

Part Three

*Heart don't try so hard this time.
There's another lover waitin' around another paradigm.
These tears we cry are just a waste of water don'tcha know?
We got to learn to see when somethin's finally gone ... and just let it go.*

Little Feat

Ten

“MOMMY,” came the squeal from around the corner.

A moment later, Sarah Jane – Susan had told me her daughter’s name on our way up to the second floor apartment – flashed into view. She wore a pink jumpsuit overlaid with a colorful floral pattern that I guessed Susan had allowed her to pick out for herself. She leaped into her mother’s outstretched arms. Unable to conceal her excitement, her laughter betraying unconditional love, she threw her arms around Susan’s neck and hugged her with all the might her tiny six-year-old limbs could muster.

I could make out her features, features that undoubtedly had belonged to Susan at one time. The same square jaw and dimpled chin, as well as the identical pouting upper lip and the same high and elegant cheekbones. The brown eyes beneath the finely arched brows hinted at some hidden mischief; and the hair – full, wavy and lustrously black cascading down her back nearly to her waist.

The reunion was complete. Now it was time for introductions.

“Joe, this is Sarah Jane. Sarah Jane, I’d like you to meet Joe January.”

I saw the child got a charge out of the formal introduction. I suspected Susan rarely talked down to her, preferring instead to treat her as an adult, her reasoning that a child treated as such would respond as such.

She offered me her hand.

“Hello, Joe,” she spoke with alacrity. Then, suddenly aware of her

inadvertent rhyme, she giggled as she hid her mouth politely behind her hand.

I felt my face flush.

“And I thought I was the only one who could do that to you.” Susan’s smile mocked me affectionately, and I felt the heat rise higher as my discomfort grew.

“Have you had lunch yet, Sarah Jane?”

“Yes, Mommy.”

“And what have you and Monica been doing with yourselves all morning?”

“Watching *Fantasia*.”

“Again?”

“It’s a classic,” Sarah Jane replied with perfected adult inflection; I couldn’t keep from smiling.

“Well, go ahead and finish watching it while I visit with Monica and Joe, okay?”

“Won’t you watch it with me?”

“Just for a few minutes. I don’t want to be rude to our guest. Later this afternoon Joe and I will take you to the park.”

Sarah Jane’s face lit up at the prospect.

“Can I have an ice cream, too?”

“We’ll see,” was Susan’s measured reply.

I detected a glimmer of triumph in the child’s eye, as if the trophy had already been awarded.

“Come on,” Susan said, taking the child by the hand and leading her through the archway to the dining room and beyond.

And then they were gone, leaving me alone with Monica. Susan had briefly introduced us at the door, just before Sarah Jane’s entrance. Since then I’d been only dimly aware of Monica’s scrutiny of me. Although she’d been discreet, her appraisal hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Taller than Susan, her figure was also more boyish – flat-chested and long-waisted. with narrow hips. Her facial features were masculine: large pores and leathery skin, as if she’d spent too much time in the

sun. Her voice was deep with testosterone. Even her movements betrayed what I presumed when she first opened the door; confirmation came with the attitude she'd been displaying toward me since our arrival – indifference at first, now, jealousy.

Does she view me as a threat? I wondered.

If her affection for Susan was what I thought it was, then I was certain she had made her feelings known. I was equally certain that Susan had rebuffed Monica's overtures toward anything but a strictly platonic relationship. She would be gentle yet firm, for she would view Monica's friendship as a commodity much too valuable to be terminated. Did Monica still harbor hope for a physical relationship with Susan? I guessed yes, but I also knew it would never happen.

The silence between us since Susan's departure stretched on uncomfortably. Finally, at a loss for anything of much substance to say, I broke the ice.

"That coffee sure does smell good."

"I'm sorry," she said, although I doubted she was. "Can I get you a cup?"

"Sure."

Even though I really didn't care for any, I felt gratified that I had gained an advantage through this exchange. Not that I felt threatened. While it was obvious Monica was very protective of Susan, I didn't wish to come between her and Susan any more than I wanted her to come between Susan and me, and so I would have to be careful.

"How do you take it?"

"Black."

"Please, sit down. I'll bring it in." Her courtesy seemed forced.

I sat on the sofa, knowing that Monica would then be forced to opt for the chair in the corner. That would leave the spot on the sofa next to me open for Susan when she returned, leaving Monica further disadvantaged. Certain she would recognize my ploy, I wondered how she might counter.

Just then she came around the corner bearing the coffee, one cup

for each of us, on a circular serving tray. The cups chattered noisily on the matching saucers as she strode gracefully into the room, trying not to spill any of the contents of the too full cups. She set the tray on the coffee table in front of me and I noted happily that she'd failed in her effort to keep from spilling any of the liquid.

"Thanks," I said politely while making a show of ridding the saucer of the spillage onto the bottom of the serving tray. I smiled my gratitude at her.

Mute, Monica took one of the remaining two cups and proceeded to settle herself into the corner chair. The seating arrangements hadn't gone unnoticed.

Determined to coerce her into conversation, I ventured a comment on the arras hanging on the wall adjacent to her.

"Beautiful tapestry. What do the symbols represent?"

"It's a chakra chart," she replied icily. "The icons symbolize the centers of spiritual energy in the human body."

"Oh," I said with feigned interest. "You practice occultism."

"I'm not a witch."

I've managed to insult her. Good.

"I'm psychic," she announced proudly.

"You mean there's a difference?" I wondered if she'd caught my intended barb.

"I don't cast spells. I'm a receptacle for psychic vibrations. I interpret those energies for those not blessed with the gift."

I indicated the crystal globe, supported by a wooden base and centered on a purple silk scarf adorned with the signs of the zodiac that was, in turn, centered on the coffee table. "You read crystal balls?"

"That one is glass, merely decorative. I keep my crystal wrapped in silk in another room. It is important that it be kept free of unwanted influence."

"I see." I tried to sound impressed.

She'd spoken of her crystal with reverence, I noted with amusement. I was enjoying this dialogue immensely, even though I didn't

have the slightest interest in her supposed “gift”. But then that’s what made it so much fun.

I wondered if she suspected what my actual thoughts regarding her psychic abilities were, and nearly laughed aloud at the lunacy of that notion. If indeed she could read my thoughts, then she would know with certainty that I believed it was all hogwash.

“I also read cards.”

“Really? Well perhaps one day you could read mine.”

Just then Susan returned.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Joe.”

I liked the way she said my name, sweetly melodic.

“Sarah Jane and I get so little time together during the weekend, sometimes I just can’t say no.”

“I understand.”

“That coffee’s for you, Hon,” Monica piped in. “Cream and sugar, just the way you like it.”

I was certain her affectation of affection was intended for me.

“Thanks, Monica.” Susan’s tone, I noted happily, was purely platonic.

“So tell me, Susan. How do you and Joe come to know each other?”

She’s fishing: how long have we known each other, how serious are we? Ad infinitum.

“From The Oasis,” Susan said.

“I supply Susan’s demand for Coke,” I said. My joke was ours to share alone, for Monica found nothing amusing about the pun; but then, I had counted on that.

“Joe was just telling me of his interest in the esoteric.”

“Interest born of ignorance. I’ve always been fascinated by that about which I know very little.” With a wink at Susan, I finished, “The detective in me, I guess.”

Susan smiled. She understood my allusion.

“Perhaps you would like a little firsthand education?”

I caught the look of rascality in Monica's eyes. This was her chance to tip the scales in her favor.

"I don't think –"

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Susan gushed.

Roguishness turned to triumph. "I'll just be but a minute," Monica said, crossing the living room to exit down the hall.

When she was gone I turned to Susan to protest.

"You don't really believe she can read the future, do you? I mean, isn't this against your religion or something?"

"She's really very good, Joe. She uses her gift to help people, and there's nothing in the Bible that prohibits that."

Laughing, she put her hand on my knee.

"Besides, it'll save me a lot of time and trouble getting to know you."

"But –"

"Unless you've got something to hide," she said ominously.

"No." My denial sounded uncertain.

Initially, I'd fretted that Monica might use this opportunity to tell lies, to fabricate untruths to undermine my status in Susan's eyes. But now I was forced to acknowledge the possibility that the truth – the truth I'd been hiding from Susan as well as myself – if indeed Monica held in her power the ability to decipher it, could be more damning than anything she could make up. Either way, I'd be at her mercy.

"In here," Monica called from the dining room.

Resigned, I went to confront whatever fate awaited me.

In the dining room, Monica was arranging a midnight blue silk scarf, similar to the one in the living room that served as a doily for her imitation crystal ball, on top of a piece of wood that looked like oak, although it was stained a dark brown. The wood, about an inch thick, was approximately twenty-four inches square. From a small, ornately carved hinged box she procured a deck of Tarot cards.

"These have been in my family for three generations," she announced.

What a pity, I reflected sardonically. *With your sexual preference there will be no fourth generation to pass them down to.*

I wondered if she'd contemplated that, and if she had, how she was planning to overcome that little obstacle.

Monica removed a card from the pack and set it down on the center of the silk scarf.

"This card, the King of Swords, represents you."

"Why that one?"

"Of all the cards of the Minor Arcana, he looks most like you – fair, with blond hair."

"I think he's very handsome," Susan said.

I'd never been able to take a compliment. Blushing, I glanced over at Susan and found her smiling warmly at me. The affection behind her smile warmed me further.

"Too bad the card can't blush," she added.

Embarrassed further, I took recompense from the daggers of jealousy that came at me from across the table, where Monica had been silently appraising our exchange. She caught my look, and in that moment, she knew that I knew. Embarrassed by her own transparency, she quickly averted her eyes.

"What's the Minor Arcana?" I asked, trying to forestall the reading.

"Fifty-six cards make up the Minor Arcana," she explained. "Like the four suits of a deck of playing cards, only with Kings, Queens, Knights and Pages. These cards deal with love, pain, gain or loss. Anything that has to do with earthly affairs. The remainder of the deck contains the cards of the Major Arcana. They represent primal cosmic beings. Unlike the cards of the Minor Arcana, they cannot portray a person."

She handed me the pack of cards.

"Shuffle the cards well. Then cut them twice, using your left hand."

My mind swam as I tried to think of some way to delay the inevitable. It was impossible. If I backed out now I would appear suspicious, and so I could only hope that Monica's "gift" was a sham and that this

would amount to nothing more than a parlor game.

After shuffling the cards, I cut them into three piles.

"Past," Monica said, indicating the pile on my right. "Present and future," she assigned to the remaining two piles. "Select one."

I already knew what my future held, in 2047. And my past I could read about anytime in the biography on the coffee table in Porter's apartment.

I pointed to the cards that would depict my present.

Monica looked askance at me, as if my choice surprised or puzzled her. She took the cards I'd indicated and squared them.

I watched Susan as she peered intently at the cards Monica turned over and positioned around the King of Swords. The first she placed across it at ninety degrees. She next placed four others around it, one above, one below and one to either side. Finally, she placed a column composed of four cards along the right edge of the silk scarf.

I held my breath. The cards meant nothing to me; yet not knowing what else to do, I carefully scrutinized the images that would, truthfully or not, reveal my present.

I'd wanted Monica to reveal my present first because it was that aspect of my life that I knew least about. Suddenly aware of the silence around me, I looked up to find Monica studying me intently. I saw distrust in her eyes. I let out my breath and ...

Silently took another, grateful to see Susan still studying the cards.

"You are not who you pretend to be." It was not an accusation; an assessment perhaps, based on uncertainty. Monica continued.

"The Two of Swords crosses you. You keep many secrets."

She stared at the card a moment, as if seeking to discover something more about it.

"You are a man shrouded in mystery."

I felt my heartbeat quicken.

"The Justice card, reversed," Monica said, pointing to the card. "You will not receive remuneration for that which you thought you had paid."

“Here, the Three of Pentacles. This card indicates material gain that was lost because of your own selfish reasons.

“The Two of Cups,” she said, eyeing me with suspicion. “The Two of Cups is the marriage card. You are estranged,” she added, her voice barely audible. “This relationship is flawed. You thought you loved her, but you were only in love with the idea of being *in* love.”

She paused a moment, perhaps for dramatic effect, perhaps listening to some inner voice of her own.

“The relationship cannot be fixed, it is gone. Even though it is something you still want, you can never have it – it will never be.

“The Ace of Cups indicates you gave material things to this person out of love, expecting to receive love in return. This woman you gave these things to was materialistic, but it was never enough for her.

“The Strength card, reversed,” she said, touching the card.

“You must let go of this woman in order to go forward. Forget her,” she advised.

“The Hanged Man reversed. The Hanged Man provides strength – you will discover yourself, who you *really* are, through the guidance of this person.”

I chanced another glance at Susan, who was caught up in everything Monica was saying.

Monica continued with the reading.

“The Emperor reversed. An invasion of your privacy by another man.” Was that a glimmer of triumph in her eye? “The Strength card,” – she pointed to it again – “is also the Devastation card. You were unable to control your emotions over what was done to you, so you escaped. You must look to the Hanged Man for guidance.”

Monica now directed my attention to the last card, the bottom card of the column of four along the right side of the scarf.

“The Moon card indicates psychic ability.” She eyed me with amusement. “You *knew* she would do this to you, but you were unable to prevent it. Or perhaps you *chose* to do nothing. The Moon card also tells you to surrender and start over. This is a brand new beginning for

you. But only if you choose.”

Here she stopped; the silence became deafening.

Not knowing what was expected of me, I looked from the image that depicted the Moon card – a dog and a wolf both baying at the moon – to Susan, who was staring at me, waiting expectantly for me to say something.

There was truth in Monica's reading. How I knew I didn't have a clue, but I knew. Images of the dark-haired woman from the hidden photograph haunted my mind's eye.

Embarrassed by the idea of a past love, I felt myself redden.

Driven by the searching beauty of Susan's warm brown eyes, I sought exile in Monica's cold, calculating, masculine stare. She wore a look of superiority, born of the discovery of intimate events about my life.

How much does she know? More than she lets on.

But why hold back? Why not destroy me now, in front of Susan? Maybe she was playing a game of discretion, waiting to relate the rest of the damning evidence later, after I'd gone.

But if Monica was indeed psychic, then it was also conceivable that she already suspected the outcome and was content to allow Susan to make the discoveries on her own.

No. More than likely she merely wants to observe my discomfort.

“Wow,” Susan breathed.

“There is truth in what I have seen in the cards?” Monica was daring me to refute the facts as she'd presented them.

I couldn't.

And I'd already told enough lies.

So I conceded.

“Yes, there was a woman. She was unfaithful to me.” Somehow I knew this to be true. “She's gone now. I don't know where she is. She hurt me.” I sensed loss and felt pain in my breast, pain as real as truth. “But I'm working through it.”

Monica, I saw, was disappointed. She'd expected denial. On the

other hand, my response elicited sympathy from Susan.

“Oh, Joe, I’m sorry.”

Susan’s response served to displease further, for Monica had expected to see my esteem in Susan’s eyes fall, not rise. Her reaction to the ensuing silence was harsh as she gathered up the cards from the reading.

“Select,” she said. “Past or future.”

“Future,” I said, thinking there just might be more to my alleged future than I’d at first thought. There was my future in 2047, certainly. And being a part of my past, I already knew much about it; but there were questions regarding my future here in 1992 as well.

Curious, I waited in silence as Monica squared the pack of cards that contained my future, and then proceeded to turn them over, one at a time, placing them as she’d done before. I nervously glanced over at Susan for a measure of reassurance.

Her smile calmed me. I drew further assurance from the hand she placed on my arm. I drew in a breath and listened as Monica began the second phase of my reading.

“The Ten of Cups crosses you,” she said.

This time it was Monica’s turn to sneak a peek at Susan; in dismay, she went on.

“You will find that which you seek, your paradigm – that which has seemed so elusive to you. Because of her, you will be able to finish that which was started long ago. Also, a lost child will seek to renew a relationship with you – this is indicated here, by the Ace of Swords.

“The Queen of Wands shows herself as an unfaithful lover. She will try to rekindle your love for her, but beware, she tells lies. Here,” she said, indicating the next card, “the Page of Wands, are those lies. But the truth is, if you take her back all will be lost.”

She paused again, head cocked, as if listening to a voice that was hers alone to hear.

“This woman caused you much suffering. You feel she must be punished because of the man who removed you from your place and

subsequently caused you to lose your ambition. This man shows up in your reading as the Five of Swords reversed. He will be defeated in battle and will no longer perform for her what she needs. Therefore she will return to you.

“The Six of Swords tells of future travel. You will have business regarding your work.

“A long lost brother will seek you out, as shown by the Knight of Wands. He is very angry with you, as well as disappointed. Listen to what your brother has to say. It will be easy for you to distrust his words, but he speaks the truth.

“The Ace of Pentacles, reversed, shows a loss of business or opportunity for continued success. You will regain all, but only if you spurn the Queen of Wands —”

“That’s enough.”

My outburst surprised everyone at the table save myself. My decision to halt the reading was the only thing that hadn’t surprised me since this nonsense began.

“But I have not completed your reading.”

“I don’t need to hear more.”

“But, Joe, what about your past?” Susan asked.

“I already know what resides there.”

The truth was that the reading she’d completed thus far, concerning my present and the one that lay incomplete before me, didn’t belong to me. None of what she was talking about dealt with me. Unfaithful lovers. How could a lover be unfaithful to me when in turn I had never been faithful?

Untrue, a part of me argued back.

But I was already moving on.

A child? Impossible. I’ve sired no offspring. And I have no brother. It’s all a sham.

Or meant for someone else. Who, then?

I stood, upending the board the cards had been positioned on, sending them into Monica’s lap and onto the floor; the reading had

come to an end, of that I'd made certain.

I strode purposefully into the living room, where I stopped in front of the window to gaze at two fags strolling hand-in-hand past Monica's second floor apartment.

A moment later, I felt Susan's light touch on my arm. That simple gesture sparked anger in me – that she could make me feel the way she did just by the gentleness of her touch.

I turned, preparing a reprimand but was stopped short by the concern in her eyes.

Now my anger was directed inward. The very idea that I could even consider reproaching her was reprehensible.

Suddenly, I was nearly consumed with a passion to cup her face with my hands, to taste the sweetness I knew resided on her lips, and to hold her close and bury my face within the soft, luxurious texture of her wondrously dark hair, inhaling its fresh fragrance.

Ashamed, yet not knowing the source of my abasement, I turned away.

“What is it, Joe?”

I ached for her, and because I ached for her, it pained me to have to do what was becoming more and more common although no less difficult – lie.

There was trust in her eyes, but like the cards had foretold, I was a man shrouded in mystery. I held secrets that, were the truth known, could not be believed. Even I was finding it more and more difficult to believe the facts as they unraveled, so how could I expect her to comprehend them?

I took a deep breath. I could seem, peripherally, Monica leaning against the archway to the other room.

How much did she actually know?

Would she contradict what I was about to say?

It didn't matter. I had to say something; maintaining silence at this point was just as damning.

“I'm sorry. It's just that ... well, I thought I had that part of my life

under better control. I thought I'd put all that behind me. But to see, in the cards, that I'll have to deal with all that again, it's painful."

"Ah, but the cards also say you have the option of closing the door."

"What if I can't?"

"A better question would be what if you don't want to?"

Then, in response to my exasperation, she added, "There *is* a difference."

"I know that."

"Isn't it better to recoup at least some of what you lost as opposed to losing it all, including yourself?"

I smiled down at her.

If you only knew, I reflected. If I opt for what you think is the best option the cards offer, then I will lose myself.

My smile seemed to reassure her.

"Come on," she said, taking my arm and leading me back to the dining room. "Let's have another cup of coffee."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Susan left to get Sarah Jane while I offered muttered apologies to Monica for upsetting her cards; she in turn accepted them graciously enough. I thanked her for her hospitality and for reading the cards; she seemed indifferent.

She may now believe the advantage has shifted in her favor, I reasoned. That might very well be the case, but I'm still leaving with the prize, while she's being left behind to play fifty-two card pickup.