your head and look me in the eyes."

"Satisfied?" Joyce said when she obeyed.

Tina took over. "What about us? Since you've been strung out, intimacy has slipped away to nothing. All we hear about is Ralph's cruelty and your poor lot in life. Now we learn that it's not all Ralph, but also Joyce. Where do we fit in this picture of your stress level?"

The question brought on another crying spell. "I'm envious," Joyce said. "I'm jealous of both of you. I've been in the delivery room and watched all your babies born. I was very happy for you, but at the same time, I was jealous. I hated you for having something that I'll never have the joy of knowing. Even so, I wouldn't knowingly do anything to hurt you. I love you too much."

"Then why don't you love Ralph the same way?" Tina asked.

The response was tender and the words sunk into Joyce's mind. Her head moved to the table and rested on her arm.

"Never outwardly do anything to hurt him. Even if it requires killing the badger so it can't interfere again," Tina finished.

"Can we stop this for tonight?" Joyce begged. "This is too much! Please?"

"I agree," said Melanie. She went to the bathroom while Tina poured some iced tea for them. When she returned, she washed Joyce's face with a wet washcloth.

"Thanks, sis." She picked up her glass and savored the cold tea when it filled her mouth. She hesitated a second before swallowing. "Cool. I needed that. The powwow also. Thanks, guys. Feels good to clear the air and get rid of garbage."

Tina raised her glass. "Amen. The Okay Corral looks better. Now, what about the resolution? What do you plan on doing, starting tonight?"

Joyce checked her watch. "Could I have your phone, Mel? The meeting should be about over now. I need to tell him I love him. That'll catch him off guard. I haven't told him that in a month of Sundays."

While Melanie got the portable phone for her, Joyce continued. "I'm going to get the badger under control and start having some rational, nonviolent

discussions with Ralph. I guess I'll also have to adjust my thinking and learn to live with childlessness. I'll just get my fixes from yours and Mel's until I get over it completely. And I'll stop the relationship with Dave. I'll give him the directions to the nearest cold shower."

"Good plan, hon.," Tina said and gave some thumbs up.

Joyce called home, and all she got was the answering machine. Her face creased in thought as Melanie regained her seat. "Strange. He never goes out afterward."

"Maybe he's in the bathroom," Tina offered. "You don't have a phone there, do you?"

"No. Long distance bubble baths are not as much fun as boinking on a pallet of paper towels."

"Watch it," Tina advised. "Don't even joke about it? Let it go."

"I will."

After three more phone calls, Joyce went to wash her face in the bathroom and the children came home. She called home at 9:00 p.m. for the last time, told him she loved him and coaxed him to pick up the phone. Finally she returned to her house.

"What're you up to?" she asked the empty driveway and dark house. She went inside and found the note she left, still lying on the kitchen table. Everything in the living room was as she left it. Nothing had been touched.

She snapped her fingers. "Answering machine!" she said and headed for the computer room. She sat in his chair and spun it to where she could hit the playback button. She leaned back and listened to two callers vent their anger on being stood up and not being informed of the meeting being canceled.

"Unusual indeed. He loves and cares for his people, sometimes more than he does me. He has a reason to begrudge me, but never them."

There were 5 hang ups and then the last one where she coaxed him to pick up the phone and told him that she loved him.

Maybe he does have a woman on the side. Does it matter? She thought of Dave and what she could do with him. Yes, it matters, she told herself, shaking off the feelings that Dave brought on. You're history, my man. No more booty for Dave.

She called Ralph's up-line sponsor and got a negative answer. In fact, he had received phone calls about the canceled meeting with no notice and wanted to talk to Ralph.

She got out the phone book and called the State Police. After a long discussion and wait, she was told that no accidents occurred with a truck matching her description and tags.

She watched some television as she frequently checked the kitchen door and the driveway for any sign of Ralph's return. At 10:30 she gave up the routine and resigned herself to the bedroom.

"You blew it. He's got another woman and it's your fault. Badger Mouth loses again." She opened the curtains and the window after she slipped on her nightgown. After brushing her hair and listening at the bedroom door for any sound of Ralph in the house, she surrendered to the urge to uneasy sleep.

A sudden storm woke her at midnight. Thunder shook the house and rattled the windowpanes as jagged lightning bolts lit the sky. She jerked upright in the bed and closed the window to stop the pelting sheets of rain that sprayed in through the screen. She turned on the light and looked worriedly at Ralph's side of the bed.

"*Where are you? This isn't funny,*" she thought and walked downstairs to check the house and the empty driveway.

"This is ridiculous," she declared and remembered her wish for a shark to devour 'her problem.'

"No. Couldn't happen. I was just joking!" Still panic gripped her and sparked an adrenalin increase. She picked up the phone, intent on calling George and Melanie for help. The largest lightning bolt of the night, struck a tree in her back yard and when the tree fell, it took out her phone and electric lines together.

"Shit!" she yelped and fumbled around the kitchen until she found her emergency candles and matches.

She lit two candles and sat huddled on a chair staring at the rain and shaking trees in the flashes of lightning. "*This is ridiculous*", she thought again. "*Maybe he's hurt. Maybe he's over a hill somewhere. Maybe he's between another woman's*

legs." All the negative thoughts increased her level of panic.

"So what do we do?" she asked. She thought of asking Dave for help. "No, let sleeping dogs lie."

She considered their situation and problems some more, her evening of heart-wringing confessions, her resolution to solve her problems, and her frustration drove her to find him herself. Once dressed and standing at the kitchen door with keys in hand, though, she paused. "This is crazy. We should wait and let the storm pass. No sane person would go out in such a storm. I should wait and let the police deal with it in the morning, or the day after. Whatever."

She immediately argued herself out of that solution. "Not good enough. He'd do this for you. I'm sure he'd not rest until he found you, even if he's not all that fond of you at the moment."

She opened the door and hurried to her car in the pouring rain.

Early on in their marriage, Ralph had insisted that she be prepared for any emergency.

The trunk of her car always had emergency supplies and an access to them through the back seat. Tins of food purchased from military surplus stores, blankets, flashlights with extra batteries that were checked and replaced on a regular schedule, a compass, a camping stove and lantern, a fuel tank for both, and an emergency signal beacon which could be located by police or rescue teams. More than once the thought of them being there brought her comfort, like in her present dilemma.

Inside the car, she wiped the rain from her face and opened the glove compartment to get her cellular phone, another security item he insisted on. Don't leave home without it, honey.

"Right on!" She called Melanie only to receive a disconnected notice. The police and 911 got her the same message. Even the operator was out of service.

"Talk about coincidence. This is too much. Like it's preplanned. Okay. Just do it."

She started the car.

"It's you against the world and all this rotten luck tonight. You know where he always goes. He took you there several times and when he wasn't fishing, you made wild love in the woods. You can do this. You'll not rest until you know he's safe. Or dead."

The lightning storm had began a move to the south, but the rain still beat down when she pulled into the parking lot. Ralph's truck was there, and she pulled alongside and stopped the engine. She unlocked the front door and found nothing. She opened the cap door and checked inside using a flashlight. The cooler and his fishing rods were missing.

"That's a good sign that he's still up river, maybe. It's possible he could have met someone here and he's dry in a warm bed with a warm body, while I'm out here, drenched like a muskrat."

She closed the cap door and ran across the parking lot and dock to bang on the bait shop door. After nearly five minutes, it opened and she pushed her way inside.

"Have you seen Ralph Korgan?" she asked the sleepy owner.

"What the hell kind of a question is that? It's not my job to watch him," Keith said. "Crazy woman. Don't you have any sense? There's a storm going on."

"I know he went fishing and I know he buys his bait here. I'm talking about Ralph Korgan. I'm sure you know him."

"I know him, but I haven't seen him since this morning. He stopped in for bait, but I never saw him come back."

"His truck's still here in the parking lot, but no fishing gear. What about the boat? Did he dock the *Joy Ride*?"

"I don't know. Look, I'm sleeping and you need to go home and come back in the morning."

She shook her head vigorously. "Not good enough. Let's check for his boat. If it's not here, then I want to use one of your rentals."

"Lady, it near 1:00 a.m. and it's storming like crazy outside! You can't go out in this kind of weather! You'll get yourself killed!"

"Would you like to be in trouble and have everyone forget you, until the storm stopped?" she asked hotly. "Help me look for the boat and if it's not here, give me a rental and I'll let you go back to bed."

"Damn!" he swore and ran a hand through his hair. "Okay. We'll look and then

you can go. If you don't come back, I'll not worry about you. I'll worry about the boat, but not you. Crazy bitch."

"Fair enough!" she enjoyed the win and ignored the insult. She waited in the semi-darkness for Keith to dress and they set out to search for the Joy Ride on the docks.

"It's not here. That is strange. He always brings it back."

"See what I mean? Something's wrong. Does your phone work?"

"Don't know." He left her to check.

Joyce stood on the dock, facing the north and praying for good luck. She held her head up, despite the rain beating against her face. "I'll find you," she promised and told her wildly beating heart to calm down.

He returned shortly. "No. It's down. Even the scanner's dead. Lightning must have taken out all of Chester."

"Which boat can I take?"

"You're hardheaded. I'll give you that." He surrendered to what he could not change. He walked her to a boat and handed her the key. "You driven a boat before?"

"Yes. Ralph taught me. He let me take the *Joy Ride* to his favorite spot a few times."

"I still think this is crazy."

"Doesn't matter much what you think. I've done crazier things, like standing on a railroad track when there's a train bearing down on you at 50 miles per hour, and you can't move until it's a hundred yards away. Ralph's too predictable to ignore this. He's too much of a routine man to not come home, unless there's a bad problem." She suppressed the thought of another woman for the moment.

"Whatever. Where are you going? So I can tell the police in the morning if you don't make it back. That's my worry."

"The northwest branch, about 5 miles north of the split. On the right bank. There are two rocks there, almost like gate pillars. That's his spot to fish."

"I know the place. I can't talk you out of this?"

"Not unless you go instead."

The rain abated as Joyce progressed north. She nearly missed the split but the heavy-duty flashlights she brought from her trunk saved her. She grew more

apprehensive as she moved northwest to the fishing spot. Before she got there, the storm ceased its fury completely and the dark clouds drifted to the south, leaving the bright moon to light the area.

This is splendid. Just what I need, she thought.

She finally reached the *Joy Ride*, still grounded on the right bank. "This is not good. He'd never stay out through this. Still, he's a survivalist. If he got caught, he would find some shelter. If he did that, I'll just think like him and find him."

She grounded the boat beside his and stepped to the shoreline.

"Ralph!" she shouted over the night birds, crickets, and other insects serenade. "Are you here? Ralph!"

She heard nothing and with resolve in her heart, she walked in the direction of his fishing site. "Oh, God! No!"

Her heart and hope sank when she saw his body on the ground. A brief inspection told him he was dead, with a broken leg and a knife in his chest.

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" she screamed as she knelt by his side. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I didn't mean it! I wasn't serious!" Her mind raced, filling with all the bitterness of the past and the times she could have made better.

The night sounds were disturbed again with the purring of a motorboat.

"I can't believe the luck!" she shouted and jumped to her feet, excited over the possibility of help. She knew that she could not move the body by herself. She stood on the shoreline waving frantically and begging for help when the boat stopped.

"Hello," Genghis greeted her. "Keith told me I might find you here. He was very worried about you, alone in this storm."

"I'm so glad to see you! Please help me. Someone killed my husband over there! The man's voice was so reassuring that she volunteered the information without thinking.

She turned and swiftly led him to the body.

"He was your husband? Where were you when he died?"

"I was home. We had a fight this morning. We always have fights. He went fishing to get away from them, from me. He does that a lot."

"Did you love him?"

"Every day. I loved him, even this morning, but I never told him enough. Why does that happen? Why don't people simply love, and say it, and enjoy it, while they have a chance?"

"I can't answer that one, Joyce. Didn't you tell him to go and die somewhere?"

"I did, but that was just an expression of anger. I didn't mean it. I've driven myself crazy to come here during a storm to find him. I love him and I want to keep loving him. I want him alive so we can grow old and die together."

He continued in a soft and gentle voice. "I see you're shaken, but consider that this will allow you to join Dave and enjoy the remainder of your life?"

"No, I'm quite done with him." She gasped stiffened. "Why did you say that? How do you know anything about Dave?"

"I know a lot, Joyce. For me to work well, I have to know much."

Joyce trembled and stepped away from him, her present stress forgotten a moment. "Who are you?"

"Genghis Kahn," he said and watched her eyes widen and her body jerk. "Yes. I'm a murderer, a thief, a teacher, and a healer. I killed Ralph to help you and now you don't want him dead. Those're the thanks I get for doing my work."

"You killed him?" The casual manner and soft voice heightened her wariness. *This man is sick and dangerous. Beware, Joyce.*

"I did. Now you want him alive." He sighed and stomped the ground. "People are never happy when they get what they want. You wanted Dave between your legs. It felt good. What do you want now? Do you want Ralph alive?"

Joyce thought over the years of her life with him. "Yes. I do. He wasn't the best, but he wasn't the worst either. He was okay. Most of the troubles was me. It was my fault."

"What about a child?"

"Yes, that would be nice."

"What would you be willing to pay, to have him alive, and for you to have a child?"

"What would I pay?" she asked incredulously. "Anything. Everything! Take the house, the car, the money in the bank, the boat. Everything."

"What about your life?"

"What?" she gasped again. This is unreal. It can't be happening."

"What about your life? Would you be willing to die for him to live?"

"What are you?" Joyce demanded again, suddenly wishing she had not stood on the riverbank and shouted to stop him.

"I'm a thief, a murderer, a teacher, and a healer. Would you sacrifice yourself for him to live? He might have a better life without you. You've nagged him half to death anyway. The self-proclaimed name of Badger Mouth fits you well."

She felt herself go numb on hearing the words. She did not want to hear them, let alone agree with them. She tried to shut them out. "I guess that's right. If I'd been more loving and less argumentative, less cantankerous, maybe he would have been different," she said.

"What about a baby?" he asked.

"Yes, I'd love one of them too," she answered again, still not looking at him. "But how can a dead woman have a child?"

"Maybe it's possible. Have you ever been dead before?"

"No, but it doesn't make sense."

"Do you remember the parable of the mustard seed in the Bible? If you had that faith, maybe you could tell your body to heal, and it would. Ralph could be alive and healthy. You could have what you long for the most, a husband, a family, and a home."

"You're right, but it's difficult for people to have that much faith, you know?"

"I can't believe I'm talking to this man." She turned and saw a gun in his hand.

"Take this and end your life. When you die, he'll live, and you'll have a child," Genghis promised solemnly.

"That was just a," she started to say. *A thought*, she finished silently.

"You can do it," he reassured her.

She took the gun in her hand.

"Put your faith where your mouth is. Turn your love and faith into reality. You said you love him, and want him to live. This will give him life. Do you love him less now? Do you wish to give up on having a baby?"

"That's not fair," she argued.

"Take it or leave it. I've given you the solution to your problem. That's why I'm here."

She gripped the gun with both hands and pointed it at him. "What happens if I kill you instead?"

"Ralph will still be dead and you'll not have what you want most."

"This is crazy! Who are you?"

"Genghis Kahn. I told you already. Come on. You can do it. You're not productive. You can't give him children, or love, or pleasure. You confessed that to your sisters tonight."

The words stung, like a slap in the face, but she could not dispute them. She remembered her mother teaching her a very simple prayer when she was young.

Her lips moved and she whispered it. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I ask the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die, before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen."

It was a dream. She felt it had to be a dream. For a moment the world seemed to disappear, and she stood immobile, lost in time and space. It was just her, alone in the vast unfathomable universe. But her hand moved until the barrel rested against her right temple.

The look of pleasure and promise from Genghis' eyes held her spellbound, and she could find no arguments to stop her actions. She closed her eyes and took a deep calming breath.

The gunshot shocked the night animals to silence. Genghis watched her body crumple beside her husband with little outward emotion.

"I never thought you'd do it," he said as the night slowly returned to normal with Joyce's death. "You had more love than I expected."

He pulled the knife from Ralph's chest and picked up the gun from the ground beside Joyce. He put them in his boat and saluted the two dead bodies. "We'll see how strong your

love really is. Possibly stronger than you both think. See ya."

The sun rose. The sky was clear. The birds chirped and bobbed their heads for breakfast as the normal morning began. Melanie, Tina, and Keith all made many phone calls to the police, wanting a search party to be organized. Fish jumped in the river,

catching insects, and the fish in Ralph's cooler began to rot and decay from the heat.

Joyce's head throbbed, and she opened her eyes to groan from the stab of sunlight that hit them. Her hair was matted and sticky and very annoying with all the internal pains. She raised her head in spite of the pain and moved the rock that lay beneath it. She lay still until she could open her eyes and focus. The first thing she saw was Ralph and the memories of the previous night flooded into her mind.

"Ralph?" she called and raised herself to her elbows. To her amazement, his body was warm and her shaking woke him.

"Joyce? What happened? How'd you get here?"

"What happened?" Emotions tore at her, and she started crying. She lay across his chest and wept from joy and relief.

"What are you doing? How did you follow me?" he asked her when she stopped. "Your head's all bloody. What happened? This is very confusing."

"You've spent the night here. There was a horrible storm. You didn't come home. I came to find you and I did. You were dead. I died too. I killed myself for you."

"You're not making sense. Are you all right?"

"You're alive and that's what I wanted most of all." She paused to kiss him.

"Nothing else matters. I'm so sorry for all the times that my complaining got in the way of our happiness. Truly, I'm regretful. I promise that from this day forward, I'll change. I hurt so much yesterday that I can't go on as I have in the past."

She grinned at his perplexed look and began to explain what had happened. The only proof was his broken leg, and he could not remember how that happened until she mentioned Genghis Kahn.

As she finished her story, they both heard the sound of an approaching motorboat. "That must be the rescue team. Probably led by Keith, looking for his boat," she declared.

To their surprise, it was the man they both knew, Genghis Kahn.

"Good day, friends," he greeted them cordially. "How are you two fine people today?"

"Well, thanks," she said. "Who are you? Or what are you?"

"I'm Genghis Kahn. I'm a murderer, a thief, a teacher, and a healer. Do you love

Ralph? Have you told him?"

"I do and I did."

"Do you love Joyce?"

"I do."

"Then I've killed the anger between you. The anger built a wedge of bitterness. I've stolen the wedge that you've driven between yourselves. And I've taught you that you can overcome problems in life, with love. You can now love each other as you both wanted, but were unable or unwilling to do."

"Don't worry about that. We've learned our lesson well. Now, are you an angel?"

"You could say that and not be too far from the truth. Step closer, Joyce. I'll heal the biggest hurt you two have." His hand moved swiftly and pressed against her stomach. His fingers were hot and when he squeezed, the pain felt like stabs of electricity, and she gasped as it brought her to her knees.

Genghis knelt with her and steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. "What are you willing to give, or to give up, to get what you want?"

"Anything. Anything I possess." She smiled through the warm pain that spread through her abdomen.

"Then do it and you'll have what you want. Both of you will have the best of life that you want."

"What about Ralph's leg?"

"You need that, to practice your love and concern in caring for him. It will heal, in time, with your love and nursing. You're about to embark on a marvelous learning experience. Love him and learn. It will do you both good."

She watched him disappear to the south in his boat and then turned her attention to Ralph.

She had the splints set on his broken leg in a very short time. She felt light-headed and bubbly, taking care of him in his helpless state. Genghis was soon replaced with Keith, Melanie, and a few medics and police officers. None of them saw Genghis on their journey north.

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