

The Judge's Wife Part 7

by Daniel Harris

Jack, dressed in full protective gear and using an electric grinder, worked on the bronze statue of Margaux. He was removing burrs and other artifacts from the casting process. A group of foundry workers watched him.

—Jack, said one of the seasoned artisans, you can put a little more pressure on that grinder.

—What'd ya say? Jack asked, turning off the grinder and pulling off his face guard.

—You can use more pressure, said an old artisan grinning. You'll be grinding that for months at the rate you're going.

—Well, I don't want to take off too much. That would ruin it.

—There's more there than you think. Watch I'll show you.

Jack observed the man's technique. He was a master craftsman. The grinder became an extension of his hands. The burr quickly melted under the whirring wheel to a millimeter above Margaux's smooth bronze skin.

—So, how long have you been doing this? asked Jack.

—About forty years, said the old man, grinning. Now, take a fine needle file and smooth it and you'll never know there was a burr there.

—Right, but first I should practice on some scrap, said Jack.

The old man nodded in agreement and found a piece of scrap bronze.

—Okay, Jack, you can practice on this. Change the wheel often. A sharp wheel makes it go faster and it's safer.

After a few practice runs, Jack had the technique down. After grinding off the burrs, he took files and began smoothing the last vestiges of the casting process.

—Shit, said Jack, putting his finger in his mouth. A small unseen burr in the crotch seam of Margaux's running shorts had cut his finger. A few drops of his blood had fallen on the statue.

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—A little blood puts some life into the work, said the old artisan smiling. The old masters thought so. It makes for a unique covenant between the artist and his work.

Jack went to get a bandage from the first aid kit in the office.

—Cut yourself? asked the office manager, a heavy-set Russian woman in her thirties.

—Yeah, my finger found an unseen burr.

—That's why the sign says: Face and Hand Protection Required.

—Well, I'm at the finishing stage of the smoothing.

—Work at your own peril.

* * *

Before Jack could take the statue from the foundry, he had to pay the bill. To do that, he needed a check from the judge. He didn't know where the judge was, but he started by calling the judge's office at the courthouse.

—This is sculptor Jack Mahler calling for Judge Howland, he said to the receptionist.

—The judge is in court, replied the woman. Give me your number and the nature of your call. If it's appropriate, he will return your call.

Well, la-de-da, a strange way to describe a request, he thought, "if it's appropriate."

—Tell the judge, I finished the sculpture of his wife, but he needs to pay the balance of the foundry bill.

—Oh, the judge will be so pleased. He is looking forward to seeing the finished statue.

—He knows where the foundry is. I've wrapped and crated the piece, so it's ready to travel as soon as he pays the bill. Or he can give me the check, and I'll deliver the statue. Meanwhile, I'll e-mail some photos of the finished piece.

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—Jack Mahler, this is Judge Howland returning your call. I understand you finished the statue.

—Yes, sir. It's crated and ready to leave the foundry. You will need to pay the balance of the bill.

—My calendar is full. Can you come to my chambers? I'll give you the check. Maybe you can deliver the statue to my home tonight?

—Of course.

—Give me the exact amount.

—It's \$1,625 plus \$227.50 tax. Total is: \$1,652.50.

—That seems high. Were there hidden costs?

—No, that's the balance due. You made a 50% deposit, but you didn't pay tax on the deposit. The tax is for the full \$3,250. You should appreciate that I didn't bill you for the ten days of hand finishing I did at the foundry.

The judge held his tongue. What about the finishing job you did on my marriage, thought the judge. The judge wanted to say that he should charge Mahler for Margaux's sexual favors. But then, that would be pandering.

—Can you pick-up the check at noon? We can have lunch in my chambers.

—If it suits you. My schedule is open.

—Mexican, okay?

—Works for me.

* * *

The judge sat at his desk. He had a bandage on his left cheek. It didn't look like a professional bandaging job.

—Did you have skin surgery? Jack asked.

The judge gave him a look that suggested the question was too personal.

—Yes, I mean, no. It's some sort of skin rash. The doctors think it's a rare tropical disease. I've had it for several weeks now.

—I guess it goes with living in Florida. Living here is hard on the skin.

The judge was obviously uncomfortable in Jack's presence. He looked like he wanted to give Jack a good pasting. The judge was working to avoid the elephant in the room: his wife and Jack's lover, Margaux.

—Are you going to have an unveiling party? Jack asked. That's traditional

The judge gave Jack his best "are you kidding me look" and raised a skeptical eyebrow.

—You know you are not welcome in my home. I plan to take the statue with me to Santa Fe for the holidays. *My wife*, son, and daughter will be there, said the judge, avoiding Margaux's name. It will be our traditional family Christmas.

—These *tortas ahogadas* are excellent, Jack said, changing the topic. Did you order them from Fonda Jalisco?

—Of course. It's the best authentic Mexican food in Sarasota.

—I use to have a studio near their restaurant. They're the real deal.

They ate in silence. Jack could tell the judge wanted to unleash his fury. His face was red and veins were standing out on his face and neck. Any moment Jack expected the judge to order the Sergeant-at-Arms to come in and arrest him.

There were pictures of the judge and his family everywhere in his chambers. Jack could see that the judge had been a dashing young handsome man. All the photos evoked a happy American family. But all the photographs were old. In all the pictures of his children, they appeared to be grade school age. Why would a man whose son played in the NFL not have a picture of him in his Chicago Bears football uniform? His daughter was beautiful and worked for *The New Yorker* magazine, but the pictures were tomboy snaps of her in pigtails. The most recent picture of Margaux and the judge looked like it was taken twenty years ago. It showed the judge accepting an award. Margaux beamed at his side. There was something wrong here. The judge had effectively ended his family life when he ascended to the bench. Or was there some other issue? Perhaps the judge had a secret.

—I hate to cut lunch short, said the judge, but I have a trial in fifteen minutes. Can you deliver the statue at nine tonight?

—Not a problem.

—See you then.

The judge stood and checked his hair in a mirror. Pulled a comb from his inside suit pocket and refreshed his hair-sprayed coif.

Jack stood and extended his hand. The judge ignored him, turned and left the room scowling.

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—Do you want me to uncrate the statue, or keep it crated for travel? Jack asked the judge.

—Oh, no. I want to see it now. I trust it is as good as the drawings and the clay model, but I won't pay the balance of the commission until I inspect it.

—I have some tools in my van. I'll uncrate it and leave the crate here for you. If you want, I can recreate it when you're ready to travel.

—Not necessary. I'm petty handy with tools. I built 75% of this house myself.

The judge, dressed in khaki slacks, a coral-pink polo shirt, and shod in huaraches sandals, still had the bandage on his left cheek. His right hand held a glass of scotch. His hair was perfect.

—Do you need help carrying the statue into the house? he asked.

—I've got a dolly. It's not that heavy.

—Suit yourself.

Jack could see the crate landing on the judge's foot. He would blame Jack, and then there would be a mess. All the judge's pent-up rage would burst forth. Jack could tell the judge was seething inside.

—Where is the statue going to live? Jack asked.

—Here in my den. I found this antique mirrored table at an estate sale. I hope it will fit on it.

—Good choice. It looks perfect, and viewers will be able to see the rear of the statue without craning their necks or touching the statue. Nothing ruins a piece of statuary like the acids and oils on human hands. I hand-rubbed five coats of wax on the statue; but still, over time, all that fondling could wear it off.

—Perhaps I should put a cloth down to protect the surface of the wood.

—I've put felt bumpers on the bottom to protect the table. I also drilled and tapped three holes in the base if you want to attach it to a stone or metal base. I put the mounting hardware in a Ziploc bag

stapled to the crate. If you decide later to mount it on a pedestal, I can do the installation, no charge.

—Enough prattle, Mahler. Just get the wrappings off, will you. I want to see what magic you've wrought.

Jack unwound the plastic and then let the covering cloth fall slowly to the ground, as if he were performing a slow striptease. He wanted to raise the judge's curiosity.

The judge stood there with his mouth open, staring at the statue. He was as transfixed as he was the first time he saw Margaux at the Law School mixer at Yale. He walked over and turned the lights in the room to their highest setting. He studied the statue silently for at least ten minutes.

Mahler had put a light tan patina on the statue. Except for the shorts and sports bra, the statue could have been from ancient Greece. She was running barefoot. The muscle definition and the attitude of her arms and legs gave the impression of effortless forward motion. Margaux was not frozen in time and space, but seemed to be fluidly moving *through* time and space.

—You know, Mahler, this statue is amazingly real. It's Margaux in full stride. It's vastly superior to anything I imagined. I'm almost afraid she will run off the table.

—Thank you, Mr. Howland. I'm glad you like it.

—You've captured her facial expression perfectly. I'm seriously impressed.

—I'm glad you're pleased. Now, if we could finish the financial end of this, I'll leave you two alone.

The judge gave Jack a quizzical look.

—Leave the two of us alone? Mahler, do you think I believe that this statue is alive?

—Hey, you never know. She looks very real. She fooled me many times when I was smoothing and polishing her.

—I'm sure you've had plenty of experience massaging Margaux's body, said the judge, giving Jack a sarcastic grimace.

The judge put his hand on the statue and stroked its left arm. He ran the back of his hand over her cheek. Too bad he had no feelings

for the real Margaux. He just couldn't let her go. No one in his family history had ever divorced. After his father's death in a gay brothel in India, the judge had curbed his sexual appetite for preadolescent boys.

—The skin feels so life-like. How did you do that, Mahler?

—Trade secret, he replied. It is startling, isn't it?

—Could fool me.

—The statue is almost a living creature, a perfect half-size copy of Margaux.

The judge felt something change in his body. He couldn't put his finger on it. It wasn't lust or desire. It was a quickening in his veins, but his heart rate didn't change. He suddenly realized Jack Mahler was waiting for him.

—So, I owe you \$2500, correct?

—Yes, sir. I also have the authentication papers and a certificate that the casting mold was destroyed as per our contract. No one can make copies unless you authorize it. They would have to use this statue as the model for any copies. As part of the agreement, Mahler Galleries will receive a 50% commission on the sale of any copies. I retain rights to all the preparatory materials, including the *maquettes* and the full-size clay model. All this is usual and customary, as you may know.

—Yes, yes.

The judge walked to his desk, sat and retrieved his checkbook from a side drawer. After he had written the check, he stood and walked over to Jack holding the check as if it were a tainted piece of rotting meat.

—Take this, he said, shoving the check into Jack's hand. Now get out of my house. I don't ever want to see you again. Never. I should have had you shot, you bastard.

Jack took his dolly and hurried out the front door. Jack couldn't believe what the judge had just said. The judge's intemperate remark was totally out of character. I must be getting to that stuffy old fart, thought Jack. Just how much does he know, or was it all intuition?

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The judge couldn't sleep. Whatever change was taking place in him was keeping him awake. He also realized that he'd lost his cool with Mahler. Telling him he should have had him shot could be trouble. If Mahler filed a complaint, he could be suspended or worse. It could cost him his judgeship. Mahler now had leverage over him. What's wrong that I lost my cool?

The judge had no interest in Margaux other than their public life as Sarasota's most glamorous couple. Margaux's social sophistication and grace, complimented by her witty repartee, had helped cement his career. Margaux was the perfect accoutrement to his professional life and the perfect foil for his illicit passions. The thought of having sex with her was repulsive to him. After the children were born, he noticed that she lost her boyish figure and was womanlier. Now she had a woman's hips, and breasts. To tear her away from Jack Mahler, he would have to resume his long-dormant matrimonial duties. The thought gave him chills.

The judge got out of bed and went into the bathroom. He decided a hot shower would help him sleep. He removed the bandage from his face. The blue-green excrescence still festered on his left cheek. He leaned in close to the mirror. The activity on the rash reminded him of the mounds of 17-year locusts piled on the streets of Princeton with their millions of dying twitches.

After his shower, he donned a bathrobe, entered the den and poured another scotch. He flipped on all the lights and stood looking at the statue of Margaux.

He touched her arm. The skin was as smooth and soft as a young boy's bum. The quickening in his body started again. He couldn't take his hands off of the statue. He rubbed the lower back. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the reflection of the left side of his face in the mirror behind the statue. He jumped back putting his hand on his left cheek. The rash was gone. He looked again. It was not there. He took a gulp of scotch. When did it disappear? He saw it not ten minutes ago in the bathroom.

The telephone rang. Reluctantly, the judge pulled himself away from the mirror, walked to his desk and answered the phone.

—Judge Howland's residence, said the judge in his professional voice.

—Leland, it's me, Margaux.

—Hello, Margaux. How is Santa Fe? Is there snow on the ski slopes?

—Did Jack deliver the statue yet?

—Yes, but you still can't return to Sarasota.

—Well, how does it look?

—Jack Mahler is a bastard, but he's a genius. The statue is so lifelike I expect it to run away.

—So, it's a success?

—Spectacularly so.

—I'm glad you're pleased. Where did you put it?

—I found a mirrored table at an estate sale. It's on that table in my den, just inside the door. I need to install some spotlights to properly light it. You will be pleased when you see it.

—When will that be?

—Christmas week when I come out to Santa Fe. I drive it out in your Honda.

—Troy won't be able to come, you know. The Bears play the Packers that weekend, and he's on the starting roster now.

—Our Troy *starting for the Chicago Bears*?

—Right! If you weren't so busy being crazy, you could have seen him play Tampa Bay last week. He intercepted a pass and saved the game. The coach gave him the game ball.

—I'm not now, nor have I ever been, *crazy*, countered the judge. Just get that out of your little pea-brain head. You could start rumors talking like that. You know better.

All the misery of living with that overbearing and belittling man came rushing back. She never wanted to see him again.

—I think I would prefer it if you *didn't* come out to Santa Fe for the holidays.

The judge froze.

—You don't mean that. It's a family tradition to spend Christmas in Santa Fe.

—You ended that tradition when you exiled me here.

—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Howland. *You* exiled yourself when you started sleeping with Jack Mahler. You see how correct my intuitions were?

—Go fuck yourself and your intuitions.

The line went dead.

The judge refilled his drink and walked over to the statue. He looked at his face in the mirror. The rash was there in all its suppurating ugliness.

—Christ! Talk to that woman for five minutes and the disease comes back with a vengeance.

He was going to turn off the lights and retire, but the desire to touch the flesh on the statue one more time was overpowering. There was a sensuousness to it that was addicting. As he caressed the outstretched hand, hardly as big as a twelve-year old's, he watched the mirror. Slowly, the maculation disappeared.

—Too much scotch, he said aloud.

He returned to bed, sleeping fitfully.

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In the morning, the judge woke and checked his face in the bathroom mirror. The rash fairly glowed on his face. After dressing and pouring a cup of coffee, he walked into the den and looked at the statue.

—Shit! Goddamn it to hell, he yelled.

A putrid blue-green patina covered every place he had touched the statue the night before.

To be continued.

