

**WWJLD?**  
**By Linda D. Brewer**

Nora never really knew how she got to work every day, only that she floated on the music of Palestrina while she drove, and at the end of every day she knew she must have driven with care because she never had an accident. When the Credo ended she would find herself in the farthest, cheapest region of the parking lot behind the football stadium. From there she walked a mile along the path under the big maple trees, and crossed the mossy stone bridge that went straight over the street to the fourth floor of the medical center. She was inside the building, but she wasn't "there" yet. She walked down a flight of concrete stairs to the third floor, the main floor, and then her journey really began.

On the Monday morning she did the same, but it wasn't the same.

Someone had painted "Lives destroyed here!" in the stairwell. Nora thought whoever had painted the words sounded like a potential killer him or herself from the look of the jagged letters and the blood-red paint. She enjoyed using that stairwell. It scared her to think that someone else had been here and profaned it. Usually she continued right on down, one flight after another, to the basement, but that morning she decided to detour along the shiny third floor hallway to the main lobby, in case the spray painters were still in the stairwell. She knew many routes, to and from the lab.

When she entered the lobby she saw—or rather her feet felt, and then her eyes saw—that the beautiful blue patterned carpet was missing. She crossed the lobby, her shoes tapping loss on the hard floor. The lobby receptionist, a woman Nora had known for years, said, "They stole it, can you believe it? Four guys came in in blue jumpsuits on Friday and said they were taking it to be cleaned, and they rolled it up and went away with it, and then we realized nobody had ordered it to be cleaned in the first place." She was upset about the rug, Nora could tell. It might have been her favorite part of the building. Nora hugged her and said, "I'm so sorry." The woman, whose name Nora could not remember—though she remembered the Youth Dew cologne—looked surprised and said, "Thanks."

Nora hurried on along the third floor hallway until she came to a small, inconsequential-looking door on the left side next to a drinking fountain. She took a sip from the drinking fountain as usual, and then opened the door, not all the way, and slipped through into another stairwell. This stairwell had no spray painting in it, and she felt happier than she had since she'd entered the medical center. She went down to the basement, and out another drab little door, then down another hall that ran parallel to the front of the building. Ductwork and pipes loomed overhead in a comforting way. The light was dim and the air had an appealing, almost fragrant odor of dust and privacy. A light shone through a window in a door at the end of the hall. That was the lab, where the work benches and equipment were and where the rats lived in their tidy cages. Her own office, and Dr. Hertford's, was a few steps closer. She always felt an urge to run at this point, to get to her desk and get to work, and she always made herself walk those last

few steps as an exercise in self-discipline.

She was just putting her key in the lock when the quiet air shivered. She heard music coming from the little stainless steel elevator that ran directly down from the hospital region of the medical center. Most of the people who used the elevator turned right upon leaving it, pushing their guerneys toward the back of the building, to the morgue. It was their job, their route. Nora never took the elevator, but other people did. Dr. Leadpants, as Nora called him, always took the elevator because he could not find his way through the stairwells and hallways. Rem, her co-worker, also took the elevator because he was always running late.

Nora heard the elevator door open. She turned and walked toward it, the back of her neck prickling with apprehension. A man in a red coat came out of the elevator playing a pennywhistle in a distracted manner. He looked at her and waggled his eyebrows. Nora made a sound she had never made before, a kind of growl that came from someplace inside her she hadn't known about until that moment. The man said, "Hi. I have a gift for you."

"Get back on the elevator," Nora told him. It was hard to speak—her heart was pounding. "Go up to the top and follow the signs to the next elevator over. Take that elevator down to the lobby. Go." She thought that if he didn't follow her instructions she would have to use force to make him go away. She had a Swiss Army knife in her purse, but the blades were hard to open. The corkscrew feature was easier, but not a daunting weapon.

The man said, "Hold it a sec." He took a gift-wrapped package from his coat pocket and held it out to her at arm's length, as if he knew about the corkscrew and felt a twinge of fear, maybe three on a scale of one to ten. Nora didn't take the package, so he set it on the floor. He said, "It's from your friend Rem. Don't shoot the messenger." He tootled a few notes on his penny whistle and stepped back into the elevator. Nora waited until she heard it stop on the fifth floor before she picked up the package. She saw Rem's handwriting on the card, his stylish jagged letters. He had given her a gift a couple of months earlier, a Bollywood DVD. Nora had only watched ten minutes of it, but she'd thanked him and said it was delightful, not to hurt his feelings. She realized the man in the red coat was a special gift delivery person and she hoped Rem hadn't paid him much for the service.

She liked being the first one in the office. Let there be light, she always thought as she switched on the overhead fluorescents. There was her neat L-shaped desk and a few feet away was Rem's desk. The desks were separated by two file cabinets, each with a potted plant on top. Across the room were the two inner offices, the big one for Dr. Hertford, the smaller one for visiting researchers. Dr. Jodhpur Leadpants, which was not his real name—Nora couldn't pronounce his real name at first, and then when she learned it his nickname was lodged in her brain—had finished his stint the previous Friday and was on his way to England, although he was originally from India. She opened the door of his office. There were the desk, bookshelf, and file cabinet that were always there, waiting to be used by someone else from some far-flung place. He had left his electric teakettle with a sticky note on top. "Please use as you like." Nora

hoped the next person would be as nice as Dr. Leadpants, who had only laughed when she once called him by the wrong name.

She unlocked the door of Dr. Hertford's office and turned on the lights. That was all. She never loitered or tried to tidy his desk. She respected him too much for that. A genius did not have to worry about being neat.

The big wall clock thumped one minute past eight o'clock. She put the package on her desk and wondered if she should wait until Rem got there to open it—but he must have wanted her to open it now, sending it by tootling messenger. She unwrapped the box and found a red coffee mug and a package of chai tea. She had never had chai. Its smell reminded her of Dr. Leadpants, who had often drunk it. The card said, "Love and a hug 4ever! Enjoy! Rem."

Nora loved Rem. She loved him not just because of the gifts, but because they had certain things in common, such as a dread of bedbugs and a love of bargains. They were both good spellers. He quipped about funny misspellings he found in the manuscripts he edited—one manuscript in particular, that of Dr. Howe, was chockfull of flubs--and Nora laughed at his quips and egged him on.

Rem was gay. He had a slim physique that felt good when she hugged him, and he always hugged her back. She worried that he was lonely, a gay man almost fifty years old. They kept telling each other that they wanted to be each other's flower girls at their weddings, but neither of them had ever married.

Dr. Hertford came in and said "Hello, Nora. How are you?" She said, "Very well, thank you," as she always did, and he said he had another chapter for her to chew on. He was writing a book based on his research in neurochemicals and their effects on behavior. The chapters were full of scientific terminology—she had to listen carefully to his dictation and scrutinize her work afterwards.

Thinking—real thinking, Dr. Hertford's kind of thinking—was not her strong suit, Nora knew, but when she worked on his chapters she tried to understand what she was typing. She had learned that miniature chemical reactions took place in the brain every moment, stimulating areas that governed love, fear, disgust, kindness, even habits like gambling or praying. Dr. Hertford was trying to link every neurochemical with the behavior it stimulated. Nora wanted her work to help him win the Nobel Prize, which she felt he deserved. Sometimes she found what appeared to be an error in his dictation, but most of the time it turned out not to be one. The first time it happened, and she found that she had made the error, she wanted to turn off the computer and walk out of the building, but Dr. Hertford talked her out of it. "We all make mistakes. My experiments don't always work. They're like paths in the wilderness. Sometimes a path gets you where you want to go, but sometimes you end up way the heck off somewhere else. But that other place might also be interesting. Nora, you help me just by showing up every day and doing what you do." She knew he could see tears prickling her eyes. "Don't let a few

mistakes stop you. We'll get there." The next day he gave her the boxed set of Palestrina and she began listening to it in the car. Palestrina lifted her out of herself. At first she found it unnerving, the music's effects on her mood, but now she didn't think she could get to work without it.

She was checking her previous day's work for any overlooked errors when Dr. Hertford returned. He had a private side door in his office that opened into the lab. Usually Nora heard him slide it open, but not when she was concentrating on a task. "Where's Remington today?" he asked. Nora looked at the clock. It was nine-thirty. She checked the calendar, knowing even before she looked that Rem had no vacation days coming up.

Her phone rang. Rem said, "Hey, little buddy."

She said, "Thank God. Where are you? Are you sick?"

Rem said, "I'm not sick, I'm well. I'm in New York at the airport. We're going to London."

"But—you're going to miss work," Nora said.

"I'm not going to miss it." Rem laughed.

Nora said, "What? How can you not?" Then she thought of the right question. "Who are you with? Who's 'we'?"

"Jaya and I are going to London to visit his family, so I can meet them and they can meet me. I left Dr. Hertford a letter." Nora glanced at the plastic rack on the wall outside Dr. Hertford's door and saw a business letter sticking out of it.

"How soon are you coming back?" she asked.

"Honeybun. Never. I'm done with the medical center and all its sights and smells. I have ridden down in the elevator one too many times with a dead body on a guerny and an orderly who's grooving to his music, meanwhile you can see toes sticking up under the sheet."

"You could take the stairwells. I could show you six different ways to get here."

Rem laughed. "I don't want to learn different ways to get to work. I want to run free before I get any older."

Nora frowned, trying to think. "So you and Dr. Leadpants are an item?"

"Nora. Please."

She blushed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I made fun of his name when he first came here. He really is a sweet person."

"I participated in that dark episode myself. Let's forget it happened."

"Thank you for the mug and the tea."

"Drink up. And you get out while you can. The world is actually bigger than the medical center. I'll send you adventurous thoughts. I'm going." He hung up.

She had planned to tell him about the stolen carpet, and laugh about how she'd thought she might have to fend off the pennywhistle man with a mini-corkscrew. She remembered with a sense of shame that not long after Dr. Leadpants arrived Rem told her he was in a quandary. Should he socialize more with people from work, or should he keep his work and social lives separate? Nora had thought he was talking about her. Glancing at the newcomer's door she had quipped, "WWJLD?" A couple of days later when she had made the same remark in respect to formatting a hormone chart, Rem had said, "Let's not do that anymore. It's not respectful." She had blushed all day over that misstep and now she blushed again.

Dr. Hertford always ran on the treadmill in the hospital gym at noon. He stopped at her desk, gym bag in hand, and said, "We'd better get a temp for Dr. Howe. He'll throw a fit if we don't." He was wearing his favorite blue plaid shirt, the one he had fashioned a second pocket for out of a piece of red corduroy. He'd done the same thing with most of his other shirts, so that they had one neat manufactured pocket and one on the other side that looked as if a differently-abled child had stitched it. Thinking of him sewing those pockets, squinting over his needle and thread, made Nora feel protective of him.

Dr. Howe, a retired professor of family medicine who was writing a book about how to use pressure points to change bad habits, came in shortly afterward with his scribbly pages in a manila envelope. Rem had typed and retyped the book for the past six months, and every week Dr. Howe brought in pages that looked exactly like the ones he had just done. Nora said, "I'm sorry, Dr. Howe. Rem is no longer with us."

"That's unfortunate. What did he die of?" Dr. Howe asked. He wore a red bow tie and a tweed jacket. He had been a well-known osteopath about town in his day. Nora suspected incipient dementia in his obsession with pressure points, but he had leave from someone in administration to keep on until his project was finished.

"He's alive and well. He went in search of greener pastures," she said.

"You can work on it in your spare time," Dr. Howe said. "If you can decipher Hertford's nonsense, mine should be a breeze. Plus you might pick up some practical tips from my manuscript on improving your life."

Nora thought of the corkscrew, but let the remark pass. She said, "I'll call personnel and have them send us someone to replace Rem. It'll just take a couple of days."

Dr. Howe looked at the manila envelope. "It's all here, this time. If you press the trigger point behind your ear, you can overcome your fear of flying. Did you know that?"

Nora nodded. She wanted to tell him that he didn't deserve to use the same office space as a brilliant researcher like Dr. Hertford. She said, "Just leave it on Rem's desk and I'll get personnel to send someone down."

He stood there smiling at her over his bow tie, and she saw that he was waiting for her to make the call right then, so she did.

This time she would behave in a professional manner from the very first—no inappropriate jokes, no insensitivity to a la poor Dr. Leadpants. She would be alert to nuances and let the new person teach her how he or she wanted to be treated.

Two days later a woman came through the door at nine-thirty, when Nora was deep into a dictation on oxytocin. She said, "Is this the office that needs a temp?" When Nora nodded, she said, "Thank God. I thought I'd never find it. I've been walking around the building for an hour. I was about to call 9-1-1."

The woman's name was Kitty Landell, which made Nora think of a movie actress of the fifties, the kind of actress who only made B pictures, but she didn't look like an actress. She was wearing a baggy gray coat and terrible black glasses that perched on her nose. She wore scuffed white athletic shoes and carried a large shopping bag. Nora felt a twinge of dismay, and then reminded herself that it took all kinds, and this woman could probably teach her certain gritty truths.

"Is there a restroom? I need to change," Kitty said.

Nora started to give her directions to the best restroom, only a three-minute walk away, but Kitty said, "It took me an hour to find this place. I don't want to get lost again." Nora put her in Dr. Leadpants's office and went back to her desk, trying not to hear the sounds of clothing being changed. A few minutes later when Kitty emerged she looked more like her name. She was wearing a silky dress striped in red and black, and red, high-heeled shoes. Her hennaed hair hung down her back in a mass of curls. The glasses were gone, and she had put on perfume. Nora decided they were about the same age, closing in on forty, though she had to admit that Kitty seemed to be approaching the deadline with more flare.

She settled Kitty in Rem's desk and showed her the phone and the computer and the file cabinet. "We don't have any visiting researchers right now, so mainly all you have to do is type Dr. Howe's manuscript and answer the phone. It doesn't ring very often. I'll think of other tasks to

keep you occupied until another researcher arrives.”

Kitty said, “I’m so glad I finally found you. You’re so nice, you make it all worthwhile.” She spoke in a low, breathy voice, as if she were imitating Marilyn Monroe. She fished in the bottom of her shopping bag. “I brought a few knick-knacks. I hope it’s okay to decorate.” She put a photograph of herself on top of her computer—or half a photograph. It was obvious she had cut the other person out of the picture. She stowed a box of diet cupcakes in the bottom desk drawer, along with a cosmetics bag. Her coffee mug bore the slogan, “You rock!” “Okay,” she whispered to herself. “Let’s get to work.”

Nora entered a special zone when she worked on Dr. Hertford’s chapters, and Rem sometimes had to remind her to eat lunch, or even go home. Today the zone eluded her. She kept hearing sounds from Kitty’s computer that made it obvious she was not using it for work. At one point she heard the tinny music that signaled a successful game of free cell and she said, “Kitty. Dr. Howe will be coming in with more of his manuscript tomorrow morning, so you’d better get today’s pages in the computer.” Kitty said, “Whoever had this desk before me left the game unfinished. I just wanted to wrap it up.” Nevertheless she took the manuscript out of the folder and began to look through it.

A moment later, before Nora had even found her place again, she said, “Are there any good men left anywhere?” Nora looked up, and that was enough encouragement. Kitty told her that her husband (“ex-husband-to-be, I should say.”) had ridden his motorcycle over Kitty’s foot “accidentally on purpose” and broken her big toe. “The nail won’t grow back right. Do you know anything about toenails?” She extended her foot as if about to take off her shoe and reveal her disfigurement.

Nora told her that maybe Dr. Howe would be able to suggest pressure points for her problems, and felt a twinge of guilty pleasure. If Rem hadn’t left she could have told him what she’d said, and they could have chuckled about it, or at least exchanged meaningful looks. She reread the paragraph she’d been working on and found she had made a mistake.

The phone rang. Kitty stared at it. Nora motioned for her to answer. In a strained falsetto voice Kitty said, “Dr. Hertford’s office,” only she pronounced it “Hurtford” instead of “Hartford.”

She hung up. “It was a wrong number,” she said in a defensive tone of voice. Nora reminded her of the correct way to say Dr. Hertford’s name. “Like the capital of Connecticut.”

“I’ve never been east of the Mississippi,” Kitty said. Shortly after that she removed a cupcake from the drawer and ate it, sprinkling crumbs over the keyboard.

Dr. Hertford met her when he came in from the lab. She said in a flirtatious voice, “So you’re the professor with the funny name.” He said, “Lowell?” and she giggled, although Nora didn’t think she’d understood his joke. Kitty said, “I’d love to take a tour of your lab some time.”

Dr. Hertford looked surprised. He said, "Research isn't a spectator sport." He ran his hand through his hair, making it stick up in the back. "I'm off," he said to Nora. He grabbed his gym bag and went out the door.

"He's kind of cute, in a nerdy way," Kitty Landell said. "Not great social skills, but he's smart, he could learn."

Nora turned up the car radio on the way home. She tried to float away on the "Miserere Nobis," but she felt too miserable.

Dr. Howe came in around eleven the next morning and went over his manuscript with Kitty. Nora could tell he was trying to convince her of the rightness of his ideas, as well as the format he required. Kitty said, "You can improve your self-esteem just by putting your hands on your hips and raising your chin? Really? I never heard of such a thing." Dr. Howe said, "I hope you're worthy of your hire. The other fellow was top notch, really perceptive. I'm not convinced you have what it takes." After he left, Kitty said, her voice thick with feeling, "Where's that bathroom again?"

Nora said, "Go straight across to the other side of the building. There's a bathroom by the door to the morgue. It's unisex."

Kitty hurried away, her high heels clattering on the concrete floor. When she came back her face was red, the front of her dress spotted with water. She said, "It's horrible. I don't know how you can stand being down here with all those--." She inhaled and made a face. "Ugh. I can still smell it."

Nora didn't bother to tell her that the morgue—the whole floor, including Dr. Hertford's lab and office—was kept squeaky clean, and smelled much better than Kitty's perfume, which contained notes of bug spray. She'd had to take a shower the previous evening, to get it out of her hair. Kitty walked around the room, opening file cabinets, examining the books on the bookshelf, and picking leaves off Rem's philodendron. When she had calmed down she sat down in front of the computer and whispered, "Right. Work smart." Nora heard the free cell theme song again. Rem had played free cell sometimes, but it was fun when he did it, a secret between them. When Kitty played it was just irritating.

At noon Kitty begged her to show her the way to the cafeteria "just this once." When they got there, Kitty said, "Please stay and eat with me. I'll buy you lunch because you're so nice." There was a desperate edge to her invitation that made Nora want run back to the office to eat her snacks in peace. She said, "Okay, just this once." Kitty patted her arm. "I'm so glad we have so much in common. We're going to be good friends, I can tell. I was dreading going to an office where I wouldn't like anybody. You're an absolute doll."

Once again she told Nora about Alfred, and how he had chopped down her favorite tree in



a fit of rage because its leaves were clogging the gutter. Nora asked her what kind of tree it was. "Alder or crabapple, one of those. It was very pretty, is all I know. It grew right next to the house. If I opened the bedroom window I could literally hug it." She plunged a forkful of tuna salad deep into the cavern of her mouth and said, chewing, "Will you please eat that cracker? You're driving me crazy, nibbling on it like that. You're like a little mouse."

Nora tended to eat around the edges of things when she was nervous. It was a habit she'd had since she was a child and hadn't been able to break. She bit the cracker in half and put the halves on the side of her plate.

Kitty said, "You're trying to make me feel fat. What you do weigh, eighty pounds? You really are a little mouse."

"A hundred and six," Nora said, and immediately regretted revealing such personal information. She said, "Let's retire the mouse analogy for awhile."

"You should wear moss green," Kitty said around another mouthful. "Get rid of everything pink in your closet. Buy moss green and heather brown. You could get away with steel blue, but not gray. I can't wear any of those colors myself. I have to wear bright shades because of my eyes."

Her eyes looked like most peoples' eyes to Nora. They were brown and round and outlined with too much black eyeliner. Kitty said, "Alfred used to call me his gypsy because of my dark eyes. He could be sweet. Then other times I'd come home and he'd start barking orders. Close that window, it's freezing in here, when he could have closed it himself. Bark, bark, bark, all because he had lost his job and didn't feel like a real man."

Palestrina had to work harder to get Nora home that evening, and although he lifted her spirits she knew it was heavy lifting and she felt sorry for him.

Kitty had a harsh, reflexive laugh, but Nora didn't think she had a sense of humor. She couldn't spell, so finding amusement in spelling errors wasn't an option. Checking her work with her on Friday, Nora saw that Kitty had let the word 'butlock' remain in Dr. Howe's latest chapter.

"It's 'buttock,'" she said, a comradely smile on her lips.

"No, it's not. He's got 'butlock' all through here." Kitty yawned.

"A part of the body? The thing you sit on?"

Kitty blushed. "I'm not an anatomy nerd like you. I've always worked with people, not body parts. I used to be in cosmetic sales and I was good, really good. I won a trip to Vancouver once."

Nora said, “Nice, but,” and waited while Kitty searched and replaced all the ‘butlocks’ with ‘buttocks.’

“Good. That’s better,” she said.

“You’re a perfectionist, you know that?” Kitty said. “I could see that the minute I met you, the way you dress and speak. I’m worried about you. I don’t want you to develop OCD or whatever.” She smiled into Nora’s eyes. “The thing you’ll learn about me is, I care.”

It rained all weekend, a heavy cold rain that kept Nora in and lowered her spirits, despite a sweaty session on Saturday evening with her exercise DVDs. On Sunday afternoon she called Rem’s cell phone and left a message. “Hi. It’s Nora. I hope you’re well and having fun. I miss you. Thanks for everything. Goodbye.”

The calls started on Monday morning. Kitty, who hadn’t magically disappeared over the weekend, picked up the handset and said, “Dr. Hurtford’s office,” then shot Nora a glance and mouthed “Oops.” She listened a moment and slammed the handset down.

“It’s him,” she said.

Nora finished typing the word ‘estrogen.’ “What’s that?”

“He said, ‘I’m looking for you.’ I’d know his voice anywhere. Bark, bark, bark.”

The phone rang again. Kitty pointed at it and shook her head.

Nora picked up her handset and said, “This is Nora. How may I direct your call?”

A man’s voice, a hoarse tenor, said, “Yeah. Is Kitty there? Kitty Landell?”

“Which department are you looking for?” Nora said.

“Yeah, I get it. Just tell her I love her and I want to see her. In a neutral public area, tell her, not in a private space. I get that.”

“I’m sorry. You have the wrong number. Please try directory assistance.” Nora hung up. Alfred sounded more like a whiner than a barker to her.

The phone rang again and she snatched it up but it was only Dr. Hertford’s dentist’s office calling to say he was due for a cleaning. Nora took the message almost absent-mindedly and put the note in the rack beside his door.

Kitty had brought her own lunch—two turkey sandwiches, a mound of carrot sticks, and

two apples. She spread it out on a cloth napkin on her desk. "So, does Dr. Hurtford have a loving wife at home?"

"Hartford," Nora said. "Like the city in Connecticut."

Kitty said, "Right," making ferocious eye contact. "I brought enough for two people, so we could eat together. It's all healthy like I know you like. I pay attention to peoples' likes and dislikes."

Nora took her purse from her desk drawer. "That's very thoughtful of you, but I have to run an errand. I'll be back soon. Enjoy your lunch." She fled down the hall to the lab and slipped inside.

It was warmer in the lab than in the office. She picked a vacant corner and pressed her back against the wall, listening for the clatter of Kitty's high heels. What she heard instead was Palestrina. The rats were singing, standing up on their hind legs, lifting their snouts to heaven, hitting the notes perfectly in their high, clear voices. "Gloria," they sang, swaying with the music. "Glory Be." She felt faint. She pressed the back of her head into the wall and closed her eyes. When she looked at the rats again they were merely sniffing and chewing, being normal rats. The music was coming from a CD player on a shelf above the habitat. She left the lab and wandered along her favorite side hall until she came to her favorite vending machine, tucked into an obscure alcove. She bought a packet of fig bars and ate them, staring down the long concrete trail back to her office.

The phone was ringing when she returned to the office and Kitty was ignoring it. Nora answered it and there was Alfred, pleading. He said, "I'm in the lobby. Just give me a clue where you are. I just want to see she's okay and be on my way. I need closure." "I have work to do," Nora said. "Stop calling or I'll contact the police."

"Bitch," Alfred said.

"God, you're harsh. I didn't know you could be harsh," Kitty said. "I've been thinking, maybe we could join the gym together. I need to get back in shape if I'm going to start dating again."

"Which gym?" Nora asked.

"Any one. Take your pick. We could be workout buddies."

Nora saw herself and Kitty trotting on treadmills, side-by-side, sprinkled with each other's sweat. She saw them going into the locker room together, the shower room. Was Kitty gay? But she was married to Alfred--and being gay was fine if you loved another gay person. Look at Rem and Dr. Leadpants. Kitty was the one who was barking, barking up the wrong tree.

She said, "I'll get back to you on that."

Dr. Hertford came in just then. He said, "Hi, ladies," in his shy way.

"Here comes the smartest man in the building," Kitty said. "Genius at work!" She uttered her machine gun laugh.

Dr. Hertford ran his hand through his hair and opened his mouth, but nothing came out and Nora had to admit that at that moment he looked far from smart. He retreated to his office.

Kitty said, "Whoever had this desk before must have been a religious nut. Look." She held up a batch of fake business cards that said simply, "WWJLD?" They were the cards Nora had printed at the print shop for Rem, before he fell in love with Dr. Leadpants, back when they were first joking about the poor man's name.

Nora said, "I'll dispose of those." She took the cards and put them in her pocket. The cards were a reminder that she was capable of thoughtless cruelty, and they were a reminder that Dr. Leadpants had often been kind to her. On the anniversary of her mother's death, when she had been feeling low, he had stopped by her desk and said, "I whatever is troubling you will pass. You deserve a happy life."

A few minutes later Dr. Hertford came back out and said, "Kitty. That wasn't very nice of me. I'll show you around the lab now if you have time."

"All the time in the world," Kitty said. She jumped up from the desk and clattered along beside him. She didn't actually take his arm, but Nora knew she wanted to.

Kitty came back ten minutes later, flushed and bright-eyed. "He really does love his work, doesn't he? All those chemicals—Lord! He needs to get a life. I could help him with that, if I cared enough to get involved."

"His work is his life," Nora said.

Kitty smiled. "That's what they all say. They don't really mean it."

Nora could barely look at her, she was so angry. "All?"

"Some. Most. You need to shake up people like that. I'm good at it. Alfred was in a rut when I met him. I shook him out of it. Now he can't forget me."

"And what do they do after they're shaken?"

Kitty shrugged. "We're all adults. Adults figure out how to deal with change, or they should."

Nora saw how a fling with a quiet hard-working man like Dr. Hertford would be a diversion for Kitty, a toy to bat around for a while and then leave gathering dust in a corner. For Dr. Hertford it would represent a catastrophic disturbance of his system. She said, "Please leave him alone." Kitty said, "I'm just throwing it out there. It's girl talk. I'm not plotting some thought-out strategy. I get bored. My mind gets all kinds of ideas, is all."

Nora said, "Some ideas aren't worth having."

The next day Kitty wore a black sweater dress with simple gold jewelry and a subdued make-up color scheme. Only her hair, piled a little too high on her head, hinted at how easily it could be let down. Dr. Hertford came out of his office with his gym bag and Nora saw his eyes slide over her and stop on Kitty. Kitty said, "I hope you have a wonderful workout, Dr. H. It's really paying off."

"Thanks," he said. His eyes slid back to Nora and she tried to read the message he was sending her. What was it? She thought about it while she typed his latest chapter, not caring whether she made any spelling errors.

Alfred called a little after five, when Kitty had clattered away toward the elevator. Nora was still sitting at her desk trying to get up the heart to walk through the building up to the fourth floor, cross the mossy stone bridge, and traverse the path under the trees to the far edge of the parking lot. The phony business cards hung in her coat pocket like lead weights.

Alfred said, "I'm standing here in the lobby crying. I'm making a public spectacle of myself. I know it's none of your business, but I think if the yogurt shop idea hadn't backfired, and I hadn't blamed her, she'd still be with me." He paused. "I'm throwing myself on your mercy. Just one peek, that's all I ask."

Nora said, "Do you have a pencil and paper?"

He said, "Yeah, give me a minute." Nora heard him ask someone, "Can I borrow your pen?" Then he said, "Go ahead."

"Where are you standing?" Nora asked him.

"Here in the lobby, by the reception desk."

"Okay. Write down exactly what I say. When I'm done, read it back to me. It's complicated."

That night she woke at midnight and lay awake a long time, trying to visualize exactly the look in Dr. Hertford's eyes. She thought she understood what he needed, but what if she was wrong? Rem had sent her many meaningful glances in the last couple of months and she had not understood them—or rather, she had not wanted to understand them. She decided that if worse came to worst and Alfred murdered Kitty right there in the office, her only option would be to call 9-1-1 and run away.

Kitty was trying to sell her again on the idea of mutual gym membership when a plump, brown-haired man stuck his head around the door. He signaled to Nora and gave her the thumbs-up. Nora tried not to give him away, but the man himself suddenly emitted a sob. Kitty leapt up from her desk and said, "Alfred. How did you find me?"

The man ducked back out into the hall. Kitty ran after him, calling, "You wait. You wait for me, Alfred."

Dr. Hertford came out of his office. "What's going on?"

"Kitty's husband found her."

Nora could hear Kitty's high heels clattering down the hall and her voice calling, "Alfred. Stop. You don't know the way out." There was a plaintive, almost maternal tone to her voice Nora had not heard before.

Dr. Hertford said, "Astonishing."

She said, not daring to look at him, "I ratted her out."

Dr. Hertford ran his hand through his hair. "Would you like a snack? I could get something from the vending machine."

So he knew about the hidden vending machine. The things they had in common! "I'll make some tea," Nora said. She got the teakettle Dr. Leadpants had used and filled it at the drinking fountain in the hall.

"A little Palestrina to relax our frayed nerves?" Dr. Hertford asked.

"You know what I like," Nora said. She pulled Rem's chair over to her desk and they sat side by side, listening, sipping their tea. Nora began to shiver as if she had been cold a long time and was just now warming up.

Dr. Hertford put his hand on hers.

"Kyrie," she thought. "Hosanna."