

## 1

“Do you think I’m fat?” Red asked while posing her taut athletic body in front of a full-length mirror, but with a look of critical concern on her face. At a height of six-foot three-inches, her long, narrow figure belied uncommonly strong muscles from working out nearly every day. Covered head-to-toe with freckles, and with fire-red hair cascading down below her shoulder blades in back, it was obvious where her nickname came from.

Once a hopeful for the Olympic tennis team, she still worked hard to keep her body fit and trim. When people saw her, clothed in anything from a string bikini to a formal evening dress, “fat” was not the first adjective to come to mind.

“Fat, relative to what?” Doc questioned, exasperatedly lowering the book he was trying to read. He’d been waiting for Red to come to bed, and was tired of fielding this same question time after time. He was trying to think of some way to get Red to stop obsessing about her figure.

Like his wife, Doc, aka Dr. Michael Manchek, was serious about body building and fitness. His roughly two-hundred-fifty-pound weightlifter’s body had been described as “built like a cement truck.” Some three inches taller than Red’s, it took up an enormous amount of real estate in their oversize bed. In contrast to her red hair and freckled complexion, his skin showed a dark tan under dark brown hair and full beard. Both hair and beard were longer than the current fashion – the better to show off his hair’s waviness – but neatly trimmed.

Depending on how he was dressed at the time, Doc’s features variously reminded people of hippies, cowboys, beach bums, or, most often, pirates (those who knew him best tended to refer to him as an “old pirate,” despite his being only in his late twenties) – anything but the technology-genius founder of a successful private research company. The piratical impression stemmed mainly from his tendency to do pretty much whatever he damn well pleased – and get away with it. Nobody ever expected conventional behavior from him, and they were almost universally not disappointed.

Red, aka Judith McKenna, had at least tried to fit in. Lordy, how she'd tried! The combination of a physically dominating presence, a mathematical genius mind, and an extremely independent personality had, however, robbed her of the ability to behave the way society in general expects a young lady to behave.

Influenced by Doc's example, she'd eventually dropped the attempt as a losing proposition. The question of what she was *supposed* to do in any situation seldom crossed her mind, anymore.

"Look," Doc continued. "You've had two babies in less than twelve months, and, per doctor's orders, had put on fifteen pounds to give them the best start you could. Now, you're trying to lose those fifteen pounds and get back to professional-athlete trim, while being a wife, and mother, and full-time student, and corporate executive. Baby, it's time for you to set some priorities."

"I suggest that you say 'Bye, Bye' to the six-pack abs," he continued. "So what if you've only lost ten of the fifteen pounds? So what if you've got twenty percent body fat instead of eighteen? You're still the most gorgeous woman I know. Settle for being the MILF I know and love."

"MILF?"

"Acronym for 'Mother I'd Like to Fuck.' I thought you'd heard of it."

"I've heard it, but I never knew what it meant," Red explained. "Now, I do."

"But, do you think I'm fat?" she asked again after a pause, still posing in front of the mirror and not looking satisfied with what she saw.

"Goddamn it, NO! You look like a bikini model. Better, because you still have your bodybuilder's muscles underneath. You've got just enough fat to smooth out the cuts around your muscles. I don't *want* you to lose any more weight. I *like* the way you are."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better," Red complained.

“Don’t call me a liar! I said it because I mean it. Now, stop obsessing and give us a kiss and a cuddle. I’m feeling neglected.”

Appeased, at least for the time being, Red pulled out the sheets near the foot of the bed, and crawled in between Doc’s feet, sliding her body up over Doc’s, and emerging between his arms, which were still holding the book. She smiled beguilingly, her eyes inches from his.

Tipping his head slightly to one side so that he could see the book, he carefully slipped a bookmark between the pages to mark his place, and tossed the book to the floor beside the bed.

With his arms still wrapped around Red’s neck, he pulled her close for the kiss part. He was already enjoying the cuddle part, with her nude body laying on top of his.

She squirmed around a little, just to renew the sensation.

For both of them.

Mustn’t let the ol’ nerve endings forget that they’re being stimulated!

“Speaking of feeling neglected, I got a call from Suby today,” Doc said, interrupting the kiss.

“Crap!” Red complained, “I thought we were going to kiss and cuddle.”

“Oh, we are,” Doc assured her. “It’s just that I promised I would talk to you about it, and if I don’t bring it up now, in about five seconds you’ll drive it from my mind, and I won’t think of it again for ... the foreseeable future.”

“Okay, what’s my best friend’s hubby pestering you about?”

“He’s feeling neglected.”

“I can’t see Bud neglecting him. She’s too fond of what he has in his pants.”

Bud was the nickname Red had given her college roommate, best friend, research partner, and onetime lover, Cheryl Thompson, who'd married Suby soon after Red and Doc were wed two years ago. The nickname was short for 'Fuck Buddy,' meaning, at the time, *her* fuck buddy, and Cheryl was such a rebel that she insisted everyone use it.

Doc was also fond of Cheryl, treating her like a favorite sister-in-law, and he objected to anyone calling her a "fuck buddy," as if she were nothing but a sex object. He felt strongly enough about it that he refused to use the appellation, despite the fact that Cheryl, herself, liked it.

Suby had picked Bud up on the rebound when Red "left" her for Doc. Actually, it had been Bud who picked Suby up, but who's going to quibble?

"I only report what he said," Doc responded. "He thinks she's cheating with someone else."

"She's got enough on her plate without screwing around behind his back. Who's he think she's playing with?"

"You."

"Me!"

## 2

“He thinks you’re shacking up in your stateroom on the *Mary McKenna*. I only report what he told me. He must think it’s important, he called from Florida to pester me with it.”

Cheryl was a marine archaeologist working on her Ph.D. mapping debris fields from shipwrecks lost in storms. Red’s Ph.D. thesis involved developing computer models to help interpret those debris fields. The *Mary McKenna* was Red’s stepfather’s hundred-plus-foot motoryacht, named for Red’s mother, which he’d loaned to the women to use in their research.

“What did you say?”

“I told Suby I didn’t know, and the only way to find out would be to ask.”

“Do *you* think we’re shacking up?”

“I truly have no idea.”

“What does your Zen-sage intuition tell you?”

“That it’s none of my business. Except for obsessing about not being anorexic, you seem happy. I know I’m happy. You don’t appear to be keeping any little secrets, so if you *are* playing around with Cheryl, you don’t feel guilty about it. You’re happy. I’m happy. Where’s the problem?”

“In Suby’s head! That’s where,” Red accused.

“I notice you aren’t denying it,” Doc observed.

“I wanted to find out what was going on in that pumpkin you keep on your shoulders before I answered,” Red explained. She hesitated, thinking carefully before finally answering.

“Okay. Sometimes Bud and I sleep together for company. You know how I hate sleeping alone. She has trouble sleeping without company, too. When you and I are separated for a few days, I get lonesome and can’t sleep. But that’s as far as it goes. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Baby, I don’t mind anything you do,” Doc assured her. “You know damn well I only want what makes you happy.”

“I’ve never fathomed that non-jealous streak in you,” Red said. “I went nuts that time I saw you making love to Bud, even though I’d broken up with you, and had told her to go ahead. It hurt so much! I’d never give you an excuse to do it again.”

“I’ve more experience with casual sex than you have,” Doc explained briefly, “so I see it more objectively. For you, sex has always been part of building a larger relationship. I, on the other hand, know that it can be just for fun, too. But, that’s not the point. FYI, I have no desire to fool around with Cheryl or any other woman. I like *you*.”

Doc took a breath, then summarized: “So, we’ve established that you and Bud do snuggle up at night, but for company, not sex. That doesn’t look good, by the way, but nobody we care about is looking. I don’t give a shit because you make me sooo happy. You’re happy, and I’m happy. Suby’s showing green eyes, but that’s between him and Cheryl. We can erect a big S.E.B. field around it, and get back to our regularly scheduled program of kissing and cuddling.”

“Yeah, S.E.B. field: somebody else’s business,” Red said. “Namely, Bud and Suby’s.”

“Should I say something to Bud?” she asked as an afterthought.

“Hmm. She could probably use a heads-up that Suby’s having doubts,” Doc agreed. “She’s almost as smart as you are, so she’ll know how to deal with it. Let her know about the call, then let her take it from there.”

“I hate to say this,” Red speculated, “but *my* Zen intuition is starting to buzz. The Tao is whispering that maybe Suby’s concerned because he’s been looking around, himself.”

“You mean he’s having ideas, and projecting them onto her? That’s a real possibility. It happens an awful lot between married couples.”

“Not very Zen of him,” Red pointed out.

“Suby has a lot to learn,” Doc said.

“I thought you were going to train him.”

“I don’t take on students.”

“You trained me,” Red said, bringing up another perennial *contretemps* between them. She claimed him as her *sensei*, or Zen master, but he refused the title.

“I did not. I pointed the way, and you took off down the path like a bloodhound on a scent. You did it, yourself,” Doc explained. “But, when I pointed for Suby, he looked at my finger.”

“Oh, to Hell with both of them,” Red grouched, and turned on her left side with her back nestled against Doc’s body, distracted from cuddling, but not wanting to give up.

He turned to hold her, reaching around her body to cup her left breast with his right hand. A minute or so later, he adjusted his hand position to pull her breasts together, pressing her left nipple with his fingers, while her right nipple pressed into his palm. Within a couple of minutes, they completely forgot about Bud and Suby. It was another hour, however, before they shut off the lights and went to sleep, with kissing and cuddling taken to its natural conclusion.

Despite her complaints, Red had achieved the lifestyle she’d always wanted. She liked to describe herself as “a mommy who plays with computers.”

She played with computers under the auspices of Doc’s aerospace-technology development company, Scottsdale Systems Technology (SST) in Scottsdale, Arizona, where she held the position of research analyst. “If

she's so rich, why does she work?" Gwen Petersen had once asked Doc, when she first found out the extent of Red's stepfather's fortune.

"Let's put it this way," Doc had explained: "If somebody asks you to do something for money, what's the first question you think of?"

"How much, of course," Gwen had said.

"When I offered Red a job, she never asked how much," Doc reported. "She wasn't interested in the job until I told her that I'd let her do the things she wanted to do, anyway. That's what makes her rich. She has enough so that she can do what she wants."

On the Mommy side, what Red wanted to do was build a home and a family with a husband she loved and respected. She'd found that husband in Doc. While Red always referred to Cheryl as her best friend, she was lucky enough to have her "bestest" friend be her husband.



### 3

“That skinny, four-eyed son of a bitch has a girlfriend!” Bud practically screamed at Red a few weeks later. Bud was referring to her husband, Suby, who’d filed for divorce on grounds of infidelity. Bud had countered by hiring Tom Devore, SST’s go-to guy for all things private investigative, to check on Suby’s activities.

“He was just looking for an excuse to shack up with a skinny, four-eyed bitch at work. She’s another computer jock, and probably reminds him of you. He always had the hots for you, anyway. So, he accused me of shacking up with you as an excuse. Not that I wouldn’t mind doing it, but for once in my life I was being a good girl.”

“Excepting that lesbian *Kama Sutra* website you modeled for with Gwen Petersen,” Red pointed out.

“That was *modeling* for crissakes! It was a one-time deal, and for a good cause, which Suby fully supported. Hell, he designed the website! This is different.”

The two women had taken Doc’s forty-five foot cabin cruiser *Strange Brew* out for a spin off Bermuda so they could discuss Bud’s marital problems away from nosy crewmembers aboard the *Mary McKenna*. Bud wanted to vent uninhibited, and Red never passed up an excuse to take the *Strange Brew* out for a spin. With twin thousand-horsepower turbine engines and a PT-boat-inspired mahogany hull, the boat cruised comfortably at fifty knots (sea conditions permitting), and could achieve a hundred knots upon request. That was heady stuff for a young woman with a taste for exotic machines.

As a fluid dynamicist and systems engineer, Doc found designing unique yachts a nice, relaxing hobby. His father, a professional custom yacht builder himself, built Doc’s toys at cost – and offered tamed-down versions for his sport-minded customers. There’s nothing like having a Doc-Manchek-designed forty-foot speedboat swinging from davits on your megayacht. It makes running up on the beach at Copacabana that much more fun for your

guests.

Red and Bud had been using *Strange Brew* to shuttle back and forth to the *Mary McKenna*. Doc had programmed *Strange Brew*'s biometric anti-theft system to respond to Red's and Bud's fingerprints, as well as his own, so they could take the boat out whenever they wanted. Anyone could operate any of her controls, but only Doc, Red and Bud could fire up the turbines.

The boat's systems were run by an embedded computer-control system custom built at SST. Doc was constantly coming up with new features and capabilities to try out on her, such as the GPS-based emergency-locator system. It was a kind of combined Lo-Jack and emergency beacon for boats. Using Iridium-satellite communications in conjunction with the global positioning system of navigation satellites, Doc could locate the craft anywhere on Earth. A simple telephone call to the system, along with a ten-digit authorization code, would return the vessel's exact location, speed, and direction. The system could also call out in the event that the boat's control software sensed a critical emergency. Doc had designed the hardware, and Red had written the software to make it work.

After weeks of practice under Doc's watchful eye, both women had become expert at handling the boat either together, or alone. Red couldn't get enough of having something that big and powerful under her sole control. Truth be told, neither could Bud. When they brought her into her slip at the yacht club in Miami Beach, both women couldn't stop grinning ear to ear.

Bud was five inches shorter than Red, but that still made her extraordinarily tall for a woman. Tall and blonde, with a smooth, even tan, her figure was even fuller than Red's, which made her jaw-droppingly sexy to look at. The ladies knew what it looked like for two statuesque bikini-clad women to precisely handle a boat that intimidated most men. Delicious!

This, however, was not a time for delicious. Bud wanted to rant and rave, inveighing against her husband. It amused Red to note the similarity between what Suby was trying to do, and what her step father had pulled off

years before.

Mark Shipton had used a fabricated lesbian affair to scrape off his first wife, a cold, conniving woman who'd married him for his money. An experienced veteran of cutthroat business wars, Mark had made the gambit work, clearing the way at very little cost for him to marry Red's widowed mother.

It wasn't going to work for Suby. Suby had made the mistake of letting Tom Devore catch him cheating before the divorce was settled.

The fact that Red could do her work almost anywhere – the apartment she still kept in Boston, Massachusetts; her office at SST; her second office in their new mountainside home overlooking Phoenix; her workstation aboard the *Mary McKenna*; or even on a laptop while sitting by the pool at the yacht club – made it possible for her to work full time while fully participating in the upbringing of her two children.

The kids' governess, Maryanne Beckett, took care of basic chores, like changing Judy's diapers, and helping Mike keep his balance while trying to walk, while Mommy was always nearby to supervise. Well, not always, because Red frequently made week-long trips to support Bud's shipboard data-gathering efforts.

Bud's research, on the other hand, required her to be at sea for weeks on end using remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) to map underwater archaeological sites. The fact that Bud had found a happy hunting ground for shipwrecks within a hundred miles of southern Florida, where Suby's company was headquartered, meant that Bud could get home on a weekly basis. In archaeology, where field work half way around the world was the norm, it seemed an ideal situation for her.

From Suby's perspective, however, having his wife away from home five days out of seven during the field season was a problem. It was a problem he'd obviously decided to solve by dumping her for a woman with a shorter commute to work.

"Bud, I don't know what to tell you," Red commiserated. "This is not a problem that's going to go away

when you get your Ph.D. Both our guys already put up with our living in Boston for a year to attend classes at Harvard. Doc even came up to be with me when Mike was born. Except for coming here to help out with the ROV data, I can be home pretty much all of the time, now. But, you'll be away a lot as long as you do field work. Unless you want to become a librarian, or give up your career to be an unemployed beach bum, like my Mom, you're going to have to come to terms with it. Is your marriage to Suby worth canceling your career for? That's what you have to decide."

"Some beach bum," Bud retorted. "Your Mom's married to a billionaire. All beach bums would like to live like that! But, I know what you mean. Suby's already voted with his feet – more accurately with his dick – for dissolving the marriage. Somehow, I can't get enthusiastic about fighting for a man who's already made it clear he doesn't want me."

She thought about it for a few minutes, lapsing into pensive silence that Red patiently waited out.

"Fuck the bastard!" Bud spat out suddenly. "I'm gonna let him buy his way out of this – for as much as I can squeeze out of his philandering hide."

"Okay," Red responded. "If there's anything Doc and I can do, or that you need, let me know. That includes leaving a honey trail to lead ants into Suby's bed. Do you want me to look for a supplier that'll sell us some fleas? Dust his hat rack with head lice? You're my best friend, and I love you. You were there for me when I needed you, and I'm here for you now. And, Doc thinks the world of you, too. So, don't be shy."

"Well, could I stay at the marina aboard this boat? You guys aren't using it much this Summer. Except for you and me using it to go back and forth to the wreck site, it just sits at the dock. If I could just live aboard until we get this settled, I wouldn't have to sit around the *Mary McKenna* with a bunch of people feeling sorry for me, or giving me advice I don't need. I want to be alone."

"Sure. We'll have to clear it with Doc. It's still his boat, but I'm sure he won't mind, seeing how it's you."

## Chapter 4

“Oh, God, baby! They *raped* me!” Bud cried, reaching out to Red, who was sitting on the side of the hospital bed where Bud was propped up with an IV tube in her arm. She’d been living aboard the *Strange Brew* for two months before things went very badly wrong for her.

“Who raped you?” Red asked, mostly to get Bud to keep talking. Red knew that describing her ordeal was the first step for Bud to deal with the emotional trauma. The physical effects – sunburn, minor cuts and bruises, hunger, and raging thirst – would quickly heal. It was that horrified, frightened look, which Red had never believed she’d ever see in Bud’s eyes, that worried her the most.

When she’d pulled her best friend out of the Atlantic swells into the semi-inflatable boat, Red thought she still saw that indomitable spirit Bud always displayed. But, by the time they’d reached the Coast Guard cutter, Bud, by then wrapped in a heavy wool blanket and nestled under Red’s long arm, had seemed to fall apart, mentally.

Crying and shaking while Red handed her up to the cutter’s crewmen, she kept making a grunting sound and thrashing around, as if she were making a supreme effort to escape something, but couldn’t get free. Red swore eternal vengeance on whoever had done this to her friend.

The look on Doc’s face up on deck was a combination of concern and anger. The reason for the concern was obvious.

The anger was another matter. It was an anger Red had never seen Doc express. Doc had infinite patience. He never lost his temper, or even his sense of humor.

Red knew that she, herself, didn’t have Doc’s patience. When she felt wronged, her heart turned toward revenge. Doc joked about her cannibalistic tendencies with respect to her enemies’ livers, but the joke was in the way he said it, not what he was describing.

For the first time since she'd known him, Doc looked *pissed* – implacably, thoroughly, remorselessly pissed. It was new territory, and she wasn't quite sure what to expect next.

Red knew why Doc was angry. (Red couldn't imagine describing any mood of Doc's as "mad." *She* got mad, reaching anger levels where she wasn't quite rational. Doc didn't get mad. Sometimes he got *even*, but never mad.) When she'd told Bud that Doc thought the world of her, she wasn't exaggerating. Doc saw Cheryl as a rare spirit who made the Universe a better place in which to live. Red could see that he'd already decided that whoever had done this to her he wanted *out* of the Universe. There was no second way.

A scream coming across the water drew their attention to Doc's boat, where the pirate leader jumped to the *Strange Brew's* controls, and jammed the turbine power levers fully forward. The boat leaped onto plane, and skated away so fast that the Coast Guard gun crew couldn't get off a warning shot.

The scream had come from one of the pirates, who was no more than a teenager. The leader had thrown him against the cockpit bulkhead while jamming the controls forward. The third pirate, who'd been standing on the cockpit deck with his hands on his head in a gesture of surrender, had lost his balance and fallen over the boat's transom into the wake, bouncing once on the swim platform edge before disappearing under the foam.

"Sink her!" Doc shouted at the gunner, who was lining up for a transom shot as *Strange Brew's* course took her directly away from the cutter, making for a temptingly easy shot.

"No!" Bud screamed, briefly coming out of her fit. "That boy's still aboard! Don't kill him. He's not a pirate." Turning to Red, she pleaded: "Help him, please!"

Not quite knowing what to think, Red tried to calm her down, saying: "Alright. We'll help him."

Doc, flashing a surprised glance at Cheryl, shouted "Belay that, sailor," to the gunner. "*Don't* shoot!" It was Doc's call because it was still Doc's boat.

He stepped aft to where Red was still hugging Cheryl.

“What’s that all about?” he asked, but Cheryl was no longer coherent. She’d gone back to fighting her internal demons.

That was hours ago. The sedatives in her IV had calmed Cheryl down enough for her to become lucid. Except for having shakes and complaining of a headache, and that all her muscles and joints ached, Cheryl was calm enough to start telling her story. In fact, she couldn’t stop telling her story.

“Who raped you?” Red repeated.

“They *all* did!” Cheryl cried, then reached out for Red, but suddenly pulled back before touching her. When Red tried to embrace her, she pulled further back.

“Don’t touch me,” Cheryl yelled.

“What’s wrong?”

Shuddering, Cheryl hugged herself defensively.

“They were so filthy. Ugh. God knows what diseases they gave me. Stay away.”

Clearly, Cheryl felt unclean. She shrank back as if she didn’t want to contaminate Red by touching her.

“They didn’t give you anything that will stop me loving you. Come here,” Red ordered, smothering her friend in an affectionate hug.

Gratefully, Cheryl let Red hold her. She buried her face in Red’s shoulder, sobbing.

“I’m so scared. What’s going to happen to me?”

“You’re going to get well again,” Red replied, “then we’re going to hunt those bastards down and introduce them to Hell. Then, we’ll kill ‘em.”