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Death By Mutual Agreement

By Linda Pillifant

The obelisk rose high from the hill. It stood alone, shunned by the other gravestones. Down the hillside, its pentagonal shadow crept as two cars raced toward it. Up from the cold soil surrounding the obelisk, electricity sparked and flashed along the edges of its dark, marble base. Power burned across the stone face, engraving the intertwined form of four roses. White light sped faster and faster through the etching. Like an unstable electron, it shot from its orbit and exploded up the alabaster pillar and burst into dozens of power veins webbing upward, converging at its pinnacle; lightning bolted free into the autumn sky. A white Mercedes screeched into the parking lot below.

The door to the Mercedes opened and a tall woman stepped out. She glared at the red BMW that pulled in after her.

A petite blonde emerged from the car. Her young face lifted toward the obelisk. She sighed. A red rose was creadled in her arms. Her back straightened and her brown eyes narrowed on the older woman before her.

"Audette," the young woman said.

"Not 'Auntie' Audette? You little bitch! I was your Uncle's wife after all, Cassandra," the older woman said, her manicured nails running through shoulder length, honey-colored hair. A white angora sweater molded to her perfectly revealed a body that she knew would never hint at her forty-three years. "Audette, my uncle is dead. I see no reason for pretense. You do remember him? The man we've come to honor tonight. On this the anniversary of the day you sent him from us." The young woman looked past her aunt into the graveyard. The sun was beginning to set behind the large marble monument which cast its long shadow down the hill toward them.

"I sent him! You know it was a mutual agreement. Don't you dare try to lay the blame on me. Where are the others anyway? I want to get this over. I don't know why I agreed to this in the first place."
"Yes, you do. So I won't contest the will. You vowed to come to his resting place on the anniversary of his death, kiss his gravestone and place a single red rose as a token of your love and the purity of our deed."

"Well, it's damn foolishness. Isn't that your Uncle Bernard's Cadillac coming around the curve? Why he insists on driving that gross black thing is beyond me. It looks like a hearse." Audette crossed her arms. Her long fingers slid along her angora sleeves.

Cassandra glanced down the hill. "He stopped being my uncle the minute he married you sister." Her eyes darkened as they rested on Audette. Her aunt squirmed under their burning intensity.

"Well, they're here now, and I don't give a damn if you call him uncle or not. Let's just get this farce over, and get the hell out of here. I have better things to do with my evenings than to hang around deserted graveyards with the demented little brat who thought this up. Besides, those are definitely thunder clouds and I have no intention of getting caught in the rain." Audette tossed her hair back from her face and looked over Cassandra's head as the first roll of thunder sounded in the distance.

"I'll be more than happy when things are taken care of. When things are put to rest as they should be. Don't forget your rose, and please make sure Bernard and Suzanne have theirs. Everything must be correct." Cassandra sniffed her long-stemmed rose and started up the hill.

"You're as crazy as the rest of your family," Audette called after her.

"Just don't forget the roses." Cassandra continued up the hill.

Audette stood arms folded, watching her sister's shapely, long legs emerge from the Cadillac. "You're late."

"I'm sorry Audette. We had an emergency at the clinic. It was one of Bernard's major contributors. We couldn't just ignore her. If we lose her and her friends, we could have a large financial loss." Suzanne nervously straightened her short nurse's uniform.

"Well, in that case I suppose it couldn't be helped. But, it shouldn't be an excuse for such a slovenly appearance. Just look at yourself. Your hair is falling out of that bun thing. And if it's necessary for professionalism to wear it like that, the stray hair ruins the effect. Haven't I always told you appearance is everything?"

"I'm sorry Audette. Of course you're right. " Suzanne tucked a long auburn strand into her bun.

"That's better. Your looks are everything for you. Now get Bernard out here. What's he doing in there anyway? Playing in his doctor's bag? It's amazing his patients let him touch them. And have him bring the roses. You did remember the roses?"

"Oh yes, Audette, I did. Bernard, what are you doing in there? Playing with yourself? Get out here and bring the roses. Audette is in a hurry."

Another roll of thunder sounded louder than the last. A short balding man in his late fifties exited the car on the driver's side.

"Sorry, darling; I didn't want to interrupt your conversation with your sister. I have the roses right here. Hello, Audette." He waved three long-stemmed roses over his head.

"How so you live with that little weasel? His brother at least was a powerful man." Audette shook her head. "Bernard, get over here and give me my rose. Cassandra is already at the grave, and she's insistent that we follow this thing to the letter."

The three started up the slope. The wind began blowing through the trees. Leaves swirled wildly along the lawn before them. Suzanne's teet chattered as she said, "Do you think she knows something?"

Audette shot her sister a sideways glance. "What's there to know?" And before she could answer, Audette added, "Bernard, go back to the car and get Suzanne's jacket. How could you let her out of the car without it?"
"Oh, darling, you must be freezing. I'll be right back." He looked sheepishly at the sisters as he headed back down.

"Suzanne," she whispered, "be careful what you say around him. He prefers to think of the skiing incident as an accident. And that I only put the pillow on Jack's head because he was suffering too much when we took him off life support. Let's just leave it that way. We can't afford to have him whining about his guilt. And, we can't do anything more permanent about him now."

"I'm sorry. I'm just not thinking. This whole thing's creepy. Could she know something?" Lightning flashed across the sky. Suzanne shook noticeably.

"Pull yourself together." Thunder clapped loudly. "It's just this bizarre setting and Cassandra's love of melodrama. Nobody was there when I pushed Jack off the ski slope. And he never regained consciousness until we took him off life support. And I took care of that. At best she's guessing. A stab in the dark unless we give her something. So for God's sake, Suzanne, keep your wits about you."

The wind whipped through the graveyard tossing leaves in twisting rivulets.

The women's hair lashed at their faces as they met before the towering monument. Suzanne vainly tried to fasten her red tendrils in place. Audette, with one stroke of her long fingers, swept back her hair and held it in place. Cassandra didn't seem to notice and let her hair fly wildly around her face.

"Now that you have us all here, let's play your little game, Cassandra, and get out of here before the storm really breaks," Audette said.

Cassandra's dark eyes searched around and narrowed as Bernard approached the group. He placed Suzanne's jacket on her shoulders.

"This is no game, Audette. Things must be as he wanted them. But seeing that we are all here, we may proceed."

"He wanted them? What do you mean? Have you brought someone else into this?" Audette asked.

"I've brought nobody else into this." Cassandra's hair blew out from her face as though electrified. Lightning flashed. She fixed the heat of her gaze on Audette. The thunder rolled. "Shut up, and I'll explain everything. You all should know what my Uncle Jack meant to me. He was my entire family after my mother left and my father died."

"I was there, Cassandra," Bernard said.

"You never even remembered my birthday. Uncle Jack was always there, first for my father when mother left, and then for me when Daddy died of a broken heart."

"Your father hanged himself, Cassandra. He died of a stretched neck, not a broken heart." Audette smirked.

"He died of the same affliction that seems to affect all the men in this family. Blind love for a beautiful woman." Cassandra glanced at Bernard. He looked away.

"But, I digress. Why have we gathered here? That's the question. One year ago today, we all came to an agreement. We gathered around the bedside of Uncle Jack, much as we gather around his gravesite today. He lay helpless in his bed, kept alive by modern technology. We all agreed that Uncle Jack would not want to exist like that. He was such a vibrant man. He had often said that he would not want to live like a vegetable." Cassandra raised her voice over the wind.

"Why are you going on so, Cassandra? We all know why we agreed to turn off Jack's life support. Let's just kiss the bloody tombstone, drop the roses, and go home. I'm cold. And I at least have plans to warm up my evening," Audette said.

"Yes, but we didn't agree to murder." Cassandra paused.

"I don't know...."

"Don't bother to deny it, Audette. I know every detail. He told me everything: how you convinced him that he was ready to ski the most difficult run when you knew he wasn't." She stared directly into Audette's face. "And, your story that he got ahead of you. And skied off the trail into an area
marked 'dangerous.' All lies.

"I told you she knows." Suzanne's eyes widened and she grabbed Audette's arm. Audette pulled away and in one motion slapped her sister across the cheek.

"Jack is dead, you fool. She couldn't know anything." Audette turned from her sister, her attention fully on Cassandra. "You really are crazy. Your uncle never spoke to you before he died. Your uncle and I were the only ones at the accident. And it happened just the way I said."

"Yes, you were the only ones there, but it didn't happen the way you said. You told Uncle Jack that you had been on the run earlier and that the trail had just been cleared. You said it was an easy run and that you would race him down. You know that mountain like the back of your hand, so Uncle Jack sped off eager to impress you. You took to the right side, going faster and faster, past more warning signs, until there before you, was a sheer drop. You, of course, expected it and turned off. Uncle Jack neither had the time nor experience to do anything. That's what really happened, Audette."


"Don't hit her again," he pleaded. She turned on him.

"Then the two of you just shut up and do as you're told." Audette spoke through clenched teeth.

"All right, Audette." He put his arm around Suzanne, and she nodded her response to Audette. Another peal of thunder crashed. Audette controlled her voice as she spoke to her niece. "This is just insane speculation prompted by your guilt. You've just taken bits and pieces of information and mixed them with a few half truths to fabricate a story. I don't have time for this garbage. I'm leaving."

"You're not leaving. He told me how you saw his eyes open when Bernard took him off the respirator. And the two of you watched while Audette took the pillow from behind his head and pressed down. He tried to scream, but the sound stuck in his throat. With his last bit of strength, he reached out and touched your hand, Audette. He felt your hands pushing down harder. Then everything went black."

"You're a lunatic, Cassandra." Audette's voice was low. It could hardly be heard over the rising wind. "Dead men don't speak and even if he spoke to you, his testimony wouldn't be allowed in court."

A short laugh came from her pale face.

Cassandra's eyes leveled on her aunt's face. "He came to me the night after his murder. I awoke from a restless sleep to find him standing beside my bed. At first I thought I was dreaming, but he sat beside me on the bed as he had so many times when I woke from bad dreams. I felt his fingers gently tighten around mine."

A tear formed and ran down Cassandra's cheek as the rain began to fall. "Cassie, Princess," he said. 'Don't be afraid. There are things you must do for me. Princess, listen very closely and do exactly as I say.' He related all the facts about his murder and the details that must be followed so that I would not contest the will. His passion for you blinded him, but he was never a fool. He always knew your only obsession was for his money. So, he had me use it as a tool to get you all here tonight."

A thunderbolt exploded, shearing a nearby oak in two. Suzanne screamed.

Audette stepped forward, stopping only inches from Cassandra's face. She pointed a long finger in front of her niece's unblinking eyes. "I'm not staying here another instant. You crazy little bitch."

"I see; then you are relinquishing all rights to my uncle's inheritance?" The rain streamed down Cassandra's face and blended with the traces of her tears.

The two women stood motionless; their eyes
locked as the wind and rain swirled around them.

"All right!" Audette pushed the word through her teeth. "Bernard, get over here. Kiss the bloody tombstone. Hurry up."

"Audette, don't you think you should go first?" Bernard asked. He gazed down at the rose. He fidgeted with it in his hands.

"I think you're a cowardly little weasel. He was your brother. Now, pretend you're a man and get this thing started."

"But, I really think..."

"You haven't had an original thought in your life. Don't try starting now."

Bernard lifted his head. His mouth opened. He looked at Audette. His mouth closed. His head lowered, and he began to move slowly forward.

Rain came down in solid sheets, washing down the stone monument before him. Step by step, Bernard edged toward it. His hand reached forward. He withered to his knees at its touch; his fingers slid down its smooth surface. For a few moments he was crumpled before it, his hand still resting on its cold face. In his other hand, he held the rose. He unfolded, inch by inch. His fingers clutched the ridge of the letters chiseled deeply in its marble face. "Jonathan Creston" they read. His purple lips touched the stone as lightning flashed. Soft cold lips pressed against his; dead, dark eyes stared back at him. His brother’s kiss held Bernard, stifling his scream.

Lightning flashed again. Suzanne screamed. "He's here. Oh God, he's kissing Bernard." She placed her rose to her lips, her fingers interlocking and her knuckles white. Suzanne giggled, then laughed, her body rocking back and forth. Her laughter blended with the screeching of the wind through the trees.

"You've all gone mad," Audette said. She walked to Bernard. Water ran down the gravestone and his frozen face as she thrust him aside. His ashen face looked up at her, his eyes fixed and unblinking. "You hysterical old fool, you've killed yourself. I'm not so easily frightened, Cassandra. In fact, you've rid me of quite a nuisance." Audette smirked.

Cassandra did not respond. She stood still, the rain soaking her hair to her head. She cradled her rose gently on her arm.

"One last kiss and I'm off." Audette leaned forward. "Here's your last kiss off, Jack." She laughed as she kissed the gray marble.

"Done," she said as she turned to face Cassandra. "Now don't bother me again. I've played your child's game, and your parlor tricks haven't fooled me. You've ruined an expensive angora sweater, but you've taken care of a problem for my sister and me. So, all in all, it's been a good night. Suzanne, stop that incessant laughing. It's time to go. We'll send someone to get Bernard later." Audette started toward her sister.

"The rose," Cassandra pointed to the grave.

"Oh yes, we mustn't forget the little details. Do you have another trick for me? It had better be more clever than the one that killed Bernard. Come on Suzanne. Kiss the stone and drop your rose. The night is still young and I have things to do." Audette's heel stuck in the soft ground as she turned, her rose in hand.

"Oops, I almost lost my balan—-, what the hell!" The dirt loosened around Audette's foot. Something pulled her down. She tried to pull her foot free. Something held her fast. Her eyes searched down her leg. A large chalky hand manacled her ankle.

The dirt loosened around Audette's foot. Something pulled her down. She tried to pull her foot free. Something held her fast. Her eyes searched down her leg. A large chalky hand manacled her ankle. The scream rushed up her leg and out of her mouth. She tried to run forward, but her foot only slid out from under her. Her body fell hard on the wet grass. Grasping for a handhold, her right hand clutched a fist full of fabric. Audette jerked to her right. Rain ran down Bernard's bald head and dripped down her nose. She screamed.

Audette struggled to get her arms behind her. The hand crushed the bones in her ankle. Her fingers dug into the ground as she began to push up. The ground beside her cracked. A hand shot up. On one
finger was a large diamond wedding band. "Jack!"
The hand and arm reached across her and dragged her down. "Oh, Jack, don't!" The hand released her ankle.

"Thank you, Jack. I knew you couldn't hurt me. Now just let go of my waist. Please." She raised her head. Rivers of rain weaved their way through the forest of black hairs on the dead arm that bound her. "You know I love you." Dirt flew across her face turning instantly to mud, as fingers closed around her throat. Her mouth opened as if to say something, then closed. The fingers of her left hand tightened on the rose, then went slack.

Suzanne laughed one last giggle, and sank to the ground. She sat crosslegged. Her nurse's uniform hiked up to her hips. With the red rose held to her nose, she breathed in deeply. "Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down," she sang, her body rocking back and forth.

Cassandra walked to the stone marker, her rose resting in her arms. The rain had stopped, but wet tendrils still curled around her calm face. Her lips gently kissed the stone. "I love you, Uncle Jack. Rest in peace."

"I love you, too, my little princess."

She laid the rose before the stone monolith and walked down the hill to her car and drove away.