

WINTER WONDERLAND

Caffeinator's Corner was usually slow on Thursday nights. Tonight it was empty. Lucretia had time to worry about classes that were too difficult, friends that were too simple, a trash can that was too full, and a bank account that was too empty. One of those problems suggested an obvious strategy.

She moved around the brightly lit coffeehouse to the can, pretending to dance. The whisper of the black silk skirt around her ankles was her music. Trying to ignore the smell of coffee-stained napkins and stale bits of cinnamon raisin bagels, she waltzed the can beyond the restrooms (coily labeled VENUS and ADONIS) to the back door. With a grunt she swung her hip into the push bar, blithely ignoring the stern warning that this was an emergency exit only.

A cool breeze caressed her face. The night was clear and moonless, dusted with stars. Lucretia minced down a set of concrete steps to the deserted parking area. A single streetlight illuminated the hulking garbage bin, lonely in the sickly yellow light. Behind the bin, out of place in this trendy area of boutiques and wine bars, lay a miniature wilderness of weeds and saplings. It seemed to be calling to her, a refuge from classrooms and timesheets.

Lucretia hoisted the can over her head and dumped the remnants of study sessions and business meetings into its hungry maw. If only everything could be that simple.

By the time she made her way back into the coffeehouse, jiggling the back door open in the secret way that all the baristas knew, she had a customer. Lucretia shaped her face into Professional Smile Number One and traipsed behind the counter. She turned the music on. Somebody sang weakly.

"Hi. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have hot chocolate?" The fellow was short, thin, and sallow. Watery blue eyes behind steel rim spectacles met hers for a moment.

Lucretia widened her smile into Number Two. *I'm going to ignore the fact that you're too stupid or too lazy to read the giant chalkboard on the wall.* "Sure do. Small or large?"

"Small, please." He touched his forehead, as if he were trying to remember something. His hair reminded her of a haystack. "Do you have any marshmallows?"

Professional Smile Number Three: The Sincere Apology. "Sorry, no. How about some whipped cream?"

"No, thank you." He retreated to a chair in the far corner of the room.

Lucretia figured him for a twenty-five cent tip at best. Not worth asking him if he wanted soy milk or real moo juice. She filled a mug with boiling water from the shrieking espresso machine and stirred in the hot chocolate mix, relishing the heavy scent of cocoa. With a shrug she topped off the mug with skim milk. He looked like a skim milk kind of guy.

The man was staring at nothing when Lucretia brought him the drink with Professional Smile Number Four. *It's almost closing time, so hurry up.* "That'll be two twenty-five. When you're ready. No rush."

"Thank you." He handed her three big coins. "Please keep the change."

Silver dollars. Real ones. They felt smooth and cold, as if they had been carved from ice.

When Lucretia looked up the man held the mug between his hands. His eyes were shut. A marshmallow floated in the chocolate. Not one of those tiny, nasty little pastel marshmallows that tasted like chalk. This was a large, irregular cube the color of newly fallen snow, the kind that had to be made at home, the kind that would melt on your tongue and make you shiver with sweetness.

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The next day Mister Fields held one of his monthly meetings. Lucretia had to show up on her day off, before the bleary-eyed commuters stumbled in. All the baristas (and Timmy, the high school boy, who insisted on being called a baristo) were there. There were the two Madisons (athletic blonde and stocky redhead) as well as LaTonya, the assistant manager. Lucretia stifled a yawn. At least she was getting paid for her predawn minutes.

"A very good morning to you all." Mister Fields was immaculately attired in a tweed three-piece suit. A scarlet bow tie added a touch of whimsy. "Please continue to push the Pumpkin Spice flavoring. We've still got a lot of that stuff to get rid of."

"I could do a Pumpkin Spice mushroom soup." Yellow Madison was the mistress of the Soup of the Day. When she wasn't working, the Soup of the Day was Campbell's.

Red Madison took a sip of her free espresso. "How about a Pumpkin Spice Reuben on Pumpkin Spice bread?" She blinked her eyes innocently. Lucretia repressed a giggle.

"That's the kind of creative marketing we need around here." Mister Fields consulted a yellow legal pad covered with miniscule handwriting. "The citywide foam art contest is next week. I want CC to take first place this year. Have we been practicing?"

LaTonya nodded, her neatly beaded cornrows rattling in agreement. "Yes, sir. I'm working on some new designs."

"Maybe I could try to come up with something," Timmy said. The poor dear was still unsure about the difference between a latte and a cappuccino.

"We'll see," Mister Fields said blandly. "I'm afraid that the repairmen can't get to that blasted back door until the end of the month. Meanwhile, I don't want to see anybody using it."

Don't worry, you won't see me. "Are they going to put in an alarm system?" Lucretia tried to sound like a concerned employee.

"Yes. Until then, don't take any chances. Java Jane's was broken into a few nights ago. I don't want anybody to get hurt." Mister Fields tore a page off his legal pad, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it into the recycle bin. "Let's go make some coffee."

Red Madison drained her espresso and dashed out the door before Mister Fields turned on the red neon OPEN sign. Timmy walked out more leisurely. Yellow Madison disappeared into the kitchen to work her miracles.

LaTonya was working the front counter today. Lucretia had a few hours to kill before her first class started, so she decided to help out with the morning rush and earn some badly needed cash.

The customers were the usual mixture of business types who grabbed a quick paper cup of stimulant and those who were in for the long haul. The latter would spend hours with their laptops and phones, savoring specialty drinks while lost to the world. Lucretia recognized one she called the Professor, an older man who was here almost every day, but who said very little to anyone. She wondered if he just didn't have anywhere else to go.

After a couple of hours of toasting bagels and cleaning tables Lucretia no longer noticed the ethereal moaning of the singers on the radio or the jangling bell that accompanied the opening of the front door. The customers blurred into a single faceless entity with an endless thirst for coffee. She was behind the counter chatting with LaTonya when she noticed a familiar pair of pale blue eyes.

"I'd like another small hot chocolate, please," the young man said. "It was very good."

Lucretia pulled a five out of the pocket of her jeans and slapped it on the counter. "Make that two. Whipped cream on mine. I'm off the clock."

LaTonya grinned. "Yes, Ma'am."

Lucretia stepped around the counter and offered a business-like handshake to the fellow. As business-like as possible, anyway, while wearing fingerless black lace gloves. "I'm Lucretia."

The man looked at her for a moment. Lucretia wondered if he was going to kiss her hand. Instead he took her fingers very gently and lowered his head. "I am Wilbur. I am very pleased to know you."

And I thought my name was bad. Lucretia led him to a secluded table for two. "You shouldn't have paid me with those silver dollars last night. Those things are worth at least twenty bucks each."

"I prefer coins to paper. They're easier to work with. More real."

LaTonya brought them their drinks. "Whipped cream for the lady, naked for the gent." She winked at Lucretia.

“How did you do that trick with the marshmallow? Are you a magician?” Lucretia teased a bit of whipped cream off her mug with the tip of her tongue.

“When you want something badly enough – something you remember with all your heart – sometimes you can bring it back. Not always.”

“That sounds like something out of a fortune cookie. A big fortune cookie. Feeds a family of four.” Lucretia drained her chocolate. “Sorry. I better run. Have a nice day.”

“I intend to. I think I’ll go skating on Hampton Pond this afternoon. Goodbye.”

It wasn’t until after she had raced to campus and settled into one of the ancient wooden chairs that filled the lecture hall, ready to listen to Doctor Montoya guide her through the beautiful and mysterious world of organic chemistry, that Lucretia realized that it was well over fifty degrees outside, with no sign of getting any colder.

#

Dead leaves crackled under Lucretia’s boots as she pushed her way through tangled vines and scrawny trees. The path between the university’s soccer field and Hampton Pond saw little use most of the year, when it wasn’t warm enough for skinny dipping. The winter sun transformed Hampton Pond into a blinding oval of pure white light. Lucretia had to blink away tears before she could tell if anyone were there.

With his thin arms, a bit too long for the sleeves of his loose gray sweater, Wilbur looked like a scarecrow. He moved slowly in gentle curves, his skates hissing over the ice.

The ice?

Lucretia waved her arms. “Hey! Isn’t that dangerous in this kind of weather?”

Wilbur spun to a halt. His eyes were hidden behind enormous snow goggles. “It’s quite safe.” He made a sweeping loop around the pond.

“You’re pretty good.”

“Thank you. Would you care to join me?” Wilbur bowed and extended an arm, as if inviting her to dance.

“I’m not exactly equipped for it.” Lucretia pointed at her skateless boots.

“Look behind you.”

There, half-hidden in the leaves, lay a pair of dove-white boots with glittering blades. They reminded Lucretia of childhood winters, holding on to her father's rough hands as he guided her over frozen puddles.

"Another magic trick?" She picked up the skates. They seemed pristine, as if they had never been worn. "I don't suppose these will fit."

"It's worth a try." Wilbur glided away.

Lucretia plopped down, thankful that the ground was dry and not very cold. She still couldn't figure out why Hampton Pond was covered with a thick layer of ice on a mild day. Maybe she'd ask Doctor Montoya about it sometime.

"I haven't done this in a long time." Lucretia thumped down to the pond, half expecting to fall into bone-chilling water. She tottered on the ice for a while, trying to remember what to do.

"Don't think about it," Wilbur said. He stood at the opposite side of the pond. "Come over here."

Lucretia slid across the ice, her arms wide open to keep from falling. She came to a stop next to Wilbur, then started slipping. He was the nearest solid object, so she grabbed his shoulders. He wobbled a bit, but stood firm. Lucretia's feet crept away from her, until she leaned against Wilbur at a forty-five degree angle.

"We must look like a right triangle," she said.

Wilbur pulled her upright. "Maybe we should work together for a while."

Lucretia wrapped her arm around his waist. They moved around the pond in lazy circles. After a time spent in silence broken only by the whisper of skates and the chattering of birds, Wilbur brought them to a halt.

"I'm a bit tired." He looked pale.

"Can I see you again?"

"I'll drop by the coffeehouse now and then."

"I didn't exactly mean that." Lucretia looked directly into the blank lenses of his goggles. "Married? Girlfriend? Or boyfriend? I'm not prejudiced."

Wilbur smiled, pulled her close, and kissed her forehead gently. "None of the above. It's just that I may not be around here very much longer."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'll see you around."

"I very much hope so." Wilbur skated to the edge of the pond. Lucretia watched him for a while, then made her way back to dry land. It was only when she was back in her own boots that she thought to return the skates. She looked for Wilbur, but there was no sign of him.

There was no sign of ice, either. The wind made cat's paws on the water. A crane stood in the middle of the pond, tall and dignified. It flapped its wings and shook its head, as if to say *Don't ask me; I'm a stranger here myself.*

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The foam art contest was held at Café Allegretto, the city's largest coffeehouse. Teams from Java Jane's (in matching T-shirts) and Allegretto itself (in unmatched blouses, shirts, cargo pants, and dresses) mingled with the crowd of spectators and reporters. A few individuals from small drive-through coffee joints were there, as well as a newspaper photographer, splendid in her safari outfit.

LaTonya was surrounded by her fellow baristas, with Mister Fields, incognito in a fringed leather jacket and feathered Tyrolean hat, watching from the back wall.

"Maybe we could make a snowflake," Timmy said.

Red Madison patted his shoulder. "Or a happy little snowman. We could have our own Hallmark movie."

LaTonya showed them her latest sketch. It was an abstract design of curved lines. It reminded Lucretia of skating with Wilbur.

"What's that supposed to be?" Yellow Madison leaned closer to them.

"A cloud chamber." LaTonya pointed at a pair of lines that started from a point near the center of the paper, then curved away from each other. At their tips they curled into tight spirals, like flower buds. "See those two? That's an electron and a positron. They form when a photon interacts with a nucleus."

"That's so sad." Timmy seemed stricken. The others just looked at him. "I mean, they were meant to be together. Soulmates. Then something forced them apart."

"I don't know if that's the dumbest thing I've heard all week, or the most beautiful." Red Madison pulled a pack of Winstons from the pocket of her flannel shirt. "I'm going outside to indulge in one of my filthy habits. Let me know when we win so I can pour a bottle of hazelnut syrup on LaTonya's head."

The opening of the contest was delayed while somebody fooled around with the sound equipment. Multiple squeals and thumps and chants of *testing one two three* echoed off brick walls.

"Oh my God." LaTonya cradled a thermometer in her hands. "It's broken! I can't control the temperature of the foam."

"Maybe you can borrow one," Timmy said.

“Not a chance. This is strictly cutthroat competition.”

The manager of Café Allegretto emerged from a back room. With his neatly trimmed goatee, bald head, and arms covered with black and scarlet tattoos, he looked like a friendly devil. He held a portable microphone close to his lips.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the third annual city-wide foam art contest. Our baristas will have one hour to create their masterpieces. A panel of experts will judge each entry on the basis of originality, esthetic appeal, and neatness.” Pounding rock music blasted from the speakers. “The sixty minutes begins – *now!*”

The baristas from the other coffeehouses went to work, in groups or as individuals. Steamers hissed. The bitter scent of freshly ground coffee blended with the aroma of warm milk. Booming drums and throbbing guitars filled Lucretia’s head.

“Damn. We should just go home.” LaTonya’s voice was nearly lost in the cacophony. “Without proper temperature control I might as well use Cool Whip.”

“Aren’t there some extra liquid thermometers back at CC?” Yellow Madison asked.

“Sure,” Lucretia said. “It won’t take that long to get there and back.”

“I’ll get the keys from Mister Fields,” Timmy said.

“Never mind that. I can just use the back door. The rest of you do what you can, and I’ll be back as soon as possible.” Lucretia looked to see if Mister Fields were watching. “The boss must be in the men’s room or something. I better leave now.”

“Can I come? I’m just in the way here.”

“OK, Timmy, but let’s get going.” Lucretia pushed her way through the crowd. She managed to reach the front door. Red Madison was outside, holding a bottle of Budweiser and chatting with a couple of guys.

“Where are you two off to?” She waved the beer in greeting. “Not going to cheer on the team?”

“Minor emergency. Be right back.” Lucretia trotted to her battered Volkswagen Beetle, Timmy close behind. She opened the door for him. “Hop in and buckle up.”

“Umm, can I drive?” Timmy offered a weak smile. “My mom won’t let me drive her BMW. I swear I’m a good driver.”

“Jeez, all right, but come on.” Lucretia tossed him the keys and jumped into the passenger seat. Timmy strode to the other side of the car.

They drove to Caffeinator’s Corner on deserted side roads. Surprisingly, Timmy seemed to know the most efficient route.

“We’re making good time. Nice job, Timmy.”

“Thanks. That means a lot, coming from you.” Timmy cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t say this to just anybody, but I’ve kind of got a thing for older women.”

“Great. Just drive, OK?”

They pulled into the empty parking lot behind the coffeehouse. Lucretia hopped out of the car and ran to the back door. “Keep the motor running!”

The door opened as easily as always. Lucretia snapped on the light switch between VENUS and ADONIS. A man in a ski mask stood by the cash register, a crowbar in his gloved hand. “Don’t make a move,” he growled.

“Yes.” Lucretia tried to turn into a statue.

“Don’t talk! Just turn off that goddamned light.”

Lucretia’s arm seemed to move of its own accord, as if it weren’t attached to her body. Darkness engulfed the room. Distant streetlights cast a pale glow through the front window, more disturbing than total blackness.

The man smashed the register with his crowbar. It broke open with a metal shriek. He shoved fistfuls of cash into a paper sack. “Is there anybody else outside?” The man moved around the counter and approached her.

“One. Waiting in my car.” Lucretia tried to slide along the wall. Maybe if she could dash inside the restroom and lock the door ---

The man grabbed her arm and pulled her to the back door. “We wait. Sooner or later he’ll either go away or try to get in here. Either way, I’ll have to knock you out.” He raised the crowbar. “I’ll try not to hurt you too badly.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea.” The voice was Wilbur’s. It came from the darkness.

“Stay where you are or I will hurt her badly. Very badly.”

“You don’t want to do that,” Wilbur said. Lucretia dared to glance at him. He was nothing more than a shadow. The dim light seemed to shine through him, as if he were made of smoked glass. “You don’t want to hurt anybody. Not really. Not for an empty sack, anyway.”

The man laughed harshly. “There’s enough in here to make it worth my while.”

“Are you sure?” Wilbur seemed to shimmer.

The man stepped away from Lucretia and ripped open the bag. “Nothing! What the hell?”

Lucretia ran to Wilbur. She expected the crowbar to crack her skull open any second.

“Paper money isn’t very real,” Wilbur said. “Maybe if it had been full of coins you would still have them.”

The man threw the crowbar at him. Lucretia tried to pull Wilbur out of the way but he stood firm. For less than a heartbeat he seemed to dissolve into a mist. The crowbar passed through him and clattered on the floor.

The back door creaked open. “What’s all the racket?” Timmy flipped on the light. The man dashed at him.

“Watch your step,” Wilbur said. Lucretia gripped his arm tightly, afraid that he might vanish.

A shiny white patch appeared on floor in front of the man. His feet flew backward as he reached it, sending him face first into the floor. He lay still.

“I’m afraid he isn’t a very good skater.” Wilbur’s voice seemed weak and thin. He collapsed against Lucretia as if he were about to faint. “Will you help me home?”

“Of course.” Lucretia led him forward, one small step at a time, as if he were very old. “My car’s outside.”

“That won’t be necessary. We can walk there.”

“Are you sure you can make it? You seem pretty sick.” They stepped past the unconscious burglar. Timmy pulled his mask off.

“I hope this guy’s OK. He’s out like a light. Hey, he looks familiar.”

It was the Professor. Lucretia trembled. He must have been planning this silently, day after day, watching the baristas sneak in the broken back door, waiting until a night when there would be enough cash in the register. She wondered if he had done the same thing at Java Jane’s. “You better call the cops, Timmy. Have them send an ambulance. Then call LaTonya and tell her what happened. I have to go.”

“Sure thing.” Timmy whipped a phone out of his back pocket.

Lucretia helped Wilbur out the door and down the concrete steps. “Where do we go?”

“The field next to the parking lot. Just about in the center.”

Lucretia half-carried Wilbur past the garbage bin, into the tiny patch of nature. Twigs crackled under their feet. “I don’t understand.”

“Just a bit further.” They reached a block of rough stone squatting near a small tree. A few last leaves clung to its branches, shuddering in the breeze. “Let me lie here.”

Lucretia placed him on the ground. “Don’t die. Please don’t die.”

Wilbur let out a wheezing laugh. "That's the very last thing in the world you need to worry about."

Lucretia sat next to him. Her fingers ran over the block of stone. Something was carved on it. WILBUR HAMPTON 1907-1933.

"I'm afraid I cheated you," Wilbur said. "Those silver dollars won't last very long. Nor the skates. Selfish of me."

"What happens now?" Lucretia took his hand. It was very cold and felt as soft as fog.

"You don't really think I know any more than you, do you?" Wilbur's body was translucent in starlight. "Thank you for being so kind to me, dear Lucretia."

"That's not my name. It's Louise. I hate it. I started calling myself Lucretia when I began wearing black lace. Nobody else knows that but my family."

"I am greatly honored that you told me that." Wilbur closed his eyes. He faded until he was nearly invisible. For a moment he was nothing more than wisps of smoke. Then he was gone.

A siren wailed nearby. Lucretia forced herself to her feet, refusing to cry. She would have to deal with the police and their endless questions. They would ask her about Wilbur, and she would try to explain. Then, when that ordeal was over, she would have to go back to the menial job, the stressful classroom, the lonely apartment. Now, however, she knew that there was something else, and that made all the difference.