

THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME JAMES B. FLAHERTY



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A Woman Reinvents Herself ... for Good ... and Bad!

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CHAPTER ONE:
**The Flawless Bettina Richardson isn't so Flawless. But only
She knows Who She Is....and Isn't.**

And her platinum-edged husband, Dillworth Richardson, did not know she was actually Bethel Sokoloff, daughter of a mediocre Bronx tailor. Heir to a multi-faceted fortune too vast for a calculator to contain, Dillworth knew Bettina only as she had presented herself—the only child of a refined family, properly grounded and educated, left penniless by the private plane crash which snuffed out the lives of her parents.

Bethel worked very hard to become Bettina. There were ten months of diction lessons paid for by working as a barmaid in a waterfront bar. It's hard to erase fluid Bronx from a voice. She memorized and practiced how a department store beauty salon did her hair and makeup and nails. A legal name change to Bettina Marshton, a fake resume, forged references, and a splendid nose job, plus a lease at a proper residence hotel for young women helped her obtain a position selling at Tiffany's.

It all paid off. Dillworth was smitten by her gentle and genteel vulnerability, and after a couple of false starts, succeeded in convincing her he was honorable and trustworthy. Meanwhile, Bethel—pardon me—Bettina never stopped studying. She would walk along Fifth or Madison Avenue and watch the women born to wealth. How they dressed. How they walked. How they wore their hair. And when they paused, how did they stand?

After a year and a half of nerve-wracking role playing, Bettina and Dillworth (she called him Dilly) were married in one of those social weddings that attracts guests from The Hamptons, Palm Beach, The Cape, Europe, and any other address deemed fashionable at the time. A three-week Caribbean honeymoon (“Mummy and Daddy never took me to the islands—they didn’t care for...well, you know, the people.”) and then they settled into Dilly’s Fifth Avenue apartment, with a converted barn in Short Hills, NJ, for weekends.

Bethel, or Bettina as the world now knew her, had ample sexual credits, but allowed Dillworth to “teach” her the techniques of passion, although it was a full year before she could engage in “mouth sex” as she called it, to Dillworth’s amusement. The real amusement was that the old Bethel didn’t have to be taught anything, even though sex had never been a paramount influence in her life.

CHAPTER TWO:

Dilly was an Orderly Man, Not Taken to Snap Decisions or Unlikely Turns in His Life. But He Remembered Distinctly the First Time He Saw Bettina.

He was shopping at Tiffany's for his Mother's birthday. He was staring into a counter of diamond and sapphire pins and bracelets when a musical and gentle voice kissed his consciousness. 'Good morning, sir, I mean, Good afternoon, it is afternoon I believe.' He looked up to see a timid, embarrassed smile, encased in a very special gathering of features and flesh and hair. 'Now that we've established the time of day, may I be of service.' Something touched Dilly. He smiled back, and somewhere chimes tinkled. He swears he remembers chimes. She looked...vulnerable. The clothes were ultra conservative, but she managed to look glamorous. She probably didn't realize she was glamorous looking. He suspected it was something that just happened to her slowly over the years so she never came to accept it as a quality of her own. He made the purchase, which was, Bettina remembers clearly, the equivalent of half a year's salary for her, and while he waited for the package to be gift wrapped, managed to ask information-gathering questions, the answers to which she had long rehearsed. 'No sir, I haven't lived in New York very long, at all.' 'Unfortunately, there's no family in the area, so I live in Heraldon Hall, the young woman's residence in the Upper East Side.' 'No, no married couples can live there, only unattached women.'

Bettina loved the questions. And she answered each one with a hint of 'Is this proper for me to be speaking to you about these things?' After all, this is what she had been training herself for. There had been other, clumsy attempts at communication from other male shoppers, but she refused to be bullied into a confrontation with someone whose 'wife doesn't understand me', just because she was lonely. She had been waiting for Mr. Right to ride up on a white horse, or better yet, in a Silver Cloud Rolls, and here he was. And besides that, he was beautiful looking. He even smelled good.

There were cocktails, usually champagne at Windows of the World; glorious flowers sent to her hotel; intimate dinners at flawless restaurants. Thank God she had studied food magazines for a full year, reading every word, checking pronunciation, and knew which fish were In and which were Out. She, quite honestly, denied any knowledge of wine, saying, I know you'll make the correct choice and I would make a fool of myself pretending. He was enchanted. At the Carlyle Hotel, a horrifically nervous Dilly, sweetly and gently eased his newfound flower into bed. She, succumbing, after tearfully admitting that the sex act had been forced onto her some five years prior, and he probably wouldn't want to have anything more to do with her knowing that. He wanted to kill the aggressor in her life and adored her all the more, sure that his gentleness would make her forget the unhappiness of five years before. It was sweet if not exciting, and she kept her remarks to the minimum, especially touching him

with, 'Oh, Dilly, when I'm with you, every day is my birthday, every day is Christmas, I'm so very happy, and feel so protected.' In his own eyes, he grew strong and muscular. They stayed there, sleeping together that night. She forced herself to wake at 5:30 a.m., and went to the bathroom and rejuvenated her face, her hair, her breath, so he woke to find his new adoring Goddess at his side, gazing at him tenderly.

Even though Bettina, still Bethel in her head back in those days, was enjoying the sex, she decided there had to be very definite limits. What was the old saying? Why buy the cow when you get milk for free? So, the courtship continued at a gentlemanly pace, now and then spiced by coupling, which while not exotic, was growing in interest enough to keep Dilly fascinated with the thought of her. During this period, she often thought perhaps she'd just opt for the status quo. He showered her with good things, and gifts and a good life, and was hinting about finding her a lovely apartment somewhere. She knew the alternative was the jackpot--getting married. But she also knew that meant meeting the family. And although she had worked hard, and was becoming accustomed to being Bettina, she also knew the family would not be blinded by sexual attraction. Would they see through the facade? It all came to a head one evening while dining at Le Bernardin, touted, with good cause, as one of the world's finest restaurants.

"Bettina, there's, ummmm, something I've been meaning to discuss with you."

"What my darling Dilly?"

“This arrangement, wrong word, relationship of ours, is, uh, missing something.” Her heart skipped a beat. Is he ending it?

“Not from my standpoint, Dilly. Being with you is everything good that could ever happen to me. If I'm letting you down in some way, please tell me, and, and I'll do whatever I can, make any changes I can.” The tears that glistened in her eyes were real, even though the emotion of her words was false, she honestly feared losing him.

“Oh, God, Bettina, please don't cry. You're perfect and I'm just stumbling here because I've never asked someone to marry me before. Here, I think this might help explain.” And he gave her the small-understated blue Tiffany box.

“Dill...Dilleeee...” Bettina's tears spilled down her cheeks and she stood up jostling the table where they were dining, spilling her champagne and reached across the table and kissed Dillworth Richardson, and said, “Yes, yes, yes, I love you and will marry you.” Dilly presented her with a 3.6-carat marquise cut diamond ring--from Tiffany's, since he was grateful to Tiffany's for introducing them. He would have bought her a larger ring, but thought it would be vulgar. It was, she decided, very cute the way he handled it. It was Dilly all the way.

CHAPTER THREE:
Edwina Richardson wasn't just Dillworth's Mother, She was The
Supreme Court, a Blue-Chip Icon of Correctness, of Right vs
Wrong.

“You’re bringing Whom to meet me?” Mrs. Richardson closed the book she had been reading without marking the place she would discover later, and made a never before gesture, which her son noticed, lightly scratching her right shoulder. She was not given to physical gestures of any sort, because she found them distracting and common. “What is her name, and tell me again why it’s important that we meet?”

“Her name is Bettina, Mother, and I’ve asked her to marry me.” The shoulder scratching had migrated to pulling lightly on the left ear lobe and an almost imperceptible side to side shake as though she was refusing to believe what she was hearing.

“Just like that I’m told you’ve invited someone to join the family whom I have never met. I think that’s rather appalling Dillworth. What if I find this, this person...”?

“Her name is Bettina, Mother.”

“Very well, Bettina. What if I find this Bettina unacceptable?”

“No chance of that, Mother. Good heavens, you don’t think I’d fall in love with just anybody.”

Fall in love! My God, it’s probably too late. “I suppose in the current vernacular of relationships that you have already consummated this tete a tete?”

“A gentleman would never discuss his private relationship with a woman. You taught me that eons ago.” Mrs. Richardson played her role well. She got her scratching and ear pulling gestures under control, and with a series of calculated questions, elicited information about the magical Bettina—information that she could use to check out her background. “In short, Mother, Bettina has found some part of me I didn’t know existed. My pulse races, my heart beats faster, I’m almost breathless when I see her.”

“Sounds to me like a coronary occlusion. Pardon me, dear, I’m just exercising my wit. I’m sure Bettina is charming. Why don’t you invite her for an evening a week from this Saturday? It will be only the two of you, your father and myself and your sister and her husband.”

“I don’t want you to frighten her, mother.”

“Frighten her! What do you think we are, Dillworth, ogres? We are your family, and if she has been invited to become a member of this family, I think we all have a right to meet her—as a family.”

CHAPTER FOUR:

Dilly, as a young man, had been one of those sons that other parents held up as an example to their own children.

Not that he was a saint, but his sense of propriety, his awareness of being a Richardson, of belonging to a correct society, kept him from any public embarrassment. His memories, as well as the actuality of his adolescent, were all normal. He never strayed too far from the norm for that period. His awareness of the opposite sex came to him gently, and his courteous self-awareness kept him from experimentation until his third year in college. Even then, it was sex without passion. He was wise enough to recognize it as such, and in the ensuing years, exercised his sexual rights and needs only when he felt it would be unhealthy to abstain for any longer.

Dillworth's relationship with his parents was like the rest of his life--proper and non-challenging. His Father, who had been left a sizeable fortune, had built it to staggering proportions. Although they weren't particularly close, Father and son appreciated each other's sensibilities. He knew nothing of his Father's highly confidential sexual couplings. Had he known, it would have offended him greatly.

His Mother on the other hand, was not to be ignored. The type who always turned her cheek and kissed the air, she was not overly demonstrative, but always demanding with her son. "Why are you taking these courses in college, Dilly? Give me your personal rational for each course and tell me why you feel it has value to

your education?" The questions she asked were never simple. "You no doubt have noticed Bill Rodgers is going to marry that simpleton he brought home from some college weekend. Considering what will be expected of Bill in terms of his family business, what is your opinion of men marrying women who are neither their social nor mental equal?" She in turn, approved of her son, although secretly wished he had more fire from within. He never displeased or disappointed, but also never overwhelmed her with his excellence. He was pleasantly predictable. Considering the alternatives, she was more than content with the status quo. There were moments when she worried about his seeming lack of interest in women. There were two or three who would have been fine as the other Mrs. Richardson. But after a while they disappeared, and a new candidate would appear.

Apparently, he had known Bettina for a while, quietly shoring up the foundations of their relationship. And by the time she was introduced to the family, he was enamored of her, and it was too late for the senior Mrs. Richardson to undermine the relationship. Their marriage stunned her. But she put on her best public face and went through all the motions, promising herself that when the time came, she would expose her new daughter-in-law as a sham. She was sure she was a sham. And certainly, time would prove her correct.

Dilly, while neither devious nor an empty shell, had always harbored doubts about himself. In his most introspective moments, he considered himself somewhat of a phony. Even back

in college days, maintaining a decent low honors average, he wondered how much he really knew. Were his grades simply a result of his organized mind? Or did he honestly grasp all the new concepts presented by his professors? They liked him. In fact, everyone liked Dilly. He was attractive, which never hurts anyone. He had, and has, a slender, angular face, skin and tissue handsomely arranged on an aristocratic gathering of bones. Even his hair cooperated. Just blond enough, but not so blond to be showy or vulgar, it was thick, but lay flat, quickly responsive to a brush and with a tendency to move with his head movements. His nose was what we call patrician, just a tiny bit too long, but it didn't matter. The eyes, wide apart, deep set, were grey-green, and were accented by healthy eyebrows, startlingly black. His mouth always hid a smile, but with a little encouragement would flash into a broad smile that was both genuine and likeable. Occasionally he was stopped for an autograph because of a definite resemblance to the actor, Jeremy Irons. He was refined/handsome, and looked as though he should live in the elegant homes of his family. As to be expected, his grooming and manners were impeccable. And he had a quick wit, a seemingly facile mind, and that engaging smile. He even smelled good, having taken an early interest in good and expensive men's colognes. That use of fragrance could easily be interpreted as an affectation, considering the solidness of Dilly's personality, but in truth, he enjoyed the subtle presence of a fine fragrance. It certainly wasn't a closeted feminine trait, but simply a personal expression. His two favorites were by Jean LaPorte—

Merchant Loup and Premier Figuier. Now and then, for variety, he'd use Armani. His clothes looked like Polo, whether they were or not. It was old money dressing, sensible, not splashy, richly conservative, and it suited him. He was remembered by both sexes in college as a “terrific guy”, “dependable”, “solid citizen”.

The girls he dated would fall in love with him for a few minutes. His money was sexy, and he was certainly cute enough. But his lack of passion made all those relationships fade away. He seemed to date the same girl. She was always slender, never sloppy, with straight or just barely curled blond hair. Her curves were always minimal, and her posture and taste in fashion, impeccable. His deflowering, now a bare memory, was in the off-campus apartment and arms of Jillian Montrose, a 20-year-old junior from Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, president of her sorority, honors student, and an aficionado of rough sex. Had Dillworth even heard the term ‘rough sex’ he would have paled, but following his own biological time-clock, he had determined it would be unhealthy for him to abstain longer, and with a little encouragement on her part, found himself nibbling on the bare breasts of Ms. Montrose, and shortly thereafter doing what comes naturally in the missionary position. He remembers the incident with some embarrassment, recalling his ineptitude, and wishing that it would end, not enjoying the sighs and her penchant for uttering such ‘C’ novel exclamations as, ‘Give it to me, Dilly...give me more of you...deeper, deeper.’ He remembers thinking; surely, this isn't what everyone's so excited

about? In retrospection, it was agreeable, but certainly not something that would or could guide his major decisions in life.

Once the necessities of college life had been dealt with, and he had his Bachelors from Northwestern University and the MBA from Yale in hand, Dilly entered the high anxiety world of McKinsey and Company, the corporate analysts. He came to love the drama of living with a company for a certain period, and then analyzing all its strengths and weaknesses. His co-workers found him to be a tower of energy. His disciplined nature served him well in the high-pressured halls of McKinsey. There were demands and deadlines, reports, recommendations, and the future of companies often were in the hands and heads of these young, dynamic corporate analysts. Dilly's point of view was highly regarded by his peers and seniors. He knew it stemmed from his ability to interpersonalize the problem, to mentally make himself part of the company, to mentally install himself as the CEO and then make all his decisions from that viewpoint. His high percentage of correct decisions paid off and he moved up through the company in relatively few years, and was made a Partner.

Dilly knew he did not have to make his own career. The corporations, factories, and industrial complexes owned and controlled by the family would have to be managed. It was certain his sister, Elizabeth, had zero interest in controlling any of it. She just wanted to maintain her three-million-dollar annual allowance, and was delighted to turn it all over to her younger brother, whom, she realized, was probably smarter than Dad, was one of God's good

people, and would never stoop to injure his sister, emotionally or financially. She was right. But he stayed with McKinsey long enough to learn everything he wanted to learn about other industries, because he knew there were huge opportunities that his father was overlooking. But he wouldn't countermand his father until he was given the right and the opportunity to do so.

CHAPTER FIVE:

If anyone had asked Bettina, What's the Tallest Mountain You've Ever Had to Climb, she would have named it, Edwina.

Even now, though accepted by the world at large as Mrs. Dillworth Richardson, every moment of that evening remained etched in Bettina's memory. "Well, Bettina, how nice to finally meet you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Richardson, it's so good of you to invite me."

Tsk tsk, she sounds as though she's auditioning for the lead in Pygmalion. Perhaps I should ask her where does it rain in Spain. "What a lovely dress." A cheap knockoff of a good design, but she does have a good body, and the color complements her.

"I like it, too. That color is great on you, and it would wash me out. I'm Elizabeth Catarsi, your future sister-in-law, and that tall handsome man over there is Teddy, my husband."

Bettina had turned to see Dilly's face, softened by a slight roundness and a splash of mahogany hair. But even better, there was a warm smile, and laughing eyes, which helped Bettina thaw from the laser coldness of the mother's icy welcome. "Hi, Elizabeth. This is very exciting, and a little scary, meeting all of Dilly's family at once."

Elizabeth was a Godsend. As she walked Bettina into the room she quietly advised her, "Mother will play 20 questions with you. Just look her in the eye and answer her as direct and simple as possible. We'll protect you if the going gets tough."

Bettina stopped hyperventilating internally, and turned to greet the senior Mr. Richardson, Roland Hughington Richardson, who was examining her with open curiosity. She felt no animosity in his appraisal, but she did feel stripped bare. He smiled. "Hello, my dear. Welcome to the family." He gently pulled her hand to him and bent slightly to brush his lips to her knuckles. She felt he was conquerable. Mother was still a high hurdle and she didn't feel strong enough to clear it tonight. "Teddy, come over here and meet Dilly's beautiful treasure."

She recognized Teddy's expression totally. She'd have to be careful to never be alone with Teddy. He wanted her naked, and was sure he was the only man alive who could make her happy. What a pig. Married to the beautiful and desirable Elizabeth wasn't enough. He wanted more. And his refined brother-in-law had that something more. "How do you do, Teddy. I'm so glad to meet you and Elizabeth."

"That goes doubly for us", he said, while massaging her hand. She reclaimed her hand, and turned back to Mrs. Richardson, who looked as though her son had brought in a native Eskimo into the parlor. "I'm delighted to meet the family, Mrs. Richardson. Dilly--Dillworth--has told me so much about each of you, I feel as though we had already met."

"Well then, my dear, you're well ahead of us. That naughty son of mine has kept you all to himself. Now that I've met you I can understand his infatuation."

Dilly, who hadn't uttered a word yet, butted his words right up to his mother's, with, was that a slight edge to his voice? "I'd say it was a bit more than infatuation, Mother. Bettina has consented to marry me, and we've selected this September 17th as the date."

"So soon, Dilly? Don't you think...."

"No mother, I think there's plenty of time for invitations and all the wedding plans. For the first couple of years, my apartment will do nicely for us until we decide precisely where we want to reside."

My God, it's fait accompli. Very well, I'll endure it for the moment, but I'll find a way to pierce your armor, Miss Bettina whatever your name is. And I don't believe the Bettina part, either. "So, Bettina, tell us about your family."

By contrast, The Spanish Inquisition was a musical comedy. Mrs. Richardson parried and thrust, again and again, and Bettina found within her enough adrenaline and spunk to answer the questions, with a light-hearted smile or embarrassed giggle, even though many of the queries bordered on cruel and made Dilly and his sister flinch. Dilly's father was enchanted, and Sister Elizabeth, not believing all that she was hearing, didn't care. She liked Bettina. She admired her goal-line stand with mother. She would be her friend. Whether she would ever know the true Bettina didn't matter, at least not right now. She was beautiful. Dilly adored her. And she had balls, something she and Dilly hadn't had to grow, as long as their behavior, both public and private, was in the realm of acceptability by mother.

Edwina thought Bettina was unnaturally perfect, her gestures too studied, the walk too practiced, the demure turn of the head or lowering of the eyes, too theatrical. She kept a close watch for chinks in the veneer. She also kept her doubts to herself, not just because she didn't want to interfere with her son's choice, but also because she feared his turning to call girls, as his father had, to accommodate his nastier sexual needs. The elder Richardson never knew his wife was aware, and she had convinced herself it wasn't important. But she did care about Dillworth, who thus far hadn't given her any major concerns, except of course, in his choice of Bettina.

CHAPTER SIX:
Bettina Understands the Meaning of Being-Between-A-Rock-and-a-Hard Place.

Bettina recognized "Mama's" doubts. And one night, after going "all the way" with "mouth sex", because "I love you more each day my daring Dilly", Bettina told him she had had a nightmare. "Something had happened to you, and your mother, who always treats me nicely, threw me out into the streets. It was so real, Dilly, I just laid awake for hours crying." Dillworth having seen his mother querulously eyeing Bettina, thought it could be true and generously signed over ten million dollars to his bride in an unusual post-marital agreement. It was hers to do as she wished.

"Oh, Kiki, you are too much," Bettina giggled into the phone, thinking what a total asshole Victoria King Van Holten really was, "and of course you're right as usual. Her paintings aren't worth the canvas they're painted on, but yes, I'll be at the opening. Looking forward to seeing you, you gorgeous, mean creature. Toodle." Toodle, ugh. I may throw up. Since I have the ten million, how many years do I have to keep this up? I know, forever. Because there's another hundred million if I wait around. Not bad pay for playing my part. Emerson, their Butler, interrupted her conversation with self, as he presented the mail. "Thank you, Emerson. Would you please bring me some tea? The mint would be nice."

The one envelope was irresistible. On the outside, it said, “We know what you're thinking, and what you would like to be doing.” The letter inside reached out at Bettina opening old wounds, bruising tender spots. It was divine revelation. Whoever Madame DeSantis was, she existed for one purpose--to elevate Bettina to a newer and higher level of being. The letter: Dear Bettina: *Like all of us, some days are better than others. The difference is for me there are no bad days--just good days and wonderful days. Today is one of those wonderful days. I am looking through my tarot cards, and thinking about you because your birthday is approaching soon. I drew a nine of cups. Alas, the card was upside-down. A robbery is in the making, which you could prevent by being more cautious. You think you're insulated from day to day crimes but that isn't so. Next, was The Tower, also upside down. This is serious. You could temporarily lose freedom just because you are vying for material gain. You must be cautious Bettina or you will bring trouble down upon yourself. And there is so much more I can tell you, not just today, but every week and every month ahead. I hesitate to tell you about the third card. It can be read two ways. But I know what it means in terms of you. I am Madame DeSantis. For three decades, people of great wealth and position have relied on me to tell them what lies ahead and which way to turn. I have served princes of industry, one president, many cabinet members, and yes, even royalty, whom I cannot name. Movie stars and bankers, and world-famous surgeons have all turned to me. Why? You may ask yourself that very question.*

You have heard that we are all merely pawns in the hands of fate. That isn't true. You are master of your own destiny. The difference is knowing which path will lead to a new opportunity, or helps you avoid a possible catastrophe.

I know the secrets that you hide. And you should have no shame for them. *I know what you want. I too, have wanted the very same things. We are both unusual women, Bettina Richardson. Your life is a two-edged sword. One edge cuts through the undergrowth and red tape of life, leaving you in golden sunshine; the other side can cut you deeply, leaving you in deep pain with your tenderest parts exposed to the world. You must know which side to wield.*

If you use the coupon enclosed in this message, my first reading to you will be for a negligible \$20, instead of the normal \$50. And besides the reading, I will reveal to you the third card I drew while thinking of you. Ah, Bettina, do not delay. There are many forces bearing down on you. They are both good and bad, and I want you to emerge glorious and victorious in the golden sunshine. Meanwhile, I am both your friend and your humble and obedient servant.

With ever-lasting affection,

Madame DeSantis

Bettina read the letter at least five times, and each time the message became more intimate. It no longer spoke to the mythical Bettina, but to Bethel, a name she had so pushed out of her mind, it was nearly forgotten. She rushed to write the check and send it to Madame DeSantis after having no success finding her by

telephone. This was what she needed. Madame DeSantis would help her survive--in grand style.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

You don't know me. My name is Kenneth, and I'd like to introduce myself by telling you about my childhood and how I've come to influence the afore-mentioned lady, Bettina.

First my childhood. My mother had painter's eyes. That she was a horror among womankind is another story that I will share with you. But thought first I'd lull you into believing this to be a story of familial bliss by telling you the solitary positive gift she left me. Even though I still damn her memory, the legacy of her eyes almost makes me want to forgive. While she wouldn't lift a brush due to ennui or unadulterated laziness, she saw beauty or at least line and form in the commonplace. She was especially moved by ever changing skies. Even now I study the sky every day. I'm anxious to wake up early so I can greet the sunrise and share its mythical pleasures. And a fiery sunset seduces me, as it turns late day clouds into gold-touched jewels.

I am touched by the memory of her stopping the car and telling me to 'Look to the horizon, Francis, (more about my name later) that's the straight-line way off in the distance. And those bumps in the line are little towns populated with people who realize their dreams. People...' and I remember her voice growing acidic, 'who don't have to live with the likes of your father.' So much for my memory. Thanks be to a Higher Power, whoever he, she, or it may be, Mother is long dead.

For some unexplained reason, today's sky was taking me back to one of many troubled childhood days. Giant cumulus clouds had

blossomed in a too blue sky, following a horrific storm, which painted the landscape pure white, grey in the shadows, with hints of mauve. And in the early morning and late daylight, it was splashed with yellow gold. Midday, with a blazing sun overhead and the temperature in the single digits, branches of the trees threw a jigsaw across the snow. Walking, it creaked and squeaked, and on the trees the snow was transformed into puffs of newly picked cotton. Every branch and twig so artistically adorned it appeared hand done, instead of art directed by Mother Nature.

The policemen came to the door, their eyes gentle, full of sloppy sentiment. `Son...son, there's been an accident.' The roads were slippery that day, and I visualized my Parents' car spinning out of control, mother screaming, my father panicked, turning the wheel pointlessly, yelling at her to shut up as the car dropped over the side of a trestle bridge, hurling them to sure death. I bit my lower lip and tried desperately to look frightened. One of the cops stooped beside me and took my two shoulders in his hammy lower class hands, and looked at me with his stupid wrong side of the track eyes, and said.... shit!

But it was only fantasy. They came home that night for yet another evening another year another lifetime of bickering. Strange how I can remember that one afternoon among so many lonely, cold, haunted afternoons. Had I been able to speak at birth I would have told my parents how much I hated them. For starters, Francis was a stupid name for a boy. I was taunted and teased, and soon learned to live by my wits. My name should have been named

Richard The Lion Hearted. Or Beowulf would mirror some of my inward passions. When I finally escaped my parent's ungenerous grasp, I summarily dropped the hated Francis. I had been named after an obscure uncle they had hoped would leave them something. My middle name was Kenneth, which was good enough.

I guess I never knew jack shit about life, but what the hell did one learn about life when you lived in *Lost Angeles*. If the sun didn't make you mushy-brained, the layers of bougainvillea and the bastardized Spanish architecture would dissolve your hard edges before you ever developed any.

So, I didn't have a clue, so what. There were private things I knew. Things I had no right to know for my age. Naw, I wasn't precocious. That word's too cute. And God and Aunt Jemima knew I wasn't gifted. I guess, I guess, I, was, wise. A young, wise old man. I remember my childhood, painfully and permanently etched in my memory bank. My peer group was moronic. As all suburban children do they played sandlot football and baseball. I hated the physical aspect of football and baseball was like watching grass grow. When not beating up on one another, they built tree huts and wasted their days fantasizing, first about castles, then about cars, and finally about girls. I participated to the extent necessary to cover my disdain for them.

But even then, I realized how easy it was to manipulate people. How willing individuals were to turn their lives over to anyone with a strong point of view. I was only a kid, but even then, I knew the world was full of suckers. Little did I know I would

become an adult lollypop full of instant gratification with sweet promises of more to come.

Perhaps I came by my gifts naturally. My father, Donald Monroe, never did an honest day's work. If there were a way to goldbrick, shirk, slack off, and malingering, he would find it. Over the years, he sold dictionaries, mainly to people who would never crack a book; vacuum cleaners, which gave him an opportunity to clean up in numerous women's bedrooms according to my suffering mother; and telephone pitches, followed by personal visits, to sell snake-infested rock quarry land in Arizona for unsuspecting retirees. If he had an ethical bone in his body it had dissolved in his own acid years before. He was shallow, but noisy.

I suppose he was good looking if you didn't see past the surface. He had one of those small, trimmed mustaches that seem to go hand in hand with an unctuous personality. He was rangy, tall, and without a drop of exercise, possessed a fatless body, which, topped with wind-blown curly hair, gave him an almost sexy, almost athletic look. It's difficult for me to praise any facet of old dad, since my recollection of him produces a moldy portrait. To add to his ample list of minuses were his excesses. Ever present was an unfiltered cigarette, evident in his stale breath and stained fingers. And now, older, I realize alcohol was a constant companion. How they afforded these excesses--for I will make no effort to whitewash my un-sainted mother--I cannot tell you. Their foundation was quicksand; their dreams were borrowed from the misfortunes of others. I suppose they managed, somehow.

Was there ever time for me? Do I remember walking hand-in-hand with dad? Did I build sandcastles with my mommy? Did someone tuck my head in the soft curve of their neck and rock me, crooning lullabies? Not even close. I was an impediment. A mistake resulting from drunken coupling, something to push aside. And to insure a lasting influence of their negligence, three years after I made my unwelcome arrival, they had the gall to further insult the reproductive process by bringing Annette The Hun, my cursed sister, into a beleaguered world. I didn't know an older brother existed until years later.

But where, you may ask, is the mother of this picture-perfect group? To praise Ethel Annabel Monroe would be tantamount to electing Typhoid Mary as Mother of the Year. Forgive my unkind, un-son-like description of Mom. I remember her as chicken breasted, with the thin legs that so often accompany incipient alcoholism, and determined mouse-hewed hair that curled across one side of the face, as unflattering as her artificial Hollywood voice, a direct steal from early Olivia DE Havilland and Joan Bennett movies. She was a horror. With better looks and more courage, she might have also been a whore. Did she cook? No, she opened cans. Did she keep a clean house, a nest for her brood? Hah! She trailed debris. We entertained no one. She and Dad just faced off one another night after night. Strong amoral wills in a battle for supremacy.

Why do I tell you all this? Do I want your sympathy? Perhaps I insist that you recognize why I am who I am. Why I do what I

do. It's not necessarily a gift, as much as a defense mechanism. It's in my genes. Fuck 'em first, ask questions later.

Strange, looking back, to realize my first scam was a harbinger of what was to come. I found an old Gypsy, down on her luck, scratching out the barest kind of existence, reading palms, and spouting all kinds of guessed crap, for a couple of dollars a throw. I asked her if she knew anything about drawing up an authentic sounding horoscope or making predictions based on numbers. The old asshole really believed in herself and told me it was all true. I signed her up with a guaranteed minimum income, almost as minimum as she had before, and I started selling Professional, Personal Readings by A Mystic...Totally Authentic...Without the Needless Embarrassment of a Personal Call to Your Home, or To the Mystic's Home. Monthly (or weekly) Guidance, for only \$20 each reading, a minimum of two readings required.

I didn't have too much hope for this scheme. Wrote up the pitch, and arranged for it to be delivered to every mailbox in Manhattan's silk stocking district, personalized to the mailing list. I still find it hard to believe all that happened.

Mind-boggling. Four thousand suckers each sending twenty dollars. Eighty thousand dollars. I had made a deal to pay "Madame DeSantis", alias Ruby Schmidt-Feller, one thousand dollars, but decided it was worth it to give her fifteen hundred dollars, big-hearted guy that I am, so we could personalize all these mind-fucking messages. Even after all the postage and printing, I

was good for more than fifty thousand profit on the first mailing, and if I was good, I could turn that fifty grand into a bonanza. And I was good. I just didn't know how good.

We were swamped by the emotional waterfall immediately following that first mailing. Bettina Richardson, now so dear to my heart, was just one of many. Empty people desperate to be filled with promises, no matter how hollow, promises of money, of long life, of dreams.

But the letter from Mrs. Dillworth Richardson couldn't be ignored. The notepaper itself was easily \$2.00 a sheet, with raised gold engraving, and gold washed edges. I had a friend run a D&B on Richardson and found he was in the Fortune 400 Richest list. Society books had little on his Mrs., other than her maiden name, and vague references to having been educated in the Midwest.

She had requested a personal meeting and reading with Madame DeSantis, and offered to pay \$500 for the privilege. Alas, I wrote back on some hastily printed Madame DeSantis stationery, to interrupt my solitude, and to meet personally, the fee is \$2,000. And even then, I said, there are no guarantees. The Madame has to feel the necessity of a meeting. hesitate. Her answer was in the return mail. Besides the \$2,000, Bettina would rent me, alias Madame DeSantis, a suite in The Waldorf for two nights. I (we) answered, and a date was set.

Next was how to make Ruby, i.e., Madame DeSantis, more appealing. Her normal drag was right out of Barnum & Bailey. Her

hair was a deep henna rinse, pulled tight to the back of her head, with a braided bun laced with silk scarves. She had Cleopatra eye makeup for God's sake, and big showy campy 40's glasses. And the outfit! Layers of color and print, with a wide belt, with signs of the zodiac, "moon earrings", a crystal ball ring on both fingers, and Moroccan style felt slippers. Pure crap. I found a woman who specialized in makeovers, and hired her for \$300 to do a complete makeup job, and costuming, and that I would pay for the costume. That ran another \$350, but the end result was worth it. Old Ruby looked terrific. Her washed out grey hair, now sans henna, was still pulled tight to the back of the head, with a zodiac stick pin as a quiet accessory. Dignified woman CEO makeup, which looked perfect with new gold Ben Franklin wire glasses, replaced the Cleopatra eye makeup. And the outfit was pure genius. Subtle and perfect. Gunmetal grey flannel, high-necked, long-sleeved, mid-calf length, with a line of black braided buttons from the shoulder to the hem. The belt, more of the black braid. One small pin, a gold crescent moon. We even kept one of the crystal ball rings. A black felt low-heeled pump, over dark, not black, hose. You'd vote her in as Prime Minister.

We rehearsed everything and anything she might be asked, and what to say. Big hearted me promised her another \$200 if all went well.

And me? What role was I to play? How could I be there and exert the necessary control? The answer came to me about a week later. I bolted upright in bed and turned on the light and

began scribbling notes before the thought faded. What could be more appealing or irresistible! I would be her disciple, a devoted follower who had followed Her advice and gained stature and now was assisting Her in her efforts to impart wisdom. Perfect.

And best of all, no disguise was necessary. I could be me, spruced up to appear prosperous, and God knows, I knew all the right moves. Role-playing was my life and this was a role I was born into. The big question was whether Mrs. Dillworth Richardson would buy it--hook, line...and checkbook.

The nights were the worst for me. Sleep wasn't in the cards. Just thoughts of the upcoming meeting and the opportunity it presented kept my motor running. I couldn't turn off. What if old Ruby blew it? What if this Bettina Richardson had a brain after all? I know I know, I'm projecting, cool it Kenny. Kenneth sounds good. No more Francis, no more Kenny. I'm now Kenneth Monroe, a disciple, a believer, and a follower of Madame DeSantis.

Maybe I wouldn't have made the cover of GQ, but little children didn't run screaming when they saw me. Maybe it was my lack of self-esteem, but the person I knew in the mirror didn't turn me on. But maybe it wasn't all bad. Even though my hair was a dead mouse brown, it was thick, and needed only to be taken care of on a daily basis. My nose was slightly long and patrician, and it just traveled downward except for one slight lump to one side, a reminder of a boyhood spat. But my eyes were something else. When I taught myself to stop looking away so people wouldn't say I looked shifty, I had almost bottle green eyes. When I learned,

they had an almost hypnotic quality, I learned to drill everyone I spoke to...or listened to. My mouth was pensive, and my lips soft, almost effeminate, and emphasized every expression as weak.

But trust me, friend, weak I wasn't. That I looked vulnerable suited me fine. How could anybody who looked as gentle as I, be dangerous? Even though anyone I ever "helped" would never forget me. All in all, I was pleasantly forgetful, except for my eyes.

It was fun. I had money in my pocket, and took my 5'11" acceptable body to Saks Fifth Avenue. I knew I didn't look like I belonged there, and for a long time none of the salesmen would approach me. Finally, one nice looking gent in his 50's asked if I needed help. I explained I was in the market for at least two suits, perhaps a sport coat, some slacks, shirts, and a couple of ties. Let me tell you, friend, clothes may not make the man, but they don't hurt. The new Kenneth Monroe, right down to his Ferragamo slippers, (I splurged) wasn't quite so forgetful. A good haircut, some Italian tortoise shell glasses, and I looked like a man who was on a big winning streak. A woman even eyed me as I was buying a good, manly citrusy fragrance from the Armani counter. How long had it been since there was a woman in my bed? I didn't want to think about it. Someday, maybe soon, I'll be able to buy what I want as a bed partner. But first Bettina, whoever you are, we have to make beautiful music together. I'm ready, are you?"

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Bettina was ready for something, but she didn't know what...or why.

Why look into something that didn't need to be touched? She knew she had the ten million, and the rest would eventually be hers if she stayed in character. Why this need to delve into her own secret self? She was increasingly aware of her growing boredom with her socialite husband, and at the same time, questioned her own boredom. Dilly was good and decent and God only knows why, loved her. But she convinced herself to privately mock his manner and gestures, all of which he was born into. She stifled yawns during the sex act, yawns which he didn't deserve. Although never overly promiscuous, the men in her world were not inclined to romantic coupling--she had known only rough, hard sex. She thought once, and the thought had frightened her, how nice it would be if Dilly died. When he took the occasional business trip, she uncharitably wished the plane would fall from the sky. Bettina only wanted what she wanted. There was no room for generosity or caring. But now she spent the day thinking of the mysteries soon to be revealed to her.

Emerson, both butler and captain of the house, who very secretly thought the young Mrs. Dillworth was common, although she didn't treat him badly, wondered what was gnawing at her. Bettina wandered through the Sister Parish decorated 12 room unit on Fifth Avenue, facing Central Park. She might have been in a furniture showroom as she paced from one room to another, now

and then perching on some spindly antique, or huddling up with herself on an overstuffed sofa. She wasn't aware what she was doing, but Emerson saw it, and wondered what the hell she was looking for.

In the library, she doodled cocktail glasses and bottles of champagne, even though she wasn't much of a drinker. During her visit to the morning room, with its silk walls and empire furnishings, dominated by a fine Monet, she filled in one word in the New York Times Sunday Puzzle, something she never played. The kitchen lost a celery stick during her trek, and she devoted 35 minutes in her bedroom, rearranging all her fragrances. Her husband's study lost a small bronze, but gained a pair of crystal Steuben animals. The Biedermeier dining room with its deep red walls and splashy Frankenthaler paintings was untouched. No, the floral arrangement in the center of the table was replaced with a collection of silvered bronze figurines, which, obviously too small for the scale of the room, were replaced by a collection of un-matching crystal candlesticks. Meanwhile, every room gave Bettina an opportunity to look at a different facet of her life.

What did she want besides the ten million dollars? Was she through with Dilly? Would she be better off in Europe? Were her needs sexual? Or purely financial? Was she bored with her life? Did she need something that was just for her? I mean, what's-her-name paints. Maybe she should become a painter. Social work is too, too...dirty. Unpleasant. Sick people. Poor

people. Wrong. Could Madame DeSantis expose her? No, no, no. She will be her friend. She needs a friend who knows me for who she is. Had she been able to foretell the future, she never would have answered that letter. A living scam herself, she was a natural and willing victim.

CHAPTER NINE:

Madame DeSantis was Destined to Play a Major Role in Bettina's Life.

"Ruby, I mean, Madame, let's go over it again."

"Kenny, I mean Kenneth, this is all bullshit. You think this rich lady is so batty in the head that if I tell her to fork over a million dollars to spread the word of Madame DeSantis, that she's going to do it? You're batty in the head. I look like Strom Thurmond's maiden secretary. She's going to take one look and run like hell let me tell you. You are a mashugannah. And if it works, you're gonna owe me more than any crappy two hundred dollars."

I really thought I was going to lose it dealing with this old sack of shit, trying to make her understand what was in the offing. What a turd brain she was. "Ruby, haven't I paid you well until now. Took you off the fuckin' sidewalk and got some decent food in your belly, and moved you to better digs. Isn't that true, huh, huh?"

"Big fucking deal. A scam is a scam. So, I didn't make as much, at least it was clean, and if I didn't feel like working, I didn't work. Now all of a sudden, it's Ruby do this, Ruby do that. Why don't we just hang out a shingle that says, The Madame is in. Open every day 10 to 6. It's all so much shit, Kenny."

"It's Kenneth, remember?"

"Kenneth, how could I forget. Now if I can only remember my own name. Schmidt-Feller has more sex appeal than DeSantis."

"RUBY, DAMMIT."

"Aaaah, forget it, Ken-neth. Ah, my dear Mrs. Richardson, and I know you will not object to my calling you Bettina. Let me have your hand. Mmmm, wonderful. So much has happened to you, and it is all nothing compared to your future. And then while I'm studying her palm, my expression changes, I squint my eyes, and furrow my brow--that's your word, I don't know what the fuck furrow means. And when she says, 'What's wrong, what do you see?', I force a fake smile back on my face, and turn her hand over and say, no, no, it's nothing. She'll probably say I can see it's not just nothing. And I will turn to her with a look of real affection and reassurance, and say, it's nothing that we have to deal with now. I promise you. In time, in time. Not now. Now we're going to talk about what Bettina wants out of her life, and how Madame DeSantis is going to help make it all come true. But first, some tea. It's very special hibiscus tea and it will open doors in your mind as we speak.

"Somewhere during all this first part, she is going to make reference to you who will be sitting silently in one corner of the room, observing us, and now and then staring out the window. When that time comes, I will explain who you are and why you are with me."

Bettina was more nervous than when she went on trial before Dilly's mother. She changed outfits three times, finally settling on an Oscar de la Renta suit. It was a curly mohair in a deep bronze color, with a military lapel flap that buttoned over the

front, just showing a hint of blouse, which was apricot colored satin. Burnished gold low-heel pumps, and tailored gold jewelry completed the look. It was rich, underplayed, good taste in every aspect. Bettina looked her part and was prepared to play her role perfectly.

Madame DeSantis didn't look like Madame DeSantis—she looked like Bettina Richardson's mother should have looked. Very dignified, composed, peaceful. But immediately Bettina felt touched and moved by her presence. God, she saw something in my hand, something bad, but.... "Madame, pardon me for asking, but who is the gentleman in the corner"?

"Oh, forgive me, dear Bettina. Kenneth, my dear Kenneth, come forward so I can present you to Bettina. Bettina, this is Kenneth Monroe. He came to me, how many years ago, Kenneth?"

"Five, Madame."

"Yes, five years ago, contemplating suicide, a completely unacceptable premise to me, and to say he was down on his luck would have been a gross minimization of his problems. We studied together, he did all that I asked and became a man of such importance, of such stature that I was thrilled for him and with him. Knowing that my job is to be a parent with special insights, once he was positively heading in the right direction, I let him go."

Kenny moved toward Ruby and knelt beside her chair. He smiled at her warmly and turned and spoke to Bettina, who was hypnotized by the physical exchange between them. "Money didn't matter. I had all that I would ever need. I suddenly realized that

what Madame did for me she can do for so many others. And here was my opportunity to pay back, to give back, to a world that had given me so much. So, I returned, despite her telling me to do whatever I wanted, I returned to be her disciple. I also make sure those she helps do not hurt her...for, as you know not everyone is trustworthy. I am her business manager.”

“He makes it sound as though I'm a prizefighter. Business manager, phaah.” I was getting ready to belt Ruby, she was straying from the script, but she redeemed herself. She took my hand and turned the palm over, and lightly kissed it. “His belief gives me strength to go on, to continue resolving the lives of those whom I have touched. People like you, Bettina, who in turn have touched my heart.” It was academy award time. The old bitch came through so good, I could have kissed her. I promised myself to give her a bigger cut. Not too big, but bigger.

“And now, my beautiful Bettina, tell me your story and I will tell you what I see inside of you.”

CHAPTER TEN:

Hah! Bettina Telling her True Story Wouldn't Thrill anyone unless he was a Student of the Dirty, the Downtrodden, and the Hopeless.

Bethel Sokoloff was one of three children, each notable for his/her lack of specialness. Bethel was probably the least attractive of the trio, although with adulthood her face caught up to her features, except for her nose. Not just a nose, it was, to the cruel neighborhood boys, "a studio apartment." A Jewish girl's nightmare. All the jokes about Jewish noses in one climactic statement, right in the middle of Bethel's face. A nose job during her transformation took care of that problem. The end result was an adult face that bordered on perfection, self-trained to have expressions of arrogance, disdain, or idleness. Her eyes were grey/mauve, an unusual color that she accented with careful eye shadows in the same color. The hair was just blond enough and had just enough body that a once a week visit to an expensive salon kept it looking flawless. Now and then, like today, she French-twisted it, other times let it fall casually, rich-girl style, to her shoulders. It always looked good. God gave Bethel trim ankles and good skin, and the rest she gave herself. From sloppy early eating habits, she had whittled her body down to a lithe size 6/8, which looked perfect on her 5'7" frame. And she kept it there. Admitting that she adored every form of junk food ever created, she banished those tastes from her mouth, probably forever, and ate only what

was necessary to keep herself alive. At this point, truthfully, it was no longer an effort to avoid bad foods, it was the way she was.

Her parents Moische and Ruth, weren't bad people. They were just what they were. Lower middle class, bordering on low, without the emotional or mental resources to do more than provide the basics for their children. They didn't scream at one another. They weren't problem drinkers, although one of Bethel's memories was of her mother sitting in a kitchen chair, rolling bourbon around in her mouth.

Moische was a tailor, and she can see him still, with pins between his lips, and the perpetual sad-eyed look that characterized his generation and his class. At least they didn't beat their children. They were just boring. Bethel's memory of them is a story without a plot. Monotony on top of monotony. A monotone chorus singing a one-note song.

Siblings Sam and Mickey (Michelle) were another story. Other than Sam making Bethel jerk him off when she was 11 and he was 12, Sam was her idol. Big brother was tough, street smart, and destined to do great things. Their genders kept them from sharing all the important stuff, like dreams, but Bethel knew that Sam had something-special going for him. His death at age 19, while attempting a peanut size robbery of a deli, ended life in the Bronx, if you could call that life, as they knew it, for Bethel. Nothing was the same, and it was at that point that she started looking for the nearest exit.

Mickey, her baby sister, found reward and importance in the sex act. The boy would feel he was in charge, but in truth she manipulated all of them. On her sixteenth birthday, she told her sister matter of factly, "I've fucked every Jewish boy in the high school. They think they've fucked me, but they don't know shit." She had clap once ("Big deal—two shots and adios."), and one abortion ("That hurt, I hope his dick falls off.") and suddenly at age 18 started dating the son of the Rabbi, and to Bethel's total disbelief, married the boy and became a pillar of the temple. All the boys who stayed in the neighborhood always referred to her, privately, not in front of the Rabbi or his family who were Big Time in our neighborhood, as "Mrs. Saul Nussbaum, the tightest pussy on Grand Concourse." Mickey, now only called Michelle, never mattered. She was non-existent from Bethel's standpoint.

Bethel herself? She worked at one meaningless job after another, hoping each one would be the beginning of the Big Break. She tried a real estate office, seeing the possibility of big commissions, and they gave her slum buildings to rent, dealing with pimps, whores and drug addicts. Her boss, Arnie something or other, was this gross pig, who weighed in around 375, who, when she came in to cry about her plight, offered relief, but she should start on her knees, right then, right there, in his office. Alas, poor misguided, poor stupid nothing that Bethel was, she acquiesced. She kept her eyes closed, and if his big belly hadn't kept hitting her forehead, could have imagined he was someone else. She never told any of them that she liked it. But given the

options, she preferred 'mouth sex' as Mrs. Dillworth Richardson would say, to the missionary position or variations thereof. She didn't want them lying on top of her. She didn't want the pushing, the grunting, and the inane comments. Cock sucking was neater. And what was it that famous writer, Capote said? Oh yeah, cock sucking was the only way to maintain a firm jawline.

After real estate, she was a sales representative for a shop at home decorating service, a division of one of the big department stores. She told her supervisor she would do better selling to the male customers who called in, saying at the time, "I have the right head to deal with men." She certainly did. The commissions were fractionally more than what she would have earned pushing coffee and donuts over a Chock Full of Nuts counter.

Then she signed on for her self-designed intensive training course. On her days off, she'd walk down Madison Avenue and watch all the women. They were beautiful whether they were beautiful or not. They knew how to walk, how to dress and how to tilt their head when they laughed. Their hair wasn't sprayed hard, like Bethels. The colors of their clothing were subtle, except now and then there would be a rich toned accessory. They had backgrounds; they had a future waiting in the wings. They didn't chew gum. They were everything she wasn't. But she watched, studied, read magazines, and watched TV shows about them. She found a reasonably good plastic surgeon in the Bronx, old but still practicing, and did him in his office, arranging a very special

rate. 'Five times for the first thousand and two times for every one hundred over that.' That ended the nose problem forever.

There was no barter for the diction lessons. And to learn how to walk and dress properly she had to rely on her own powers of observation. Neighbors thought she was strange. They'd hear Bethel, knowing she was alone, speaking in a soft, well-modulated tone, about a world that didn't exist. "I'm crazy about the Miro show at the museum—just divine, really." "Did you read the review of Sondheim's newest? It sounds frightful." "There's the most marvelous bistro on First Avenue--you can't believe the food. I felt I was back on the left bank."

The Tiffany job let her take her show on the road. She also left the Bronx for the first time in her life and moved to a woman's residential hotel...a place where decent young women lived in New York. She never allowed herself to even think that she was bored. And when she caught herself thinking about going down on the elevator operator, mentally slapped herself.

"So you see, Madame, I had a rather modest upbringing. We were comfortably middle-class, which isn't terrible, certainly not poor, but modest by comparison with the standards by which I live now. After my parents unfortunate passing, I came to New York and obtained the position selling at Tiffany's, and it was there I met Dilly, I mean, Mr. Richardson."

"Well my dear, good things had to happen to you. Had I known you way back then, I could have told you all these riches would come to you. It was foretold in the stars and in your hands!"

Kenneth interrupted the exchange between Bettina and the Madame. “But why are you here? Why did you have to meet with Madame? What did you hope to find?” He leaned far forward, his arms crossed across his midsection as though he had a stomachache. His eyes never wavered from Bettina's. The intensity of his gaze unnerved Bettina. She got up and paced, unaware she was doing it. “I don't know.” She almost whispered. “Your letter said you know what I want and know that good things can happen to me and bad things, and maybe I need to know all that you know. Maybe I am living a lie. Maybe I will be robbed. Maybe I....maybe...maybe it's not enough.”

“What's not enough, child?” Madame DeSantis had walked over to Bettina and put a protective arm around her waist, encircling her arm. “Open your heart and you will find a good and caring person inside, and we, together, will make sure that person is given the opportunity to live life to the fullest.”

I was flabbergasted with the poise and polish of old Ruby. She could bring a tear to your eye. My God, Ruby, Madame, is wet-eyed. She can cry on cue. Holy Shit!

“Come, Child...come sit with Madame and let's peel away the layers that keep you from feeling the warmth of the sunshine.”