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Jewel Box

Book I: A Change in the Weather

Chapter 1: Heavy Petting

It was just after midnight when the snow started. By three a.m., six inches had already piled up in the upstate New York town of Schuyler Falls. More to the point, however, six inches had piled up on Harry Merton's pickup truck. By six a.m., two more inches had fallen, and Harry's Toyota Tundra could very well be confused with its namesake. Harry, still being asleep, was blissfully unaware of the digging out he was going to have to do in approximately 25 minutes. When the time came to clear the snow off the truck, he would be far too aggrieved to savor the irony that the reason his truck wouldn't fit in the garage was that the snowblower was in the way.

In Harry's bedroom, the clock radio clicked on, and a blast of Van Halen jolted Harry awake.

"Dah!" he shouted, startled. "Did war break out?"

His wife—who actually had once slept through a loud explosion—barely stirred next to him.

Happily for Harry, the song ended almost as abruptly as it had sprang on. Well, Harry at first thought it was a good thing.

"Hey!" said an overly exuberant disk jockey, "This is the X98 Rock Bottom Morning Zoo, and I'm Sleazy!"

"And I'm Cheesy!" chimed in his partner who, Harry thought, had the exact same voice.

"And this morning we're your Blizzard Buddies, we've got eight inches—"

"And you better believe it, ladies!"

"Yes, eight inches of unexpected, fresh, virgin snow out there this morning, and you know what that means!"

"Well, Sleazy, it means we get to say 'virgin snow' as often as possible!"

Harry grunted.

"And, Cheesy, it also means it's 'Let's write our names in the snow time!'"

Over the radio came the sound of what sounded to Harry like a herd of asthmatic water bison choking to death in a vat of Jell-O. Actually, as it turned out, it was just the guffawing of the DJs.

"Don't radio stations play music anymore?" grumbled Harry. His wife stirred.

"Right you are, Sleazy, and we'll be going outside to violate the virgin snow right after we find out today's Painful Extraction."

Sleazy took it from there. "As you know, this is the part of the show where we call local emergency rooms to find out the strangest objects people have had to have removed from their—"

Harry leapt up and slammed down the Snooze button on the clock radio. He pulled the cord from the wall and tossed the clock-radio across the room. His wife, more or less awake, looked over at him.

"You know, you do this every morning. And that's the fourth clock-radio you've destroyed in as many months. Why do you set it to that station if you hate it so much?"

He smiled at her. "Because if I set it to something that didn't absolutely appall me I'd never get out of bed."

She laughed. "Oh, Harry."

Suddenly, something hit him.

"Damn! Did those zoo animals say there were eight inches of snow?"

He dashed to the window and pulled open the blinds. "Ahh!! They were right. And we open at eight today."

"Harry, if there are eight inches of snow on the ground, I don't think *anyone* is opening at eight."

"You want to make a bet? Last year when we had that blizzard I was 15 minutes late and Roger docked me an hour. This job only lasts six weeks out of the year; I have to make every hour count. It's our winter getaway money."

Harry Merton had been a chemical engineer for more than 40 years until he retired two years ago. Although he built up quite a little nest egg for himself and Martha, and although Martha still worked as a real estate agent, every Christmas season, Harry played Santa Claus at a local retail store. The mere pittance he made as Santa was what he claimed finances his and Martha's January-long trips to Fort Lauderdale. In point of fact, it wasn't.

Harry was built for the part of Santa—a tad on the stout side, gray hair, long, white beard, and the unnerving tendency to smoke a corncob pipe. Despite his physically fitting the part, the only Santa role he could get this year was for the local Pets, Etc., which was starting a holiday gimmick, "Have Your Pet's Picture Taken With Santa."

"Even if you open on time," Martha was continuing, "how many customers are you likely to have?"

"I'm hoping none," said Harry, still gawking out the window at the snow. "The whole 'Have Your Pet's Picture Taken with Santa' *sounded* like a cute idea. I like animals.

But I've been scratched, bitten, and peed on more times in the last three weeks than...well, I can't remember when."

"How many chemical engineers are ever scratched, bitten, or peed on?"

"Oh, there have been some meetings... Anyway, it's bad enough when the customers bring in dogs and cats, but the loonies are starting to come out of the woodwork. Let me tell you something—the sensation of having a gerbil stuck in your beard is not one I would recommend."

"I'm happy to say I can't imagine ever experiencing that—for a whole host of reasons."

"I wanted to draw the line at the boa constrictor, but, no-o-o. Roger insisted, 'You pose with the snake and you'd better be jolly about it.' I'd like to know who in their right mind can be jolly with a ten-foot snake coiling around their torso."

"I'll bet that crocodile hunter guy could."

"Well, let *him* play Santa."

"That would certainly be interesting," said Martha.

Within 15 minutes, Harry had got the snowblower fired up and was clearing the driveway. By seven a.m., the truck was clean and it even looked like the snow had stopped. He went

back in the house, showered, and changed into his Santa suit. By that time, Martha was up and preparing breakfast.

"Are the roads clear, did you notice?" Martha asked.

"Looks it. One thing you have to say about a town like Schuyler Falls, the Department of Public Works is run with an almost military precision." He crunched into a slice of toast. "You're not thinking of going anywhere today, are you?"

"We need food. I wasn't expecting a storm, and there's nothing in the house to eat. You'd never believe what I had to scrape off that bread to make toast."

He froze, the slice of toast midway into his open mouth. He dropped it to the plate.

"Martha..." he groaned.

"Well, look at it this way. Think of all the bacterial infections you'll stave off."

"I think I'll grab a doughnut on my way in," he said. "Make a list of what we need. I'll stop by FoodTrough on the way home." He put on his trademark red fur-lined coat and fastened the enormous black belt.

"Ho, ho, ho," he boomed, and strode out of the kitchen into the living room.

"Arf! Arf!" barked Martha, following him.

"Yeah, I *hope* all I hear is 'arf arf.' One more psychotic parrot and Santa's gonna have two hands full of bloody stumps where his fingers used to be."

"Oh, before you go, why don't you wear this?" There was a glass tschotschke bowl on the coffee table. She reached into it and pulled out a small, red object. She handed it to him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a Santa Claus pin." He examined it. Yes, it was indeed a Santa Claus pin. A big, ruddy Santa face, mouth erupted in a disturbingly jolly smile.

"This is pure nightmare fuel," he said.

"Oh, it's festive. And look, see? If you press the beard the nose lights up."

He did and, sure enough, it did.

"Where on earth did you get this?"

"I found it at that antiques show in Bouckville last summer."

"Figures. Did you settle for this? I mean, was the eight-foot-tall Betty Boop statue sold already?"

"Oh, cut that out." She slapped his lapel playfully.

"Okay, okay." He clipped the pin to his coat. "Happy?"

"Now you look Christmasy."

"Beautiful."

They kissed, and he ventured out into the snow.

The roads were plowed, but still slippery so Harry inched his truck along Route 6Z, barely able to stop for the red light at the intersection of Route 6X. In Schuyler Falls, every state highway was numbered "6"; back in the 1940s, the public works commissioner in charge of the regional state highway numbering system was terribly innumerate, having graduated from the local community college with a degree in English and having failed—and quite spectacularly at that—every math class he ever took. Thus, every highway he had to specify used the same number—6—followed by a different letter. The locals were used to it, but out-of-towners were naturally confused, and the question "Where is Route 6?" would inevitably yield the response "Which one?" which just led to even more confusion.

The light changed, and Harry hit the gas. A car ran the light and cut Harry off. Harry had to hit the brakes and the truck miraculously stopped short, although Harry's head smashed against the steering wheel. Oddly, he didn't feel any pain; he examined himself in the rearview mirror and didn't notice the slightest mark on his forehead, even though he had struck with a not insignificant amount of force.

"There'll probably be quite a bruise later," he groused.

He shook it off and proceeded into the heart of town, passing the spot that gave the town of Schuyler Falls its name. No, not a waterfall, but rather a spot on the sidewalk where Revolutionary War General Philip Schuyler took a tumble one winter day after slipping on a patch of ice. Every February, there's a weekend of special events to commemorate the event, with many of the locals taking their own spills on the ice—not all of them deliberate, it should be pointed out. Tourists came from miles around to attend the festivities, and the Broken Coccoyx Inn on Route 6V has its one big weekend of the year.

Harry pulled into a strip mall and parked some distance away from the entrance to Pets, Etc. The store owner, Roger Spaniel (yes, his real name), had very strict prohibitions about employees parking in spots that customers would find convenient, and he used his connections in town to have this policy enforced by having his employees' cars ticketed and or towed (depending on the extent of the foulness of his mood) if they violated it.

Harry entered the store and was greeted by the blast of both warmth and pet urine, combined with cedar chips and some kind of heavy, industrial strength room deodorizer

that Harry could have sworn could be used as a chemical weapon, if not first banned by the Geneva Conventions.

"You're late," said Roger, as Harry clomped the snow from his boots. Roger emerged from the back room with a Chihuahua tucked under each arm and an iguana perched on his shoulder. On his head was either a Scotch terrier or an even more ludicrous toupee than Roger was normally given to wearing.

"I don't know if you noticed, but we had eight inches of snow last night," said Harry.

"No, I hadn't noticed."

Roger actually did live in the store, although Harry never knew exactly where. He was suspicious after, one morning, he noticed that the cage next to the St. Bernard was filled with empty potato chip bags.

"Well, I can't imagine we're going to get very many customers today. Everyone's going to be too busy digging out or resolutely refusing to dig out until April."

"UPS is going to be delivering several boxes of gerbils later on," said Roger. "I'll need your help stocking them."

Roger didn't buy his gerbils from a very reputable pet supplier. The boxes were always labeled "Tennis Balls."

"Hey, I'm just here to be your pet Santa. I'm not the stockboy. Where's Josh?"

"He called in sick, although I had trouble hearing him over what I can only assume was the snowmobile he was riding at the time."

Harry grumbled.

"Look, I'll even pay you, if it's that important to you," said Roger. The iguana stared intensely at Harry, who quickly relented.

There wasn't much to do for the first few hours, except watch Roger obsessively straightening things: the bags of pet food all had to be facing the same way, the containers of fish food on the shelf all had to have their labels out, all the pet toys had to be arranged, first alphabetically by type of animal and then alphabetically by type of toy. Roger even spent an inordinate amount of time in the aquarium aisle trying to get all the fish to swim in the same direction. Whether it was from sheer force of will, or some Aquaman-like ability to communicate with them, they inexplicably obliged, and Harry was mesmerized by the sight of 20 aquaria filled with fish all swimming in sync with each other. Roger then glared at the snakes; they all looked at each other and coiled in the same direction on

the small treelets that occupied their cages. Harry just shook his head. It was Dr. Doolittle meets Monk.

At around eleven, the UPS truck pulled up outside, and the driver carried in two boxes marked "Tennis Balls." Roger was in the back, so Harry signed for them. As the UPS guy left, Roger emerged from the back, a brace of ferrets draped over his shoulders.

"Ah, good, they're here," he said. "Harry, please unload these boxes and place the gerbils in those eight empty cages in aisle seven. There should be 24 gerbils, so that will work out to exactly three per cage. Please try to make sure all the gerbils in each cage are roughly the same color."

"Aren't gerbils all generally the same color? I mean, there aren't any hot pink or fluorescent green gerbils in the world, are there?" Actually, Harry had to admit that he wasn't entirely certain.

"Just humor me." He handed Harry a box cutter. "You'll need this. Be careful slitting open the boxes. We don't want to end up with a number of gerbils that isn't a multiple of eight." He adjusted his ferrets and walked off.

Harry shrugged and looked at the boxes. As he was running the box cutter slowly along the top of the box, there was a loud crash from the back of the store as a

lemur that Roger was trying to feed escaped from his cage and swung himself across the store and knocked over the stack of *Math Puzzles for Dogs* books. Startled by the noise, Harry lost control of the box cutter and it slipped, the blade plunging straight into his thigh. Except that instead of piercing first his red flannel Santa pants and then his flesh, the blade snapped clean off and clanged to the tile floor. Harry looked at it curiously.

"What a cheap box cutter," he said, although he had to admit that he was a little relieved.

He instead used his keys to open the boxes and successfully stocked the gerbils in their mathematically appropriate cages.

There still being no customers, he wandered to the back of the store, where his Santa throne was set up. He sat down and reached under the chair, pulling out a paperback book he kept secreted there to read during the inevitable downtime.

Which didn't last long.

As he was absorbed in his book, he didn't notice a figure approaching.

"Oh, Harry Potter, you Satanic little scamp," he said, turning the page. Then he looked up and started. "Hi...I mean, uh, ho, ho, ho."

"Mr. Claus, I'd like to have my pet Alistair's picture taken with Santa."

It was difficult to argue with the man, as he was easily seven-and-a-half feet tall. His head was completely clean shaven—which has that odd effect of making people look even more menacing. His face was heavily scarred, as if he had been in a knife fight, or had at one time been the goalie for a darts team. He was dressed completely in black leather. In a word, he scared the crap out of Harry.

"Alistair," Harry could barely say. There didn't appear to be anything accompanying him. "Um, Mr..."

"Mennis. Denis Mennis. Yes, Alistair."

He opened his black leather trenchcoat and a large, dark brown shape flew out directly at Harry.

Harry screamed.

"That's Alistair. He's what's known as a False Vampire Bat, or Spectral Bat—*Vampyrum spectrum*. Native to South America, the False Vampire Bat is able to reach a wingspan of three feet. Just like Alistair here." He beamed with pride.

Alistair had attached himself to Harry's beard and stared at him—presumably not discerning a great deal. He squeaked.

"What does this thing eat?" Harry didn't really want to know but asked anyway.

"Birds, small mammals, things like that. They kill their prey by biting its head and crushing its skull."

"Charming. And it's just the thing to have flying around a pet store."

This aggrieved Mr. Mennis. "He's not a thing. He's my Alistair. And your precious birds and hamsters are perfectly safe. Alistair is a perfect gentleman."

"I see."

"So, please keep your bat-phobia to yourself and just snap his picture."

"Fine." Harry reached down and picked up the remote control for the digital camera, which was mounted on a tripod a few feet in front of the Santa throne.

Mr. Mennis walked over and adjusted Alistair so that he was hanging upside down from Harry's beard and facing the camera, his claws grasping tightly the thick gray hair. Despite Alistair's weight, about seven ounces, Harry could feel no pain—though it could not be said that he was even remotely comfortable.

"Ready?" asked Harry, aiming the remote control. He pressed the exposure button and a blinking red light on the

front of the camera counted down 10 seconds. "Say 'freakish.'"

"Spread your wings, Alistair!" exhorted Mr. Mennis.

The immense bat obliged, and the flash went off.

"All done," said Harry.

"See?" said Mr. Mennis. "Didn't he behave perfectly?"

Harry had to grudgingly agree.

Mr. Mennis held open his coat. "Here, Alistair!"

Alistair detached himself from Harry's beard and flew into Mr. Mennis's coat. He closed it over her.

Harry rubbed his beard. "God, I hope this picture came out," he said to himself.

He walked around to the back of the camera and brought the picture up on the LCD—happily, it was perfectly exposed. He showed it to Mr. Mennis, who was pleased. He printed the image to the attached photoprinter and handed the print to Mr. Mennis.

"You can pay up at the front register," said Harry.

"Thank you very much. And Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you...and to Alistair."

Mr. Mennis smiled approvingly and departed. Harry collapsed on his Santa throne and closed his eyes for a good long time.

What began to concern Harry was the complete lack of pain he had been able to feel all day. First the blow to the head in the truck—which didn't even leave a mark—then the box cutter, then having a half-pound bat hang from his beard—normally, these things would hurt or at the very least leave some kind of mark. And yet as he examined his forehead in the men's room mirror—and then checked the thigh he had hit with the cheap box cutter—he could detect not even the slight bump, bruise, nick, or soreness. Not that he was complaining, but it sure was peculiar.

Later that afternoon, as the roads got better and people began to venture out, business started to pick up and get back to something akin to normal. Roger's staff actually showed up, so Harry didn't have to handle every customer himself.

"Are you Santa?" came a voice from behind him. He looked around the back of his Santa throne and beheld a small, well-past-middle-aged woman. Her face was pulled taut, obviously the result of a facelift, but it looked more like her face had been caught in some kind of industrial accident. Her hair, which should by all rights have been gray, was dyed some weird shade of red that made it look like a Bozo the Clown wig. She had the rough,

gravel-strewn voice of someone who had smoked for at least 500 years.

"Yes, yes, I am," said Harry, resisting the urge to make a sarcastic comment.

"Take Pookie's picture." She presented him with something that looked like a giant, white, furry millipede but was apparently a dog of some kind. It even had a little red bow in its hair.

"Pookie," said Harry. "Is she a dog?"

"Yes, she's— Of course she's a dog, you idiot. What else would my precious be?" She kissed the dog's head for emphasis.

"I don't know. I missed that *Empire of the Insects* special on PBS last night."

Suddenly Harry missed Mr. Mennis and Alistair.

"Sure, let's get to it," he said.

He sat down on his throne and the woman placed Pookie on his lap. The dog kept squirming and yipping. He tried to pet her and make soothing sounds to calm her down, but Pookie would not stop moving.

"I need you to keep her still, otherwise the picture's not going to come out," said Harry, as the dog's yipping got more insistent.

"If you're going to run this business, the least you could do is know how to handle pets."

"Lady, for the past three weeks I have been handling pets that would literally make your skin crawl. Come on, Pookie, there's a good doggie. Sit still." He cooed softly and stroked the dog behind the ears. This did not please Pookie and she whipped her head around and sank her teeth into Harry's wrist. Except that the teeth did not sink into Harry's flesh, as Harry and Pookie were clearly expecting them to. In fact, not only wasn't there a mark on Harry, but several of Pookie's teeth broke off and fell into Harry's lap. Pookie began yipping and yelping until her owner picked her up.

"What did you do to her?" asked the woman, distraught. "What did you do to my Pookie?"

"I didn't do anything—she tried to bite me, and it didn't quite...work." Harry was just as bewildered as anyone.

"I'm going to report you to your manager, and then to the Humane Society." She and Pookie stalked off.

Harry stared at his wrist. There wasn't even a mark where the dog tried to bite him.

Harry was so focused on his wrist that he never even noticed the Santa pin on his lapel. The nose was glowing bright red.

Chapter 2: The Road Worrier

The rain stopped at precisely 8:47 am. Carol Munch knew that because she had been perched in front of the window, staring out at the pouring rain, a clock on the window sill next to her. She would be extremely late for work, but she absolutely refused to drive when it was raining. For some reason, was her thinking, Southern California drivers were incapable of comprehending the concept of water falling from the sky and the freeways became free-for-alls and were even more nightmarish than they normally were.

So for the past three hours, Carol had sat in front of the window, silently cursing singer/songwriter Albert Hammond, whose 1973 top five smash "It Never Rains in Southern California" was one of the things that had drawn Carol and her husband to the South Bay town of Mall Beach nine years earlier. After the first year, when much of the month of December made a liar out of Hammond, Carol's then-husband Edward simply shrugged and said "I guess songs can be wrong. Who knew?"

But by then Edward had been completely absorbed in his work. A comparative zoologist by training, he had accepted a professorship at Mall State, a small Southern California college located in downtown Mall Beach.

As the rain ended, Carol quickly began getting ready for work. As she bustled about her bedroom, she grabbed a locket from her dressing table. A gift from her sister back east, it had come in the mail only a day earlier and had been sent to celebrate what would have been Carol and Edward's 15th anniversary. Within the locket was a picture of Edward. It wasn't actually a photograph; Edward actually hated to have his picture taken, so all anyone in the family had to remember him by was a caricature that had been drawn one Friday night on the Santa Monica pier. In the picture, a big-headed Edward wore a bib, had a knife in one raised hand, a fork in the other, and, with a huge goofy smile, was about to dig into a large supine lizard reclining on a bed of salad greens.

The caricature was a playful reference to Edward's chosen field of study.

Dr. Edward Munch (no relation to the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch) had been a pioneer of—and, in fact, the inventor of and, well, sole researcher in—the field of gustatory taxonomy. Dissatisfied with the system of classifying animals and plants that had been devised by Carolus Linnaeus in the 18th century (grouping animals and plants with similar physiological characteristics into phyla classes, orders, families, genera, and species), Dr.

Munch sought instead to classify animals and plants according to how they tasted. Ultimately, he desired to answer a question that had been eating him (as it were) his entire scientific career: how many animals actually do taste like chicken?

Needless to say, such a system required a not insubstantial amount of empirical evidence—which is to say, eating. So, for several years, Dr. Munch traveled the globe, sampling as many creatures as he could, and his life's work—the immense *A Concordance of World Organisms—Encyclopedia and Cookbook*—was coming together nicely. His monograph, "Functional Morphology of *H. hydrochaeris* With and Without Pork Gravy," was a smash hit at that year's National Zoological Conference and had even led to his helping found a new cable channel, a joint venture between the Discovery Channel and the Food Network.

But, alas, it was all to end too soon. While in the Amazon rain forest, he had no sooner taken a bite out of a large, brightly colored, and—unbeknownst to Dr. Munch, poisonous—tree frog, than he uttered what were to be his last words ("needs paprika") and, according to one witness at the scene, did a remarkable imitation of his Norwegian namesake's most famous painting. He then fell face first

onto the frog, and a brilliant scientific career ended just as it had begun: with Dr. Munch wearing a lobster bib.

As Carol continued to be haunted by the loss of the one great love of her life (especially after she had finally forced him to accept that *she* would pick the romantic dinners) she smiled forlornly. She clasped the locket around her neck and reflected on what was the great irony: at the same time that Edward was digging into his fatal frog, back in Mall Beach, his research assistant Claude Linguette had just perfected the LickMaster 3000 Electronic Tongue which could analyze the taste of any object placed in it and correlate that taste with a database of more than 180,000 individual flavors.

The rain gone and the sun finally muscling its way through the cloud cover, Carol turned the light off in her bedroom, padded out to the kitchen, and grabbed her car keys from the counter. Distracted as she was by the terror of the thought of having to drive for 90 minutes on the 405 Freeway, she didn't get a good grip on keys and they fell to the floor. She looked down and stared at the keyring on the floor. She had five keys, her car key was in the middle and it was so much larger than the other keys that it looked to her like her keyring was giving her the finger.

Figures, she thought. And that pretty much summed up the way she perceived the act of driving in L.A.

She picked up her obscene keys, took her umbrella from a coatrack by the front door, opened the door, and stared outside at her car in the driveway. She took a deep breath, and out she went.

It should be noted, in the event it hasn't been made apparent, that Carol hated driving. Well, not so much driving *per se*, but rather other drivers.

The town of Mall Beach, California, had been founded in 1773 by a Jesuit priest by the name of Father Carmelo Jello (pronounced "Hay-yo," it should be noted). One of the original Spanish missionaries to settle in the area, the town, like so many in California, was originally centered around Father Jello's mission, named San Serrif, notable for a peculiar unadorned style of architecture. The mission was distinguished from others of the period by Father Jello's policy of not exterminating the indigenous peoples if they failed to wholeheartedly accept Church dogma. In fact, Father Jello was known as quite the humanitarian, and even after his passing and the mission was abandoned, he remained quite the hero and the remains of the mission had remained intact for over 200 years. In the 1960s, it was

converted into a shrine to a period in pre-colonial history that people weren't actually ashamed of. Unfortunately, in the early 1990s, the mission was torn down to make room for a shopping mall—indeed, the mall that gave Mall Beach half its name.

The other half wasn't really a beach *per se*; the town fought with the county and neighboring towns to give San Serrif at least *some* oceanfront. It was Southern California, after all. The others relented, and it was agreed to redraw San Serrif's borders so that a one-inch-wide strip of land was allowed to stretch from landlocked San Serrif through five miles of coastal Flako del Mar, and reach the Pacific Ocean. And thus it was that San Serrif changed its name to Mall Beach, hoping to lure tourists as well as local Southern Californians to take advantage of its immense mall as well as its "exclusive" oceanfront property, although taking advantage of Mall Beach's beach was only possible if you were no larger than a small tree frog.

Carol pulled out of her driveway onto Beech Street and made an immediate left onto Beech Road, which merged onto Beach Drive and intersected Beach Boulevard two lights down. She had just missed the green left turn arrow and sat back and waited the 20 minutes it would take for the

seemingly endless series of light permutations to cycle back to her lane. In a way, she was glad. She was in no hurry to hit the freeway. Her boss would probably be mad that she was so late, but tough. It was the company's own damn fault for moving. When the company had been located two blocks from Carol's house, she walked to work and was early or at the latest on time every day. When they decided to move the company 90 miles south to Rancho Bastardo, she was upset—for reasons you can pretty much fathom by now.

The left-turn arrow finally turning green, she turned left into Beach Boulevard and headed north toward the 405 Freeway. Traffic was still heavy, even at this relatively late hour, and she inched her way toward the freeway on ramp. She pulled up to the metering light and, as it turned green, she closed her eyes and gunned the engine. Pulling onto the freeway always reminded her of a airplane taking off. The surge of the engine, the g-forces pushing her back in her seat, her heart in her throat, her knuckles white with terror. She successfully merged into the freeway without much incident. Now, she had to get over a lane or two as the rightmost lane would abruptly vanish one exit later—a phenomenon that took her completely by surprise the first time she had ever driven this route, since there was no warning that the lane was going to do any such thing.

Traffic remained heavy, yet everyone was cruising at about 75 or 80. Naturally, everyone tailgated. She clutched wheel tightly in her hands, and went with the flow. In her rearview mirror, she saw a pair of SUVs pinballing from lane to lane on opposite sides of the highway. Exploiting the slightest opening between cars—be it two car lengths or one Ångstrom—they shot forward like it was the Indy 500. As they both simultaneously loomed up quickly in the rearview mirror, Carol knew for sure they were going to hit her. She couldn't imagine how they could not—but, miraculously, they shot by. (Unbeknownst to Carol, 10 miles up the road they would miscalculate their trajectories and collide with each other, eliciting an inappropriate yet satisfying round of applause from many of the other drivers who had been terrified by them.)

As she espied more hellbent drivers approaching at multiwarp speeds behind her, Carol could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Oddly, it was accompanied by the sensation of some other object—hopefully not an internal organ—pounding *on* her chest. Whatever it was, it was radiating some kind of heat—not a searing, painful heat, but rather a calm, soothing heat. She was too busy being terrified of the traffic to pay much attention to this strange sensation, and as she saw a sports car shoot over

four lanes and attach itself, leechlike, to her tail, a very strange thing happened. Her car started to rise.

"What the hell?!" she exclaimed, as, indeed, her car moved vertically, until she was moving at the same forward speed, but only 100 feet above the freeway.

Now her heart was really going, but the other pounding sensation, and the accompanying heat, had abated. Now she had to deal with the fact that she was also terrified of heights. There was what sounded like a sigh that came from her chest, and the heat and external pounding started again. Her car descended and she landed in a clear spot of freeway. At the same time, every *other* car on the freeway rose 100 feet above the road surface. They all stayed in their lanes, and they all followed the curve of the highway and it wended its way southeast. In fact, all the cars behaved exactly the way they would if they had been on the ground—the only difference being that they weren't. Carol was surprised—to say the least—but she was happy. There were now no cars around her to terrify the life out of her and for the first time in her life, she enjoyed the drive to work.

When she pulled off the freeway 65 miles later, all the other cars were restored to the road surface.

True, her boss berated her for being late, but she didn't mind—and soon, no one else minded her lateness. Given how happy her mood was, they all felt that whatever the reason for her lateness, it was worth it.

Carol didn't ask questions, like how it happened, but she was inordinately happy to discover, when she started her trek homeward at 5:00, the same thing happened.

When she read the *L.A. Times* the following morning, she discovered that Steve Harvey's "Only in LA" column was entirely devoted to the incident.

Chapter Three: This Bird Has Flown

The Hammond organ swelled as the band abruptly changed time signature, leaving the bass player feeling the musical equivalent of whiplash. The guitarist unleashed a salvo of obscure power chords, half of which he had made up himself some years earlier, some of them requiring three hands to play, a sound that was difficult to replicate on stage (he tried a variety of prostheses but none seemed to work very well). The keyboardist pivoted around from the Hammond to a synth and ran through a stream of notes with a speed that would almost certainly lead to carpal-tunnel syndrome in a few more years. A brief drum fill sounded like someone upending a box of basketballs at the top of a spiral staircase.

The Broadway Lambs were halfway through their signature song, the 20-minute "Harvester of Tears," and the lead singer was standing at the side of the stage, resting his vocal cords while the instrumentalists soloed, preparing for the lung-rending climax of the song. (Early in his career, he abandoned the idea of banging a tambourine during the instrumental passages, which seemed more a move of theatrical desperation than musical necessity.) If asked—which he never was—the singer would be at a loss to explain what the song was about, even though

he had written its lyrics. Not that it was the result of some manner of chemical-induced inspiration; rather, his method of lyric writing was to stand at the far end of his kitchen and randomly pitch words from a magnetic poetry kit at his refrigerator. Whatever stuck, he wrote down and the rest of the band set to music. The more cryptic the results, the more the band's hardcore fans assigned deep philosophical meaning to.

The band's progressive rock recalled the glory days of Yes, Genesis, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, and at times, inexplicably, Seals and Crofts.

On stage, bassist Nat Phillips was having a devil of a time seeing through the mask he and the other bandmembers had grudgingly agreed to wear. Their latest album, *Walk the Plankton*, was ostensibly a concept album about microorganisms (or at least that's how the magnetic poetry word toss came out as the vocalist was writing his lyrics) and the band were dressed appropriately. Pete Crane, the drummer, was a paramecium; Roger Howe, the guitarist, was an amoeba; Keith Banks, the keyboardist, was a streptococcus; Peter Dennis Ogden Charles Anderson, the singer, was the titular plankton; Nat got stuck being the Ebola virus.

It was an elaborate stage show, in danger of being taken to Spinal Tap-ian proportions, but limited, thankfully, only by the band's budget, which was virtually non-existent. The costumes had been made on a shoestring—and using shoestrings, actually—by Anderson's girlfriend. The venue was also not the most accommodating, being a small dive bar called Westminster Shabbey in the Colden Damp neighborhood of London, located next door to the entrance to a London Underground station. The audience numbered less than 30, half of whom were the band's core fan base, the other half of whom had wandered into the wrong door looking for the Tube and were too polite to walk out while the band was still playing.

It was shortly after 11 p.m. when the band wrapped up their set to a smattering of applause, and half the crowd darted out to look for the train. The other half stared enraptured as the band left the stage. Those who had brought their own chemical refreshment could still see the band on stage.

Backstage, in a cramped, foul-smelling room whose chief decor was graffiti (some of it dating from the 18th century and written in beautiful script, with illustrations not unlike 12th-century manuscript illuminations), the band removed their costumes and toweled off the gallons of sweat

produced therefrom. A cooler was quickly raided for its cans of lager.

"I swear that was our biggest crowd yet," said Nat. "I tell you, it was genius locating this place next door to the Tube station."

"Yeah, and I'll bet Pete's saying 'mind the gap' between the songs probably kept a few of the stragglers from leaving, too," said Keith.

At that point, the club's owner poked his head in. "Guys, that was fantastic. We'll see you tomorrow night, then."

"Thanks, Clive, you're a real mate," said Nat.

Nat grew up, and still lived, in the Colden Damp neighborhood and the club's owner was an old friend of his family and had been one of The Broadway Lambs' most ardent supporters.

Nat grabbed a guitar case and walked back out onto the stage. The room was nearly empty, although he could make out a few stragglers propping up the bar at the back. As he began packing up his gear, he thought about the argument he had had with his parents earlier that day. He had made the mistake of stopping by around dinner time. His dad sat at the table looking surly, while his mum poured a small amount of brandy into the baby's bottle and screwed the lid

back on and set little Jacob to nursing. Nat had popped in only for a moment to grab some old guitar leads out of his old room. His one-room flat two streets over only had so much storage space.

"Son," said his father with concern, "you're not happy or anything, are you? You seem happy to me."

Now, it should be pointed out that the Colden Damp neighborhood of London, due to a strange geographic and climatological anomaly, was literally the rainiest place in the entire United Kingdom. Even when the sun was shining elsewhere in London—even as near as two blocks away—it was raining in Colden Damp. As a result, residents of the neighborhood, many of whom were the descendents of families who had lived there for centuries, were among the most congenitally depressed in the world. While longtime residents considered it a badge of honor and were thus suspicious of the cheerful, even other Brits could be put off by the sheet dourness of the locals. Charles Dickens had lived for several months in Wetton Street in The Damp, as it is called, during which time he wrote his "lost" novel, *The Tortured Orphan: Being an History of Edgar Mazzletov, His Abuse at the Hands of a Vicious Schoolmaster and the Divers Fluids which Poured from his Body on a Regular Basis*, which, upon Dickens' departing of that

neighborhood, was destroyed and its author thus penned the far cheerier *Oliver Twist*. As Dickens wrote to his friend and future biographer John Forster in 1837, "Bloody hell, it's good to get out of the Damp. I already feel my spirits returning and have renewed vigor with which to document the atrocities of Yorkshire schools and provincial workhouses."

Longtime residents of The Damp were not inclined to think anything particularly unusual about their disposition.

Nat just glared at his father.

"I don't want to hear that you've been a shrink or anything," said his dad.

"Or those awful antidepressants they have now," said his mum. "Mrs. Harris's son was on them and he just kept smiling all the time. How 'orrible."

"I promise you I am not seeing a shrink nor am I on drugs," said Nat, eager to get out of the house as soon as possible. While it was true that he was what you might call "not appreciably miserable," it was more due to a lot of the things in his life finally coming together: the band was starting to see some success, they were enjoying playing music together, and, of course, there was Shirley.

"Honey," said his mum, "I do hope you're drinking enough."

Parents! "Yes, mum," said Nat, "at least six pints a day."

"And whiskey?" asked his dad.

"When it's not too dear."

"Good. If you need money, you just let me know."

"Thanks, dad, but I'm doing OK."

He supposed he should be happy that they cared as much as they did. Still, he could take care of himself. And so what if he only wanted to have *four* pints at a sitting? He was over 21.

As he finished packing up his equipment in the main room at Westminster Shabbey, a young woman approached him.

"Nat, you were great," she said. Nat looked over and smiled.

"Shirley," he said. "I'm glad you were able to make it. I was hoping you'd come."

They kissed. They hadn't been going out for very long, but he had to admit that he was smitten. She had been one of the band's earliest fans. Extremely shy, despite being an American by birth, she had been buying tickets to the Broadway Lambs' shows for three months before actually attending one, and attending the shows for six months before she was able to face the stage. But, she soon came out of her shell—and that's not a metaphor. Watching her

from the stage one night gave Peter Anderson the idea for one of their early songs, "Venus Emerges from Her Shell and Stands About Awkwardly" (it took weeks to get the magnetic poetry to come out right). Finally, she was able to come to the shows without her shell, and it wasn't long before she caught the bass player's eye (an unfortunate accident involving an errant fishing line). Nat and Shirley had been on one date, part of it even spent in the same room. Nat had high hopes for the future.

"I wouldn't miss one of your shows for the world" she said.

"If only we could clone you about a million times we'd be on the road to platinum success, Ebola virus costume and all."

"That's the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to be."

He smiled. "Listen, I have a few more things to pack up here and then I want to run home and grab a shower, but if you want to get together later tonight, I'd like that very much."

"Yes, I think I would, too," she said.

"Great; Why not meet me at my flat, number 5 Clammie Court, right across Moistleigh Green. Say, about half 12?"

"You mean 6?" she asked.

"No, 12:30."

"Oh, right, sorry."

She started to leave. "Oh, wait," she said. "I have something for you."

"For me?"

"I was in this shop in Soho the other day and I saw these and thought of you." She reached into her pocket and took out a small white box and handed it to him.

"You know," he said sincerely, "I really have been looking for a box like this for quite some time."

"That's nice, but there's actually something inside it."

"Oh, right." Yes, they were probably the most awkward couple that ever was. Anyway, he opened the box, and pulled out a set of earrings: each one a metal stud with a tiny Rickenbacker electric bass guitar dangling from it. "Bass guitar earrings," he said. They're quite lovely. Thanks you, Shirley." He kissed her again, and she blushed madly.

"I know it's hard for you to wear earrings while you're wearing your stage costume, but I figure there are going to be times when you are not dressed as the Ebola virus..."

"You know me so well."

There then followed an awkward pause. "So, um, I'll see you at half 12," she said. "Which is not 6."

"Right. Yes, see you then."

She ambled backward unsteadily, unsure at what point she should turn around, the decision rather made for her when she backed into a pole. He had tried to warn her by waving, but she interpreted that as simply waving goodbye and, well, hit the pole. Unhurt, she took that opportunity to turn around and make for the door and the nearest pub.

"You and your wild groupies," said Roger Howe, the guitar player, who had been watching them from a discreet distance.

"She does seem to be the wildest one yet," said Nat. He wasn't being ironic; they were a neo-progressive rock band. 'Nuff said.

"We're all going down to the Cheese and Grater after we're done packing up. Wanna come along?"

"I'd love to but I'll have to take a sun check. I'm meeting Shirley later on."

Events in Colden Damp were often postponed on those few occasions when the sun was shining especially hard, as the fair complexions of the locals weren't always up to severe solar rigor, or at least not until the recent introduction of SPF 1,000 sunblock.

Roger smiled. "It seems to be getting serious, does it?"

"With luck. At the moment, it's all rather silly." He help up the earrings. "She gave me these."

Roger examined them. "Cute. I thought you gave up wearing earrings."

"I had, but it would be rude to not wear these."

He looked at them somewhat reluctantly, and put them on. As soon as he had secured them to his earlobes, he felt a strange but slight pulse of energy over his skin that ran from his ears down to his toes.

"Wow—I feel weird."

"You *look* weird," said Roger. "But no weirder than being dressed as the Ebola virus."

"I'm not sure that's the fashion statement I want to make, but I'll take it as a compliment."

"As well you should. Anyway, if you get the chance later on, stop on by the 'Grater. We'll be there till closing time."

"No offense, but I rather hope I don't get the chance."

"Amen to that, brother."

Nat finished packing up his equipment, grabbed his guitar case, and stepped out of the club. Outside, there

was a driving rain, the kind that comes at you from all directions simultaneously. Whoever said "keep the wind at your back" has apparently never lived in Colden Damp, as the wind very rarely comes from any fewer than 50 directions at any given time. Nat buttoned up his mac, turned the collar up, and set off across the street. As he walked briskly across Moistleigh Green, he was lost in thought, thinking of...well, what do you think? Shirley, of course. Had he not been distracted, he probably would have felt the soft pulsing in his earlobes and noticed that not a single drop of rain had touched him.

By 12:15, he had shaved and showered and tidied up his flat. He remembered, almost at the last minute, to put the bass guitar earrings back in. He turned his laptop computer on, plugged in the stereo speakers, and launched iTunes and set it to "random" to play some romantic background music.

The doorbell rang at exactly 12:30. Shirley was at least known for her punctuality. He ran to the door, then stood behind it for several moment not wanting to seem as eager as he actually was. Behind him, he could hear his iTunes playing King Crimson's "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part One." Perfect, he thought.

He opened the door. "Hi, Nat," said Shirley, who was dressed casually, but had obviously gone home and spruced up. Her hair and overcoat were, to his eyes, delightfully wind- and rain-tousled.

"Please, *entrez-vous*," he said mock gallantly and led her into the living room. Well, actually, the *only* room. He gestured for her to sit on the couch.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" he asked.

She admitted to herself: she was always uncomfortable and awkward in dating situations, and was trying to think if it was appropriate to drink at this point. "Um, I'll have a pink squirrel."

He stopped on his way to the kitchen. "A what?"

"Oh, um..."

"I have no idea what that is. Unfortunately, the potent potables are a tad limited. I have beer, wine, and a bottle of Scotch whisky."

"I'll just have a glass of wine," she said.

"One glass of wine coming right up." He walked through the open doorway into the small kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of wine from atop the ancient refrigerator and busied himself opening it.

"So you liked the show tonight?" he called out to her.

"Oh, yes, very much so," she said. "You guys are getting better with every show."

"That's what we're trying to do."

At that point, the music, which had started off very quietly, suddenly launched into a loud section. It startled Shirley.

"Who is this?" she asked, as Nat walked back into the living room carrying two glasses of red wine.

"King Crimson. One of the albums with John Wetton on bass. He's always been one of my heroes." He handed her a glass. "Cheers."

They toasted each other silently. They sat silently and awkwardly for a moment. The music quieted down a bit, and a solo violin played. She looked over at him.

"You have the earrings on," she said.

"Yes, I do rather like them. I'll have to take them off when we're performing; when I take off my Ebola mask, if I have earrings in they tend to get ripped out of my earlobe."

"That's understandable."

She looked around the flat. It was a small room in a house that was built in the early 20th century. The front door opened directly into the living room. Immediately to the left, underneath a window, was the couch on which they

sat. On the wall opposite was a small, ancient-looking TV (it still had antennae) and a larger somewhat more modern stereo set-up comprising a turntable, a CD player, a variety of tape recording equipment, and an amplifier. The set up was bookended by two bookshelf speakers. A computer and speakers—from whence the music—were nestled in another corner. Massive stacks of vinyl records and CDs occupied every available space. The walls were largely decked with concert posters and other music-related imagery. A bass guitar stood in a stand next to a small Fender Champ-esque amplifier.

Shirley took a sip of wine, just as the music surged loudly again, startling her. She did a slight spit take.

"Sorry," she said with an awkward laugh.

"It does ebb and surge, doesn't it?"

The song ended, and the next one came on, also by King Crimson: "In the Wake of Poseidon."

"Ah, this is the Greg Lake era of King Crimson."

"It's quite nice. It sounds like that one song you guys do. Um..." She thought for a moment. "'The Devil's Eaten all the Chicken.'"

"That's right; Roger wrote the music for that. He's a big fan of this album."

As he had a few more swigs of wine, he decided to nestle his way closer to her.

The music switched to the Yes's "The Fish (Shindleria Praematurus)," and that always put him in an amorous mood. But then, it should be pointed out that both Lou Reed's "Metal Machine Music" and John Cage's "4'33'" have been known to put him in an amorous mood, so perhaps other forces were at work. He put his arm around her. She caught his movement out of the corner of her eye, and seconded the motion. Oddly, he found himself unable to physically touch her. His arm stuck about three inches from her torso. He could move it no closer. She looked at him strangely.

"You're perfectly welcome to, um, put your arm around me."

"I'm trying."

He tried to force his arm closer to her. She, in turn, tried to nestle closer to him, but also could not come within three inches. Attempting to climb onto his lap, both of them were equally surprised to see her hovering several inches above him, until she fell over backward and fell to the floor.

"What the—" he said.

He stood up and attempted to help her to her feet, but as he went to grab her hand, again, flesh could not meet

flesh and he grabbed empty air. He lost his balance and fell backward on the couch.

She looked up at him. "Nat, I admit I've always been clumsy and awkward in these, um, kinds of situations, but this is ridiculous."

"I hear you."

She stood up and then had an idea. She got as close to the TV and stereo and she could so as to get a good running start, then ran at him. She jumped onto his lap but, rather than landing on him, she somehow skidded over his body and went sailing over the back of the couch and through the window with a crash.

"Shirley!" he called and pivoted to look out the window. They were only on the second floor, so with luck she was not seriously injured. He bolted out the front door, still not entirely certain what was happening. He also failed to notice the throbbing in his earlobes.