

Valentine's Day

"Let's take a break." Chuck jumped up to his feet, leaving Mandy, his young patient, lying on the red vinyl exercise mat in the Physical Therapy gym of the Austin State School. He stepped around the parallel bars, threw open the double doors and stared out at the grassy grounds. *Whew*, he thought, *I've got to get used to the perfume here—'eau de' State institution*. A gust of crisp winter air smacked him in the face, loosening strands of flaxen hair along his gaunt cheeks.

"Ah, yes," he said. "A few more months and those Texas bluebonnets will be everywhere. Can't beat a hill country wedding among the oaks. This time it'll be perfect. She is perfect—Dena, the real McCoy." He knew it. Not like his last disaster.

"But first, a sneak preview of wedded wonder—a perfect Valentine's weekend in *Cancún*. By this time tomorrow, we'll be walking on the beach, her golden hair rippling in the breeze, her moist lips... Tomorrow night, a little beer... no, not beer, wine. Dena likes wine. Then a little... well, you know..."

A sudden mess of flies whizzed into the room. "Great." He swatted at the air. "Just what we need in here." He slammed the doors shut, pulled his hair back in a ragged ponytail, and returned to the red mat.

Mandy lay on her back, her brown hair a tangle. Chuck slowly stretched her twisted left hand, and straightened her food-stained dress that sheltered her flat girl-chest.

"I love you," Mandy squealed. She grinned up at Chuck, showing her broken teeth.

"Yeah, yeah. What do you know about love?" Mandy grabbed Chuck's ponytail. "Ow! No pulling. Hey, no fair! Just because I'm new." He wiped the spit off her chin with a clean diaper. "Come on, stretch." Chuck pulled on Mandy's deformed left arm, gently, then a bit harder.

"Ow! You hurt me." Mandy jerked back her arm and rolled onto her side.

"Hey. Sorry." He sopped up drool from the mat. Mandy reached over and bit his arm. "Ouch! No biting!" Mandy grinned. "Okay, on hands and knees." He flipped back her snarled hair, and shifted her weight onto her warped left arm. "That's it. You got it. Cool." The phone rang. "Hold it." He ran to catch the phone.

"Yeah, P. T. Department."

"Chuck, it's Dena. Listen, let's go early. I know the flight's not till eight, but we could run into traffic. You know I hate the way you always cut it close. Come get me at six. We can eat at the airport."

"Damn it, Dena. I've got two patients left. And I've still got to pack." *And pick up flowers*, he thought, *and call Dan to feed the dog, and I really should get her a card too, and...*

"Chuck... if we miss that flight... You promised me this trip. To make up for all the—"

"I know, I know."

"Chuck, I swear. If you screw up one more time... like last year—"

"Come on, Dena."

"... *and* Christmas, *and* Thanksgiving—"

"Hey, I'm not always late."

"Yeah, when you show up! Oh, let's stop this. I don't even want to start. Just be there."

"Okay, calm down. I promise, babe. Six o'clock. I'll be there. It'll be great. Sun and sea. The perfect hideaway. We can start planning the ceremony. See you in a bit. Bye."

Chuck returned to the mat. Mandy grinned up at him. “I love you,” she said, squealing again.

“No you don’t. What’s so funny? Come on, my next patient’s here.” He gestured to a young man in a wheelchair chewing his finger. Mandy collapsed on the mat in giggles.

“I’m gonna marry you some day.”

“Oh, Christ. No, you’re not.”

“Know why? ‘Cause you go *faaaast*. In your car. *Zooooom!*”

Chuck pulled her up to standing and walked with her down the corridor as she limped on her spastic left leg. They arrived at the sitting room where two other residents sat watching TV. Mandy collapsed onto a sofa. A goofy cop sitcom was blaring—*Car 54 where aaaare youuuuu?*

A half hour later, Chuck wheeled his last patient down the corridor, wrote a quick note in the chart, and slapped it down on Andrea’s desk. “Just needs a P.T.’s signature.” Andrea glanced up.

“Say, Chuck.” Andrea took off her glasses. “You shouldn’t have any trouble passing probation. You’re doing great. With Mandy especially. Boy, she sure likes you!” Chuck rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry,” Andrea added. “She’s harmless. As long as you can outrun her!”

“Yeah, thanks. Christ!” he moaned as he looked at his watch. “Got to run.” He rummaged through his pants pockets for his keys. “Shit!” Andrea calmly handed him his keys left on her desk. He grabbed them and ran to the parking lot, turned the ignition, and sped out to 35th Street.

A moment later, he headed north on Mopac Expressway, turned up Aerosmith on the radio and gunned it home. Ten minutes... fifteen... twenty. “Come on, two more exits.” He squirmed in his seat and tapped his fingers against the steering wheel.

In the rear view mirror, something moved.

“Jesus, fucking, Christ!” he screamed as a tangle of brown hair emerged into full view. Mandy yawned, leaned toward him and pressed her chin against his seat.

“Where we goin’?”