

CASSANDRA

By Cheryl Lynn



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

Copyright © 2001, Friendly Applications, Inc. - All Rights Reserved

Reluctant Press TG Publishers

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. All situations and events herein presented are fictional, and intended only for the enjoyment of the reader. Neither the author nor the publisher advocate engaging in or attempting to imitate any of the activities or behaviors portrayed.

Persons seeking gender reassignment surgery, hormone therapy or any other medical and/or body-altering process should seek the counsel of a qualified therapist who follows the Benjamin Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorder.

Protect Professional Fiction on the Internet!

We need *your* help! We want to keep providing our readers with low cost, professional quality fiction on the Internet. We spend thousands of dollars to edit, illustrate and typeset *each story*. It is important, therefore, that everyone works to help keep professional fiction alive on the Net.

This story is protected by US and International copyright law, and is owned exclusively by Friendly Applications, Inc, DBA Reluctant Press, which retains exclusive rights to publish these materials. The civil penalties for copyright infringement can be severe, including substantial monetary damages, injunctive relief, and liability for attorneys' fees incurred in prosecuting a case. If a court determines that the infringement was committed willfully, statutory damages of up to \$100,000 for each copyright infringed can be awarded. Even if not found to be acting willfully, a defendant can still be held liable for statutory damages of \$500 to \$20,000 for each copyright infringed. **These penalties apply even if money was not charged.** In addition, criminal penalties may be imposed if someone willfully infringes a copyrighted work for commercial advantage or private financial gain. This crime is punishable by up to five years imprisonment, up to \$250,000 in fines, or both. State civil damages and criminal penalties vary from state to state and country to country, but are always severe.

The best way to keep professional illustrated fiction available on the Internet is to do YOUR part to protect the author's and publisher's copyright. *You can be part of the solution.* Encourage others to purchase our stories. Never share the access rights you've purchased. **You** make the continued availability of TG fiction on the Internet possible. Thank you for your cooperation!

CASSANDRA

BY CHERYL LYNN

The long line of limos wound slowly down the narrow serpentine drive. Gusty winds lashed the rain against windshields and curbs as the heavens poured forth their condolences on the sad procession. The lead limousine came to a stop and a man dressed all in black leapt out and unfolded a large black umbrella. Holding it protectively over the rear door, the figure reached out to open the limousine door.

A heavily veiled woman dressed all in black from gloves to heels emerged to take the umbrella possessively. She left the man standing in the rain with water pouring off the sleek beak of his cap like a veil. She carefully made her way up the walk and past the silent, dripping marble monuments and headstones. As she walked, others emerged from their vehicles and quickly followed. The women all wore black and the men dark suits and ties. There was much soft sobbing and low murmuring as the group gathered around the open grave.

Almost as if prearranged, the heavens opened with renewed energy and as a massive lightening bolt crashed out in stunning brilliance.

The preacher stepped forth. He took his place at the head of the white oaken casket. His robes were dripping wet as he began the service. Lightening flashed and the rain thundered off the fluttering canvas awning that provided very little protection for the mourners huddled beneath. The loud tattoo of the rain drowned out what the preacher was saying to those standing just a short distance away.

It was a forlorn day and a miserable time that seemed somehow fitting. It was as if the heavens grieved along with everyone else now that Cassandra was no more. The very light of her mother's eye and the very breath of her being was the beautiful Cassandra. Cassandra's mother was strong, both in mind and body. To her great credit, she did not sway or bend under the awful burden that death had wrought. She cried, oh how she cried, but with the rain and her resolve no one saw. No one knew, just how deeply the hurt had penetrated into her very soul.

-000-

“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes,” the service continued to its conclusion. With rain saturated clothing clinging tightly to their bodies, everyone was more than anxious to get out of the weather and back to their vehicles. The final words had hardly been uttered when they all hurried away.

Decorum forgotten in the downpour. Soon, only Cassandra's mother and the driver remained.

“Ma'am,” he said softly to the grieving woman, “Ma'am, please! It's time to go. You have to let go. Come, bring your grief with you, if you must, but everyone has gone and the storm is getting worse.”

He took her arm and carefully led her back down the cobblestone walk.

She held the umbrella in a death grip and did not say a word, but she allowed him to lead her back to the car. She was numb from both the cold dampness and the grief that filled her. As she settled into the back seat, she pulled the wet veil back over her head. The face was sad, but its underlying beauty could not be hidden.

Time heals all wounds, it is said. But what of a mother's loss? Now that is the makings of our tale.

So let us jump forward in time to another day, in another year, and in another place.

-000-

Sam brushed the hair out of his eyes as he peered out into the traffic. The light wind whipped at his face, flipping his rather long brown hair back into his eyes.

“Aghhh,” he groaned as he once again brushed it away. “I’m going to get this stuff cut off the very next chance I get,” he said to no one in particular. The light changed and he stepped from the curb as another breeze flipped his hair.

He felt the hand grab him under his collar and forcefully jerk him back. He almost lost his balance and had to windmill his arms and do a little hop/skip backwards. As he turned his head a quarter turn and opened his mouth to yell out a few choice expletives, the side panel of the delivery truck filled his vision and the air horn blasted loudly into his ears. Stumbling backwards his right foot was grazed by the passing truck, spinning him back around and into the arms of a tall, thin, grubby looking bum.

“Hey, man!”

Sam saw the bum in that focused intensity that only comes with fright. The man was wearing tattered army greens, sweater, frayed army jacket, and a pair of scruffy jungle boots. It was obvious that he was both homeless and probably crazy to boot.

Sam pulled back his hand and making a fist was getting ready to punch the guy's lights out, but paused in realization that this bum had just saved his life.

“Hey, cool it man!” the bum yelled. “I wasn't tryin' nuthin'! Youse almost got ran over, man!”

“Oh boy!” Sam exclaimed in a rush of held in air, as he realized what had just happened. Lowering his fist, he tried to apologize and thank the man who had pulled him from the street.

“Doan mean nuthin' man! Stay cool, dude!” the bum said as he brushed off Sam's clothing and with a pat to his butt quickly strode out of arms reach and turned the corner. Soon he was lost in the crowd.

Sam started to turn around when he felt a sharp pain fly up his leg from his ankle. “Ahhhhhh,” he cried as his leg collapsed sending him to the pavement. Sitting on his butt, he reached out and grabbed his sore ankle. It hurt like the dickens and left him panting. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead and it was all he could do to keep the tears from flowing down his cheek.

“I'm acting like some big sissy,” he mumbled as he rocked slowly back and forth while holding tightly to his throbbing ankle. “Damn, damn, that hurts,” he said as he looked up into the soft nose of the police horse. “Ahh, the mounted police here at last.”

After what seemed like years, Sam was taken to the local public hospital where he was admitted with a broken ankle. It was while they were removing his clothing in the examination room that Sam discovered that his wallet was missing. It seemed that that bum stripped him of his only identification and money. Every penny that he owned was in that wallet.

“Man, what a bummer!” was all he managed to say.

Dressed only in a hospital gown that left nothing to the imagination, Sam laid on the table listening to the doctor. Fortunately the pain killer that the nurse had given him made the loss of his wallet and dignity seem less of a burden at the moment.

“You're very fortunate,” the emergency room doctor told him. “Usually in these circumstances, the ankle bones are shattered from the force of the blow, but you are a mighty lucky man. We're only going to have to put one or two pins in it. My guess is that you'll be laid up for only ten or twelve weeks. Hope you've got somebody to look after you. You're not going to be able to move around much until we take the cast off.”

Turning away from him, the doctor told the nurse, “Go ahead and admit him. Schedule surgery first thing in the morning and inform Doctor Cooper. Okay!”

Switching his attention back to Sam, the doctor finished, “Well, er...Sam,” he said after looking down to the chart he held in his hands to double check his name, “the nurse will take care of you. Doctor Cooper is our Orthopod and he'll stop by in the morning to check with you. Don't worry about a thing, everything is going to be all right.”

Sam was restless. He couldn't get comfortable no matter how hard he tried. Not only was his ankle still throbbing despite the pain killers, but that little hospital gown they gave him kept riding up around his waist. That would not have been so bad if he had a pair of shorts to wear, but they did not even leave him that little bit of modesty.

To add to his discomfort, his roommate was some kind of wacko psychotic that had tried to commit suicide but only managed to break both of his arms.

This was turning out to be one hell of a fine day.

Fresh off the bus with no one to call on for help, Sam was in pretty dire straights. Even if he could get to the bus terminal and retrieve his suitcase, there wasn't going to be anything for him to wear once they applied the cast to his leg.

Not only that but the key to the locker had been in his stolen wallet. Lost in despair, it was beginning to look like absolutely nothing was going his way. Letting his head fall back into the small hard pillow, Sam let a tear escape out of the corner of his violet blue eyes. As he wallowed in his melancholy, a thin wailing moan came from across the room.

“Great! Just fuckin' great!” Sam muttered as he pulled the pillow up around his ears trying to deaden the noise from his roommate. He tried his best to scrunch up under the covers trying desperately to muffle the noise. The tears flowed freely down his cheeks as he clenched his eyes closed and gritted his teeth in a vain attempt to shut out reality. Sometime during the night, he managed to fall asleep.

He wasn't sure what it was that woke him, but everything was quiet.

“Maybe that was it,” he thought, “it is so quiet. Yeah, its just too quiet now. Just as well, maybe now I can think of a way out of this mess I got myself in. Come on man, get a grip! There has to be some way to get over this hump. Just takes a little thought. I've gotten this far on my own, I can work it out. Just think, all I've got to do is apply myself and a solution will pop up.”

Sam reflected that he had been out on his own ever since leaving home nine months ago. His stepfather and he did not get along one bit and with his mother's illness and confinement, it was time to pull up stakes. So here he was in the big city alone and on his own. Like every other "Gomer Pyle" fresh out of the country, he'd been taken for a ride as well.

"This was going to prove an expensive lesson," he thought as he lay there.

"Good morning Mr. Waters," a toothsome nurse greeted as she entered the room and walked over to him. "And how are we feeling this morning? I'm nurse Winters and I'm here to prep you for your surgery this morning," she continued without skipping a beat. She picked up his chart from the front of the bed and, flipping it open, gave it a quick scan before writing something in it and then with a loud "plop" slammed it back into its slot.

"Look Nurse," Sam said, "I'm really starving. How about something to eat before we do anything else, huh? Then, maybe you can do something about getting me moved some- place else. This wacko across from me has been moaning and screaming all damn night long and I can't get any sleep. How about it, please?"

Setting a tray alongside his bed, Nurse Winters pulled back his covers before he could do or say anything else.

"Mr. Waters you ought to know that we cannot give you anything to eat just before surgery. Didn't anyone tell you that you were NPO. Can't have you go gagging all over the OR now can we? Don't you worry, we'll have you out of surgery before you know it and; then, if you feel up to it, a nice meal will be waiting. Now then, just you settle down while I shave your legs for you."

Sam tried to wiggle back under the covers while the nurse was talking, but only managed to raise his hospital gown up around his waist exposing himself all the more to her amused stare.

"Oh, don't worry about that," the nurse said as he hurriedly pulled the hem of his gown back down. "If I've seen one, I've seen a million of 'em in my time. Now you just relax and let Nurse Winters get you all ready for surgery."

With that she began soaping down his right leg in a thick lather. Picking up a straight razor, she smiled into his slack jawed face and began stripping away the hair. Stroke after stroke she carefully and methodically applied the razor blade. She removed all the hair on first his right then his left leg, all the way up to his groin.

When he questioned the need for shaving both of his legs, was told it was to ensure a sterile field and that she had to do it all the way up past his crotch. Sam smiled nervously while staring up at the acoustic tiled ceiling, he did his best to ignore nurse Winters as she happily shaved the hair from around his penis. He blushed bright red as she lifted his balls and quickly removed the hair there.

At last, the nurse finished her preparations and put the tools of his great embarrassment away. Sam thought that he would go through the ceiling when Nurse Winters casually flipped his penis out of the way using the back of her hand as she scraped the hairs off the inside of his thigh. If the truck hadn't killed him, the nurse's familiarity just about did. The only thing that had kept him still was the thought of

what would happen if he suddenly jerked while she held the razor so close to his very vital organ.

As a final insult, Nurse Winters had him roll over on his side while she injected several shots into his bare rump. With the indignity still fresh in his mind, another woman walked into the room just as the nurse left.

“Oh Damn!” Sam whispered, “Just what I need. Another woman coming to embarrass and harass me. You'd think that they had enough fun tormenting me by now.”

Sam rolled over trying to ensure that his gown was tucked in enough to offer some concealment and modesty. As he turned to face the newcomer, he heard a small yelp of surprise and the sound of something hitting the floor. He was looking at an older woman, good looking and refined, but strange nonetheless.

She was positively gawking at him. Her mouth was open but no sound came out and she was clutching her hands to her ample breasts. A binder was laying on the floor where it had fallen.

Almost as soon as it happened, the woman bent down and picked up the binder all the while not taking her eyes off of Sam.

“I'm sorry,” she said in soft tones. “I thought that...that you were someone else. Please...er...please forgive me. I did not mean to startle you. It's just that you look so....so much like...like someone I knew.....but never mind about that now. I'm Mrs. Norris.”

Sam found himself getting dizzy and laid his head back down on the pillow.

“*So he reminded this woman of somebody. Big deal!*” his thoughts were becoming fuzzy as well. “*Must be the drugs,*” his mind told him.

“Sooooo, whooooo arrrreee youuuuu?” his slurred voice asked. It sounded to him like his own voice was coming from inside of a tunnel.

“Why, I'm Mrs. Norris. The social worker and I'm here to see if I can help you. I understand that you are an indigent patient and came to us without any identification or anything. According to our records..that is...you were a victim of a mugging? Was it?”

“Ye...ah,” Sam managed to force out between suddenly very thick feeling lips. His mouth was so dry. “I...I wa...was robbed of my wa...wallet....an....and..I..ju...just got here. No....no wh...where n...no one to hel...elp meeee.”

It was getting very difficult for him to remember what he was trying to say, much less actually say it. The drugs were beginning to take full effect.

His last conscious thoughts were of seeing the woman bending over his bed looking at him. He thought he heard her say, “Cassandra?”

When Sam woke up in the Recovery Room, his whole body was numb. While uncoordinated and lethargic, he was aware of the heavy weight dragging at his right leg. He tried to rise, but did not have the strength. He felt an arm reach around his shoulders and help prop him upright. While still supported by the arm, a glass appeared in front of his face and he sucked greedily at the straw.

Finishing about half the glass, Sam's mind cleared somewhat and he became aware of the woman, though he couldn't remember much else about her, that had been with him last. She supported his head while holding the glass of water. He mumbled his thanks and with a last look at the plaster cast running the length of his right leg, let himself down to the pillow. With a heavy sigh, he closed his violet blue eyes in slumber.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” the woman muttered. “The only thing keeping you from being the exact clone of poor Cassandra is your sex. I wonder if I should tell Mabel about you? Once she sees those eyes of yours..ummm...well I don't know. It just may be too much for her.”

Mrs. Norris turned to the bedside table and replaced the glass. Moving a little ways back from the bed and the sleeping youth, she continued her reflections, “If she only saw you the way I did when first we met. The way your hair was spread on the pillow, even the nose so like hers, but the eyes. Those violet blue eyes so rare and yet so....so absolutely devastatingly expressive. They capture the soul. Yes, I do not have any real choice in this matter. I owe her that much at least. You rest now. I'll be back when you are awake.”

Thirty minutes later, Mrs. Norris hung up the telephone. Mabel had been more than eager to hear what she had to say. While the woman sounded somewhat dubious, she said that she could not take the chance that her daughter had returned from the grave. Gloria Norris just shook her head as she hung up the phone feeling sorry now for calling.

“Mabel had never completely gotten over her loss, but maybe, just maybe seeing this young man would jar Mabel back to reality,” Gloria thought. *“After all, she wouldn't be able to claim it was her precious Cassandra in any event. The shock of seeing her daughter's eyes in the face of a man would undoubtedly destroy any notions she had that Cassandra would return. Well, at least that was her fervent hope.”*

Gloria let her thoughts skip through time. Mabel had been a very good friend and her daughter's death had struck deep.

“Miserable child that she had been. Always breaking her Mother's heart. Mabel had so wanted a frilly feminine daughter that she could dress up and show off to society.”

Gloria shook her head as she let her mind continue its train of thought, *“Instead, she had gotten a world class beauty that hated dressing up. Cassandra preferred jeans and tie-dyed shirts and beads to the trimmings of society. Cassandra even gave up her religion to become a Buddhist. Of all the nonsense, a Buddhist no less. It just about broke her Mother's heart and then to so waste her life on a drug overdose. Tsk, tsk, such a waste. Such a waste!”*

-000-

“Oh, Gloria, I don't know just how to thank you for telling me about Cassandra's return. I just can't wait to see her. You know its been such a long time,” Mabel Johns was saying as they walked past the Cassandra Johns' wing of the hospital.

They paused in their walk for a second while Mabel looked at the plaque, then continued on their way.

“Look Mabel dear,” Gloria countered. “I did not say that Cassandra had returned. I only said that a young **MAN**...looking like Cassandra...had been admitted here at County General. I did not say she was really back. If I thought that you were going to go on like this. Well! I never would have called. I'm sorry, I did it now. Mabel, you really must get over this obsession of yours that she will return. This young **MAN** only bears a striking resemblance to your baby **AND** that's all! Look, if you don't get control of yourself, I won't take another step. Do you hear?”

“Oh, Gloria. You're just overreacting as usual. I'm sure that once I see this young man of yours....that I'll realize that you are just pulling my leg. You just imagined that you saw violet blue eyes when what you probably saw was just a deep blue. No one could have eyes like my Cassandra. No one! Don't you understand.”

“Well, I know what I saw and what I saw were her eyes,” Gloria responded. “More than that, he has her facial structure as well. Here, let's go into my office and continue this chat. I do not feel comfortable talking like this out in the halls. It's right over here.”

She did not like having her ideas ridiculed or rebuffed either, but did not say so out loud where Mabel could hear. She went over to her desk, picked up the thermos and poured two cups of tea.

“One lump?”

Seeing Mabel nod, she dropped the sugar cube into the steaming cup. Handing the cup to Mabel, she sat down beside her on the couch.

“Just you wait,” Gloria continued after they settled down on the couch. “Once you have a chance to meet him, you'll know that he isn't Cassandra. He is all male, if you know what I mean! Heck, I was there when they prepped him this morning. I ought to know the differences in the plumbing by now. I've been married for many years you know.”

“Oh, don't go getting your panties in a bind, Gloria dear. I am just so excited about your news that I got a little over zealous. I am not questioning your judgment nor am I saying that I believe that it's my little girl come back to me either. Once I've had the chance to see and talk to her...I mean him, myself; well, then I'll make up my mind what I believe.”

Mabel paused to sip her tea, then looking off to the side like she was embarrassed softly saying, “You don't really think that I'm being serious when I say that I believe in all that heathen stuff, now do you? Reincarnation of all things! Gloria, I was so hoping that you'd at least have a better opinion of me.”

Hearing her friend hastily deny any such notion, Mabel happily continued, “So, tell me all that you know about him. Everything, and don't leave out the tiniest detail. It may be important.”

With the slightest misgiving, Gloria shrugged off her concern for her best friend and resumed her story. Besides, where was the harm in making an old friend happy?

“Well, from what I've managed to gather, he is new to the city. Just got off the bus in fact. I know that sounds a bit corny, but it's true. He just arrived from a small town

in deep northwest Texas somewhere. Checked his bags into a locker at the Greyhound station and headed out the door. Seems he wasn't paying attention and almost got run over by a truck. Then, to add insult to his injury, the guy that saved his life snatched his wallet and took off. Just left our Sam Waters sitting on the curb with a shattered ankle. It was a mounted policeman that called it in to us.

“He underwent surgery this morning and now he is in recovery. I stopped by just after the surgery and he is doing fine. Poor boy has a cast running up his entire right leg. He's going to have one heck of a time managing things lugging that load around. Best I can figure, he doesn't have any place or anyone to go to. All alone in the big city. Don't know anything about family back home or nuthin' like that. I haven't had the opportunity to really talk to him yet. I was going to see about placing him at the Salvation Army Center. That's why I was up in his room when the nurse was prepping him. He is all man Mabel!”

They chatted some more until it was time to go and check on the subject of their conversation.

He was back in his room resting peacefully when the two women walked in. A soft halo of light filtered around his shoulder length blond hair as it fanned out around his face. His eye lashes were thick and his brows shaggy but not overly bushy. His face was delicate and his cheekbones too prominent to be considered rugged. His nose was even a little upturned with a sprinkling of freckles.

“Just like Cassandra's,” Mabel thought. *“If I did not know better!”*

Well, when he woke she would have a better idea of what it was she wanted to do. She was ready to believe that Cassandra just may have returned to her. Except for the obvious physical differences like two day growth of beard and hairy body, but Mabel was willing herself to over look such minor details. Details that Gloria hastened to point out to her as well as those which weren't so obvious.

“No,” Mabel said to herself, “It'll be in the eyes. I'll be able to see my baby reflected in the eyes!”

Telling Gloria to go on about her business that she was going to stay for a time, Mabel pulled up a chair and sat. While she waited, she let her eyes roam over every inch of the man that was laying partially covered in the bed. She noticed how much his build and coloring was so like her darling daughter's. And the hair, that same straw wheat color that gleamed so in the sun and felt like spun gold when she washed it. Mabel let her head fall back, closed her eyes and began reminiscing of days gone by when she had her little girl to tend and to love.

A loud cough brought her out of her reverie and she sat up, hearing her neck crack in the process.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I must have dozed off,” she mumbled. As she looked over to the bed, Mabel saw the most vivid violet blue eyes she had ever seen with one major exception, Cassandra. “Oh dear!” was all she could say at that moment.

“Who are you?” Sam inquired.

“Oh, I'm Mabel Johns. I'm.....I'm a good friend of Gloria Norris, the social worker here at the General. She...she told me all about your accident and the problems you were having. Gloria, Mrs. Norris that is, informed me of your situation. I find it intolerable that on your first visit to our fair city you found such an undeserved welcome. I was considering the possibilities of your convalescence occurring at my home. If you do not think it too out of line, I would like to try to make amends by offering you the use of my place until you can take care of yourself. Unless, of course, you would prefer staying at the Salvation Army Center?”

“Salvation Army Center?” Sam asked to no one in particular. “I...I don't quite understand. Why on earth would you want me to stay at your place? You don't know anything about me. I could be a crook or something.”

“Well,” Mabel began, “Sam, you don't mind if I call you Sam do you? No, fine. Sam, in the course of my life, I've had to make a number of rash, on the spot judgments about people and let's just say that I have a very good feeling about you. I sold my business a few years ago when my daughter passed on. I retired then and well, now, I enjoy helping out. You know....giving something back.”

She paused to help Sam get a drink of water, then waited patiently as he drank thirstily. “Business, oh, you want to know what kind of business I was in. Well, let's just say the computer software business. It's somewhat technical but in essence we created interfaces between the computer and machines. It was challenging, but like I said it's time to give some of my fortune back. That, in a nutshell, is why I wanted to offer you respite while you recuperated.”

She waited for a moment before continuing in a rush, “You don't think that you can take care of yourself with that cast on your leg do you. I would be careful about putting myself in the Salvation Army's hands. Don't get me wrong! They do a wonderful job, but a person with your restricted capabilities. Well, do I have to say more. Please? Sam, let me help by agreeing to stay at my place for a while at least. If you don't like it, you can always move out. What do you say?”

Sam let his head fall back on to the pillow.

“Oh man, all this is coming so fast. I just want to get out of here, but I don't know what to do. I don't have any money to pay you for your kindness and....and I can't even get my clothes out of storage cause I lost the key with all my money and identification. Man, things are piling up so fast. Lady, I...I couldn't ask you to go so far out of your way to help. I wouldn't wish me on anybody.”

“Well, if you don't want me to help, then what about family? I'd be more than happy to contact them for you. Gloria said you came from some place in Texas. You just give me a number and I'll call them right away. I'm sure..”

Sam cut off her statement by telling her he did not have any family.

“No, I don't have anyone. I'm on my own now, besides, I don't know of anyone else. Look lady, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but right now I just want to sleep, OK?” With that he tried to turn on his side away from her, but the cast wouldn't let him. In his frustration, he muttered a “fuck” into the pillow and kept his head turn away from the woman.

Mabel waited for a few moments, then said, "I understand this has been most traumatic experience for you, but I'll be back after you have had a chance to rest. Think about my offer while I'm gone. It's still good."

-000-

Several days later, Sam fully understood just how helpless he was. Even the simplest chores like getting out of bed required the assistance of a nurse's aide. The full leg cast went from around his foot all the way up his hip where it joined with his groin. While it was made of lightweight plastic, it was still quite heavy and cumbersome to deal with. The bulk and weight contributed to a constant lower back pain that the mild drugs administered to him failed to alleviate. Needless to say, it also required the continued use of a hospital gown which left his butt exposed.

Mrs. Norris had visited him frequently offering suggestions for him to consider when he would be discharged. Since he did not have any money or friends that would care for him, he really had no choices. It would be either the Salvation Army, or a flop house that accepted Welfare recipients. In either case, he would be totally on his own as the state did not provide coverage under his circumstances for any other care.

The enormity of the difficulties facing him, soon got the better of Sam. In a mounting despair, Sam silently cried himself to sleep on more than one occasion. When the day finally arrived for his discharge, he was at a total loss.

He had tentatively told Mrs. Norris that he would appreciate it if she would set him up at the Salvation Army Center, but he was filled with misgivings.

His old roommate, now long gone, had ranted and raved about the horrors of living in such places. It seemed that flop houses and charity shelters were pest holes crawling with all kinds of low life. He was just about to give up all hope after the doctor discharged him, when Mabel entered his room.

"Well, how are you doing today dear?" she asked merrily as she came in and stood by the bed rail. "Look what I brought you! I hope you don't mind, but I did so want us to part on good terms."

She held up a bouquet of flowers tied together by a lavender ribbon.

"I understand that you asked Gloria to help you get into the Center. Well, I'm sure you did what you thought best, didn't you dear?" she continued as she walked around the bed and placed the flowers in his hands. Smiling broadly looking deep into his eyes, she placed her warm hand on his as they gripped the flowers.

"Dear, you look worried and tired. Haven't you been getting your rest?" she asked.

She listened attentively as he related how his back was giving him fits and all the other worries that had been bothering him. She patiently patted his hand reassuringly and made comments as necessary to keep him talking. Finally, after he seem to have exhausted himself, she bent down and kissed him on the forehead. Standing up, she smile down at him and once again said that her offer to let him stay with her was still good.

“No, don't say anything just yet,” she cautioned. “I have to go and visit with my friend Gloria, but you think about my offer and I'll be back before you have to go. Dear, I'm sure you will make the right decision.”

“This Mabel Johns was likable enough and seemed sincere, but there was something about her that was eerie,” Sam thought. “Nothing I can put my finger on, but, well, many little things just don't seem to add up. First, there was something in the way she looked at him, as if seeing someone else. Second, she was all kissy-kissy, lovey-dovey and he was not used to being around that kind of person. She was way too familiar with him and it made him feel very edgy. Finally, he was used to having his space.”

Not for the first time did a nagging doubt enter his mind over her sincerity.

“No,” he decided, *“smothering was not entirely his cup of tea and for now the shelter offered him the best alternative. Heck, can't be much worse than Scout camp.”*

Mabel did not show any sign of disappointment when he told her of his decision which in a way surprised him. She told him that if he ever changed his mind to just let her know. She patted him on his hand and left so that he could get dressed.

Mrs. Norris had given Sam a pair of bright yellow wide legged terry cloth shorts with an elastic waist band and an equally bright Hawaiian short sleeved shirt. He looked ridiculous by his standards, but it beat the hell out of the hospital gown he had been wearing.

By his second hour in the shelter, Sam regretted ever coming here. The place was full of winos and spaced out addicts. When they weren't trying to steal him blind, their foul body odor, stench, and noise caused him total misery. Life in the shelter had not been understated by any means. The good news, in the Army's defense, there were some kind and caring people there that tried to help.

Regardless of their intentions, he had his medicines and suitcase, just recently recovered, stolen before the second night was over. The remnants of his possessions and what remained of his dignity were all dissolving away before his eyes. His back hurt worse than ever.

The third night of his stay in the shelter was his last. Sometime in the early morning hours, a large man decided that he wanted Sam's blankets. When Sam refused to give them up, he was severely beaten and stomped by the rampaging psychopath.

Sam woke in pain back in County General. Only this time, he resolved not to go back to the shelter. No matter what.

When everything seemed to be working against him, Sam saw a familiar face enter his room.

“Hello, Mrs. Norris,” Sam greeted. “I didn't expect to see you so soon.”

“Well, I imagine not under these circumstances at any rate,” Mrs. Norris replied. “Now dear, is there anything that I can get for you? I guess that you don't want to go back to the shelter when the doctor releases you this time, do you? No! Well, as I said before there are not a lot of alternatives available.”

She paused in thought, tapping a pencil against her chin, then continued, “There's the flop house, but then, you'd be totally on your own. Yes, dear. I know that idea isn't

to your liking either, but.....well let me see what I can do. You know that your particular circumstances do not leave me much choice. I'll see what I can come up with, but at least in the flop house you'd have a room of your own. Oh, well, sleep tight and don't worry. I'm sure something will come up to resolve your problem. I'll stop by again tomorrow. Bye.”

-000-

Back in her office, Gloria picked up the telephone, reached up and pulled the earring from her lobe and said, “Yes? Mrs. Norris, may I help you?”

It was Mabel on the other end. They chatted briefly before Gloria told her that Sam had been readmitted. When she told her what happened to the poor boy, Mabel sounded like she wasn't surprised. Yes, she was concerned about his injuries and asked several questions, but acted too calm about the whole thing.

Gloria promised herself to check closer with the shelter and authorities about the incident. Something just did not ring true in her mind, but it would have to wait until she had the time. Right now she had too many pressing cases that just had to be processed before she could allow herself the luxury of investigating this one case.

Besides she was just being silly, how on earth could her friend Mabel be involved in such a ghastly deed.

Sam was feeling desperate by the time the doctor notified him that he would be discharged in the morning. He had no clothing, other than his all too loud shorts and flowered shirt, and no place to go. Unless you counted the flop house as someplace to go, but what choice did he have. All-in-all his prospects were looking pretty dim.

Gloria promised to drop off some more clothing she had gotten from the shelter for him. She also promised to see that he got safely to the hotel that was to serve as his home until he could do better. Unfortunately, that was the best she could do for him at the moment. She was trying to speed up the Welfare application to get him some cash, but that wasn't the same as getting food and shelter. It took its own bureaucratic time and couldn't be rushed.

“Maybe, in time,” Mrs. Norris informed him, “she could find some other placement for him that would be more acceptable. Until then he did not have any alternative.”

-000-

It was while he was in his deepest despair that another familiar figure knocked on his door and entered.

Coming over to his bedside Mabel Johns smiled broadly at him.

“Hello again dear,” she began, “I'm ever so sorry to hear about your misadventure. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by to pay a little visit. If you don't mind that is? No, well I'm glad to see that my visit has brought a smile to your lips. When I first entered, you looked like you had just lost your very best friend. So tell me everything dear. Yes, everything since last we visited.”

She reached out, took his hand in hers and squeezed it gently. As he began telling her the events that led to his new stay in the hospital, she stared into his eyes and smiling nodded her understanding.

After what seemed like hours later, he was completely and absolutely spent. All the emotions and feelings of inadequacy had been released and their burden taken up by Mabel. Her motherly attention and soothing understanding eased a great burden from his care worn body. He felt so relieved that he enthusiastically jumped at the chance to accept her offer of a place to stay.

“Yes! Mrs. Johns, I would love to come and stay with you!” Sam almost shouted in relief. “I...I just wish I had sooner, then this wouldn't have happened,” he raised his left arm now in a cast as well.

Smiling sadly, he went on, “Are you sure that you want to take on a loser like me? You know, I'm going to be a handful until I can maneuver on my own? You sure that you want to take me on like this right now? I'll do my best to behave and not be a bother to you ma'am. I swear!”

“Why, of course! Think nothing of it my dear,” Mabel replied. “Now you don't worry about a thing and in the morning you give this address to the cab driver or whoever Gloria gets to take you. I'll be waiting for you at home. Won't that be nice dear. You'll be safe there. Well, you get your rest and I'll see you first thing in the morning. Oh...dear...by the way, don't say anything about this to Gloria. She worries so and I don't want her concerned about me being able to care for you, Okay? Good night dear.”

“Gee, I don't know how to thank you,” Sam replied feeling very happy even if it meant he would have to endure some overbearing mothering. It would be a darn sight better than the beatings. “I really appreciate you kindness and I won't mention anything to Mrs. Norris.”

Mabel bent over and kissed him on the forehead, turned and left. For the first time in days, he felt at peace. After all, what could possibly be any worse than having to stay at the shelter or a flop house. Compared to that all his previous misgivings were mere trifles, really nothing. He was just over- reacting. He slept soundly and did not stir during the night.

-000-

Mabel left Sam's room and turned down the hall heading to the elevators. Taking it down to the subbasement, she checked to make sure there was no one about; then, stepped out. Quickly she walked down the deserted hall arriving at the frosted glass paned door with the name “Dr. Jonas Little” painted in neat black letters, she raised her hand and gently rapped on the door.

Without waiting for a response she turned the knob and entered the room.

“Oh!” was all she said as she saw the elderly white haired man sitting before a microscope on a stainless steel stool. He raised his head and pulling down his spectacles, closely examined her.

“Mabel, Mabel Johns, is that you?” he asked as he rose from the stool and began walking over to where she stood.