FIREWORKS

by Norman Klein

It's eight fifteen in the morning, my favorite time to call, and a guy named Ernie DeCampo answers the door in his work pants and a t-shirt. "Good morning, Mr.De Campo," I say. "Do you have any fireworks in your home?"

"No," he says and starts to close the door.

I hold my right hand up and that stops him. "Please," I say, "I'm Chris Corvi from the Fire Marshal's Office, and I'm here because combustibles near heat sources cause fires. Most people know that, but they don't usually think of old newspapers or paint thinner as fuels. And here's another little known fact -- did you know your insurance company could refuse to pay a fire claim if they find evidence of arson? If you're storing fireworks, paint thinner, or other flammable liquids in your cellar you're asking for trouble."

"Sorry, got to get going. I don't have any fireworks," he says, and that's when I step closer and tell him that I don't want to make him late for work. I just want him to read through my checklist of twelve items that could save his life or his home.

Promise me you'll read this before you go to bed tonight," I say, handing it to him, and he nods and takes the checklist, and I head back to my car.

Mr. DeCampo's like most people. He doesn't want to be bothered, but he'll remember my visit. Some day the City of Rockingham is going to wake up to the fact that even though there's no longer a Fire Marshal on the payroll, his assistant is still drawing a pay check every two weeks, and I will show them my log of visits, and if they should happen to call De Campo he'll remember me and my checklist.

Most people will just remember me, but there are also people who are glad I stopped by. Just down the street from DeCampo I visited a single mother who had other things to worry about and didn't know her ex had left paint stripper and fuel additives within a few feet of the furnace. She put the checklist on the refrigerator door, and I gave her Teddy's telephone number and told her he would haul away the stacks of newspapers for twenty bucks, and for a little more he would take the stripper and additives as well.

That was an easy visit, and next came my friend Mr. D. I first visited him two years ago and caught him in the middle of a bowl of corn flakes. I didn't say anything about fireworks. A guy in his seventies living alone is not going to have fireworks in his basement. I looked for pictures of grandchildren, but there were no pictures of any kind. There were three walls of book shelves full of old books that hadn't been dusted for a while, but no pictures, no radio playing, and no pile of mail of the kitchen table. Everything was secured and in place, like a ship readied for a storm.

I asked if I could have a look at the basement. He nodded and I went down the stairs and looked around and for the first time in my life I was standing in an empty cellar. There was an old stepladder leaning against the far wall, and a spade, a snow shovel, and a rake propped against the stairs, but that was it. When I returned to the kitchen he looked at me with a modest grin that said in his own gentle way, “Gotcha.”

I told him he had the cleanest basement I'd ever seen, and he thanked me and offered me a piece of Dentyne gum. I accepted and made a note to myself to keep an eye on him.

A few weeks later I happened to catch him at the bottom of the hill he lived on. There's a stretch of tenements there, and there he was all dressed up in his suit passing the convenience store, and

then five or six kids piled out of the store and came after him, some running, some on roller blades, and all of them shouting, “It's mister D. How you doin, Mr. D?”

A second later he had a girl on each arm, and they stayed with him until he got to the corner and then said good bye. I couldn't help myself. I parked at the next corner and got out and crossed the street to say hello. “What was that all about?” I asked, and he told me that when the kids were a little younger he would always stop and give them a piece of Dentyne gum, until one of the mothers heard about it and asked him to stop. But the kids still stopped to say hello. And still called him Mr. D. “D for Dentyne,” he said.

I asked if I could drop him off somewhere down town, but he said the walk would do him good. “But I appreciate the offer, Mr. Corvi, I surely do,” he added, and shook my hand.

That's why I keep checking on him every so often, that handshake, and the empty basement. It was a neat thing seeing him with his fan club, and then he hit me that that was probably all he had, and that when the weather turned cold he wouldn't have that. I asked myself how a guy like Mr. D. got to be so alone. And then I remembered he wore a wedding ring, and it hit me that I knew several old men who had lost their wives and settled into the business of waiting.

Later that afternoon I turned onto Pearl Street and noticed a woman smoking on the first floor of a three-decker tenement. Sometimes the owner will live on the first floor, and so I knocked on the door. Mrs. Corrigan wasn't the owner. The owner was her son in law, and it turned out she was raising her two grandchildren and the younger one, the nine-year old boy, was the son of the owner.

It was a tough situation. Mrs. Corrigan had an injunction against her son in law, and wouldn't let him visit the boy. Not that he ever

wanted to. He wanted them out, because his girl friend had told him it gave her the creeps to see the boy staring at him, like he was waiting to get older so he could get even for what his father had done to his mother.

The more we talked the more red lights I saw flashing. I suggested it was probably not a good idea to leave her cigarette lighters all around the house. She told me she hadn't started smoking until her son in law turned off the heat the previous winter, and that she'd finally called his brother, who was a policeman, and who came and broke into the basement and turned on the heat for her. I ended up putting her in touch with my friend Jake at the Salvation Army, and told her to ask Jake to help her start the ball rolling on food stamps and medical insurance for the kids.

I was depressed as hell driving home, and there was Teddy waiting for me in my driveway when I got there. He thanked me for the call from the lady with the newspapers, but he had a bone to pick with me. I had told Teddy that the guy at the dump would charge him to dispose of paint cans, so he had started doing what I used to do when I had the truck and I was hauling stuff out of basements for free for people. I would dump stuff in different dumpsters around town, especially ones on construction sights in the commercial park, because there was never anybody around to see me pay my little visits. Well, Teddy had gotten himself busted for dumping behind the new condos that are going up on the hill behind the hospital.

“There was lots of paint cans and sheet rock and stuff in there, so I figured they wouldn't notice a little more,” he said.

“So was it a security guard, or the police that nailed you?” I asked.

“Police,” he said, “and I told them that you work for the fire department, and that you had told me it wasn't safe to store stuff like that in the truck over night,” he said.

“Did you tell him you were working for me?” I asked

“No way,Chris,” Teddy said. “But one of the cops recognized the truck, and so I had to explain how we were friends kind of, and you had given me the truck so that I could make a little money and go to college.”

“So, did they arrest you?” I asked.

“No, this one officer knew you,” Teddy said, taking a piece of paper out of his pocket, “and she said it would be good if you could stop by tomorrow, that's all.”

There are only two women on the police force, and I didn't have to look at the slip of paper to know which one had stopped Teddy. But I did look, and I was right. It was Selina. I wanted to tell Teddy that I would rather set myself on fire on the steps of city hall than drop by to visit with Selina, but he didn't give me the chance. “She said there's a five hundred dollar fine for illegal dumping, but that if you stopped by she might be able to work something out.”

It's nine sharp. I'm at the station. I haven't called. She's not expecting me. I'm hoping she's still in the habit of arriving a little late and I can just leave her a note thanking her for letting Teddy off the hook. But before I can say a word, the duty officer says she's expecting me — third office on the right — and there she is at the door of her office waiting for me. My heart is pounding, and I'm telling myself I can't do this.

“Long time no see,” she says, putting her hand on my shoulder in a sweet way and then she motions me into her office, and pulls out a chair for me and says, “How you been?”

“Fine,” I say, “Same as ever.” But I'm not fine or the same as ever, I'm twisting in my chair and my heart is pounding. She looks older, wiser, put back together, and even more beautiful than the day we met more than eight years ago.

“I couldn't believe it when I saw the kid driving your truck. I loved that old truck,” Selina says.

“Good truck, but I just couldn't afford to keep it,” I tell her, remembering the dozens of times we helped friends move, and how great it was, with the beer and music, and how at the end of the day we'd squeeze into her tiny tin shower together.

“She nods as if she knows what I'm thinking and says, “He seemed like a really nice kid, and he said you gave him the truck, but I wanted to be sure.”

“Did you recognize him?” I ask. “Little Teddy from across the street, Mrs. Deniker's boy? Remember him?”

“Oh, my god,” she says, remembering him, “Little Teddy, of course. That's right, it's been five years.” She pauses and looks at me, and I begin thinking it would be nice to just slip out for coffee with her, maybe have breakfast at the Rock, and then I panic and remind myself that this is the woman who stole my money, ripped my heart out, and damned near died on me.

“You're looking good,” I say. “I like the short hair.”

"It took me three years, Chris, but I'm finally straight," she says. "I almost called you last week, and then I thought I should wait another month just to make sure."

"I can see it in your eyes," I say. "You're you again." I'm glad to see her alive and well, but my insides are still in knots.

"I'm quitting the force," she says, "like you told me to years ago. But I didn't ask to see you to tell you that. I wanted to apologize face to face. I am so sorry for what happened, Chris. I know I let you down."

"It's okay," I say. But I'm not okay. I don't want to hear any more. I want to get out the door so I can begin forgetting how lovely she looked and how wonderful it was to see her well again.

"No, don't say that," she says. "I know how you feel. I know what I did, and I want to start by paying you back the money I took from you. I know you're going to say that I don't have to do that, because you're making good money now that you're fire marshal, but that doesn't matter. I still have to pay you back."

"What do you mean? Who told you I was fire marshal?" I ask.

"I was at the city council meeting the night they voted to promote you," she says. "It was the same night they reinstated me. What's his face, the attorney, had just learned the city was going to lose a bundle of state money if they didn't have a fire marshal, so they promoted you on the spot."

I tell her I was never appointed.

"The mayor was supposed to tell you, and move you into the office next to the fire chief, and that was eight months ago," she says.

I told Selina that I had been flying under the radar — doing my job but hoping nobody would ask why I was still on the payroll. We laughed about how I had been working without a boss for almost two years, but the not so funny truth was that I was in a bind. The city council thought I was the fire marshal, and the mayor knew I wasn't, and I had no idea why he had decided not to appoint me.

Selina's guess was that he had just never gotten around to it, just like he had never gotten around to a lot of things he was supposed to be doing. But there was one more complication. It turned out that the fire marshal, the fire chief, and the president of the city council all share the same secretary, whose name is Gretchen Cross, and she had called Selina about ten days ago to ask for my telephone number.

“Did she want to know why I was never in the office?” I asked.

“Kind of,” Selina said. “But she was also trying to put you in touch with some reporter from the Guardian who wants to do a story on you.”

My battered brain jumped to thoughts of the field day the reporter would have with me, but what could I do? I gave Selina my cell phone number and asked if she would call Gretchen and explain why I hadn't been in the office for the last eight months. She said she'd be glad to and told me not to worry.

But I was already worried, just a little about my job, sure, but much more worried because the thing I had sworn could never happen, had happened: Selina was back in my life. I'm a person who hates surprises, especially surprises like the way Selina, the love of my life, came apart at the seams. She and her partner Frank had answered a ‘robbery in progress' call., and arrived to find the owner of the liquor store holding the robber at gunpoint. Frank told Selina to check the back door of the store just to be sure, then walked in

with his gun drawn, and when owner saw he was not in uniform, he turned on Frank and shot him. Selina didn't even it see it happen, but she blamed herself for not being there to prevent it. For three months she visited Frank every day, and as soon as he could talk about it he told her it wasn't her fault. But she wouldn't let herself off the hook, and week after week I could see she was slipping deeper and deeper into the hole.

First it was nightmares and pills, and then weed, and then crack. And finally, about a year after Frank was shot, she left the house one Sunday morning and was gone for a week, and then the following Sunday morning I got a call from a trucker who had just found her sleeping in his cab. Two hours later I pulled her out of his truck and put the stinking body and shell of what had been Selina into the back seat of my car, knowing she was almost dead, knowing she might die on the way to the hospital, and telling myself that this had to be the end. I had said everything I knew to say, and done everything I knew to do, and no matter what I said and did, and how often I told her how much she meant to me, Selina kept slipping deeper and deeper into the hole she had dug for herself.

We made to the hospital. She was in critical condition for five days, and then released into the clinic. I called every day until I knew for sure she was going to live, and then I stopped calling. I couldn't go to see her. I just couldn't make myself go.

So there I was, caught in the middle of a squeeze play between the mayor and the city council, and after one conversation getting goose bumps over Selina. Add the reporter to the mix and it all added up to my worst nightmare. I couldn't go back to Pearl Street. I had to take a break.

I'm at the Rock, my favorite diner, picking at my eggs and bacon, hoping my phone won't ring, knowing it will. I'm in the eye of the storm. The sun is shining, and then it rings. "Chris Corvi," I say.

“Oh, Mr. Corvi, it's such a pleasure to meet you,” Gretchen says in a very pleasant voice. “I've heard so much about you. You're a bit of a legend around here, you know.”

“That doesn't sound good. But what can I say,” I tell her.

“We know you've been very been very busy,” she says, trying to be nice to me, “because people call almost every week to say how wonderful you are. I told Marion, our president, about the woman you took to the hospital, and how the doctors said you saved her life, and that's why Danny from the Guardian wants to write a story about you.”

“You don't mean Selina, do you?” I ask

“No, no,” she says, “it was a short lady with a long name. Mrs. Schwertzensteiner I think it was,” Gretchen says.

I tell her anybody would have taken her to the hospital. I just happened to be there at the right time.

“But what about the girl and her baby you saved from carbon monoxide poisoning, and the time you bought groceries for Mrs. Ingersol?” she says.

“Is she okay? Somebody should be checking on her.” I say.

“She's fine. Your friend Jake stops by every week,” she says.

“That's good to hear. It's Jake that should have a story in the paper. I'm more concerned about staying on good terms with the mayor,” I say.

“Oh, I know,” she says, sounding like my mother. “Marion was really upset about that, but she took care of it last Thursday. Once she realized you'd never moved into your office, we called Tom in HR and found out the mayor hadn't even started the paper work on you. Marion wants you to know that it's all been taken care of, and she's hoping you'll be able to stop in tomorrow at ten so she can fill you in on the details,” she says.

“Ten it is,” I say, “and please tell her I'm looking forward to meeting her.” I slip the phone back in my pocket and it only takes me a split second to realize that I'm not out of the woods, because she's still not going to appreciate the fact that I've been working without a boss. Then I wonder why people are calling Gretchen, and bingo, the answer is obvious. The fire marshal's phone number is at the bottom of the checklist I've been handing out for years.

Gretchen gave me a big hug when I met her, and told me she had given Danny, the Guardian reporter, more than 20 names, and her notes from a dozen or so phone calls. “People just love you,” she said, “and if you don't mind I'm going to write to Oprah and tell her about you.”

When I sat down with Marion I told her that I wasn't really comfortable with the idea of a newspaper story. I explained that conversations that I had with people had to be kept confidential, especially the people who need medical help, or the parents who were struggling to find the money to buy clothes for their kids to wear when they go back to school in September. She agreed with me that we could never embarrass people, but asked me to at least meet with Danny, because it was her impression that at least three or four people wanted to talk about what I done for them as a way of saying thank you.

“There's something else I want you to think about,” she said. “Think about the stories you see in the paper that mention city

employees. City news is almost always bad news. And then you come along, and from the moment you step into people's homes they sense you're trying to help them out, and that you care about them. You come with your safety checklists on your clipboard, but you see more than the fire hazards. You see what they need to survive, and you do your best to help them.

“Gretchen says you very modest, and don't like talking about what you've been doing,” she said, “but think about the possibility of a story that also mentions the guys who drive the plow trucks who save lives every winter, and the city nurses who do emergency visits. Let's ask Danny to do a story that has a whole list of numbers people can call for help, and a story that makes city workers know their efforts are appreciated.”

“God, damn, Marion, you're good. You should be mayor,” I said, and she laughed. She also confirmed that Selina had been right. The mayor had dropped the ball, and so she had just showed up in his office on Thursday with a contract for me dated six months ago, and a voucher for him to sign that gave me a raise and six months of adjusted back pay. She gave me a copy of the voucher, and I almost fell out of my chair when I saw that my back pay came to almost thirty thousand dollars.

“It's only right,” she said, “because you are going to have to buy a couple of suits and a computer.”

There were a number of ways my job was going to change, starting with getting to know Bill Monday, the fire chief, a little better. She asked me how I got along with Bill, and when I told her, “just fine,” she looked at me as if maybe I was the only one who did. I told her that we had talked a few months ago about my taking on the prevention campaign for small businesses - especially the restaurants and the other high-risk establishments, but I didn‘t tell her that that was his way of giving me a little dirty work to do, work

I was glad to do for him, because he had done a couple of huge favors for Selina, including putting her in a half-way house that fire money paid for.

Marion asked me to catch up with Bill as soon as I could to work out a prevention plan we could present to the city council, and I promised her I would do that.

I asked Marion if the council had a handle on the impact of all the jobs that had been lost in the last year in Rockingham -- by my count just talking to people out of work it was something like twenty five hundred jobs, and that had to mean there were at least five thousand people hurting and feeling the pinch.

“That's a lot of jobs for a city of fifty five thousand,“ she said, and made a few notes that told me she knew that meant more people who couldn't pay their hospital bills, more domestic disturbance calls, and more folks depending on Rockingham's four food pantries.

“We'll have to meet again so you can give me details,” she said. “I need to go those companies and find out what they can do to help.” Hearing her say that impressed the hell out me. We rambled through a few more topics and then as I was about to leave she asked me if I could break free on Friday to meet with Pasha Corliss. “I'll join you if you don't mind,“ she said, “because we need to talk more about the impact of all those jobs disappearing.” “Sounds good,” I said, and I thanked her for going to bat for me on the new appointment.

Gretchen was waiting for me as I left Marion's office, feeling grateful, shell shocked, and at the same time like some kind of highly endangered species. “Here we are, sweetie,” she said as she handed me two slips of paper. One confirmed the meeting with Pasha Corliss on Friday at ten, and included her address. The

second meeting was for a meeting with Danny in my office at three on Friday.

It's ten on Friday and I'm right on time, surprised by the narrow driveway that bumps its way to Pasha's cozy cottage, a nice little hideaway built in the fifties, not too big, but with plenty of trees and lawn. The door swings open as I approach, and there is Pasha, in her late fifties wearing her husband's flannel shirt and one of those fashionable hair cuts that looks like the hair cut my mother gave me when I was twelve.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice. Did Marion tell you how I heard about you?" she says, and then just as I reach out to shake her hand she pulls me in for a hug.

"No, she didn't," I say, reminding myself that one of these days I'm going to have to learn how to hug people that I don't know.

"You dropped in on my daughter two years ago," she says, "and she told me how clever you were about getting her to take prevention seriously. She said you begant by asking about fireworks and that really got her attention, and then she was even more impressed when you noticed the fire alarm in the kitchen and immediately got up on a chair and tested it for her."

"Has she got the safety checklist on the refrigerator?" I ask.

"No, it's on the bulletin board," she says, and I can't help smiling at that.

She sits me down in the kitchen and we have tea. Pasha's home is cluttered with pictures everywhere and newspapers piled on tables. There's a coat hung on a doorknob and her husband's muddy boots left by the kitchen door. Pasha's a nutritionist at the local hospital -- thoughtful, well spoken, and more than that a rock-solid and caring

person. Half way through our tea and scones she asks me what Selena is going to do when she leaves the force. That comes as a shock. I ask her how she knows Selina and she tells me that she volunteers at the hospital clinic and that they've stayed in touch.

Then ten minutes later she steers the conversation back to fireworks, and explains that she's had her kid sister's boy living with her for a time. He's 27 years old, but days after his mother left the country he'd quit his job and taken up with a fast crowd. His two-room apartment is like a little summer beach house right next to the swimming pool, but Pasha says she hasn't seen him since the day he returned from a trip to Canada with some of his new friends.

She remembers seeing him move boxes out his van and into his apartment, and there was something about the pictures on the biggest boxes that made her think they were fireworks.

Pasha tells me it took her several weeks to reach her sister in South Africa, and when she finally got through to her, her sister told her not to worry. So at this point the kid has been gone seven weeks, and the apartment remains locked, with the shades drawn. She doesn't want to go against her sister's wishes, but she's been thinking that a fire prevention inspection might be in order.

Just the few details she had given me about the kid made me uncomfortable, and as soon as I opened the door I smelled trouble. There was a chance the kid was in jail somewhere, or in Mexico. She was right about the fireworks. There was at least a couple thousand dollars worth of big rockets. There was a chance, too, that there were drugs involved. I poked through the closets and drawers, and all of his clothes were gone, but in the tool box under the kitchen sink there was a pile of money.

When I told Pasha what I'd found, she was mad at herself for not acting sooner. I didn't tell her that I thought he might be in jail

somewhere, but when she asked how much money I had found, I had to tell her that I hadn't touched it because it was obvious that it was a fair amount and that we needed to call Selina to come down and go over everything with a fine tooth comb. I told her I that if the fireworks were in fact fireworks they would be taken to a special upstate facility to be destroyed, and that it was likely that Selina would want to dust the pile of money and the fireworks boxes for prints, and that her nephew would need to be reported as a missing person. I suggested that the first thing she should was have Selina get in touch with her sister and make sure that her nephew was in fact missing.

There was a pause in our conversation as Pasha figured out that he might be on the run, and then Marion arrived, and we got talking about how the city council worked. I learned that each member of council kept an eye on one or two functions of city government. Marion looked after the schools, Pasha did the hospital and the nursing association, and there were three others who looked after finance, highway and transportation, and Police and fire. All five of them worked closely together and thought alike, and there was one other guy, Gary Munter, who did policy and administration. He and the mayor played a lot of golf, while the gang of five ran the city.

The mayor wasn't corrupt. He did little favors for people, but for the most part he just liked to hang out at the country club and frequent the city's better restaurants. However, the gang of five had decided it might be nice to have a mayor who worked for a living, and so they were looking for a candidate, and asked me if I would be interested in running. I told them that I couldn't do that, because I knew nothing about how to run a city. Marion said they could teach me, but I told her that she should run. I stayed for lunch, and left agreeing with Pasha's suggestion that I come to council meetings every other week. “That way you'll have no excuses when we ask you again in four years,”

she said.

Pasha walked me to my car, promising to call Selina as soon as Marion left. “Let me know if there's anything I can do to help,” I said. And thanks for lunch.” That got me another hug, a longer and closer one, the kind you give a friend.

Gretchen was waiting for me when I got to back to my office to prepare for the interview. “Danny had to cancel,” she said. “His dog's sick and he had to rush him to the vet, and he wants to know if Monday at two is okay.”

I said that was fine, and she told me that she had booked me with Bill Monday at three, and Selina at four. “Selina is on her way to Pasha's at the moment, but she says that it's urgent that she meet with you at four.” She gave me a funny look, as if she knew something I didn't know, and then ran off to tell Bill we were on for three.

It was a good meeting with Bill. He'd been doing his homework, and we talked about inspecting all the vacant buildings in the city, and making sure we have current blueprints and owners on file.

Then suddenly it's four and there's Selina in a dark blue dress with matching shoes --makeup, earrings, every hair in place, an absolute knockout.

“What's this?” I ask.

“Come on, Marion says I have to get you a suit,” Selina says, and I can see Gretchen hanging around between my office and hers pretending she's not listening.

“What's the hurry?” I ask.

"We have to meet with Stanley, the finance guy, at the Country Club. So chop chop Mr. Fire Marshal. We've got to be there at six," she says.

Five minutes later we were on the way to the mall to get me a suit. There's something joyous and electric about Selina when she's having a good time, and I could see she was really into the suit thing. "So, this trip is official police business, right?" I asked

"You bet," she said. "Ever heard of the fashion police?"

She asked me if I still had the three ties I used to have in my closet. I said I did, and she said, "Figures," and informed me that she was going to have the final say on all purchases.

There was a big sale, and so I left the mall wearing one suit and a new tie, and carrying another suit in a box. And of course Selina paid for everything.

I sulked for a bit, knowing I couldn't have done it without her, and then I thanked her, and also told her she'd also done a great job smoothing the skids with Gretchen and Marion, and I really appreciated that as well. "But can we call it even now?" I said. "No more gifts, okay?"

She just smiled at me, and told me I was going to need more ties and a computer. She was still having fun and even though my old Selina would never be caught dead at the country club, the new Selina was dressed to kill and looking forward to the evening.

"So what's this meeting all about?" I asked.

"Well first of all, it's more like dinner," she said, "and I think Pasha might join us."

."Figures," I said, "You and me and your friend Pasha."

"And Pasha's husband, and Stanley and his wife," she said.

She could see that I was catching on, but that just made it even better for her. "Did Pasha tell you that she and Marion asked me if I would run for mayor?" I asked and she nodded, and so I asked her if Stanley was going to try and sell me on the idea, and she shook her head.

There was a pause and then she said that she had told them I would be a good mayor but that it would drive me nuts.

"And why is that?" I asked.

"Because you don't like to push paper and order people around," she said. "It's just not your thing. You like dropping in on people and helping them out. You're kind of like Robin Hood with a little Fire Marshal thrown in."

"Do Marion and Pasha know that?" I asked

"You bet, and they think it's great, because nobody on the council really knows what's going on in the city. They need you, and from now on you'll be hanging out with them, and maybe even writing a weekly column in the paper telling people about the new out-patient clinic or where they can get food if they need it," she said.

"I'm a lousy writer," I said.

"That's okay," she said. "I'll help you."

It turned out to be very relaxed. Pasha's husband had begged out, and that gave Pasha and Selina an excuse to run off to the ladies room together for a few adjustments. I liked Stanley. He

understood why I didn't want to run for mayor. He gave me a list of the next ten council meetings and suggested I come early so he could show me the budgets and walk me through the talking points. He also told me that Marion was going to run, and asked for my support. I told him he could count on me.

“That's good to hear,” he said, trying to play the politician. There was something about him, though, that reminded me of my old scout leader.

“Both Pasha and Marion are very impressed with you,” he said. “You and Selina are just the kind of people we need to energize the election.”

I nodded, not at all sure what that might mean, and then he told me that one of the things he hoped we could decide over dinner was where Selina was going to fit in. “We really need someone sharp to run the highway office, but Pasha said it would be mean to put her out there next to the sand pile with nobody to talk to,” he said.

“She's not right for office work,” I said.

“Pasha says she got her EMT certificate a while back. Maybe that's what she has in mind,” Stanley said.

“Maybe, but the waiting around for something to happen might get to her,” I told him, and then Pasha and Marion came back, and we ordered. But as soon as the iced tea arrived I could see Pasha giving Selina some kind of a little squint and nod, and a minute later Selina asked me to dance.

There was a nice little trio playing a lazy version of “Time After Time,” and for a minute or two I was caught up in the way that our bodies just came together again in the easy sway of not quite dance

steps we had worked out years ago, and then I sensed that Selina was a little nervous. “What's up Sel?,” I said.

“Oh,Chris,” she whispered,” I thought you'd never say that.”

“I always used to call you that,” I said.

“Not when I was sick, and stealing from you, you didn't,” she said.
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