Syda's voice bubbled over the phone, "Hey BFF, I need you to shill for me tomorrow at the Felton Firefighter Faire,"

"What do you mean?" Pat asked.

"I told you I'm selling my latest triumphs at the faire…"

"Unhuh."

"The smaller garden art stakes are selling well, but the big pieces, the really imaginative ones where I've combined what I learned at the glass class where Garryn Monteith was murdered with my own touches are languishing. You've seen some of my pieces; they're gorgeous. People are stopping and oohing and ahhing, but not reaching for their wallets or plastic."

"And you want me to pretend to be a buyer?"

"Exactly. You know how it works: if people think other people are about to snatch their treasure, they'll decide they better make their move. When you act interested, it will reinforce that they have good taste and motivate them to be decisive even if they're nervous about the price."

"That feels like I'd be conning people," Pat teased.

"It's not conning. It's just a tried-and-true sales technique. I know it works. The vendor next to me makes beautiful leather goods. Her smaller, less expensive things like wallets and credit card holders were selling well, but she was complaining her more expensive purses weren't moving. Yesterday two women were looking at them when a friend for hers came swooping in, grabbed an expensive purse and said, 'Thank goodness no one bought this one yet. I'll take it.' Then she turned to the woman who was holding up another purse and asked, 'Are you buying that one? Because if you're not, I am.' The woman immediately said, 'I'm buying it.' Pat, I can't just be an artist anymore, I have to be an astute business woman, too. Come on. Help me."

"Will I have to wear one of your infamous disguises?" Pat giggled.

"I don't think so, although I do have my blue fedora, a dramatic scarf you can wrap around your neck à la Isadora Duncan, and some oversized sunglasses here if I change my mind. I'm probably going to rule out the sunglasses, though, because there's been an issue with the overhead lighting and it's darker than it should be where my booth is. I'm bringing some lamps from home to help, but if you could bring your tall tripod lamp, that would be great. We'll make artificial sunshine; it'll help sales."

“Okay, Pat the shill to the rescue. When should I get there?”

“The faire opens at 9:00. If you come around 8:30 we can plan how to have you work and it will also give you time to walk around and look at some of the other vendor’s creations. There are some amazing things here.”

“Are any jewelry makers creating things at the faire? Last week I found my grandmother’s gold locket in a box I’ve been carrying around unopened for years. It’s set up to be a pin right now, but I’d love to have it made into a necklace.”

“You’re in luck. There’s a guy near me who has all kinds of gold and silver chains and charms. He assembles things to your specifications. He should be able to mount your locket.”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

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Pat rose early and took Dot for a quick walk. They got back in time to give Tim a kiss—Dot a slurpy lick and Pat something more tender—before he headed off to work.

“I left a bagel for you,” he said. “I’ll be off early today. Technically, I’m not really working, but being a new sheriff’s lieutenant comes with lots of paperwork and I’m still learning some of my responsibilities. When I finish, should I swing by the faire and see if there’s anything you’ve picked out that we might want for the house?”

“That’s a good idea. I have the feeling I’ll need to buy at least one of Syda’s pieces as a show of solidarity. You can help me decide which one.”

It had taken some maneuvering, but Pat managed to get the tripod lamp Syda requested into her car without having to loosen screws and reduce any leg lengths. Getting it out was easier, but walking it from where she found a parking spot to the faire was a bit more complicated. When she reached the broad driveway where the fire trucks would normally leave the station, a pink-cheeked girl dressed in a firefighter uniform, her hair braided and pinned up around her head to keep it tidy, rushed toward her. “Do you need help with that lamp, ma’am?”

“Thanks, but I’ve got it. Can you tell me which part of the station my friend with the glass garden stakes is in?”

“She must be in the section where we’re having trouble with the lights or you wouldn’t be bringing in a lamp,” she smiled. “Go in the main entrance right here and turn right.”

“Thanks,” Pat smiled back and forgave the girl for making her feel so old—she still had a couple of months before her thirty-sixth birthday—with her offer of help and the “ma’am” she used.

Pat saw Syda’s stall as soon as she followed the firefighter’s directions. Her bright garden flowers were backlit by several lamps creating a striking contrast to the illumination of the room.

The floor was clear until Pat reached Syda, but beyond her booth, industrial grade extension cords covered with duct tape to keep them secured to the floor snaked in every direction. Small yellow handmade hazard signs dotted the aisle between Syda and vendors opposite her all the way down the firetruck bay until they reached the next segment of the station where overhead lights did a proper job of lighting the building’s interior.

“What happened to the lights?” Pat asked as she reached Syda and presented her with the tripod light.

“No one knows exactly, but look up. See that light fixture over the last booth opposite me? Yesterday about midday, we stated noticing the light was doing strange things, flickering and finally flashing on and off intermittently. One of the firefighters climbed a scary high ladder to look at it and yelled down that he needed a new bulb so he could replace one of them. By the time he got down the ladder, it had shorted out. It made the whole fixture strobe like crazy. It was like being at a rock concert and we all thought we’d get blinding headaches within half-an-hour.

“No one could find a replacement bulb; the fire chief was upset about that. Some firefighters climbed up again—one of them is my next-booth neighbor’s nephew and she couldn’t watch—and tried to fix it, but they couldn’t make it stop.

“They couldn’t shut down the one fixture without turning off some lights in the row behand us and the plugs in some of the booths. That plunged six of us into semi-darkness.

“Most of us didn’t need electricity for our displays until we lost the overhead lights, but once they were gone, we all did. We improvised with extension cords from the booths that had working plugs and the firefighters and volunteers scoured the station for portable lights. That helped. Most of us said we were okay or would bring additional lighting from home for today if we needed to.

“The only whiner was the guy under the outed light fixture. In all fairness, his booth was really dark, especially in back, but he doesn’t need that much light, anyway. He just needs to shine light on his counter, not his whole booth. I told him his metals would look striking if they were the only part of his booth that was lit up. If he had a few really bright lights to make the gold and silver gleam, he’d have such a dramatic display,” Syda shrugged. “He disagreed with me.”

“He should have listened to you; you’re an artist.”

“Do you think?” Syda’s words dripped with sarcasm. “Cynthia, the volunteer coordinator, immediately offered to refund his full faire entrance fee, but that wasn’t enough to satisfy him. He said he would compare his sales before the outage with what he made after it and expect to be paid for his lost income and time in addition to getting an entrance fee refund. We all think he’s a pain in the neck…”

“You’re too high in the anatomy,” Syda’s next door neighbor vendor said loudly. “We all need shows like this to support ourselves, but this is a charity event, after all, and it’s awful that he’s demanding money for lost time and wages or threatening to sue if the firefighters don’t ante up. He's the only one who knows how much money he made yesterday before the lights went out; I bet he inflates his numbers.”

“He's the jewelry person you told me about, isn’t he, Syda?” Pat asked. “I brought my grandmother’s locket. I’ll make sure to have him make it into a necklace for me. At least I’ll be one sale he won’t be able to say he didn’t make.

“I need coffee if I’m going to be a swooper. Where can I buy some?”

“There’s a food station all the way down past the main entrance. I’m Charlotte, by the way,” the leather goods vendor said. “I need some, too. I’ll walk with you and show you where it is…” she tilted her head quizzically.

“Pat, I’m Pat. That would be great. Do you need anything, Syda?”

“I drank so much coffee before I got here—energizing to make sales—I’m good for now.”

On the way to the food court, Pat noticed there were two additional large rooms with vendors, noted where a bathroom was, and discovered a couple more vendors in the smaller room which housed the kitchen. “Oh, look how cute those birdhouses are, Charlotte. They’re so creative.”

“The older man who makes them is Richard. He’s a regular at these events and I agree he makes sweet birdhouses. Take a look. I’ll order you a coffee and you can buy me one later today.”

“Deal.” Pat stopped at the birdhouse man’s booth. He was reclining in a lounge chair and made no effort to get up when she approached.

“Nice, right?” he called out. He grinned and she noticed one of his front teeth was missing.

“They are.”

“Yep. I had a good day yesterday so I can relax today. Course, I wouldn’t mind a few more sales. I made a good living when I was younger, but after my wife passed, I started drinking and developed a nasty gambling habit and lost everything. Don’t drink or gamble any more, though; joined AA and Gamblers Anonymous and they worked. Have to live on social security now, which is hard, but I’ve owned my house on the San Lorenzo River for years which keeps my taxes low. My family’s all in the ground so I don’t have help, but I make do.”

He was a talker, Pat thought, probably lonely, and seemed to enjoy telling his life story even more than he enjoyed making sales.

“All my materials are found things: driftwood, broken plates, and discards people don’t recognize for their possibilities, so my investment is only my time and I got plenty of that. Turns out I like birds and people so I make houses for my birds and talk to people about them at shows like this. I’m always trying to match people with the right birdhouse. Now you, I think you should have that pink one,” he pointed to one that had caught Pat’s eye.

“It’s adorable, but I have a cat…”

He held up a hand, “No birdhouse for you then, Missy. I don’t want any of my feathered friends eaten,” he chuckled.

Pat and Charlotte took the long way back to Syda, touring the two other rooms full of vendors, seeing the booths behind Syda and Charlotte’s stalls,

and viewing the ten vendors in the smallest room separated from them and beyond the power outage.

As they left the smaller room, a volunteer stationed where the fire station darkened stopped them and said, “Watch your step. There are cords on the ground. We did our best to secure them, but be extra careful as you walk, especially since you’ll be wanting to look at the wonderful things the vendors have to offer instead of your feet.”

Syda had a huge smile on her face when Pat got back. “I think I’m making a sale even without your help. The woman went to her car for her credit card but asked me to hold this stake for her. Yay, my first big sale! I think all the lights shining through the glass is working.”

Pat was only called on to do her “acting interested” routine a couple of times before midday and Syda made six more big sales.

At noon the sound of Beach Boys music began emanating from the top of the stairs that rose from the firetruck bay to a landing above it. A plump man-sized grey rabbit wearing only a surfer shirt that struggled to button above his large tummy waved to the vendors below as he began to hop down the stairs. “Cowabunga, dudes. I have chocolate eggs for you all!” he yelled as he continued his hopping descent.

He missed the bottom step, wobbled dangerously, and came close to spilling the bright foil-wrapped eggs that filled the basket he carried. “I guess this rabbit is too old to hop. From here on, this bunny walks.”

“Even if you’re walking, be careful, Surfer Bunny or whatever you are. Watch the cords on the ground,” a volunteer warning guard positioned before he got to Syda’s booth tittered.

“It’s easier when we have a holiday faire in November and I can be Santa, but then I only have candy canes to give out and I bet most people would rather get a chocolate egg. Cowabunga, Martha,” the jovial rabbit quipped. “You’ve been such a good girl standing here all morning protecting us. Have two eggs.”

Once the rabbit moved into the next room, Pat took her locket out of her pocket. She was about to go talk with the gold chain vendor when all the lights at the front of his booth went out.

“I have to pee,” he proclaimed loudly enough that she, Syda, and everyone within twenty feet of him could hear his announcement. “And there’s no point in asking any of you to cover my booth like you’ve been

doing for each other because none of you have the knowledge of my pricing or the skill necessary to do what I do."

He flipped up a hinged piece at the corner of the counter that stretched across most of the front of his booth and let himself out. Then he stopped at the station next to him and continued to speak loudly to the woman who was selling homemade condiments and dried spices. "You, keep an eye on my wares, will you, and don't let anyone wander off with anything."

"But I…I."

He overrode her. "Thanks," he said as he ambled past her before she could say more and headed in the direction of the food and bathroom areas.

"Royal pain," Charlotte said only loudly enough for Syda and Pat to hear her.

The spices and condiments vendor lamented more to herself than to anyone nearby, "I hope he doesn't take long. I need to use the restroom, too."

"Don't worry, Kristi, go ahead," the woman with the olive products stand across from Syda said, "Doug and I will watch your booth and his majesty's, too. I remember how it was being pregnant even if it was thirty-five years ago. The baby sits on your bladder and you've got to go a lot."

Charlotte took advantage of a shopper lull and came into Syda's booth. "I noticed you eying my navy-blue purse, the one with fringe, and I love this garden art piece," she said pointing out one of Syda's large stakes. "They're similar in price; could we do a trade?"

"I do love that purse," Syda replied. "Okay, let's do it. I'm going to call my husband and have him bring me some more inventory. Put the purse aside and I'll do the same with the stake, but you can choose another piece from the ones he brings me if one of them speaks to you louder than this one does."

"Great."

Syda called Greg, "Pat's bringing me luck. I'm selling big stakes like a madwoman and need more as soon as you can get here with some."

"Syda, I'm getting hungry. Do you want anything from the kitchen?" Pat asked. "And I owe you a cup of coffee, Charlotte."

"I'd like a chicken salad with that coffee."

"Umm, me, too, "Syda said. "Coffee and a salad."

“Anyone else need food? I’m going to the food court,” Pat broadcast her offer.

“Me, if you’re willing,” Debbie from the olive stand across the aisle chimed in. “I had a chicken salad yesterday and it was really good. I’ll have another one.”

Her husband motioned for Pat to come closer. “And if you could, get me a plate of nachos,” he said softly, trying to keep his request quiet.

His wife heard him anyway. “Doug, you know you’re not supposed to eat things like that with your cholesterol where it is. Make it another salad,” Debbie scolded.

“There’s a bottle of basil and garlic olive oil in it for you if you ignore my wife,” Doug laughed jovially. “She’s a chronic worrier who’s trying to ruin my life.”

“What should I do?” Pat looked from one spouse to the other laughing as she pretended to struggle with her dilemma.

“Bring me nachos and a salad and let my wife and I argue about it.”

Pat headed off with her food orders. She was glad she had come; it was fun to participate in a faire with people who were so nice.

She ran into the gold chain vendor just before he left the food area on his way back to his booth. “Hi,” she said, “I’ve been meaning to come by your booth and look at gold chains. I brought my grandmother’s locket with me today to have you make it into a necklace.”

He beamed, “Of course, I can do that.”

Pat reached into her pocket and produced the locket.

“Let me have a look.” He held it up and inspected it. “Ahh, yes,” he said. “It’s a lovely piece. I have several chain choices I think you’ll like that will complement the locket. I’ll take it back to my booth and start picking some out for you.”

As he spoke, Pat detected a strong smell of alcohol on this breath. *Drinking before lunchtime*? She didn’t trust that he wouldn’t lose her grandmother’s locket. “Thanks, but I’ll hold on to it for now,” she held out her hand, “and come by later.”

He stopped smiling and twisted his mouth into a displeased expression as he dropped the locket into her hand. “I charge by the inch for the chain, but make the necklace for free,” he said flatly.

When Pat got back to Syda's stand carrying her orders on a tray the kitchen volunteers had given her, the afternoon crush of shoppers was in full swing. She handed out her purchases and helped Syda talk to potential buyers, finding time to sip coffee, but not to eat her lunch.

She glanced at the gold vendor who sat about half way back in his booth sulking in semi-darkness with only one small light on over his counter doing a poor job of illuminating his products. He looked ghoulish sitting in the darkness and made no attempt to interact with shoppers. Pat was sure he was trying to sabotage potential sales.

The birdhouse vendor appeared in the bay carrying a green birdhouse. "Here ye, hear ye. I'm giving this birdhouse to whoever guesses the number I'm thinking of between one and twenty. If you're a psychic, you can win a birdhouse."

Pat guessed three, Syda guessed twelve.

"No and no," he said. "Sorry dear ladies.

Debbie yelled out "thirteen" and Doug went for twenty.

"Good guesses, but both wrong."

Charlotte's guess was four and the bookseller next to her offered seventeen as her guess.

"Nope."

Kristi returned from another bathroom trip in time to say, "Eighteen?"

"We have a winner," the birdhouse vendor proclaimed. "This lovely birdhouse isn't all that heavy, Missy, but it's awkward for a lady in your condition to wrangle. Let me put it in your booth for you. You take care of your customer—she looks like a buyer for sure—and I'll put it in the back so it won't be in your way."

He took his time positioning and repositioning the birdhouse, stepping back to admire it, and then moving it to another location several times. Syda had a sudden rush of customers and Pat got distracted helping her with them. Richard winked at Pat on his way out of Kristi's booth when he finally left it.

"I think he intended for her to win the whole time." Syda said.

"Me, too." Pat chuckled.

"How are my two favorite ladies?" Greg, almost hidden behind the large flowered stakes he carried, asked as he slipped into Syda's booth.

“We are fabulous,” Syda gushed. “You’re just in time with more inventory. I was getting worried I’d sell out. I don’t think I’ll jinx anything if I give you a quick peek in my cashbox. Look at how many sales I’ve made!”

“You’re too late for lunch, Greg, but I think they’re still selling a few things. Do you want me to get you something?” Pat offered.”

“I’m good. I had something to eat before I left home.”

“Then now that you’re here to help,” Pat said, “and Kristi’s back from a quick break so I don’t have to keep an eye on her booth, “I’m going to take my locket over to Mr. Grumpy—that’s what we call the gold and silver vendor—and get Grandma’s locket put on a chain.”

“You’re going to ruin his day by buying something from him,” Syda snickered.

“That’s my plan,” Pat smirked.

She took her locket out of her pocket, crossed to the other side of the aisle, being careful of the taped down extension cords, and held it out toward the vendor. “I’m ready for you to make this into a necklace. I want it to hit about here.” She pointed to her chest.

He left his perch in the middle depth of his booth and came forward. He took the locket and held it up, studying it and then turned it over a couple of times before he put it down on his counter. “Looks like you’ll need about twenty-five inches of chain, maybe twenty-six. Take a look at this chain and this one over here, and this one might be nice, too.”

Pat held the locket up to the first chain.
“I don’t know. I like the design, but are the gold colors the same? It’s so dark in here, I can’t tell.”

“Let me turn on some lights so you can get a good look at your choices.” He tried to switch on one of the lights he had positioned to the side of his counter, but nothing happened. He tried one on the other side of the counter. Still nothing. “Damn! The plugs must be disconnected again. I tripped over them a couple of times already in the dark and every time I do, my power strip and the extension cord seem to be somewhere different from where they were the last time.”

He turned his back to her and moved to the deep darkness at the very back of his booth muttering as he went. “Where is that damn firehouse extension cord? It’s not enough I had to bring a power strip from home, and

that I think somebody keeps moving it, trying to make my life miserable, but the extension cord has moved, too. The volunteers are going to hear from me about this!"

He plugged his two lights into the power strip and went in search of the extension cord. "It's so dark back here I can't see what I'm doing," he grumbled. "Where is …oh, here it is." He dropped to his knees, held his power strip in one hand and picked up the orange fire station cord with his other hand. Before he could connect them, he started to shake violently.

For a second, Pat thought he was having a seizure, and she realized he was, but not one produced by an electrical misfire in his brain. "Greg!" she screamed.

The volunteer posted nearest the gold vendor's booth could see what was happening and began screaming. Kristi had a clear view of the seizing vendor and screamed, too.

Greg was next to Pat in an instant. He added his voice to the shrieks of the screaming women "Cut the power!" he shouted. He yelled again even louder and more frantically, "Cut the power! Electrocution!"

Kristi started toward the fallen vendor. "Don't touch him!" Greg commanded. He put his arms around her, stopped her before she left her booth, and held her so tightly that she couldn't move.

Drawn by the screams, one of the firefighters had come rushing into the bay. He heard Greg and didn't hesitate before he raced up the stairs the rabbit had descended earlier, taking them two at a time. A moment later the entire firetruck bay was plunged into the deepest gloom, lit only from the light coming into it through the small windows in the firetruck bay doors.

The rabbit—sans his oversized head—, the firefighter who came back down from the space above the stairs carrying a defibrillator, and two more firefighters rushed into the downed vendor's booth. The rabbit bent over the still vendor. His voice was unsteady, "No pulse and he's not breathing."

One of the firefighters ripped open the victim's shirt and yelled "clear" before he pressed paddles against the fallen man's chest. The man jerked and then became still once more. The rabbit checked his pulse and breathing and shook his head. "Again!" he yelled.

The procedure was repeated two more times with the same results. After a fourth try, the rabbit stood up and said, "There's nothing we can do for him. He's gone."

Kristi began wailing, unwilling to be comforted by Greg. “It’s my fault,” she sobbed. “I killed him.”