



*Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love.*
William Shakespeare

Patricia Stillwell watched as the curvaceous blonde made her way down the aisle of the company lunchroom. A tiny hot-pink handbag dangled from one wrist. It matched the blonde's hot-pink lips and her hot-pink knit top. The hot-pink top brimmed over with a cleavage that seemed almost real. In her slender arms she balanced a salad in a clear plastic box as if it were a gift.

'Look at that. Look how she *moves!* It's like Jell-O on springs,' Pinky McGee hissed across the table to her friend Patricia.

As soon as the woman passed by, Patricia twisted herself backward and watched with fascination as the men in the lunchroom responded in a mass-hysterical Pavlovian response wave.

'Those aren't *real.*' Patricia gave her best friend Pinky a roll-eyed look. 'It's *silicone* on springs, not Jell-O.'

As Patricia continued to watch the passing parade, she saw every guy in the cafeteria develop a snap-action Ken doll head as the blonde and beautiful Lizbeth Summers from the lingerie department passed by their long tables.

‘Unbelievable. You’d think she was a T-bone steak and they were starving dogs,’ Pinky said. ‘Look at them drool.’ Pinky pushed her black-rimmed glasses back up in disdain.

‘So what? She’s a blonde,’ Patricia said. ‘She’s Marilyn Monroe and we’re Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis. Or in our case, more like Geraldine and Daphne, their female alter egos.’

‘Just find me Osgood Fielding the Third and you’re on.’ Pinky smirked and batted her eyes.

‘You are impossible.’ Patricia took a bite of her sandwich and ignored her friend. The subject of blondes vs brunettes was not a new one in the Nordquist Department Store’s employee lunchroom.

‘You use that same obscure movie reference every time I yammer about some bimbo blonde from the lingerie department making all the boys go ga-ga.’ Pinky crossed her arms and stared, unblinking. Patricia gazed upon her best friend. Pinky’s brown eyes looked bigger because of the way her glasses magnified them. Her Mary McFadden bobbed hairdo set the whole picture off. Pinky always made her smile and drove her nuts at the same time.

Patricia finished her bite before she set her friend straight. ‘*Some Like It Hot* is not obscure. It’s a classic.

And besides, Paulie knows what I mean. Who cares about anyone else but you, me, and our honorable landlord and third musketeer, Paulie?’ Patricia slumped over her sandwich. She was in a mood. She sucked her diet Coke through a straw and hid her face from Pinky so her blonde envy wouldn’t show. The truth was, she wished she could be as beautiful as Lizbeth.

If she had been the pretty sister instead of the plain one, would she be here working at Nordquist in the catalogue department? Or would she be engaged to an Orthodontic Greek god like her sister Carol, or maybe teaching Russian and Romantic literature to a room full of attentive college students focused on her striking appearance yet still soaking in the wonder of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*?

‘We need new movie references; modern movies, beyond the sixties. We’re just getting so inbred; so predictable. Isn’t that the same thing you ate last Tuesday?’ Pinky asked.

‘What’s wrong with leftovers?’

‘It’s the meatloaf Tuesday thing. Every Monday Paulie makes meatloaf. Every Tuesday you eat a meatloaf sandwich.’

‘So I’m economical.’

‘No, Patricia, you are in a rut! We are in a rut.’

‘Okay. I’m in a rut. I admit it. What shall we do, take a cruise to Fiji? Enroll in a knitting class? Go river rafting? Learn to ride a bike again?’

‘You’re a very pretty girl, you know.’ Pinky tapped her short unpainted fingernails on the bare woodlike

tabletop. 'You haven't had a serious relationship in over four years. You should be dating.'

'Are you hitting on me?'

'*Fesso.*' Pinky reached over and swatted Patricia's hand. Good thing she'd put down the sandwich.

'Ouch. What's that mean?'

'Idiot in Italian. Paulie is teaching me Italian.'

'So what's your point?' Under this plain exterior we're both living dolls? We're not. We are the plain-brown-wrapper girls. We are Barbie's best friend whaz-zername. See? We can't even remember Barbie's best friend's name. And do you know *why*? Because she was a brunette like us. She probably had a degree in some obscure literature.'

'Like you?' Pinky smiled.

'Yes, and that's why we don't know her name, because she's twenty-eight, working in the catalogue department of Nordquist, underutilizing her education, and not even getting a decent employee discount because she doesn't quite have what it takes to be on the sales floor. She's at Nordquist getting the second-tier discount. Sad, isn't it?'

'She was a redhead sometimes. I remember that. But I had her with brown hair. She was probably an Irish Catholic girl from Brooklyn,' Pinky mused.

'Like you?' Patricia took another bite of her sandwich. Eating with Pinky always made eating somewhat difficult and slow due to their joint tendency to philosophize over lunch instead of chew.

'Yeah, like me. You think this Northwest land of Norwegians and fish is so great. These Scanadhoovians

have no idea what do to with food. Did I ever tell you about the food in New York? People out here just don't get it. What is it with the bagels here in Seattle? Just stupid.' Pinky made a very weird face and gestured in the air.

Patricia laughed. 'Let's see, did you *and* Paulie ever tell me about the food in New York? Only about a thousand times a week. Shall I just flop over and expire of hysterics right here? We've been searching for the perfect bagel in this city for five years, Pinky. Talk about predictable!' She snorted in response to her friend.

Pinky made a mean face at her, which abruptly changed to a happier configuration. 'Oh, look, here comes Osgood Fielding the Third.'

Patricia turned completely around to see what Pinky was staring at. Just like the blonde moment, a hush fell over the lunchroom as their new store manager, Brett Nordquist, son of the owner, made his gorgeous way down the aisle.

Patricia felt herself flush with a strange, unnerving desire to throw herself at Brett's lean beautiful body and declare her love. Her lips parted and she breathed in his scent as he passed. She'd spent an hour at the man-scent counter on the first floor figuring out what cologne he used. It was Eau Sauvage by Dior. Intoxicatingly animal.

On so many levels the beautiful Brett was the male counterpart to Lizbeth Summers. She wondered if Brett and Lizbeth knew they were destined to create genetically perfect children together. She wondered if she could possess Lizbeth's body and take her place for that union – a surrogate Lizbeth, so to speak.

Brett stopped to talk to Lizbeth. Perhaps he had an inkling of his fate after all. He was doing that casual kind of hands-in-the-pants-pocket-of-a-great-suit thing. Lizbeth looked perturbed at him. Silly woman, Patricia thought. Wake up, Lizbeth; look up at the bronzed blond, godlike creature, almost kneeling at your feet and recognize your preordained path!

‘How could Lizbeth be dissing Osgood like that?’ Pinky mused.

‘Brett Nordquist is so, so beyond Osgood.’ Patricia sighed.

‘That’s going to be our new saying. Beyond Osgood.’

‘I’m in love with him.’

‘Beyond Osgood? Really?’

‘Yeah, Beyond Osgood. Pathetic, isn’t it?’ Patricia started to laugh and snort at the same time; a bad and strange habit that overcame her on occasions when the laughter was tainted with embarrassment, thereby compounding the problem twofold. ‘Deeply, hopelessly in love.’

Paul Costello walked up behind Patricia and put his hands on her shoulders. She jumped at least an inch off her chair, startled, he guessed. He winked at Pinky across the table. Her short brown hair parted to reveal her thick glasses and a large grin directed his way.

Patricia looked up at him with her less-thick gold-rimmed glasses. She had that whole Marion the Librarian look down pat. But she was pretty, too, like Marion. He stared at her lovely features for a moment.

‘What’s going on here? I hear snorting. You girls know what happens when you snort-laugh and try and drink diet Coke at the same time. It is just not pretty.’ He pulled out a chair beside Patricia and studied his two best friends. They both had their hands over their mouths in a lame attempt to stop the inevitable blurt of gossip and free-form hysterics that occasionally came upon them.

‘You’re gonna blow, you know. Just don’t mess up the suit.’ Paul held up his hands in a fake protective manner and cringed against the wall.

They blew, then started gossiping about unnamed blondes. It was loud and somewhat embarrassing, although it took a whole lot to embarrass him these days.

After all, he was the assistant buyer of ‘ladies’ better handbags’ for Nordquist Department Store. For a living, even. Sure, the money was actually quite good, and he traveled to all his favorite places. But when you said what your job was, the eyebrow almost always raised up. He hated the eyebrow.

So hanging out with these two was harsh at times, but not that bad. His family could always top it. Just take his Sunday visits with his Seattle-transplanted Bronx Italian family where his brothers would make with the jokes. ‘Oh, *Paulie*, you forgot your *purse*!’ His youngest brother Mitchell would make some excuse to do *that* little joke every time. Then Nick would laugh his head off.

So what could two off-the-wall broads do that his two brothers couldn’t top in a heartbeat? Besides, they were *his* off-the-wall broads, living in the lower half of his

house, and he loved them both. He adjusted his glasses and gave them both a look.

‘Stifle it, ladies. I’m here slumming with you underlings, so show some respect,’ he said.

They quieted and apologized for their childish behavior, then gave him huge doses of crap for his slumming comment. He knew perfectly well the whole buyers-mingling-with-the-riff-raff thing would never fly – he just had to poke the anthill once in a while for fun.

The truth was, he was a happy man with his interesting, quirky housemates. Sometimes he wondered what could ever lead him to change the way things were. *And yet*, little things did lead him. Which reminded him of his mission.

‘I brought chocolate,’ he announced.

‘Oh, oh, we promise to behave.’ Patricia grabbed his arm and made tiny jumps in her seat.

‘You two are like Chihuahua dogs. I’ll refrain from making you roll over or beg.’

‘Hand over the chocolate and no one gets hurt,’ Pinky said.

Paul opened the tiny gold Godiva bag he’d brought with him and pulled out one glazed apricot dipped in dark chocolate for Pinky, and one espresso truffle for Patricia, each one wrapped in a bit of waxed paper. He knew what they liked. Both girls swooned and made a great drama of accepting their heavenly treats.

‘Oh, Paulie, have we told you how much we love you?’ Pinky nibbled on her apricot.

Patricia gave him a somewhat wet kiss on the cheek. 'You are a god among men, Paulie. You've spoiled us for all others. Nordquist's is lucky to have an assistant handbag buyer such as yourself.'

The place where her lips touched his cheek had probably left a ketchup splotch from her meatloaf sandwich. He borrowed her napkin and blotted. Yes, indeed, ketchup. She was so funny. Her kiss felt good, though. Patricia had a special place in his heart.

'Keep your panties on, ladies, there's a price to pay.'

'Ooo, I just knew it.' Pinky's eyebrow tweaked high on her forehead as she looked sharply at Paul. 'I'm such a *fesso*.'

'That's her new word for today. It's Italian...'
Patricia said as she bit into her truffle. Paul watched her lick her lips with pleasure.

'... for idiot,' Paul said. 'I know. It's a little on the fancy side as usage goes.' He paused, then went ahead and threw himself to the she-wolves. 'I need a few hours alone tonight.'

'As in an actual date alone? As in make the moves on some poor unsuspecting girl? Why? Wouldn't she love to meet your charming house-mates? What is she, antisocial?' Patricia asked.

'No, she's social. She's very social.'

'Is she a werewolf and you don't want us to see her change into a horrible fanged hairy beast when the full autumn moon rises?' Pinky asked.

'No, she's not a werewolf as far as I know.'

'Well, then, what is she, chopped liver? Princess

Mononoke? The bride of Frankenstein?’ Pinky leaned over the table, arms extended, and said that fairly loudly.

‘No, she’s . . . she’s . . . blonde.’

A collective groan passed between Patricia and Pinky. Pinky slapped the table. Patricia smacked Paul on the back of the head.

‘*Fesso!*’ she hissed.