

## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The way this book is written, you can read one story, and it will stand alone - or you can read the entire book, cover to cover. Whatever you choose, there's one thread that ultimately runs through each of the stories, and it's not magical at all. Ultimately, it's that every life matters, and love is the most important thing on Earth, or anywhere else.

All any of us ever want is more time, more love, more hope - more *life* in our lives, while they last. We want to care about others, and to have others care about us. It's a fact of life. We live, we die. The day we finally shuffle off our mortal coil, we want to be remembered, and maybe even loved, by those who remain - as it is only in that way we have any modicum of immortality. The Egyptians had a phrase that summed it up perfectly:

*"Say my name, and I will yet live again."*

It's on tombs all across Egypt. It's why they built tombs and shrines, and went to all the trouble of mummifying and honoring their dead. They didn't want to be forgotten. It's part of the human experience. We don't know for sure what lies beyond this life until we actually go there, and while we're here - well, we humans have a funny way of liking to think we have all the answers, because it makes us feel a little bit better, and more sure of our time here.

I can't help but think, though - when you're on the *other* side of life, 'pushing up the proverbial daisies' - all you ever want, or can think of is to be *here*. To have life; to beg, borrow or steal it, in any way possible. And that's where things get - different. Where the usual and the unusual, the seen and the unseen and the truly strange may cross paths. Well, maybe it is a little magical after all...

*"As you read each line and spell,  
Learn one lesson very well.  
It is not the words or chants you do;  
It is not the tools that see you through -  
They simply help you work your plan  
While all the power's in your hands.  
Words and deeds may play a part -  
But true magic lies within the heart."  
-Author unknown*

Walking along the street, you could very easily pass the store by, not realizing it was there at all if you weren't looking, or were trapped in your own thoughts. You might have passed Treasure Trove by dozens of times, maybe stopped in the coffee shop next door, Cuppa Love, and never chanced into it. Should you notice it, or it catches your eye, there's an old wooden door on the left, and a large display window on the right, where the owner has many wares on display. Across the top of the window, in antique lettering, and gold paint, it says 'The Treasure Trove,' hand-stenciled in large letters, with 'Antiques and Uncommon Goods' in smaller stencil beneath it.

In the window, there are many objects on display, though what most people notice first is the large 'Gone With the Wind'-style lamp in the window. It always remains lit, and many people have felt the invitation and warmth of the glow of its light. Many have noticed the lamp, and thought it was beautiful, or ugly, or it just managed to catch their attention. Surrounding the lamp are items as varied in nature as artfully displayed pieces of jewelry - many quite old; some handmade items, including a beautiful old handmade quilt; two antique hand-

tooled leather handbags; an antique Jack-in-the-Box toy; an exquisitely dressed Victorian-era porcelain doll, and an old sock monkey, missing a button eye.

When you turn the brass doorknob and push the door open, you're greeted with the friendly tinkle of wind chimes, and fragrant wafts of incense. There is a long, old-fashioned oak counter immediately to the right, with glass atop the oak, and the front entirely of glass. The floors, pleasantly creaky, are solid, wide planks of pine that were original to the building, built in the 1870's. The cash register, unlike many of the antique items in her store, is totally modern.

Helena Craswell, the lady who runs Treasure Trove and owns the building it's in, has a tall wooden stool behind the counter next to the register where she spends most of her days, and she's quick to offer those who enter a friendly greeting, and ask if they're looking for something in particular. There's a large black shop cat wandering around the store, sauntering through it as if he owns the place. He's protective of Helena, and most of the time can be found on the counter-top, sitting next to the register with Helena, disdainfully judging all the inferior humans and their comings and goings as cats will.

The store itself is quite long, with an old Victorian-era pressed copper ceiling. There are tall shelves against either wall, and tall shelves running down the center and all of them are chock-full of every kind of thing you imaginable, with plenty that never would've occurred to someone to find in a place like this. It's like a perpetual flea market, with all kinds of strange and unusual objects waiting to be found or claimed by the right person. Helena has kindly helped any number of folks by buying their random stuff or their most cherished possessions to get them out of a bind. The result of this is that nearly anything can be found, eventually, if you know where to look.

Most of the 'gift' type items are located toward the front of the store, including pretty rocks and stones geared at those who believe in their occult properties, and even those who are likely to see them just as pretty paperweights or simply like how they feel in their hand. Jewelry and valuables are in the massive oak and glass case the register sits on.

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Around the middle of the store, on the far left, is a pass-through to the coffee shop next door, called Cuppa Love. Their best selling 'potion' is Chocolate Bliss - chocolate coffee, with a bit of chocolate syrup, a hint of cinnamon, and chocolate whipped cream. Past the coffee shop, toward the back of the store on the left are the more unusual and larger items, including an Egyptian sarcophagus. There are two doorways at the back of the store. The doorway on the left is marked by a sign that reads 'Employees Only,' kept private by deep-red velvet drapes that most of the time remain closed. The doorway on the right is an old oak door, stained red, with an intricately carved dragon - that door is kept locked. Many have wondered where the door could lead to - but in fact, it only leads to Helena's private residence upstairs. On the right side, past the two doors are books of all types. Many of them are on the occult and various religions, but Helena stocks a little bit of everything from current popular novels, to travel, to self-help, all grouped by kind.

Some of Treasure Trove's patrons have suggested - most kindly, but a few not - that the items she sells have been bewitched in some way.

Who can say for sure which items are magical, and which aren't?

When asked, Helena will readily agree that some of her items have had traditionally magical beginnings - but most haven't. She is quick to point out that it's hard to truly say what *is* and *isn't* magical from one person to another. In a shop like this, one person's magical item is likely to be another person's junk, and there is no way of knowing what item will resonate with a particular person. What if for some people, an item for sale isn't magic, but for some, it is? Who knows at what point a person's need and desperation takes a simple object, and imbues it with something: love, hatred, fear, or joy - that makes it more than it originally was?

Who knows where the magic comes from? From the object? Maybe from our own hearts, or our most cherished desires and dreaded fears, whether we acknowledge them or not? How blurry is the line that divides them?

Maybe it has something to do with the lamp at the front of the shop,

like a siren song calling people in when it's their time to find it. Maybe it's Helena, bewitching everyone who comes in. More likely, it's what Helena tells her customers if they ask: You bring your own magic into the store with you. After all, every one of us *is* magic.

Fair warning before entering Treasure Trove: In this store, what you bring in and what you take out are likely to be related. Just in case, though, Helena likes people to be forewarned. She has plenty of signs around. Not the usual 'You break it, you bought it' signs, or even 'Smile, you're on camera.' Her signs all say, 'Be careful with what you pick up.'

That, and 'Returns gladly accepted.'

## *BEST FRIENDS AND BAD INFLUENCES*



Two co-workers from a law firm ran into Treasure Trove, taking refuge from the sudden, torrential downpour, which quickly turned into a rather nasty thunderstorm.

They looked over to the gray-haired lady behind the counter. "Mind if we hang here for a couple of minutes until this lets up a bit?"

"Oh, not at all. Feel free. I don't remember them calling for this today." Even as she said that, the rain started to come down sideways, blown by the wind, beating against the large display window. The door chimed again as a lady quickly came in and shut the door behind her also seeking respite from the rain.

The lady went to the counter, and chatted about the weather, and the jewelry in the case with the gray-haired lady. The two men, Mark and Harry, looked at each other questioningly. They weren't getting drenched, but this kind of store really wasn't their scene. There was some kind of incense in the air, and there were crystals and weird shit for sale.

Mark looked at his friend. "Look around, or go back out and get wet?"

"Might as well look around for a little while. Maybe the rain will let up quick and we can get out of here."

They went up and down the aisles, laughing between themselves about the seeming randomness of the items for sale. One of them picked up a statue. It was about eight inches high, and about as strange a thing as either of them had ever seen. It was a goat, standing

on its' hoofed-hind legs, wearing a smoking jacket, with hands where its' front hooves should've been. It had a human face, and goat horns, and was covered with fur. In one hand was a cigar. In the other hand, a whiskey bottle. It was cast in some kind of metal - maybe bronze? - in one solid piece that included its' base. On the base, there was text which made them both laugh. "Don't forget to enjoy the little things in life."

Mark laughed. "I think I'm going to get this for my desk. It'll make me laugh every time I see it." Harry shook his head. "That's great, bud, but you know what? You gotta get a life before you can, you know...enjoy it?" Mark flipped his friend the bird with his free hand. "Pot calling the kettle black."

"At least I'm in a relationship with someone other than my hand..."

"Low blow."

"You wish."

As they turned the corner, they noticed there was a doorway leading to a coffee shop. They exchanged a glance between one another, and that fast, it was decided. They would check out, and go next door with a cup of coffee, and wait the rest of the storm out.

Mark purchased the statue, even as the street outside lit up and thunder resoundingly boomed. "What a mess tonight's commute home is. Thanks for letting us hang here."

"No problem. Who wants to get drenched? Besides, looks like you found something, anyway."

"He's going on my desk, first thing tomorrow morning. Don't know what my co-workers will think about it, but I don't really care one way or the other." They all laughed, and the two men left through Cuppa Love, where they sat until the storm let up.

The next day, they both showed up at work, more or less on time. They sat near each other, and were in the same branch: Corporate Mergers. Both of them were junior lawyers at their law firm. The one

given is that they both spent insane amounts of time at work. It was sad; most of the time they ended up getting paid for 40-50 hour work weeks, but actually worked something closer to 60 hour weeks, sometimes more. Both of them missed quite a few family events, though occasionally they were glad they had a built-in excuse not to attend certain functions. The bad thing for Mark and Harry was that their jobs and the amount of hours they ended up working didn't leave them much room to find relationships that weren't built around other co-workers. Dating co-workers was usually a recipe for disaster, because it eventually devolved into something nasty. In fact, around the time Mark and Harry started at the firm, one of the relationship disasters that happened between two partners was so epically bad that the firm made everyone sign agreements stating that they wouldn't have undisclosed relationships between co-workers. Either own up to the relationship up front, and sign an agreement that if it ended badly, one of you would be leaving, or just don't do it at all. Have an undisclosed relationship, and you risked both of you being terminated.

It didn't give either of them much time to pursue a relationship or much opportunity to find someone just to have fun with. Harry belonged to a professional dating site, and occasionally he met up with one of those ladies to have dinner at some point during a weekend, but he hated doing it because most of them were of an age that their biological clocks were taking over their brains and they weren't looking for some quick fun - they were looking to settle down. He knew from experience that a heterosexual lawyer with a steady paycheck, possessing relatively decent looks, passable hygiene, who breathed in and out all day long might as well have catnip tattooed on his forehead. Harry hated that every woman he went out with had a long-term game plan by the second date (if there *was* a second date.) He told them all up-front that he wasn't looking for anything long-term; instead, he was looking for 'good friends with benefits,' and certainly nothing exclusive. A few were smart, and realized they weren't going to get anywhere. Most found him to be charming even after his little speech about only interested in friends with benefits, and by the third time they were involved in the 'benefits' portion of their arrangement, they were picking china patterns in their heads, and spending time at wedding planning websites. Harry found it hard to deal with. Mark found it even more so. Where Harry was charming, Mark was more awkward and geeky. Harry was pretty sure his friend



was somewhere on the spectrum and had a touch of Asperger's. While it made him a damn fine lawyer, more often than not, his relationships ended in restraining orders.

When Harry and Mark went for coffee, he noticed that Mark now had the goat statue proudly on his desk. "I *told* you I was going to put it on my desk."

"I should've believed you."

"Damn straight."

"Well, good luck with that."

Except Mark did. He had an exceptionally good run of luck.

He met a teacher while shopping on Saturday morning for groceries and other necessities. Mark struck up a conversation with her while they were both shopping for coffee. The grocery store had a little coffee shop area with actual baristas, and somehow, he got over himself enough that he invited her to sit there and have a cup of coffee with him. She did. Mark bragged to him that next Monday that he had a hot dinner date with a pretty lady, and Harry assumed he was bullshitting him.

He wasn't, on either front. Mark texted him a selfie with her from the restaurant.

Mark fell head over heels for this woman, named Erica, and apparently, she was enough of a geek that *his* innate geekiness didn't bother her. Personally, Harry assumed Mark's Corvette, nice apartment, and decent paycheck figured into the equation somehow, but he wasn't going to argue it. He decided it was easier to be happy for his friend while it lasted. Harry just assumed that this one would crash and burn like any of Mark's other relationships.

A month later, they were still a thing, and Mark was saying things like 'I really like her.' 'Erica this,' and 'Erica that.' 'She might be *'the One.'*' That rare, illusive '*One,*' that people talk about all doe-eyed initially, but a few years into it, they're ready to run them over like a speed

bump in the parking lot, or divorce them if they're married. He knew several folks who were junior partners at the firm that were on their fourth 'the One.' All he could think was that for being lawyers, they should be smarter. If not smarter, at *least* learn to write a damn good water-tight pre-nup.

Harry sat at his desk early on a Thursday morning. He needed to be a work an hour early because there was going to be a client meeting that he and Mark were both supposed to attend. The meeting was in fifteen minutes, and Mark still wasn't in yet. They'd cut it close before, but not usually on days where they had client meetings. He gathered the papers he was going to need, and then ran to the men's room. When he came back, Mark *still* wasn't there, and they needed to be in the meeting in five minutes. Harry picked up the phone and called Mark's house, and got the machine. "You better be on your way here, or your ass'll be grass, bro." He called Mark's cellphone, and it went to voicemail after ringing fifteen times. He left the same message, hung up, grabbed his papers, and went to the conference room for the meeting. The fact that Mark wasn't there was noted, but Harry stepped up and did both their parts, trying to highlight the what his absent buddy had contributed so their bosses would notice that while something obviously happened, Mark had contributed his share. It's what friends do. You have each other's back.

When the meeting was over, he went back to his desk, and Mark still wasn't in. Maybe he was sick. He'd call him when he got home. But when he got home and called, he got the answering machine again. His cellphone went straight to voicemail, which said it was full.

The next day, Friday morning, he went to work, and before he even got up to his desk, people were acting strangely; both in general and towards him. If he didn't know better, he'd be wondering if he'd stepped in dog shit. He got to his desk, and there was a message from one of the lead partners that he'd like to see him. His blood pressure ratcheted up twenty points at least, just for fear that he'd fucked something up yesterday and was going to get canned for it. That would be a helluva way to start a weekend.

The ride up the elevator to the firm's top floor seemed to take forever. By the time he got to the top floor, he was convinced he was getting

fired.

As he got out, he marveled as he always did at what it was like to see how the other half lived. Someday. Someday, he'd have a big window and a walnut desk, and bookcases full of books. If he worked long enough and hard enough, and got a couple of breaks on getting higher-profile cases, he too, could have this. He took a deep breath of the lovely, rarified air (lemony furniture polish-scented), and went to Marcia, the secretary. She looked at him kind of oddly, too. Rather than direct him to have a seat and wait like the handful of other times he'd been in here, she simply said, "Mr. Jacobi will see you. Go right in." That didn't bode well. His heart sunk.

Art Jacobi sat behind his walnut desk. Two comfy chairs sat in front of it, and there was a table in the one corner of the room that could seat six. There was a stocked mini-bar built in to the bookcases. There were commendations and degrees hanging on the wall, and pictures of him playing golf with a couple of pro's, and even a president. He looked up as Harry Barth from Mergers came in.

"Hi, Harry. Have a seat." He gestured to the chairs in front of him.

"Thanks, sir." Harry sat nervously, waiting for bad news. It was, but it certainly wasn't what he expected.

"I have bad news for you, and I wanted to tell you personally. I know you and Mark Winters are good friends. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but he was killed yesterday morning. Some kids were arguing in the subway, and it turned violent; one pushed another, who fell and ran into Mark. He lost his balance, fell onto the tracks and was hit by a train before he could get off of them. His mother called me yesterday evening. She tried calling you also, but apparently she had an old phone number for you, and couldn't reach you. I promised her I'd let you know. She'd like you to call her when you can."

Harry's brain stuttered, even as he tried to register that something that awful had happened to his friend. Jacobi stopped talking after a minute, realizing that Harry's brain wasn't keeping up.

"Harry?"

\* \* \*

"Yes, sir?"

"Go home. Take next week off. Give yourself time to process all this; go to his funeral. His mom said she thought it would be Thursday. Many of us will see you there. Find something else to do in the meantime to take your mind off of it."

"Yes, sir."

Harry stood, and shook Art's offered hand. "I'm sorry for your loss, Harry."

As he left, and closed Art's door behind him, he glanced at Marcia, who quickly looked down, and got busy shuffling papers. He found that once he got off the elevator, most people were still hesitant to look him in the eyes. A few folks were brave and came up to him to say they were sorry, that Mark was a good guy. He went to Mark's desk, which was just as he left it, and sighed heavily. It would be strange here without him. After he came back to work, he'd make sure Mark's desk got cleaned out, and his personal effects got to his mother. Harry saw that stupid-ass goat statue he bought seven weeks earlier and took it, as a funny memory of his friend. He turned, went back to his desk, grabbed his keys where he'd left them sitting, and headed right back home.

Harry got part of the way through his commute home, and realized if he went home, what would he do? He wasn't going to sit there and boo-hoo-hoo about his friend. There was a restaurant/lounge that was a favorite, where they would meet at sometimes after work, and he decided that's exactly what he would do. He'd go there for an early lunch, have some drinks, and hang for a while.

Well, that was the plan, anyway. Plans don't always work out the way those who make them intend.

Once there...it was closed. It didn't open for another hour. Damn.

Harry started walking. He just wasn't ready to go home yet. As he walked, his brain was spinning in circles, whether he was actually

aware of it or not.

*"Harry."*

Harry heard a voice in his head, and he stopped cold in his tracks on the sidewalk. He had heard it clear as day, as if someone was standing right next to him. Only it was in his head. *Someone* called his name. He must've mis-heard. He kept walking.

*"Harry. You don't even want to go home. What are you going to do for the rest of your week?"*

"What the f..." He turned quickly. *"Who said that?"*

*"I did. But if you keep turning around and talking to yourself out loud, you'll end up locked up somewhere. Your weekend is starting badly enough as it is, to add that to it."*

"I'm going crazy."

*"No, you're not. You're talking to me."*

"That *isn't* making me feel better. I need to go home."

*"You do. You need to pack. Get your passport and make reservations for the Bahamas for a few days. They gave you a week off, and the funeral isn't until later next week."*

"What? I can't do that!"

*"Watch out, you're flipping out again. People are looking at you."*

Harry decided he was going to ignore the voice, and head home. He made it there without incident. Harry threw down his keys on the table by the door, and sat the statue down next to them.

*"Surely, you can think of a better place to put my effigy than there. Can you put it somewhere where I might have a view? Do you have any good views in here?"*

\* \* \*

"Who are you?"

*"I am Pan. That statue is meant to be an image of me."*

"So. Lemme get this straight. I'm hearing you because I brought home the statue from Mark's desk that he bought from that weird-ass little junk shop?"

*"Precisely. I'm sorry for Mark's untimely demise. He was coming along nicely."*

"Coming along? What?"

*"I gave him some advice, which he took. It was I who pointed out Erica to him, and talked him into talking to her. They were well-suited to one another. I normally wouldn't recommend marriage..."* Pan paused, *"...but given that both of them were hopeless introverts, putting them together had them rutting like rabbits, and it still had the intended effect."*

"You did that?"

*"I did."* Harry could actually hear the self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"But *why* would you do that? Why would you even *care*?"

*"It's my nature. People have always been self-absorbed, and get involved in the pursuit of everything other than life, and what matters."*

"What matters?"

*"Living your life, man! You need to enjoy it while you have it! Whatever works for you, but personally, I'd recommend wine, women and song. Beer! Lots of it! Good food! Today is fleeting. You need to enjoy your life, not squander your days saving up for the great 'someday.' What if 'someday' never comes? What if 'someday' isn't everything you built it up to be in your head, and all you ever really had was today? That's all Mark had - a bunch of 'todays' strung together. That's all any human has. A handful of days. So why would*

*you want to let them sail past you, willy-nilly, without having lived them fully?"*

Harry shook his head. "This is all messing with my head." He put his hand to his head, as if he had a headache, and sighed. "So - what exactly do you recommend?"

*"A long, stress-free four-day jaunt to a warm beach somewhere away from here, with lots of alcohol and beautiful women to ease the loss of your friend. A hedonistic adventure."*

"My best friend dies, and you recommend 'Sex on the beach,' literally and figuratively?"

*"Exactly!"* To Harry, Pan sounded pleased with himself.

"I don't know. It sounds wrong, and I'm taking advice from a voice in my head that I didn't start hearing until the day I found out my best friend died. Part of me is wondering if I need to check myself in to a psych ward, and pronto, before I fuck up everything in my life entirely. *None* of this is normal."

*"And the other part wants to be on a beach because you haven't had a real vacation in over three years."*

Harry sighed. He knew when he was beat. It was true. The last vacation he had, he went with one of his 'friends with benefits' girls, and unfortunately for him, it didn't go well. In fact, the second night into the vacation, after an evening's lovely pursuits, she started talking about moving in with him. He reiterated his stance on relationships, and that it was strictly friends with benefits, and reminded her she'd agreed to it. He wasn't mean. He wasn't snarky. Harry just reminded her of what she'd signed up for. When he woke up the next morning, he was alone, she was gone, and the only evidence that she'd even been there at all was the lipstick on the mirror. She'd written 'You're an asshole.' Harry spent the rest of the vacation mountain biking in the nearby hills, and then went home on his scheduled return flight three days later. It wasn't really a fiasco, but it felt like one.

Harry sat down at his computer, and looked up what was available for

last-minute bookings. There were actually quite a few.

***"That one." Pan chimed in. "Go there."***

Harry clicked on the link, which took him to a booking site for the hotel, with a description. It looked beautiful. There was a beach, a nice restaurant, and even a spa in a cave, not that he had any use for a spa. There were availabilities for this weekend. Before clicking on it, he checked flight availabilities. And then Harry did something he didn't imagine himself doing in a million years when he woke up this morning. He booked a vacation to Bermuda. Harry shut down his computer. He needed to go pack, and go to bed. He had a 7:45 flight from JFK to Bermuda tomorrow morning. Like Mark used to say, "Sleep fast, bro."

By the next afternoon, Harry had his swim trunks on, and he was drinking a double bourbon on the rocks while lying on a beach chair, the breeze ruffling his hair. It was perfect.

He hadn't heard anything else from his mind-worm, Pan. Hearing voices not his own, or belonging to someone not physically in the room with him bothered him, but maybe - just maybe - this beach idea wasn't a bad one. If he got any more relaxed, he'd be asleep.

"Harry? Harry Barth, from Mergers and Acquisitions?" Harry turned his head, and shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun, to find himself looking up at a leggy blonde in a sexy hot bikini.

"Hi.....!"

She giggled. "You don't remember my name, do you?"

Harry laughed. "Busted. I have no clue. Wanna sit down so I can get properly re-introduced to you, and you can chastise me for not remembering you?"

She held out her hand to shake his. "Pamela Rogers, Contract Law."

"Oh my God, I *do* remember you! We worked the Klein/Bingham case together, back when I just started at the firm. I didn't recognize you.



You look great.”

Pam sat beside him, and Harry motioned for the waiter to order a drink for her. She turned to Harry. “What are you drinking?”

“Double bourbon on the rocks.” When the waiter arrived to take her order, she ordered a double bourbon, too.

“You like bourbon?” Quite a few of the women he knew didn’t, so it always surprised him.

“I find it goes well with boardrooms and mahogany offices.”

“So true.” They both laughed.

“You look good, too. This might sound insensitive, but I thought I heard through the grapevine that Mark died the other day.”

It took Harry a little off-guard, that she asked, but he didn’t anticipate anyone from work being here, either. “I was pretty wrecked. I needed to be somewhere else. A...friend recommended that I come here as a way of changing scenery, since Art gave me a week off.” He paused. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve had this vacation planned for about eight months. I was supposed to be here with one of my friends, but her mom ended up in the ICU, and needed emergency surgery. I couldn’t find someone else to take her place, so it’s just me. I can’t blame her for not wanting to leave her mom, but at the same time, I haven’t had a vacation in ages, and since we’ve lost a few folks at work recently, the chances of getting off again any time soon doesn’t look so good, you know.” Suddenly, she realized what she’d said. “Oh, God. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean Mark. That...didn’t come out right. I didn’t mean it like *that*.”

“No... I knew what you meant. No worries.” He laughed. “It makes perfect sense.” He gestured out toward the ocean. “So, here we are.”

“So, here we are. This is pretty damned near perfect.”

They had dinner at the restaurant together that night, went dancing,

and then went for a moonlight stroll. Normally, Harry would be all over this, but work has its' fraternization policies. He didn't want to lose his job over a sexual encounter, and he was pretty sure she didn't either. They were both working too hard to make partner for a chance encounter to derail them. When the time came for them to part ways, it was awkward - but in a good way.

He looked her straight in the eyes. "I'd kiss you goodnight, but I need to consult with my attorney first."

They both broke into giggles that broke the tension. "Me, too." Pam winked at him.

"Have *your* people talk to *my* people, and we'll revisit it tomorrow. Have a good rest of your night. Damn, what a perfectly good waste of moonlight." And with that, they both headed off to their separate rooms, at opposite ends of the hotel.

Harry got back to his hotel room, and poured himself another bourbon on the rocks as a nightcap. He was starting to feel pretty good. He hadn't heard any voices all day, and at this point, was attributing hearing Pam as being too stressed after Mark's death.

*"She's the one for you."*

"So much for *that*," he muttered under his breath, as he hung his head a little in defeat. "And why do you say that?"

*"Because she's just like you."*

"What do you mean by that?"

*"Both of you like relationships - but not the messy, emotional strings that are generally attached to them. Both of you are trying to work harder while you're younger so you make partner, and get to enjoy the 'good life' sooner. Both of you like really good, regular rolls in the sheets, but neither of you want commitments. If you joined forces, you could get everything you want, and still enjoy life. You watch her back, she watches yours, you have a relationship where you are in one another's lives, enjoy one another physically, and even as friends, but*

*you aren't tied at the hip to one another. You're lawyers. Write up the contractual agreement that your job requires, so you both know where you stand; what's permitted, what's not permitted, what happens if you decided to dissolve it, and then file it with your firm. Have your fun and work on your career goals together. It'll be the best thing you ever do."*

Harry crawled into bed, and thought about it until he fell asleep. The idea had it's merits, for sure.

He woke up to the sun streaming in the window, and needing to piss like a racehorse. While he was still in the bathroom, he could hear his phone going off; someone was trying to text him. Harry finished up, and then went in search of his phone. It was Pam.

"Good morning! Want to go to breakfast together?" she had written.

"Sure. When do you want to meet?" he responded.

"I'm ready whenever you are."

They planned to meet outside the restaurant in ten minutes. Harry was going for breakfast, but he would've been well-served to be prepared for a negotiation. As they're sitting there, companionably munching on eggs, bacon and home fries, Pam began her opening parlay.

"I want to sleep with you. I think you want to sleep with me. We need an agreement in place before we do."

Harry wasn't really expecting that, but managed to keep his composure. He was impressed and wondered if Pam wasn't right. "How would you be with some sort of 'friends with benefits' arrangement?"

"That would be perfect. We both know how many hours we work. We're both trying to get ahead. This way, we have all the benefits without the traditional drawbacks."

"Do you want to draw up the contract?" Harry offered. It was only

fair. "Or maybe we can go back to your room, and write it up together." Pam laughed, deep and throaty. "I love it when you talk sexy to me."

They finished up breakfast, and went back to Pam's room, and hammered out an agreement that included everything from schedule availability for 'benefits,' to spending time at each other's apartments, parties at or for work or with parents/family, and when to call it quits. They were getting turned on even writing the agreement. It was contract law becoming foreplay. Who knew?

They spent the next two days in bed together, enjoying one another, and then caught their respective flights home. It was the best long weekend of his life.

Harry got his luggage, got a taxi, and headed home. He opened the door, put his keys down on the table, and took his bags into the bedroom. When he came out, he saw the little statue still sitting on the table, and remembered his previous conversation. He carefully moved the statue to the window in the bedroom. While it wasn't a great view, it *was* a view of outside. As he sat the statue on the windowsill, he simply said, "Thank you, Pan. I thought going away would be a crazy idea, but it was just what I needed."

Pam went back to work; Harry was still administratively on leave for the rest of the week. He and Pam decided they would go up to the partners on Monday, after Harry returned to work to file their agreement together, and have it on record.

On Friday, Harry attended Mark's funeral. They had been best friends since they were in college, and got hired on together at the firm. It was hard to attend a funeral for someone so young, that had so much to live for, and so much promise. His mother and Erica were inconsolable. They sat together surrounded by his family. There were many people from the firm in attendance. That evening, Pam came over, and spent some quality time consoling him for his loss, though she wasn't spending the night. They had made a conscious decision not to do any overnight stays until the contract was filed at work. It had been curiously quiet in Harry's head, meaning no advice from Pan, not that Harry was complaining. Hearing something in your

head that wasn't you felt strange, and he wasn't especially equipped to deal with it. He was glad things had been quiet. He didn't really want to have an argument with... What *was* Pan, anyway? A mythical Greek deity? A demigod? He couldn't see himself having an argument with something that couldn't be seen, much less an argument with a mythical deity in front of Pam. That would be a one-way ticket to dissolving their contract, and it would put a hell of a crimp in his career, too. He put their dishes and wine glasses in the dishwasher, turned off the lights, and crawled into bed.



Harry dreamed of Mark. He found himself walking along a path in the woods, Mark walking beside him. Mark was dressed curiously, in jeans and a t-shirt, which was pretty normal. It was the top hat and cane that he had that made him take notice, and think it odd.

"What's with the hat and cane, bro?"

"I just wanted to make sure you remembered this dream. Figured the top hat and cane would help. What did you think of my memorial service? Who from the firm was sad, and who was there because they felt like if they didn't go, it would make them look bad?" They both laughed. It was *so* like him to be talking about his own funeral, which of course, he attended, though no one could see him.

"Maybe about 70-30 in favor of sad. Bad news is that some of them probably thought you were named Bob, though."

"Probably. It doesn't matter. I went naked, and rubbed my ghost junk in the faces of the people I didn't like just for good measure." They both laughed out loud at the prospect of Mark dancing around his own funeral - *naked* - and getting his own curious brand of retribution on the folks he wasn't fond of.

"What did you think of Erica? I told you so, right? Hot as hell, and

totally into me.”

“You’re right. Though, I gotta tell you: she won’t have much use for a *dead* dude. You *know* that, right?”

“Nah, I’m going to be a sexy ghost, and haunt the hell out of her. Watch her in the shower, and see if I can get her to pay attention to me while she’s sleeping.”

“Dude, that’s wrong, on so many levels. Don’t tell me. You’re going to introduce her to your ghost junk?”

Before Mark could answer, they were joined on the path by Pan, looking very much like he did in the statue. Like the statue, he had a cigar in one hand and a whiskey bottle in the other.

*“Hello, gents. Anyone care for a little flavor tonight?”* He held out his whiskey bottle at them. Mark took it, and took a swig, and then passed it to Harry, who looked at it for a few moments before taking it and pulling a swig off of it himself. They handed it back. *“Sorry again for your recent demise, Mark.”*

“Thanks. It sucked. It wasn’t what I had planned at all.”

**Pan laughed wryly. “*It never is.*”**

They rounded a corner, and there was a bonfire raging in a pit with stone seats around it. *“It appears we’ve reached our destination.”* Pan gestured toward the clearing, and they took seats around the fire. It felt good. The clearing was large enough that when you looked up, you could see the starry sky. Pan passed around the bottle of whiskey again, and they all drank from it. He pulled out his pipes and began to play. At first, it was a somber tune, that felt wistful. Then the pace picked up, and Pan got up and began dancing around his friends as he played. When the song was finished, they clapped for him, and he bowed toward them in an exaggerated fashion before taking his seat. *“Why, thank you.”*

They sat around the fire for a bit, staring into the flames, not speaking at all, until Pan broke the silence. *“Did you tell Mark about the*

*delightful Miss Pamela from Contracts yet?"*

Mark turned to Harry. "Whaaaaaat?? When did that happen?"

Harry laughed sheepishly. "Art gave me off for a week. I took your statue, and then Pan started talking to me, right? I thought I was going batshit crazy. He told me to get out of dodge, and find a beach somewhere...even told me which one to go to. So here I am, sitting on a beach in the Bahamas drinking a double the day after I find out you...*died*, and Pam comes up to me and says hi. She was at the same resort, only I felt like a jackass. I didn't remember her name."

"No." Mark laughed at his friend.

"Really. We hit it off. We want all the same things. In fact, she's the one who said she wanted to sleep with me. We went to her room to write up the agreement for the firm. Holy shit. Who knew that writing up a contract for a mutual agreement could be so...sexy? We spent the whole rest of our time at the resort in bed together. We're going to file our agreement with Art on Monday, and make it official."

"Good on you, dude."

"Thanks." Harry turned to Pan. "Thank you. I moved your statue near a window. It's not a great view, but it's better than my table."

*"Thanks. I did notice. I appreciate that. Since you're all settled with Pam, I need you to do me a favor."*

"Sure. Name it."

*"Return me to where you bought me."*

"Okaaaaaay." Harry had thought to keep the statue. Guess that wasn't in the cards.

*"You don't need me anymore. And if you screw things up, I'll be back to let you know about it. But somewhere out there is another person who needs a reminder to live while they're still alive."*

\* \* \*

"Sure. I can do that. I'll do it Monday, on the way home."

**"Good." Pan turned to them both. *"I wanted to give you a chance to say goodbye, because as suddenly as Mark was gone, you never got it. It's my gift to you. Many are denied that opportunity."***

Mark and Harry looked at one another, and shook hands for the last time, even as Pan began to play again.

Harry flicked Mark's ear. "Gonna miss you, bro."

"I'll visit once in a while. I'll turn off your laptop while you're trying to surf porn."

"Niiaiiiiice. Have fun with your ghost junk."

They laughed, and the music swirled around them, and Harry drifted back off to dreamless sleep.

Monday, Harry did as he promised Pan, and stopped at Treasure Trove, the statue of Pan in hand. He had to think hard where the shop was, since he wasn't really paying attention when he and Mark stopped on that rainy day. They were just trying not to get drenched or struck by lightning. He opened the door, and once again, he heard the tinkling of the wind chimes on the door, and smelled the incense. Yup. Right place. The same lady was even at the counter.

She looked up at him. "Hi. Need something?"

Harry walked up to the counter, removed the statue from the bag, and sat it gently on the glass counter.

"Ah. I remember you. You and your friend ducked in from that bad thunderstorm a couple of months back. I remember *him*, too," gesturing to the statue. "For some reason, he seems to get returned a lot."

Harry laughed nervously. Part of him wanted to ask her about his experience, part of him was afraid to. What if when he told her the statue talked to him in his head she thought he was nuts? He would.



\* \* \*

Helena continued. "If I remember right, it was your friend that actually bought that, though."

Harry nodded. "He did. He died. Did you hear about the person who got knocked onto the tracks by a couple of teens fighting, and got hit by a train?"

"Oh, no. That wasn't your friend, was it?"

"It was."

"I'm so sorry. That must've been very hard losing your friend so suddenly."

Harry took a deep breath. "You mentioned the fact that the statue keeps getting returned. How many times has it been returned?"

"I think this makes it eleven." Helena laughed.

"That many?"

"Uh-huh. Either there's something going on with the statue, or my return policy's too generous."

"I think I can help you understand why, but it's a damn strange story."

Helena nodded. "I get that a lot around here." She glanced around, and gestured with her hands in an exaggerated fashion, as a way of saying, "Take a look around, buddy."

Harry continued. "I teased Mark for buying that thing," gesturing at the statue. "But after he bought it, his life changed. He got a hot girlfriend that quickly turned into a serious, steady relationship. I couldn't figure out why. He was always a good guy, but when it came to women, it was like they were a foreign language he could never master." He shook his head, and snickered.

"The day I found out Mark died, the last thing I did before I left the office was take that statue off his desk. Before I even got home, I

started hearing a voice in my head that wasn't mine. I can only guess by the statue it's Pan? Either way, he told me to fly to the Bahamas, and then talked me into it; he even told me which resort to go to. I was afraid I was really losing my grasp on reality. I know that statues don't talk, and generally, it's bad news to be hearing voices in your head, much less *do* the things they suggest. But he...made sense. While I was in the Bahamas, I ran into a lady from my law firm...and it...gelled between us. We spent the whole time there together. We even wrote up a relationship contract for my firm. Thankfully, he didn't talk to me while we were together. I would've had a hard time explaining that. I dreamed about Pan and Mark a couple of nights ago. He looked very much like the statue. He asked me to do him a favor, and return his statue here. He said other people needed to be reminded to live their lives to the fullest while they're still alive."

Helena didn't respond immediately. Instead, she picked up the statue, and looked at it carefully.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Not one little bit." Helena put the statue back down on the counter.

"Really?"

"I've seen and heard much stranger stories."

"Was I really hearing Pan?"

"I can't say for sure, but considering the fact that the statue's been returned so many times might argue in favor of it."

They both stood there, looking at the statue of Pan.

"Is there something you'd like to exchange it for?"

"Got a nice paperweight in here that I could put on my desk at work?"

"It so happens that I do, I think. I'll be right back." She hopped down off her stool, and went down the aisle closest to the display case. She returned a few moments later with something in each hand. "You've

got your choice of two. I've got a really pretty hand-blown glass sphere with a green swirl inside, and I have an oversized Monopoly game piece that looks handmade, too." She placed the top hat on the counter next to the sphere.

"Holy sh.... I don't believe it!"

"What?"

"The dream I had with Pan and Mark that I told you about? Mark was wearing a top hat...so I'd remember the dream." He shook his head in wonder. "I'll take the top hat."

She wrapped it up and put it into a bag, and Harry took it and left, and she followed him to the door. Helena flipped her open sign to closed and went back to the display case. She picked up the statue of Pan, and smiled at him.

"Liking my return policy, are you? Well, how about we put you someplace a little more...visible? Hopefully, you'll like the view." Helena carefully put him in the front window, between a really pretty hand-tooled leather bag and the sock monkey. Mischief jumped up on the counter, and head-butted her to get her attention.

"I know, I know. You're hungry. Well, let's go then." Mischief meowed loudly, and jumped off the counter. "G'night...!" she called out, as she turned off the lights. "See you tomorrow."