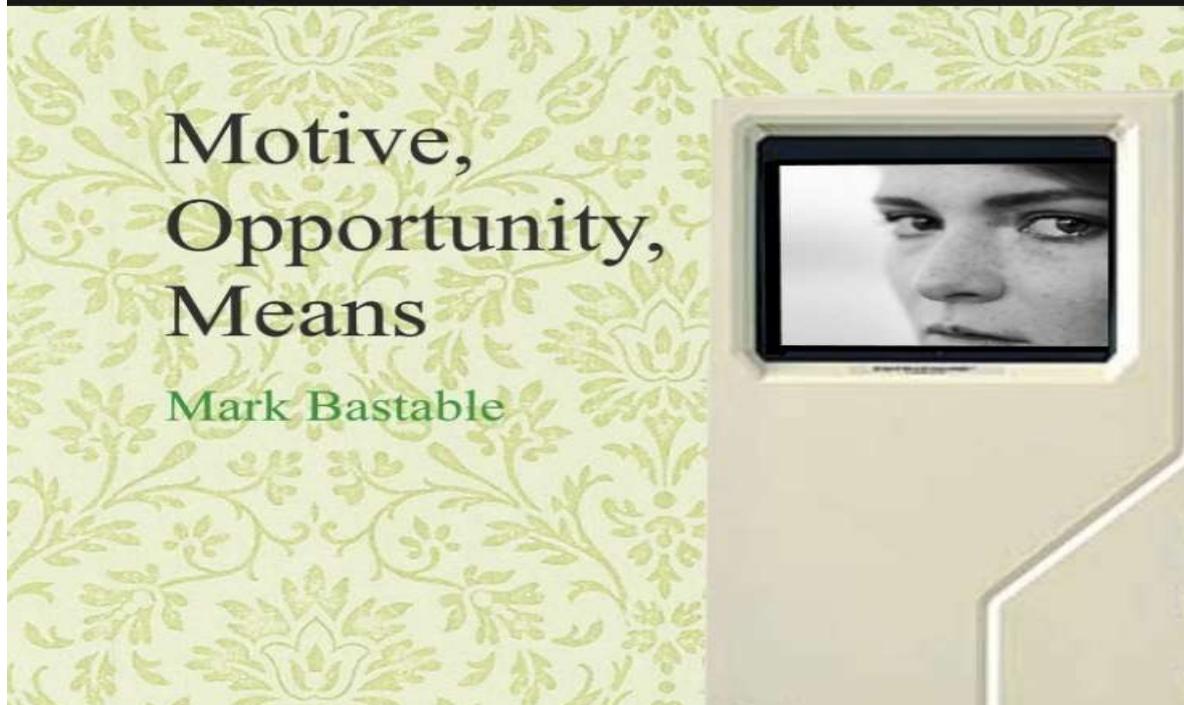


THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



“Americano double-shot, no frills, name of John?”

“That’s me.”

John Fuller took the coffee and walked out on to Wisconsin Avenue. His cell trilled, and he read the incoming text.

I have photographs of the Vegas trip. Think about that, Mr. Congressman. Think about that splashed all over the Washington Post.

Fuller shrugged. She was getting weirder. He flicked back through messages over the last month. She was going to ruin him. She was going to kill herself. She was going to tell John’s dad what a douche his son was. She was going to relocate to Australia and take Erin with her.

He’d probably have to pony up for counseling or something. Given the hassle all this crap could cause the Party, therapy for his insane ex-wife might even constitute a legitimate expense claim.

*

“She mentions a Vegas trip?” Detective Pinski asked.

“Wedding anniversary three years ago – we went to Vegas,” Fuller replied.

“And photographs?”

“Beats me. I spent all my time at the craps tables.”

“You play high stakes?”

“I like risk. It’s in my nature.”

“So what did you think when you read that text?”

Fuller shook his head. “Detective, you have to understand that Alison has a very, umm, unique view of events. You might want to bear that in mind during your investigation.”

*

John Fuller walked up the front path of what used to be his house. Technically, it still was. He put the key in the door and sighed when it didn’t open. She’d bolted it from the inside. He turned and mimed a ‘what can you do?’ shrug to Laura, who was watching from the car. Then he pressed the button on the intercom and looked up at the camera.

The speaker crackled. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Of course. Is Erin ready?”

“Not yet. You’ll have to come in. I’ll get the door.”

In the kitchen, Fuller poured himself a coffee uninvited, simply to make the point that he could.

“Just one time,” he said, “you’d think that she’d be ready when I got here.”

“Maybe she’s not sure you’re going to show,” Alison said.

“Oh, get real. When have I ever not shown up for her?”

“Her birth.”

“You have to go back twelve years to find one? That’s a stretch.”

He almost added, “And, by the way, I’m not responsible for lightning storms over JFK,” but that was the first line of a three-act argument they’d played out too many times before.

Alison rinsed out the empty coffee pot. “She hasn’t eaten. Again.”

“We’ll grab a burger on the drive to my dad’s.”

“Oh, right. So your whore gets to meet your dad now?”

Rather than say something incendiary that would set off a series of explosions, Fuller took a swig of coffee.

Alison opened the fridge. “Anyway, I don’t want Erin eating fast food crap. Can you make her a sandwich for the car? I’ll go hurry her up.”

“Sure. You have cold cuts?”

Alison put some ham on the counter, and a tomato.

“She’ll complain about the tomato, but don’t let her ditch it.”

Making the sandwich, Fuller realized that there were things in this house that he missed. The knives, for instance. He liked to cook, and he’d spent a small fortune on a top-quality set of Swedish knives. But you can’t take that stuff with you. It looks petty. You have to just walk away.

*

In the interview room, Fuller leaned back in his chair, and gazed around. He had to stay calm. It wouldn’t help to get snarky with the investigating officer.

“Sure my fingerprints were on the knife,” he said. “My fingerprints are all over the house. My fingerprints are probably on – I don’t know – the blender and the egg-whisk.”

Detective Pinski nodded. “And if the victim had been beaten to death with the egg-whisk, we’d certainly have the forensic team check that,” he said.

*

Alison Fuller didn’t go to the front door to wave her daughter goodbye. That would look like she was waving to all three of them – John, Erin and the slut Laura. She wasn’t about to do that. She kissed Erin at the bottom of the stairs, told her to be good and then hung back as John ushered the kid out into the sunshine.

Alison closed the door and bolted it. She opened the control panel for the intercom and turned it off. Then she went to the kitchen. She pulled on one yellow latex glove. With her fingertips, she picked up John’s beloved chef’s knife by its tomato-stained blade.

She put the knife in a Tupperware box. Then she walked to the control panel and turned the intercom back on. She pressed the button marked ‘Manual Set’ and flicked the camera switch to ‘Active’.

*

“Pretty messy separation, huh?” Pinski asked.

“Are there tidy ones?”

“You left her for your secretary, right?”

“You don’t need me to confirm that, do you?” John said. “It was all over the media.” He

picked up the mug of coffee from the bare table in front of him. “How’s Erin taking this? She okay?”

“She’s as well as can be expected under the circumstances, Congressman,” the police officer assured him.

*

“We made good time,” John said on Sunday, as Laura slid the car into a spot outside Departures. “I have a couple of hours to kill now. We could have stayed for breakfast with my dad.”

“By the time you’ve stood in line, checked in, gotten through security, it’s not that much leeway,” Laura said. “You cut everything too fine. Why risk it?”

“It’s in my nature. But at least I have time for a drink.” Fuller opened the door and walked around to the trunk. Erin turned to smile at him from the backseat as Laura got out of the driver’s side.

“Does Alison know it’s me dropping Erin off tonight?”

“Yeah. I said you’d be over around eight. Don’t worry – you don’t have to stay and chat. Just wave Erin in from the street.”

Laura grinned. “I wasn’t planning on inviting myself in for cocktails and gossip.” She touched her fingers to her lips, and then to his. “You be good in Miami, mister.”

Erin’s head emerged from the side window of the Dodge. “You can whatsapp me, okay?”

Fuller wagged a finger. “I never again want to hear you use that as a verb. See you next weekend, baby.”

As he joined the line for security check, his phone trilled the arrival of a text.

We need to talk. Talk now. About Erin. It has to be now. This won’t wait. You need to come to the house. It’s about Erin, not us.

“For Christ’s sake,” Fuller muttered.

The hell with that. Whatever drama Alison had cooked up would certainly keep until after his trip. But – wait – Laura was going to drop Erin off. And Laura didn’t need to be dragged into some batshit scene with Alison. Especially with Erin there too.

Fuller dialed the house. The machine kicked in.

“I know you’re there, Ali. Pick up.” He waited. “Pick up.” He checked his watch, and grimaced. “Dammit, Alison – I’ll be there in half an hour. But we have fifteen minutes, tops – you understand? I have to make this flight.”

He strode towards the exit, hoping to God there was a taxi right there and ready to roll.

*

Alison listened to the message. He was coming. She knew he would. He'd do anything for Erin. For Erin, sure. If he'd had a message saying that Alison was dying in an alley, he'd put it on hold till after a ball-game or a cook-out. But 'Erin' – that was a magic word.

In the living room, Alison took the knife from the Tupperware, and she wedged it carefully into the slightly-open drawer of the dresser, at about stomach-height, angled upwards.

She pulled down all the blinds, and then tipped over the armchair. She flipped the coffee table, spilling a vase of freesias across the carpet.

She went upstairs and came back holding a gift-box and a small handgun. She unbolted the front door, then turned and fired two shots across the hall into the far wall. She wrapped the gun in a paisley silk square. She opened the gift-box and took out a framed photograph of Erin, John and herself, smiling, with the Disney castle in the background. She put the wrapped gun in the box and put the box on the hall table. She stood the photo on top, and she leaned against it a card bordered with glittery stars and, in dayglow pink, the words

To John, Open Me! Good memories! xxx

*

“Yes, it's my gun. You know that. But I haven't seen the damn thing in years.”

“The prints were fresh, Congressman.”

“Well, it was in a box with my name on it. All wrapped up. You unwrap something like that, it just naturally falls into your hand.”

“You're talking about the box containing the photograph?”

“No, the photograph was on top of the box, not in it.”

“Right – the gun was in the box. But not the photo that's exactly the right size for the box.”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Why did you open it? I mean, your wife sends you a crazy text. You're under time pressure. You stop to open a gift in the hall?”

“I wanted to figure out what she was doing, where her mind was at. You have no idea how insane she could be.”

“Must have driven you crazy.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I can smell alcohol. Have you been drinking?”

“Sure. I had a two, three shots of Glenmorangie before I checked in. Don’t make a big deal of it. I’ve had enough of that over the last twenty years.”

“Congressman, I am in no position to criticize a man for liking good Scotch.”

*

Closing the door between the living room and the hallway, Alison walked over to the dresser. The entry would have to be just right. Up from underneath, at an acute angle. And deep. There would only be one thrust, and it had to do the job.

She stood there by the bureau for twenty minutes, breathing steadily, the tip of the knife tickling her stomach through her blouse. In her right hand she held the phone. With her left, she was pulling the window-blind back a fraction, watching for the taxi.

And there it was. Alison dialed 911, gave her address in a panicky voice, then cut the call. She threw the phone across the room onto the couch.

She’d hear the police coming, and she’d see them arrive. She figured she had maybe five or six minutes to tell John a few uncomfortable truths about himself. If the conversation lasted even that long.

*

“What time did you get to the house?”

“I don’t know. A little after four.”

“And you got no reply on the intercom?”

“No. But I have a key. I waited a while, and then opened the front door.”

“And you left the door open.”

“Did I? Does it matter?”

“If you’d premeditated, you’d’ve closed the door. Your attorney will probably use that as plea-bargaining chip.”

Fuller rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. “Oh, that’s a great help,” he said, deadpan. “I appreciate it.”

“And then what?”

“I walked inside and saw the box.”

“Which you opened, and found the gun. But you didn’t fire it, right?”

“No. She must have done that.”

“She shot two bullets into the wall before you got there?”

“Right. She must have. And then I walked into the living room.”

“Still holding the gun?”

“I really don’t remember.”

“And where’s Alison?”

“She’s standing by the dresser with the tip of the knife pressed against her belly.”

“Did she say anything?”

Fuller laughed. “Oh, she said plenty. She could have gone on for hours. But when you guys pulled up, lights flashing and sirens wailing, she had to cut it short.”

“Nice choice of words.”

Fuller slumped a little in the chair, gazing at his hands. “She lunged onto the knife, stepped back, closed the drawer, and staggered towards me. I froze. She grabbed me, and then slid down. I was trying to hold her up, I guess, but I went down on my knees beside her. And then your guys came in.”

Pinski steepled his fingers and pinched the end of his nose. “Congressman, there are not twelve adults in the whole metropolitan area who’re going to believe that.”

“I’m aware that it seems far-fetched. She planned it that way.”

“Do you remember what you said when the officers came in?”

“I have no clue.”

“You said, ‘Fellas, this is not what it looks like.’”

Fuller sighed. “Jesus, did I? That does sound pretty feeble.” He looked straight at Pinski. “So what should I have said?”

*

“What we got?” the DA asked, opening the file.

“Totally straightforward,” Pinski said. “The wife’s sending him blackmail notes. Very unhappy and angry woman, but loves him, I guess. Still arranging little guilt-making gifts – you know. He checks in for Miami, but she sends a get-your-ass-over-here text. He must have been pretty pissed – he’s not a guy who likes to be told what to do. Big scene at the house. He keeps a gun there – seems unlikely he had it on him when he was about to take a flight. Fails to shoot her. She manages to call 911. There’s a struggle, and he stabs her. We show up just as he’s pulling the knife out of her belly.”

“Good. So we have forensic, we have the weapon, we have motive, we have him at the scene, practically in the act of stabbing the woman. The jury could be home in time for dinner.”

“Or even lunch, yeah.” Pinski pursed his lips, thinking. “From a criminal justice point of view, though, our problem is that he probably didn’t do it.”

“What?”

“See – I don’t like the gun. We found it next to the giftbox, and there were still rounds in the clip. If you’re trying to shoot someone, and you miss, you don’t put a still-loaded gun neatly down on the table and go find a knife in another room. It doesn’t ring true.”

“Maybe he was worried that repeated gunfire would raise the neighbors.”

“Maybe. But they’re big homes there, far apart. It’s a small gun – not so loud. No one remembers hearing the two shots that were actually fired. Could be they weren’t even fired that day.”

“That’s all you’ve got? Because I’d still take it to a jury.”

“Right now, yeah – that’s it.” Pinski stood up. “Well, that and a caught-red-handed statement so intensely lame that you’ve got to figure it might be genuine.”

The detective turned as he got to the door. “Thing is, he’s completely consistent, and that usually means a guy’s telling the truth. You find one lie, you got something to go on, something to start tugging at. Just one lie. So – sounds insane – but if he’s not trying to fool us, then she must have been.”

In the car, waiting for a gap to pull out into the traffic, Pinski realized he was likely to be late for dinner again. He glanced at the dashboard. 18:47. Except it wasn’t. It was 19:47. He had never figured out how to sync the clock in and out of Daylight Saving. He reached for his cell, to call home. Then he stopped.

“Synchronized clocks,” he said aloud.

He was going to be much too late for dinner. He sent Susie a text and then headed back to the precinct, to talk to Fuller again.

*

“You said she said plenty when you were in the living room. Did she also call 911?”

“No. She must have done that before I arrived.”

“Right. And we have a record of the time she made that call. Thing is, you don’t know what time you got to the house.”

“Not exactly. A little after four.”

“The 911 call was made at seven minutes past. If you got there at eight minutes past, you’re in the clear.”

Fuller nodded. “Okay. I got there at eight minutes past.”

“Yeah – nice. Unfortunately, I’m not going to take your word for it. But the intercom’s hooked up to the house wi-fi, so there’ll be a reliable timestamp on the video from the security camera.”

Fuller tipped his head back. “Oh, thank God,” he murmured. Then he looked at Pinski. “I knew you’d find a hole in her craziness. I knew it. Thank you.”

*

At his desk, Pinski ran the video from the security camera. Even before he got to John Fuller arriving, he could see there was a problem.

Out of shot, there was the sound of a car pulling up. And here was Fuller walking to the door. He pressed the button. He looked up at the camera. He said, “Ali – let me the hell in. I don’t have time for this shit.” He pressed again, then cursed and took the key from his pocket.

And in the corner of the frame, the clock said 21:41.

Pinski rewound the film. He ran it back a day, two days, three, watching the digits count down. And, suddenly, they changed. Pinski saw Fuller and his daughter leaving the house, the girl carrying a weekend bag. The time showed as 18:22. Then there was a flicker, and the time was 00:00.

“She overrode the auto-sync,” Pinski muttered. There was no way of knowing how long the camera had been turned off. The hole that might save Fuller had been closed. “Man, she was smart.”

He ran the tape fast-forward to a few moments before the congressman’s arrival. Cab door slams off-screen. Fuller speaks to camera. Curses. Unlocks the door. Enters, leaving the door open. No action. No action. No action. Then sirens. Cops show up.

Pinski rewound and watched it again. And again. There was nothing new to see. Not that he knew what he was looking for.

The detective checked his watch. He could still be home by eleven, just in time to apologize properly before Susie went to bed. He shut down the computer and headed for the elevator.

*

He drove home on autopilot, running the action through his head, watching the video with his mind’s eye. Something was bugging him, but he couldn’t see it.

He was thirty seconds from home – about to turn the corner into his street – when a horn blared.

“Oh, jeez! Sorry, sorry – my bad,” Pinski blustered – as if the angry guy in the cab of the truck could hear him. He gave an apologetic wave. “My bad, my bad.”

He let the truck pass and then he turned the corner, a bit shaken. He’d been visualizing the video – Fuller speaking to the intercom, opening the door, leaving it open, nothing happening onscreen till the cops arrive – and he hadn’t seen the truck. Man, he sure heard it though. Nearly scared him to death.

...Sure heard it though.

Pinski slammed on the brakes.

“Yes,” he said. “Got it, got it, got it.”

He took out his phone and texted Susie. He was not going to make it home to say goodnight.

*

The following morning, unshaven and ragged having caught a few hours’ sleep on a couch in the break-out area, Detective Pinski brought a laptop into the interview room where John Fuller, looking no fresher himself, was waiting.

Pinski ran the video.

“Here you are arriving at the house. You speak to the camera – wait. There. Good quality sound. Then you unlock the door and go on in, leaving it open. Now, listen...”

Fuller leaned towards the laptop’s speaker, head turned slightly. Nothing happened on screen. And then, after a few minutes, there were sirens, distant but getting closer.

Pinski raised his eyebrows.

“Police cars,” Fuller said. “I don’t get it.”

“You didn’t hear something else? Before that?”

“No. What did I miss?”

“You missed something huge. Wait.” Pinski dragged the video cursor back twenty-four minutes. On screen, the front door of the house was shut. “Now listen to this part,” he said, hitting *Play*.

Fuller leaned forward, closer, head turned, eyes still on the image of the closed front door. And he heard it.

Puk! Puk!

Fuller frowned – and then blinked. “Oh, Jesus – of course.” He sat back and breathed out, chuckling with relief.

Pinski nodded. “Door wide open like you left it – actually, even with the door closed – we should have heard two shots in the hall. But they weren’t there. The gun was fired more than twenty minutes before you showed up.” He spread his hands. “Crazy as it sounds, she really did set you up.”

“Yeah – but you found the hole,” Fuller said. He extended his hand across the table. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I know it would have been easy for you to take this thing for what it looked like.”

Pinski took the congressman’s hand and shook it. “Hey – I’m a persistent guy. But, I’ll tell you, after seventeen years in this job, I’m still surprised by what people will do when they’re angry, or desperate, or threatened. The lengths they’ll go to. It’s hard to believe sometimes.”

*

“Honey, this is crazy. And just...out of proportion. Marriages break down all the time. You have to move on.”

Alison looked at him sideways, her belly against the knife. “In our bed, John! You fucked her in our bed – while Erin and I were waiting at Luigi’s on my birthday. Two hours we waited, and you were fucking that whore in our bed!”

Fuller shrugged. “Maybe I wanted to use it for something other than fighting for a change.”

“Oh, you bastard. They are going to crucify you, and you’ll deserve it.”

“Give me a break,” Fuller said. “You’re not going to fall on that knife. Get real.”

“Oh, I’m going to do it. You don’t believe I’ll do it?”

“No – *you* don’t believe you’ll do it. That’s what the gun’s for.”

“I’m going to do it.”

“If you were going to do it – if you really believed that you could make it look like I stabbed you – you wouldn’t need the whole shtick with the gun. But you know you can’t do it, and without the gun, you got nothing. ‘He threatened me with a knife!’ ‘My estranged wife is deeply disturbed. It’s very sad.’ On the other hand, with the smoking gun, you got a story even if you chicken out. ‘He shot at me and tried to stab me.’ ‘Uh, no, it was her shot the gun, not me – honest.’ That looks like attempted murder. Which, I guess, would serve the purpose of ruining me.”

“That’s not...”

“I’m not saying you thought it through that clearly. But, crazy though you are, you’ve always been smart.”

Alison bit her lip. “In all the time we were together, I don’t think you ever told me I was smart.”

“Then I should have, and I apologize. Do you mind if I get a drink?”

“That’s your answer to everything, isn’t it?” Alison snorted, instantly angry again. “Another drink.”

Fuller opened the cocktail cabinet and took out a bottle of Glenmorangie. “And you’re going to need to be smart. Smart and alive. Because, I have to tell you, this whole thing is way too elaborate, too over-engineered. There’ll be a hole in it somewhere.”

“No, no, you’re going to pay!”

Fuller took a glass and poured a generous measure. “Real-life cops are not the gullible dullards that your crime library paints them. They’re going to find a hole, and if you’re not around to use your smarts to plug it, I’m going to stroll through it into the sunshine. As indeed I should, what with being innocent and all.”

Alison took a pace away from the dresser, jabbing a finger at Fuller as he leaned against the cocktail cabinet. “You’re going to be humiliated. I’ll make sure of that. I want to see you brought down.”

“Exactly my point. And that’s much more likely if you’re not dead.” Fuller knocked back the shot and turned to pour another. “What’s the rap for attempted murder? Fifteen to twenty?”

“I sure hope so,” Alison said. “That’s plenty.”

“And murder – what, twenty-five to life? I’m fifty-six years old. What difference does it make?”

Alison laughed. “None! You’re finished either way, you bastard! Ha!” In the distance, sirens wailed. Alison stormed across the room, jabbing the finger again. “You hear that? I got you! Admit it! I got you! This is all your fault, and you’re going to pay.”

He swallowed the drink, and handed her the glass, which she took from him simply through twenty years’ habit. As she turned to put it on a coaster on the coffee table, he strolled past her to the dresser.

“You have a point,” he said. He opened the drawer and took out the knife. “Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five. It doesn’t matter what I go down for, really, does it? And that’s assuming I go down at all.” He turned to face her, as the sirens got louder and cars screeched to a halt outside.

Her face fell. “John…” she murmured, backing away. “John, no.”

“My faith in the intelligent detectives of our city may be misplaced. But that’s a risk I’m ready to take.” He stepped towards her. “It’s in my nature.”

*

It had been a crazy-busy couple of months, and Detective Pinski knew he’d been neglecting

Susie. Too many late nights. Too many skipped events and cancelled plans. He cashed in some vacation days and arranged a long weekend in the Keys. Susie loved the Keys.

Check-in was smooth, but the line for security was tiresome. By the time they got airside, they needed a drink.

“I’m going to the powder room,” Susie said, as Pinski took a seat at the bar. “Vodka tonic, please.”

“And for you, sir?” the bartender asked.

“I’ll get a Glenmorangie, thank you,” Pinski said, scooping up some nuts from the bowl.

“I’m afraid we don’t have that. Can I recommend an alternative?”

“You’re out of Glenmorangie?”

“No, sir, we don’t carry that brand at all. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, okay. But they have it at the bar outside – in Departures – right?”

“No, sir. None of our bars carry that brand.”

“They don’t?”

Pinski palmed some more cashews. He gazed at his own reflection in the mirror above the row of liquor bottles.

“I’ll get the lady’s drink while you decide.”

“Sure. Let me think.”

He watched the bartender mix the drink, and as it was placed in front of him he heard clicking footsteps that he knew were Susie’s. She slid up on to the stool next to his.

“Well, this is nice.”

“Yeah.”

“I hope the kids are well-behaved with your mom.”

“Sure.”

“Hello? I’m over here?”

Still staring at the shelves of liquor, Pinski rattled the cashews in his fist, like dice.

“One lie,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry?”

“They don’t serve Glenmorangie at the airport.”

“Hey, get something else. Live a little. We’re on vacation.”

He turned to her, pursing his lips. “Yeah. Listen – let me make a suggestion here.”

“Uh-oh,” Susie said. “I know that look. Wait...”

“What’s so special about this particular weekend – you know? There are flights to the Keys every day and...”

Susie raised her hands, pushing back.

“Oh, *no*, Sammie. No. No, no, no...”