

Collectors

by Don Taylor

Touch the wrong thing and everything will crash down around you. This was the fatherly advice Warren bestowed upon me as we entered his Miami apartment. It didn't matter that the fat man knew me only through a series of emails, or that he wore Old Navy camo shorts to my tailored seersucker suit. Something in the humid air told the greasy Mr. Baum I needed these words of wisdom. Without them, I would flounder and gasp like a newborn puppy dropped into the proverbial shit's creek. But Warren's advice arrived late. The local news teams had already scouted the location and set up their bright lights, big camera and satellite hook-ups. At any moment, I would disappear in the glare of high-definition screens. Another extraordinarily ordinary man crushed under the pixelated thumb of Modern America.

"Seriously, Tucker," Warren said, "screw with any of my stuff and you'll get so lost you won't know where you're going till you get there."

"Has that happened before?"

"Not to me."

Warren shoved past a school of spawning trash bags and stopped at a lone bookshelf. He repositioned the retired action figures that prayed a bored Minotaur reading ancient Beckett Collectibles remained listless. Pink sunlight gift-wrapped a maze of boxes. Squeezed between the ruins, a large window revealed half-cocked men on tide-kissed boats.

"Great view. How much does it run you?"

A whirring motor chugged the blinds closed and ended the scene before the credits rolled.

"What you want isn't in here," Warren said.

He laid down a breadcrumb trail through an apartment smelling of basil and the soft musk of antique words. I followed close behind until my wrecking ball of an elbow nudged a pillar of Time into a Playboy phallus. I slammed two sweating palms down and ended

their drunken dance. Under my right hand Cindy Crawford winked; Refrigerator Perry and Sweetness shook my left. I grabbed the Playboy and raised it high.

"I had this issue until my cousin 'borrowed' it. How much?"

"You didn't come here for spank tools."

"It's nostalgic."

"Then buy it on fucking eBay. That one's mine."

The pristine pages opened locked door memories and hasty wardrobe changes. Cindy frolicked on the beach. White sand diamonds obscured her flawless body. On the next page, she leaned forward. A perfect 34B hand-bra cupped her soft breasts. My sperm navy spun the warp engines to speed.

"Fifty bucks," I said.

"No."

"You didn't even know this existed."

"I know everything." Warren indicated the piles surrounding me. "You're standing in the eighties. The kitchen holds the nineties. The guest room is stacked to the rafters with hippies."

"Sixty bucks."

"You want porn? There's a place off the Boulevard."

The suggestion sank my sperm navy's battleship. "Today's porn is a perverted anatomy class," I said. "Within five minutes of perusing it you should be awarded a MD in OBGYN."

"Hit the 'net, type 'cindy crawford nude' and spank it raw."

"Can't do it, Warren. I have this nagging fear that some guy in Alaska will be getting off to the same image at the same moment I am."

"Tucker, we don't have time for this shit."

Cindy kissed me goodbye and ascended her regal spire. Mourning the break-up, I tracked Warren through his forest of nostalgia. A blinking door lock ensnared my attention at the end of Memory Lane. Warren shadowed the number pad preventing ninjas, spies and nosy grandmas from gleaning his Shangri-La code.

His dab chin seeped over a hairy shoulder. "You're not what I expected."

"I get that a lot."

"Name like Tucker you'd expect a big guy, not someone like you. Tucker. Tuck. Strong. Virile. You half expect a guy who'd buy you a beer after leaving your wife in an orgasmic pool."

"My mother named me. My father wanted to call me Marion."

"Why the fuck he'd do that?"

"Big John Wayne fan."

"Why not call you John or Wayne? Hell, why not call you Duke."

"Two and half months premature," I said, thumbing my chest.

"Waste a good name on a soon-to-be corpse? Not my father. That would be bad parenting."

"Duke is a great name. I'm naming my first kid Duke. Girl or not, the kid's name is Duke."

"Better name for a dog."

He shrugged and punched in two more numbers. "One last time: Are you a cop? I've seen enough TV to know you've got to come clean, otherwise its collusion or entrapment or something."

"TV lies. A cop can tell you he's the Pope to get you to confess." Opening a satchel, I added, "I'm not a cop and this proves it."

The satchel hovered inches from Warren's snout. The aroma of 750 twenty dollars bills will alleviate most plaguing concerns.

"Doesn't prove shit," he said, "but it does pay your entrance fee."

He keyed in the last digit and the lock retracted.

