



Secret Rendezvous

I TOOK A RED-EYE FLIGHT HOME FROM MONTANA, arriving in Pennsylvania in the wee hours, and slept late the next morning. As soon as I got up, I described the entire episode at Lucy's cottage to my wife over tea at the dining room table. She hung on to my every word, but dismissed my assertion that there were no instructions in the lockbox. She was fascinated by the birthing clinic business card.

"You have to call these people!" Annie insisted. She held the mysterious card in her hand, thinking that maybe if she stared at it long enough, its secrets would be revealed to her. I gazed out the dining room window at the ducks poking their heads underwater in our pond, their rear ends sticking up like fishing bobbers. Maple tree helicopters rained down on the patio outside, and the house wrens, who had recently migrated back to their northern home, were chattering like crazy, their busy song pouring in through an open window. The smell of spring drifted into the house and across the dining room table, perfuming the air.

"Are you listening? You need to call the number on this card." She flung the card across the table as if dealing a poker hand.

“Why should I?” I answered, shrugging my shoulders. “I was obligated to follow Lucy’s instructions as stated in her letter. She instructed me to go to her house, find her lockbox, and follow the instructions there. There weren’t any instructions there, so now, as far as I’m concerned, I’m off the hook. *Finito*. Done.”

“There were no instructions that you are yet *aware* of. That doesn’t mean that there were no instructions *at all*. Something must have been extremely important for Lucy to leave you thirty thousand dollars and then promise you another half million. You can’t just blow it off because you don’t understand what she’s trying to tell you.”

“Plenty of old women, and men no doubt, leave lots of money to televangelist shysters when they die. That doesn’t mean they’re not fools,” I said pointedly. “It may not bother *those* people’s consciences to take money from senile folks, but it bothers *me*. I can’t just take an old lady’s money and waste my time running around on a wild goose chase. I think I’ll donate the money to charity and be done with it.”

“Look, you went all the way to Montana and came back with this stuff. You can’t ignore it. There *is* a phone number on that business card. The very least you could do is call it. For all you know, it’s a disconnected number. If it is, you’re home-free. I don’t see what the big deal is,” Annie said, matter-of-factly, sipping her tea and staring impatiently at me over the rim of her cup. Her slender body was propped on her elbows as her gaze lost focus, perhaps she was imagining what Lucy’s “instructions” really did mean. Maybe she was dreaming of what we could do with a half million bucks.

Penelope, our ten year old daughter, was still asleep, tucked in with her menagerie of dolls and stuffed animals in her bed upstairs. With her long, wheaten hair and slight, delicate frame, it was readily apparent that she was indeed her mother’s daughter. They both had the same positive dispositions, always with a smile on their faces, laughing when they stubbed a toe, or made a mistake. I, on

the other hand, was just the opposite, swearing when I made a mistake and straight-faced most of the time. They say opposites attract, and in this case it was true. Annie and Penny were always fawning over a little kitten, or baby duck. My responsibilities lay with making ends meet, “bringing home the bacon.” Being the sole breadwinner in the family, I tended to dwell on my contractual and financial responsibilities, often working seven days a week, as self-employed people do. Annie’s job, by choice, was in the home, where she did most of the gardening, child-rearing, cooking, and cleaning. Earning money was never part of her responsibility. It was a partnership that worked for us, and although I played the staunch role of no-nonsense businessman, I sought her counsel whenever I had an important decision to make. She usually offered a fresh insight that was helpful.

“So you really think I should go ahead with this thing? You want me to phone this birthing clinic?”

“Well, you can’t just call it quits.”

“Alright, then. I’ll call right now and get it over with.”

I grabbed the business card off the table. “Sandy Riding and Cynthia Bernard,” I read out loud. “Never heard of ‘em.”

I grabbed the cordless phone and walked out to the sun porch, wanting to concentrate on the conversation without anyone, even Annie, listening too closely. I punched the number into the phone and waited impatiently while it rang. Secretly, I hoped a recorded voice would answer and tell me the number was no longer in service. It rang a few more times; I heard a click, and, much to my surprise and dismay, a voice at the other end answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello?” I stuttered. “This is Joe Jenkins, calling from Pennsylvania. I’d like to speak with either Sandy Riding or Cynthia Bernard.”

“This is Cynthia.” The voice at the other end was pleasant and soft.

“Oh. You’ll have to excuse me if this call seems a little

odd to you. I got your name and number from my Aunt Lucy Boggs. I know you don't know me, but she sort of asked me to call you, I think."

"Did you say *Jenkins* from Pennsylvania? Oh my god! On the contrary, Mr. Jenkins, I *do* know *of* you. Lucille told me *months* ago that I might expect a call from you someday. This is quite a shock!" After a short pause, Cynthia spoke with an earnest tone. "We should meet as soon as possible."

"What for?"

"Didn't Lucy tell you?"

"Tell me what?" A hush from her end of the line suggested that I must have said the wrong thing. I waited silently, not knowing what to say next.

"Lucille didn't mention *anything* about this?" she asked incredulously.

"Well, she did say some ominous things in a disturbing letter she sent to me, but I didn't understand any of it. Now that she's dead, I obviously can't get her to explain it."

"Lucille's *dead*? Oh my god! I just spoke with her not more than a month ago. When did she die? How?"

"You didn't *know*?" I was surprised by her reaction, and felt awkward that I had become the bearer of bad tidings. "I don't know how she died. Nobody told me how. She wanted me to call you, I think, as part of some instructions she wanted me to follow in the event of her death. Some craziness about a battle with her ego and the world coming to an end. Maybe you know what she was talking about; you probably knew her a lot better than I did, didn't you?"

"I knew her very well," Cynthia replied curtly, in a somber voice.

"Then tell me, was my aunt lucid in her old age? Did she have Alzheimer's or something? You know, I'm kind of a busy guy, and I don't know if I can really do whatever she wanted me to do. Especially since I have *no idea* what it was she wanted anyway."

"We're all busy people, Mr. Jenkins, and —"

“Call me Joe.”

“Okay, Joe. Listen. Lucy was one of the most rational and intelligent people I have ever known. I would suggest that you take her recommendations, whatever they are, *very* seriously. If she had asked *me* to do something for her, I would’ve risked my very life to do it. I’m obviously going to have to convene the Sisters for this. We must meet with you as a group. As soon as possible.”

“What for? What sisters?” I asked, turning the card over in my hand. “The Sisters of the Sacred Circle, by any chance?”

“How did you know that?” she inquired warily.

“It’s written on the back of your business card that Lucy left for me at her house in Montana.”

“Can you come tomorrow night at eight? We’ll meet near Youngstown, at a private place in the woods. You’ll have to meet me at my house and ride with me in my car or else follow me. It’s too difficult to give directions over the phone; you’d get lost.”

“And what’s the purpose of this, if you don’t mind me asking — again?”

“We really shouldn’t discuss this over the phone, Joe, but let’s just say that you’re now bearing a tremendous responsibility, one that you’re obviously not aware of, and maybe you shouldn’t be at this time. We’re pledged to assist you, to help point you in the right direction for your journey. Lucille asked me to do this for you, and we’re willing, if you are. You have to trust us.”

“What journey? Journey to where? Willing to do *what*?” The stack of roofing jobs which were quickly piling up on my desk flashed through my mind. Then I thought of the thirty thousand dollars and Lucy’s letters. I couldn’t believe what I seemed to be getting myself sucked into.

“That’s what we’ll ascertain tomorrow night, at eight. Please be on time,” she paused. “Oh, I almost forgot! You should fast the entire day tomorrow, from sun-up. Take nothing into your body except water and natural juices. And tomorrow evening, come alone. And please, don’t

share what I've told you with anyone. Bring whatever you have that relates to your aunt. Dress for a hike in the woods. And please be on time."

"Let me get this straight. You want me to meet *you*, a total stranger, tomorrow night, at a private place in the country, dressed for a hike in the woods, and you won't tell me *why*?"

"You should already know why. If not, you'll find out tomorrow night."

"With all due respect, this seems a bit far-fetched."

Cynthia replied impatiently, "As I said, Joe, you'll have to trust me. It's the least you can do for your aunt."

"Oh alright, give me the directions." I grudgingly wrote down the directions to Cynthia's house, and placed the phone back on the receiver.

"Guess what, Annie," I yelled through the doorway. "I have to go to Youngstown tomorrow night on a secret rendezvous into the Ohio forests with a bunch of women."

"If it's a secret, then why are you telling me?" she yelled back.

"Damned if you do and damned if you don't," I muttered.

"Can I come?"

"No. It's a *secret*. Anyway, that's one of the conditions. I have to go alone. I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

"How do you know you *will* get back?" Annie replied laughingly, mocking my reluctance to go.

"Don't laugh. I have no idea what I'm getting myself into. Who knows, I may disappear into the woods of Ohio, never to return. Then Lucy's secrets would be lost forever, and me with them. If I do get back, I'll tell you all about it."

Annie stepped up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. "You'll return. You never were good at keeping secrets."