

The Glass House

“R-E-S,” Pat belted out letters with Aretha, “P-E-C-T” as she pulled into the parking spot labeled “Law Librarian” at the Santa Cruz County Building. There weren’t enough employee spaces for everyone who worked in the multistory building, so getting a designated spot just before her thirty-fifth birthday was a serious coup. Pat turned off her car’s engine, suspending Aretha’s anthem in mid-note.

Such a special parking space warranted a special car, and as of a week ago Thursday, Pat owned precisely the right one to fill it. She had turned in her ancient practical Honda and treated herself to a sunburst-yellow Mercedes two-door coupe, a gift to herself for her milestone birthday. The car wasn’t new, but it was perfect—distinctive and her favorite color—and since she had managed to save the \$27,000 it cost, she had a pink slip to go with it. Never mind that her savings account read zero, her ride was worth becoming destitute.

She flipped the sunscreen flap down to reveal a mirror, checked her strawberry blonde hair for strays, and made sure her peachy lipstick didn’t need a touch-up. Satisfied, she flipped the sunshield back up against the car’s ceiling and opened the car door. Pat’s stylish pointed-toe pumps hit the pavement and she slid out of her car, tugging her leopard-print briefcase with her.

She felt life was, if not perfect, at least good, better than it was a few months ago and getting better every day. The parking space and her car helped, but her attitude was hard won after her recent history. It was good she had made so much progress because as she went to work, she had no idea how different her life was going to be by the end of the day, let alone by the end of the month.

It had been eight months since she caught Rick, her long-term boyfriend, kissing “an old friend” he ran into unexpectedly, and almost six months since he had asked her to join him at their favorite romantic date-night restaurant. He said he had something important to ask her. She expected a proposal. What she got was a confession that the old friend was a former girlfriend and that she and Rick had rekindled their relationship. The important question Rick had to ask was her forgiveness for stringing her along while he explored his feelings for his old flame.

She had wished him—them—well. It was a classy thing to do, but she didn’t mean a word of it.

Pat’s best friend, Syda, was the sort of woman who favored getting on the next horse out of the stable to recover from a fall, so when Pat called her with her heartbreaking news, she had bounded into action. She had given Pat one week, a carton of mocha fudge ice cream, and as many tears as she could fit into that time frame before she started pushing masculine finds in Pat’s direction. Each came with the promise that they were a perfect match for a nice rebound romance.

First up had been Syda’s yoga instructor. “He’s single, straight, and gorgeous. Wait till you see his biceps. They’ll make you forget all about that cheating Rick,” Syda had promised. “And he’s so dedicated to his students; you’ll be impressed.”

Pat had made a face like a first grader might make when her mother told her she had to wear her new sensible navy blue rain boots because last year’s ladybug boots didn’t fit her any longer. But Pat had borrowed a yoga mat from Syda, put on cute yoga pants, and allowed herself to be dragged to class. Reluctantly.

“What have you got to lose?” Syda had quizzed on the drive. “Even if you don’t like him, you’ll get your exercise done for the day.”

To any mildly observant person, and Pat was considerably above average when it came to observation, it was obvious the dedicated yoga instructor taught the class in large part because it put him in front of an admiring and ardent—and Pat wagered occasionally pliant—audience, which he could leisurely assess from behind as his students worked on their downward dog.

As it turned out, Pat was not impressed.

Syda’s second choice for Pat’s get-back-in-the-game romance had been the assistant manager of a small trendy food store. Syda had taken Pat shopping and arranged an accidental meeting between her and the assistant manager in the produce department. He was mildly attractive, and Pat loved vegetables. The meeting held some promise until Syda had decided to hurry things along.

“Could you tell us how to pick the best dragon fruit?” Syda asked. “My friend, Pat, who is single, by the way, wants to know if you should squeeze it hard, or just softly.” Syda tittered suggestively.

The assistant manager had turned the color of one of the plump beets stacked in a nearby bin.

Pat had been mortified.

Pat spied him four days after their encounter, not in front of his store, which she was assiduously avoiding for the time being, but in the Safeway parking lot. He was wrangling three grade-school kids into his car, screaming at them the entire time.

Any thought she might have had about a return visit to New Leaf Market—sans Syda—for exotic fruits and vegetables vanished immediately. She knew she didn’t need that kind of drama in her life; besides, she didn’t like men who yelled at kids.

Syda was disappointed. “You’re going to wind up alone,” she warned her friend.

“Right now that sounds good,” Pat fired back. “A rebound romance doesn’t appeal to me.”

Syda backed off and let Pat have some space and time, but she couldn’t resist playing matchmaker forever. Syda’s next scheme had been presented the day before Pat bought her new car.

“Come over to dinner next week—you pick the day—but give me a couple of days’ warning.” Syda thought her invitation had been presented so casually that Pat would never guess she had an ulterior motive.

Pat smelled another set-up. “Why do you need to know in advance?” she asked, trying to entrap Syda. “Usually you invite me over the same day you want to see me.”

“Umm,” Syda had rolled her eyes looking for an explanation, “because Greg volunteered for the swing shift for the next two weeks, and I want to make sure he arranges his schedule so he can join us?” Syda’s voice rose by the time she reached the end of what should have been a statement. She hadn’t seemed to notice, though, and she had smiled broadly. Too broadly, Pat noted, to look sincere.

“Oh,” Syda had added, attempting to act like her request was an off-handed afterthought, “and you might want to wear your green dress.”

“My green dress? The one with the plunging neckline? Just for you and Greg?” a mischievous Pat had asked.

“Well, if Greg rearranges shifts, it may mean trading hours with another team, and he may have to bring a fellow officer along. Greg’s on temporary assignment with an officer whose partner is on vacation like his is. He’s pretty happy about the arrangement because he partnered with the guy when

he was new to the Santa Cruz Sheriff's Department. They've remained friendly. So your green dress might not just be for us."

"What does Greg think about your little dinner plan?"

"Oh, he's the one who thought you should meet his friend. I don't know him exactly; I've only met him in passing, but..." Syda had thrown her hand over her mouth when she realized how much she had said and how badly she had blown her cover story.

Syda's meet-up track record may have been abysmal, but Greg's was untested. In his line of work, Greg had to make quick decisions about people or he could wind up dead. She trusted his people-reading skills much more than her well-intentioned, but desperate-to-play-matchmaker buddy's. Greg was a good guy, too, and likely to be friendly with others who shared his standards. He knew Pat well and cared about her almost as much as his wife did. He also had a bit of a knight-helping-a-damsel-in-distress temperament so, even though Pat had never considered herself in need of rescuing, she knew Greg's heart was always in the right place.

Most importantly, though, Greg had never been that fond of Rick—and wasn't shy about saying so. He got that right, as it turned out, so if Greg thought she and his friend should meet, Pat was sort of willing to accept the dinner invitation. Soon.

"Okay, Syda," Pat had acquiesced, "but not next week. I know you're trying to help..."

"Well, of course I am. That's what best friends do."

"...but I'm fine, Syda. I have a job I love, a cute little house to rent, my dog and cat, and I'm about to treat myself to the car of my dreams. Don't worry about me. I don't need a man in my life to be happy."

"I know that, but it's just that I want everything for you." Syda had spread her hands palms up in explanation.

Pat had grabbed her and given her a hug. "Let me get past my birthday and have a little more time without you trying to fix me up and then, well, we'll see. Full disclosure, though, when I come to dinner, I'm not wearing my green dress."

She bought her car two days later and was contented, even if Syda didn't think so.

Pat turned for one last glance at her gleaming sunshine-yellow car and then walked down the ramp to the lower level of the County Building where the Law Library was housed. As she approached the doorway, the sensor clanked the door open. As usual, she startled at the sound. As many times as she came in this way and as many times as the door had opened for her, the sound it made was always awe-inspiring: castle gates with rusty hinges being parted by armored cavaliers ready to do battle with invaders. It closed behind her with the same flourish.

Pat walked down the long, empty corridor, her high heels clacking on the concrete floor. Some people might have found the entry to the Law Library off-putting. Overhead florescent lights shone too brightly and cast an obviously artificial glow. Pipes strung overhead reminded her that she was in a subterranean place. But the ceiling was high, and she knew the County Building basement was overbuilt and ready to become ground control in the event of an earthquake or other natural disaster. The setting made her feel secure, nestled, and protected.

Halfway down the hall a bump-in with high glass doors announced the Santa Cruz County Law

Library in black and gold lettering. Pat pushed the door open—it creaked, too, but nothing like the building’s entry door—and let herself into the paneled coziness that was the Law Library.

“Hi, Jefferson,” she greeted the assistant law librarian who was just taking his seat behind the intake counter. “Any interesting questions from attorneys that need immediate researching?”

“Not really, Pat. I left one note on your desk, but he said, ‘no rush,’ and your phone’s been quiet so far this morning.” Jefferson busied himself with making sure his showy bow tie was straight. “Oh, but Dick Drinker called. He wants to come by right before we close at noon. He wanted to know if you preferred chocolate or lemon. I told him lemon. Was that a good call?”

It was Friday, the day before her birthday. Pat was sure the lemon/chocolate question was about cake flavors. She had a great relationship with Dick Drinker, the Library Board president, and she would have bet her new car he was going to stop by with some of the other attorneys she helped on a regular basis to sing “Happy Birthday” and present her with a cake.

“You can’t go wrong with either chocolate or lemon cake, Jefferson,” she smiled. “Great tie.”

Pat poked her head into each of the three rooms of stacks which housed over 16,000 massive leather-bound volumes of the law, checking for legals or members of the public who might need assistance before entering her small office, but she and Jefferson were the only ones in the Law Library.

She was happy to have some alone time to enjoy her office. It was fronted with a large window so she could see what was happening in her domain, although the stacks with their books and tables for spreading out while researching were hidden from her view. Originally it came equipped with a standard-issue metal desk, table, and filing cabinets, and an ergonomically correct and functional rolling chair. The walls held pictures of several prominent judges evenly spaced out around the room, all hung a little too high for the average person viewing the photos to meet their gaze. She asked if she could paint the muted white walls a bright color, since there were no exterior windows and no natural light, but was told she couldn’t. It seemed a work-around was in order.

Once she was officially given the title of Law Librarian four-and-a-half-years ago and her weekend key was bestowed, she went to work on the office to make it hers. Pat changed all the lightbulbs to full-spectrum daylight, which helped tremendously. Next she returned the desk and file cabinets to county storage and had some friends help her bring in her inherited grandfather’s mahogany desk. It was massive and much too big for her rental house, but it was just right at center stage in her new office.

She purchased metal filing cabinets off Craigslist and spray-painted them in rainbow hues. She duplicitously explained the colors helped her keep her work organized better, but the truth was that she liked their bright disruption of an otherwise staid environment.

The judges were the next thing she tackled. They got moved and massed on the two end walls of her office. She formed tidy squares with them, each three pictures high and three pictures wide, nine judges per square, just like the number of justices in the Supreme Court. They were visually more accessible in their new locations, and she imagined they enjoyed their proximity.

Her rearranging left the wall behind her desk, the largest wall in her office by far, bare. She remedied that with one of Syda’s paintings: a huge decent-if-not-perfect rendition of Santa Cruz’s surfer statue done in a foreshortened panorama so some blue water from Monterey Bay and the Santa Cruz Lighthouse could be squeezed into the scene. Her office was unconventional for a law librarian’s, but

then she was an unconventional law librarian, and since she was so good at her job, no one minded her improvements.

Pat settled into her seat, plopped her briefcase on her desk, and snapped it open. She reached inside for the two pieces of research she'd taken home with her last night and put them on her desk before putting her briefcase and purse into one of her grandfather's enormous desk drawers. She dialed the number neatly written on the sticky tab on page one of the first report.

"Law offices," a professional, well-modulated voice greeted her.

"Hello, Mark Bellows, please."

"Just a moment."

"Mark Bellows," a deep, friendly voice answered.

"Hi, Mark, it's Pat Pirard. I have the reference you need for your Carson case."

"Thanks, Pat, I'll stop by a little before noon and we can go over it then."

Pat liked the idea of seeing Mark in person. He was tall, bright, good-looking, with a sprinkling of premature gray in his hair that made him look distinguished, and recently divorced. His visits to the Law Library had become more frequent since his marriage ended, and she thought even more frequent after Jefferson mentioned her breakup to one of his firm's paralegals. Gossip in the law community was currency, just like it was in any other bureaucracy, and Jefferson had traded some juicy info about Pat over lunch with a young woman as he tried to convince her to give him first pick from her Jack Russell terrier's litter of pups. No doubt she mentioned Pat's breakup to others, and within a few days, everyone knew Rick was no more.

Pat absentmindedly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and, when she realized what she had done, chuckled out loud. Syda would be pleased to know that Pat was exhibiting behavior widely recognized as interest in and encouragement of the opposite sex.

She turned to the final information request and dialed the number on its sticky note. A very different greeter answered.

"You have reached the law office of Roger Drago and Associates. How may I direct your call?" a woman with a strong New Jersey accent asked.

In her mind, Pat put the woman in a noir movie and saw the receptionist leaning back in her seat with the phone tucked under her chin while she inspected a fingernail that was losing its bright red polish at the tip. Pat knew Roger Drago was a one-man law firm and that his receptionist was his sister, but she played along.

"Mr. Drago, please."

"Drago here."

"Hi, Roger, it's Pat Pirard. I've finished researching that question you had for me."

"You're a doll. Mind if I swing by a little before noon so we can yammer about it?"

"That would be fine, Roger."

Pat smiled as she hung up. It seemed pretty clear to her that cake and attorneys singing was on her day's schedule. With luck, her cake would be a lemon sponge with Meyer lemon curd filling and chocolate ganache frosting from The Buttery.

Her day went by quickly and, as Pat predicted, ended with a parade of attorneys and their staff

marching into the Law Library at 11:45 singing “Happy Birthday.” Mark Bellows motioned her out of her office into the much larger reception area while the song progressed, because there were too many well-wishers to fit in her office.

Also, as she predicted, Dick Drinker carried a sheet cake frosted with chocolate ganache and pricked with thirty-five candles. He sat it on the reception counter and began lighting the candles. It took more than one match to get them all going, and for just a moment, that need made Pat feel like the first phase of her life, the one with youth and goals and the promise that anything was possible, was about to end. But the feeling passed and it wasn’t until Dick Drinker, president of the Library Board of Trustees, ushered her back into her office after everyone left that she discovered how right her hunch had been.

“Thank you so much for the cake and organizing the happy birthday singing party. There were so many people; I’m overwhelmed. You were the one who did that, weren’t you?” Pat glowed with the honor she had just received and from eating a large piece of Buttery cake.

“I was. Pat, we need to talk,” Dick started out simply enough.

For someone she had just thanked for making her so happy, Pat thought Dick looked quite morose. She tilted her head just a bit and asked evenly, “What do we need to talk about, exactly?”

“I think you should take a seat.” He motioned her to her chair and perched awkwardly on the edge of the county-issued metal table. He leaned toward her like a sage father about to have a heart-to-heart with his daughter.

“You know how we all respect you and appreciate the work you do for us. You just saw how much we all love you, too, which makes this so much harder. The Law Library is funded from legal fees and donations from the legal community, and while I’m the president of the Library Board of Trustees, I have much less to say about how this place gets run than you might think.”

Pat listened carefully. Dick wasn’t telling her anything she didn’t already know, and it was concerning that he seemed to need a preamble like he had just given for whatever it was he was about to say.

“The thing is, court filing fees are down and there’s been a lot of pressure on the Law Library budget, and that’s not even counting the employee pension situation that’s barely begun to rear its ugly head. There have been calls to save money any way possible.”

Pat spoke quickly to defend her beloved institution. “The Law Library is mandated. It can’t be cut.”

“No, it can’t, but budgetary cuts are still required. The Board of Trustees decided the size of our Law Library doesn’t warrant a law librarian and an assistant law librarian.”

Pat felt a momentary pity-pang for Jefferson until she realized where Dick’s speech was going.

“Jefferson makes half of what you do, Pat, and while he won’t be as good as you are initially, maybe—probably—he’ll never be as good as you are—you’ve trained him well. He’ll suffice.”

Pat understood how it must have felt to the French Revolutionaries who were deemed by the next wave to have been too lenient, and were shown to Madame la Guillotine for their sympathy.

“You’re firing me?”

“Not firing. Of course, not firing. Firing implies that you did something wrong. You’re being downsized.”

“Semantics aside, I’m being let go?”

“I’m afraid so. I did everything I could, but the Trustees’ vote was four to one. I did get you a good severance package: six weeks. And you have a week’s vacation remaining and sick days. I arranged that you could be sick for the next ten days and have your package start after that.”

Pat swallowed repeatedly, trying not to be woozy. “You aren’t wrong about the sick days. Right now I feel quite ill.”

Dick’s distress was genuine. “I’m so sorry, Pat.”

Pat stiffened her back. “May I keep my key for a few days? I’ll get my things out by…” She had to stop speaking and compose herself. “I have to make arrangements for some help; I’ll get my things out by Wednesday.”

“No, Pat. The least I can do is hire someone to get your desk and file cabinets moved. Shall I have them delivered to your house?”

She nodded silently. Pat opened the desk drawer where she had put her briefcase and her purse. She detached her after-hours key from her key ring and handed it to Dick Drinker. “Don’t forget my painting. I’d take it now but it won’t fit in my car.”

He walked her out. Pat startled one last time as the outside doors boomed and creaked open and closed, rendering her forever an outsider. She got into her car, closed the door, gave him a little wave, and waited until he had gone before she leaned her head against the steering wheel and sobbed.