

The Judge's Wife Part 10

by Daniel Harris

After his failure to destroy the statue, the Judge drove to his boat, retrieved the hand and drove home. He took a long shower then poured himself a generous scotch and leisurely pleased himself with the magical bronze hand. This small talisman protected him from the blue-green plague. He kissed the hand and placed it on his erection.

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It was after noon on Sunday when the Judge woke. It was late. He had a severe case of cottonmouth. He drank two glasses of water, ate a banana, and drove to his boat.

When he passed the charter boat docks, he saw that the *Flying Fish* day boat was out; also two of the larger charter sport fishing boats. Big Pass must be navigable. He parked and boarded his boat, *Justice*. He started the two diesel engines and disconnected the shore power.

—You going out? asked Cass, the Harbor Master.

—Yeah, going up to St. Pete. I'll go up the bay.

—Good idea. Captain Mike said he had a rough go navigating *Flying Fish* out of Big Pass. The channel has moved about a twenty yards south-southeast. Mike said one of his guys dropped a black and white buoy near mid-channel.

—Will you take my mooring lines, said the Judge, passing the boat's stern lines to Cass.

—When are you coming back?

—Probably tomorrow.

—Have a good trip.

The Judge saw the buoy in the Big Pass channel. He passed it close aboard. He could see plenty of breaking waves. It was white-knuckle navigating. He knew from long experience how one could be in nine feet of water and two feet away the water depth was less than a foot.

Once clear of R2, the most seaward channel buoy, he set his course due west, not at all toward Tampa Bay.

The confused seas became more regular the further from shore he sailed. On his westerly course, *Justice* shouldered the waves off her starboard bow. *Justice's* motion in the seaway was easy with no pounding.

The Judge set his engine revolutions and the autopilot. He was feeling a little queasy. He'd never been seasick, but he was having all the symptoms. He took to his bunk and dozed.

When he woke, it was after five. Sunset was less than a half hour away. He better finish his mission. He stood up and stretched. He put the severed hand in the pouch of his jock strap and went up to the bridge.

He throttled back the engines and then put the shifters in neutral. *Justice* was rolling and wanted to lie broadside to the waves. By giving the boat a little throttle, she moved slowly ahead quartering the waves. *Justice* now had a better motion for working in the aft cockpit. Occasionally, a bigger wave would push *Justice* off course, but the autopilot brought her back.

The Judge unwrapped the three-foot bronze statue. He grunted as he lifted the statue onto the stern rail. It lay on its right side, back to the Gulf. The wind flensed the blue-green patina off the statue.

—Ah, my little hand. My talisman is keeping me safe and cleaning you, too, Margaux, said the judge to the statue. Your bronze hand protects me from your lover's nasty tricks. And now, my whore-wife, you shall swim with the fishes as pristine as the day that bastard Jack Mahler created you. Say your prayers. I am The Judge, and the verdict is to condemn you to the deep for adultery and disloyalty. Say hello to Davy Jones, you bitch. Try fucking him you bronze slut.

* * *

Jack's cell phone rang.

—Hello, said Jack.

—This is Manny Ramirez from ADT, calling Jack Mahler.

—This is Jack Mahler.

—Do you know the password for your alarm system?

—8836-5397.

—What's your mother's maiden name?

—Erika Swann, Erika with a "k" and Swann with two n's.

—And the name of your first pet?

—Lucky, a Springer Spaniel.

—One last thing, do you remember your four-digit token number?

—6996

—All correct. Mr. Mahler, I'm standing in your studio. The studio door was open, and the telephone line was cut. I don't see any obvious damage or missing items, but you'll have to make an inventory.

—What about the big stone statue in the studio?

—Looks perfect. That's some woman you used as a model.

—She was a wonderful find.

—Jack, who is that? Margaux asked.

—ADT, mouthed Jack pointing at his cell phone. Excuse me, Mr. Ramirez, what about the gallery? Does it look like anything was stolen?

—It appears they came through the bathroom window, replied Ramirez, avoiding the question. It's open. Looks like they left a flashlight and an axe behind in the parking lot.

—Well, I didn't keep an axe in the studio, said Jack. What's the next step?

—I closed and locked the window. Later this morning the Verizon techs will come and restore the phone line. Until they arrive, I'll keep watch in my car. I doubt they will return.

—Anything I can do?

—Nope. It looks like they were sick in the parking lot, whisky and peanut butter. Probably kids.

—Yuck. Thank you for getting back to me so quickly.

—That's why you pay us. Have a good day, Mr. Mahler

—Thanks, said Jack ending the call.

* * *

The Judge waited for the perfect wave. He needed to use the motion of the boat to help him push the statue clear of the

swimming platform and the attached fish roller. Justice rose, tilted, and slid off the waves. He balanced the statue on the edge of the rail.

Maybe I should try to stand it on the swimming platform, he thought. He had to think this through. In this seaway, putting the statue on the swim platform would be tricky, but once it was on the platform, a gentle push and splash, bye-bye Margaux.

The judge lifted the statue off the rail and laid it down next to the fighting chair. He took two large seat cushions from the lazarette and placed them on the stern rail. He grasped the statue by the left leg and hand. He slid the statue over the rail and onto the swim platform.

Suddenly, the severed hand in his jock strap burst through his unzipped fly. In the hand were his scrotum and penis. The hand snapped onto the end of the stump of the left arm as if responding to a powerful force. It dropped the bleeding genitals onto the swim platform.

Agggggrrrrrrrrhhhhhhhhhhhh! screamed the Judge, releasing the statue and grabbing his crotch.

The Judge saw that the little hand was clutching his belt. The weight of the statue pulled him against the boat's rail. The small hand, now reattached to the statue, held his belt. The Judge tried to pull the statue back into the cockpit, but a rogue wave heeled the boat to leeward tipping the statue off the swim platform. The judge watched in seemingly slow motion as the weight of the smiling Margaux pulled him over the rail and into the water.

Frantically, the Judge worked to release the hand. He was sinking fast. He could see the face on the statue smiling. Did it wink at him? Jesus H. Christ, the fucking statue is alive. Margaux is killing me! Did he hear her laughing? The Judge frantically unbuckled his belt. The bronze Margaux, now free of the judge, tumbled to the bottom the judge's belt in its left hand. The judge, trailing blood, frantically swam toward the surface. He didn't think he would make it. He fought the impulse to breathe. He started to exhale slowly hoping to relieve the reflex.

The Judge surfaced, gulping air and water. He reached for the boat, but *Justice* was fifty feet away and motoring further out into the Gulf. He worked to keep his head above water. The judge kicked off his shoes and jeans. He was surrounded by the blue-green sludge. Screaming in pain and frustration, he swallowed a mouthful of the blue-green slime. He made an effort to swim after the boat, but he made no progress against the waves. His last sight of *Justice* was of a large raven perched on the taffrail. It hopped down to the swim platform, flicked the severed penis and testicles into the Gulf and resettled on the taffrail. The raven's malevolent eyes began changing colors: red, green, blue, yellow, orange, and then a vivid magenta. Suddenly the raven morphed into a coyote-like apparition and vanished against the setting sun

The Judge didn't see the bull shark. The Judge's blood and flailing arms and legs attracted the shark. His shrieks of terror were brief.

* * *

Carlos, dressed in his fleece vest, jeans, boots, with a red bandana around his head, sat in his pick-up truck, exhausted. For the past twenty-four hours, he had sat in his sweat lodge working to balance the forces he had put into play. His face was drained and gaunt from the heat and the fasting. He leaned back in the seat looking at the setting sun. He had lost control of the prank. Coyote sometimes did that. Coyote was after all: The Trickster

As Carlos sat in a zero state, he stared at the setting sun. As the bottom of the sun neared the top of the mountain, the face of the Laughing Coyote appeared on the surface of the sun. Carlos smiled at the image.

—Coyote, you owe me one.

* * *

Margaux and Jack sat in field level seats at Soldier Field behind the Bears' bench. Margaux liked them because she was near Troy, who sat unused on the bench. So far the game was not going well for the Bears. Packers' quarterback Aaron Rodgers was picking apart the Bears secondary. The Bears were scoring, but only field goals to the Packers touchdowns. It was the fourth quarter, and the

score stood at Packers 28, the Bears 12. The Packers had the ball on their own 42 yard line.

—Jack, said Margaux, clutching Jack's arm, look! One of the coaches is talking to Troy.

—Good! He might get to play after all.

Troy ran onto the field donning his helmet, said something to the defensive huddle and lined up.

Rodgers took the snap and fired at his tight end. Steve Harris, Troy's former college teammate at Michigan, timed his rush perfectly. Steve tipped the ball in the air. Troy caught it, eluded a tackle and ran down the sideline. Aaron Rodgers bumped him out of bounds four yards from the goal line.

Margaux jumped up and down, screaming and hugging Jack, who yelled and celebrated with Margaux. Soldier Field erupted.

Troy came out of the game holding the ball. His teammates pounded his back and helmet-bumped him. The defensive coach grabbed his arm and slapped him on the butt. Troy saw Margaux in the stands and saluted her with the ball.

The Bears scored, but it was too late to win the game. Final Score: Packers 28 Bears 19.

* * *

Margaux's cell phone rang. She and Jack were asleep in their hotel room.

—What's that? Jack asked.

—It's my cell phone.

—Maybe you should answer it.

—I'm too sleepy and had too much wine.

—I'll get it.

Jack got out of bed and took Margaux's cell phone from her purse.

—Hello?

—I'm trying to reach Mrs. Margaux Howland. This is the Chief Petty Officer Cunningham with U.S. Coast Guard, Cortez, Florida.

—Please hold.

—Margaux, it's the U.S. Coast Guard for you.

Margaux felt a tightening in the pit of her stomach. She had expected this call for twenty years.

—One minute, please. She is asleep.

—Take your time. We know it's early.

Jack handed the cell phone to Margaux.

—This is Margaux Howland.

—This is Chief Petty Officer Susan Cunningham, U. S. Coast Guard, Cortez, Florida. Is your husband Judge Leland Howland?

—Yes. Has there been a problem?

—Mrs. Howland, Judge Howland's boat, *Justice*, was discovered motoring on autopilot by a commercial fishing vessel early this morning. There was no one aboard. Your husband is presumed missing.

—What does that mean?

—He may have fallen overboard, or committed suicide by jumping overboard. He was last seen leaving Marina Jack about one-thirty yesterday afternoon.

Margot felt her stomach knot. Even though she despised the Judge, this was not how it was supposed to end.

—What should I do?

—Can you come to the Coast Guard station in Cortez?

—I'm in Chicago. I'm here because my son plays for the Chicago Bears.

—Hey, are you the mother of Troy Howland who made that incredible interception last week against the Buccaneers?

—Oh ...yes, yes I am. But what about *Lee*, my husband? Is he dead?

—Without a corpse, I can't confirm that. One of the commercial fishing vessels from Cortez spotted *Justice* approximately twenty-eight miles west of Sarasota. How soon can you come to Cortez?

—I've been living in our Santa Fe home, so I'll have to change my flight plans. Maybe Tuesday or Wednesday.

—There was no note on the boat. Suicides usually, but not always, leave notes. We're assuming he fell overboard. It frequently happens

with men his age. They urinate over the side of the boat, suffer a heart attack and fall in the water.

—Well, I know Lee hated anyone to use the head. Women used a bucket and men let go over the side.

—Sorry, ma'am, that's our experience. Will you call me when you return to Sarasota so we can arrange a meeting? There will be an investigation. I will tell the Sarasota police I have contacted you.

—Yes, Officer Susan Cunningham?

—Yes, ma'am.

—I'll call as soon as I arrive in Sarasota.

* * *

Six Months Later

Jack entered the back door of Margaux Howland's Sarasota home. Margaux was sitting in the breakfast nook writing e-mails.

—How did it go, Jack? asked Margaux rising to give him a kiss.

—They bankrupted me. That bull dyke judge let my wife's attorney out-manuevered my lawyer. I've lost almost everything. Her lawyer made a fool of us. I'm lucky I didn't end up in jail. I have 72 hours to vacate my studio and home. All I have is my art, my van, my cat and you, if you'll have me.

—Jack, don't say that. I'm not going to abandon you.

—But I have nothing.

—But you're here. We're here together.

Jack took Margaux in his arms and gave her a long kiss.

—I love you, Margaux.

—I love you too, Jack. Why don't you open that bottle of champagne in the fridge?

—Good idea. You always have good ideas.

Jack opened the champagne and filled two flutes.

—To freedom, said Jack.

—To freedom and us, said Margaux, clinking Jack's glass.

—The Coast Guard telephoned while you were in court. A shark fisherman caught a bull shark off the Manatee River two days ago. In the stomach was Leland's Rolex watch engraved with his name.

—Yikes! That's not a good way to go. I wonder what happened.

—There's more.
—More? What?
—Some diving students taking open-water tests found the bronze statue and Leland's belt.
—That's curious. Sounds like some foul play.
—A Detective Martin McGinnis thinks Leland was trying to dump the statue in the Gulf and might have accidentally fallen into the Gulf. It was pretty rough the day Leland disappeared.
—Why would he want to dump the statue? He paid \$10,000 for it plus the foundry bill.
—Who knows? Why was the statue in the boat 28 miles offshore? Leland was mentally unstable. He thought he had a rash on his face.
—So, who has the statue now?
—The dive school. I offered to donate \$1500 to the school in return for the statue. I'm anxious to see it.
—Let's do that tomorrow. I've got to get over being financially raped today.
—Jack, don't worry. I have a home to sell, one-third of the judge's big trust fund, and his \$500,000 insurance policy. The children and I have decided to keep the Santa Fe house.
—So, I guess you're now officially a widow? asked Jack.
—Not officially. It will take some time and a court order.
—Well, we're both single and fancy-free, said Jack, trying to be upbeat. What should we do?
—Let's move to Europe. I don't want to live here anymore. Jack, we're free to do as we want. Where should we live?
—I always wanted to live on the Côte d'Azur.

* * *

Carlos sat on the patio in Margaux's Santa Fe garden. The firmament of the Milky Way glowing overhead illuminated the scene. The bronze statue of Margaux gazed upon him from atop its fountain pedestal. Did Margaux know his magic? Did Jack know the power Carlos invested in Margaux's likeness? Carlos shrugged and walked to his truck. Coyote still comes at sunset to keep the rabbits away.

Finis

