

*Stephanie Doesn't  
Answer the Phone  
Anymore*

*— R.M. Rhodes —*



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*"Precious things lead  
one astray."*

—*Tao Te Ching*

Stephanie had always told herself that if she got the chance to go to Italy, she would take it, no questions asked. When opportunity presented itself, she took it. Except that it wasn't quite an opportunity, was it? That thought nagged her on the train between Milan and Venice and it cropped up again in the ruins of Pompeii.

She kept pushing the thought out of her head until it caught up with her in Florence. In the process of trying to buy a cappuccino in a small café, Stephanie discovered that all of her credit cards had been cancelled. Even the ones that belonged to her. Luckily, she was in Tuscany. She called Lorenzo with the small handful of euro coins she had left after paying her bill.

Lorenzo showed up eventually, but Stephanie spent half the night being hit on by horny men, accosted by police, trying not to make eye contact with junkies and violating the privacy of several copulating couples. The night ended with a moonlit cruise through the countryside on the back of Lorenzo's Vespa. An odd, high-pitched lounge music was playing in the mini speaker attached to the helmet strap.

"What is this?" she shouted into Lorenzo's empty ear.

“The music. Who is this?”

“Esquivel,” Lorenzo said into the air. He said nothing more for the remainder of the trip, leaving Stephanie to ponder the meaning of the word without elaboration.

Was it a genre? An artist? She almost didn’t care to know.

Instead, she concentrated on holding onto the remains of her luggage, a Louis Voutton bag that was balanced between them like an awkward chaperone. Inside were the most essential clothes bought during that initial trip, along with a Chanel toilet kit and the most beautiful pair of Prada shoes she’d ever seen in her life.

Someone else might have balked at allowing her to bring the Louis Voutton case, but Stephanie knew Lorenzo’s reputation as a clothes horse. Indeed, when he showed, he was wearing a green velour suit with a bright pink tie. His helmet, of course, matched the tie—as did his belt and shoes. Despite his reputation, his scowl at the sprawl of baggage that she’d bought when she first arrived in Milan was enough to make her reevaluate her materialistic choices.

When they got to Lorenzo’s villa, Stephanie was ready to pass out and gratefully followed her host to a tiny guest room. She looked around and said, “Thank you, Lorenzo.”

“It is no problem,” he replied.

She looked at his silhouette in the doorway, watching her. “Don’t you want to know what I’m doing here?”

“Very much,” he said. “Tomorrow, though. Tonight it is very late. You sleep now.”

“Good night, Lorenzo.”

He shut the door, leaving her in darkness.

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Stephanie knew Lorenzo through Armando, her boss (or former boss, depending on how one looked at things), an artist who was famous or, rather, successful enough to need no last name. Stephanie had been answering his phone for five years. In practice, though, she did more than that. She handled a lot of Armando's business affairs, paid his bills, set up shows, arranged for deliveries and did everything else the artist was too flaky to do for himself.

One of her most important jobs was to listen to the Italian poems that Lorenzo left on the voice mail every morning and transcribe them into a useful format so that Armando could use them if and when he needed something extra for a painting in progress. When the process was first explained to Stephanie, she almost decided that the job was simply too bizarre for her to continue doing it. However, that attitude had changed over time and she had grown to love the sound of Lorenzo's voice coming out of the speaker in the morning. The weirdness factor had simply vanished into the slipstream of Armando's plethora of eccentricities.

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When she awoke in the morning, the door to her room was ajar and six cats were perched on various pieces of furniture, watching her. They scattered when she got up, which she took as a good sign.

After a long shower, she shimmied into a Gucci sundress and made her way towards the sound of cutlery on porcelain. She found Lorenzo sitting at a table made from a slab of pale wood, stirring a massive mug of coffee

that was almost a bowl with a handle. As always, Lorenzo was dressed well. He was wearing a pale blue polo shirt, a pair of charcoal slacks and azure alligator skin shoes. In contrast, Stephanie (almost) felt underdressed.

“Good morning,” she said, sitting down at the table.

“Good morning,” Lorenzo said in his familiar voice. “Would you like to drink some coffee?”

“Please,” Stephanie said.

Lorenzo did not stop stirring. “There is a coffee press over there.” He inclined his head in the direction of the counter.

Stephanie made no immediate move towards the counter. “Have you talked to Armando?”

Lorenzo shook his head. “I do not talk to Armando in years. But some bitch from his office calls me to tell me stop leaving messages. I explain that I am an old friend of Armando, but she does not care.”

Stephanie smiled. “That bitch is the reason I left,” she said.

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Virginia, but she calls herself Ginny. As I understand it, she went to college with Armando and, back in the day, he promised her a job when he got famous.”

Lorenzo stopped stirring his coffee. He withdrew his spoon, leaving the brown liquid to continue moving with the locally established Coriolis forces.

Stephanie got up and started making herself a mug of coffee at the counter. “Ginny showed up last month and called in that favor with Armando. And you know how he is.”

“Indeed,” Lorenzo said, nodding.

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"So, after years of loyal service, suddenly this bitch has my job."

"This is unfair," Lorenzo said.

"Tell me about it," Stephanie said. "So I grabbed a handful of Armando's credit cards and came to Italy. I figured I was entitled."

"Everyone should visit Italy," Lorenzo said. Stephanie couldn't tell if he was approving of her decision or not.

"Now none of Armando's credit cards work. She must've cancelled them. Mine, too. That pisses me off. She had no right to cancel my personal credit cards."

Lorenzo sipped his coffee. "How long?"

Stephanie frowned. Unsure about what he was referring to, she just started talking. "I landed in Milan a month ago, but my credit expired yesterday. I don't know how long this whole mess will take to sort out, but I'm hoping it won't be too long." She covered her confusion by drinking her coffee.

"Do you call Armando?" Lorenzo asked.

"Sure," Stephanie said.

"Phone on the wall," Lorenzo said. "Very early there, though."

Stephanie started to move towards the phone and froze almost immediately. She had forgotten about the time zone shift; Italy was several hours ahead of the East Coast of the United States. "I'll call later tonight," she said.

"Very good," Lorenzo said, nodding.

Stephanie spent the rest of the morning walking through the orchard and eventually found herself at the bottom of the hill that the villa rested on, looking at an old barn. The massive building was made of the same crumbling stucco as the villa: where the villa's walls had

been repaired and maintained over the years, however, the barn was obviously abandoned.

She walked around the outside of the building and discovered that a Sopwith Camel had crashed into the right rear corner, caving in a portion of the roof along with most of the rear wall. She climbed up next to the old plane and examined the lines that she only knew from her Snoopy fixation during her early teen years.

From her vantage point on the edge of the wall, where it met the compact pile of adobe dust that had blown against the wall through the miracle of dune-forming wind, she was able to see into the darkness of the barn. Through the shifting shadows, she began to discern shapes—beams, portions of the plane and what could have been a family of feral goats.

The unknown darkness and the murky odor of the still air kept her from descending into the building. Instead, she climbed down through the bright dust and around the corner of the barn back into the quiet, shadowy space between the trees of the orchard. She admired the sunlight lancing through the branches and the dust clouds illuminated by the same.

By the time she returned to the villa at the top of the hill, the sun was high in the sky. Sweaty and covered in dust, Stephanie wandered around the villa until she found a full-length bathtub in a small antechamber. The room had a glass ceiling that was overhung by trees that had wandered from the edge of the orchard.

She started to fill the tub with water and headed to the kitchen. She put a bowl of fruit, a plate of cheese, a knife, a pitcher of water and a glass on a serving tray and carried the whole thing back to the bathtub. When it was

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filled, she stripped off her dusty sundress and kicked it into the corner before climbing into the water to soak the dirt off her body.

Stephanie leaned back in the tub and immersed her blonde hair, sitting up to rinse the dust out of it in one fluid movement. She ran her fingers through her hair to get the remaining dust and water out, then leaned back until she was floating. Her face, hips, knees and breasts broke the surface tension and her pale skin contrasted with the darkness of the water, so much so that a casual observer might have thought about anthropomorphic icebergs and the hidden depths that they implied.

She was sitting in the tub, cutting an apple when she heard someone calling Lorenzo's name. The more she heard the masculine voice, the more familiar it sounded. She was starting to think that it was getting closer to her when a man stepped into the doorway of the antechamber.

"You're not Lorenzo," the man said. He was of medium height and medium build, with mouse-brown hair and a wide, relaxed face that had more than its fair share of laugh lines.

"No," Stephanie said. She bit into the chunk of apple that she had just cut from the core.

"Uhn." The man stood there, staring at Stephanie, obviously trying to collect his thoughts.

Stephanie looked down and noticed that she was sitting half out of the water with her breasts visible above the line of the tub. She looked up and smiled at the man in the doorway. She wasn't sure if she should opt for modesty by sliding under the water or if she should be bold and show off her tits. "You're looking for Lorenzo?" she said.

"Yeah," the man said. "Have you seen him?"

"No," Stephanie said, admiring his poise and ability to maintain eye contact now that the conversation had been engaged. "In fact," she said, "I haven't seen him since this morning."

"Well," he said, "maybe he's sleeping. It's midday, you know. I'll go find him." Something about the way he shifted his shoulders as he exited the frame of the doorway triggered a memory in Stephanie's subconscious and yielded a name.

"Owen," she said.

He stepped back into the doorway.

"It's good to see you again," she said.

He stepped back out of the doorway, reestablishing her privacy.

Owen and Stephanie's father used to work in the same newsroom and Owen had been invited home for dinner from time to time. Owen and Stephanie had developed a cursory friendship during those infrequent dinners and one of the things that initially drew them together was the enjoyment of a good story and the shared ability to spot one on the horizon.

It had been too long since she'd seen him, but she was not very surprised at his appearance here of all places, nor was she terribly confused. She knew to expect an explanation from him, which would probably be good, all things considered. Stephanie smiled and bit into a piece of cheese. She loved a good story.

She stood up in the tub and let the water fall off her body while she ate her cheese. When she felt dry, she stepped out of the tub and wrapped a towel around her torso. She picked up her sundress and dipped it in the

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muddy tub water to get the dust off it, then hung it up on a towel hook.

She picked up the service tray and took it down to the kitchen where she found Owen sitting at the table. "Hello again," she said.

"Nice towel," Owen replied.

"Have you found Lorenzo?"

"Not yet. I haven't checked the garage, though. I'm almost afraid to, actually."

Stephanie frowned. "The garage?"

"Lorenzo's garage is infamous," Owen said. When Stephanie didn't reply, Owen continued. "He has so many clothes that he had to turn his garage into a walk-in closet."

"Really."

"Honest to God. He doesn't really have proper clothes racks, though." Owen smiled.

"Okay." Stephanie remembered Owen's storytelling style well enough to know that he was setting up for some kind of punch line.

"In fact, there have been a few occasions when the clothes have fallen on him."

Stephanie started to laugh.

Owen nodded. "Exactly. Can you imagine a gravestone saying 'Smothered by his clothes'?"

Stephanie kept laughing and Owen joined her for a long moment. Eventually, her mirth subsided and she felt refreshed—like the cleansing that she had tried to accomplish with the bath was finally complete.

"So you figure he's in the garage?" Stephanie asked.

"Communing with his clothes? Maybe." Owen shook his head. "That place is like something out of a Stephen King story. I wouldn't be surprised if he came out and

told me that the clothes had attacked him and stolen his identity."

"Really," Stephanie said, not sure whether to laugh or not. "Why would they take him over? What message would they want to convey?"

Owen shrugged. "Maybe they want to sell the idea of exercise equipment that can transform into a full-service clothes rack."

"That's not a bad idea," Stephanie said, nodding. At a loss, she escaped the conversation. "My dress should be dry by now. I'll be right back." She walked up to the tub room and traded her towel for her damp sundress. When she got back to the kitchen, Lorenzo was talking to Owen.

"Yes, that is something I look for in my exercise equipment," Lorenzo said.

Stephanie walked in and the conversation stopped cold. "So what are you doing here?" Stephanie asked Owen.

"I was in Guyana researching a story and I flew to Geneva when it blew up in my face." Owen put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. "It started when I heard a story about a small group in Tennessee that claimed to worship an avatar from an obscure Venezuelan pantheon. I started researching the group and I discovered that they were part of an older religion that had schismed off sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century and it kind of went from there."

"Which character?" Lorenzo asked.

"An unnamed being fulfilling a role in a desert plane." (Stephanie thought of the Sopwith Camel in the barn and wondered if Lorenzo even knew that it was there.) "He lives in a stone tower that sits next to an empty road and

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he invites pilgrims inside. According to the story, what happens next depends on the traveler. I have no idea how the services went because the entire church burned to the ground during a special Thursday night mass."

"Wow," Stephanie said.

"Was he really avatar?" Lorenzo asked.

"I don't know," Owen said. "No records or parishioners survived the fire, so all that's left is hearsay, which is difficult to believe without supporting evidence."

"What happened to the second group?" Stephanie asked. She also wondered if the avatar had been real and what he'd done to travelers during the services. She also noted Lorenzo's interest in the subject and considered Owen's theory about Lorenzo's garage.

Stephanie was prepared to accept the idea of an incarnated clothes horse as easily as she could a desert sentinel. Through Armando, she had also met a demon, an alien warrior and a sociopath, so she was more open to the idea of mental aberrations being taken to the level of a lifestyle choice.

Suddenly, she realized that Owen had been talking but she hadn't heard a single word. "Can you say that again?"

"What part?" Owen said.

Stephanie flashed a sheepish grin. "The whole thing," she said. "Everything about the second group."

Owen smiled at Lorenzo and shook his head when the Italian shrugged.

"The second group," Owen said, "stayed in Venezuela doing archeological excavations—which stopped when they found the remains of an old emerald mine.

"The trail gets a little random at that point, but

somehow the mine wasn't as played out as they thought it was, so they ended up with a small fortune — which is a good thing, I guess. I'd read about their religious artifacts turning up at an estate in Guyana, which is where I was when the Venezuelans showed up."

"What happened?" Lorenzo said.

"I have no idea," Owen said. "I was just working on the basic research so I could approach the last remnants of the Venezuelan cult with all the information straight in my head."

"They approached you," Stephanie guessed.

"They were well-armed," Owen said.

"But what happened?" Lorenzo said, leaning forward.

Owen shook his head. "It was a whole thing." He was not a coy individual by nature, but he was dramatic and he loved a good story. In fact, the only thing better than telling a good story was throwing out hints until the listeners couldn't wait to hear it.

Stephanie determined to get the full story from Owen at a later date. "So you landed in Geneva," she prompted. "How long ago was this?"

"Two days ago," Owen said. "I rented a car and came straight down."

"How long have you known Lorenzo?" she asked.

"Your father introduced us that time when..." Owen met Lorenzo's panicked look. "...um."

"When mom died," Stephanie said. "It's okay." She looked at Lorenzo and cocked her head. "I didn't realize that Dad knew Lorenzo."

"Yes, well," Owen said. "How is your dad these days?"

Stephanie inhaled and thought about the last time

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she'd seen her father. "He's good."

"And your sister?"

Stephanie laughed. "Caroline hooked up with a married couple, which was just odd, y'know?"

"Knowing your father's lifestyle choice," Owen said, "that is ironic."

Stephanie and her sister discovered that their parents were swingers only after their mother died. When they demanded an explanation for the parade of women who occupied their father's bed for the six weeks following the funeral, those same women sat down and explained the situation to the distraught sisters. Stephanie's parents belonged to a stable group of couples. They were all very close and the women decided to comfort Stephanie's father the best way they knew.

Stephanie and Caroline were assured that it was all over now, though. Their father had elected to leave the group and deal with the pain of loneliness for awhile. That had been five years earlier, and Stephanie had gotten her job with Armando shortly thereafter.

Stephanie hadn't told Owen the story, and she was not willing to probe in an effort to find what he knew or didn't know. It was almost a point of honor. They played the same game in the other direction with the details of how her mother had died. Nobody had ever told her the truth of what actually happened, but she knew that Owen was there when the shit hit the fan.

"What was Father's reaction?" Lorenzo asked. Heaven only knew what Lorenzo knew.

"It's been five years, remember," Stephanie said. "In that time, Dad's become a devout Buddhist."

"How devout?" Lorenzo asked.

"He's celibate now."

"That's new. So how did he react?" Owen asked.

"He offered his blessings. Then we had to talk him out of a trip to Nepal."

Owen laughed. "Yeah. Right now is not the time to head towards that part of the world."

"That's what we said. In the end, we sent him on a walking tour of shrines on the main island of Japan."

Owen chuckled. "So what are you doing here?" he asked her.

"That's a long story," Stephanie said.

"Do you want to see garage?" Lorenzo stood up abruptly, headed out of the kitchen and away through the house.

"You can tell me as we go," Owen said.

So she did.

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That night, unsure whether she was realized that she was dreaming of her memories. Stephanie began to understand Lorenzo's garage. She was standing in the silent villa listening to the books whisper to each other in papery voices on the still air. By that point, she had made several phone calls to Armando's studio, which yielded mixed results at best. Ginny had left of her own accord, which didn't surprise Armando in the least.

"That was my master plan," Armando claimed during the first phone call.

Unfortunately, Armando had no real grasp of anything beyond paint, canvas or brushes. If it wasn't design or color, he simply didn't care.

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Stephanie's systems had been trashed by Ginny, though, and walking Armando through anything was a painful process at the best of times. Adding the filter of a temperamental phone system and attempting to troubleshoot his complicated credit arrangement pushed Stephanie through an entire pack of Owen's cigarettes. Finally, she got disconnected again and decided to let that be the current status of their communications. When Lorenzo asked in the morning, she could truthfully tell him, "We've been disconnected."

Having made that decision, Stephanie stood next to the phone in the library where Lorenzo usually called America from — Armando's number was on speed dial, country code and all — and let herself relax for the first time since she'd arrived on the back of the Vespa the night before. The remains of the last cigarette died in its ashtray and she swore that she heard the rustling of paper, like the ghosts of leaves asking for revenge, redemption or simply to be recycled once more. The longer she stood there, the more of the sound she heard. But she was unable to identify it until she remembered Lorenzo's garage.

Inside the quiet structure on the side of the villa were all of Lorenzo's clothes. Every square inch of the space was filled with clothes hanging off all manner of impromptu racks. Stephanie recognized a shopping cart, a stepladder and several pieces of exercise equipment. There were other odd pieces that might have been sculptures and Stephanie imagined a lost Picasso being used as a clothes rack somewhere in the world.

She stood there, in the silent, warm air and listened to the sound of the walls shifting in the sunlight and the

movement of the clothes as the heated air rose through them. Stephanie almost wanted to accept that the whispering movement was not mere noise. As she listened for a signal, though, she was unable to determine if she was listening to her memories or to the books telling their stories to each other, one word at a time.

There was no discernable transition between her memories of those silent rooms and her dreams of exploring the darkness of the barn, running her hand over the shadowy outline of the ancient plane. Feeling the cracked canvas with the tips of her fingers. Stepping into the brightness of the sun on her face, seeing that bright point abruptly eclipsed. Making out the details of the face.

"Have you seen my cigarettes?" Owen asked. "I swear I left a full pack in the kitchen last night."

"Sorry," Stephanie said. "I think I smoked them all last night."

"So you got through to Armando?" Owen sat down on the edge of the bed.

Stephanie sat up in bed and her blankets pooled around her waist. "Sort of."

"What do you mean? Either you did or you didn't."

"Fine. I got through. Except that he has no idea how to work anything and trying to talk him through anything is a huge pain in the ass. This is why he has a personal assistant."

"So where is she?"

"The one that replaced me stole four paintings and took off."

"And you're here."

"And I'm here."

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“So you have no idea how much longer you’re going to be here?”

Stephanie shrugged. “Somewhere between the amount of time it takes to annoy Lorenzo and the time it takes to help Armando send me a ticket home.”

“That could be years,” Owen said.

“I don’t think it’ll take years to walk Armando through how to wire me money. Then again, we are talking about the man who wanted to fax a painting to Singapore.”

“Sounds like something he’d try.”

Stephanie got out of bed and padded across the room in the t-shirt and panties she’d obviously worn to bed. “Absolutely.” She gathered some clothes from her bag and headed for the door. “I’ll see you in the kitchen,” she said over her shoulder as she walked out.

After breakfast, she offered to replace Owen’s cigarettes. They got directions to the nearest corner store from Lorenzo, climbed into Owen’s rented Citroen and lurched off in a cloud of dust. Cigarettes in hand, Owen offered to buy Stephanie an espresso at the local café to show that there were no hard feelings. She accepted, of course, and they sat in the sun, enjoying the company and their ersatz vacation from reality.

Stephanie found the experience of a rural café to be much different from the urban sidewalks she had grown accustomed to elsewhere in Italy. Instead of trying to relax while the mob bustled past her elbow, she and Owen found themselves practically alone on the street. It was as if population density somehow increased the speed at which people lived their lives—making the small town feel like the entire population was on some kind of extended vacation.

There was no pressure to finish their drinks and leave so that the tables could be filled by newer customers. Instead, the owner of the café seemed to enjoy the novelty of new faces in his establishment. Even the regulars appeared to enjoy—or at least tolerate—the intrusion.

Two hours later, they were at the point where they would have to buy another espresso or leave when Owen cursed.

“What?”

“That guy,” Owen said, nodding down the road at a man wearing a very conspicuous suit.

“What about him?” Stephanie asked. Aside from the fact that he was very obviously a lawyer, she didn’t see any reason to panic. Lawyers could smell panic.

“That guy’s name is Dennis Whocking. He’s the general counsel for the Venezuelans.”

“The guys that tried to kill you.”

“Exactly.”

Stephanie regarded the lawyer, who was now walking up the road towards them. “Must be serious, if they’re busting out with the lawyers.”

“This man is no laughing matter,” Owen said. “A couple of years ago, he was hired by the Cuban government to defend a couple of spies in Miami. The Cubans flew him down and put him up in their best hotel. He was in there for about fifteen minutes before the head of Cuban Intelligence showed up holding his father’s file from when he was in the CIA.”

“That’s bizarre.”

“Call it common courtesy. They smoked Cuban cigars and the guy asked Dennis what it was like to live in Cairo.

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Very odd, right? That kind of thing happens to him all the time."

"How do you know? Where'd you hear that story, anyway?"

"A paralegal in Barbados told me for the price of a drink."

"Listen to yourself," Stephanie said. "You're prepared to believe a drunk paralegal you met at a bar in Barbados?"

"When it comes to this guy, yes." Owen was starting to fidget. "Let's get out of here."

"No way," Stephanie said. "I want to meet him."

"Are you nuts?"

"Here he is," she whispered.

The man stood at their table. "Mr. Otto? Mr. Owen Otto?"

Owen nodded.

Stephanie stifled a smile. She hadn't known Owen's last name.

"And this is?" the lawyer asked, looking at Stephanie.

"Stephanie Coake," she said from her seat.

"Charmed. My name is Dennis Whocking. I wonder, Mr. Otto, if we could talk in private?"

Owen looked at Stephanie with an expression that was equal parts panic and a desperate request for rescue.

"I don't see why not," Stephanie said. "Give me the keys to the car. I'm sure Mr. Whocking can get you home."

Owen's expression went from angry to cold as he handed the keys over and Stephanie knew that she'd pay later.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Whocking,"

Stephanie said as she got up. "I'll talk to you later, Mr. Otto." She walked out of the café and made it all the way to the car before she started laughing. When she drove past the café, Owen was deep in conversation with the lawyer.

Stephanie was sitting on the front stoop of the villa, reading the Decameron when a taxi dropped Owen off that afternoon.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I have become unaccountably rich," he said.

Perversely, he refused to say more until they found Lorenzo in his garage and the three of them were in the kitchen.

"Apparently," Owen said, "Dennis Whocking was hired by the Venezuelans to sue them on my behalf."

"Who is Dennis?" Lorenzo asked.

Owen brought Lorenzo up to speed on the results of the cigarette expedition and went on to explain the meat of his conversation with the lawyer. "It's basically a tax dodge," Owen said. "I sue them, their lawyer takes a percentage for representing both sides. It's a very nice little system, actually."

"You went along with it?" Stephanie said. "That's money laundering."

"Certainly it is," Owen said. "And I got paid a nice fee to help them out."

"Plus you have material for your article."

"I dunno about that," Owen admitted. "Between the lawyers, guns and money, I'm thinking of dropping the whole thing. I never even got close to the group and look what happened. Could you imagine what kind of trouble I could get into if I really started to pursue the story?"

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"I couldn't imagine the trouble you're already in," Stephanie said.

"What now?" Lorenzo asked. To the point, as always.

"Well, hell," Owen said. "I'm going to Amsterdam to unwind. I figure I'll buy Stephanie a ticket home while I'm at it."

"Excuse me?" Stephanie said. "You're actually thinking of going to Amsterdam without me?"

"I didn't know if you wanted to go," Owen said.

"I'm the biggest pothead you know," Stephanie said.

"That's true," Owen agreed. "Good, that gives you something to do..."

"When are you leaving?" Lorenzo asked.

"Tomorrow, probably. I have to use the phone for a bit—to transfer the money around, buy the tickets, that sort of thing."

"Certainly," Lorenzo said. "The phone is this way."

Stephanie went back out to the front stoop so she could return to Boccacio's world.

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They got on the road the next morning, Owen driving his rented Citroen upcountry to Milan, where he returned it to the rental agency. Their flight out of Milan would leave in the early afternoon and they would be in Amsterdam by dinnertime.

On the way to Milan, they agreed to trade stories, one for one. By the time they arrived at the airport, Stephanie shared the full story of Armando's new personal assistant, along with highlights from Stephanie's travels across Italy.