The Ghost and the Actress

by jacksonja

Summary

Penny's cheating husband Kurt dies from a drunk driver leaving her with debt and relationship issues. She moves to a small and strangely inexpensive cottage with her friend Bernadette so they can share expenses and for mutual support.

Notes

AU Inspired by The Ghost and Mrs Muir this won't be worrying about canon so much as trying to have fun with the characters.

See the end of the work for more notes
Penny wondered what to do with herself now with the funeral a week behind her. Kurt hadn’t been the best husband. Not the worst, but the cheating broke her heart. Even with that he didn’t deserve to get run over by a drunk driver. She was left at a loss for what to do. The acting was finally getting a few small theater roles but she didn’t have the energy to talk to her agent these days. She looked around their L.A apartment and she knew it was a great place but it was too expensive for her alone but worse it reminded her of Kurt and everything that went with him.

Penny picked up her phone and called her friend, Bernadette. ‘Hey, Bernie, how are you doing?’

‘Great, but I should be asking you that. The funeral was just last week. How are you holding up?’ Bernie didn’t know how she’d feel in Penny’s shoes even as a single girl.

‘Better than I let on, we weren’t in the best of places, but he didn’t deserve worse than a divorce. I miss him but I’m not dying here.’ Penny did want the memories to fade some and a change of scenery would do that. ‘How do you feel about visiting a couple of realtors with me? I can’t really afford this place and I want to look around at some new places this weekend.’

‘That sounds like a great step, honey, I get off before lunch, meet at 11, at the Cheese Cake Factory, OK?’

Penny drove over to meet Bernadette at her part time job in Pasadena. She had met Bernie there when a cast party had decided the restaurant was close enough to their theater and big enough to handle the first night celebration. Bernie had been wonderful with a bunch of overexcited actors and stage crew and they’d been friends ever since. Penny hoped Bernie would have a few ideas on cheap places to rent.

They were having pretty poor luck and were almost ready to call it quits. The last place wasn’t looking promising when the guy in a Beatle’s haircut and leisure suit leaped from behind his desk and greeted them. ‘Enchante, mademoiselles, Howard Wolowitz at your service.’

Bernadette jumped in front of her friend to take this one for the team. ‘Hi there, tiger, sit!’

Penny grinned at Howard’s abrupt step backwards. Bernadette could be a shock to much larger guys when she went into her defensive angry badger mode. ‘We came to look for someplace quiet.’

Bernadette filled in some more qualifications. ‘And, we’d like it for access to Caltech and getting to LA.’

The three went through several books of properties when Penny found a place in the area of JPL, Los Robles Cottage. Howard looked like he was getting sick. ‘You don’t want that place.’

‘Why not? It looks great, look Bernie.’ Penny and Bernadette read in disbelief, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, kitchen, livingroom, master study, library. The price was what they couldn’t believe, two thousand a month.’

Bernadette’s skepticism dripped poisonously. ‘How much spent plutonium is under that joint?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with the property, it’s all in perfect condition. It’s just its history. Folks don’t like to stay there?’

Penny was feeling some of Bernadette’s wariness. ‘Why not, is there an outlaw biker gang running a
meth factory next door?’

‘No, the last owner died. They say he committed suicide. The place has been troubled ever since. His family in Texas keeps the place for his sake so they aren’t looking for money from it.’ Howard seemed to be holding something back but Penny wanted to see the place.

Bernadette rolled her eyes. ‘Ghosts, that’s why it’s so cheap? Come on, there really is an outlaw biker gang cooking meth next door, like Penny said?’

Penny felt excited. She loved psychics and spirits so a haunted house would be great. ‘Come on Bernie, if it is haunted we could talk to the spirit world. That would be so cool!’

Bernie rolled her eyes but she knew Penny wouldn’t give up if her heart was set on the place. ‘Let’s go take a look at it but when the toxic waste under it turns you into a zombie mutant, don’t blame me.’

Howard just sighed and prayed the place would be quiet long enough to get these girls in and out before something crazy happened. ‘I got the keys here, let’s drive up there.’

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The road up to the Los Robles Cottage was quiet and the cottage was alone on a bluff overlooking the canyon. It was odd such a nice piece of real estate hadn’t been developed. The cottage was two stories and was clear of trees in case of fires but the trend of the canyon kept the cottage in the shade for most of the day except for the sunset which now cast the home in a beautiful rose color. Penny felt like she was coming home just looking at it.

‘We’re gonna get murdered up here, aren’t we? There’s some crazy cult living in the hills. That’s why this place is so cheap, isn’t it, Howard?’ Bernadette was sure there had to be something beyond silly ghost stories to make a place like this so cheap.

‘No, but we really shouldn’t be here, now, it’s laundry night.’ Howard knew how bad this place could get on that night.

Penny practically ran to the door. ‘Come on, it’s beautiful here and the view is gorgeous.’

‘Yeah, I wish I could sell the place but the family won’t budge and no one wants to live here so let’s say we looked and it was awful and leave?’ Howard started back for the cars but Bernadette grabbed his arm.

‘Not so fast, mop-top, let us in and show us around.’ Howard winced at the grip on the small woman and wondered which was worse, disappointing her or bothering him inside.

The girls walked in quickly peaking around the first floor in excitement. The living room was on the left as they went in and a dining room was opposite on the right. It was decorated with a dozen different models and comic book characters. The kitchen connected to the dining room and went across the back of the house to a pantry that went into a small equipment room for extra kitchen equipment and an extra refrigerator and then back to the living room. The library was set off the living room and was well stocked with physics and math texts as well as science fiction novels but the whole room was strangely without sign of dust. Bernadette was suspicious of that. ‘Are there squatters here, Howard?’

‘No, no one at all, it’s just a low dust area, I guess.’ Howard was getting more nervous as the time got later to six o’clock. He always did his laundry at six. ‘We ought to get going. There’s nothing really to see. Hey, where’s Penny?’
Penny had gone up to the second floor. One bedroom was in the back over the kitchen at the top of the stairs and a good sized bathroom was opposite. The bedroom was attached to a small sitting room which had a spiral staircase that went down to the library on the first floor. She went around the main staircase to the front room and found the master study. ‘Holy smokes!’ The room was half library with white boards that were filled with math like she’d only seen in movies. The other side had models, video games, and comic books and a large TV. The study had a bathroom door to the left that was bigger than the one over the kitchen with a full length tub that looked like a swimming pool to Penny. The bedroom was opposite and was furnished with a full queen sized bed. The study had a balcony that was glass enclosed with French windows and a telescope stand. Penny could stay here for the rest of her life. A large leather wing chair sat in the near center facing the TV at an angle so one could just as easily look out the balcony windows. Penny sat down and the chair was luxuriously comfortable, all she needed was her Hello Kitty comforter and she would be set for the night as far as she was concerned.

‘Oh, dear lord!’

Penny looked around for the man’s voice she heard. ‘Howard, is that you out there?’ Penny looked around the second floor but she didn’t find anyone. She looked again in the back bedroom and came back out to find Bernadette coming up the stairs. They looked around the second floor together and flipped a coin for the front room. Bernadette gritted her teeth when Penny won. ‘Look at it this way, you’re going for a PhD. That library downstairs will make a better working office for you than up here and you can use the living room for more space of your own. Besides, we can share tub time anytime. Heck, that thing is big enough for the both of us, together.’

Bernadette laughed at that. ‘Don’t say that around Howard, I think it would give him a heart attack he’s so jumpy. Where is that little ball of stress, anyway?’ Penny and Bernadette started and grabbed each other when they heard Howard scream downstairs.

‘It wasn’t my fault! I’m sorry! I told them not to come! Ahhh!’ The girls heard running from the direction of the library and then the front door slammed. They went to the balcony and saw Howard jump into his car and drive madly away.

Penny and Bernadette took down two funny looking sword things from the study walls and walked cautiously downstairs. They thought someone must have scared off Howard and now they were alone with a mad person in the house. They looked all around and found no one. When they searched the basement all they found was a washing machine running. It was all very bizarre because there was an inch of dust around the machine but there were no footprints.

‘Are you sure you want to move in here, Penny?’ Bernadette was a little nervous about Howard running off and finding the washing machine running like that.

Penny huffed in in frustration. ‘Howard kept telling us this place was troubled but I didn’t see anything upstairs, did you see anything before this?’ Penny pointed to the washing.

‘No, no I didn’t.’

‘See, I’ll bet it was just Howard. He kept trying to make us nervous about the place. Once he was alone, he probably started the machine somehow, then did the screaming act and ran off so we’d be too scared to take the place.’ Penny shook her head. ‘I don’t scare that easy.’

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Penny and Bernadette signed the papers on Los Robles cottage and moved in the following weekend. Bernadette started to like the plan Penny had to divide the house. She loved Penny but she
had seen how much chaos she could create. Having the study area upstairs would confine her nesting and she wouldn't be wandering everywhere when she was running her lines. They mopped, and brushed, and vacuumed for hours and by the end they felt very much at home. Bernadette found a small delicate patio table and chairs in the basement that would make a lovely place to have tea on the patio outside the downstairs library. It confirmed the place for Bernie the moment she sat down with her tea. Penny was just as happy when she had her Care Bears lined up where those comics had been. She went out on her balcony and saw Bernie lounging on her patio set. ‘Don’t you look like a happy cat?’

‘I am very happy. You were right about the setup, this is heaven.’

‘When you finish your tea, could you come up here?’ Penny looked through the old comics and wondered if she should throw them out but when Bernadette came up stairs after her tea she suggested they try to bring them to a comic shop near Caltech and sell them. They looked old but very carefully kept.

‘The geeks will spend crazy money on stuff like this.’ Bernie looked through the books carefully but with little recognition. She knew the main characters by look, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, but that was it.

Penny knew a couple others from going to the Marvel movies but she didn’t know anything about the characters beyond the films. ‘Let’s call the shop later and see if they might be interested in looking at some of these?’

Bernie liked the idea and looked up the name of the place she had in mind, ‘The Comic Center of Pasadena’ but it was closed looking at the clock. The housemates put off the comic issue for the night and decided to have a moved in dinner.

Penny got some wine to celebrate their successful move into the cottage and they went upstairs to open it in the study after their dinner and relax on the balcony. They stopped in the doorway of the study when they found the comics on the shelves and the Care Bears in the boxes they’d put the comics in.

‘How did that happen?’ Bernie was feeling nervous. Neither one of them had been away from each other long enough to move all the stuff.

‘I don’t know but I am too happy to care. Maybe, Howard was here playing a ghostly practical joke like the washing machine?’ Penny was bothered by that possibility but she wasn’t going to be scared by some jumpy real estate guy with a phobia for quaint cottages.

They watched an old comedy on the TV in the study while they enjoyed their wine, ‘Smokey and the Bandit’ and they laughed themselves silly trying to imitate Jackie Gleason’s Sheriff Buford T Justice. They washed up and found the tub really was big enough for the both of them to sit in comfortably. Penny and Bernadette high fived the excellent choice to ignore jumpy Howard’s attempts to scare them off.

After Bernie went to bed, Penny decided she wanted her Care Bears back in place and switched them once again for the comics and went to sleep. Around 2am, Penny was woken by the grumbling voice of a man in the study. ‘What sort of vandals are those two harpies to treat a superlative comic collection in such way?’

Penny picked up her baseball bat that she always slept near and crept into the study. She saw a tall man in the moonlit room tossing her Care Bears into an empty box. She swung for the knees to put him down but she hit one of the spaceship models on the lower shelf, instead. It shattered
impressively.

‘My classic series Galactica! What kind of insane she-devil are you?’

Penny wasn’t taking any more chances. ‘I’ll give you a she-devil, you asshole!’ She swung for the guy’s head to put him down but the bat swung through his head and Penny spun wildly connecting with nothing until another model exploded on contact.

‘The Enterprise, Kirk’s USS Enterprise, NCC 1701, have you no sense of cultural heritage, you, philistine Amazon?’

Penny looked astonished. She saw the bat actually go through the guy. She poked the bat into his chest but it passed through his body. ‘Holy smokes, you're a real ghost.’

‘If I wasn’t, I would have been with the way you tried killing me with that bat.’ Sheldon clenched his hands in outrage at the damage this lunatic woman had done to his precious models.

‘What did you think would happen sneaking into a woman’s room! And don’t get me started on trying to throw away my Care Bears, creep!’ Penny was angry at the dust and dirt she could make out on her Funshine Bear.

‘Madam, this is my room in my home. You are the intruder here.’ Sheldon glowered and his ghostly aura glowed blue and fiery.

Penny marched right through Sheldon and grabbed another model off the shelf by the TV. ‘Wanna see how many pieces this thing can turn into in MY home?’ Penny wound up and got ready to toss the model in the air for her swing.

‘No, not the Serenity! Stop this madness!’ Sheldon backed off from the angry woman. She clearly wasn’t going to be scared off by ghostly tactics. Penny lowered the model but she kept the bat ready.

‘I don’t know who you are miss, but those models, this room, They’re all I have. I am a ghost and they are all I have left in this world and I don’t want to lose any more.’ Sheldon looked sadly at the broken toys. ‘Another part of me gone from the world.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Penny put the model back on the shelf. ‘But, you scared me to death. Bernie and I are alone here and I don’t have much more than what’s in this room.’ Penny plopped down on the wing chair from the post adrenaline shakes. ‘My cheating husband is dead and most of our money disappeared into the funeral and paying off credit cards. I can only afford to live here because Bernie went in halvesies with me.’

Penny shivered in the wing chair, the adrenalin rush turning her cold now that she was calming down. ‘Jesus, you scared me to death. Who are you, anyway?’

‘I am Sheldon Lee Cooper, and who are you?’ Sheldon looked at the broken models. ‘And what are you going to do about vandalizing my property?’

‘I’m Penny Queen and my friend is Bernadette Rostenkowski. And that’s what you get for scaring women alone, don’t push me, sweetie, or I’ll find a way to make this bat hurt. I’ll bet my psychic can give me a few ideas.’

‘Psychics? They are nothing but superstitious fiddlesticks for gullible minds.’ Sheldon felt his word was authoritative on the matter.

Penny snorted. ‘Says the ghost? Which fiddle should I stick that opinion in, Sheldon? I’m going to
bed. Put my Care Bears back, clean and in order the way you found them, or I will draw a little smiley face in one of your comics somewhere. Penny marched back to bed irritated with Sheldon and his antics. ‘Since when does a ghost need space ship models?’ Penny sat down on her bed and thought about the sad face he had and what he said about another part of himself gone and felt a little guilty. She thought a trip to that comic shop might be worth it.
Penny woke up the next morning and wandered out towards the bathroom and noticed her Care Bears back in place and all amazingly clean. She had never seen Funshine look better. She made up her mind to go visit the comic shop today after she went to the rehearsals her agent had gotten for her. The final rehearsal for a new show called ‘The Coven’ had been the oddest because the role was for a small recurring part of a witch but she’d spent more time doing fight choreography than running lines. She didn’t give it too much thought so long as she got some kind of job. After the rehearsal she drove over to the comic shop. Penny walked into the store Bernie had looked up last night. She looked around at the bewildering and colorful displays and had no idea where to go first so she shouted out for a clerk.

‘Hi, a little help here.’

Everyone in the room froze and stared in amazement. Penny smiled in confusion. She’d seen rooms freeze in comedies plenty of times but she had never seen it happen in real life.

A man in a red cardigan sweater and receding hairline to compliment a nervous face hurried his way up to Penny. ‘Hi, I’m Stuart, the owner of The Comic Center, are you lost?’

Penny thought he seemed nice but a bit jumpy. ‘No, I came to buy some toys for a friend. Some models got broken last night and I wanted to get him some new ones.’

Stuart looked around at the store wondering what kind of models a girl that looked like a model could want. ‘She’s a girl; you’ve all seen one, get back to shopping.’ He looked at the model displays not sure what to suggest. ‘Does your friend want something from comics, movies, TV shows, or some kind of crossover?’

Penny had no idea what the Galaxy thing was but she did recognize the Star Trek thing. ‘One of them was Kirk’s Enterprise and he said some numbers and another model was some ship called Galaxy or something.’

Stuart nodded, ‘Did he, maybe, say Galactica instead of Galaxy?’

‘Yeah, that was it; he said it was a classic series model.’ Penny was relieved Stuart seemed to know what the ships were because she was sure she’d never find the right ones in all this stuff in the store.
They walked over to the TV models and discussed the various ships and Penny guessed Sheldon would want whatever was most like the first in line among the many variations. They came with a hefty price tag for toys but it was a lot less than some of the shoes she’d bought in the past and she did break his models she thought a bit resigned.

‘Do you live around here, Penny? The store does have a club discount if you are going to come back here regularly.’ That was a fib; Stuart just hoped Penny would come back regularly.

‘I just moved to Pasadena with my friend Bernadette. We moved into Los Robles Cottage a few days ago.’ Penny was thinking of getting a couple of comics since Sheldon probably only had the ones in the house.

‘You moved into Sheldon’s old place?’ Stuart was surprised at the coincidence.

‘Did you know Sheldon? Well, there are a lot of comics and models in the house so I guess he came here a lot.’ It made sense since this store was close to Caltech.

‘Yeah, he spent a lot, not always an easy customer, but a regular one. He liked things very orderly and on time.’ Stuart sighed at the quandary. Sheldon was a pain a lot of the time but he was loyal as a customer and a loyal friend.

‘I’ll say that for the order. He is a neat freak.’ Penny had argued with Sheldon enough to agree with Stuart’s assessment.

‘Did you know Sheldon, Penny?’ Stuart caught the way Penny talked about Sheldon like she knew him.

‘No, I didn’t but the cottage is filled with his stuff. It’s pretty easy to guess. They say he killed himself; that’s so sad.’ Penny remembered how Sheldon had looked at the broken models and she felt guilty again for breaking them.

‘I remember that’s what the obituaries said but that’s hard to believe. Sheldon was a lot of things, most of them weird, but he would never kill himself. I still can’t believe that.’

Penny and Stuart talked a few minutes more about Sheldon and what he used to shop for in the store. In the end, Penny found a few of Sheldon’s favorite comic book choices and added them to the models.

Stuart finished boxing up the models and bagging the comics. ‘Is there anything else?’

Penny looked around at the shop Sheldon must have come to religiously. ‘No, that’s it but I might be back.’

Stuart walked Penny to the door. ‘I hope so. It was nice to talk about Sheldon again. A lot of folks don’t, I hope you like it up there at Los Robles, Penny.’

‘Thanks, Stuart, sweetie, and thanks for the help.’

Stuart watched Penny all the way to her car still not believing a girl like that was in his store. ‘Best day ever.’

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Penny parked in the driveway happy to be home. She checked her phone when it rang a text message. The casting director wanted her to come back for a second speaking rehearsal for ‘The
Coven’ and had an attachment with script pages for the scenes they wanted to see her do. The news gave her a lift if only so she could cover the credit card bill for the models she bought. She texted back that she was ready whenever they wanted her and send her the time and whatever she needed for the rehearsal. She got in the door and heard Bernadette cursing in the kitchen about the washing machine. Penny put the box down in the dining room and found Bernie in the kitchen almost in tears from frustration. Bernie tossed the laundry basket on the floor and seemed ready to pull her hair out.

‘Pink, every white thing I own is pink! Penny, this whole day has been a nightmare of shit and this is the icing on the cake. I know there wasn’t anything colored when I put those clothes in the machine. God, tell me I’m not going nuts!’

Penny wrapped her friend in a hug; she had a pretty good idea of the source of the problem. ‘What happened today, Bernie?’

‘What didn’t happen? I made breakfast and the coffee maker overflowed from water left in the pot I’m sure was empty. I got locked out twice when I went out to do some yard work. Three different pizza places thought I wanted delivery, and now this. Maybe this place is haunted or that little twerp Howard is trying to make us think it is somehow?’ Bernie hugged Penny hard glad to have someone to vent this day with. ‘Please, tell me you had a better day. Let there be some light, today.’

Penny pulled out a chair for Bernie at the table and got them both a soda from the refrigerator. ‘I got a second rehearsal and some sample scenes for it. I don’t want to jinx this saying more but yeah me.’

‘Congratulations, honey, that’s huge! That is something to celebrate, cheers!’ Bernadette was happy for Penny but the day was too much to let go of. ‘I wish I could celebrate more but you wouldn’t believe this place when you’re out.’

Penny growled at the likely cause. ‘Maybe, the place is troubled by something? I have a few tricks from my psychic that might do a little cleansing of the aura here.’

Bernie looked skeptically at her New Age inclined friend. ‘I don’t buy that stuff but I am ready to try anything at this point, even a priest to do an exorcism. Were you trying some cleansing last night? I heard some banging around.’

Penny smiled and gave Bernadette’s hand a squeeze. ‘Sorry, I couldn’t sleep and got watching the TV a little loud. Anyway, we can look into exorcists later but maybe something closer to home would be better. I know Sheldon’s family wants to keep this place the way he had it but I don’t think they’d mind if we moved some stuff. How about we put some of the downstairs crap in the living room and library into the cellar? It’s time we make it look like ours and let the house know who lives here.’

Bernadette and Penny jumped a bit when they heard metallic bang from the cellar. ‘No, not my work clothes!’ Bernadette ran for the cellar. Penny guessed she had struck a nerve and got the box in the living room and headed up to her room.

Penny barged into the study and put the box on the wing chair. ‘Sheldon Lee Cooper, show your sorry ethereal ass, right now or I’m gonna go rodeo on your entire model collection!’

Penny swung around at the contemptuous snort behind her. ‘Is violence your whole way of solving things, Penny?’

Penny ground her teeth and clenched her fists in outrage for her abused friend downstairs. ‘Don’t give me that anti-violence crap, Sheldon. You’ve been making Bernie miserable all day.’
Sheldon tried to look innocent but the twitching around the eyes gave him away. ‘Well, I am sure I don’t know what you are talking about.’

Penny growled at the obvious lie. ‘Look here, mister, I felt sorry for you last night, but if this is how you are going to act I will personally get rid of every stick of sci-fi crap in the whole house.’

Sheldon got a fire in his eyes at the threat. ‘I know very well you cannot do such a thing. My mommy wants the place untouched as a memorial to her genius son.’

‘Well, maybe she’d like a few mementos mailed to her, especially after she finds out about the vandals that got in here and trashed most of them!’ Penny got a hold of the Serenity model that had brought Sheldon up short the night before.

Sheldon backed off a bit. ‘You wouldn’t dare do such a thing.’ He looked nervously at Penny; he knew he couldn’t really scare her so his options were limited. ‘Please, I won’t bother Bernadette anymore,’

Penny held his eyes for a few seconds and decided to give Sheldon a break for now. ‘Good. If we have to live here together, this can’t be all about you, Sheldon. You’re dead and we’re not and we have to live here with some peace. I want to make this work for all of us but we can’t be tip toeing around you. Let’s make a deal here. I’ll keep this stuff up here,’ Penny waved around the study, ‘and Bernadette and I are going to make the downstairs more our house and put your things in the cellar.’

‘But, Penny, I want my Doctor Who memorabilia in the living room. It’s the best spot to display my collection of sonic screwdrivers.’ Sheldon cast about desperate to keep change from happening.

‘Sweetie, if this is going to work, there has to be compromise. If you want some things from downstairs they can come up here.’ She saw Sheldon’s smile and knew what he had in mind, everything. ‘But, whatever comes up, one or more things here go down, and if you can’t compromise they are going to be gone to Texas.’

Sheldon got close to Penny trying to stare her down with his height and ghostly aura. The room was bathed in an unearthly blue for a few seconds from which Sheldon had seen everyone run screaming from the house. His mojo wasn’t close to working on Penny. ‘Fine!’

Sheldon was a master of sulking if anyone was so far as Penny could see by the way he stood with his shoulders slumped in the balcony entrance. It had to be hard to have unwanted people move into your house even if you were a ghost. Maybe, more so, because you had to know the real world had left you behind. She wanted to hug him; he looked like a lost little boy. Little boys love toys, she thought. ‘Hey, Moonpie, I got you something, today.’

‘Penny, only my Meemaw calls me Moonpie. What did you get me?’ Sheldon came back over to Penny looking a little happier.

‘Who’s Meemaw?’ Penny was curious about Sheldon’s background.

‘She’s my grandmother in Texas. She was the only one who really understood what it was like for me growing up in Galveston. I have an IQ of 187 and I was doing college level work before I was 10. It was hell growing up in Texas and she was the only one who could really understand how I felt.’

Penny could feel for that. She used to have a close relationship like that with her dad until she started getting breasts then he didn’t know how to handle a girl. ‘I can understand being different. I was rebuilding tractors at age 12 but my dad lost interest in me when I started growing out.’ Penny
cupped her breasts which made Sheldon jump like a cat.

‘Penny, I don’t need my study turned into a bordello.’ Sheldon waved at where Penny was holding her hands and looked as blushing as a ghost could get.

‘Excuse me? Is Sheldon Lee Cooper nervous around girls?’ Penny asked coquettishly. She laughed at the gulp and run to the balcony Sheldon did. She joined him out on the balcony. ‘I’m sorry Sheldon, but seriously, my dad got just about as nervous you are. I still went hunting with him, won rodeo completions, anything to get him close like we used to be but he just spent more time on my little brother no matter how useless he acted. I wish I had someone like your Meemaw. She sounds nice.’

‘I wish I had a dad like yours. At least he just got nervous with you. My dad was a red-neck who couldn’t understand anyone who didn’t like football, hunting, and bourbon. I had three strikes on me before I was born.’ Sheldon stared off down the valley remembering his days growing up in Texas with little fondness.

Penny thought about the conversation with Stuart and talking with Sheldon now, it really didn’t seem like he’d be the type to kill himself. ‘Sheldon, this might be a personal question, you being a ghost, I don’t know if it’s rude, but they say you killed yourself. Stuart at the comic shop doesn’t believe it and listening to you, I can’t say I do either.’

‘Kill myself? I was murdered!’ Sheldon glared at a passing bird flying by outside.

‘What? Didn’t the police investigate or anything?’ Penny was shocked no one guessed there was foul play.

‘Ha! Even a team of incompetents from one of the CSI shows would have put the feathers together and known it wasn’t suicide.’ Sheldon huffed in derision.

‘Feathers? What are you talking about, Sheldon?’ Penny couldn’t imagine what feathers would have to do with a murder unless Sheldon was suffocated with a feather pillow.

‘A wretched blue jay flew in here while I was working on a problem and landed on that white board!’ Sheldon pointed at the board near the balcony. ‘I panicked and ran onto the balcony but I overbalanced on the railing and fell over and broke my neck. It was murder most fowl!’

Penny looked open mouthed and struggled not to laugh but she couldn’t help it she started laughing. When Sheldon started spluttering in outrage it only made Penny laugh harder. ‘Oh god, I’m sorry Sheldon but that was not what I expected when you said murder. You know, if there were two crows you’d have had a double murder.’

Penny started laughing again and Sheldon had to laugh at that joke. After they settled down from the laughter Sheldon wanted to know what Penny had gotten for him. They went back to the box and Penny got out the two models. Sheldon’s eyes gleamed in delight.

‘Galactica and Enterprise! And they are the deluxe editions with running lights and operating hanger bays. Oh, this is wonderful!’ Sheldon opened the boxes and started going over the models like a jeweler with the rarest gemstones. Penny couldn’t help a feeling of warmth towards the simple joy in every movement Sheldon made going over the models.

‘I got you these to go with the models, sweetie. I talked with Stuart about some of the comics you used to buy in the store and I got these for you, too.’ Penny held out the set of five books she bought. Sheldon came over and looked like he was going to cry if ghosts could cry.
‘Penny, I haven’t seen a new comic since—’ He took the comics reverently. He had no idea what to say or do. ‘I wish I could hug you, I don’t have any words to say.’ He looked at the girl from Nebraska and he felt something he hadn’t really felt since the last time he saw his Meemaw. He put the comics down on the desk and he vanished before he could start crying.

Penny smiled and sighed hoping things would start getting better. She put the models on the shelves where the broken ones had been and put the new comics on the comic boxes so Sheldon could sort his new comics.

The next morning Penny came downstairs to find French toast, sausages, strawberries and the rest of a very superbly made breakfast in the kitchen. Bernadette came down not long after, the smell of delicious cooking having reached her upstairs from her balcony over the kitchen. They were surprised to find Bernadette’s laundry basket by the cellar door with the contents all white, clean, and folded. ‘You’re welcome, Sheldon.’ Penny whispered to the ceiling.

Chapter End Notes

School's starting so it will get done if slowly.
Life settled into a happy routine at Los Robles cottage. The chaos of the past week seemed to be behind the two housemates. Bernadette was getting on with her PhD work between Cheese Cake factory shifts and Penny was on tenterhooks over her auditioning for The Coven. She’d done scene rehearsals with a few of the main cast along with several other actresses up for the part. They didn’t have any more disasters in the cottage so Bernadette began to hope whatever New Age whammy Penny had done last weekend had worked. She opened her room’s balcony to get some fresh air when she heard Penny screaming in the kitchen. Bernadette flew downstairs to find out what happened. She guessed the cottage was acting up again. If it was, she was going to kill Howard.

Bernie charged into the kitchen. ‘What’s happened, Penny?’

Penny grabbed her smaller friend up in a bear hug and spun her around the kitchen floor. ‘I got it! I got the part, Bernie! I got the part!’

‘Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I knew you could do it, Penny, I knew it!’ Bernadette and Penny laughed and danced and hugged in glee after the long slog this move had been from the start. They both hoped this was the start of bigger things. ‘So, what happens now, big time TV star? ’

Penny leaned back against the sink not sure she could stand up she was so happy. ‘I have to go to the studio, today. I need to go for wardrobe fittings, make up tests, some test promo photos for my character. This is so huge. It's only 10 episodes in the season but they could go for more if the character is popular.’ Penny started crying and she felt embarrassed she couldn’t stop.

Bernadette hugged her again. ‘You should take a long shower and let this sink in before you drive out to this new job. I’ll make us breakfast, get going superstar.’

‘Thank you, Bernie, I love you.’ Penny kissed her dear friend and ran up to put herself together.

Penny came back down a while later to pancakes and coffee and the girls talked about what was up for the day.

‘Most of the day is the studio for me but I might try to stop by my psychic for a reading, afterwards. How about you, Bernie?’ Penny wanted to see what her psychic had to say about handling a ghost.

‘I’m going to do some writing on the PhD most of the day since I don’t have a shift at the Factory, today. Later, I want to stop by Howard’s office. I still want to know what he knows about this
Penny and Bernadette cleaned up after breakfast and Penny went upstairs to her room to get dressed for the day. She saw Sheldon in the wing chair reading his new comics. ‘What up, buttercup?’

‘What’s up, you left out the verb to be, Penny.’ Sheldon put his comic book aside to see what made Penny sound so happy.

‘To be or not to be, that is the question, and the answer is I be getting the part in The Coven, muffin.’ Penny laughed at Sheldon’s eye roll and went into her bedroom to dress.

‘Assaults on Shakespeare and English at large, congratulations, Penny. I have no idea what The Coven is, though.’ Penny looked surprised at that. ‘It’s the show about witches that I’ve been working on for more than a week to get a part in. I was doing lines in here last night while you were working on whatever that is on those white boards. They look like some crazy magic spells, whatever they say.’ Penny hadn’t given the boards a lot of thought since she had moved into the cottage.

‘A TV show about paranormal claptrap is hardly something I would follow, Penny.’ Sheldon didn’t catch on to the hole in that statement but Penny did.

‘A ghost is telling me witches are claptrap?’ Penny smirked at the way Sheldon held some fantastic fiction like spaceships sacred but others about witches claptrap.

‘At least, you have empirical evidence that ghosts exist.’ Sheldon felt his word must be conclusive on the matter.

‘Well, buttercup, until I met you, I had no evidence ghosts existed, how does that mean witches don’t?’ Penny was curious why Sheldon always needed to be right no matter what.

‘It doesn’t mean that they don’t only that you have no proof that they do.’

‘Well, honey, I am playing a witch, so they do.’ Penny smiled to herself and came back out into the study.

‘You are playing a fictional witch. A real one could cast a spell and make something happen.’ Sheldon felt that should put an end to the matter.

‘I’ll bet I can cast a spell and make you say ‘I believe in witches’, Sheldon.’ Penny smirked and walked over to the chair and picked up one of Sheldon’s comics.

‘Twaddle, my dear, utter twaddle.’ Sheldon gasped out a laugh at the silly idea of Penny casting spells.

Penny waved her hands in an intricate pattern and intoned ‘Hocus, pocus, and comics new, today is new comic day and only if witches be true shall Sheldon get books that be new.’ Penny laughed at the twitches in Sheldon’s face.

‘I believe in witches, and you are the wickedest witch of them all, Penny.’ Sheldon grumbled his unwillingness overcome by the offer of comics. He cursed his weakness.

‘So, you never said what you were working on, Sheldon.’ Penny waved at the boards. ‘I have never seen anything like this stuff. It looks like something a wizard or a mad scientist would write.’
‘It is an attempt at a proof on String Theory. It is what I was working on when I died. I had come back from the arctic with empirical proof but it turned out I had made a vast mechanical error. I have never been able to discover what that mechanical error could have been. Its resolution would help me settle where the theory is at fault if I could discover whether that mechanical error was real or not.’ Sheldon still felt the foolishness of announcing he had proof of his theory. It should have been sound. He had checked everything too many times to be wrong.

‘I wish I could help you, Sheldon but I can listen if you want to talk about your problem. I’m good at listening. I gotta go now, see ya, honey.’ Penny rushed out the door with a quick wave and hurried down to her car.

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Penny’s drive to the studio was going well. Even the heavy traffic wasn’t bothering her since she could concentrate more on rerunning her lines in her mind while rolling through the slow moving crawl she was in.

‘Penny, your engine light is on.’

Penny almost hit the roof of the car from shock. ‘Jesus, Sheldon! What are you doing here? How are you here?’

Sheldon looked at Penny in surprise. ‘You said you were a good listener and that we could talk about my work.’

Penny looked at Sheldon and wanted to strangle him right now. ‘So, you decided to give me a heart attack to do it after I’m dead?’

‘Eyes on the road, Penny, I’m not endangered by traffic accidents but I still have no wish to be in one.’ Sheldon couldn’t imagine why passenger safety should be any different to drivers even if the passengers were part of the afterlife.

‘Because this is all about you, you scared me to death, Sheldon. How are you even out of the house? Aren’t ghosts supposed to stay put?’

Sheldon looked around at the sights outside fascinated to see the outside world once again. ‘I wanted to test a hypothesis. You are correct that I am limited to the house and surrounding grounds. I postulated that you, and Bernadette, now being part of the house I might be able to accompany you since I would still be with a living part of the house. Of course, I was correct.’

‘Congratulations, Mr. Science. Next time, tell me when you’re coming, don’t just pop up like that and never scare Bernie like that.’ Penny drove for a few minutes getting used to the idea Sheldon could travel and decided he could make himself useful. ‘Sheldon, you can help me right now by reading my scenes with me.’ She handed him the pages in question. ‘I’m first two scenes today in rehearsal before filming next week and you can make yourself useful.’

‘It would be more useful to have your engine serviced.’ Sheldon pointed to the blinking light.

‘Focus, Sheldon, I need money for a garage and that won’t happen if I screw up this job, now read.’ Penny couldn’t believe how easily Sheldon got under her skin. She wondered why that didn’t bother her.

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Penny drove up to the studio security and gave the guard her sign in information and charmed him
with asking to take a selfie picture with her. ‘Come on, it’s my first day as a real TV actor and you’re the first person I met today so come on, please?

The old guard, Darius Green, had seen a lot of excited actors on their first day. Sometimes, they turned into entitled nightmares later but that first day was always special with every one of them. They snapped a few pictures and Penny went off feeling as happy with the photos as an Emmy award. This day was really happening.

‘Do you plan to take pictures with everyone we meet, Penny?’

‘Don’t be a buzzkill, Sheldon. You invited yourself, besides what if someone sees you?’

‘No one can see me unless I wish it. Right now, only you can see or hear me. I would like to see this show of yours and see you as this Kaley Jenkins character.’

Sheldon was surprisingly quiet through the day. The great amount of technical support that went into making a TV show was something he had only seen pictures of on the Net or on various online videos. The scale of operation a show needed in real life made quite an impression since he could better appreciate what must have gone on in the making of his own favorite series. He particularly enjoyed watching the makeup people working and the special effects people preparing the sets for the explosive charges being used in an upcoming fight scene to be filmed later in the afternoon.

‘What’s the gist, physicist?’

Sheldon turned and saw a brunette woman in tight leather and knee high boots wearing dark glasses actually addressing him. She looked very imposing with the long deadly looking sais she was carrying. ‘What, are you, can you see me?’ Sheldon’s shocked expression made Penny chuckle.

‘Of course, I can see you, Sheldon, you said only I could.’

Sheldon was taken aback. The costuming, makeup, and body language had all confused him. ‘Great Caesar’s ghost, I never would have recognized you, Penny.’

‘That’s the idea, but my character is supposed to be in disguise for the first couple of episodes so they have to sew me into this get up.’ Penny wasn’t crazy about the fit. She wouldn’t be able to eat a thing without showing it in costume.

‘How are you supposed to be a witch when you look more like an escapee from Xena, Warrior Princess?’

‘It’s part of the role, there is a lot of action and fighting demons and vampires and stuff with my character to go along with the spells.’ Penny and Sheldon walked along to the set where the promo pictures were going to be taken for her character. The show’s director came up to say hi to Penny while they were talking.

‘Hi, Penny Queen, is it? I’m Craig Zisk and I’ll be directing this episode. Who were you talking to; I like to keep phones and stuff offset unless it’s really an emergency.’ Craig sounded friendly and the phone rule made sense so scenes didn’t get ruined. Penny had seen enough scenes ruined by audience, actors, and stage hand phones to complain about it.

Penny glanced at Sheldon. ‘I was preparing for the scene. I like to imagine Kaley has an invisible familiar she talks to. He’s kind of a sarcastic pain in the ass with an ego the size of Texas.’ She laughed at Sheldon’s eye roll and affronted harrumph.

Craig laughed at that. ‘Oh god, you’re all method aren’t you?’
The rest of the day went well and Penny got to meet the main cast and crew during the whole day. It was a whirl of theatrical chaos that she adored and even Sheldon seemed to be enjoying the day in spite of being a silent observer for most of it. They left with a final picture with Darius who was still on gate duty and drove off to The Comic Shop to get Sheldon’s long awaited new comics.

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Bernadette had a productive day on her PhD work and shut down her computer satisfied with the day’s work. She left a note in the kitchen that she was off to Howard’s and said there was a bottle of champagne in the fridge to congratulate her on her first working day. Bernadette wrote a card to go with the wine. She drove down to Howard’s office because she still had some questions about the house and the odd goings on. Even though they had stopped since last weekend, she still wondered if it was the little mop-top. She walked in to find Howard grumbling over some paperwork but he brightened considerably when he saw one of his latest clients.

‘Enchante, Ms. Rostenkowski!’

‘Stow it, tiger, I’m here to talk about the house.’ Bernie thought Howard was kind of cute but he was too desperate to get anywhere with a woman, especially dressed and styled the way he was.

‘Oh, have there been any problems at the cottage? I did try to warn you off the place.’ Howard didn’t want to see the two girls dealing with him. Howard had never seen Sheldon’ ghost but he was sure that’s who was scaring everyone off.

‘Problems? We spent almost every day fixing something, saving something, or replacing something until last weekend. I was even wondering if you knew anything about that, Howie.’ Bernadette’s voice took on a very hard edge that made Howard imagine unpleasant results if Bernie didn’t get the answers she wanted.

‘Yeah, I expected that. Everyone who tries living there says the same thing and most don’t make it through the night, there. I’ve tried getting the family to sell it so it can get demolished. Maybe that would make him go away.’ Howard hated Los Robles Cottage because it reminded him of his old life before this crappy job.

Bernadette got very suspicious on that note. ‘What do you mean make him go away?’

Howard wished he had kept his mouth shut but he could see Bernadette wouldn’t be going away without answers. ‘I’m sorry you’ve been having a hard time up there. I close up around now so let me buy you dinner to apologize for your trouble and tell you about him?’

They found a small Chinese restaurant near Howard’s office and ordered up some Szechuan chicken and eggrolls to share while they talked.

‘You know the place was owned by Sheldon Cooper. He was a physicist at Caltech. He was a genius, an IQ that could embarrass a supercomputer but he was also a wacko for having things just his way. We were friends for a long time but…’ Howard wasn’t really sure how to start this story but Bernadette gave him a starting point.

‘Why was a super genius physicist pals with a real estate agent, did you go to school together?’ So far this wasn’t much Bernadette didn’t know already.

‘No, we didn’t but we did work together. I used to be an engineer at Caltech and an astronaut before I had to start doing this job that I am useless at.’ Howard didn’t want to sound so pathetic in front of
Bernadette but he couldn’t help remembering how much he’d lost since Sheldon died.

‘Come on, an astronaut? You look more like a Keebler Elf.’ Bernadette was sure Howard was pulling her leg.

‘Oh, no, it’s all true.’ Howard pulled out his wallet and showed Bernadette a picture of himself on the International Space Station. ‘I loved that job more than anything.’

‘What happened and what does Sheldon have to do with it?’ Bernadette couldn’t believe this harmless looking guy in the cheap suit across from her did such dangerous work going up into space.

‘That started up in the arctic. I went up there with him and some other guys from Caltech to help, friends of ours. Sheldon had some experiments to do up there to prove one of his ideas on String Theory. It didn’t work out. He made some big claims but the results turned out to be mistakes and it almost ruined his reputation and his career. They say that’s why he killed himself. It’s why I quit Caltech. I felt guilty about what happened to Sheldon.’ Howard wasn’t feeling hungry anymore. There was a lot more to tell but he had no way to tell it believably and even the short version of the arctic story ate at him.

‘I’m sorry that happened to you, Howard, and to your friend. So, what, you think he’s haunting the cottage because of that arctic thing?’ Howard’s sincerity was beginning to move Bernadette a little.

‘That’s what I’ve always thought. The place was a favorite hangout once upon a time but now, no one goes there anymore, until you got there. Maybe, Sheldon likes you, Bernadette?’ Howard chuckled at the idea of Sheldon liking anyone.

‘If his ghost is in that house, he sure had a funny way of showing it.’ Bernadette was still sore about the laundry even if it had gotten mysteriously repaired of its pink nightmare moment. ‘You don’t look very hungry anymore, Howard. I’m sorry I blamed you for the strange things up at Los Robles. How about you let me buy you a drink to apologize?’

Howard perked up at the offer. ‘Sure, I’d like that.’ Now, he had to make sure his mother didn’t call in the middle of everything.
Price of Fame

Chapter Summary

Penny's career is going well but it's not always fun to be famous.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs Muir. Not trying to be canon just having fun with Big Bang's toys.

Trigger warning. Actor's get stalkers and so does Penny.

A month into The Coven’s first season, Penny and Bernadette were curled up on the small sofa Penny had bought for the study. Her first appearance on the show was finally going to air and they had champagne to celebrate the occasion. Like any theater, show time was more nerve wracking than any rehearsal or filming work. The filming for this episode had been done weeks ago but now everyone would see the finished product. The main cast of witches and their battles, natural and supernatural, had been a hit so far so Penny didn’t want to be the dud of the show.

‘This is almost as bad as first night at the theater. At least I don’t have to hear the audience getting bored.’ Penny couldn’t help feeling the stage fright that went with the first night.

Bernadette gave Penny a hug. ‘Come on; don’t get yourself down like that. You’ll be great. I heard you practicing enough up here. You sounded brilliant.’

‘I’m not; I just don’t want to jinx it even if my psychic said it would be a game changer for me.’

Bernadette was amazed at the amount of physical fighting that went into a show about witches. She had expected something more sedate but Penny’s part was more like watching Blade or Xena. ‘Isn’t some of that dangerous?’

Penny shrugged. ‘Not as much as it looks on TV but there are some tricky parts if you’re not careful. Still, there was nothing as hard as trick riding in a rodeo, and not nearly as dangerous. At least, the stunt people don’t try to kick you or trample you if you fall on your ass.’

They talked about the show and the behind the scenes gossip for a while until Penny’s phone rang. It was Mary Livingstone, the show’s social media director. The show’s websites were being bombarded with praise for the show and for Penny’s character, Kaley. She wanted Penny to come in next week to do a special interview session to go up online with some background about her work and some questions about working on the show. She sent an attachment with interview questions for Penny to discuss in the planned video. Penny was over the moon by this point and the anxiety of a couple of hours ago was long forgotten.

After Penny hung up Bernie chided Penny for her nerves. ‘See, I told you it would work out.’
‘Yeah, so did my psychic, but now, I can feel it’s real.’ Penny poured them another glass of champagne. ‘What about your new show, Bernie?’

‘What new show?’

‘The Bernie and Howie show, you’ve gone out every Friday for the last month. When are you going to introduce us?’

‘Howie is so sweet, but we always meet in town. He’s still scared this place is haunted.’ Bernadette looked around at the white boards and their math that she could follow a bit of. She noticed it kept changing and seemed to be correct. She wouldn’t have pegged Penny for an interest in higher mathematics.

‘He doesn’t have to be afraid of the house. Nothing has happened in over a month, now, I’m sure he’ll be fine.’ Penny put extra emphasis on the last since Sheldon was likely listening in on the conversation having said he was interested in tonight’s show.

Bernadette looked around at all the paraphernalia in the room that had belonged to the former owner. ‘He doesn’t want to take any chances. He thinks Sheldon doesn’t like him.’ Bernadette thought that was silly but looking around at the study, Bernie did wonder why Penny kept so much of Sheldon’s stuff up here.

‘Has Howard seen Sheldon? Have you?’ Penny thought she was the only one Sheldon showed himself to.

Bernie shook her head and took a sip of her champagne. ‘No, he’s just reaching about Sheldon. I think he feels kind of responsible for Sheldon’s death. They used to work together, you know.’

‘They did, how?’ Penny couldn’t imagine Sheldon selling real estate.

‘Howard used to be an astronaut and an engineer at Caltech and he worked with Sheldon. He quit after some experiment in the arctic went wrong and Sheldon killed himself over it. Howard feels like he’s to blame in some way, I guess.’

‘An astronaut, our nervous little house agent? Wow, I never would have thought of that kind of job for him.’ Penny wanted to ask Sheldon about Howard. She never would have taken the nervous little real estate guy for some kind of science wiz. First, she hoped she could help him and Bernie feel a bit better. ‘Howard has nothing to blame himself for. No one was here when Sheldon died. The fall could have just as well been an accident. I’ve met some of his old friends at the comic store; none of them believe it could have been suicide either.

‘That’s what I keep trying to get across to him, but I guess he takes losing friends pretty hard, especially like that.’

Bernadette looked around the study at all of Sheldon’s odd collection of stuff. ‘Speaking of hard to take, how do you take living with so much of Sheldon’s stuff? This place looks like you’ve moved in together.’

‘I didn’t want to change everything in the house. Besides, some of it is kind of cool. There’s plenty of stuff to give me ideas for scene practice and some of the comic stories are kind of fun.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ Bernadette was skeptical of that.

They chatted about a number of the books in Sheldon’s collection and Bernadette found a couple of titles that Howard had mentioned on their dates. She thought she’d read up on some of the stories
he’d talked about and surprise him with a few comic book questions and chat on their next night out. She said good night to Penny and went down the hall for a little comic book reading before bed.

+++ Sheldon appeared a few minutes after Bernadette left for bed. ‘Congratulations, the show was not too tedious and your action scenes were worthy of Wonder Woman or Xena.’

‘Thank you for not saying I punch like a girl, Sheldon.’

‘You are a girl, Penny, how could you not punch like one? Unless, you thought I meant to insult you? I assure you, I wasn’t. My sister, Missy, can punch like a pro-boxer when she gets riled up.’

Penny sighed a bit contrite; her nerves were still making her look for the worst over her performance. Thank you, sweetie, I’m sorry I sounded snappish. Waiting for the reviews is the worst part of acting. It makes me pretty ornery a lot of times. By the way, did you know Bernadette has been dating Howard?’

‘Yes, that was rather a surprise. I have been looking at some of her biochemistry work. It is really quite impressive. I can’t imagine what she finds to be stimulating in the mind of a lowly M.A.’

Penny let the insult slide since she didn’t want to get side tracked from what Bernie had said about Howard feeling some responsibility for Sheldon’s death. ‘Bernie said you and Howard worked together and that you guys had some trouble with that arctic experiment you told me about. She said he feels guilty for your death.’

‘Yes, he was there with me and Rajesh Koothrippali and Leonard Hofstadter. I can’t imagine what he would feel guilty for. Besides, you know the real facts of my demise by winged assassins.’ Sheldon made some changes on one of his boards. ‘Howard is likely feeling misplaced guilt due to the belief that my death was a suicide. I am sure if he had the facts he would no longer blame himself.

‘Sheldon, you can’t let him keep blaming himself.’

‘Penny, there is little I can do if he won’t come here and we agreed I would only appear to you so it’s all a rather moot issue. Besides, I would still be no closer to solving what went wrong in the arctic. That would give us both some peace.’

Penny came closer to Sheldon and the board he was working on. ‘I keep wondering about this stringy stuff you keep working on. I was thinking about it the other day at work because of a scene we were doing.’

‘A show about kung-fu witches is tackling String Theory? What’s next, Kim Kardashian demonstrates cutting edge alternative energy resources?’

Penny gritted her teeth in frustration at Sheldon’s obliviousness. ‘Nice attempt at empathy, Moonpie.’

‘Only my Meemaw calls me Moonpie, but what interest could your show have in quantum mechanics?’

‘That’s the point. There was a scene with a scientist guy who was trying to explain how witches were impossible and couldn’t exist. He was using math like yours to explain power and entropy and stuff like that. I was wondering if the math he was using was correct or if it was just faked for the scene.’
Sheldon sighed at the memory of the amount of fake math he’d seen on the screen over the years. ‘It was very likely faked. Math in genre media is often just cut and pasted from any source that has the right look. I once saw Planck’s Constant used to explain the atmospheric power of a hurricane.’

Penny nodded in sympathy. She had seen Sheldon pouring over the math on these boards many times and his dedication to the work had grown on her, not to mention his arms and hands looked kind of hot when she was watching him work. ‘I guessed so. It made me want to be able to read this stuff. I used to like math until I started thinking guys didn’t like smart girls back in high school.’

‘That is a crime, Penny. You obviously had a natural talent for math and mechanical engineering growing up. It is a shame it was never nurtured.’ Sheldon was impressed by Penny’s talents as a young girl. He was equally impressed by her facility with such things around the house. He sometimes wished she might have lived in Galveston when he was a child there. He was sure she would have been a kindred soul.

‘Yeah, that too, but I never finished college. That school was too boring on top of everything else.’

Sheldon could well imagine Penny’s community college. ‘Unsurprising in such a backwater, I remember the sort of places my mother took me to around Galveston. I would have gotten a superior education from watching reruns of ‘Mr. Wizard’ than going to such a place.’

Penny looked at the board for a while and back to Sheldon. ‘I was thinking of transferring the credits I had in Nebraska to UCLA and finishing up my B.A there. I might even try to add a double major with physics so I can make heads or tails of this stuff you do.’

Sheldon wasn’t sure if a B.A. in physics would ever make heads or tails of his work but it would be gratifying to have someone to talk science with. ‘I would be happy to offer my assistance as a tutor. It would be a welcome relief from the babble I have to spout trying to speak like a sorcerer when we rehearse your scenes together.’

Penny rolled her eyes at that after having listened to plenty of Sheldon’s ridiculous Star Trek technobabble. ‘Well, one witch’s ‘Book of Shadows’ is another geek’s explanation of warp theory.’

Sheldon wanted to argue the point but he had to admit the validity of Penny’s assessment. He was often surprised at her turns of logic at unexpected moments. It was one of her most fascinating characteristics to him. ‘Fair point, for a liberal arts major.’

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The year ahead on the show went great for the series and it had won three Emmys at the end of the season including one for Penny as best supporting actress. The increasing fame did bring paparazzi and fans around Los Robles Cottage. Their presence was a nuisance to Sheldon who caused quite a few accidents and unexplained occurrences. The odd coincidences around Penny’s home didn’t go unnoticed by fans of the show. The fan sites had a growing set of theories about Penny and her character on The Coven. Among the theories were several she found funny. It was said Penny was hired because she was a real witch. Her house was cursed and she was a sentinel for some kind of hellmouth. Her personal favorite, the series was meant to hide the existence of real witches and what they were up to and Penny and the show were some kind of disinformation campaign.

There were downsides. Penny felt more confined to the house recently. Bernadette and Penny had come to love the idyllic privacy of the wooded hills around the cottage but now there were often fans and photographers looking to get pictures of Penny and even Bernadette. There were more than a few rumors about their living together in the same house from the bottom feeding tabloids.
‘Hey there, teddy bear, how’s the String Theory coming along?’

‘This is not my work; it is actually an amusing attempt to explain the physics of a world where powers like your Coven are a real occurrence.’ Sheldon had become something of a closet fan of the show, especially whenever Penny was on. They had both been overjoyed when she became a regular for the show in the next season.

‘You can do that? How would you make magic work?’ Penny didn’t think Sheldon had that much interest in magic or witches.

‘You can’t make magic work in the real world, but you can postulate how magic might work in the world of your show assuming the show is consistent in the use of magic within its universe. For instance, this equation is explaining the telekinetic powers your character possesses.’ Sheldon pointed out the long set of equations that explained how Kaley could make things fly about on the show.

Penny walked over to the board and recognized some of the parts from her physics classes, now. She still couldn’t read the stuff but she felt happier that she could pick out some of the bits and pieces. ‘Isn’t that the Planck’s Constant that bothers you in so many TV shows?’

‘Very good, yes it is. To cause movement, there has to be energy transference. I speculated the witches on the show were altering reality at a quantum level rather than exerting biological energy to cause change in the world around them.’

Penny thought she got what Sheldon was saying. ‘You’re saying the telekinesis isn’t really moving something; it’s making the something be somewhere else?’

‘That would be one way to express it, yes.’ Sheldon was surprised at Penny’s growing familiarity with mathematics in spite of complaining how hard it was. It seemed, like her mechanical ability, she had an intuitive grasp of mathematics which was inhibited more by her lack of self-confidence than by any lack of ability.

‘Wow, that’s so cool.’ Penny felt happy Sheldon had put this much thought into her show. She knew the fans spent a lot of time working out the rules of magic and how the spells and everything worked but she had never seen anyone try to actually explain it with real science and math. ‘I’m finishing up the B.A. work in Theater this year and I should have the physics one done next year if the load isn’t too much while working on the show. It kind of feels like being a real witch being able to understand some of the stuff on your boards.’

Sheldon gave some thought to that idea. ‘I believe it is better than that since you have an understanding of how the universe really works, Penny, and you have shown an excellent aptitude for it when you are not selling your ability short.’

Penny smiled and felt a little shy at the praise from Sheldon of all people. Thanks, sweetie, that means a lot to me. But right now, I need to get some running time in. Work and school is making a mush of my head and I need to get out for a run. I just hope the paths are clear. Last time, those two photographers scared the crap out of me when they popped out of the trees. I miss the old quiet around here. Even Bernie is getting bothered by it.’ That reminded Penny of something she wanted to talk about with Sheldon. Howard had proposed to Bernadette last weekend and she had accepted.

‘Sheldon, we talked about appearing only to me and leaving Bernie alone but there might be some changes coming along.’

‘What kind of changes?’ Sheldon looked at Penny walking out to the balcony and followed her over
there.

Penny scanned the countryside looking for people around and hoping for a quiet jog this evening. ‘Howard proposed to Bernadette and she said yes. Bernie and I were talking and she would like to have Howard come live here. The Cottage has plenty of room for three people and you could, maybe, talk to Howard about the arctic and all, get his mind off of blaming himself.’

Sheldon didn’t like change but he had come to find comfort in both women in the house and wanted them both to stay here. Bernadette’s work made an entertaining change from the physics and related science reading he usually did and her work was quite innovative. Penny had become irreplaceable to him so some compromise seemed needed. ‘I think you may be right and it would not be disagreeable to have some male company to relieve me from the endless chatter about shoes and Cosmo’s Most Eligible Bachelors.

‘Thanks, Sheldon. I was thinking we could start slow, maybe, this weekend we could introduce you to Bernadette, first?’ Penny hoped Bernadette was over the start of their living here; she could hold a grudge like no one’s business. ‘Get ready to do some apologizing. I’m not sure she’s over the laundry thing, yet.’

Penny changed into her running clothes and headed downstairs. She met Bernadette on her way out and told her she’d be back from her run in about an hour.

The early evening air was refreshing tonight and the road way was mercifully quiet until she got around the bend and passed a van she knew well from several locations. The photographer driving, Micky, was well known by the whole cast, now, for his persistence to get the perfect candid photo of all the lead actors of the series. She slowed down and waved to him to catch up and asked if she could just have a quiet run tonight and he could come back tomorrow and get a few shots when she was out jogging then. He was nice enough to agree and they set on a time and location near the Cottage for some photos of her warming up for her run.

Penny jogged on a bit further and screamed when she got tackled from behind and pulled off the road.

‘Come on, what are you screaming for? You knew we were meeting here.’

Penny had met one of any actor’s nightmares, a stalker. Her head went to rodeo practice and more than a few fights growing up instead of talking to the nut. She stomped down hard on his foot then dropped to her knees which let her slip out of his arms unexpectedly. She rolled forward and ran a few paces to pick up a heavy branch she saw on the ground.

He was thin and had receding hair and was wearing a green jacket and blue jeans. The guy was nondescript but the knife he pulled out looked far more disturbing. ‘That hurt. What are you hitting me for? You’ve been watching for me for weeks. Your powers should know we are soul mates, Kaley. That is your real name, anyway.’

‘Dude, you have made a serious mistake so why don’t you just jog away and leave me alone.’ Penny hoped he would do that but she wasn’t expecting it.

‘Go away? We’re going away together, Kaley!’

He charged at Penny and she used the branch to bat away the knife and swung up into the guy’s diaphragm taking the wind out of him. A third swing hard at his right knee broke the branch and took him off his feet. The guy screamed in pain.
‘God, I think you broke my knee, what did you do that for? I love you!’ The guy struggled to his feet. He limped from the pain but his leg didn’t seem broken. Penny just hoped he was injured enough for her to run away.

‘Back off, pal. I am not a TV character, I am Penny Queen and if you don’t get lost I will put you somewhere permanently you will not like.’ Penny brandished the unbroken half of the branch ready to fight if she had to and she very much wished she didn’t have to.

The guy started to look at her afraid all of a sudden and began to limp backwards. ‘What are you? What the hell are you?’ He turned and tried to run but his injured leg made him trip and he hit his head hard on a tree root on the ground and knocked himself out.

Penny looked around wondering what he was talking about when she saw her hand with the branch was glowing brilliant fiery blue. She looked at herself and saw she was bathed in the ghostly aura Sheldon would project when he was trying to put a real scare on people. She realized Sheldon was here and let her legs give out from under her.

‘Oh god, Sheldon, thank god you got here.’ Penny hugged herself trying to stop the shakes that she was rocking with.

‘I saw a familiar van passing the house and thought one of those press people might have disturbed your run. I didn’t expect to find a lunatic. You handled him masterfully.’

Penny got out her phone and dialed 911 and reported the situation. They advised her, if it seemed safe, to get the man’s ID but to head home as quickly as possible regardless. She felt too shaken to really move very much. She had never felt this scared from anything in her rodeo days from trick riding to getting thrown or trampled. Horses really weren’t out to stalk and kill you, after all. When she felt calm enough she used the guy’s jacket and belt to make a simple hogtie that would slow him down if he came to before the police got there.

‘I wish I didn’t have to master him at all. Just, don’t talk right now, sweetie, I really wish the cops were here. God, I can’t stop shaking.’ Penny shivered in the evening air and Sheldon felt terrible all he could do was stand unable to really give any comfort to his friend. The police arrived about fifteen minutes later with an ambulance. Penny saw the cruiser’s search light checking the sides of the road as it came along and she stepped out onto the road to flag them down. They secured the prisoner and took a few basic details of what happened from Penny while the EMTs gave her a quick examination to see if she was feeling alright. While the EMTs were checking her over the police officers got the stalker up and brought him to the cruiser. He started screaming that Penny was a real witch and they should be arresting her.

The officers got Penny safely in the car and they helped the EMTs confine the lunatic to a stretcher and deliver him sedated in the ambulance to a sanitarium for review after they logged the arrest. They took Penny home after the ambulance drove off. The officer driving, Patrolman Sawyer, helped Penny out of the car when they got back to the cottage. ‘I guess you’re pretty shaken up. Are you sure you don’t want to go to a hospital and get checked out Ms. Queen?’

Penny shook her head negative, she really just wanted to get home and lock her door. ‘I’m OK, nothing a hot bath and a glass of wine won’t help fix. I am so glad you guys got here so fast, thanks.’

‘I’m glad everything turned out alright. We’ll come by tomorrow to get a full interview about tonight, if that’s alright with you, ma’am.’

Penny agreed and waved good bye to the police. She locked the door and turned around into Bernie running down the stairs and hugging her. ‘What were the police bringing you home for? Is
everything alright?’

Penny started crying as soon as she felt Bernie’s arms around her. ‘No, it’s not, there was a nut out there waiting for me and I had to fight him off and I don’t want you to stop holding me.’

Bernie went back upstairs with Penny and helped her draw a hot bath and got her a glass of wine. She listened to Penny’s story and talked about some of her own bad experiences. After her bath, Penny got her bedclothes on and went to bed. ‘How are you doing, Penny? Would you like some company, tonight?’

‘Please, that would be good.’ Bernadette slipped into bed with her friend and hugged her gently. They slept together for the rest of the week while Penny got her calm back into herself.

Sheldon stood out on the balcony and wondered about his two friends and what they had put up with all their lives. He had listened to their stories and was shocked by how many awful things they heard and saw from men expecting their attention and hating them for not getting it or not getting it the way they wanted. He knew about bullies. He had faced enough of them growing up but none of them had come after him because he was a guy. And, he didn’t have any real harassment after puberty unlike his two friends. He had felt a bit hurt when Penny had asked him not to talk in the woods but after hearing their stories he thought he understood a little why she didn’t want to listen to a guy talking to her just then.
A Quiet Chat

Chapter Summary

Penny and Sheldon talk about their traumas, the stalker and the arctic.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs Muir. Having fun with Big Bang's toys but not worrying about canon just having some fun.

Penny made a quick road to feeling better having Bernadette in the house. They both met Micky when he stopped by for the promised photographs the next day. He appeared just in time to meet the police who were taking Penny’s statement at the time. He’d been shocked at how close he had been to the near tragedy and was going to take a rain check on the photo session after answering a few questions about what he had seen last night. Penny wanted to do something anyway and had Micky come with her and the investigating officers to get some pictures of the area and her after the ordeal. The attack had scared the hell out of her last night but Penny was determined her attacker wasn’t going to scare living out of her today. The police were reluctant to see the crime scene turned into a photo opportunity but Micky saw a news opportunity and bigger possibilities if he compromised a bit and he and Penny settled only he could get pictures of her and the scene and Penny would try to let the story lie as much as possible until the trial.

Howard even came by to say hello when Bernadette told him about the attack and he came see how she was doing which surprised both girls. He was still nervous about the house even though Penny and Bernadette assured him everything was perfectly fine. Penny wondered where Sheldon was through that visit. Howard and Bernadette were going out for dinner and they asked Penny if she wanted to come with them but she said she wanted to stay home. Penny was really wondering where Sheldon had gotten to. The house had been particularly busy today but he hadn’t shown up in any fashion.

Bernadette paused at the front door with some worry about leaving Penny alone after a long day of police and all the talking about last night. ‘You sure you don’t want to come? I could even ask Howard to stay for dinner here. I think he’d do that for the sake of everything you’ve been through, honey.’

Penny was warmed by the concern but she did feel safe having Sheldon here. She hoped he was here somewhere, anyway. ’I’ll be fine, go have fun.’

‘OK, but we’ll make an early night of it, anyway. I’ll be back around 9, OK?’

Penny shook her head because she didn’t want that nut to start overshadowing their lives but she was grateful to know Bernadette and Howard were there for her. ‘Alright, but don’t be afraid to paint the town a bit. I wouldn’t mind a call to say hello, though.’

‘I’ll do that.’ Bernadette and Penny shared a good bye hug and Penny waved them off on their date.
Penny locked the door and turned some of the downstairs lights down and got herself some lavender tea in the kitchen. She checked the downstairs locks just in case while the water boiled for tea. She saw no sign of her ghostly friend downstairs and she really wanted to find out where Sheldon had gotten himself to so she headed up to the study with her drink. She went out onto the balcony and sipped her tea and enjoyed the smell of the evening countryside. ‘Sheldon, honey, everyone is gone now, where have you gone to?’

‘I haven’t gone anywhere; I just thought you wanted some quiet time after last night.’ Sheldon appeared by his precious white board but he wasn’t sure what to talk about. He was still thinking about what Bernadette and Penny had talked about last night and by why Penny might have wanted him to not talk to her last night in the woods. ‘I wasn’t sure how much you wanted a man around the house after last night.’

Penny sighed and smiled a bit. ‘Oh, honey, why would you think that? This is your house, too, Sheldon.’ Penny sat in the wing chair under the Hello Kitty comforter she had for lounging with a good movie and put her tea down on the side table.

Sheldon sat on the sofa and wished he could articulate his feelings as easily as he could mathematics. ‘I was listening to you and Bernadette last night and it was a lot to think about.’

Penny seemed shocked for a second. ‘You were listening in the bathroom? What were you doing in there with us?’

‘Of course, I wasn’t in the bathroom. I am simply aware of the house, especially these rooms since they were the most mine, the place I felt most attached to. The first day you came, I wasn’t really aware you were here until you sat in that chair.’

‘Yeah, I remember hearing a guy’s voice; I thought it was Howard walking around up here.’ Penny remembered that first day and how comfortable she felt up here even with all the wacky stuff around. ‘So, how come you scared Howard instead of me or Bernie?’

‘He brought you both here and you seemed to like it here.’ Sheldon hadn’t really stopped to think why he’d never done anything to Penny to scare her away other than pack up her Care Bears.

‘I do like it here. It feels like I’ve always lived here. I don’t think it would have felt the same without your stuff here, though. So, why did you think I wouldn’t want you around?’

‘Perhaps, I misunderstood your asking me not to talk out in the woods? When you were speaking with Bernadette it sounded like you were exasperated to have men around. I recalled my experience with bullies and abusers growing up but it rather paled to what you and Bernadette described by comparison.’

Penny moved over to the sofa to sit next to her friend. ‘Oh, I couldn’t listen to anyone after that nut got knocked out. I was in too much shock to want anything besides silence. I’m sorry if you thought I didn’t want you around, I didn’t mean that at all, sweetie. Your showing up took all the fight out of him with that glowing trick. And, you’ve helped me with the physics and science stuff, run lines with me for hours; you’ve been one of my best friends. You are exasperating when you get into your finicky just so phases but you are one of the best guys I have ever known, Sheldon.’

Sheldon levitated Penny’s comforter over to the sofa for her. ‘Thank you, Penny, and I have enjoyed your company here greatly. It is odd that I didn’t notice your presence in the house that first day until you came in here. I normally notice such things before people even get in the house. Perhaps, my subconscious was telling me I was here alone too long?’
‘Oh, that’s so sweet, Moonpie. But, that makes me wonder, why are you here? What got you haunting the cottage?’ Penny had read through her books for stuff about ghosts and talked to her psychic. Her psychic had said it was usually some life trauma that kept a spirit bound to a location, something unfinished in life.

‘Penny, only my Meemaw calls me Moonpie. I really am not sure. My work, the arctic question, bringing my murderers to justice, take your pick; I really am not absolutely certain but I do believe some local feral cats may have avenged me.’

‘I was talking to my psychic a little while ago and she said unfinished work or quests can be something that holds spirits to the Earth, maybe this is all about your theories and the arctic thing you can’t solve?’

Sheldon scoffed at the suggestion. ‘Psychics, they are a most ridiculous source for suggestions. Which spirits told her that idea?’

Penny rolled her eyes at Sheldon’s myopic awareness. He still saw himself as a real scientist in a world without the supernatural. ‘I don’t know, but not ones that told her the existence of spirits was ridiculous, I’ll bet.’ Penny smiled at the frustration in Sheldon’s glare after that retort. ‘Look, you’ve been obsessed with that one thing ever since we moved in. It seems like you don’t think of much else besides scaring folks away, Sheldon.’

‘I have always valued my privacy, Penny, even when I was alive. Also, I am bound to the house and property so there was little else to occupy me before you came and made it possible for me to get outside. I never thought anything would bring me to think of it until you came and vandalized my models. You got me thinking of something besides my home and my work.’ Sheldon looked at the new models and comics Penny had bought for him. She was a breath of fresh air that he wondered if he would have appreciated if he had met her when he was alive.

‘Maybe, it’s not the work that needs settling; maybe it’s your ties to the people around it? Tell me about the arctic again. I remember Howard went, so tell me about the other guys, too.’ Penny thought whatever Howard’s guilty feelings were about everything it all kept coming back to whatever happened up north.

Sheldon looked out the balcony doors and recalled the expedition once again. He outlined what the experiment was and got back into the science of what he was trying to prove.

Penny shook her head in rejection. ‘No honey, you’ve told me about the science stuff. You’ve been over that stuff more times than I can count just while Bernie and I have been here. No, tell me about the people, why were they there for you and how were you set there with them?’

Sheldon couldn’t imagine what Penny was getting at since it did nothing to address the magnitude of what he was trying to discover or the depths the failure brought him to. ‘Howard, Raj, and Leonard were there because they were my friends. They were the people I trusted most to help me succeed in my project. Howard is quite good as an engineer in spite of having only an M.A. and it’s criminal he doesn’t apply himself further. Raj really understood my work the best of the group. His grasp of the theory and what I needed to succeed was far ahead of the other two. Sometimes, I wish he had come here since he might have been able to untangle this question with me. He was somewhat more focused on Leonard, though. Leonard is an experimental physicist. He’s not as profound as he imagines himself but he is a competent engineer when it comes to creating the machinery needed to test a theory. Unfortunately, he spent far more of his time bemoaning his inability to pursue his new found relationship with Priya.’

Penny snapped a glance at the new name and its association with a new found relationship. ‘Who
was Priya?"

Sheldon groaned at the memory of Leonard’s whining for months up in the arctic and his frequent bouts with Raj. ‘Priya is Raj’s sister. She is a lawyer who had moved into the LA area from India to work at an international law firm on their Asian business law interests. Raj introduced her to us about a month before we left for the arctic. Leonard and Priya started dating 12 days before we left. Twelve days where Leonard had no work focus and was a constant source of distress with his arguing with Raj who didn’t approve of their dating. Raj is quite protective of his sister and felt Leonard wasn’t suitable boyfriend material. I was inclined to agree with Raj since Leonard’s focus is easily distracted by any pretty girl no matter whether he is in a relationship or not. That has put an end to more than one past relationship of his.’

‘How did Howard feel about all this Priya talk?’

‘Howard and Raj have been best friends for ages. I believe he felt caught in the middle. He wanted to support Leonard as a friend but he, too, was aware of Leonard’s shortcomings so he was reluctant to counter Raj’s objections to their dating. It was soon after we returned that Raj decided to take a job at a rather prestigious university back home in India with his parent’s assistance. They are somewhat wealthy. I believe he took the failure of the experiment quite personally even though he was not affected by the fallout. Howard’s story you have some familiarity with.’

Penny was thinking about a lot, and especially about Priya. Besides the experiment, she was the one thing in this story that tied all four guys together and she tied them together before the experiment. Men bringing about disaster in pursuit of a woman was a theme in drama as old as time, just ask Helen and Paris. ‘Sheldon, I really think we should talk to Howard. I think his guilt might be deeper than just your death. He left his job and so did Raj right after you came back.’

Sheldon nodded. ‘Yes, the experiment was touted to have proven my theory but turned out to be unrepeatable and therefore unsupportable.’

Penny frowned. ‘Yeah, that’s what happened but I don’t think that was the cause of all this. What happened with Leonard when he came back?’

‘I am unsure. He seldom came here after he first met Priya. When we returned from the arctic I saw nothing of him at all except when we were in meetings with President Siebert and Professor Gablehauser over the embarrassment of my early release of results. Leonard was far more concerned to renew his pursuit of Raj’s sister.’

‘So, Leonard didn’t really face any consequences at all from this, just you, Raj, and Howard?’ Penny had watched enough Sherlock and Miss Marple, always look for who benefits most from the crime.

‘Why would he face any consequences, he didn’t release any false data?’ Sheldon had no idea where Penny was going with this.

‘Yes, why would he face any? Haven’t you ever thought about how much Priya is tied up in all this, Sheldon?’

Sheldon looked at Penny and gasped out a laugh. ‘Whatever for, she was in California and had no way to affect the experiment apart from listening to Leonard’s talking in his sleep about her? That’s a memory I wish I could forget.’

‘Sheldon, sweetie, you talk a lot about quantum entanglements in your work but I think you have missed a very obvious one in your arctic data. We really should introduce you to Howard and Bernadette.’
Chapter Summary

Penny has some chats with Sheldon and Bernadette before Howard comes over tomorrow.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs. Muir and having some fun with The Big Bang's toys.

Penny wanted to introduce Sheldon to Bernie and Howard but Sheldon had grown comfortable with the current status quo. Penny was really the only one he really felt comfortable with and he had no desire to reconnect with the living.

‘Sheldon, that’s just going to make all of this harder, don’t you want to find out what really happened in the arctic?’

‘Of course I do, Penny, but you are more than capable of getting to the bottom of this. If you are right about Leonard, it will be up to the living to bring him to justice. I can hardly appear before the entire university board, after all.’ Sheldon wished the solution was as simple as Penny put forth but he didn’t think his presence could really help. Also, he was a little scared of Bernadette. Sheldon still sometimes heard her dark mutterings on laundry night about what she’d do to the gremlins that almost ruined her clothes.

Penny frowned in exasperation. ‘How am I supposed to convince Howard to talk more about the arctic? Bernie has been trying for more than a year to get him to open up about what happened and he won’t budge.’

Sheldon had considered that and got out some old journals. ‘These are my log entries for the weeks between the arctic and my death. There are also some files on my old laptop. I am sure there are sufficient materials there for you to derive the same conclusions which you arrived at through my story.’

Penny glanced through the logs Sheldon kept. The minutiae he could concern himself with astounded Penny but it was very clearly written and easy to find much of what Sheldon had told her. She looked through the laptop files for a few minutes when Sheldon produced his work computer for her. ‘OK, I may be able to use the journals just as well, but I want you to be there, too. Even if they can’t see or hear you, you can still tell me if what Howard says sounds like we are on the right track and he’s not just feeling guilty about your death.’

Around a quarter to nine, Bernadette called to tell Penny she was going to a late movie with Howard unless Penny was feeling nervous home alone. Penny said she was alright but she did ask if Howard would stop by, tomorrow. She thought they could have a chat about the wedding and Howard moving in. They could decide how things might need to shift around to make room for Howard’s
stuff in the house.

When Bernadette and Howard got back from their movie it was a bit after eleven-thirty. They could see the lights on in Penny’s rooms. Bernadette hoped Penny wasn’t feeling nervous home alone. Penny had sounded fine when she called earlier but feelings can change alone at night in a quiet house. Bernadette made sure Howard would come by tomorrow morning to talk about the wedding and stuff and kissed him good night. She got out of the car and waved him off and went inside to see how Penny was doing.

The first floor being dark except for the hall light, Bernie headed up to Penny’s rooms. She was about to knock when she heard what sounded like Penny having an animated chat and then breaking up in laughter. She knocked on the study door and poked her head in. ‘Hey, honey, what are you still doing up?’

‘Hi Bernie! I guess I lost track of time chatting. How was your night?’ Penny only realized then Bernadette couldn’t see Sheldon standing by his comics where he had been reading.

‘Chatting? Who were you chatting with?’ Bernadette was feeling a little concerned that Penny was talking so animatedly to herself.

Sheldon popped up Age of Conan on his open laptop and suggested Penny go with it.

‘Oh, just some Age of Conan people online, some of them are pretty funny when they get in character.’

Bernadette grinned at the game site on the laptop. She didn’t get why Penny liked that game so much but at least she hadn’t been freaking out being home alone or having some kind of stress attack after the other night.

‘How was the evening with Howard? I hope you didn’t rush back here just for me?’ Penny didn’t want Bernadette to think she had to rush back home early just for her.

Bernadette looked at her watch. ‘It’s almost midnight, dearie. You do get lost in that game, don’t you?’

‘I suppose so. There’s a player, Sheldor, who is a lot of fun to play and chat with online even if he’s a little slow sometimes on the quests.’ Penny grinned at Sheldon. He was still put out by how quickly Penny had mastered the game.

‘Oh, sweet Mary, Mother of God, no, not an online romance? Who knows what kind of weirdo is on the other end?’ Bernadette was only half serious but Penny had been out of the dating game for quite a bit. She figured Penny was still figuring that out after having been in a poor marriage with her old Nebraska flame that brought her out to California.

‘Don’t!’ Penny whispered to Sheldon when he started to try something ghostly on Bernadette.

Sheldon pulled back and looked affronted. ‘I am not crazy or weird. My mother had me tested.’ Sheldon walked out onto the balcony in a huff.

‘Don’t what? I’m not saying you’re going to try and find this Sheldor, honey. I do wonder, sometimes, why you don’t go out on a date once in a while. I know you’ve got to be pretty busy with your show and trying to do your classes but it wouldn’t hurt you to get out of this museum of geek culture once in a while.’

Penny shook her head and smiled at her old friend. ‘I’m sorry, Bernie. Maybe, I was playing that
game too long, tonight. I was kind of staying in my QueenP character there for a second. You are right, there are no online romances in sight for me, trust me.’ Penny looked out to the balcony where Sheldon was watching the moon. ‘I just don’t have any real interest in dating. You remember that last jerk I came home with?’

Bernadette chuckled at the memory of the naked actor running and screaming through the house and out the front door. The police had picked him up still going at a dead run over a mile away. ‘I still want to know what you did to scare him like that. I can’t say he didn’t deserve it, though.’

‘Me, too.’ Penny looked fondly at Sheldon while she remembered that night and being so furious with him ruining her date until he showed her the phone with its images Zane had managed to secretly take of her in the shower. Fortunately, nothing had been sent from the phone before Sheldon had stepped in to put a stop to Zane’s filming. ‘I like to think the right guy is somewhere out that balcony door. I’m just not in any hurry to go back on the dating train right now.’

Bernadette was glad to hear the old happy Penny voice slowly coming back. ‘You know, Howard and I stopped by the comic shop, this evening. He wanted to pick up some of his books. They were all talking down there about the news. The attack on you has hit a lot of the stations and the guys at the store were all worried and asking about you. The news reported how you fought him off and all but everyone wanted to know you were alright.’

‘That’s so sweet. Maybe, I’ll stop by tomorrow after Howard comes by. Did you ask him if he would come over?’

‘I did and he really didn’t want to but he will come. This place still gives him the creeps but he does want to see you are getting better.’

‘Great, I would really like to talk about how we can make this place a little more comfortable for the three of us. Also, I was reading some of Sheldon’s old journals and logs. I was kind of hoping to talk to Howard about the arctic. Sheldon was puzzling a lot over that and it really doesn’t sound like the stuff someone suicidal would write. It makes me think Howard is wrong about Sheldon killing himself. It might help take some of the guilt off his shoulders over all that?’

Bernadette scowled a bit in frustration over that. She had tried to get Howard to open up over that but he had never said much more than what he’d said on their first date at that Chinese restaurant. ‘I hope you can get him to talk about it. It would make things so much better if you could take some of that weight off of him. That arctic business is really what’s eating him up and making him miserable enough to stay in a job he hates so much. Anything that would help would be a godsend.’

‘Well, let’s see if we can’t lighten his load together, tomorrow? Let’s get ready for bed, bunky, I’m exhausted.’ Penny insisted Bernadette use the big tub for the trouble of being her stress pillow for another night if she didn’t mind.

Penny went downstairs and made them both some lavender tea and brought Bernadette’s to her in the tub where she was singing an old Polish lullaby in her bubble bath. After that, Penny went out on the balcony where Sheldon was still watching the moon.

‘What’s the matter, Casper?’ Penny sipped her tea and grinned at Sheldon’s growl. He hated being compared to any media made ghost.

‘Besides, your pitiful attempts at pop culture based torture? I guess I wonder like Bernadette why you don’t try dating again.’ Sheldon hadn’t really liked any of Penny’s dates but it had really only been that Zane fellow that had ever been a problem. He certainly didn’t want to see Penny fencing out the world because of a bad apple or two.
Penny sighed. ‘What for? I did the marriage thing and that with someone I thought would be the love of my life.’ Penny remembered how excited she had been leaving Nebraska with Kurt. They had gotten married on the way west in Las Vegas and Penny had believed she’d found the perfect future. Four years of marriage and Kurt's cheating on her broke her heart like she didn’t think possible. Even his death didn’t hurt half as much; his death had made her feel more cheated of getting some kind of justice for her heartbreak than anything else. ‘None of the guys I have dated since I moved here have ever made me feel anything special. I get more satisfaction out of my box of toys these days than any of the guys I’ve been out with.’

Sheldon snorted at that. He had no idea what the box Penny had under the bed was and when he peeked in he was more shocked than the night he found his sister Missy sneaking into the house one night with a boyfriend from high school. ‘I would like to see you happy just as Bernadette does, Penny.’

Penny looked up at the moon with Sheldon and at the spectral color of the land around the house in the moonlight. The bright glow on the trees across from the balcony reminded her of the ghostly aura he used to scare unwanted people off but that aura had never bothered her from the start. In the similar light of the Moon, the blueish glow lighting the countryside made her feel dreamy and contented.

‘I am happy here with you and Bernadette, and Howard, soon. It’s like having a family again. I visit my folks at Christmas but Nebraska really isn’t home anymore.’ Penny looked back inside at the whiteboards and script outlines and science projects scattered among the models and comics and Care Bears and games. ‘I’m happy right here doing what I am doing, Sheldon. I’m happy doing what we are doing together, Moonpie.’ Penny smiled at Sheldon and strolled off to take her shower and get ready for bed.

‘Only my Meemaw calls me Moonpie, Penny.’ Sheldon told her once again. He turned back to look at the moonlit world outside. ‘But, I don’t mind so much if it makes you happy to do so.’
Howard showed up around 10am. Bernadette let him in when he rang the front door bell. ‘Good morning, Howie! How are you, sweetheart?’

He looked like the house was going to bite him when he came through the door. ‘Fine, I hope you and Penny are good, today. Are you sure it’s OK to be here?’

Bernadette glanced around quickly. ‘Sure, we’re fine but why wouldn’t it be OK, here?’ The house had been quiet for so long Bernie had almost forgotten how rough the early weeks had been. She brought Howard into the living room and asked if he wanted coffee or something. She went to get him his drink and called up the stairs to let Penny know Howard was here. Penny called back and asked Bernie if she’d mind getting her a coffee along with theirs.

Upstairs, Penny put some place markers in Sheldon’s logs on passages that put together her theory about Priya being the central catalyst to the arctic disaster and Sheldon’s death. She also tabbed the laptop files she wanted to show Howard and went downstairs to chat.

‘Good morning, Howard!’ Penny found Howard looking around skittishly. She smirked when he jumped at her voice.

‘Hi, Penny, you look great. I’m glad you’re OK.’

‘I am, and Bernadette’s a big help. I don’t think I’d be half as good without her. I’m sorry if worrying about me cut your date short last night.’ Penny sat on an easy chair by the sofa so Bernie and Howard could sit together. ‘I hope you’re not nervous about the house? There’s no trouble here, anymore.

That was mostly true. Sheldon still felt the laundry should be available to him on Saturday at 6pm so he could keep his favorite superhero T-Shirts in fresh, clean condition. Penny had to apologize profusely to Bernadette the first time he’d dumped one of her loads for his JLA shirts to be washed on time. Godiva chocolates were a friendship saver that weekend.

Howard was happy to see Penny looked well after everything. ‘That’s great. I hope there won’t be any more crazy guys up here.’

Penny shrugged and sighed. ‘Me, too, but I’m kind of glad the house has the reputation it does. It
keeps folks at a bit of a distance.’

Bernadette came in from the kitchen with a tray of coffee and cranberry muffins for everyone. ‘Are you talking about the house, again, Howard? Sometimes I see more ghost hunters around than fans but Penny’s right about the reputation. We do get fans of the show a lot but I think some of them come around to see if she really is a witch more than to see an actress.’

They chatted for a while about the wedding plans and using the house for a close family reception before the wedding. Sheldon popped in at the sound of that. ‘Penny, if you think I am going to put up with my home being turned into a music hall, you’ve lost your collective minds.’

‘Oh, Sheldon—’ Penny looked abashed at her friends staring at her addressing an empty chair by the window. ‘Sorry, I mean, Sheldon’s family is very protective of the property. We really should keep anything focused on these downstairs rooms and outside. Maybe we could make a small outdoor pavilion for it’

‘That sounds nice, don’t you think, Bernie?’ Howard wasn’t sure the house would like any more people in it than it currently did.

‘Come on, you don’t think the house will start acting up, do you guys?’ Bernadette was keen to use the house to save some money on the wedding but she didn’t want any freaky accidents to ruin the day, either.

Penny walked over to the window and chair she’d talked in the direction of. ‘I don’t think there will be any real problems for your wedding.’ Sheldon looked scared into a ghost’s version of the next life from the look on Penny’s face as she got closer to him.

‘I wouldn’t think of ruining Bernadette’s wedding, Penny, but I do wish you could keep everything outdoors as much as possible.’

Penny relented a bit on Sheldon with a smile and turned back to the sofa. ‘What do you think of the pavilion, guys?’

‘It would make clean up a lot easier but the set up would be such a nuisance.’ Bernadette was wondering if some kind reception hall would be better, after all.

‘Set up is easy; I could design something and build it with my eyes closed.’ Howard was eager to get to do anything that was building something instead of trying to sell stuff.

Penny threw her support behind Howard. ‘Handy marrying an engineer, isn’t it, Bernie? And there are plenty of folks I know from work who do carpentry and electrical work on the side. Builders are no problem, especially if it’s a temporary structure.’

The idea was growing on Sheldon. If Howard moved in as planned there was likely to be an increase in some form of party activity or other. ‘I would suggest you look into zoning requirements and plan the design with intent to create a permanent structure. It would make it much easier to host various functions such as family affairs like this or job related events with your career, Penny.’

Penny agreed with that thought. ‘Howard, do you think we could make it something permanent for parties and things?’

‘Yeah, that would be great for the wedding, Howie, could you build it in time?’ Bernadette was growing eager for this.

‘Build it in time, sure, that’s no problem, but getting the zoning and building permits done before the
Bernadette was disappointed by that but the long term made it all sound like a good idea. They chatted for a while about Howard moving in and Bernadette thought about all that stuff in the cellar that had been upstairs. ‘All that outdoor building talk reminded me of Sheldon’s stuff downstairs. How about doing some kind of playroom downstairs, Howard? You have a lot of sci-fi stuff; too, you could make a place to have it out and make collectors heaven downstairs.’

Sheldon started to get his finicky face on. ‘Penny, my mommy doesn’t want my stuff disturbed and I, certainly, don’t!’

Howard and Bernadette both noticed how cold the room had gotten all of a sudden. Howard began to fidget thinking the house was going to attack like he’d been expecting all along.

‘I think, that’s a great idea, Bernie, you can have your own Man-cave, Howard. Comics, movies, maybe a home theater, something with a larger screen than the TVs up here. Firefly on the big screen in your own home. I think we could tinker that together, don’t you?’ Penny hoped Sheldon could be enticed with the idea of his favorite series life sized for viewing.

‘Yeah, that would be great, I’d like to have my collections out somewhere but I don’t want to turn your house upside down.’ Howard had noticed the absence of all the collectables downstairs. He was guessing the girls wouldn’t be crazy to have another set of geek things everywhere.

The room started to feel comfortable again after the chill. Penny could tell Sheldon was warming to the idea of a real collector’s room downstairs. ‘Howard does have some fine pieces that wouldn’t look unwell with my superior collection.’

Penny rolled her eyes at the likely diplomatic disputes ahead with her ghostly friend. ‘Just make sure the stuff is well labeled so it doesn’t get confused with Sheldon’s stuff if the family wants to sell his things or something.’

They chatted some more about the wedding and moving in as well as the projects for the basement and the pavilion. They took a look around the basement and Howard took a few measurements to get a general idea of what might be done to fix it up. They also went back outside to look at using the yard area for an outdoor reception. Howard seemed to be getting comfortable with the idea of moving in with all the talk about rebuilding. Penny suggested a look around upstairs as well to see what they might want to do there. Bernadette’s bedroom was a good size and its walk in closet space was generous enough for the two of them. Sheldon had planned the room around having his Meemaw, sister, or mother all together come along. Along with the sitting room, it made a comfortable home space for Bernadette and Howard.

Penny felt Howard seemed pretty OK with the house so she wanted to bring up the arctic business. ‘Howard, I’d like you to look at something in my study.’ Penny started down the hall to her rooms but they stopped when they didn’t hear Howard coming along.

‘In there, are you sure that’s alright? Sheldon never let anyone in there.’ Howard had almost never seen the rooms. Sheldon kept them strictly to himself when he was alive and after his death, Howard seldom got the chance to get anyone to the second floor much less to Sheldon’s old rooms.

Bernadette took his hand and coaxed him along. ‘Of course it’s fine, Penny and I are in there all the time. Come on, Howie.’

‘Couldn’t we just go downstairs and get some more coffee?’ Howard was getting more anxious by the second.
Penny tried to get him to see the bigger picture. ‘Howard, you are planning to move in here with Bernadette. You can’t be jumping out of your skin every second. It will be alright.’

‘Penny, you never knew Sheldon, he was intense on stuff like his room.’

Penny smiled and just shook her head. ‘I want to know about one thing, or I should say one person, and I think that person is at the bottom of the house’s troubles and yours.’

‘What do you mean?’ Howard and Bernadette were both wondering who Penny might know that could be that important.

‘Priya.’ Bernadette had never heard the name before but she felt Howard clench her hand and the look of shock on his face told her that name did mean something to him.

‘Howie, who is Priya?’ Bernadette wanted to know who this person was that seemed to shock her fiancé so badly.

‘Priya is the sister of one of Howard’s friends, Rajesh Koothrappali. She got involved with another friend of Howard’s, Leonard Hofstadter. All together with Sheldon, they make up what went wrong in the arctic and I think Howard knows a great deal more that I would like to know for Sheldon’s sake and for his own peace of mind.’

‘Guys, there’s nothing to know, really, I should go.’ Howard tried to get his hand free from Bernadette but she had a death grip on his hand.

‘Howard, you do know something. You are going to talk, buster. You’ve been half crazy with guilt over this house and losing your job ever since I met you and it can’t go on like this. You run out that door, Howard, and you can kiss this marriage good bye because it won’t survive the weight of that guilt going on.’ Bernadette pulled him towards the study door and Howard looked at the entrance like a gallows.

‘Why don’t you ask Penny? It sounds like she knows everything.’ Howard wished he hadn’t come here. Right now, Penny seemed scarier than the house ever did.

‘Howard, I want to help you, both of you, but all I have are theories right now, I need facts. You have those facts and they will weigh you down every day you try to hide from them. Bernie is right, a marriage cannot survive on secrets.’ Penny walked into the study where she saw Sheldon standing in the balcony doorway. He looked shocked that Penny’s theory of what went wrong in the arctic seemed to be a viable explanation for everything.

Penny sat in the wing chair and Bernadette and Howard sat on the sofa. Howard looked at the journals on the table by Penny’s hand and recognized the titles. Sheldon had kept them meticulously up in the arctic. ‘I guess you put all that together from the journals? Sheldon, yeah, Sheldon never would have thought of Priya as a cause of anything. He was always straight up science. Emotions just never came into anything for him. At least that’s what he always said.’

Penny picked up one of the journals and leafed through it. ‘I have theories, like I said, but take me through the facts. Priya came to LA to join a law firm, Raj introduced you all to her. Leonard started dating her a couple of weeks before you left. The journals say Leonard was more focused on her than the experiment. Raj spent a lot of his time arguing with Leonard over Priya and was also not as helpful as he might have been as a result. I know you supported Raj over Leonard because he was less than faithful when it came to relationships. While you were up there, the team found the proof of Sheldon’s theories that he was looking for but when you came back that proof was refuted because it couldn’t be replicated. It was assumed something electronic or mechanical must have interfered with
the detection equipment but Sheldon could never figure out what. It led to a public disgrace for him. You and Raj left Caltech, and Leonard is still there or was when Sheldon died. One dead, two disgraced or at least removed from their jobs, and one sitting like nothing happened. What can you fill in for me?’

Penny looked like one of Agatha Christie’s detectives about to send a criminal to the gallows from Howard’s perspective. He glanced at Bernadette and he didn’t feel a lot more warmth there at the moment. ‘I was psyched when we got back. It would have been huge. Raj wasn’t so excited and he wanted Sheldon to hold off on any announcements. Leonard backed Sheldon because he just wanted to get back to LA and Priya. I thought Raj and Leonard must have settled on him dating Priya because he didn’t argue about it anymore. Sheldon made his announcement as soon as he could but in the week it took us to get back from Point Barrow the experiment was looking suspect. When we got back to Caltech, people were asking uncomfortable questions about the validity of the work and things went downhill from there.’

Howard asked if he could get some water and Bernadette got him a glass. He held it nervously while he drank. ‘I guess the journals talk about all that?’ Penny nodded and Howard went on. ‘During all of it Raj came over to my place. He told me he made a deal with Leonard. Leonard had sabotaged the results somehow to give positive results so they could get back. He told Raj he could prove to Priya it was Raj’s idea so he could get back and keep him and Priya from dating. He knew that would stop him more than a job threat. Raj almost worships Priya so he just tried to keep Sheldon from publishing anything. I tried confronting Leonard but he just said he could open up the sabotage and blame the whole thing on me just as easily as opening a can of tuna. That’s when it hit me how Leonard had sabotaged the results. He had some kind of electric can opener, no idea why at the time other than laziness but I guessed it gave off a frequency that made hits on the detector. He built those detectors so he should have known that was possible right from the start. Maybe, it was his plan before we even left so he could get back to Priya?’

Howard could feel the room getting eerily cold all the while he was speaking but he kept on. ‘Raj and I went to tell Sheldon. We thought he might be able to think of something but we found him dead outside there, under that balcony. We didn’t know what to do. We both thought he might have killed himself over the failure. It was like the world fell apart around us. Raj didn’t want to lose Priya but without the can opener and Leonard’s data we had nothing but our word against his. I left Caltech because of it but the stigma of being part of Sheldon’s team stuck with me because I wouldn’t distance myself from it. Raj went back home for pretty much the same reasons. Leonard married Priya and I haven’t seen either of them since the funeral. neither has Raj or his family, I don’t think.’

Penny looked over at Sheldon and saw the outrage and disbelief painted on his face. He never accepted Penny’s theory because he and the guys were friends and scientists. He never counted on emotions like jealousy and envy and spite coming in to disturb his world of pristine math and science. Penny was crying and walked over to the window to be near her friend. ‘I’m sorry, Sheldon. I’m sorry I was right.’

‘Never be sorry about confirming a theory with solid evidence, Penny. You never betrayed anyone and neither did Howard or Raj. I never would have thought of it, never. I understand why you didn’t want to hear anything that night.’ Sheldon disappeared looking like the dead.

Bernadette was shocked by the story. She knew what claiming success on faulty results could do to a career but to have those faulty results come from sabotage was like sacrilege. ‘Jesus, Howard, how have you lived with this?’

‘Guys, let’s get out of here. There’s a little too much past in here, please?’ Howard didn’t know
where he wanted to go except away from so much of Sheldon’s stuff. Right now, it just reminded him of that day outside when everything went wrong.

Bernadette and Howard went downstairs to get some more coffee in the kitchen while Penny stayed in the study to put away Sheldon’s logs in their secure safe. She picked up Sheldon's laptop with its notes and Penny’s ideas about the arctic to bring downstairs to get more details about everything. The way to get to Leonard went through Priya. She hoped Howard still kept in contact with Raj. He sounded like someone that needed some absolution from this mess just as much as Howard did. The more she heard of Leonard, he sounded even worse than Kurt. At least he supported her career instead of sabotaging it, if nothing else. She suspected Priya might be less in Leonard's camp than Howard and Raj suspected by this time if he was anything like the guys had described him being.

Penny sat down in the wing chair and hugged herself and thought about the day she found out Kurt had been cheating on her. Sheldon’s face had held that same heartbreak she had felt burning her understanding of the world away. She didn’t really grasp the career implications that hit Sheldon like Bernadette did but she knew about the betrayal of someone that you thought was your best friend in life. She and Sheldon had both thought they were on the brink of all their dreams coming true. Then, the people they trusted most had tossed away their love and trust and had tossed them aside like broken toys. It wasn’t fair and Penny knew she could never get justice for Kurt cheating on her but she was sure she could get some for Sheldon and maybe that would be a little like justice for her heartbreak, too.
Penny found Howard and Bernadette in the kitchen. Howard was still shaken up by telling what he knew about Sheldon and the arctic but he was talking more openly. He had needed to be able to tell someone about it. He and Raj had seldom talked much about that day they found Sheldon dead and it had eaten at them both over the years. Howard seemed to have found a little relief from the admission upstairs. Penny chatted with Howard a bit more about Leonard, his likes and dislikes, places he hung out but she really wanted to know more about Priya. She didn’t expect Howard to be able to tell her much since he hadn’t kept in touch with Leonard or Priya since the funeral. She assumed Raj would be able to tell her more, at least about Priya, so she asked Howard to arrange a Skype meeting so they could talk about the arctic if Raj was up for it. Penny was hoping Raj would want to unburden himself as much as Howard seemed to.

After talking with Howard and Bernadette, Penny wanted to go to the comic store. She wanted to thank them for their concern after the attack and to get some little pick me up for Sheldon though she could imagine it wouldn’t feel all that lightening to him right away. On the drive she took a few calls about the upcoming season of The Coven from the publicists. They wanted to schedule some promo interviews for the show. She also got a call from the police asking if she could come for some interviews and the DA’s office wanted to schedule a time to discuss the case. Penny started to wish she could disappear like Sheldon by the time she got to the store.

The shop was quiet with only a few regulars looking through the back issues. Penny had taken to coming on these quiet off days for Sheldon’s comics. He had been keen on resuming new comic day with her but when he saw Penny encounter the number of fans that could intervene in her progress he understood her preference to come when she could make a quiet entrance and exit.

‘Hey, Stuart, how are you doing?’ Penny was happy the place was just the regulars. She didn’t really feel up to dealing with fans quite yet.

‘Penny, it’s great to see you!’ Stuart came over to greet her. Lonely Larry and Captain Sweatpants came over too to wish her well after the story came out.

‘Thanks guys, I’m glad to see you guys too after everything. Howard came by and told me you asked about me so I had to come down and thank you all.’ Penny gave each a hug and they all sat
around for a bit in Stuart’s couch section.

They all wanted to know what happened but Penny said a lot of it was still part of the police investigation so she didn’t want to go into details. ‘Basically, the guy was a nut. He thought I was really Kaley Jenkins and a witch. Don’t ever let anyone make you feel you’re weird because you guys are Pasadena’s finest. That guy was honest to goodness wacko.’

Stuart wondered if the show brought a lot of that stuff. ‘Do you get many folks thinking the show and cast are real?’

‘I guess it’s a little like some of your shows. We are getting some who really get into figuring out the details. Most of them just have fun with it like you guys, but there are just some who are looking for a rabbit hole to go down.’

Captain Sweatpants nodded at that. ‘I met some like that at the last San Diego Comic Con; they were two guys getting intense on some of the Cosplayers with pictures and hands. Security had to kick them out twice. They finally had to have them arrested.’

Stuart wanted to keep the conversation from going downhill in case Penny was uncomfortable dwelling on crazy fans. ‘I saw on the show’s website that they have a comic book coming out next month. Is there any chance you could come down to promote it?’

Penny shrugged and looked hopeful. ‘They have Comic Con stuff ready to go. The cast are going to some conventions soon but I’m going to have to skip that because of the nut and the court stuff over the case. We’ll all be at San Diego for the new season but if you call the marketing folks they can probably set you up with something. I can call them, too, and say I’d be willing to come down for a signing or two. Some of the other cast might as well.’

They chatted for a few minutes more and then Penny picked up a few comics Sheldon had on order. She gave the guys another thank you hug and started out on her way. She gave Stuart the contact information for Mary Livingstone so he could look into doing a store promotion. She also sent a private text to Mary throwing her enthusiasm behind the idea. She got back home to find Howard and Bernadette had left a note that they’d gone out for a walk to get some air and would be back to go out for dinner around 6 if Penny wanted to come with them. She decided to stay home after they came in from their walk and let them have some more private time.

‘We don’t mind the company, Penny, you should come.’ Howard seemed a little less nervous about the house but neither he nor Bernadette could figure why she felt so at home there, especially up in her study.

‘No, that’s alright. I have to look over some promo materials for the show and Stuart wants to do some kind of signing thing for the new comic about the series that’s coming out. That will keep me busy for a while, you guys go have fun.’

Howard went out to start up the car and Bernadette wanted to make sure Penny wasn’t just staying in for them. ‘We don’t mind you coming, Penny, it’s not really like a date. I think Howard is just happy he can talk about the arctic with someone. He and Raj don’t really think back on it, I guess. It brings up stuff they felt they couldn’t do anything about. You know, Howard texted Raj and we got a text back on the walk and he’s up for that Skype call this weekend. I think he might need to talk about this just as much as Howard.’

Penny was relieved Howard was opening up more. It would be better for both him and Bernadette. ‘I’m fine here, I have plenty to do. You guys go have a good time and don’t let him think about Sheldon dying. I’ve read enough of the journals and stuff. He wasn’t anywhere near suicidal. I am
sure whatever happened was just a freak accident. He’s got nothing to blame himself for. Talking about it might just get him thinking better for himself. I’m sure Sheldon wouldn’t want him wallowing in guilt.’

Bernadette agreed with that but she was still concerned for Penny. ‘Thanks, I’ll tell him but you should think about getting out of here, too. You keep talking about Sheldon like he’s here and alive sometimes. It’s kind of weird.’

Penny laughed a bit at that and shrugged. ‘I guess I got kind of caught up in playing detective and going through Sheldon’s stuff. I’m sure I won’t be so stuck on being here and dwelling on Sheldon when the show gets started back up.’ She gave Bernadette a hug and reminded her Howard was waiting outside. ‘He may be feeling a little better but I guess he’d like to get away from the house. At least for tonight.’

Penny gave Bernadette another hug good bye and went upstairs after she left. She got out a bottle of wine from the small wine cabinet she and Bernie had bought for the upstairs and poured herself a Zinfandel and went out on the balcony.

‘Are you calling it a day, Penny?’ Sheldon had been waiting for some quiet in the house before talking to Penny. The confirmation of Penny’s theory was so very altering to his understanding of everything he was finding it hard to put into words.

‘It’s been a hell of a day for everyone, especially Howard and you. How are you doing, Moonpie?’

Sheldon sighed and looked pale. ‘Only Meemaw calls me that but right now, I’m glad to hear it from you. I wish I could hear her say it because I feel like I was seven again after surviving another day of bullies. I just can’t believe it.’

Penny led them back in and stretched out on the sofa under her Hello Kitty comforter with her wine and Sheldon sat in the wing chair. ‘How did you and Leonard meet? Were you just work friends?’

Sheldon shook his head. ‘No, actually, we were roommates for a long time. We used to live down on N. Los Robles Ave. in an apartment down there. When I saw this place for sale, I named it after the old apartment and Leonard even lived here for a while in Bernadette’s room. He didn’t really like living outside town like this so he moved back to the old building.’

‘Did you guys get along as roommates?’ Penny was curious why Leonard would have sabotaged Sheldon and if it was only because of Priya.

‘I had thought so, before now, but he wasn’t always an easy roommate.’ Sheldon looked at Penny with some hauteur when she snorted her wine in a mixed cough and chuckle after that observation. ‘Was that display indicative that I am less than accommodating, Penny?’

‘Oh, no, you’re a peach. I’m sure it was all him.’ Penny rolled her eyes and took another careful sip of her wine.

‘As you should be.’ Sheldon just didn’t catch sarcasm so he went on with his tale. ‘We did quite a bit together along with Howard and Raj. Leonard seemed happy with our roommate status but he did often chafe against our roommate agreement; mostly, when it involved his never ending quest for coitus whenever an attractive woman was in sight. He was positively an embarrassment when he met my sister, Missy.’

Sheldon walked over to his fire safe and opened it to take out a photo album. ‘I have never shared this with you, Penny, it is my family album. This is Missy, we are twins.’
Penny looked at the strikingly beautiful dark haired woman. She wondered if she was a genius like Sheldon. ‘Is she a scientist like you?’

‘Good heavens, no, one would never guess we were related by intellect, though she is far more intelligent than our older brother, George.’ Sheldon took Penny through the pictures and sounded happy to recall them until he came across a picture that had Leonard in it. It was from a time that his Meemaw had come to visit in Pasadena. One of the reasons Sheldon wanted this house was because he hoped he could take care of her if she wanted to give up tending her own house. Now, though, the picture just brought back bad memories and Sheldon removed it from the album.

‘Was that a happy picture, Sheldon? Happy before all this came out from Howard?’

Sheldon looked at the photo and thought about his Meemaw and that week she’d spent with him and Leonard. ‘It was at the time but it doesn’t make me feel happy at the moment.’

‘Yeah, I get that. I couldn’t get rid of a lot of Kurt stuff fast enough but be sure throwing things out are what you want. Wait a minute.’ Penny went in the bedroom and brought back her own album. Sheldon was surprised to see a number of pictures of Kurt in Nebraska and when they first moved to California. ‘I don’t look at these much, it does still hurt, but we did have good days, too. Don’t let what Leonard did ruin all those good memories, even the ones he was part of. He threw them away but that doesn’t mean you have to, too. I guess it’s like those models I broke, don’t let the breaking make you love the memories less.’

Sheldon considered Penny’s advice. ‘Yes, but you weren’t trying to hurt me that night, you were trying to protect yourself from an unknown intruder so far as you knew. And, you weren’t a friend lashing out just because I was in the way of your pursuit of a paramour.’

‘That’s true but I kept some of those Kurt pictures because we weren’t always bad. Funny thing, this is the first time I’ve looked at those pictures since I moved in here. Life moves on, Sheldon, and there is always something new. Don’t let the good parts of the past with Leonard be ruined by the bad later. That just closes off your heart when someone new comes along.’ Penny put the albums in Sheldon’s fire safe and got back on the couch.

‘I’m dead, Penny, so there really isn’t anything new coming into my life.’ Sheldon looked forlorn at Penny only then realizing how much he wished he was alive again so he could deal with Leonard.

‘Come on, Sheldor!’ Penny sat up on the couch. She wasn’t going to let Sheldon mope any more than Bernie was going to let Howard brood over Leonard. ‘Look what we’ve done together. I am getting my degrees in school thanks to you, you were practically an acting couch for my part on the show, and now we are getting to real answers to what went wrong in the arctic. We are not going to let death put a stop to Sheldor and QueenP, are you?’

Sheldon smiled a little lighter at Penny’s enthusiasm. He wished he had known her when he was alive. Meemaw would have loved meeting her. ‘You are an incorrigible influence, Penny, but yes, we won’t let death stop us.’

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Penny and Sheldon spent much of the week discussing the arctic and Leonard in light of the revelations from Howard. Penny was stunned at the scale of effect on Sheldon’s life that was made by the false data. That it was created by sabotage she could understand why Bernadette felt almost betrayed by the event herself. Being a scientist, too, Bernie was especially sensitive to the integrity of the work. She felt very upset for Howard since that betrayal had sent his whole career into a tailspin and landed him in a job he had no gift for trying to make ends meet. On a better note for Penny and
especially Bernadette, opening up about everything did make Howard a lot less jumpy and more comfortable coming to the house. He threw himself into planning the pavilion for the wedding and the collectors room in the basement with glee. It wasn’t building spacecraft but it was designing and building stuff which is what he loved most.

When the weekend came around for the skype call with Raj, they set up the call in the library at 8am because of the time difference, 8pm in India. Howard asked to talk to Raj first before he introduced Penny and Bernadette. He explained about Raj’s anxieties and he wanted to make sure this call wouldn’t get fouled up in mistranslation, so to speak.

‘Hey Raj, good to see you again! What is happening with you?’ Howard hadn’t talked to Raj in a couple of weeks so he did want to get in a little catch up chat before jumping into a return to the arctic.

‘Dude, it is so good you called, today. I just got engaged to an old neighborhood friend, Lalita Gupta.’ Raj gave Howard a quick rundown on his sometime nemesis from his childhood who had since become a dentist and much less combative with Rajesh.

‘Congratulations, man, I got engaged not too long ago, myself, and her name is Bernadette Rostenkowski. Actually, I’m calling from her place. She and a friend are living in, you won’t believe this—’

Howard was cut off by Raj’s shocked exclamation. He’d recognized the room Howard was speaking from. ‘Howard, is your fiancé living in Sheldon’s old house?’

Howard nodded in equal amazement. ‘Yeah, it shocked me when she and her friend Penny wanted to rent the place. Remember all the stories about it being haunted? I even saw some scary stuff. Bernadette said her friend Penny had done some kind of New Age magic on the place and all the weird creepy stuff just stopped happening. At least, it stopped happening in the house at any rate.’

‘That’s some magic after all the stories you told me. Is Penny some kind of witch or something?’

Howard had to laugh at the irony of the question. ‘No, but she plays one on TV. She’s Penny Queen from ‘The Coven’.’

‘What? Oh, man, Lalita is going to be so mad she isn’t here for this call. That’s one of her favorite shows. We have to schedule another call when she’s here, man, she’d love to say hi to Kaley.’

Howard looked over at Penny and she smiled and whispered it would be fine so Howard told Raj to set up a time when they could all sit down for a chat. ‘I guess you don’t have as many anxieties talking to pretty girls anymore, then?’

‘Well, it’s easier to talk than before because Lalita makes me feel so much better about everything that I don’t feel so tongue tied anymore.’

Howard was happy Raj sounded like he was doing well after everything that happened from the arctic fallout. ‘Speaking of talking to girls then how would you like to say hello to Bernadette and Penny? They really wanted to talk to you, especially Penny. Like we talked about earlier, she’s taken a real interest in what happened to Sheldon and she wanted to talk to you a bit about what happened and about Priya.’

Raj looked pretty conflicted for a second between wanting to meet both Howard’s fiancé and the famous TV star and his insecurities over the arctic and with the separation from Priya. Penny wanted to take this slow so she whispered to Bernadette to take the first round and talk to Raj about the
engagement and all. She thought it would be better to chat about some more upbeat stuff before jumping into heavier issues.

Bernadette and Howard had a happy chat with Raj over their dating and engagement tales and Bernadette was eager to get to know Raj’s fiancé by the end of their chat. After a little more light hearted conversation, Bernadette moved the talk into the arctic issue. She was eager to help Howard get this stuff behind him and she wanted to get the unfair smearing of Sheldon’s work cleaned up because she felt professionally insulted by the sabotage as well as personally invested by the effect it all had on Howard. She called Penny over and Raj almost had a return to his anxiety laden silence from coming face to face with the actress he’d seen on TV so many times thanks to his fiancé.

Penny took it slow by starting off with finding out about Lalita. Raj brought over a picture of Lalita for Penny and all to see. Sheldon took that moment to make his presence known. ‘Oh, dear Lord, Raj is marrying Princess Panchali!’

‘Princess Panchali?’ Penny looked a bit abashed at blurting that out from surprise at Sheldon’s sudden appearance.

‘She’s a character from an Indian Folktale that I loved as a child, my mother used to read it to me when I was sick.’ Penny nodded at Sheldon’s explanation and excused her exclamation to Raj by telling him about the folk tale.

‘Really, I will have to look the story up after this. Lalita will love that Penny Queen compared her to an Indian Princess.’ Raj hadn’t heard the folk tale but he had always been more interested in science fiction as a child than romantic folk tales.

‘Speaking of tales, you know Howard told us about Leonard and his sabotage. I’m sorry all that had to involve your sister, too. I don’t expect talking to Leonard to do any good, especially after all this time, but have you ever talked to Priya about it?’ Penny was wondering if Raj had ever told Priya about the arctic in any way.

‘No, I haven’t. I have hardly spoken to her since I came back to India. I don’t know why but she has been drifting away from us all over the years since she married Leonard.’ Raj’s sadness from missing his sister was very clear in his voice.

‘Haven’t you wanted to try?’

‘Sure, but she’s a lawyer, and she hates any feeling someone is pushing her in a direction she doesn’t want to go. She would need proof and that would mean more than just my say so or Howard’s. She would want real evidence but so would I in her shoes.’ Raj sounded defeated over that fact like he’d mulled it daily for years.

Penny could understand that reason. If someone had come out of the blue and told her Kurt had been cheating on her before she had gotten any proof she would never have taken it seriously. She guessed Priya might be even harder to convince without the solid evidence a lawyer’s mind is used to demanding. ‘Do you think she’s been drifting away because she felt some kind of pressure from your family, maybe about her marriage? Howard has told us you really didn’t want to see her get involved with Leonard.’

Raj wrung his hands a bit and looked like he was trying to figure something too knotty to explain in words. ‘Yeah, I was against it because I didn’t think Leonard could be faithful to her. She just put that down to typical jealous brother nonsense. It didn’t help that my parents didn’t like her dating someone who was not Indian. That was exactly the kind of pressure she would always balk against. I am sure she doesn’t want to hear any lectures on that score but I don’t think our parents care about
that anymore after all this time. They just want to hear from her and so would I. Sheldon died over the arctic failure but in some ways it feels like Priya did, too.’

Penny and Raj talked for a while longer about Priya and she suggested his sister would probably really want to hear about his marriage.

‘I guess she would, she used to help Lalita beat me up. She would have found our engagement all so very funny. I’d love to hear her laugh about it.’

‘You should try to get in touch with her and tell her then, better yet, make part of a honeymoon trip here and meet her. Is she still friends with Lalita? Penny hoped the two women had kept in touch.

‘I don’t think they talked much after Priya moved to the UK to study law but I think they would enjoy hearing from each other. It might feel less like family pressure to Priya if it were Lalita reaching out?’ The conversation was cut short by Lalita arriving and seeing the face on screen in a skype chat.

‘Rajesh Koothrappali! How could you have a conversation with my favorite actress and not tell me?’ Lalita came into frame and looked aghast. ‘Oh, ah, I’m so sorry Ms Queen, god, I love your show, what is Raj doing talking to you?’

Penny grinned at the familiar fan struck reaction and gave a short explanation of what was going on. Lalita was shocked by the whole story but she was quite ready to help out her fiancé and her old friend bridge the past. When Raj suggested taking some of their honeymoon time to go to the US and help out meeting Priya she agreed quickly. The chance to help out family was very important to her and so was the chance to meet a favorite actress in person. Sheldon was delighted the image of a fairy tale princess was going to be staying in his home in the coming months when plans were more settled.
Weddings, Waltzes, and Comics

Chapter Summary

Bernie gets married and Penny goes dancing.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs. Muir. Not trying to be canon just playing with Big Bang's toys.

The work on the pavilion and the collector’s room got started in earnest. Since the pavilion was temporary, its work went very quickly. The basement work went quite a bit longer because Bernadette wanted to fix up a proper laundry room and a downstairs workshop and office for Howard and all his tools and equipment.

Sheldon took a particular interest in following the work downstairs and he was impressed by how well Penny could handle the wiring and woodwork. Howard was even more impressed that Penny hardly ever checked the blue prints he made. When he asked her about a particularly complex section he was stunned that she could rattle off the many measurements and pieces involved after having glanced at the design in the morning for little more than a minute. Penny just rolled her eyes at that and let Howard get back to work on the pavilion outside where Bernadette had a few suggestions.

Sheldon was equally curious about that capacity ever since Penny had moved in. ‘Penny, have you ever paid much attention to plans when you build something?’

‘sure, I pay attention to the plans; I read those, didn’t I?’ Penny went on with the wiring work while talking to Sheldon.

‘I would say you casually glanced at them rather than read them. Have you ever looked at a set of plans more than once or twice?’

‘What for, Sheldon, plans like that show you what to do pretty easy if they’re made well.’

Penny finished off the work she was doing and started putting the electrical tools away in the box with surprising neatness in Sheldon’s opinion considering her usual offhand way with things. ‘Was that tractor you built as a child done as easily as this job?’

‘I guess so, I never thought about it. What’s so special about it? It’s not like it’s hard to follow a manual or do you think a girl can’t handle something like that?’

Sheldon shook his head in quick denial. ‘Oh, no, actually, I find most people rather daunted by a set of blueprints or manuals for assembly but not you. I have noticed that you tend to downplay your intelligence, Penny, yet when you are focused on an interest or a task you desire to complete well, you show an extraordinary capacity for memory and ability to apply that knowledge.’
‘It never seemed so special but it used to make my mom crazy. I spent so much time on stuff like this as a kid. She thought it was stuff for guys. I guess a lot of the guys I knew felt the same. Even Kurt used to get bugged when I tried to help him with stuff like this.’ Penny shrugged feeling a little resigned with that.

Sheldon felt concerned that Penny had learned to hide her intelligence under a dumb blonde blanket. ‘Penny, you really should not let such feelings from guys make you suppress your natural abilities. You are capable of far more than just putting a play room together. You have a natural gift for mathematics and engineering that you have neglected because you have sought to let others feel superior to you due to a social convention that girls shouldn’t excel at those things.’

Penny thought about what Sheldon had said and she had to admit there was a lot of truth to what he said. She had even taken advantage of being the pretty airhead more than a few times to get guys to do things for her that she could have done faster and better herself. ‘You think I should stop playing the ditz so often?’

Sheldon smiled and looked at the nearly finished collector’s room. ‘Look around, Howard guessed it would take two to three days to finish the electrical work that you managed in half a day. You finished your theater degree and are close to completing your physics degree both within three years combining your community college time and your UCLA time while being employed full time as a successful award winning actress. It’s quite natural to not notice your own abilities as being other than natural but from an outside perspective your mind is brilliant, Penny, compared to most anyone. I think it is a shame life made you feel you ever had to play the ditz at all much less to please others.’

Penny put the tool case back in the tool cabinet and brushed her hands along its cover remembering the first time she ever got to use one. She’d been five and her father was working on the family car. He taught her all the tool names while he worked so she could hand them to him. She had loved the tools and working with her father. She got her dress so filthy her mother complained for days about having to throw it out. Penny hadn’t cared until the next time when her dad told her not to help because she shouldn’t get her new dress covered in grease and oil again. She’d hated that dress after that. She couldn’t help tearing up over what Sheldon said.

Sheldon felt confused when he heard Penny sniffing and wiping her eyes. ‘I am sorry, Penny, have I upset you?’

‘No, sweetie, not at all, that was one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me, Sheldon. Thank you.’

Sheldon watched Penny go up the cellar steps just as mystified by human emotions now as he was when he was alive but he was glad he had made Penny feel happy even if the crying confused him.

+++ At the end of the month, Howard and Bernadette had their wedding. Penny was Maid of Honor for the ceremony and she had a wonderful time for the most part. There were the usual drunken relatives that stayed too long and drank too much but Sheldon made a superb invisible bouncer. Her biggest enjoyment was helping Elizabeth, the intern from the studio, do the filming of the wedding and the reception afterwards. She was a film student working over the summer on film jobs as part of her course work on directing and production. Penny scandalized Bernadette when she changed out of her bridesmaid dress into black jeans and Sheldon’s old Green Lantern t-shirt to help Elizabeth after the opening dance sets at the reception. She was surprised when Howard stepped in to play peacemaker.

‘It’s OK, Bernie, Penny is having a good time, let her be.’
Bernadette rolled her eyes and looked at the bride’s maids. ‘How do you think it looks when my Maid of Honor is dressed like a roadie from a rock concert?’

‘Well, most folks are acting surprised she isn’t some kind of Hollywood diva upstaging everything. Come on, if she was dressed up, everyone would be paying more attention to ‘Penny Queen, TV Star’ than the real star of this wedding, you.’

Bernadette punched Howard. ‘Stop acting so sweet, smart, and romantic, Romeo, but I guess you are right. I just thought, you know, weddings, maybe she’d find someone?’

Howard watched Penny and Elizabeth going over one of the fancier cameras for night photography. ‘After watching the way she handled building the basement, I think she already has. Look at her with Elizabeth; she’s had more fun learning about that equipment than she’s had all day. She’s into anything new, anything that’s unknown. It’s like she doesn’t know the words back down when there’s something unexpected or new.’

‘How do you mean?’ Bernadette really didn’t understand Penny sometimes. It wasn’t just the New Age stuff, it was the sports, and the acting, and the physics, and the building. Every time she thought she understood Penny something unexpected blossomed, especially since they’d moved here to the cottage.

‘Starting with moving here? No one wanted to come near this place, she took over and nothing bizarre has happened since. I would be terrified after that attack she went through but she hardly missed a day to go out jogging after that. She has gone into the arctic stuff and she’s got Raj and me believing we might be able to do something to fix that mess. She loves a challenge more than anything else. I’ve seen some of her home movies of her rodeo riding and trick riding, have you ever watched that stuff? You’d have to be crazy to try some of the stunts she did in those competitions.’

‘I guess, it’s just I’d like to see her find someone and be happy.’ Bernadette wondered if Penny was really just hung up on Kurt after all these years in spite of the infidelity.

‘I’d say she looks pretty happy.’

Sheldon watched Howard and Bernadette go back to the dance floor for another set with some relatives that had flown in for the wedding. He agreed with Howard’s assessment of Penny. It had shocked him that first night when his aura had done nothing to deter Penny when everyone else ran with barely the slightest ghostly flicker. She could be so very fearless but he did feel for Bernadette’s point. He understood Penny’s growing devotion to her work and various side projects. He had been similarly devoted to his own interests in life but he also knew Penny’s natural affectionate nature. She hadn’t been on a date since Zane had been here over a year ago. He would never have considered that a problem before he’d gotten to know Penny. He had never thought of dating when he was alive but he’d learned the value of social contact from his actress mentor in emotional interaction. He hoped she really was happy.

Penny took over hosting duties after Howard and Bernadette left for the airport and the South Pacific. They were spending a week in the Maldives and they promised to come back in spite of work. The activities wound down rather quicker than most weddings when Sheldon started making his presence felt among the lingering guests. Penny let him have his way so long as he didn’t go overboard. She was ready to call it a night herself. She let the caterers have their pick of the bar and food and split a bottle of champagne with Elizabeth while they went back over the footage taken during the day. It was close to 2am when the last of the people left and Penny could get to bed. She got out of her bra, sneakers, and pants and dove onto the bed and fell asleep as soon as she hit the pillow.
Penny stared at the large statue in the middle of the vast granite and marble square. He was riding a horse and holding a flag over his head. Opposite was another statue of an antique soldier on a horse facing this one. At the far side of the square beyond the statues was a large palace that had numerous people arriving in horse drawn carriages. The entire square was lit by torches and gas lamps. The women exiting the carriages were dressed in sumptuous gowns and jewels while the men were dressed in tuxedos or quaint military uniforms. Penny thought the plaza looked familiar but she couldn’t place it anywhere she had ever been to. She looked closer at the plaque at on the statue’s pedestal. It described the military garbed horse rider as Archduke Charles, Duke of Teschen. ‘Who the heck are you?’

‘He is the third son of Emperor Leopold II, Penny, and one of Austria’s most famous and successful field marshals. The other rider is Prince Eugene of Savoy.’ Sheldon stood next to Penny dressed in a nineteenth century style tuxedo and Penny finally noticed she was dressed in a red satin gown with golden filigree lace at the shoulders and neck. She was wearing a diamond bracelet and black pearl necklace. Sheldon held up a hand mirror where she saw her hair done up in a French chignon with an elegant emerald and pearl studded tiara gracing her forehead.

‘Sheldon, where are we and how are we here?’ Penny was feeling astonished by the clothes so she almost fainted when Sheldon took her hand and guided them toward the palace everyone was entering.

‘This is the Hofburg in Vienna. I came here for a celebration when I was living in Europe and teaching in Germany. I took some license with the period since I have always loved the ambience of fin de Siecle Vienna.’

‘Can we travel anywhere like this?’ Penny had believed Sheldon was confined to the house.

‘We haven’t traveled anywhere, really.’ Sheldon took Penny’s hand and they walked towards the palace steps.

‘Sheldon how can you be holding my hand? I can feel it; I mean really feel your hand.’

‘You are at home sleeping, Penny, and we are in a dream. A ghost can feel very real in the mind, that’s how I can seem so scary to people. They are not just seeing something they are feeling it in their deepest mind.’

Penny had often wondered why Sheldon’s light show was so scary to people. ‘So, how come your ghost thing never scared me?’

Sheldon had contemplated that from the first night he’d tried frightening Penny after she’d destroyed the Galactica and Enterprise. ‘I do not know, perhaps you are just too fearless?’

Penny laughed at that idea. ‘Hardly, I get scared by plenty of things, Sheldon, maybe you didn’t really want to scare me?’

Sheldon considered that with the torchlight making Penny’s hair shimmer in their light. ‘Perhaps, you are right; I do very much enjoy your presence.’ Sheldon walked them towards the people alighting from the carriages. ‘You did not get to dance very much at Bernadette’s wedding reception so I thought you might enjoy being invited to waltz. Where better to do that than Austria?’

‘You can waltz? I never expected a whack-a-doodle physicist would know how to ballroom dance.’ Penny was amazed to think of Sheldon on the dance floor.
‘Penny, you are not far from wrong to think I do not care for dancing. However, I am from Texas. In the South, pre-adolescent children are forced through a process called cotillion, which indoctrinates them with all the social graces and dance skills needed to function in 18th century Vienna. While, ordinarily, I would not care for such events, I would very much enjoy seeing you happy, tonight, so let us waltz.’ Sheldon offered his arm to Penny and they walked up the stairs to the Hofburg entrance. A grand looking guard inspected the invitation Sheldon handed him and he directed the couple to the introduction line. They were announced to the hall as Dr. Sheldon Lee Cooper of Galveston, Texas and Ms. Penelope Queen of Omaha, Nebraska.

Penny stood amazed under the crystal chandeliers that hung above the dance floor. The ceiling must have been fifty feet above them and the ceiling paintings were so glorious Penny felt she could look at them for days. There was a warm golden hue from the candle light that danced among the crystals of the chandeliers that made the gold work around the hall seem alive. Sheldon bowed and offered his hand to the opening sounds of the Vienna Blood Waltz. The evening whirled in a melody of crystal and candle and music that swam through Penny’s heart and soul. ‘Are you happy, Penny?’

‘Happy, I’m ecstatic, Sheldon, how couldn’t I be happy here?’

‘But, are you happy in Pasadena, Penny?’

Penny thought about Sheldon’s question while the dancers twirled about the floor to the tempo of the music. ‘Happiness has been a lot like Zeno’s Paradox for me, the half way point is always ahead of you and you can never get to the end. I kept expecting being things for guys to make me happy and it never did. You just let me be me, and that has made me happier than I can ever remember.’

Sheldon smiled and held Penny close and they whirled along to the waltz beneath the vaulted ceiling of the ancient Hofburg.

+++ 

In the morning, Penny woke up and began humming the Blood Waltz and stretched out on the bed. She had the house to herself so didn’t bother to dress but put on a pair of thick stockings and went online to search up the waltz from last night. She danced around the house like a fool to the stirring music. She got to the closing crescendo and landed in a wide split that had Sheldon appear in a state of shock.

‘Penny, are you alright?’

‘Sure, why wouldn’t I be, Sheldon?’ Penny wondered why Sheldon sounded so upset.

‘How are your legs doing that without injury?’ Sheldon had only seen circus performers doing maneuvers like Penny was doing.

‘This is nothing much, I used to be more flexible when I was back in Nebraska trick riding. I should take some yoga classes or something, though, maybe you could join me?’

Sheldon just shook his head. ‘Even dead, I could never bend like that, Gumby.’

Penny started to retort when the phone rang. She got up and answered the call. It was Mary Livinstone calling about setting up Stuart’s store for a comic signing. She had set up this coming Wednesday for the comic signing and she wanted to find out if Penny could be there along with her co-star Jason. He played the Coven’s main antagonist, the vampire Cristoph, and Mary and Stuart both felt having Kaley along with the popular villain would be a big draw to the store and raise interest in the comic book serialization of the show. Soon after she hung up there was a call from the
DA’s office that her attacker, Jonas Twill was going to be arraigned on Monday and she needed to be present for the reading of the charges. Penny had a very mixed set of feelings after those two phone calls.

‘Would it help if I came with you to the court, Penny?’ Sheldon made a point of asking to accompany Penny when she traveled outside. Mostly, he went to work with her when she wanted to keep rehearsing some difficult scene and of course for Comic Book day.

‘Yeah, that would be a big help. I knew this day was coming but I could use the support.’ Penny was happy she didn’t have to see the guy without some kind of family with her. ‘How do you feel about Wednesday comics? That’s going to be longer because of the signing and all and it might be crowded given the advertising Stuart’s been doing for it?’

‘I am loath to miss shopping for my comics but the crowd is apt to be off putting. I should like to avoid the crowd. Perhaps, we can go for comics on some day following, possibly Friday?’ Sheldon assumed Penny would be comfortable at a fan event.

‘That’s no problem, and the studio provides security for the day so Jason and I will be fine. Friday would be a good day to go together. I’d like to find out how Stuart felt about the day after it’s all over.’

Penny and Sheldon spent the remainder of the weekend on some physics homework Penny was doing for an intercession class and played several rounds of Halo. During the game, Sheldon mentioned he had learned to use a bow from his father which prompted Penny to want to buy a hunting bow to Sheldon’s surprise. Penny had loved bow hunting back in Nebraska and she wanted to get back into practice, even if it was just target practice. They spent Sunday afternoon visiting various sporting goods supply stores until Penny found a bow she liked. The shop she bought hers from also had a practice range and club that Penny was happy to join. Sheldon couldn’t wait to see Bernadette’s reaction to this latest development.

+++ The arraignment on Monday went very quickly, quickly downhill. Penny met the DA and went over what would happen when they got into the courtroom. He didn’t expect Penny to be speaking since this was just supposed to be the reading of the charges and taking formal note of the accused’s plea. There had been considerable discussion over Jonas’s mental state because he had an insistence that Penny was really Kaley Jenkins and that she was an actual witch. The DA was prepared to see Jonas committed to long term psychiatric holding.

The DA and Penny got to their seats in the courtroom where they soon rose for the judge on Jonas’s trial. Jonas entered the courtroom seeming calm until saw Penny and began screaming that she was an evil witch that was here to steal and eat everyone’s souls. He leaped at Penny abruptly surprising the courthouse guards but he fell back when he saw the blue fire igniting in her eyes.

‘See? She’s a witch! Can’t you see her eyes? She’s going to steal all our souls and send us all to hell!’

‘Thank you, Sheldon.’ Penny whispered in relief that he had come with her.

‘You’re welcome. I trust we have seen the last of him.’ Sheldon shuddered at how close Jonas had come to Penny in spite of the court officers present. He watched the officers trying to contain the thrashing fanatic and was shocked at seeing it take four large men to hold him down.

‘Me, too, sweetie, me too.’ Penny waited to see if there was any more to do but she wished to get as
far away from Jonas and this room as possible at the moment.

The guards finally corralled Jonas and dragged him out of the courtroom. The lawyers and the judge came to the conclusion that Jonas was unfit to stand trial and he was quickly committed to long term psychiatric care and incarceration. That was one relief for Penny but the tabloid press had quite a field day with The Witch and the Madman. Penny rolled her eyes at the questions thrown at her outside the courtroom and handed everything off to the lawyers. She was grateful Sheldon was with her to subtly put a scare into the reporters who couldn’t explain to their angry editors why they had let such a prime story simply walk through them and away without a picture or interview. That, too, along with Jonas’s outburst in court fueled more than a few rumors about Penny and her character among the fans on the Internet.

+++ Wednesday went considerably better. Penny drove down to the comic store a bit early and met Stuart. He was busy with setting up the area for signing and Jason came in soon after Penny did. Stuart had set up his back office for the actors to wait in while the event started under way. Penny found Stuart’s copy of Age of Conan and introduced her co-star to the game. They were having a very enjoyable time and were eager to keep their enthusiasm going when they went out to meet the fans. Everyone was having a good time and there were several very impressive cosplayers in the mix. Penny suggested an impromptu acting event for the cosplayers to perform some well-known scenes from the show which she and Jason would judge. The showdown between witch and vampire in the season finale was deemed the best performed by a couple from Brazil who were fans of the show on vacation in California for their anniversary.

The games, events, and signings made a long and exhausting day for Penny and Jason and while an actor has to take the schmooze that goes with the job it’s always a relief to take the happy face off at the end of the day. They both collapsed in Stuart’s office with some beers he’d gotten for them and toasted a successful day. They relaxed over their beers while the store slowly emptied out except for the few regulars who were used to seeing Penny around so one more actor from the show wasn’t overwhelming. Jason was delighted when his husband finally showed up to drive them home. Stuart had no idea Jason was married much less gay which had Penny laughing and slightly embarrassed for her co-star’s sake.

‘Stuart, don’t ever look at the part as some idea of who the actor is.’

‘You’re right, Penny, I’m sorry, Jason, I see you and I think of Cristoph and he’s just so cool.’

‘See that, Paul, I’m not cool anymore, what’s it all for?’

He sounded sincere and sad to Stuart which threw him off. Stuart went into an anxiety fit thinking he was ruining the day but Penny just laughed and smacked Jason along with Paul. ‘Don’t be a dope, Jason, or I won’t drive you home.’

Penny agreed with Paul and nudged Stuart in the ribs with her elbow. ‘Jason loves winding people up, pay attention to him and he’ll have you thinking Cristoph is Mother Teresa by the end.’

The four were laughing and chatting freely about the day soon after Stuart started feeling more relaxed around having two stars in his store. Jason and Paul left after a while and Penny picked up Sheldon’s comics. She started out when a familiar short guy with glasses walked into the store. He almost fell over his own feet looking at Penny.

‘Hi’ Leonard had come to pick up his comics but he never expected to see a woman so beautiful right before his eyes.
‘Hi’ Penny recognized the short glasses wearing man and she was glad Sheldon hadn’t come. She didn’t think he would have held back from doing something extreme. She was having trouble to refrain from extreme action.

‘Hi’ Leonard held out his hand to greet the dreamy girl in front of him but Captain Sweatpants came up to interrupt though Penny was happy he did.

‘I can help you to your car; I think the security has left so I don’t mind walking with you.’

‘Thanks, Toby, I’m sorry, what’s your name?’ Penny wanted to keep the initiative before she left.

‘Leonard, hi.’ Leonard seemed to be having trouble with handling more than single syllables.

‘Hi, well, the event is over so, I’m sorry but I have to go. Do you come to Stuart’s shop often, Leonard?’ Penny hoped this wasn’t a one-time thing.

‘Sure, all the time, do you come here much? What’s your name, by the way?’ Leonard looked confused when Stuart and Captain Sweatpants started laughing until they pointed at a large stand up poster. Leonard turned white and choked when he realized he was speaking to the Penny Queen of The Coven. ‘You’re her?’

Penny grinned and looked at her hands. ‘The last time I checked, yeah.’

‘Hi’ Leonard slipped back into monosyllables.

‘Hi’ Penny was finding Leonard’s inability to talk a bit odd even by excited fan standards.

‘Hi, uh… maybe we could get coffee sometime?’ Leonard started finding his voice again.

‘That’s so sweet but we don’t even know each other and I need to go. Good night, Stuart thanks for letting Jason and I use your office. Nice meeting you, Leonard’ Penny saw the recognition of her co-star dawn in Leonard’s eyes with his glance at the matching poster across from hers. She left Leonard to ponder what he missed today. She got out her phone once she was out the door and sent a text to Stuart asking him to keep any information about her to a minimum saying it was because she didn’t know who Leonard was. Stuart texted back that he understood thinking Penny was worried about crazy stalker fans.

‘Is everything OK, Penny?’ Toby was curious about Penny’s sudden burst of texting.

‘I was just texting Stuart to keep it quiet about my coming to the store like I do. That Leonard guy was a little creepy.’

Toby nodded and guessed Penny had to be kind of stand offish meeting people out of the blue like that. ‘Yeah, Leonard used to come around more but since he got married he hardly comes around more than once a month or so. He gets kind of flustered when he meets any pretty girl. It’s too bad, too, his wife is really sweet and everything, but Leonard has a wandering eye.’

Penny and Toby chatted a bit about Leonard and Toby offered to tell the other guys to be cool about her to Leonard if he started asking questions about her. Toby didn’t think Leonard would be a nut like Jonas but he didn’t care for guys who couldn’t be straight with girlfriends or wives. Penny thanked him for walking her to her car and everything and went home happy Sheldon didn’t have to run into Leonard like she had. She wasn’t sure if she would have bothered stopping Sheldon from doing something more than bad to his former roommate.

Penny drove back to the house thinking about Leonard still coming around the comic book shop.
Toby had said he really didn’t come there often which Penny could well believe. She’d never seen him in the couple of years she’d been there with or for Sheldon but he’d been quick to claim he was there all the time. He also got out the innocuous coffee invitation which set another alarm bell off because she knew he was still married. Now, she had Toby noting Leonard’s wandering eye along with the same observation from other folks that had known him considerably longer. She wondered if Priya had learned of it. In spite of movies and books saying wives always know, a lot of spouses don’t for any number of reasons.

Penny had never caught on to Kurt because she was so busy becoming an actress and Kurt had always been very supportive. It was only at the end that she realized he was using that support to cover his philandering. Penny wondered if Priya might be the same, too busy as a lawyer to notice what was happening. On the other hand, she might know and be too embarrassed to say anything to her family. Penny didn’t think there was any kind of open relationship since the guys had told her about Leonard’s jealous streak. That was what set off the whole arctic fiasco to begin with. Leonard couldn’t handle Priya might find someone else while they were doing Sheldon’s experiments. ‘Proof, she’s going to need proof.’ Penny thought about how to reach past Priya’s lawyer disposition to Raj’s sister inside.

She got home and took a shower after the long afternoon of playing for a live crowd. It was still early, only seven-thirty, so she got out a new Cosmo and opened it to the crossword puzzle.

‘Oh, Lord, what purpose does it serve to retain so much banal pop culture trivia, Penny?’ Sheldon found Cosmo one of the most perplexing of Penny’s interests.

‘It’s relaxing, Sheldon, there’s nothing to think about which is nice after a day of thinking. I could ask why you like Klingon Boggle so much.’

‘Klingon Boggle, while based somewhat in pop culture, has the challenge of needing to speak a language. What use is there to knowing actors and their favorite drinks for summer?’

‘You never know when you might run into one and embarrass yourself in front of your friends, just ask Leonard.’

Sheldon looked at Penny in shock. ‘You met Leonard Hofstadter, today?’

‘Um hmm.’ Penny went on with the crossword while she told Sheldon about the day at the comic shop. ‘Leonard came in after the event was over. I don’t think he even knew who I was until he read the posters, besides he was too busy being tongue tied to say much.’

‘Yes, that is his typical reaction to meeting any attractive woman. When he met Priya, he started jabbering about curry being a laxative and beneficial to a clean colon.’ Sheldon laughed along with Penny at that memory.

‘Did you confront him at all?’

‘No, sweetie, it was a surprise to me, too. I was leaving and just ran into him at the door to the comic shop. He tried inviting me to coffee in one of the lamest pickup lines ever heard.’

Sheldon growled in frustration. ‘I wish I had gone with you instead of humoring my distaste for crowds.’

Penny sighed and felt different. ‘No, you’d have done something and I wouldn’t be able to blame you but we aren’t going to be able to scare the proof out of Leonard. He has nothing to gain from cooperating. No, our best bet is to talk to Priya. Raj and Lalita will be here in a few more weeks. We
don’t want to spook the game, Sheldon.’
Weddings and What May Come After

Chapter Summary

Marriages in the air and all the stuff that can happen from them comes along for Penny and the gang.

Chapter Notes

AU based on The Ghost and Mrs. Muir. Not trying for canon so much as having fun with Big Bang's toys.

Penny spent the next couple of days going over some promotional materials for the upcoming season of The Coven. The study desk was covered in notes on the new season and questions to and from the writers about character arcs. The showrunners also wanted to do some early cast photos for the summer comic con conventions.

The show let Penny cut back her showings because they had supposed she might be needed to testify in the case of Jonas Twill. Even though that had settled faster than anyone expected, they still didn’t want her to push herself if she was uncomfortable with large scale appearances so soon after the trial. Penny called back to Mary that she was still keen on the San Diego Comic Con but she’d like to stick with some smaller events closer to home this summer. They talked about the event Penny did with Jason at Stuart’s shop. It turned out fairly popular and some of the local comic chains had contacted Mary about setting up something similar for them. Several of the cast who wanted to stay around the area expressed interest in being available and Penny threw her availability in to do some more local appearances.

After talking to Mary, Penny wanted to find out how Stuart and the store were doing. He answered the phone and asked her to hold on. The store sounded busy from the commotion over the line. ‘Hello, The Comic Center of Pasadena, how can I help you?’

‘Hi, The Comic Center of Pasadena, how can I help you?’

Penny was glad to hear Stuart sounded happy at any rate. ‘Hi Stuart, it’s Penny, you sound busy for a Friday.’

‘Hey, Penny, yeah, we are, and a lot of them are asking about your show’s comic, too. We even sold out of all the signed stuff already.’ Stuart asked Penny to hold while he took another customer. He got Denise to take over the register and popped back into his office to take Penny’s call. ‘Hey, Penny, it’s been a good couple of days. We are even putting in another order of books for new customers.’

‘That’s great. Let me know if you’d like Jason and me to sign a few more books or photos.’ Penny was glad the event had worked out for Stuart. She knew the shop was often running on a thin margin like a lot of book sellers.

‘Thanks Penny, hey, I saw on the news that Jonas guy got sent to the psychiatric ward. I guess that’s
the end of the case, how are you doing?’ You guys didn’t even mention it but the news made it sound like he tried attacking you again in the courthouse.’

Penny was grateful for the segue. ‘It’s OK; the news makes it sound worse than it really was. He really didn’t get near me because the courthouse guards tackled him like a bunch of linebackers. I worry about the ones that are out there on the loose and not in custody. That reminds me, you remember that strange guy at the end of the night, Leonard I think, has he been around? I was thinking of stopping by the store next week.’

‘Yeah, he stopped in today, he even bought one of the signed comic and picture sets of you. It’s funny because your show really isn’t the kind of thing he usually buys. He’s a straight cape comic kind of guy, usually.’ Stuart hoped Penny wasn’t feeling worried about Leonard after meeting him.

‘Oh, great,’ Penny made that sound unhappy. ‘That’s why I sent you that text after Toby walked me to my car.’

Stuart guessed Penny was jumpy after the stress of the trial and now Leonard following on the heels of it. ‘No one’s said anything about your coming around to the store but not everyone’s a regular here.’

‘It’s cool, Stuart, I just don’t want it advertised that I like to come in there on a regular schedule or anything. Just keep an eye on him.’

Stuart hoped Penny wasn’t feeling scared of Leonard so he tried reassuring her. ‘We will, but try not to worry. He hasn’t come around much for a long time but he really is harmless. He does have an eye for pretty girls so I’m sure he’s just trying to say hi and get a selfie at most.’

Penny kept a note of caution in her voice about Leonard. ‘Thanks, Stuart, it’s nice to know. I just don’t need another stalker, not even the harmless ‘I just want your picture’ kind.’

‘Sure, Penny, we’ll keep an eye out.’

‘Thanks, Stuart, honey, bye.’ Penny hung up and thought about Leonard buying comics he normally wouldn’t buy. It could be just picking up a picture of an actor unexpectedly met, it could be his eye for pretty girls since everyone kept mentioning it, or he could be out to cheat on his wife starting with inviting a total stranger to coffee out of the blue. She wondered if that could work for them. Coffee was harmless but she bet Leonard had no idea how fast and easy the tabloids caught on to a celebrity on a date, especially when it was one who was known to be a grieving widow.

Sheldon appeared on the couch near Penny while she pondered things in the wing chair. He looked concerned for her after her talk with Stuart. ‘I hope you are not feeling afraid about Leonard? As bad as he proved to be at being a friend and fellow scientist, he is by no means a violent type like Jonas Twill.’

Penny smiled at Sheldon. ‘What, sweetie? Oh, Leonard, no I didn’t think he was. Thanks for worrying, but I just wanted Stuart to keep his eyes on him. I’m betting he’s hoping to meet the actress of his new favorite show.’

Sheldon had been privy to Leonard’s tastes for years so he wasn’t convinced of Penny’s assessment. ‘I hardly think Leonard would watch a show like The Coven, meaning no disrespect to you or your co-stars, but he is quite averse to anything supernatural even in his choice of entertainments.’

‘I didn’t suppose he’d be a fan, either, if there wasn’t a chance of meeting one of the hot actresses on the show.’
Sheldon realized all of a sudden that Penny wasn’t concerned about a possible stalker. ‘You were acting with that call to Stuart?’

Penny chuckled a little at Sheldon’s surprise. ‘Only a bit, sweetie, I am worried about Leonard but not for the reasons I told Stuart. I don’t want Leonard to be aware we know about him and the arctic. He doesn’t want Raj or Howard coming forward so he’s probably kept the proof for the reasons Howard and Raj told us, insurance against them. I’m worried that if he gets spooked someone else could come forward he might destroy the evidence so there is no physical proof of what he did.’

Sheldon looked impressed. ‘Penny, you sound like Hercule Poirot.’

‘You think? The critics hated our theater group when we did ‘Murder on the Orient Express’ one summer.’

Sheldon scoffed at the thought. ‘Those critics obviously were a group of ill-educated cretins. You performed brilliantly just now.

‘Thanks, sweetie, we sure could have used the support that night, especially our poor Poirot.’

+++ Penny cleaned up around the house on Saturday, especially Bernadette’s room since she was sure Bernie would probably want to crash as soon as she got in after the long plane flight home. She drove to LAX to pick up the two newlyweds. They made it through customs with barely a fuss and made it home before the afternoon rush hour started.

‘How’s the jet lag, guys?’ Penny seldom had trouble with jet lag but she knew Bernie could be cranky just coming back from the east coast.

‘We didn’t have any trouble in the Maldives but we had other things on our minds at the time. I think we might have more trouble coming back since we have to catch up with the real world again.’ Howard seldom felt the problem after a few space missions. He was almost able to go to sleep or stay up at will.

‘Speak for yourself, tiger, but it was easier in the islands. It was paradise, Penny. You have to go there, sometime.’

‘I want to see all the pictures but I expect you both might really want to rest when we get back to the house.’ Penny asked if they wanted to pick up anything before they got home but both her friends were eager just to get to the end of the vacation trip now that they were so close to home.

Penny helped them carry their bags upstairs. Bernadette cried out in delight when she found a pot of hot lavender tea in a tea cozy by the bed along with sleeping masks and Advil. ‘Oh, honey, how did you manage to have hot tea ready when we got back?’

‘I’m a witch, Bernie, you know that. That’s what half the press keeps running with ever since the trial.’ Penny gave a laugh at the memory of the last batch of supermarket tabloid articles she had seen. She, also, wanted to thank Sheldon later for thinking to heat up the tea.

Bernie looked shocked. ‘Did that happen while we were gone?’

Howard was just as surprised. ‘Jeeze, Penny, I’m sorry we weren’t there for you.’

Penny waved off their concern. ‘It came to almost nothing, you were better off in the Maldives. I was there maybe an hour or two, mostly in the DA’s office drinking coffee. Jonas got committed almost
as soon as he walked in the courtroom. He started freaking out about how I was a witch stealing
everyone’s souls as soon as he saw me in the courtroom and that was the last of him.’

Bernie came over and hugged Penny. She remembered the week of sleeping with Penny and she
could tell when her often all too plucky friend was putting a brave face on things. ‘I’m glad it didn’t
last long but I am sorry I wasn’t there, Penny.’

Penny hugged her old friend back and whispered in her ear. ‘I missed you there, too, honey.’ Penny
let Bernadette go and poured her some tea. ‘Now, how about you guys have some tea and lie down a
bit. I’ll get the tub ready and you can both have a nice long hot bath and get some rest with the whole
candle and incense deal?’

‘That sounds perfect, dearie, and maybe a Zinfandel.’ Bernadette drank down a couple of Advil with
her tea and put her mask on to start her jet lag recovery program.

‘I’ll get the bath ready for you, Bernie; I’m not feeling any jet lag so I’d probably just stress you out
right now.’ Howard started out to the main bathroom in Penny’s rooms.

‘That’s fine, Howie, just take the bags with you and start the laundry before you try locking yourself
in the man-cave downstairs.

‘Welcome to married life, Howard.’ Penny laughed at Howard's expression and headed off to get
Bernie her wine.

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The following week, Penny opened a Skype call from Raj and Lalita.

‘Hey, Penny, are Howard and Bernadette around?’ Raj was eager to find out how Bernadette and
Howard were doing after the wedding and honeymoon.

‘Sorry, Raj, they’re both at work right now. The worst part of travel for them is coming back to all
the backed up paperwork. Bernadette had been complaining how she almost missed the simplicity of
being a waitress, at least there hadn't been reams of paperwork for project proposals.

Raj nodded in understanding. ‘I can believe that. I wanted to tell you all Lalita and I will be getting
married in two weeks, it should be Saturday evening around 10pm, your time, and we’ve set up a
channel for folks to watch.’

‘That’s great, we don’t want to miss that, you guys, and we’ll all be here. Are you guys still coming
this way to visit?’

Raj nodded. ‘Of course, we both want to help with meeting Priya. I was talking to my parents and
they were ready to have the wedding in Pasadena if we could get Priya to come.’

‘I wish we could make that happen but we’ll get there, Raj. Speaking of Priya, do you think she
knows about Leonard’s roving eye?’ Penny told Raj about the comic event at Stuart’s shop and
running into Leonard.

‘I’d be surprised if she didn’t. She can read minds or something. It’s what makes her an amazingly
effective lawyer; she can read people like an open book if she talks to them long enough. I don’t
think Leonard could keep anything like that from her for very long. I just don’t know what she’d do
when she found out.’

‘What do you mean?’ Penny was curious. She had thought about Priya’s possible reactions towards
a cheating spouse. She knew damn well what she had wanted to do in that situation.

‘Remember how I said our parents were against the marriage outright? The whole family was against it for different reasons but Priya wouldn’t hear it. Maybe, she was right, especially where our parents’ objections were concerned. She would hate hearing them say ‘We told you so’ regardless. And me and everyone else who told her about Leonard’s cheating to begin with, she’s got a lot of pride in her ability to read people. If she missed something like that, I think she might hate herself too much to admit it with a divorce. She wouldn’t want us to know she’d missed something like that after some of the rows we had. Maybe, if I hadn’t been so vocal against it she might still talk to me.’ Raj looked close to tears remembering everything.

‘Don’t beat yourself up over it, Raj. No one wants to believe their fiancé is a cheater. I would have laughed in my parents’ faces if they’d warned me against Kurt. You did what you thought was right for the best of intentions. If she does know, like you think, she really is going to need you even if she’s too proud to say anything right now. She probably thinks she’s alone in this now because she went against the family to begin with. She’s probably afraid she bit the hand that fed her, so to speak. Don’t give up; she’s far from lost to you all, Raj.’

Raj felt a bit better about things after that bucking up and Penny was happy to tell him to hold on when she heard a car outside. She did a quick check from the balcony and saw it was Howard back home. She told him to come on up because Raj was calling. She said good bye to Raj after Howard came up to the study and asked Raj to say hi to Lalita. She left the two guys alone to catch up on a guy’s eye view of weddings and about Howard’s man-cave he was eager to show off to his old friend.

Penny went down to the kitchen and started to make an early dinner and to have something ready for Bernadette. Bernie was terrible at cooking for herself during the week because she was so focused on work and she got very cranky when she was underfed. Penny was well familiar with this side of her longtime friend and housemate but she wasn’t sure if Howard had yet to meet a ‘hangry’ Bernadette.

‘That was a very inspiring speech, Penny; I would have thought you had known Priya for years after the way you spoke.’ Sheldon had been listening, of course.

‘That was nothing I hadn’t thought one time or another after Kurt. My parents weren’t happy we eloped but they did like Kurt. Mom was mostly mad because she didn’t get to turn her only daughter’s wedding into the Nebraska State Fair. All the same, I didn’t tell them about the cheating until months afterwards because I felt guilty somehow.’ Penny put some leftovers in the stove to warm up.

‘That is ridiculous, why would you feel guilty, or Priya, because your spouses cheated?’ Sheldon compared the situation to the arctic and it sounded like he’d be feeling guilty about Leonard’s sabotage by analogy.

‘I can’t speak for Priya, but I kept wondering what I did wrong, wondering if I pushed him that way, somehow. It is ridiculous, I know, but sometimes at night I’d ask myself that. That was one reason I had to move out of the LA apartment Kurt and I had, it kept those feelings running in my head. When Raj talked about how she might be afraid of proving the family’s warnings right that just sounded like some of the guilty feelings I had.’ Penny sat down at the kitchen table and fidgeted with the salt and pepper shakers.

Sheldon heated up some hot water and added a bit of honey for Penny. ‘You don’t feel like that anymore, do you?’
Penny took the tea grateful for the drink. ‘Hmm? Oh, no, not like those days, no. But, you do put a lot of trust in someone when you marry them. I met Kurt when I was seventeen. We ran away as soon as we were both eighteen and then I was cheated on and then a widow at barely more than twenty-two. It all happened so fast the emotions are hard to separate. I felt anger at the cheating, grief at the death, guilt that I wasn’t good enough, frustration I couldn’t rake him through a divorce court, and yet, part of me still loved the bastard. Sometimes, I felt all of that at once and I just wanted to scream. Once in a while, I still do and I guess talking to Raj brought some of that back to mind. I figure Priya has her own cocktail of mixed up feelings that she’d be hard pressed to separate or explain, too.’

‘That sounds quite bewildering. It is a shame you could not have spoken with my Meemaw. She was quite sagacious in such matters.’

‘You’re not too bad to talk to, either, Sheldon. It does me good to have you around when I need someone to talk to.’ Penny let the hot mug warm her hands and hummed the waltz from their dance to herself.

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Two weeks later, the living and the dead of Los Robles Cottage were gathered in the study to watch Raj and Lalita’s wedding. Everyone loved the whole event and Sheldon begged Penny to get a picture of Lalita in her fabulous wedding dress. The kaleidoscope of color and pattern along with the jewelry was mesmerizing and he said she was the living avatar of the mythical Princess Panchali. Raj and Lalita also made a personal skype call when they had a free moment after the main wedding ceremony to thank their friends for watching with their families.

The happy moment was thrown off a bit when Bernadette made a rush to the bathroom and started dry heaving in the dark washroom. Penny followed her in and closed the door. She asked Bernadette how long this had been going on.

‘Just a couple of days, now, I haven’t been able to look… at… breakfast, Oh, Christ.’ Bernadette realized her period should have been kicking in by now. She got up from the toilet and sat on the tub rim.

‘I’ll go run and get a pregnancy test. Do you want to say anything out there, yet?’ Penny sat on the edge of the tub with Bernie and rubbed her back.

‘No, not yet, it’s too soon without a test. I don’t want to break up the wedding fun for a false alarm.’

Penny nodded. ‘Let’s just say you might have picked up a bug at work and I’m going to get something from the pharmacy. You can lie down in my bed while I’m out so we can do the test in here. You can tell Howard you don’t want him catching something from you.’ Penny and Bernadette went out and told everyone their story and wished the wedding couple a happy honeymoon before Bernie went to have a lie down. Penny ran out to get the pregnancy test while Howard checked up on Bernadette.

‘I’ll be fine, Howard, go to bed before you catch something.’

‘I don’t mind waiting for Penny, can I get you something downstairs?’ Howard got an extra blanket from the ottoman under the bedroom window.

‘Thanks, but go to bed, Howard, I’m fine.’ Bernadette was feeling nauseous and upset, now. She really didn’t want Howard catching on to her possible pregnancy.
'Let me get you some chicken broth down stairs, I’ll be right back.’

The thought of eating even some broth sent Bernie’s stomach into a summersault. ‘No, Howard, Go. To. Bed!’

Howard was surprised at Bernie’s vehemence and he was also starting to feel like the room was getting very cold and spooky. ‘Are you sure you want to lie down in here, Bernadette? This room doesn’t feel right.’

Bernadette’s nerves were getting jangly from the nausea and Howard’s constant talking. ‘Please, go to bed, Howard, Penny will take care of everything, and the room feels fine. Penny and I have both slept in here plenty of times, there’s nothing spooky in here. Now, go to bed, honey.’

Sheldon watched with satisfaction when Howard finally left Bernadette to rest. He felt her unease and he sent a calming thought of relief into Bernadette’s mind that let her drift off to sleep at last.

Howard went downstairs to wait for Penny, and so Bernadette wouldn’t get more worked up. When Penny got back, Howard told her about Bernadette’s snappishness in case she got angry with Penny. Penny just laughed and said she knew what Bernadette could be like when she was sick.

‘You just go to bed, Howard. I’m used to handling Bernadette when she is under the weather. She’s used to hardly ever getting sick so she can take it pretty bad when she comes down with something. Let her rest with me, tonight, I’m sure everything will be better in the morning.’ Penny let Howard lock up downstairs and went up to take care of Bernadette. She locked the study door so they wouldn’t be interrupted and gave Bernadette a gentle caress when she sat on the bed next to her.

‘What’s wrong, Bernie, why are you crying?’ Penny brushed some hair from Bernie’s forehead and felt her temperature.

‘I’m going to be a terrible mother.’ Bernadette had never felt any silly biological clock ticking and the idea of kids had always given her the chills at the best of times.

Penny got a tissue for Bernadette and gave her a kiss. ‘Well, I’ll just be a worse aunt so you won’t seem so bad, and we can both blame Howard for doing this to you.’

Bernadette laughed, sat up, and hugged Penny. ‘What would I do without you, honey?’

They went into the bathroom and used the two tests Penny got just to make sure. They both came up positive. ‘Guess it’s the doctor’s, tomorrow?’ Bernadette felt a little better after the tests and with Penny to help.

They got ready for bed and Bernadette borrowed some of Penny’s pajamas for the night. She wondered why Howard was feeling the house being spooky again. ‘Penny, does it always feel so cozy in here?’

‘Pretty much, why?’

‘Howard was saying it felt spooky in here but after he left it felt like the room kind of liked me being in here. I guess the hormones and mood swings to come are kicking in.’ Bernadette guessed this was another sign of the pregnancy.

Penny guessed Sheldon was involved if there was unexplained spookiness and happiness. She could feel the welcoming air of the room Bernadette was talking about and guessed Sheldon was using his mojo so Bernie wouldn’t feel so sick and she could sleep. ‘I don’t know, I think you were right and the house does like you, and the baby.’
Chapter Summary

Penny and Sheldon talk about happiness and needs.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs. Muir, not looking for canon just playing with Big Bang’s toys.

Penny whistled Strauss’s Voices of Spring while she looked through the mail and separated out the bills and personal letters for everyone and brought her letters along with the bills upstairs to the study. She kept up the tune while she got a duster out and began cleaning the models and Care Bears. She got about three minutes into the waltz when Sheldon appeared.

‘Penny, you know very well how much I detest whistling.’ Sheldon found whistling all the worse since he died because earplugs and sound canceling headphones didn’t work for ghosts.

Penny stopped her rendition and sat on the edge of the desk. ‘Sheldon, why is Bernadette downstairs proving to Howard none of the chairs in the collector’s room are electrified?’

‘Because Howard was going to disassemble my Bat’leths and replace the blades with rubber in order to childproof them,’ Sheldon had been concerned for the changes that would come when Bernadette’s pregnancy tests proved positive but he wasn’t unduly worried, ‘Penny, I am sure between Bernadette and you the child will want for nothing with regards to safety and good health. Howard, on the other hand, may need to be ejected out the metaphorical airlock for the child’s wellbeing.’

Penny started in confusion. ‘What are you talking about; Howard can’t wait for the baby?’

‘Indeed, and he is behaving like the engineer his education trained him to be. He is endlessly imagining disasters that may befall the child before they happen. The poor creature will have more neuroses than the cast of a Woody Allen film before it gets to kindergarten.’

Penny snorted at that. ‘I didn’t take you for a Woody Allen Fan, Sheldon.’

‘I’m not, but I am bombarded buy the choices you and Bernadette make daily.’

‘We’ll try to consider your existential suffering before we binge the Mia Farrow years again.’ Penny laughed and sat in the wing chair to look at the letters from Nebraska that had come in the mail. One of her high school friends had become an elementary school teacher. The children were writing about their favorite TV show and a few had said they were fans of Penny and her character. She had written her and asked if she would respond to the students as part of their class project. ‘How is supernatural electroshock therapy supposed to help prevent that, Sheldon?’
‘Penny, Bernadette’s room has a catcher’s net outside the balcony if the toddler gets out there.’

‘What’s wrong with that? It isn’t an unreasonable safety feature?’ Penny thought it was early to go that far but she knew how even the smallest kids would get in the most unlikely places.

‘The net has two back up nets under it, and the balcony now has three different types of motion detectors.’

‘Alright, that’s excessive.’ Penny put the letters down on the side table. ‘Bernie and I will talk to him again but if you go scaring him and he starts freaking out about the house he could move out and Bernie and the baby will be going with him. Do you want them gone, too?’

‘While I would not be averse to having only the two of us here, I would miss Bernadette’s presence and I am intrigued what a child of Wolowitz could turn out to be.’ Sheldon sounded like a mad doctor.

‘This is a baby we’re talking about Sheldon, not a science experiment. Also, I don’t want the baby scared by ghosts so no whacky business with the kid.’ Penny could imagine Sheldon’s stranger quirks coming out and she started to feel a headache.

‘Penny, my childhood showed me all I needed of the abuse that children can suffer from bullies and tormentors. My own siblings were no great help all too often, so I would never allow distress to befall Bernadette’s child.’

Penny felt bad for thinking the worse of her friend. ‘I’m sorry Sheldon; I wasn’t being fair to you there. You have been great with everything and I’m guessing you are the real reason Bernadette sleeps better here these days, aren’t you?’ Bernadette had mentioned the house feeling better several times over the past week since she’d been to the doctor’s and confirmed the results.

‘The child needs optimal conditions for its development, the health of the mother, therefore, requires optimum care. Also, you would be greatly distressed by Bernadette feeling unwell since your friendship is quite close.’

Penny felt happy that Sheldon worried about them both. She knew they could get on his nerves with the way they kept changing the house around, first with the redecorating, then bringing in Howard and then rebuilding rooms, and now a child on the way. ‘Thank you, Sheldon, but you can say if something is bothering you, too. The baby is going to bring in more changes than motion detectors and catcher’s nets. Maybe we can’t accommodate you but I still want to know. Your happiness is important to me, too, Moonpie.’

‘Penny, I’m a ghost, happiness is of very little importance to the dead.’

Penny didn’t want to argue about that by pointing out how he shouldn’t be worried about failed experiments or messy housemates in that case. ‘It may not be important to you, but it is important to me. Losing these models would hurt, I know.’

‘Penny, I told you the first night, everything here is important to me because it is inseparable from me. I value all that is in these rooms, but I would feel more hurt if I lost you.’ Sheldon couldn’t say why that was, ghosts care about the things that anchor them somewhere but Penny was something new. ‘You and Bernadette have been something I had too little of since I left Texas, a family, and they were often no box of peaches. I do not think much of personal happiness, but your happiness, Penny, is very important to me.’

Penny had no idea what to say since Sheldon never really talked about personal feelings and she had
to wonder what she felt about him. ‘Thank you, Sheldon, but I can tell you, I can’t feel happy if you’re feeling walked over so, please, talk to me if something is bothering you. That’s what friends do; they take care of each other, like my friend, Judy, here.’ Penny picked up the Nebraska letters. ‘She needs help, sometimes it helps to tell your friends they are needed. People want to be needed, too.’

‘What do you think a ghost would need, Penny?’ Sheldon felt skeptical that there was much that could be needed by the dead.

‘You tell me, Sheldon, I know I need you. I wouldn’t have gone back to school if it wasn’t for you and all this science stuff around. I sure wouldn’t have done the science stuff. I wanted to be things for dad, for Kurt, for friends, but I never wanted to be things for me.’ Penny thought about their conversation when she was wiring up the collector’s room. ‘I got into acting because I wanted to be famous but if there are bad reasons to get into acting that’s probably the worst. I was terrible at first. I’ll say this for Kurt; he pushed me to go back to theater classes. Turned out he was meeting girls in the classes, but, I got to be a better actor, even if I was just taking the classes for him. You were different because you helped me do what I wanted just because I wanted to do it. I needed that, Sheldon, someone to let me be selfish.’

‘Well, then, Penny, I guess I am happy to be needed by you, because I do enjoy seeing that you are happy.’

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Penny dropped by the comic store to pick up Sheldon’s books for the week. She, also, signed a couple of comics for fans who happened to be in the store at the time. She wanted to ask Stuart if he could get one of Raj’s favorite Batman comics that he’d mentioned in one of his last Skype calls. Stuart took a look at the inventory of collector’s issues and found a copy and told Penny he’d be a few minutes in back finding it.

‘It’s got a hefty price tag; it’s five hundred dollars.’

Penny’s eyebrows did a high climb. ‘Wow, folks pay that for Batman? A Pair of Manolo Blahnik’s, sure, but Batman? Bernadette said you guys pay some serious money for the stuff. I’m amazed Sheldon lets me touch his books.’ Penny remembered a coffee stain she made on one of Sheldon’s Flash comics that she got curious about. She was almost afraid to ask how much that might be since it was a pretty old book.

‘Yeah, Sheldon was always very strict in how his comics got handled. Collector’s stuff like this, he’d have kittens if it was breathed on. You want me to put it back?’

‘No, I was just surprised, that’s all.’ Penny wondered how Sheldon felt about the coffee stain. She’d have to look and see what issue that was and find out how much it was, at least, for her own conscience. ‘I’m getting it for Raj.’

‘Raj, you don’t mean Raj Koothrapalli, do you?’ Stuart couldn’t believe Raj might be back in the states.

‘Yeah, he’s coming here during his honeymoon travel. He got married last week to an old girlfriend, Lalita Guptra, and they are coming to visit. They’ll be arriving this Saturday.’ Penny could see Stuart was delighted to hear about Raj and his new bride.

‘Married, I can’t believe it. You know he couldn’t talk to girls when he was here at Caltech, and I mean truly could not talk. I guess he learned to say, I do. Give me a minute.’ Stuart did a quick run in
back to look at the store’s books and his bank account. When he came back he looked rather satisfied.

‘Hey, Penny, I am so happy for Raj, I’d like to make this issue a wedding present for him, if you don’t mind. I hope I’m not stepping on your present?’

‘No I don’t mind, but are you sure you want to spend the money?’ Penny was happy to let Stuart buy the book for Raj but the money really wasn’t a problem for her being on a successful show.

‘No, I’m fine. The event you and Jason did made a great boost for the store so I can cover the book.’

Penny was glad they were able to help the store enough for Stuart to feel free to make a present like this out of the blue. She remembered how stressed he often looked when she first starting coming in here so it was nice to see him get to breathe easier. ‘Well, then, He and Lalita are coming in Saturday and they should be at the house by 4pm, you should drop by and give him the present yourself. I’m sure he’d love to see you.’

‘Thanks, I’d love to come by and see Raj, it’s been forever since I last saw him.’

Penny and Stuart chatted for a while about Raj and the wedding. Penny asked Stuart about a few more of Raj’s favorites that he might remember and Penny was able to get a couple more books that Stuart felt sure Raj would like. While they were talking Leonard made an appearance to pick up some books. Stuart saw Leonard coming in and gave Penny a heads up and went over to the register to do some paperwork and keep an eye on things.

‘Hi.’ Leonard was still in monosyllables in front of Penny.

‘Hi… Lenny, wasn’t that your name?’ Penny was glad of Stuart’s head’s up so she felt comfortable to chat for a minute.

‘Uh, yeah, my friends call me Leonard, but you can call me Lenny since it is a common nickname for Leonard.’

Penny raised an eyebrow; it was one word or an avalanche with this guy. ‘Oh, I guess we’re not friends since you said it’s your friends that call you Leonard, not Lenny.’

Leonard looked like he had swallowed his tongue. ‘No, no, we’re friends, I mean, we can be friends, my friends don’t call me Leonard, I mean that is they do, but they don’t call me Leonard because they are my friends.’

Penny nodded and looked at Leonard quizzically. ‘Right, well, nice meeting you.’ Penny put some coolness in her voice and went over to the register. Leonard made a run for the door before he could trip over his tongue any further.

‘Wow, I have seen Leonard fall apart in front of a girl but that was a sight.’

‘Yeah, it happens, you saw those fans earlier. I’d be a mess if I ever ran into Meryl Streep. Anyway, I was thinking, maybe you were right about him being harmless, but don’t say anything about me and Sheldon’s place. I like to keep where I live and who I live with quiet so Howard and the rest don’t get sucked into news about me.’

‘Sure, Penny, besides, Leonard pretty much dropped out of everyone’s life after Sheldon’s funeral so I doubt he’s interested in seeing the old gang anymore. Howard still comes in regularly but I don’t think they’ve said two words to each other. Leonard usually takes off faster than he did just now if Howard’s here.’ Stuart wondered what might have happened to make a falling out like that.
'That does sound weird, has Howard ever told you why?'

'Not really, he just said it was job stuff and he doesn’t like to talk about it. I guess you know he used to work at Caltech with Leonard?’ Stuart guessed Penny must have known that since Howard was with Penny’s housemate, Bernadette.

‘Yeah, I heard some, I guess if Leonard and everyone at my house have some kind of bad blood; it’s best not to bring up everyone being at my house. He freaks out enough already just standing near me.’ Penny was sure the less Leonard knew about the gathering at the house, the better.

‘Yeah, that makes sense. Like I said before, I think Leonard’s harmless but he hasn’t been much of a friend to Howard or us here at the store so he’ll hear nothing from me.’

‘Thanks, Stuart, and make sure to drop by Saturday. You will love Howard’s new playroom.’ Penny had no doubt the collector’s room was going to be geek heaven this weekend.

Penny started to leave and saw Sheldon over by the model displays. She thanked Stuart again for the help with Raj’s comics and went over to talk with Sheldon. ‘Been following me around, again, and are you the reason Leonard fell apart?’

‘I may have had a hand in that, yes.’ Sheldon had a self-satisfied smirk and swagger.

Penny sighed and smirked at her sidekick. ‘Thanks, I’m glad you didn’t overreact.’

‘I had considered overreacting but I need you to help me fix this disaster. Howard shouldn’t be an estate agent, and Raj could be doing so much more than teaching undergraduate astronomy. We all need you, Penny. I thought it would help if Leonard didn’t get too comfortable around you.’ Sheldon really didn’t want Leonard comfortable around Penny at all, truth be told.

‘Really, who would you be comfortable having around me, Moonpie?’ Penny was sure she heard a jealous note in Sheldon’s voice.

‘Someone who makes you happy and I can assure you, it wouldn’t be Leonard. Simply ask Priya.’

Penny shrugged and smiled lightly. ‘We’ll get him, Sheldon, and believe me, I already know someone who makes me very happy and it isn’t Leonard by any means.’ Penny ushered them both out to the car to go home.

‘Who would that be, Penny, I believe Bernadette would be very relieved to know who this might be as would I?’

Penny laughed and went out to the car. ‘Someone who can waltz, Moonpie.’

They walked across the lot and Penny saw Leonard coming back towards the comic store. ‘Be cool, Sheldon, let me handle this.’

‘Very well, Penny.’ Sheldon was far more busy thinking about the waltzing comment at the moment.

‘Uh, hey Penny, I’m sorry if that sounded kind of weird in there, I don’t know what came over me.’ Leonard hoped he hadn’t made a complete fool of himself.

‘That’s alright; I’ve seen stranger folk, Leonard.’

‘Yeah, I guess there are some strange folk on your show, are you filming that, now?’ Leonard was trying to find something to talk about but this girl frazzled his brain too much to think of anything
‘Not at the moment, but we start shooting again soon.’

Sheldon was getting bored and confused since he had as little idea what Penny was doing with her directionless responses. ‘Is there some point to this, Penny, or are you trying to see if you can give Leonard a seizure?’

Penny chuckled a bit at that which made Leonard feel he was getting somewhere with this seeming ice maiden. ‘So, Penny, are you going somewhere, now?’

‘Yes.’ Penny smiled again knowing Leonard was clearly fishing for a way to ask for a date.

‘Great, ah, well, great.’ Leonard shuffled his feet and looked like a puppy begging for attention. ‘So, how about that coffee, would you like to get one sometime?’

‘Coffee, perhaps, are you married, Leonard?’ Penny had seen the wedding band and she noted how fast Leonard’s hands went into his pockets.

‘No, I mean, I used to be but that didn’t work out.’

‘Oh, that’s too bad, I hope things get better for you. Things can get scary when you are on your own.’ Sheldon assumed the last comment was a hint so he turned up his mojo. Leonard started fidgeting a lot more.

‘Yeah, I guess, are you seeing anyone, Penny?’ Leonard really didn’t know why Penny made him feel so tongue tied. Even Priya didn’t scare him this much when she got angry.

‘Why?’ Penny’s voice took on a distinct coolness that rattled Leonard.

‘Oh, no reason, but I guess you’re busy with the show and all, maybe we’ll run into each other again here, at the comic shop.’ Leonard hurried off for the store without waiting for Penny to respond.

‘That odious toad, did you see how fast he hid that ring, Sheldon?’

‘I did, I hope you meant for me to scare him off like that.’

‘You did perfect, Moonpie. How do you feel about coffee shops and nightclubs?’ Penny sent Stuart a text to say Leonard ran into her in the lot and he acted kind of jumpy so play it cool about her to him.

‘I abhor them.’ Sheldon couldn’t imagine why Penny would ask his opinion on such places.

‘I’m not surprised, but I’ll bet Leonard likes them.’

‘He does, but why would you be interested. Surely, you are not thinking of going to one with him?’

‘Not without my dance partner, Sheldon, and I believe some of our paparazzi friends would be interested to know as well.’ Cheating husbands didn’t like to be recognized. Penny knew that all too well.

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Indian Princesses

Chapter Summary

Penny meets Lalita and events roll closer to Priya.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs Muir, not looking for canon just some fun with Big Bang's toys

The weekend arrived and Howard went to LAX to pick up Raj and Lalita. The two old friends were almost speechless for the first minute and never stopped talking for a second after that. Lalita didn’t follow half of what they were talking about, jokes and stories of her new husband’s past, but she was happy to see him look and sound so joyful.

They got back to the cottage and everyone got together in the living room down stairs after touring through the house. Sheldon was comically entranced by Lalita which made Penny giggle more than once while they toured through the rooms. She had never seen a ghost trip over his feet before. Sheldon was delighted when Raj gave Bernadette and Penny copies of the wedding album.

Howard got out some champagne and some non-alcoholic sparkling wine he’d gotten for Bernadette and passed the drinks around. He proposed a toast. ‘Welcome back, Raj, and a wonderful marriage to you both, cheers!’

Bernadette got up to make her speech. ‘We have an announcement, too, something we found out the night of your wedding, in the middle of your call, actually. Howard and I are going to have a baby.’

‘No!’ Raj was stunned.

‘Yes.’ Bernadette was surprised by Raj’s reaction.

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘I already had this same conversation with Howard; I’m not going through it again.’

Raj apologized to Bernadette. He was genuinely overjoyed for them both but he had never imagined his pal becoming a father. More drinks were quickly passed around and more toasts were made for the new baby on the way. Stuart arrived in the middle of the toasts and the room was livelier than ever since he had brought his girlfriend, Denise. The welcoming party carried on for a good while and the guys eventually were led by Howard down to the collector’s room. Raj was still amazed by it and Stuart and Denise were speechless.
While they were downstairs, Penny, Bernadette, and Lalita got some coffee and relaxed in the quiet of the living room and talked about Bernie’s baby. Eventually, they got around to marriage and finally Priya and Leonard.

‘He tried hitting on you at the comic shop, did you smack him?’ Bernadette hated the smell of cheating and Lalita was just as averse.

‘No, of course not, I knew what he was so I wasn’t going to act all shocked. Besides, he got too nervous to wait for an answer.’ Penny smiled at Sheldon sitting by the window. ‘I was wondering if Priya knows about Leonard’s habits. Raj thinks she would, do you think so, too, Lalita?’

‘If she’s anything like I remember her, I’d say she knows but I can’t imagine her putting up with it.’ Penny agreed from her point of view, at least. ‘Raj seemed to think Priya might be too embarrassed to do anything because she was pretty much going against the whole family and a lot of her friends back home.’

‘I guess that would bother her a little but Priya was always very independently minded. I think her being wrong about him would bother her more than anything else. What is odd is that I never imagined her marrying anyone, at least no one like Howard and Raj. They are too much like kids with all their games and comic books.’

Bernadette agreed with that, at least. ‘Howard makes me crazy with that stuff, that’s why I’m glad he built that playroom downstairs. This place used to be filled with Star Track stuff.’

Sheldon flinched and growled. ‘Star Trek, woman, how could anyone dislike something so glorious?’

Lalita giggled at Bernadette’s feelings about science fiction decoration. ‘I think it’s Star Trek, Raj has mentioned that a few times.’

‘There, Penny, the Princess Panchalli understands the difference.’

‘I think I’ll make him mention it a few more times before I suggest a playroom like Howard’s.’ Lalita was glad of the hobby for Raj but she did wish it didn’t take up so much of the house.

Sheldon looked aghast. ‘The evil women do, I shall be in the ‘collector’s’ room, Penny.’

Penny looked fondly at Sheldon’s disappearing form and went back to Lalita. ‘I don’t think Priya needs anyone to prove Leonard is cheating, I think she might want something he can’t deny. Lawyers do prefer questions they already know the answers to when they get into court.’

‘What do you mean, honey?’ Bernadette was curious where Penny was going with this.

Penny went over the comic shop encounter again. She knew Leonard’s manipulative side and Lalita was shocked how much so many other people were affected beyond her Raj’s life. She was sure Priya had never known any of that or she would have never married Leonard. She even questioned why Raj ever took Leonard’s threat seriously. Priya hated being pushed around by her family but she liked other people pushing her family around far less.

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In the study, Penny got ready for bed and Sheldon appeared looking happy. ‘I had not thought I would ever condone this house to be inundated with so many people.’

‘Have you forgiven Lalita’s Star Trak plans, Sheldon?’ Penny still enjoyed the memory of Sheldon’s
‘That, well, I suppose so since she is woefully under-educated in the world of Gene Roddenberry’s Vision.’

‘Ah, the princess has had her day, Sheldon?’ Penny was too happy about today to tease Sheldon about his hobbies.

‘Not at all, I am simply acknowledging she is not a fan of Star Trek, I am sure Raj will correct the deficiency.’

‘Really, sweetie, like your attempts to correct mine?’

‘Penny, your love of Firefly more than makes up for your ignorance of Star Trek.’

Penny’s response was cut off by a soft knock on the door.

‘Come in!’ She turned to see Lalita open the door. She was carrying some roses.

‘Hi, Penny, did you leave these, they are so beautiful, I asked everyone and no one knew where they came from so I guessed they must be from you. Thank you!’

Penny could tell by Sheldon’s dismay he was the culprit. She glanced at Sheldon and remembered his talking about the Indian princess. Fortunately there were no lotus blossoms around for Sheldon to decorate her hair with. ‘It was said roses were ashamed to bloom in the presence of her ruby lips.’

‘Pardon?’ Lalita was confused by the beautifully romantic phrase.

‘I was reminded of that Indian folk story, Princess Panchali, so I thought you might like them. You and Raj really should be on your honeymoon, still, not revisiting painful old history.’ Penny walked over to the bookshelf and found the children’s book Sheldon had gotten the story from. Lalita and Penny sat on the couch and looked through the book and the page with the picture that introduced the Princess made Lalita gasp. It really did look remarkably like her.

‘Oh my, I have never seen this picture. Raj and I did look a bit online but we never saw any that looked especially like me but this, it looks like I modeled for it.’ She laughed and asked if she could show the book to Raj. she said good night to Penny with the book in hand to show Raj.

‘Look at you, mister ghosts don’t need happiness, leaving romantic nothings to Indian princesses?’ Penny walked over to Sheldon.

‘Penny, I was simply struck by the uncanny resemblance, there was nothing romantic involved.’

‘Sure, Don Juan, whatever you say. But I can’t help noticing how you’ve dropped me like a hot potato as soon as princess ruby lips showed up.’ Penny grinned at Sheldon’s discomfort and went to bed.

In the morning, Penny found a vase of roses by her bed. She sat up and picked up the flowers to breathe in their aroma. ‘Oh, Sheldon, I was just kidding last night, but you do know how to brighten a girl’s day more than most guys I know.’

+++ Sheldon and Penny went back to the comic store on Monday. Stuart had told them Leonard usually came by then because there were few regulars on such a quiet day.
'Hey Stuart, what’s up? Did you enjoy the party?'

'Hey Penny, god, yes, and Howard’s collector’s room, Denise and I couldn’t believe it. We might never leave a place like that.’ They chatted for a while and Penny brought up Leonard’s appearances around the store.

‘Stuart, did Leonard mention he tried asking me out again out in the parking lot?’

Stuart looked none too surprised. ‘No, but I’m not surprised. You know, he’s married. That might have slipped his mind.’

‘Yeah, Toby talked about a wife but Leonard did the hand hide and say he ‘used’ to be thing.’ Penny rolled her eyes and felt Sheldon’s displeasure with the conversation. Penny was glad Sheldon never tried being a professional card player.

‘You know, Stuart, I can’t stand cheating husbands.’ Penny smirked at Stuart’s smile of understanding.

‘I bet, the news all talk about how you practically never date since Kurt died. I guess you miss him?’

‘Penny ‘The Grieving Widow’ Queen, I get that a lot but it was a long time ago, now, I miss him but you’ve got to move on. We got married young, romantic elopement and all that, so cheating just bugs me.’ Penny wrote down Micky’s number. ‘This is a paparazzi pal, he films a lot of our show’s cast for the trades. He might like a tip about an actress at a coffee shop, say today at Bialiks.’

Stuart took the number and wondered what Penny was up to but he didn’t ask until Leonard came in.

Penny hoped Leonard might make an appearance today since he was fishing so obviously the last time they met. Sheldon looked up Leonard’s class and office schedule online and made a deduction on the time Leonard was likely to visit the shop. His accuracy was worthy of Sherlock Holmes.

‘Hey Penny, funny running into you again.’ Leonard hoped Penny didn’t think he was a fool after their last meeting. He still didn’t know why he’d run off the way he did the other night. There was just something weird around Penny.

‘Yeah, my psychic might say it was fate.’ Penny smiled and glanced at Sheldon.

‘Fate, Penny, you’re going to use that supernatural claptrap to initiate a conversation.’ Sheldon waited for Leonard to react.

‘Uh, yeah, I guess, so would you like to try that coffee, Penny?’

Sheldon looked amazed since he expected Leonard to start talking about how ridiculous psychics were.

‘Oh, I guess coffee would be OK, hey Stuart, have you tried Bialik’s up the street?’

‘No way, Penny, that place is ridiculously expensive but I hear the chocolate mousse is to die for. Denise loves to go there with her girlfriends once in a while.’

‘Great, thanks Stuart, I love chocolate mousse. Chocolate anything really, let’s go there, Leonard.’

Penny and Sheldon led the way out the door and Leonard made up the third wheel he wasn’t aware of being. Bialik’s was quiet after lunch time. Penny and Leonard sat by a window where Penny saw Micky’s van pull up. She gave a long smile out the window and put a finger to her lips. It was a
signal to Mickey he had with the cast to give them a few minutes but he was welcome to get a story.

‘A physicist and a witch meet in a coffee shop, what happens next, Leonard?’ Penny could see the magic stuff was wearing thin on Leonard. Sheldon really hadn’t been kidding about that but some guys will put up with anything to talk to a girl, especially, the ‘nice’ ones.

‘Come on, Penny, you know there are no such things as witches. All that New Age psychic stuff is a bunch of baloney. Here, let me show you some real magic.’ Leonard took out a ping pong ball and put it on a plate in front of him.

‘Here’s some real magic. I can pick up the ball without lifting the glass, can you?’

Penny smiled, he was going to use simple centrifugal force. She’d seen the trick done in her first physics class at UCLA. ‘Come on, really?’

Leonard whirled the glass on the plate and the ball raced around and climbed the inside of the glass.

‘Holy smokes! That’s so cool.’ Penny looked astonished when Leonard quickly lifted the glass and turned it upright. He handed it to Penny.

‘It’s easy, you try it.’

Penny set the trick up again. ‘I had no idea you could do it by moving the glass.’ Penny put her open left palm on the upside down glass.

‘No, Penny, you don’t hold it like that.’ Leonard reached across the table to help but Penny held up her free hand.

‘Oh, well this is how witches hold them.’ Penny waved her right hand in a circle above her left. Sheldon began to levitate the ball and it began circling around in the glass and climbing up the inside to Leonard’s astonishment. Penny lifted her hand and the glass followed her palm upwards a few inches. She quickly closed her hand, righted the glass, and handed it to Leonard.

Leonard held the glass and picked up the plate in front of Penny and checked them in disbelief. ‘How did you do that?’

‘I told you, I’m a witch, or you could just ask at the Magic Castle but they will never tell you.’

Leonard sat back and laughed. ‘Jeeze, you’re a professional magician, too? You really had me going, there.’

‘I’m many things, Leonard, but what about you?’ Penny waved abruptly. ‘Hey Micky, good to see you again! Micky, come on over. This is Leonard, I didn’t get your last name.’

‘Hofstadter, Leonard Hofstadter.’ Micky shook hands with Leonard and sat down quickly.

‘Hi Penny, so, are you guys on a date, I’d hate to get in the way.’

‘It’s fine, Leonard and I kept running into each other at the comic shop up the street so he asked me out to coffee. He’s single and he does magic, isn’t that right, Leonard?’

Leonard blushed a bit at the praise after Penny’s trick. ‘I can’t do magic like Penny but I can do some stuff.’

‘That is so cool, are you a magician, Leonard?’ Micky guessed this guy was who the tip was about but he didn’t seem all that news worthy.
‘Me, no, I work as an experimental physicist at Caltech, lots of cutting edge stuff.’

Penny wanted to draw Leonard out more now that he was feeling comfortable and able to show off his date in front of this new guy. ‘Caltech, you must be some kind of superbrain or something?’

‘Please, Penny, his work is derivative drivel.’ Penny snapped a glare at Sheldon and snickered a bit.

‘Your aura says you are quite the scientist, Leonard, how is it you aren’t married?’ Penny saw Micky swiping through a site on his phone that he kept below the table out of Leonard’s sight. He waved it at Penny and it had a picture of him with a very pretty dark haired woman. She’d seen enough pictures to recognize Priya. Penny nodded to Micky and Sheldon’s eyes widened. He was impressed by the quick silent conversation Penny and Micky shared. Actors and the press were as devious as any batch of film spies he could think of.

‘I never found the right girl.’ Leonard did his shy puppy dog thing.

‘That isn’t what your aura tells me, Leonard, that tells me you prefer mystery.’ Penny said that slowly and looked at Sheldon meaningfully. He wondered why she was looking at him. Penny sensed the flaw in the plan.

‘Aura’s, you don’t believe in that stuff, do you?’

Micky guessed where Penny was going, fortunately. ‘Penny can be pretty scary when she reads people, Leonard, try her out.’ He sat back and gave a small signal to his partner in the van to get some good shots.

Sheldon caught another more pointed look from Penny and realized what she meant and turned up the fear on Leonard.

‘Well, was I right about the mystery, Leonard?’ Penny wanted to start rattling Leonard.

‘Sure, but that’s so vague, you could say it to anyone and they’d probably say yes.‘

Penny locked her fingers together and leaned forward to rest her chin on them and gazed into Leonard’s eyes for a minute. For some reason, he always found her stare a little creepy.

‘I see a love of mystery, not just mysterious women but exotic women. Well educated, intelligent, but foreign, foreign taught, and foreign bred.’ Penny could see Leonard getting progressively antsy.

‘Well, that’s still vague stuff, I mean…’

‘Oh, no, I see a country in your aura, India, yes, there is an ancient aura mixed with yours Leonard and her spirit is from India.’ Penny nodded and took a deep breath. ‘One can almost smell the lotus blossoms in her ebony hair from her aura.’

‘I don’t, I mean, I have never been to India.’ Leonard was shifting uncomfortably in his chair and Sheldon was enjoying the show.

‘Are you sure, your aura is so entwined with hers, I can’t believe you guys didn’t work out, did she pass away? I have always felt drawn to the departed, I think it’s because my husband died.’ Penny sounded wistful and distant.

‘Dead, no, Priya isn’t dead.’ Leonard shut up and looked like a cat caught in a canary cage.

‘Priya, your wife’s name, which sounds like a lovely name, like an Indian princess of a noble family,
wealthy and wise. What happened to her Leonard?’

‘Nothing, she’s, um, I should go.’ Penny clamped her right hand down on Leonard’s and kept her chin propped on her left. She was sure Micky’s cameraman would be getting this.

‘Come on, Leonard, you said you don’t believe in that stuff.’ She smiled but her eyes were strangely shifting color.

Micky got out his phone where everyone could see it and started another swipe and got to Caltech. ‘Let’s check, Penny scares the hell out of me when she gets that voice. Hey, they’ve got a page for you at Caltech.’

Leonard choked at the sight of the university faculty page. It had a picture of him and Priya.

Micky showed it to Penny. ‘Look, it says he’s married to some lawyer, Priya, hey and she’s from India! Jesus, you are scary.’

Penny clenched Leonard’s hand. ‘Married? You said you weren’t married. What is this, Leonard?’

‘Hey, I told you I was married.’ Leonard tried to sound scandalized but he couldn’t get over the cold in the restaurant.

Micky shook his head. ‘No, Leonard, I was sitting right here when she straight up asked you and you said you weren’t.’

‘Is this what you do, cheat on your wife?’ Penny let go of Leonard’s hand and got up. ‘Don’t talk to me ever again, Leonard.’

Leonard looked between Penny and Micky and started to panic. ‘I really have to go, I’m sorry it was a misunderstanding.’

Penny and her guys watch Leonard rush out of the restaurant. ‘Not much of a story, but it might hit a back page.’

‘That’s all I need, Micky, I just want to help a friend out.’

‘This friend wouldn’t be Priya, now, would it?’ Sheldon was astonished at the paparazzi’s deduction. He had to do some reevaluation of their skills in light of today.

‘Remember how well the Jonas Twill thing turned out for you? This could be a bit better.’

‘Really, well, I’ll shop the pictures and how about the story?’

‘The grieving widow tries the dating scene and gets flummoxed by a cheating spouse? I can cry for you if that would help?’

Both Sheldon and Micky smirked and told Penny she really was an evil witch.

Later that week, Lalita tried calling Priya and they had a happy reunion chat. Priya had no idea her old friend was in America and Lalita thought she sounded like she missed more than just an old childhood friend. Lalita left off that she was married to Raj and just said she was on vacation for a few weeks with her boyfriend. Lalita put off Priya’s questions saying she didn’t want to make him nervous by springing old girlfriends on him. Priya agreed, he’d probably think Lalita was trying to get him to propose to her or was having friends check him out to see if he was marriage worthy. That led to talking about Priya’s marriage which Priya got quiet about. Lalita was hopeful because Priya
invited her out to lunch to talk about how things were going.
Friends and Family

Chapter Summary

Lalita and Priya have a chat over lunch.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs. Muir

Not looking for canon, just having fun with Big Bang’s toys.

Lalita and Priya met at a hole in the wall Indian restaurant in East Los Angeles. Lalita was curious why Priya picked the place because everything was in Spanish but she had to admit it smelled like a place she knew back home.

‘This doesn’t look like a restaurant where you’d find a successful lawyer who went to Cambridge.’

Priya snickered at that since Lalita was right. ‘Back home, I’d never have come to a place like this but a client told me about it. He grew up in this neighborhood. The owner here dropped out of college and went to India to discover himself.’

‘One of them looking for their guru?’ Lalita laughed at Priya’s smile and shrug.

‘Yes, but he grew out of it and he learned to cook because he didn’t have the money to get home. He said his guru turned out to be a fry cook in Bangalore and he learned very well. His Idli Dip Sambhar and Bisi Bele Bhath are to die for. Besides, Leonard would never think of coming to this part of LA much less a hole in the wall like this. He has no stomach for real home cooked food.’

The girls chatted about Lalita’s family and about each other’s jobs until the food came. Lalita was amazed. ‘Priya, this Idli Dip is just like my grandmother’s!’

‘See, I told you, that’s just what I thought the first time I came in here. I had to bring you just to find out if I was imagining it.’

They tucked into lunch and talked about old times and eventually came around to the present. Lalita could tell Priya was unhappy because she kept avoiding anything about Leonard.

‘Are you happy, Priya? Everything you talk about is someplace Leonard doesn’t go or doesn’t eat or doesn’t do.’

Priya looked at the tablecloth and shifted her plate around distracted and sad. ‘No, not really, successful sure, but I guess they’re right when they say lawyers sell their souls for success.’

‘What are you talking about; you’re no evil lawyer, saheli.’ Lalita never thought she’d hear Priya put herself down like that.
‘Everyone was against my marriage to Leonard and I ignored them, they were right, especially Raj. At first, I blamed myself since I was always working but later, he always had an excuse, a reason. I should have seen through that but I trusted him. I needed to trust him because I stood up for him. You know how my family feels about us marrying outsiders.’

Lalita nodded, her family wasn’t a lot better, especially her grandparents. ‘You can’t let their expectations keep you with someone that’s cheating on you, Priya.’

‘I’m not, I don’t really care if they know, but I would care if Raj knew. He knew Leonard for years but I wouldn’t believe him. How do I look him in the face and say I am sorry I didn’t listen.’

Priya talked about how she found out about Leonard’s cheating, especially with the silly science fiction conventions he went to. He knew she’d never want to go to them; they were perfect cover for him. So was his lab, and seminars, all so reasonable. All so sordid and hidden but his latest tryst truly hurt because her office knew about it and talked with that sad office gossip hush for the clueless wife. She got out her smartphone and swiped to a tabloid article the office had been talking about, it was about him jilting his wife and embarrassing Penny Queen by trying to lure her into date.

‘The pity is what hurts the most. I want to kill him but I did this to myself, saheli, how am I supposed to tell Raj I messed up like this? Priya cried and seemed to fold in on herself. Lalita brought her chair over next to Priya and hugged her old friend.

‘Priya, you know how close our families are, I promise you none of them care about how you married Leonard, not even your parents or Raj. They just want you to come back to them. They want you to come home.’

‘I wish I could, Lalita, I wish I could.’

Lalita knew things could go good or bad from here because Priya hated being pushed into things or manipulated into them. They were old friends but friends who hadn’t seen each other in years and Priya was in a very delicate place where she lost trust in herself. Lalita had to hope Priya was ready to trust to old times.

‘Priya, I really wasn’t honest about my boyfriend, he actually is my husband, although it’s hard not to think of him as a boyfriend, still, he acts like a kid, at least.’

‘You’re married, why didn’t you just say so, I’d love to hear about a happy marriage.’ Priya was puzzled by the turn of story here.

‘That’s the thing, I am sort of here to say what your family can’t. They are afraid you don’t want to see them anymore. There were so many hard feelings back home, even my family had opinions on your marriage and I will spare you them. But all that was so long ago, Priya, and they stopped tending those feelings a long time back. They do want you to come home. Raj was a big part of that change when he went back. That doesn’t really matter, though.’

Priya felt Lalita was holding something back. ‘You are here with Raj, aren’t you? You married my brother?’

‘After all the time I spent beating him up as a kid, I figured, why stop?’ Lalita snickered and pulled her wedding album out of the bag she carried it in and handed it to Priya. She opened the book like a member of a bomb squad and leafed slowly through the images.

‘Like I said, Raj was a big part of changing their minds, but didn’t you ever wonder why he went back home? He loved it here in California. He had his own life without anyone pushing him around
so why did he give it up to go back and teach undergraduates?’

Priya paused on the photo of Raj and Lalita in their full wedding garb. ‘He said he talked to Leonard in the arctic and he saw things Leonard’s way.’

Lalita gave an undignified snort. ‘You know how dead set Raj was against your marriage, did you ever ask him or Leonard what changed Raj’s mind? You have the world’s most annoyingly overprotective brother so what changed his mind when we both know he knew what Leonard was?’

Priya closed the book and Lalita could see the lawyer face Priya had almost from birth. ‘Are you saying Raj was forced into supporting Leonard?’

‘I’m married to him; anything I say is tainted evidence, so look at the events, instead. Raj was dead set against your marriage because he knew what Leonard was like.’ Lalita tapped Priya’s phone and brought back the article about Penny and Leonard. ‘Raj never told you the reasons from his side for siding with Leonard and the only one who did tell you had a vested interest in one version, the one that got him what he wanted, marriage to you. After that, Raj went back to India to take a job well below the capacity he is capable of and never wanted to do. What questions do you want answered about this?’

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‘Raj, if you don’t stop pacing, I will throw you out that balcony window. You’re just making this worse for yourself.’ Penny sat at the desk putting book marks in the arctic journals that were relevant to the connection of Priya to all this. She could understand the nerves, she was wound up like a nervous cat right now, so she tried getting her mind off what could be happening with Lalita by putting the case together. However, the sweeping of Raj’s slippers around the study was torture.

‘Penny, what if this doesn’t work? What if Lalita can’t get through to Priya or Priya figures out what Lalita is there for before she gets the whole truth? We might lose her forever.’

‘I don’t know, Raj, those are questions I can’t answer and I won’t offer any false hope by saying it will be OK. This is too important to you for that, honey; we’ve just got to trust Lalita.’

Penny tried to think of something to occupy Raj with. ‘I’m probably going to regret this but Howard has a project in the cellar he’s working on. It’s a safety surveillance system for the baby. He wants to rig up the house so he and Bernadette can keep an eye on the baby from anywhere. Why don’t you go downstairs and help him. The work will take your mind off of worrying a bit.’

Raj said that was a good idea but he asked Penny to call him as soon as she heard anything from Lalita. Penny assured him she would and walked over to the balcony to use the telescope after Raj went downstairs to help Howard. She looked down the roadway that came up the canyon but there was no sign of the car Raj and Lalita had rented. Penny took the long wait as a sign Priya and Lalita had to be talking so that should be cause for hope.

Sheldon appeared by the telescope. ‘Do you think we did the right thing confronting Leonard the way we did, Penny?’

Penny looked up from the telescope. ‘It’s a little late for that question, but I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t think so. All the same, like I said to Raj, that’s the kind of question, no one can give a sure answer to. I don’t know how Priya will react. Lalita thought the woman she knew a long time ago would never be involved with someone like Leonard to begin with so who’s to say? If I hadn’t listened to Kurt, I’d have never taken those classes that got me my first real roles. On the other hand, he wouldn’t have been in a place to get tempted to cheat so maybe I’d still be married and he’d still
be alive? Or maybe, I’d be broken up with Kurt and waitressing, living in a cheap apartment somewhere mooching off my neighbors because I couldn’t get any work except crap roles like that Serial Apeist thing we caught Howard and Raj watching last night?’

‘Please, I find it hard to believe you could sink that low, Penny.’ Sheldon was aghast at that ridiculous film playing in his home. He came close to putting the two of them into a fit of terror they would never wake from.

‘You’ve got to get work where you can get it; Bernie was waitressing at that Cheese Cake place for years barely keeping above water to pay her school loans. There’s no knowing what you may need to do in life. Just like you can’t really know what others will do when it comes to how they will feel or react. I can guess what Priya might do but it’s only a guess. I’ve been cheated on so I can imagine how she feels but I can’t know for sure. Lalita has known her far longer than me and she’s not sure what will happen.’

Sheldon shuddered at the many unqualifiable variables while he went to his white board by the window and read the elegant mathematical functions. ‘People look at quantum mechanics and imagine it as some kind of esoteric and arcane mystery but it is simply math. It is no different, than two plus three equals five except in scale. However, emotions have always seemed far more a mystery than the most perplexing mathematical theory to me. You saw through the arctic puzzle in a way that would never have occurred to me and arrived at a solution I had begun to think was unobtainable. You are every bit the genius anyone ever called me where human motivations are concerned, Penny.’

‘Please, I’m no genius on that score. If I was, I wouldn’t have eloped to begin with, or at least not been so love struck with Kurt as to marry him. I bought any wisdom I have and it was not cheap. I’m not sure if it was even wisdom I bought.’ Penny looked through the telescope at a car coming up the canyon. It was Lalita on her way back and she could make out two passengers in the car. She rushed downstairs to tell Raj. Sheldon looked through the telescope at the approaching car. He was glad he was dead since otherwise he’d have a heart attack from the stress at this point.

Raj just stared at Penny not knowing what to do. Howard gave him a good hard back slapping and sent him upstairs with Penny. After Raj left, Howard went to find Bernadette to tell her how worried he really was about all this. Bernadette brought Howard out to the pavilion to talk about how he felt and to keep things from being too overwhelming off the bat inside. Upstairs, Penny had Raj wait in the study while she met Lalita downstairs to see how everything went. Raj was far too keyed up to be meeting Priya right away and she guessed Priya would be feeling overwhelmed, too, depending on what Lalita had been able to explain. She was starting to wish she was in the study hiding out with Raj.

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Penny met Lalita and Priya at the door and they went to sit in the living room. Lalita and Priya sat on the couch. Bernadette had put a tray with pots of coffee and tea on the coffee table for Penny and them when Penny came down from settling Raj in the study. Penny sat in the easy chair on the other side of the table and they all looked fretfully at each other for a few seconds. The conversation started off very awkwardly trying to be polite and obviously trying to miss everything they all wanted to talk about. In the end, Priya took the initiative and went to one of the thorns they had been avoiding.

‘I don’t blame you, Penny, about Leonard. It’s not the first time. He said you led him on as though I hadn’t heard that excuse from him before.’ Priya was grateful for Lalita holding her hand because she wanted to get up and run out of the house. She felt like a fool talking to this woman who was so
well known about her fool of a husband.

‘Yes, I have heard that excuse before, too, from my husband before he died. I wanted to believe it so badly but it wasn’t true.’ Penny hadn’t talked to anyone about Kurt except for Bernadette.

‘You’re kidding?’ Priya couldn’t believe the patron saint of romantic marriage was a jilted wife.

‘He was run over and before I could do anything except smile at all the condolences. He wasn’t all bad. That’s why I married him so when he died I felt like I would have been worse somehow to accuse him of cheating. He wouldn’t have felt anything I guess but that wouldn’t have fixed my heart from that pain he put there. There would have been no justice in it just empty revenge. Instead I get to listen to well-meaning pity and condolence. I think that feels the worst because I’m lying with every thank you.’

Priya nodded in understanding about the pity. ‘Up to now, I’ve been the only one to know about Leonard. That was bad enough because my family warned me about him. I thought he was just a silly child at first and he’d learn better. I needed him to be better but he never was and I couldn’t tell my family, not Raj, he knew better but I didn’t listen to him. I don’t know what Leonard was thinking when he met you. He followed your show, bought his toys and comics; I thought he couldn’t be so stupid.’ Priya bent forward and covered her face with her hands to take a breath.

‘It was hearing about it at work that was hardest. The pity from everyone who read Leonard was cheating on me. They were all trying to make me feel better. It was worse than Leonard’s lies. I felt so foolish because they didn’t know what I had already compromised forgiving him so many times and what I lost turning on my family to be with him. Sort of like you, divorce would just be revenge and it wouldn’t fix anything. When it was nerds at his work or comic conventions no one knew but now, it feels like I’m getting what I deserve for not listening to my family or just divorcing him the first time I found him cheating.’ Priya felt like she needed a shower from the inside out. Her skin crawled to be telling all this out loud what she had thought far too many times over the years.

‘Priya, I guess Lalita told you Raj is here and everything.’ Penny continued when Priya just nodded. ‘There is justice to be had in all this. Leonard did a lot more than just cheat on you. He hurt a lot of people before he even married you.’

‘What do you mean?’ Priya was curious because Lalita had already brought up Raj’s turn of mind about her and Leonard getting together.

Penny had been wondering where Sheldon was ever since Lalita’s car came back to the cottage. She guessed he must be as nervous as everyone else in the house, today.

Lalita took up the moment feeling some of her old Priya coming back to herself. ‘You should ask Raj about that. A lot happened here in this house and up in the arctic that I believe Leonard never told you. You’re a lawyer, Priya, you know how important knowing what all the evidence in the case is, you can get that right here, from Raj and Howard, and from Sheldon.’ Lalita looked at Penny and got up. She offered her hand to Priya.

Priya looked at both women and made up her mind to follow the evidence. Penny followed Lalita and Priya upstairs and Penny told them Raj was waiting in the study. They were all apprehensive and Priya was glad Lalita was here for support. Lalita opened the door and led Priya into the study. Raj got up from the desk where he had been reading through the arctic journals. The siblings stared at each other like each was seeing a ghost. They took a tentative step towards each other then rushed to embrace. Raj was stunned by his sister crying. She always guarded her feeling so much he sometimes thought she was made of steel.
Raj hugged his sister tight and closed his eyes trying to forget she had ever been away. ‘What’s wrong, why are you crying?’

‘I feel so happy, so terrible, and I feel like it’s over. My biggest mistake; I’m sorry Raj; sorry I didn’t listen to you. I’m sorry I lost you when I left you and everyone.’ Priya rambled everything at once trying to put too many feelings she could barely explain into words she wasn’t ready to say.

Raj gently cut off her apology with his own apologies. ‘I’m sorry I pushed so hard. I’m sorry I ever made you think you couldn’t talk to me. I just wanted you to be happy, all of us did. I was stupid thinking I could make you happy by trying to make your decisions about Leonard. I was never there for when you really needed me.’

Penny saw Sheldon vanish from the telescope by the open balcony and she reached over to hug Lalita’s waist. They both breathed a sigh of relief and left Raj and Priya to their reunion.
Memories of Home

Chapter Summary

Penny and Sheldon do some looking back over the past.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs. Muir. Not trying to be canon just having fun with Big Bang's toys.

Lalita and Penny went downstairs to the kitchen and Penny made them both some iced tea. Lalita wanted to take hers outside to the pavilion to think about Raj and Priya upstairs. She wanted to call home to talk to her folks after everything that happened today.

‘Penny, did your parents look sad when you got married?’ Lalita remembered how oddly wistful her parents had looked at the airport when she and Raj left on their honeymoon.

‘Beats me, Kurt and I eloped. I expect they were more angry than sad although they never said anything. Well, my mom still complains about not getting to throw a big wedding like yours.’ Penny could still hear the shouting on her phone the morning after in Las Vegas.

Lalita giggled at that story. ‘Sometimes, I wished I had eloped when my mother got going on all the details but when we left from the airport, they looked sad in a way I never saw before. I wonder if all parents feel that way. When I think about everything with Priya and Raj, I worry about what might happen with my kids, someday.’

Lalita was glad she got to help Raj and Priya get back together and now she wanted to call her parents and tell them how much she loved them. ‘Watch, they’ll think I’m upset and want a divorce, already.’

‘Well, Priya is a pretty good lawyer, I hear. Check with her.’ Penny laughed and said she’d give her a call out in the pavilion if Raj came looking for her.

Sheldon appeared across the kitchen table from Penny after Lalita went outside. ‘How are you doing, Moonpie?’

‘I am pondering family. I know very little about mine since I died. I was not communicative with them except for Meemaw and my mommy. The calls were more dutiful with my mother because she is quite the staunch Christian of a particularly fervent Texas variety.’

‘Not the Charismatic types?’ Penny sighed in sympathy. ‘We have them in Nebraska, too. Lucky me, my family aren’t big church goers.’

‘I believe my mother found her faith because her husband drove her to it. He was not an easy man, very particular and very set in his ways. His house, his rules was how he ran things. But it was the
drinking that made things hardest for her so she discovered the church. It was my Meemaw who really understood me and I do miss her very much. All the talking upstairs between Raj and Priya has made me wonder, considerably, what has happened to my family since I died.’

‘You’re listening to them even now?’ Penny couldn’t help feeling that was a bit rude.

‘Like I explained to you when you and Bernadette were discussing Jonas Twill’s attack on you later that evening in the bathroom, I am always aware of those rooms. It is almost like they are in my mind up there because of my attachment to that space. I can ignore other parts of the house but not those rooms. That is why I prefer only you being there, though Bernadette’s presence is not disagreeable. She is surprisingly careful and thorough in her dusting around all my models.’

Penny raised an eyebrow at Sheldon’s approved list. ‘Is that why Howard still gets creeped out whenever he goes up there by himself? He says he hates to go in there at all if Bernadette or I aren’t in the study.’

‘He has his collector’s room downstairs which has a great deal of my collectables to lounge around in. Besides, he keeps eyeing my Battlestar Galactica which you purchased for me. He believes his display is in need of it to make his ensemble of starships complete.’

Penny gave a nod to Sheldon’s complaint. ‘I can understand you not wanting him taking your stuff downstairs. I’ll talk to him about the study collection and tell him it all stays up there. Just, try to let him feel a little more welcome, Sheldon. I know you only want me and Bernadette in there but he does live here, too, so don’t go scaring him out of the study.’ Penny saw Sheldon wanted to argue the point further. ‘You can give him a nudge if he tries taking your things, just don’t send him screaming.’

‘Penny, why do you seldom talk about your family? You do not sound displeased with them when you do so, I wonder why you so seldom mention them?’

Penny sipped her tea and glance around the kitchen. ‘Not much to say, they were OK, no different than anyone else or maybe they were? My mom wanted me to act like a girl and dad wanted me to act like a boy until I hit puberty then he spent all his time on my little brother after that. Randal did nothing but get into trouble, trouble enough to end up in jail for cooking meth. Even then, it was always poor Randal to him and why don’t you get married to me. That’s why I wanted out of Nebraska; I would have just ended up some farm wife having babies like my older sister, Helen. Don’t ask me why I married Kurt, that was all too hormone and romance novel fueled to give a good answer to. I guess I’ve just grown away from Nebraska and them. I love them but this is home for me, California, and acting, and the physics and math stuff. I love everything here with you, Sheldon. That would puzzle them back home, me and physics.’ Penny chuckled at the thought of her mother’s face seeing her nose buried in a science book.

+++ Sheldon felt Raj and Priya ready to talk to everyone. Penny got Lalita, Howard, and Bernadette out in the pavilion and they all went up to the study. Raj and Howard spent a lot of time feeling like they were in court with the thoroughness of Priya’s questions about the arctic. Penny’s research in the journals and Sheldon’s computer logs helped a lot to fill Priya in on their side of the arctic story. Penny started to worry that Priya didn’t believe it for a while when her questioning grew colder and clinical but Raj and Lalita’s ease with it reassured her. Raj later told Penny that was when he started feeling Priya was feeling like the sister he knew, again. She was just in her lawyer armor but he knew she was outraged not just at the sabotage.

Penny was impressed by Priya's all in commitment to clearing up the arctic fiasco and asked Raj
about her quick alliance. Raj was used to this side of his sister as was Lalita. The idea that Leonard had hurt her brother and Howard and possibly driven Sheldon to kill himself was worse than anything Leonard had done to her with his cheating. The cheating on her she would have forgiven, too much and often which had always been Raj’s worry about her, but hurting his friends, and her brother, Raj assured Penny Leonard had no idea what he had unleashed.

‘Priya, how are you going to find the equipment and notes from the arctic? It’s not something Leonard is ever going to talk about.’ Penny had always come to a halt on how to find the proof they needed, shy of a search warrant like a TV show.

Priya looked at Lalita and they smiled like a couple of Cheshire cats. Raj buried his face in his hands and started moaning.

‘Penny, you’ve met my husband and seen how he reacts to a pretty face, Lalita can get him talking like a fool, have no doubt of it. And besides, I am quite good at getting information from a hostile witness. A little good cop, bad cop, and Leonard will sell whatever little is left of his soul to us.’

After the war council wrapped up, Priya, Raj, and Lalita went out to dinner to have some family time. Howard and Bernadette wanted to call it a day and get some rest so they went to bed after an early supper. When Penny and Sheldon were finally alone in the study Sheldon couldn’t hold back his disbelief. Sheldon was shocked, especially after the way Penny had duped Leonard. ‘Is there some clandestine school where women go to study these arts and allurements which manipulate men or is it genetic?’

Penny glanced at Sheldon from the wing chair with some bemusement. ‘Sheldon, women hardly have a monopoly on manipulation and deviousness, look at Leonard.’

‘Yes, but it is shocking how easily people prey on others through the use of emotional intimacy. The desire for sex drives out all reason and it is easily triggered to manipulate simple minded fools.’ Sheldon had always been confounded by feelings. He felt much more at home with math and science where reason ruled supreme. Emotional intelligence was always a contradiction in terms to him. Her ability to untangle the bewildering world of feelings was what made his Meemaw so invaluable to him growing up.

‘They do, you remember Zane and his camera in the bathroom. I can only imagine what might have come of that if it wasn’t for you, Sheldon, but most people really are not out to hurt anyone or gain something that way. The Leonard’s and Zane’s who will manipulate people to get what they want make it really hard to trust again after they burn you. That’s what makes trust so very precious. It’s hard to gain and easy to lose, just like respect. It’s a shame more people don’t value it more so it can be hard not thinking like you do, Sheldon. But it isn’t a woman thing; it’s a human thing, a very bad side of every one of us. If we aren’t careful, it’s easy to think everyone is out to hurt you to gain something. You’re a good man, Sheldon, don’t let the Leonards make you think worse of everyone.’

‘Emotions and trust about feelings from others outside my family have always been difficult for me. Even my family is a mystery at times, except for Meemaw, but I do trust you as much as my Meemaw. You have made a world of difference to me, more than I can ever thank you for, Penny.’

Sheldon vanished and left Penny thinking about what a difference he had made to her life. She really couldn’t say anyone had apart from her parents, not even Kurt. She went over to the study desk and got out the paperwork about the house and looked through the owner’s information. Howard had told them about Sheldon’s mother keeping the house as a memorial to her son but that couldn’t be cheap. She found another name, Constance Tucker, and she was described as the grandmother of the deceased owner. Penny had found Meemaw. She hoped the address listed was still current and got out some stationary. Penny expected Sheldon would never expect a letter to arrive from her.
Phase one went well but Lalita returned to Los Robles Cottage more subdued than Penny expected. She told everyone that Priya and she had gotten the information they needed. The hardest part was some of it was in a safe at Caltech which Priya thought would have the most sensitive stuff; especially that can opener Howard figured had created the results. Penny took a turn out on the balcony to chat with Sheldon while everyone was trying to come up with an idea about the safe.

‘Can a ghost crack a safe, Sheldon?’ Penny cut to the chase.

‘Easily, should we resort to criminal methods to do this, Penny?’

‘You know, this game ain’t for guys that’s soft!’ Penny did her best Edward G. Robinson.

‘Thank you, Rico Bandello, that makes me feel ever so much better.’ Sheldon scoffed at Penny’s mimicking the gangster boss. Her recent love of classic gangster movies had her and Bernadette doing gangster skits all over the house.

‘Yeah, you’re right, Sheldon, this isn’t honest. I can live with doing this, I wouldn’t be surprised if Priya could, too, to save Raj, but she’s a lawyer. She could lose everything doing something like this. I don’t doubt Howard and Raj have the skills but they can’t afford to get caught doing something like this and the university would never look at the proof if they got caught. Leonard could just say they were planting it. I really don’t see this in Bernie or Lalita’s wheelhouse. It’s not really mine either but I do have a friend none of them do who can get this done with me. I can’t ask you to do it because it isn’t the honest way to do this but I can tell you I am willing.’

‘I am dead, none of this will really change anything for me but it will change so much for them.’ Sheldon looked in the study where he never expected to see his friends together ever again. To see more new friends like Bernadette and Lalita, he couldn’t express how much Penny had added to his soul. ‘We will go, tomorrow night, assuming Leonard has stayed true to form. There is an annual Babylon 5 viewing party which he attended religiously. I believe Priya can tell us if he still attends that festival, if so, access to his lab will be quite simple.’

Sheldon did feel there was a flaw in the idea. ‘Wouldn’t Leonard simply say the things were stolen?’

‘Sure, he can admit to hiding data proving he sabotaged your experiment, I’m sure that will work.’ Penny did think it would be best to go over that with Priya after they had the proof.

‘He could claim that it is fabricated.’

‘How did he keep his data, Sheldon?’

‘Much like mine, hand written journals and computer records.’

Penny gave that a thought and felt it shouldn’t be a problem. ‘It’s hard to fake a whole journal of handwriting so that would fall apart pretty quick. Computers and files can be just as hard to fake, I guess, not something so needed with a set of journals of undeniable handwriting. One should back up the other and we aren’t going in a court of law, we are going for scientific proof. That is something you guys do know. I am sure with the know how in that room the proof will stand up.’

Three days later, Priya came to Los Robles Cottage in the morning with some of the equipment and paperwork from the arctic that was in the basement of her home. Penny let her in and brought her to the living room where a large FedEx box sat on the table. She asked Priya to sit and give her a second while she found everyone. She called folks down from upstairs where Raj, Lalita, and
Bernadette were putting themselves together. Penny found Howard in the kitchen making breakfast before he went to work and had him join everyone. They all were happy with the stuff Priya brought from home but the safe in Leonard’s lab weighed on them. Penny asked Howard if he’d mind opening the box that had been delivered this morning. The contents had them all astounded. The journals had Leonard’s name and were labeled Cooper Arctic expedition. Everything was there, including the can opener Howard remembered from the arctic. The rapid fire of questions about where the box came from all went to Penny since she got the delivery. She just put it down to the ghost of Sheldon.

Priya, Raj, and Howard took over the study for the day. Howard told Bernadette he wasn’t bothering with opening his office until this was over now they had the proof they needed. She gave him a kiss and told him to make her proud. Bernie hadn’t seen her husband ever look so changed for the better. She did have questions for Penny, though. She found Penny in the kitchen and asked her to take a little walk outside with her. They headed up a trail out behind the house they enjoyed for the views of the valley.

‘It’s great that box of goodies showed up out of nowhere, sweetie.’ Bernadette didn’t bother keeping the sarcasm out of her voice.

Penny smirked and agreed. ‘Yup, it is.’

‘It wasn’t Sheldon’s ghost, was it, Penny?’

‘Oh yes, yes it was.’ Penny had no reason to lie about that. She’d never been able to get past the cameras, motion detectors, and locks without him. He did wonder about the FedEx but Penny wanted the box to get to them with some sort of trail so it didn’t just fall into their hands from the get go. It made it a little harder to say they had faked the contents.

‘Come on, I want to save Howard’s bacon just as much as you, you can tell me.’

Penny gave Bernadette a hug. ‘You know, something could go wrong. If it does, well, some crazy actress living in an attic full of Sheldon’s stuff got her head filled with the guy. She came across his old work pal and got jilted just like the press said. Being a crazy old bat, she went and tried a silly stunt to get back at him for the jilting and for hurting the guy she went nuts for up in that attic. It’s just a story but Leonard can’t really touch me. Not even over that stuff because he would have to admit having it to begin with.’

Bernadette looked at Penny with newfound respect. ‘Talented, beautiful, and evil, I think I’ll divorce Howard and marry you.’

‘Good idea, love of my life. We’ll make that Plan B, if this doesn’t work. Let’s keep this between us, though. Howard and Raj need this win a lot more than I do.’ Penny and Bernadette held each other and promised to never talk of the box and its appearance ever again.

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For the next two weeks, Priya, Howard, and Raj took over the library to go over all the data that they had from the arctic expedition. Sheldon, through Penny added some of the theoretical proofs he had worked on to explain what happened in the arctic experiment. Raj had brought his journals and files from India, and Howard had kept his own which added to Sheldon’s meticulous work bore out the discontinuities in Leonard’s public journals. His private journals revealed the source of the mechanical faults which gave Sheldon the positive results. Being a lawyer, Priya took up the opposing side and worked to invalidate Howard and Raj’s arguments. She managed to rattle them a few times with tangents Leonard was likely to use. Years of marriage gave her a keen insight into
how he might seek to deflect the charges against him and she helped them greatly in dealing with those possible defenses. Howard and Raj took up demonstrating the equipment and Leonard’s sabotage via the electronic interference created by the electric can opener and eliminating other possible sources of the false data.

During the work on the arctic case, a letter arrived for Penny from Constance Tucker of Galveston, Texas. She got some coffee and went up to the study to get comfortable in the wing chair and see what Sheldon’s Meemaw had to say. Penny was glad to see the letter come since Sheldon was growing more nervous and Sheldony by the hour about the data and the case. Penny could follow some of what the guys were demonstrating after all her classes and having listened to Sheldon talk about the experiment many times but she wasn’t on a level to really add anything meaningful without Sheldon feeding her the information. He insisted she should speak for him but she knew that was a bad idea because she didn’t have the qualifications, yet, and that alone would tend to make her input weak from the start even though she could be speaking fluent Sheldonese. Penny felt sure the letter would distract Sheldon and give him some needed family help.

Penny had written to Mrs. Tucker to talk about Sheldon because she had been living around Sheldon’s papers and things so long and to tell her about what she and the others hoped to do to validate Sheldon’s work. Penny had wanted to get to know Sheldon from her perspective and wrote about some of her own impressions from living with his presence in the house. Meemaw was happy to write about her grandson. As happens with death, many people will try to avoid bringing up lost ones to avoid upsetting those left behind. The idea Sheldon could have committed suicide had been especially painful to her and that had really silenced discussion of her much loved grandson. She was taken with Penny’s letter immediately for the chance to bring him back to life if only in a few pages of a letter.

‘Penny, you must come down to the library and speak to the group about the absurd tack they have taken on Smolin’s criticism on String Theory.’ Penny looked up from her letter and smirked at Sheldon’s latest complaint.

‘Didn’t Frodo push him in that volcano or something?’

‘Smolin, not Smeagol, though I wouldn’t mind seeing him fall into Mount Doom. Is this another of your attempts to get under my skin?’ Sheldon was never sure anymore whether Penny was serious or kidding him with her malapropisms or not ever since she started taking up her physics degree.

‘Tell me what the chicken was about, first.’ Penny could see the wheels turning at the left turn in the conversation.

‘What chicken are you talking about, Penny?’

‘The one Connie, here, says chased you up the elm tree in your front yard when you were seven.’ Penny waved the letter towards Sheldon.

Sheldon gasped in shock hearing his Meemaw’s name. ‘How could you have a letter from Meemaw?’ Sheldon ran to the couch and ripped the letter from Penny’s hand. He scanned the pages rapidly drinking in the familiar elegant cursive loops that were so familiar to him.

Penny curled her legs up under her and watched Sheldon read the familiar stories about his past with alternating expressions of embarrassment, humor, and wistfulness. ‘You’re not forgotten, Sheldon, not by her, or your family. You’ve been so keyed up over the arctic stuff in the library; I figured you needed to remember some more important things like the people who love you, Moonpie.’

Sheldon held the letter delicately as though even a ghostly breath would make it disappear. ‘I haven’t
heard from her in so long, I can’t tell you what this means.’

‘You don’t have to, Sheldon, I can feel it. Now, tell me about her, tell me about you both.’ They spoke of Meemaw, and Texas, and Sheldon’s childhood and Penny got out some memorabilia of her own that even Bernadette had never seen and for a few hours, there was no past or future for either Penny or Sheldon. There was only the life and love of their families to share between them.

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Communication

Chapter Summary

Snippets of conversations about the arctic fiasco.

Chapter Notes

AU inspired by The Ghost and Mrs. Muir. Big Bang owns the toys, I'm just having fun with them.

Leonard and Priya+++ 

The whole Week had been one frustration after another. His planned meeting to talk about funding for his latest research with Gablehauser had been put off three times already. Gablehauser kept telling him nothing could be done at the moment until the department’s funding as a whole got settled out. Everyone kept miscommunicating and not communicating from Barry Kripke’s campaign of embarrassment over the funding which he’d managed to obtain to Leslie Winkle’s tormenting him with the aftermath of the Bialik’s fiasco and getting in the news for that mortifying non-date with her favorite TV star. He had even more trouble at home since Priya seemed to have gone into permanent lawyer mode on some kind of case at her office. Every conversation seemed to go to the same dead end.

‘Hey, is your friend, Lalita, coming over again?’

‘I don’t expect so; she’s got a lot of people she wants to meet from her time studying at USC.’

‘That’s too bad. She was pretty funny. You should invite her again; you two seemed to have a good time.

She’s traveling with her husband so I expect he’ll take up a lot of her free time.

‘You didn’t say she was married.’

‘No? We were too busy reliving old times to think about husbands.’

‘You’ve been going out a lot lately, Priya.’

‘Yes, I have’

‘Well?’

‘Well, what, Leonard?’

‘What are you doing?’

‘That makes you concerned, for what reason?’
‘I’d just like to know where my wife is going, isn’t that OK?’

‘You are evading the question, Leonard, why does my going out make you concerned?’

‘It doesn’t worry me, I just want to know?’

‘Why does it make you concerned to know what you say does not worry you? That is a contradictory statement, Leonard. Are you suspicious of something, Leonard?’

‘Do you love me? I try to do right by you and I know I screw up a lot but you mean everything to me, Priya.’

‘Did you tell that to Penny Queen or any of the other women, Leonard?’

‘I love you Priya.’

‘That is reassuring.’

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Raj and Lalita

Lalita brought Raj to La Casa Bangalore, Priya’s and now Lalita’s favorite restaurant in LA. Raj had been dubious about the place until he got a whiff of the food and tried the Bisi Bele Bhath. The restaurant was a lot like them. They’d lived overseas for so long being given the best education their families could get them but they had grown in so many more ways they felt most comfortable in places like this. A café that was a jambalaya, it was their lives made manifest.

‘What happens after this is over, Raj?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If we win and we prove everything about the arctic and Leonard, what do we do from there?’

‘Do you want to go back home, Lalita, back to India?’

‘Every decision we make turns into something bigger, Raj, almost from when we were children.’

‘Is that why you spent so much time kicking me in the groin growing up?’

‘No, I just enjoyed that; I didn’t want to be married. What ten year old does, really? Our parents made an arranged marriage for us and I hated the idea, but here we are because anyway but because we wanted to do it.’

‘Are you worried about us lasting, Lal?’

‘Of course, how can you take care of a marriage if you do not worry about it?’

‘Are you worried about choosing to live in India or America?’

‘I am worried that we work to be happy wherever we are. Are you happy teaching in India, Raj?’

‘Of course not, we have talked about that hundreds of times.’

‘Then, it should be easy to answer what happens next, Raj.’
‘I want to return home, home to California. Would you be happy coming to California?’

‘When I was studying at USC, I might have said no because I was alone, but now I have you. And, Priya did find the most wonderful restaurant, here.’

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Howard and Raj+++ 

Howard was seeing double from staring at formulas and data for the last week. He and Raj had thrown themselves into the work and they were dying to do more but they hadn’t had a break in days. Raj looked up at the moan that escaped from Howard.

‘Can’t look at any more, either?’

‘I want to, man, but I’m getting to where I’m rechecking what I rechecked because I thought I didn’t recheck what I did check. I have no idea what I just said.’

‘There’s only one answer, man. We have got to risk it.’

‘Are you crazy, Raj? Remember what Bernie said the last time you brought it up?’

‘I know, and she set Priya on us and you know how she feels about the idea but we have a stake in this, too, maybe, the biggest stakes.’

Howard got up from the desk and tossed the pen and calculator aside. ‘Let’s do this. We are droppin’ into Hell, troopers! Time to grow a pair!’

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Priya arrived at Los Robles Cottage at her usual 11am for the last couple of weeks and didn’t see Raj or Howard in the living room or library. She greeted Lalita and they both wondered what became of the guys. They went up to the study where they found Penny in her favorite chair playing a chess game on a weird multilevel board set. She said she hadn’t seen the guys since early this morning but they hadn’t come up here all morning. She seemed to pause in thought a second and said they were in the basement collector’s room. Priya mumbled something harshly about childish games and marched out of the study.

‘Could you get Priya to go easy on the guys, Lal, they’ve been burning themselves out. I don’t think they’ve slept in the last forty hours and they’ve be losing it. A little Halo time might help them unwind and focus more.’ Penny was almost glad she couldn’t be a big contributor after seeing the guy’s haggard faces this morning when she had gotten up. She’d gotten them some coffee and something to eat but she wasn’t surprised that hadn’t been what they really needed.

‘Sure, Penny, what’s that game, some kind of chess?’

‘Yeah, it’s from Star Trek, Sheldon loves the game.’

Lalita nodded at the funny way Penny sometimes referred to Sheldon in the present tense but she had to save the guys from the wrath of Priya.

‘Your game has improved greatly, Penny.’ Sheldon had been surprised how quickly Penny picked up three dimensional chess but he had to admit she did have a facility for puzzles and the
complexities of strategic games that made her a satisfying opponent for Sheldon.

‘Thanks, Sheldon, but I still like Age of Conan, more. This does work to get your mind off things, and I do like this part, check.’

‘What?’

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Howard and Bernadette +++

Bernadette had seen Howard’s pictures and memorabilia. She knew what his job was, well, the one he was trained for and hoped he could go back to again. She didn’t like it, not one bit.

‘You can’t be serious about that, Howard?’

‘Of course I am that was what I did for a living, build spacecraft and fly up in them.’

‘You can’t do that anymore, you have a wife and a baby to think of!’

‘I am thinking of them but can’t I think of myself, too?’

‘Obviously, but how can you do something so dangerous?’

‘Bernie, it’s more dangerous driving over to JPL than flying up to the ISS.’

‘I can’t think of losing you, Howard, the baby needs you because I would be a terrible mother alone.’

‘You won’t be a terrible mother, you’ll be Bernadette and she is wonderful.’

‘What would the baby be without a father?’

‘I can’t promise you a danger free life, Bernadette. Sheldon died right in this house. Penny almost died jogging up the road. I’m not fearless, Bernie, but space travel is no job for the fearless or the reckless.’

‘Those rockets scare me, Howie.’

‘The thought of losing you scares, Bernie. If it’s what you need, I guess I’ve had enough time up there.’

‘Would you really miss it that much, Howie?’

‘Yeah, I would, but I need you more, Bernie.’

Penny and Sheldon+++ 

Penny read through the script again for The Coven’s new season premiere. The show was set to begin filming next month so she had to put the arctic stuff aside for a bit which annoyed Sheldon quite a bit. Penny didn’t doubt his supportiveness towards her work but she also knew his conceit for his own field over everything else.
‘Penny, I have several ideas that I wish to have you introduce to Howard and Raj.’

‘I’m sure you do, Sheldon, but I don’t have the time or energy to go through another ping pong science match between you and them with me being your ghost speaker.’

‘You have no idea what they are considering. The overarching goal of my experiment was not meant to work within—’

Penny cut off the tirade by whistling up a shrill rodeo horse call. Sheldon hated the high pitched noise more than any show tune melody. It reminded him all too much of his father’s loathsome hunting trips. ‘Sheldon, Howard and Raj are pretty good at what they do and Priya knows more about how to present a case than all of us combined. The theory doesn’t matter, we are proving the sabotage. They don’t need more theory down there to do that and I need to have this script prepped and ready so I can do my job next month.’

‘They will soon be presenting this case to the university. Well before you have to shoot your show and your familiarity with the character and setting should make the preparation little more than memorizing your lines of dialogue.’

‘Sheldon, honey, I am not going to have a debate with you about the merits of my work or how it needs to get done. You are not an actor I am not going downstairs to, basically, argue their job with them since I really am not a scientist and they are right to make those arguments I bring from you an uphill fight. All they see is an actress with some coursework in her head. They aren’t wrong. Would you listen to some BA arguing String Theory with you, Moonpie?’

‘Of course not, but you are not a simple BA student and you have my intellect behind you.’

‘They don’t know that, Sheldon, so throwing my two cents in takes more effort than it’s worth all too often and it is time taken from doing this work which is my job and does need my attention.’ Penny lifted the script meaningfully.

‘Penny, I am grateful for the time you take to speak for me but this is urgent.’

‘So, is this, and in this job, I am the expert. Respect, all jobs need it to work. I wouldn’t tell a pilot how to fly a plane or a surgeon how to operate. I do know about acting. You know how hard it is for you to lie, Sheldon?’

‘Of course, you have read Meemaw’s letter and read about a most regrettable attempt.’ Sheldon was still shocked Meemaw had shared that story with Penny and that Penny had found it charming.

‘Acting is a lot like that. If you aren’t prepared, anyone can see you are just some nitwit who memorized some lines and are just spouting them back like a parrot. Maybe, worse, since parrots can manage authenticity in their speech even if it’s nonsense.’

‘I had not considered acting to be akin to being a professional liar.’

‘I don’t think I’d say I’m a professional liar but I am creating a version of the truth, if the work is any good.

Leonard to Siebert’s office+++

Leonard was taken aback after he hung up with President Siebert’s secretary. He felt Prof Gablehauser wasn’t taking the funding issue seriously so he tried getting an appointment to discuss
the situation with the university president and get some pressure put on Gablehauser to get his funding locked down. The secretary had explained the president was aware of the funding issues in the physics department but a review of the department was ongoing and funding issues were tied up in the review. When Leonard had pressed the secretary on what was being reviewed that could affect his ability to continue his research, she had said there was a review of research of the staff within the last five years and future funding depended on the integrity of that prior research. Leonard felt uneasy with that time frame since that went back to the arctic expedition with Sheldon.

Leonard started when his lab door opened. He looked up at Leslie Winkle’s wry grin.

‘What’s got you so jumpy, dumbass?’

‘I’m not jumpy; the door just surprised me, that’s all.’

‘Did it surprise you as much as being in the news, again? Penny Queen’s show is back on soon and the gossip news is running your hundred yard sprint from that coffee shop, again.’ Leslie poured herself a coffee and enjoyed watching Leonard getting worked up.

‘Jeeze, not that again? It wasn’t a date and she asked me out!’ Leonard kept telling everyone about the comic shop and it was just getting coffee not some kind of date.

Leslie rolled her eyes and smirked. ‘Yeah, Penny Queen, the grieving widow of Pasadena, the idol of tweener and angst filled teens asked you out, is that what you told Priya?’

‘Hey, leave Priya out of this, Leslie. I have enough trouble with her already without you adding your two cents.’

‘Leave Priya out of this? Like the way you left Priya out of that ‘not a date’ at Bialik’s? You really are a dumbass.’ Leslie chuckled and freshened her coffee before leaving to teach her class.

‘Thanks for the sympathy, Leslie. Hey, did you have any trouble getting next term’s funding?’

‘No, why would I? Is something going on?’ Leslie hadn’t heard of any funding troubles in the department but she always liked to keep her radar checked.

‘My funding has been held up and I tried talking to Siebert about it since Gablehauser’s been stonewalling me for the past week over it. His secretary said there was some kind of review of past research going on. Have you heard of anything?’

Leslie took a sip of her coffee and mulled over what Leonard said for a minute. No one in the department had said anything about research reviews. Some people were still waiting on the usual slow wheels of departmental paperwork but there was no talk about reviews. She guessed it might be something to do with Leonard’s work specifically that was holding up his money. She thought about warning him but she figured you really can’t save a fool from himself. ‘Nope, my money came through fine.’

‘You don’t suppose that Penny news has anything to do with it, do you?’

Leslie laughed and figured Leonard was too hopeless to save. ‘Why would the department make funding decisions based on your so called love life?’

‘It wasn’t a date!’ Leonard growled at Leslie’s back while she went out the door and he grabbed some antacid out of his desk drawer for the burning in his stomach.

Leonard tried again to get an appointment scheduled when he got back from lunch. She told him the
president was available to see Leonard in his conference room. That worried Leonard because Siebert only held meetings there when something big was going on. He got his paperwork together to discuss his money requirements and headed over to the meeting.

On his way he met a petite blonde with a high pitched voice and wearing glasses. 'Hey, can I help you, miss?'

'Bernadette, thanks, I’m looking for the president’s conference room. My husband has some kind of meeting there and I am so lost here on this campus.’

'I’m headed there myself, Bernadette, let’s walk together, my name’s Leonard, by the way.’

Bernadette laughed and started walking. ‘That’s a funny name, Bytheway, do you play for St. Louis?’

Leonard looked confused and tagged along. ‘What?’

‘What’s on second.’ Bernadette strung Leonard along with the old vaudeville routine.

‘I don’t know?’ Leonard was quite lost now and wondered what was wrong with this girl.

‘He’s on third; we’re not talking about him, Bytheway.’ Bernadette waved and called out to the woman on the sidewalk. ‘Lal, over here, honey, I thought I lost you.’

Leonard couldn’t believe this odd girl was friends with Lalita. ‘Hey, Lalita, how do you two know each other?’

‘Hi Bernie, hey Leonard, my husband and I have been staying with Bernie at her place. I had no idea I’d see you here, Leonard, you sounded like your lab was your life at dinner the other night. How’s the science going?’

‘Great, but I have a meeting with Pres. Siebert in a few minutes.’ Leonard thought for a second and it hit him what Bernadette had been talking about and he cracked up. ‘Who’s on First, Abbot and Costello!’

Bernadette giggled at her success. ‘Yeah, my girlfriend and I like to do routines from old movies we watch. Sometimes, something just triggers me like when you were saying you were Leonard Bytheway.’

They chatted their way up to the conference room and Leonard froze when he heard Penny’s voice when he walked in and his gasp choked in his throat when he heard Priya respond.

‘And, did he try that centrifugal force trick with the ball in the glass?’ Penny handed Priya another coffee and sat down on the couch next to her.

‘Thanks, Penny. Oh, yes, he thought that was so smooth. Almost every sophomore physics geek tries to impress a girl with that, even at Cambridge.’

Lalita piped up in the middle of their laughter. ‘I found Bernie; I guess she got turned around coming back from the parking garage.

‘We may never find the car again; do you know how to find the parking garage, Priya?’ Bernadette got some coffee for Lalita and herself.

‘Don’t worry, I know this campus thanks to Leonard, but I want to ask you about this one here.’
Priya pointed to Penny. ‘How could you get her a Skype channel for your wedding and not get one for your old friend?’

Leonard’s head was spinning from the interconnections in the room. Penny was Skyping Lalita’s wedding? Lalita was staying with Bernadette? Priya was friends with Lalita and now she seemed all chummy with Penny. ‘Someone wanna catch me up? It sounds like you all know each other.’

Leonard didn’t get to hear an answer since he saw a sight that made him feel much worse. Howard Wolowitz and Rajesh Koothrappali came out of the conference room with President Siebert.

‘Gentlemen, it’s been a pleasure to see you here at Caltech again after so long. I want to say how happy I am for myself and for the university to have you both come and speak to me and the board. There’s so much we should discuss, I would like to invite you both to lunch tomorrow at my home and I hope you can bring your wives as well. Mrs. Siebert would be delighted to meet them, and maybe Ms. Queen and your sister could come, Raj?’

Raj shook hands with Siebert. ‘I hope they will, how about it Priya, Penny?’

Howard seconded the invite. ‘Yeah, the president puts on quite a spread, you guys will love it.’

Leonard grew sick watching the scene play out in front of him. The stonewalling and prevaricating had to be from Raj and Howard trying to bring up Sheldon and the Arctic. The whole thing about reviewing past work was an attack on him. Fortunately, he had his backup plan ready in his laboratory safe. Siebert’s secretary brought his attention to Leonard.

‘Ah, Prof. Hofstadter, I am glad you could make it. The board and I would like to discuss some previous work of yours.’ Siebert’s voice had turned to a cold frost in the instant he turned to Leonard. ‘Ladies, Gentlemen, if you would excuse me, I have some university issues to discuss with Prof Hofstadter, please I would be very happy to see ‘you’ all, tomorrow.’

Leonard tried to march confidently into the conference room but the table the board of governors sat around held a nightmare. Sheldon’s journals were scattered about along with several laptops that had his data. He was aghast at more and worse, his private journals from his safe were there as well as his arctic equipment, his computer data, and the electric can opener he’d used to fudge Sheldon’s results.

Sheldon watched the scene play out in front of him. He had caused panic in too many people invading his home to not see it in Leonard. He wasn’t revengeful by nature but he had watched with pride how Raj and Howard had handled themselves. Now, he saw Leonard start to fall apart and he didn’t even have to use his ethereal influence to see his ‘best’ friend face the consequences of what he’d done to benefit himself. Sheldon watched the proceedings begin and he thought that if he had ever won a Nobel Prize this was how it would have felt, vindicated.

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Penny looked out the window at the campus with its students and teachers and bustle between classes and waited for Sheldon. She took a sip of her coffee when he appeared next to her.

‘Have you seen enough, Sheldon?’

‘I have but where are the others?’ Sheldon thought they would all celebrate together at the victory they had achieved.

‘They’re all gone to a victory dinner at some place in East LA that Priya likes but I wanted to wait for you so I said I’d catch them back home. How did it feel in there, Sheldon?’ Penny couldn’t help thinking about Kurt while she watched the afternoon sky.
‘Howard and Raj were magnificent but it is strange, I felt oddly sorry for Leonard just now. I was so angry and shocked when Howard told his story. I was mortified at how Raj was manipulated into supporting Leonard marrying Priya. Yet, if Leonard had only hurt me, I think I would have forgiven what he did. I almost want to forgive him now except for how he hurt so many lives. This is that strange cocktail of emotions you talked about when you found out about Kurt’s cheating, isn’t it?’

‘It is but you are a better soul, Sheldon. I don’t really feel forgiveness for what Kurt did to me. They say forgiveness heals but his death took away the chance to face him for what he did. I felt more cheated by his death than I ever did from his sleeping around. I’m glad you can forgive Leonard; I like to hope I could forgive Kurt but I don’t know. You make me want to be able to, though, Sheldon, thank you.’
New Arrival

Chapter Summary

Sheldon's name is cleared, the aftermath is over, and December is here.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by The Ghost and Mrs Muir

Just playing with Big Bang's toys and not trying to be especially canon.

The wake of the arctic brought a host of changes to the Los Robles family. The immediate aftermath saw Howard and Raj got their positions back at Caltech. The Board and Pres. Siebert had been quite impressed by their presentations and by their loyalty to Prof Cooper and his memory. They would be starting full time with classes again in the coming spring term which gave them a little time to get their affairs in order to restart their old jobs.

Priya and Leonard got a divorce in the aftermath of everything. That had been surprisingly less acrimonious than she had thought it would be but in arbitrating the terms of the divorce; she and Leonard had finally had an honest discussion about everything that had happened between them and it brought them closure. As much as Leonard had connived to get together with her, she had married more to prove to her family that she could than to be with him, really. They both realized they shouldn’t have gotten married to begin with.

Howard and Raj got their jobs back at CalTech and were busy re-orienting themselves. Raj found the change less stressful than Howard because he had the advantage of having been able to stay in his field and work while in India. Howard had fallen behind but with Penny and Bernadette’s encouragement he used the time to begin his own engineering PhD program to help him catch up on advancements in the field while he was ‘slumming it in real estate’ as he called his time outside academia.

The biggest change for all of them came in December.

+++ Bernadette loved seeing Howard heading off to Caltech in the morning. He looked happy enough that sometimes Monday morning wasn’t entirely awful. She was more concerned with Penny these days. She knew Penny was usually rehearsing later in the day so she went up to the study after Howard left to have a chat before Penny dove into her Coven work. She heard Penny talking from outside the door and guessed she was rehearsing something and hoped she wasn’t breaking her concentration on something important when she knocked.

‘Come on in, Bernie!’

‘Morning, Penny, how goes the show?’ Bernadette came in with a pot of coffee and some mugs. She
set them down on the study desk and poured for Penny and herself.

‘We start filming the midseason finale in a few weeks and it all looks good. How’s your finale coming on, the baby will get here soon, I expect.’

‘Oh, god, not fast enough, but the exam yesterday went fine. The doctor is still predicting the end of the month for the birth. Howie and I decided on names, finally, Halley for a girl and Neil if it’s a boy.’

‘They sound lovely. Do you mind if I write to Connie about the names? She’d love to know, I think she wants to knit something for the baby.’ Penny chuckled a bit at Connie’s curiosity about the doings in Los Robles Cottage.

‘Sure, that would be lovely, please thank her for the thought.’ Bernadette poured some more coffee for them both and decided to get to the real reason for this morning’s chat. ‘Penny, are you thinking of doing that M.A.? I get you wanted to help Howie and all but it’s over. You seem to be getting buried in this study more and more and I worry about you.’

‘Why? I have the show, my classes, and my friends?’ Penny could guess what was on Bernadette’s mind.

‘When’s the last time you went on a date?’

‘A real date, Zane, pretty much, I just haven’t wanted to date anyone, Bernie.’

‘That’s what worries me, you used to get out and see people, but now you turn everyone down. You’re barely 25 but you are acting like dating has passed you by or something.’

‘You know, life has been pretty busy of late, Bernie, and besides, I dated more than my fair share in high school before I married Kurt and I met enough guys after him that I don’t feel like I’m missing out on anything.’

‘Don’t you ever get lonely up here, sometimes?’

‘Bernie, I have never felt lonely since we moved in here. I dated guys but I feel like I was always trying to be something for them. I never felt I needed them. A lot of times, I really felt happier when the break up came along. I guess I feel happier being here for me.

Bernie sighed. ‘I wish you would do something besides work and study. I worry about you up here all the time. Sometimes, I hear you talking like there must be someone else here, arguing even, and it doesn’t sound like rehearsal, either.’

Penny looked abashed since she knew how she and Sheldon could go at it from time to time. ‘I’m sorry, Bernie, I guess I can get talking to myself up here but it’s nothing to worry about. I’m not going to turn into some crazy cat lady up here.’

‘Oh, honey, it’s just I don’t want to see you get stuck and trapped up here so much. It just seems a little too much like after you found out about Kurt cheating on you. You got all barricaded up there in that old apartment.’ Bernadette looked around the room with its eccentric decoration. She got up and walked over to the bookshelves. She perused the eclectic mix of books—science and math, theater and literature, new age spiritualism and astrology.

Penny’s eyes followed Bernadette’s hand running along the books and her thoughts ran along the paths of those final days with Kurt. ‘Bernie, you know I was hardly happy back then. The highlight of my life back then was my husband dying. I was angry, despairing, and exasperated. I was relieved
I didn't have to tell my family about the cheating, but I was filled with guilt and doubt about everything ahead of me. I had found my fairy tale prince and kingdom when I got to California and it all had come crashing down on me.' Penny picked up their coffees and brought Bernadette’s over to her. ‘If I didn’t have you back then, Bernie, I don’t know what I would have done.’

Penny took Bernadette’s hand and smiled. ‘That isn’t what’s happening now. I was feeling miserable back then but now, now I have everything I dreamed of when I left Nebraska. Everything I ever wanted for me.’

Bernadette took a thoughtful sip of her coffee and considered what Penny had said. ‘Wasn’t Kurt part of what you wanted; not the cheating obviously, but someone to love just for yourself? I don’t want to see you cutting off your love life. You have such a big heart and I don’t want to see it afraid to reach out. You deserve to be loved, honey.’

Penny squeezed Bernadette’s hand and hummed to herself for a second. ‘Do you remember your first dance back in school? The one you can’t forget?’ Penny put her mug down on a shelf space and went over to the music. She got out one of her CDs and put it on. ‘Mine was a homecoming dance for the football team.

‘Yes, mine was the Valentine’s prom in my sophomore year.’ Bernie affirmed and smiled at the recollections that came to mind while she waited for Penny to continue.

Penny came back to Bernadette. ‘Dance with me a bit.’ Bernadette put her coffee down and gently swayed to the music, LeAnn Rimes ‘Can’t Fight the Moonlight’

‘It was my first date with Kurt. I was one of the pretty and popular girls. He was the new star on the football team. It was all a painful teenage cliché. I thought we’d go to the dance, get drunk on some peach schnapps, make out, and I’d be home before mom could wake dad to be ready to kill me again, but it didn’t go like that. We danced and I can still feel his back and smell the Old Spice aftershave he used too much of and this song in the dark. ‘Part of me the starlight’, we were starlight and dreams. We left right after that song and went out to his car. We sat in there, just sat and held hands and talked.’

Penny and Bernadette went and sat back on the couch and Penny felt Bernadette’s tummy where the baby was moving from time to time. ‘I had never really done that with a guy before. We clicked and we talked about feelings and pasts and dreams and what we dreamed for the future. He got me back home so late dad and mom were outside and giving us hell before the car had even stopped but we didn’t care. Our parents were always telling us after that that we were too close for our own good. A year later we eloped. Maybe, they were right in the end, but he was everything to me. That’s why I never go dancing on a first date, too many memories and too many comparisons and too much betrayal in the end. I still feel the shattered bits shifting in my stomach when I hear that song on a dancefloor or on a date.’

‘You still love Kurt, don’t you?’

Penny hugged Bernadette close. ‘It wouldn’t hurt so much if I didn’t. I don’t think I stopped looking for someone so much as I don’t want to bother. I had everything I wanted with Kurt, my fairy tale ‘happily ever after’ until the cheating. Now, I have so much more than I ever did then. I love having me and dating would be a distraction. A distraction from what I want to be and do and become.’

Howard had told Bernadette she was trying to get Penny to be like her and now she thought maybe he was right. Bernadette grabbed Penny’s hand and gasped aloud. ‘Penny, how do you feel about becoming a driver right now?’
Sheldon appeared looking terrified. ‘Penny, I think Bernadette-‘

Bernadette unwittingly cut Sheldon short when she groaned louder. ‘I don’t think the baby heard the doctor’s prediction.’

Penny leaped for her phone and car keys and helped Bernadette out of the study to the stairs.

‘Penny, we have to get the hospital bags.’ Bernadette tried to steer them into her bedroom.

‘I already moved the bags to the car, Penny.’ Sheldon had sensed Bernadette’s early pangs during her dance with Penny and had moved the emergency bags to the car.

‘The stuff is already in my car, we just need you down there.’ Penny and Bernadette moved gingerly and quickly down and out of the house which Sheldon locked up behind them.

‘What? How? When? Oh, God!’ Bernadette was confused but the labor spasms overtook her curiosity. Penny got Bernadette into the car and started for the hospital. Bernadette called her obstetrician and then Howard while she and Penny were getting on the road to the hospital.

‘Did you get a hold of the doctor, Bernie?’

Bernadette nodded quickly. ‘Yes, she’s already at the hospital and Howard said he’s on the way so now we just need the baby and us to get there.’

‘Penny, you are exceeding the speed limit by 12mph.’ Sheldon’s advice had been a constant chorus for Penny that she envied Bernadette’s ignorance of at the moment. She rolled her eyes and huffed.

‘Yes, and yet, people are still passing us.’

Bernadette looked at Penny awry. ‘I don’t mind they’re passing us, honey, it’s OK. You’ll get us there, fine.’

Penny patted Bernadette’s arm. ‘I’m sorry, Bernie, I’ve just got a voice running in my head that won’t shut up.’ She glared at Sheldon in the rear-view for emphasis.

‘I am just looking out for the safety of everyone in the car, Penny, especially the child.’ Sheldon’s high pitched worry touched Penny beyond her irritation with his backseat driving. She brushed Bernadette’s arm gently. ‘I’ll be careful driving. We’ll get there, soon.’

‘Penny, both hands on the wheel, please!’ Sheldon’s voice carried a more pronounced Texas drawl as his anxiety increased and Penny slowed the car for her own peace of mind as much as his.

Penny and Bernadette were both grateful when they finally pulled up to the hospital’s emergency entrance. Howard was already at the door waiting when they arrived. They quickly ushered Bernadette into the hospital and a wheelchair. The nurse started asking questions about the contractions, timing, duration, when they started and so on. Penny walked with Howard and Bernadette up to the delivery room doors but had to stay outside when they went through.

Penny stood looking at the doors feeling unnerved and helpless, oddly not unlike the night she’d fended off her stalker. She had felt relatively fine until she’d gotten out of the police car but the walk to her door had suddenly felt cold in her guts that she’d never known before. She’d felt overwhelming relief when she’d gotten in and hugged Bernadette that night. Seeing Bernie go through the delivery door without her brought back some of that feeling. Her head told her everything would be fine but she wished she was with Bernadette so she could feel it. Penny went to the waiting room and about an hour later Howard came in to give her news.
‘How is she, Howard?’

He smiled and sat next to Penny. ‘Bernie’s fine, she’s only threatened to kill me twice. They are sending her up to a room. The doctor is sure that this really is early labor and that can take some hours.’

Penny felt happier having some news. ‘Can we go and see her, now?’

Howard nodded. ‘Yeah, she sent me to get you in fact. We could be here till tomorrow so it might be good to go home and get some stuff if you’d like to stay. I have an overnight bag, too, if you don’t mind getting it.’

‘How could you forget Howard’s stuff?’ Penny growled at Sheldon.

‘I have never been part of delivering a baby. My foremost concern was getting Bernadette to the hospital.’ Sheldon stated in his best teacher voice.

Howard tried to reassure Penny unaware of Sheldon’s presence. ‘Don’t worry about it, Penny; I’m glad you were there for Bernie.’

Penny rolled her eyes wondering when someone was going to try and have her committed one day for talking to empty air. ‘Thanks, Howard. I need to stop at the studio, too. It might take a while getting your stuff.’

They went upstairs to see Bernadette. Howard asked a few questions to Bernie and said he’d be back soon so as to give Penny and Bernadette some time together while he went to take care of some more hospital insurance forms.

‘How are you doing, Bernadette?’ Penny helped Bernadette unpack the emergency bags and settle into the room.

‘Pretty good, I guess. The doctor says everything is going smoothly.’ Bernie sat on the bed and looked around the Spartan room. ‘I’m sorry if it felt like I was pushing you this morning.’

Penny sat next to Bernadette and smiled softly. ‘That was hardly pushing, you should come to Omaha for Christmas to see how pushing is done by professionals.

‘I believe Bernadette’s anxiety is deeper than that, Penny.’ Sheldon tried to be helpful with the obvious and Penny looked at him with a smirk.

‘You think?’ Penny forgot herself for a second talking to Sheldon.

‘Think what, Penny?’ Bernadette looked for Penny to finish her thought.

‘Do you still worry about being a good mother, Bernie? I think you will be great.’ Penny felt part of Bernadette’s worry for her was projecting some of her own fears onto herself.

‘Sure, sometimes, but don’t you wonder about having kids, Penny?’

‘Are you asking because you’re worried for me or for yourself?’ Penny hugged Bernadette. ‘Ever since my sister had her kid, my parents have wanted me to start having grandkids. That was something Kurt and I always agreed on, we didn’t want them. Maybe, it was because we were barely kids ourselves when we got here but we both got to like our careers and we were always happy for each other’s success. I don’t know if I’d make a good mother or a bad one, I just know I never felt like I needed to be one.’
Bernadette sighed and leaned against her old friend. ‘I never thought about having kids, either. I had to help raise my younger brothers and sisters since our parents both worked. I keep thinking about all the responsibilities and I keep worrying I’ll screw everything up.’

Penny got up and helped Bernadette lie down in the bed and tucked her in with the extra blankets in the room’s closet. ‘You’re not alone in this, Bernadette. We all love you. Why don’t you try to take a nap, now?’

‘That would feel good right about now.’ Bernadette took off her glasses and gave them to Penny and closed her eyes to rest a bit.

Penny nodded at Sheldon a few times and looked pointedly at Bernadette.

‘I fail to see what your gestures are for, Penny. Bernadette is trying to sleep.’

Penny just sighed and smiled at how hopeless Sheldon could be at picking up on body language. She poured some water for Bernadette to have nearby. ‘I guess you can’t have anything to help you sleep, Bernadette?’

‘No, not until after the baby comes, I wish I could, though.’ Bernadette opened her eyes and got a drink of the water she heard poured then settled back to try and rest.

‘Oh, I see, why didn’t you ask for my help in the matter, Penny?’ Sheldon’s aura glowed and Bernadette’s breathing eased into a sound sleep.

Penny reached to strangle Sheldon but she was grateful Bernadette could get some rest. She picked up her purse and phone and whispered to Sheldon. ‘Let’s find Howard and say goodbye before we go to the studio. After work, we can get the other hospital stuff at the house.’

Penny and Howard said their good byes and Penny left with her ghostly peanut gallery to do her filming and get some fresh clothes for Howard and herself. She was glad of the light filming this week for her character. She hoped to be able to shift some filming times so she could be at the hospital for everything.

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Penny had gotten her day cleared and her few scenes in this episode filming this week set for filming the day after next. She went home and got some fresh clothes and Howard’s emergency bag and then returned to the hospital for the wait. She also heard from Raj and Lalita who said they’d drop in that evening to see how things were going. Penny had gotten back just in time for Bernadette to go into active labor. After Bernadette went into delivery, she went to the waiting room with some script work. The waiting had finally gotten to her.

‘Sheldon, what time is it?’ Penny sat in her chair wondering how Bernadette was doing in the delivery room.

‘6:15 pm, or 12 minutes and 7 seconds since you last asked. I can inspect the delivery room if that will make you easier, Penny.’ Sheldon had felt Penny’s anxiety all day. He was surprised at how well she covered it during her work but since leaving the studio even he had noticed her fretfulness.

‘No, this is Howard and Bernadette’s time, I don’t want to intrude. I just feel so helpless and useless sitting here.’

‘I can sense Bernadette’s distress but she also feels capable of getting through the state she is in, plus Howard is providing a great deal of calm for her.’ He hoped Penny would relax but he wondered
how she was feeling after some of the conversations she had with Bernadette, today.

‘You can feel all that? I thought you only felt that close to people in the house?’

‘That is true, but at the moment Bernadette’s emotions are very intense and hard to miss, almost as hard to miss as yours.’

‘Mine? You feel my presence, what, here or all the time?’ Penny was surprised to hear that from Sheldon since he was so standoffish about pretty much everything.

‘Always, Penny, you are very important to me.’

‘And you are important to me, Sheldon. I have never felt happier with my life, with my work, with school as hard as it is, and you’ve been a great support through all of it.’

Penny’s anxiety finally got relief when Howard came into the room. He was still in the blue hospital smock and Penny thought it made him look a bit like a smurf. ‘Penny, Halley has landed! Everything went fine. Bernadette’s going to be in the nursery for a while because of routine checks and stuff but everything is fine.’

Penny got up and hugged Howard in congratulations. ‘That’s wonderful, I’ve been on tenterhooks, and I can’t wait to see her. When can we see her? Raj and Lalita are coming soon, they can’t wait.’

They chatted for a few minutes and then Howard wanted to get back to Bernadette and Halley while Penny went up to Bernadette’s room to wait for the newly enlarged family. Penny said she’d get a hold of Raj and Lalita and let them know the good news.

‘The house is going to be a lot busier, Sheldon; I hope you are ready to deal with it.’ Penny remembered the difficulties of the past and she was determined they wouldn’t be repeated on the baby.

‘I understand that, Penny. That is why I have created a house plan and schedule which will benefit everyone.’ Sheldon began by explaining the optimum areas for Halley during the course of the day and the activities appropriate to each area.

Penny gazed out the window and nodded absently at Sheldon’s plan until she got bored. ‘Enough, Sheldon, you can’t schedule a baby’s pooping and changing times. In fact, none of that is going to happen. Halley has a room and her parents will decide what happens with her.’

Sheldon shuffled about in frustration. ‘Penny, a child is an anarchy machine. She will turn our well worked out routines into a hurly burly of selfish whim.’

Penny laughed and rolled her eyes. ‘We haven’t had to deal with that, before. So, are you still avoiding Bernadette’s laundry nights?’

Sheldon’s retort was cut off by Bernadette being brought into the room and Howard following behind. Halley followed in a specialized warming crib to keep her temperature stable when she wasn’t being held.

Penny was happy and relieved to see her friend back safe and sound with the new baby. She envied Howard being there with Bernadette through the whole delivery.

‘Penny, I am so happy you are here, did you see the baby?’ Bernadette was groggy from the delivery and half nodding off while she spoke.
'Yes, and she’s beautiful like her mother, honey.'

Bernadette smiled and asked for Halley. Hoard brought the baby over and Bernadette held her gently. ‘Do you still feel the same about our conversation in the study?’

Penny nodded. ‘Oh, yes, just waiting here was as close as I want to get. I’m happy to be the kooky aunt.’

Penny and Bernadette talked about the baby for a few minutes before Raj and Lalita arrived. Bernadette was curious at Halley’s fixation on the wall. ‘Do you think something is wrong with her eyes? She keeps staring off into that corner.’

Penny looked over to where she could see Sheldon standing. Penny went over to the corner and whispered to Sheldon to walk around. ‘Penny, only you can see me.’

Sheldon walked around the room and Halley seemed to be following him as he walked. Sheldon walked through the wall into the next room and came back in several times and the baby giggled. Penny and Sheldon looked at each other in silent astonishment. ‘That is very peculiar. Perhaps, it is because she is a newborn? I could try an experiment.’

‘I guess she’s alright, maybe you are just both tired.’ Penny cut off Sheldon before he could go any further with that thought. Fortunately, Raj poked his head in to see if it was OK for him and Lalita to have a quick visit.

Bernadette was happy to see Raj and Lalita arrive just then. Penny felt the room was getting too crowded and she wanted to talk to Sheldon so she wished everyone goodbye and headed home to Los Robles Cottage with Sheldon.

Penny and Sheldon rode in silence for a good while after leaving the hospital. Both were preoccupied by thoughts of Halley.

‘Penny, you saw how Halley seemed aware of my presence in the room, didn’t you?’ Sheldon’s scientific mind was fascinated by that event.

‘Yes, I did. I thought you had to make your presence known. Were you trying to make Halley see you?’ Penny wondered if Sheldon might have been trying to get Halley used to his presence since he was always felt around the house to some degree. His moods were often felt in the air by Howard and Bernadette quite unintentionally, especially when one of his quirks got riled up.

‘I was not, that is the fascinating aspect, and I wonder if it is a function of being a newborn? We should try to determine if it is just Halley or if any newborn could perceive me. We have an ideal opportunity to explore the crossover between paranormal beings and biological reality.’ Sheldon grew excited considering the implications before him.

‘No, Sheldon, we are not going to experiment on Halley or any other babies.’ Penny shot down Sheldon’s ideas but she was curious about Halley’s reaction. ‘You need to be careful around Halley. I don’t want her scared or afraid, Sheldon. If she can see you, it might be best to let her be and leave her alone.’

‘Of course, I would never scare her but I believe you are letting an invaluable scientific opportunity slip through our hands, Penny.

‘She’s not a scientific opportunity, Sheldon; Halley is a person, a little girl who will be treated with respect. She’s not an experiment in the making.’ Penny got heated with Sheldon’s obtuseness.
‘I am sorry I upset you, Penny, but Halley is unique. Not unlike you, she doesn’t feel any fear from my presence. Most who sense a ghost become afraid, after all.’ Sheldon wondered if that absence of fear in Halley, and Penny when he first confronted his thespian friend, was what let the baby see him in the hospital room. ‘I admire your maternal protectiveness.’

‘Maternal protectiveness? I am hardly maternal, I just want Halley to have a happy home, Sheldon.’

‘As do I, Penny, but you are very caring. I can’t imagine anyone buying models and comics for a ghost.’ Sheldon wished he could really feel and hold Penny’s hand for the preciousness of that gift.

‘Sheldon, honey, I could feel how much those models meant to you. I couldn’t let you lose something so important to you. Besides, you’ve given me something just as important. You’ve given me a whole knew me with the math and science, helping me with the acting, and believing I could be more than just a hot babe. You’ve been the best guy in my life, Sheldon Cooper.’

‘While I am very flattered by your esteem, I am dead. Don’t you think Bernadette might be right about looking out for more than a dead physicist in your relationships?’

‘What would that give me that I don’t have? Did you feel the need to go dating when you were alive, Sheldon?’ Penny was curious what brought this turn of mind to Sheldon. He was usually telling her how inferior any of her dates were when he encountered them.

‘I did not. Dating would have been a distraction… from my work.’ Sheldon paused recalling Penny’s own words on the subject to Bernadette. ‘Oh, I see.’

Penny drove up to the Cottage and parked. She turned off the ignition and lights and sat in the darkness outside for a minute. ‘Ever since we talked about how I learned about tools from my dad when we were building the collector’s room with Howard, I have been thinking about how much of myself I was putting into my relationships. After a while, I started thinking about how I was putting in more than I wanted to. I guess it felt like I have always been keeping that dress clean I hated so much as a kid. Maybe, that’s why I didn’t notice Kurt’s cheating. I always thought I was stupid but maybe, deep down, I didn’t notice because I wanted to be out doing my work.’

‘Perhaps, your marriage breaking down was inevitable?’ Sheldon knew how much his passion for his work made social interaction a chore, especially when it involved activities that held no interest for him.

Penny and Sheldon got out of the car and strolled around to the pavilion out behind the cottage. They sat on an outdoor couch and looked up at the night sky. The cloud cover was lit up by the city below and the moon above and in between starlight shone through like her new thoughts. She thought about Sheldon’s question in the new light of why she hadn’t noticed Kurt’s cheating. ‘I’d hate to think inevitable but maybe breaking up would have been for the best in the end. We did get married far too young. We clicked, we knew each other, at least who we were. We never thought about what we might become or how we might change in our future.’

‘Do you think you can forgive what happened, then, Penny?’ Sheldon almost rolled his eyes at the sound of the question since it sounded so much like something his mother would have asked but he was sure it was something Penny needed. Sheldon knew about holding on to grudges, he’d had plenty in life. Ever since he’d died, he had plenty of time to reflect on their inconsequence.

Penny closed her eyes a minute and felt for the anger the betrayal always set off inside her when she thought about it. It was still there. She was sure it always would be but it didn’t make her feel like screaming for once. ‘Maybe a little, just a bit to start.’
Milestones Young and Old

Chapter Summary

Life keeps moving on for the folks in Los Robles Cottage

Chapter Notes

Inspired by The Ghost and Mrs Muir and having some fun with Big Bang's toys. Not trying for canon just having some fun.

Penny had been reworking her MA proposal but it was going nowhere. She felt close to what she wanted to say but the words came flat and the equations didn’t sing an original note to her. It all looked so pedantic and pedestrian. She picked up her diary which was crammed with thoughts of Sheldon and how to save his reputation from his Arctic disaster. Ever since the Arctic Affair had come to an end Penny had felt like she was drifting. The last six months were spent finishing the back half of The Coven’s season and dawdling on finishing this proposal. ‘Where is the muse to write this?’

Penny looked at the diary and was ready to toss it aside for another day. Ennui had set in and she was without a clue. She threw down her pen and went over to the music collection. Needing something different, she went through Sheldon’s albums instead of her own. She needed something out of the ordinary and his music was sure to be that. She didn’t see anything she recognized by name but there were a lot of science fiction themes on the CD covers. She found one that had a stylized LAX terminal made to look like a space station called ‘Project Comstock: Music for Outer Space’ so she settled on that. She settled herself in the wing chair with her comforter and let the weird Theremin notes lull her into a restful snooze.

Sheldon felt Penny’s disquiet and appeared in the hall outside the study. He listened to the album choice Penny made and nodded approvingly. It was one of the few albums he enjoyed when he had a knotty problem to work out. He popped into the study and found Penny dozing to the music. He glanced at the MA proposal on the desk and smiled at his napping friend. He approved of the concept she was working on, an offshoot of his own work, but he could see Penny was confused about something. It wasn’t like her to abandon something she set out to do and the music choice was very unlike her. He frowned and tucked the comforter up around his sleeping friend.

In spite of his concern he didn’t want to interrupt her nap so he looked in on Halley. The baby was sleeping soundly with Bernadette and she was sleeping even more soundly in the room with the balcony open to the warm June afternoon. Bernadette seldom got to sleep so well since bringing Halley home so he went to check on Howard to make sure he didn’t wake anyone upstairs. Howard was in the collector’s room watching a marathon of aquatic sci-fi: Dagon, The Creature from the Black Lagoon, and The Shape of Water. Sheldon settled down to watch the films while the ladies upstairs dreamed their worlds.

Bernadette dreamed of her daughter. She tossed uneasily in a recurrent dream that she had forgotten
something. Halley needed her to remember something but she couldn’t think of what it was. Her restlessness stilled when she held the baby in her dreams and sang an old lullaby her grandmother had taught her long ago, A-a-a, kotki dwa, Ah-Ah-Ah, Two Little Kittens.

A-a-a, a-a-a,
były sobie kotki dwa.
A-a-a, kotki dwa,
szarobure, szarobure obydwa.

Ach, śpij, kochanie,
jesli gwiazdke z nieba chcesz - dostaniesz.
Wszystkie dzieci, nawet źle,
pograżone są we śnie,
a ty jedna tylko nie.
Ah-ah-ah*, ah-ah-ah,

There were once two little kittens.  
Ah-ah-ah, two little kittens,  
They were both grayish-brown.

Oh, sleep, my darling,  
If you'd like a star from the sky I'll give you one.  
All children, even the bad ones,  
Are already asleep,  
Only you are not.

In Penny’s dreams she weaved her hands over a cauldron and summoned a future. She danced within the rhythms that rose from the tripod. She added herbs and starlight and red vines. Her becoming had to continue. She had arrived where she wanted to get but where she wanted to be was always further on. It troubled her and the spell she was trying to cast needed something further on from where she was. That last ingredient was what she left Nebraska for, what she immersed herself in acting for, what she wanted to take the physics MA for. She yearned for love that was embraced in letting go. She dreamt of The Lusiads, the Portuguese epic poem of Vasco de Gama’s voyage to India. She’d loved its vision of exploration in her high school poetry class and its stanzas stilled her fretting. She was born for the journey and the dance.

Love is a fire that burns unseen,  
A wound that aches yet isn't felt,  
An always discontent contentment,  
A pain that rages without hurting,  
A longing for nothing but to long,  
A loneliness in the midst of people,  
A never feeling pleased when pleased,  
A passion that gains when lost in thought.

Haley dreamed of shapes and sounds and smells that had no names. Her young mind was still recognizing and cataloguing the world. Mama was one fixed point she knew was always nearby. She slept and dreamt of faces and funny noises and soft kittens and a funny tall figure no one seemed to see except for other mama. Her dreams were of the song the tall one sang every night and
she wondered what a kitty was.

Soft kitty,

Warm kitty,

Little ball of fur.

Happy kitty,

Sleepy kitty,

Purr Purr Purr

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Penny woke from her nap renewed and clear on what she really wanted to write. She went to the balcony and opened the window to gaze down the valley with the telescope. She gathered her thoughts as through the lens that showed her the hills below the cottage in crystal clarity. She walked over to the desk and cleared away the MA proposal and got out her favored stationary and wrote to Sheldon’s Meemaw. She was glad of the correspondence that she had with Sheldon’s grandmother. Sheldon looked forward to seeing the letters when they arrived. He was surprised at the candor his Meemaw and Penny shared. Penny had found it a great help in navigating Sheldon’s prickly feelings about his work, his life, and his ways.

Dear Connie,

I need to sit down and do more than write you emails so I apologize for a lot of old news; I need to clear my head. It’s a whole new world here. I would have written this real letter long ago but we were so busy building the case to defend Sheldon’s work. As you know, Sheldon’s friends really stepped up for him. Rajesh Koothrapalli came all the way from India with his wife to be a part of this. He and Howard wanted to get to the bottom of what happened up in the arctic for years but for many personal reasons they felt helpless to act. It turned out that it was jealousy and a woman that was at the bottom of everything. Sheldon had been looking at the science and technology from one end to the other. The study here is filled with his work. It never occurred to him hearts and desires and jealousy were the culprits. Leonard, Sheldon’s friend, had gotten involved with Raj’s sister Priya and everything all came down to Leonard destroying everyone’s lives to get Priya to marry him. She is quite a woman and a formidable lawyer. When she found out the truth, she was tireless leading the charge to take down Leonard and put things right for Sheldon, Howard, and especially her brother Raj. She doesn’t take harm to her family well. I think you might like meeting her…

That wasn’t the only thing to make things busy here. Raj’s marriage wasn’t the only news we got back then. The first wind of Halley’s arrival came while we were watching Raj and Lalita’s wedding online. Bernie started feeling unwell during the big moment. She was thinking it might have been a bug she picked up until it hit her she’d been unable to look at breakfast for a while and her period was late. Sure enough, a pregnancy test later and we knew the house was going to have a new family member. Bernie had her daughter about six months ago and everything is going fantastic. Mom sends her thanks for that beautiful quilt. Howard is envious of the thing with its Solar System and Halley’s orbit included. I thought Bernie was going to die just a few days ago when Halley called her mama for the first time. It’s amazing how quickly she seems to be comprehending things…
In answer to your question from Mary about the show, there are no Satanists writing for us. None that I know of any way but we do have a few Wiccans on the crew, not sure if that will ease her mind, though. We’ll be filming the next half of the new season soon so I am glad this arctic stuff is behind us. It’s a big weight off of everyone here as I am sure it must be for you as well. I did want to ask you some advice, Connie, since Sheldon’s work is important to you all down there. It’s why I wanted to write this letter. Sheldon’s work has grown important to me, more than I thought it had. I started pursuing a physics degree out of some scenes we’d done in The Coven’s first season and from being surrounded here by Sheldon’s work while we were solving the arctic failure. It has become a part of me that I can’t let go. I have been working on an M.A. proposal that is based on Sheldon’s work. I have been hung up on writing it, I think, because it kind of feels like taking over a part of him from you all down there and I would hate to make you feel I was poaching his work, so to speak…

Penny sighed in relief when she finally closed the letter. It had cleared her mind of the ennui. She knew she wanted more than just Sheldon’s name cleared she wanted to see his work move forward. She felt more centered after she told Constance about the M.A. program she was planning and that she felt inspired by her grandson’s life and work. Looking around the study and at the white boards, she could now make sense of much of the math after finishing her B.A. She felt a new sense of purpose that she had wanted Constance to know about. She also wanted her to know she was doing out of respect for her grandson’s work and accomplishments.

+++ In Galveston, Constance reread the letter from Penny. She was very glad to get the greater details about Sheldon’s name being cleared and she wanted thank Penny, Howard, and Raj for working so hard to clear their Shelly’s good name. Constance thought it deserved more than a letter or phone call so she was determined to fly out to LA and Pasadena. She did have some questions of her own for Penny. She had enjoyed the correspondence they’d shared over the last year or so but she had noticed Penny’s strong attachment to Sheldon. She figured a house full of his stuff might have caused simple curiosity but feeling so strong as to continue his work was a big step up from childhood stories. Penny wasn’t the only one she was concerned with being over attached to Sheldon.

‘Momma, what are you thinking of going all the way over to California for?’ Mary Cooper put down the church calendar she’d been looking through.

Constance and her daughter Mary had not been to Pasadena since Sheldon’s death. They had gone there to bring the body back to Texas and set up the Cottage as a memorial to Sheldon. All that had changed into a day they had never thought to see, Sheldon’s name cleared of the odium of that Arctic failure. Neither really was sure how to thank Howard and Raj and especially Penny who they knew was the prime mover in all the effort to redeem Sheldon’s reputation.

‘I don’t want to sound ungrateful but what would make that girl fight so fierce for Sheldon, momma?’ Mary Cooper was happy her son’s name was free of that arctic disgrace but she kept wondering why some actress would care so much about her Shelly. She figured it was because she was living in Sheldon’s old house but that just made her attachment all the stranger to Mary’s thinking.

‘I don’t know but her girlfriend there is her housemate and she is married to Howard Wolowitz. Remember, he was one of Sheldon’s friends in the arctic so maybe it was really to help them?’ Connie felt that had been a big part of Penny’s concern. The way Penny talked about Bernadette
sounded more like someone talking about a sister than just a housemate or friend.

Mary considered that might be the case but she couldn’t help wonder if there was more on Penny’s mind. ‘I just wonder if she might want something for all the help she did?’

‘What is running through that head of yours, Mary Cooper?’ Constance had been exchanging letters and the occasional phone call with Penny for quite a while now so she couldn’t help feeling her daughter was acting needlessly suspicious.

Mary hated the feelings that crept through her because they were unchristian but Shelly was her special baby. ‘I just wonder if she feels she’s owed something for this.’ Mary waved the letter from Penny with a shade of suspicion across her face.

Connie didn’t have a clue what her daughter was bothered by but she knew Mary was disturbed by Penny’s zeal. ‘Owed something? Mary, honey, I have been communicating with Penny for quite a while and she isn’t fishing around for thanks or anything else. Whatever put such an idea in your mind?’

Mary Cooper loved her son fiercely. She didn’t understand his work except that it was brilliant. Of course she wished he would have found Jesus and a girl before he died but she had been glad he was happy doing what he loved. She knew what a pill he could be to the people around him but she knew it wasn’t done out of meanness but out of certainty that he was right, just like his father and grandfather. His brilliance didn’t help soften that hubris. She was convinced the church and a girlfriend would have softened that prickly streak. Mary sighed and thought about her mother’s question. What was really bothering her about Penny Queen?

That show of hers was one thing. It was about witches and demons and it just wasn’t proper Christian TV. She knew it wasn’t really the devil’s work like her church group felt but it still didn’t sit right with her even if her momma was a fan of the show. The much bigger thing was how deeply involved the actress had become in her son’s life and work. She couldn’t deny it had all been to the good but why had a TV star got so committed to her dead son’s life work? Mary had read some of the letters exchanged between her mother and Penny and the woman seemed to be acting more like a girlfriend to her son’s memory than anything else was how it seemed to Mary Cooper. Why was Penny so attached to a dead man she had never known?

‘I just don’t get why Penny’s so attached to Sheldon, momma, it’s not like she ever knew him. If she’d been a girlfriend or something it would make some sense but I just can’t make her out for the life of me.’

Connie Tucker sat back and looked across the kitchen table at her daughter and figured, now, she knew what was wrong. ‘Mary, Sheldon’s gone, you know that and Penny isn’t taking him away from you.’

‘I know that, whatever made you think a crazy notion like that?’

‘Because I felt that every day you were married to George Cooper. Mary, you are afraid she wants that house and all it means having been Sheldon’s home there. Be honest with yourself, what’s got you so tied to that house?’ Connie had been gently pushing Mary to sell the place and let go of Sheldon for her peace of mind. With Sheldon’s reputation mended, she figured this was a good time to get Mary to give up that burden.

Mary sighed and closed her eyes in a prayer. ‘I miss him every day and I know he’s with Jesus but I just can’t let him go, letting his house go feels like giving up on him, momma.’
Connie understood that feeling well even after all these years since her husband Sam had died.

‘Mary, you won’t be letting go of anything in your heart just the burden of keeping stuff and memory that won’t let you feel happy out of guilt that he’s gone. It’s time you laid that burden down, Mary.’

‘I would feel better about it if I could get to know those people there, especially Penny.’ Mary got up to pour more coffee for her and her mother.

‘Well, we should do just that. I would like to see the house again and get to know the other folks there that helped save Sheldon’s name. What do you say we go visit them in California? I wouldn’t mind a tour of that show of Penny’s while we are there, either.’ Connie grinned at the surprise on her daughter’s face.

‘You can’t be serious? Traveling all that way at your age, what are you thinking?’ Mary didn’t half mind the idea but she did worry for her mother’s health on such a long trip.

‘Of course, I’m serious, and I’m not half so old I can’t fly to California. We’ll be spending more time in the airports than it takes to get there, anyway.’ Connie got up and went to the living room to turn on her computer and send a note to Penny about coming to California with Mary.

+++ Sheldon and Penny walked along the hiking trail above Los Robles Cottage. The early evening air was cool and the first stars could be seen coming out. For the first time in years, Sheldon felt free of what had gone wrong and it was all the work of the woman walking by his side. He would never have thought the impulsive and tempestuous baseball bat wielding thespian would be the one to free him from the failure that had bound him to the Cottage. Penny had proven so much more than an actress or an activist. Sheldon felt bound to her side.

‘You seem satisfied with the M.A. proposal. It seemed for a while that you might be at a loss.’

Penny swung away with the nunchucks she was carrying to stay in practice for the fight scenes coming up in the filming for The Coven. ‘I guess I was at a loss. I got into all the physics and math because I wanted to understand everything about your work and the arctic. When that was solved and my B.A. was finished I was really vexed what I wanted to do next.’ Penny considered the hillside its crest blending with the coming night.

‘How so?’ Sheldon was curious where Penny’s mind was headed.

Penny stopped the weapons routine with the nunchucks and looked at Sheldon. ‘Remember when we talked about my father teaching me about the tools for fixing the car when I was helping Howard build the rec-room? You said I shouldn’t have to hide my talents under a dumb blonde disguise. I have been thinking a lot about that conversation, especially now that we got to the bottom of your problem. I’ve been acting for a long time, not the job, but being the pretty girl that smiles at her man because he’s so smart. It’s what my mother wanted me to be; she understood a life like that, my dad, too. The M.A. is like a chance to get that dress dirty again like when I did working with my dad.’

Sheldon thought about Penny’s career and what a big change she sounded like making. ‘Are you thinking of leaving off acting?’

‘No, I love it too much to do that but I just want to see what I can do with your deal. Heck, I put that tractor together mostly because dad didn’t think it could be fixed. I don’t expect to be some professional physicist or teacher but I want to know I can do it.’ Penny began her workout routine again with the strikes and kicks. Sheldon watched her somewhat awestruck at what his friend could do when she set her mind to the task and wondered what she might accomplish running up this next
Sheldon and Penny got back to the house and Penny was surprised by Bernadette rushing out of the living room and pulling her back with her. ‘Come on! Hurry!’

Penny was surprised and curious at Bernadette’s excitement and saw Howard filming Halley. Halley was rocking and starting to roll over. ‘You’ve got to see this, Penny. She’s really starting to move.’ Bernadette was almost jumping and both women got down to eye level with Halley.

‘Look at her; she’s been feisty all day.’ Howard couldn’t contain his laughter following Halley’s moves and the baby finally rolled herself over and started pushing herself up.

‘Come on, Halley!’ Penny and Bernadette clapped and laughed together.

‘She seems unusually precocious about this, Penny.’ Sheldon was just as fascinated by this as everyone else. Halley zeroed in on Sheldon’s voice and began pushing and arching and finally getting her legs under her to begin a few unsteady paces of crawling in his direction before going flat again. Everyone began laughing and clapping and Halley giggled and began making her way up into a few more crawls that took her to Bernadette where she managed to sit up and laugh. Bernadette was crying and laughing too much to speak.

‘This is cause for celebration!’ Penny went out to the kitchen where Sheldon had already gotten a tray ready with bottle of champagne and glasses for the family.

‘Thank you, Sheldon. You are happy for them, aren’t you?’ Penny picked up the tray and headed back into the living room.

‘Of course, I am not without sympathy, Penny. The child is clearly quite intelligent and discerning.’ Sheldon was fascinated by Halley’s development over the months although he proved just as adroit as Howard at disappearing when it came time to change the baby.

Penny, Bernadette, and Howard enjoyed their champagne and replayed Halley’s first crawl and sit up quite a few times. Howard continued to film her exploits when Halley would try crawling again. ‘It’s funny; she keeps looking like she has a goal every time she gets up.’

‘She does, Penny and it is always in my direction. This is too fascinating not to try-‘ Penny cut off wherever Sheldon might be going.

‘Now that she’s starting to move, we should give some more thought to baby proofing. I think the study might have a lot of stuff that should be kept out of reach.’ Penny looked archly at Sheldon and he glared back.

‘Penny, what do you mean?’ Sheldon still meant to defend his turf.

Bernadette picked up Halley and rocked her. ‘I think it’s a little early to worry too much but I guess it is worth a look around over the weekend now that she is starting to move on her own.

‘Raj and Lalita are coming over tomorrow. He and I can start setting up some of the baby gates.’ Howard had designed and built them and was ready to see them in action as soon as possible.

‘I’ll take a look around upstairs and see if any of the study things should move down to the collector’s room.’ Penny smirked at Sheldon and he blanched at her clear threat. They talked a bit more about some of the precautions to take and things to start double checking for. After another
glass of champagne Penny said good night to Howard and Bernadette and Halley, and then headed up to the study.

Penny found Sheldon standing guard over his models. She smirked and rolled her eyes at his predictability. ‘Something bothering you, Sheldon?’

‘You know very well, what do you mean by moving things to the collector’s room?’ Sheldon glowered impressively but he was more nonplussed by Penny’s laughter.

‘Don’t panic, Sheldon. It’s going to be a while before Halley gets moving freely but first, we both know she can see you. We talked about that when she was born, she isn’t an experiment.’ Penny sat down on the sofa and patted the seat next to her for Sheldon to come sit with her.

‘I apologize. I was carried away in the moment. However, I do want to keep the study as it is as much as possible.’ Sheldon knew things were going to have to change; he just didn’t want to admit it, yet.

‘Don’t worry; I want to keep things here for you and me. Besides, the door does have a lock. I don’t suppose she’ll be picking any locks any time soon.’ Penny smirked.

‘When did you pick your first lock, Houdini?’ Sheldon remembered opening a toy safe his brother George kept his allowance in. George had forgotten the combination and Sheldon had opened it for him with ease. He had been four at the time and George had needed an hour convincing Sheldon it was OK to break into the safe.

‘I was a little over two.’ Penny chuckled at Sheldon’s look of shock. ‘You should hear my mother tell the story; I don’t really remember it that well. I do remember the Twinkies, though. Mom had a lock for the pantry and I had managed to use a coat hanger to jimmy the lock and managed to get the Twinkies off a top shelf with some clever climbing and a mop with a makeshift lasso at the end I’d made from stuff in her yarn basket.’

Sheldon started looking around the study fearful of what damage a commensurate hellion might cause. ‘There would be no stopping the chaos she could create.’

‘Sheldon, Halley is not going to create chaos. Well, no more than any other two year old and that is a ways away, yet. Raj is coming over, tomorrow, and he and Howard are going to start baby proofing the house.’ Penny got up and went over to the desk. She got out two sheets of her stationary. ‘Why don’t you write down some of your preparation ideas down here? It might make you feel better to have some input. Just, these two pages, one sided, double spaced.’

‘That will hardly scratch the surface, Penny. Your professed experience with breaking and entering in your terrible twos should be clear indication you are underestimating what havoc Halley might accomplish.’

Penny rolled her eyes at Sheldon’s consternation. ‘Two pages, Mister, no more. Besides, Howard and Raj will be engineers on a mission that I’m sure will satisfy even you, Sheldon.’

Penny pushed the pages over to Sheldon along with a pen. She laughed at his grimaced acceptance to these miserly limits to his thoughts on baby proofing. While Sheldon wrote, Penny booted up her computer to take a look at her email and Twitter. She found Constance’s email that had just come a few hours ago. She whistled the Star Wars Imperial March much to Sheldon’s annoyance.

‘Penny, you know very well that I cannot stand whistling. Isn’t this shortfall of space for my ideas penance enough?’ Sheldon had already filled half of the first page in cramped and precise script.
‘I suppose you were never terrible when you were two, honey?’ Penny grinned at Sheldon’s aloof glare.

‘Certainly not, and my eidetic memory is most clear on that, Arsene Lupin.’ Sheldon was still amazed at Penny’s thievery.

‘Well, I think I will just check on that from the horse’s mouth when your mom gets here, Moonpie.’ Penny laughed at Sheldon’s double take. She turned the monitor so Sheldon could read the email.

‘Oh good Lord, and Meemaw is coming, too?’ Sheldon’s eyes rolled and he vanished. Penny had never seen a ghost faint before.
Chapter Summary

Mary and Meemaw pay The Los Robles family a visit.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by The Ghost and Mrs Muir and having some fun with Big Bang's toys.

It had been three weeks since Connie’s email about coming to California. It had taken a little doing but Penny had finally convinced her and Mary there was plenty of room at Los Robles Cottage for them. The master study was quite large enough to put the fold away beds in for the house guests. Penny, Bernadette, and Howard moved the beds into the study as well as a small chest of drawers for Mary and Connie the night before they were due to fly in. The couch and wing chair had gone down to the library so the study was a comfortable space for the Texas arrivals.

On arrival morning, Penny was woken by Sheldon’s agitated yammering. ‘Penny, you need to get up and get ready right away! Meemaw’s plane will arrive at 2.45 and you haven’t even gotten up yet.’

Penny glanced at her bedside clock with one half open eye, it said 7am. ‘Sheldon, my alarm is set for nine. I am going back to sleep.’ She groaned and buried herself under her blankets and pillows.

‘How can you go back to sleep?’

‘Sheldon, if you don’t shut up and let me sleep, I will find a way to punch you in the throat.’ Penny rolled deeper into the darkness of her pillows but Sheldon persisted until she raised a shaking fist in warning.

When her alarm went off at nine, Penny woke to find Sheldon’s agitation had turned to more useful purpose. She sat up and saw her favorite white blouse and black jeans laid out on the ottoman under the window along with her new Jimmy Choo sandals that she’d bought to go with the outfit.

Sheldon appeared looking a little wary. ‘Your alarm has gone off so I trust you will not be throat punching anyone.’

I’m sorry Sheldon but I hate being woken up so early. You know that, honey.’ Penny ruffled her hair and stretched out with a long morning yawn and then got out of bed.

‘Thank you, and I apologize for waking you but I am anxious to get to the airport for Meemaw.’ Sheldon began making the bed for Penny while she wandered across the study to the bathroom.

Penny nodded in sleepy satisfaction at what she found, a tray with coffee, scones, and marmalade. ‘I have drawn you a bath and added your preferred mixture of bath soap and scented oils to the water.’

‘This is great Sheldon, especially the coffee and scones.’ Penny got herself ready to have a nice lie
down in the fragrant bath.

‘I have also started breakfast downstairs for you. In addition, there is also chili, pozole, and huarache ready for when Meemaw and my mother arrive. Meemaw loves Mexican food and so long as there is ample coffee, Pepsi, or some other caffeinated beverage my mother will be satisfied. However, if you want to know true culinary delight you should get my mother to make her fried chicken.’ Sheldon appeared in the bathroom once Penny was settled into the bubble bath.

‘Sheldon, I am not going to ask your folks to do any cooking. Besides, don’t freak out Howard and Bernie cooking in the middle of the night like that.’ She could just imagine having a conversation about a ghost in the house after all this time.

‘Not to worry, Penny, Howard and Bernadette have already gone out. Howard’s mother called a while ago asking for Howard to take her to the hospital. They left with Halley about an hour ago.

‘Sheldon, get me my phone. God, I hope it’s nothing serious.’ Sheldon levitated the phone into the bath for Penny and she tried calling but got Bernadette’s voice mail. She left a message and also sent a text asking how Debbie was doing. ‘I hope she’s alright. Her horoscope says this is a delicate time for her health.’

‘Penny, how can you cling to that delusional claptrap with your education? Are you aware of the number of pathogens, alone, that surround us every day? Such fatuous advice would apply to any day of the year. And while we are on the topic, your habit of prancing about unclothed is inviting who knows what new form of influenza that might be floating about. Furthermore…’

Sheldon lectured on while Penny giggled at the idea of a ghost paranoid about sickness. She sipped her coffee and had a scone with some grapefruit marmalade while she waited for Sheldon to wind down.

‘Well, turnabout is fair play, I suppose.’ Penny’s non sequitur brought Sheldon to an abrupt pause.

‘Turn about? To what are you referring, Penny?’ Sheldon was at a loss to respond to that remark.

‘Your running around naked, of course, Sheldon.’ Penny poured another coffee and smiled at Sheldon’s wide eyed shock.

‘What? I have never been naked around you, Penny.’ Sheldon had no idea what was going on in Penny’s head and was wondering if she was quite well.

‘Not me, Sheldon, but I am sure your mother must have seen you in the buff growing up. Meemaw, too, I suppose.’

‘Of course they did. I was a baby once upon a time but what does that have to do with anything?’ Sheldon was perplexed by Penny’s whole conversation.

Penny stretched out in the bubble bath sending Sheldon fleeing out into the study. ‘Sheldon, honey, your mom isn’t going to bathe clothed, you know.’

‘Oh, lord.’

‘And Meemaw has to wash up, too, you know.’ Penny chuckled softly.

‘Oh, dear lord!’

‘You know, this room is big enough and with the privacy of the study and bedroom, we could make
a girls’ bath and slumber party up here so they can get to know Bernie and Halley, too.’ Penny warmed to the idea with gusto.

‘Penny, you can’t be serious!’ Penny smirked at the quavering high note Sheldon squawked out.

‘Maybe, we could get Priya and Lalita to come over, too. You and Howard and Raj can have your sci-fi stuff downstairs, and we women can have a bath and slumber party up here. Doesn’t that sound like fun, Sheldon?’

Penny heard Sheldon give a strangled scream and then one of the white boards fell on the floor. ‘Sheldon? Sheldon, honey, are you OK out there?’ Penny listened for a minute but only silence followed. She settled back into the warmth of the tub with her coffee. ‘That should give me a quiet bath.’

After her bath, she found breakfast waiting downstairs and she ate without incident. The bath party idea had worked better than she had expected. Bernadette called with an update during breakfast. They had brought Debbie to the hospital for a checkup. She was feeling pains in her chest when she woke up this morning. They got her to emergency right away and they were waiting on the examination.

‘How long has she been with the doctor?’

‘It’s been about an hour and Howie is going up the wall. He doesn’t show it but I can tell.’ Bernadette couldn’t think of anything to say that would help him except platitudes that didn’t feel right.

‘It will be OK, I’m sure. I’m going to pick up Mary and Connie this afternoon but let us know as soon as you hear anything. I love you both and you’ll be alright.’

‘Thanks, Penny. I want to tell that to Howard as confidently as you sound I don’t want to give him false hopes.’

Penny understood that feeling. ‘You need to say it for each other just as much as for Debbie.’

‘You’re right, thanks, Penny. We’ll let you know as soon as we hear anything.’

Penny said goodbye and hung up with a concerned look around the kitchen. ‘Sheldon, where are you, Sheldon?’ Penny waited for a few minutes and then went up to the study.

She peeked into the bathroom and bedroom calling out for her ghostly companion. ‘Sheldon, honey, come on out. I’m sorry for teasing you like that. I just wanted a quiet bath; I’m not going to be having any naked bathtub parties with your mom. Come on out.’

Penny hoped Sheldon wasn’t sulking. She figured he might just be nervous. He’d been very overwhelmed when Connie’s first letter had shown up. Having his mother and Meemaw soon to appear in person might be just a bit too much. ‘I’m going to the airport, Sheldon. If you want to come, now is the time.’

‘I don’t think I am ready for this, Penny.’ Penny jumped at Sheldon’s voice from behind her. He was sitting on one of the beds and looking white as a ghost.

‘I hope you’re not going to pop up on your folks like that, Sheldon, you’ll scare them to death. What are you so worried about, sweetie, they are your family.’ Penny sat down next to Sheldon and waited for him to put his thoughts together.
‘Penny, I hadn’t seen them in years even before I died. My mother and my sister Missy came here when I bought the cottage. That was almost seven years ago. It has been just as long since I saw Meemaw except on Skype. I feel so dead and alone.’ Sheldon started to fade away.

‘No you don’t Sheldon Lee Cooper. You are not disappearing like that.’ Penny glared at Sheldon nigh on willing him back into the study. ‘Sheldon, honey, they love you. That is why they are coming here. I am sure they love you just as much as they ever did.’

‘That’s what I am afraid of, feeling their awareness that I am dead. I am. I feel it every time someone becomes aware of my presence. They feel death. With strangers, it does not matter but feeling that from my family, I don’t know if I can handle that.’ Sheldon rocked quietly on the bed deep in morbid thought.

Penny reached over to hug Sheldon but her hand passed through him and she fidgeted in shyness at her forgetfulness. ‘Oh, honey, you know they love you and I do, too, Sheldon. Alive or dead doesn’t make any difference, Moonpie.’

‘Thank you, Penny, but I need to think about this. Would you mind picking up Meemaw and my mother alone? I don’t think I am ready to see them so soon.’ Sheldon faded from sight leaving Penny to her own thoughts.

Penny got her purse and car keys and went downstairs. She checked the kitchen where Sheldon had already started stress cleaning; this morning’s breakfast had vanished. ‘We’ll get through this, Sheldon; we’ll get through it together.’

Penny locked up the house and got in her car. ‘Sure you don’t want to change your mind, Sheldon?’ She waited a minute and then started up and drove off to get to the airport.

For once, she didn’t feel like any music while she made her way through the traffic. She wished she had time to stop by her psychic for a reading and a chat. Penny had never talked much with Sheldon about how people felt about experiencing a ghost or how ghosts experience people for that matter. Her brief chat opened up a new train of thought on her own spiritualism. Her psychic had always said that ghosts were souls that were not ready to move on from this life. That was because they felt either their purpose in this life was not yet done or they were too afraid to move on to their next journey. Penny didn’t feel either of those really fit Sheldon’s situation.

Sheldon felt the real world and the people like something he could never get back, a distant shore on the horizon left behind. That was why people coming to the cottage could feel like an unwanted intrusion because it couldn’t add to him or change him. People who encountered Sheldon felt that non-life that is a ghost. It was sort of like looking down and seeing an abyss under your feet instead of the ground and you could feel the unstoppable instant just before the fall starts. The fall people were feeling when Sheldon used his power was the feeling of the fall from life to death.

Penny kept coming back to asking herself why Sheldon was still here after the arctic business was solved. She didn’t think anything was holding him here or that he was unready or afraid to move on so what was the deal? It wasn’t that she was in a hurry to get rid of Sheldon. She had come to appreciate his presence, heck; she looked forward to coming home to him a lot of times in spite of his quirks and demands. She thought of the first day she had come to Los Robles Cottage and saw its rose color in the sunset and sat in the study chair and saw the sunset through the French windows. She had felt like she had come home.

‘Well, maybe it really is the blue jay that’s the problem.’ Penny left off any more thoughts to later having arrived at the airport.
Connie and Mary’s flight arrived on time at LAX. They made their way through the bedraggled business folk, tired parents with bored and restless kids, and the general chaos of airline arrivals finding their bags. When they got their suitcases off the carousel they headed down to the arrival’s gate. Connie looked at her phone when she got a text message.

‘Good, Penny is waiting for us outside.’

Mary sighed a bit. ‘Are you sure this is a good idea? Wouldn’t you rather stay at a hotel, momma?’

Connie nodded in some agreement. She knew the house was a good size but with a new baby there strange house guests would have to feel a bit trying. As much as she wanted to see Halley, she could understand her parents feeling cramped with two more folks in the house. ‘We could do that but I would like to see the house for more than a peek and Penny was very warm to have us stay.’

Mary frowned a bit from wondering why Penny was so eager to have them stay. They weren’t family, after all, even if they did actually own the place. ‘I’d really like to know why she’s so keen to have us there. She wants something more than to say thank you if you ask me.’

‘Penny said they’ve all talked this out and gotten things ready for us. Let’s at least take a gander at what they’ve got for us. She said they had Sheldon’s study fixed up for us so give it a chance.’ Connie was eager to see the house but she was curious to see Penny. She really was just as curious as her daughter about Penny’s attachment to Sheldon and the house for her sake at any rate.

Mary nodded and walked along with her mother keeping her thoughts to herself. Her mother had known Penny for a while now through the mail and phone and all so her mother probably did know the actress better than she did. She couldn’t deny Penny and her friends had been a force for good to her family but it was all just too good to be true. It might be unchristian or looking for fault in a good turn but she worried about Penny’s attachment to Sheldon. It didn’t seem natural to Mary for Penny to be so attached to a dead man, especially when that man was her son.

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Penny waited at the arrival gate for Constance and Mary. A few fans recognized her and got her autograph while she waited for Sheldon’s folks. Her day brightened a lot when Bernadette called with an update.

‘You’re kidding me?’ Penny chuckled.

‘Am not, Debbie’s chest pains were just stiffness from the first day of her water aerobics class, yesterday, that Howard had signed her up for. She’s been thanking him for that scare since we left the hospital.’ Bernadette joined Penny in the laughter and relief. ‘All the same, it was scary so we’re going to spend some extra time here. Say hello to Texas for us.’

‘I will, and tell Debbie how happy I am for her she’s alright.’ Penny hung up in relief. She knew how close Howard was to Debbie. She was like a mother to everyone she came in contact with full of pushy advice and bemused love for Howard and all his friends. Penny’s reverie was broken when the first arrivals came out of the reception gate.

Penny recognized Connie from their Skype calls and waved to her and Mary when they came through the arrival gate. ‘Connie, Mary, over here, welcome to L.A.!’

‘Penny, dear, how are you? I hope you weren’t waiting too long for us.’ Connie gave Penny a hug. ‘You haven’t been properly introduced to Mary, yet, it’s time you met my daughter and Sheldon’s
'Hello, Mary, I am happy we finally got a chance to meet. Sheldon’s talked a lot about you.'

Mary gave a funny look at the odd greeting. ‘Well, hello, Penny, you do know Sheldon’s dead, right?’

‘What? Oh, yes, of course, but Sheldon had all those journals and he was very detailed. Sometimes, I wondered when he had the time to do any science stuff.’ Penny wasn’t exaggerating there, even dead he still managed a bewildering array of interests but she was a bit flustered by the slip.

Both Connie and Mary nodded in good humor at the truth of that. Connie spoke up to get things moving along. ‘How about we find someplace more comfy to chat than the middle of an airport?’

‘Sorry, momma, let’s get going to the house and put these bags down. I could use something to eat and a large pot of coffee.’ Mary picked up her bag and Penny grabbed Meemaw’s bag and the three women headed out to the car and Los Robles Cottage.

‘How do you folks feel about Mexican food, we’ve got huarache, pozole, and chili ready at the house and I couldn’t live without coffee so there’s plenty of that to go around.’

‘Honey, those are some of my favorites, how in the world did you ever think of them?’ Connie loved those dishes though she’d be hard pressed to think of any Mexican food she didn’t like.

‘Sheldon’s journals were very detailed.’ Penny opened the trunk when they got to her car and after the bags were put away and everyone was settled they got on the way to the cottage.

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Mary and Constance were glad to see Los Robles Cottage again for the happier memories it still held for them. Penny was hoping Sheldon had gotten out of whatever funk he was in. She didn’t expect him to make any trouble for these two guests, of course, but she didn’t want him to miss their arrival.

Mary and Constance were glad to have all the travel getting here done with when they put their bags down in the front hall of Los Robles Cottage. They glanced around the hall and into the dining and living rooms on either side. They didn’t see any of the toys Sheldon used to have all around the place but the Cottage, somehow, felt more like Sheldon than when he was alive.

Penny could feel the welcoming air she usually felt when she got home from work. Judging by the smiles from the house guests, she figured they could feel it, too. ‘I guess you’d like to freshen up before anything else? Bernadette and Howard are over at his mother’s with Halley so things should be quiet for you upstairs after your flight.’

‘I could use some of that coffee I smell before I do anything. You know, you should be careful leaving something like that running, Penny.’ Mary was feeling the travel from Galveston and getting a little edgy.

‘You’re right but it’s all got timers so it hasn’t been running long, how about you, Connie?’ Penny knew it was Sheldon that got the coffee running since she hadn’t even thought of it, a bit to her chagrin.

‘I’m fine, Penny, I’d just like to put my things down and get my slippers out of the bag. Why don’t you get your coffee, Mary, and we’ll get these bags out from under foot.’ Connie wanted to relax a bit after the flight and she knew Mary would be easier after she got her caffeine fix.
‘Do you want some help finding anything, Mary?’

‘No, dear, I’ll just follow my nose. I guess you’ve got things ready upstairs for us?’ Mary wanted her coffee and just as much a moment alone to look around the house and say hello to her Shelly.

‘Alright, we’ve got the beds and things made up for you in Sheldon’s study when you want to find us, and there’s plenty in the fridge if you’re feeling hungry.’ Penny wanted Sheldon’s folks to feel at home and she hoped they wouldn’t mind the changes around the property since they moved in, big things like the pavilion out back or all of Sheldon’s stuff down in Howard’s collector’s room.

Mary ambled her way through the dining room to the kitchen while Penny grabbed the bags and went upstairs to the study with Meemaw.

+++ ‘You know where the study is, I guess?’ Penny wondered if Sheldon was listening and hoped he was ready to have Meemaw upstairs in his rooms.

‘Sure, I do. I like how you’ve got the place fixed up. What happened to all of Sheldon’s toys?’ Meemaw well remembered how littered with collectables anywhere Sheldon lived became. His old Pasadena apartment had been loaded with them.

‘We moved a lot of the stuff down stairs in the basement. Howard and I made a collector’s room for a lot of it but there’s still quite a bit in the study. I hope you folks don’t mind us moving it around. I know you guys wanted the house to be a memorial but we kind of also wanted to make it a little bit more our space.’ Penny had felt no one would mind moving stuff, other than Sheldon, of course.

‘I don’t mind at all, Penny, but Mary will be sure to ask. She’s no big fan of the toys but she does miss her Sheldon and that stuff really does remind her of him.’ Connie was happy these kids moved the stuff for their comfort and she hoped Mary felt the same way. It was time she let a lot of things get put away as far as Connie was concerned.

Connie opened the door to the study so Penny could get through with the bags. Penny saw Sheldon standing in a fret by the telescope and gave him a reassuring smile. ‘Here we are; I hope you’re OK with everything.’ Penny chirped with some extra emphasis for Sheldon and his very apparent nerves.

Connie paused a second in the doorway almost sure she saw Sheldon for a second but she just laughed at her own silliness. The room had so many of Sheldon’s toys around it must have just made her think she saw him in the balcony doorway. She glanced around the study with a bemused air at all of Sheldon’s things.

‘I know Mary wanted to keep Sheldon’s memory alive but isn’t this a little overboard, dear?’ Sheldon ran up to Meemaw and followed her stroll around the room.

‘Doesn’t she look wonderful, Penny?’ Sheldon’s joy was a strong presence both Penny and Meemaw could feel.

‘Yes, she does… it does.’ Penny caught herself in the moment feeling caught up in Sheldon’s joy. ‘I guess it looks that way but they are kind of cute toys. It all helped in solving the arctic stuff and by the time that was over I got to like them all where they were.’

‘The way you have things set up here, you look like you got hitched.’ Connie smiled at the collection of Care Bears. It looked more like a kid’s tree house up here than anything else.

Sheldon snorted and grinned looking bemused. ‘Hitched? Do I seem the marrying kind, Penny?’
‘Hitched to Sheldon? He’d have to make more room for my Care Bears.’ Penny grinned at Sheldon standing by his models. ‘Maybe, I should make some space on this shelf and move a few models like this Serenity.’

‘Penny, you wouldn’t dare!’ Sheldon glared in frustration since he couldn’t upset Meemaw.

‘I’m sure Sheldon wouldn’t mind a bit, dear. Which one is Serenity?’ Connie looked over the models not knowing any of them besides Sheldon’s favorites from Star Trek.

‘Meemaw, how could you?’ Sheldon never expected Meemaw to ever say such a thing.

Penny grinned at Sheldon’s dismay and picked up the Firefly spaceship. ‘It’s this one. I almost broke it my first night here. I thought I heard a prowler and I came out of the bedroom swinging with a baseball bat. Took out two of them, that Galactica model, and the Enterprise.’

‘Oh, lord, Shelly would have had a fit if the Enterprise was destroyed.’ Meemaw looked at Penny and stage whispered for effect. ‘I broke his old Enterprise, once, I was lucky the store had another so I could replace it before he found out.’

‘Meemaw?’ Sheldon was flabbergasted. Penny couldn’t help laughing for a while and Connie soon joined in.

‘Yes, have your laugh, vandals. I am going to see how my mother is doing.’ Sheldon disappeared leaving Penny and Meemaw to reminisce and unpack.

+++ Mary got a mug from the cupboard and poured her coffee. She thought about Sheldon while she looked around the kitchen. She wondered where all Sheldon’s toys had gotten to not that the place didn’t need the cleaning from them all. Their absence just reminded her of Sheldon’s having passed away. She saw the pavilion out the kitchen window and decided to have a look since it was new to the property. ‘Momma, what did you let them do to Shelly’s house?’

Mary walked out the back door to the pavilion. Opened up for the warm weather it did look like a comfortable place for a coffee and to sneak a quiet cigarette. She kept meaning to give them up but ever since she took to them for her quiet moments away from George when he’d had a few too many they had became part of her thinking time. She sat down on one of the sofas and took in the quiet. ‘I hope you’d have liked this, Shelly, but you were never one for parties. I can’t see what else a place this size would be for.’

Mary put her feet up on the sofa and thought about Penny and the house. She couldn’t deny the girl and her friends seemed to have taken good care of the place but she did wonder where Sheldon’s things were. She didn’t feel there was enough of him inside, not downstairs at any rate. ‘I miss you, Shelly.’ The day hadn’t gone by she didn’t think of her special, genius son. She’d been against any renting until her mother had insisted. When folks kept moving out, she tried getting her mother to stop trying to rent the place. That is until Penny came along.

She’d just thought of Penny as another tenant until The Coven came on TV. She had been surprised to find her tenant was in the show when her church group started petitioning against what they saw as the Devil’s work with all the witches and satanic images in the series. Mary had been ready to have the actress evicted until her mother put her foot down. Her mother loved the show and it was just a TV show to her and Penny was just an actress. She was almost ready to let the thing go until Penny started writing to Texas and getting involved in her Shelly’s work. It all turned out well and the girl had saved her son’s good name but the why of it still bothered her. Witches, real or not,
getting all friendly with her mother, getting into Shelly’s work like that, it was like the girl was wheedling her way into Mary’s family and it set off her alarm bells. It wasn’t Christian because of all the good work Penny had done but Mary couldn’t help it.

Mary lit her cigarette, closed her eyes, and took a long meditative drag. She sipped her coffee and couldn’t help thinking they’d built a nice place to come and have a quiet moment to think.

‘Oh, good lord!’

Mary snorted wishing Sheldon wouldn’t act so critical. The thought brought her up short and she sat up spilling some of her coffee. She could have sworn she heard Sheldon. It was impossible but she looked around half expecting to see him. She put out the cigarette remembering how much he didn’t like her smoking.

‘I’m sorry, honey, I know you don’t like them but they do help me to think when I’m troubled.’

Mary took another sip of her coffee and lay back again. Sheldon sat on a sofa opposite his mother and listened to her long remembered voice.

‘What would you have made of that Penny? Witches? I don’t think my church group would have kept that girl as far away as you would have. I know she’s an actress but you were never into magic and hocus pocus.’

Sheldon had to agree with that but he was sure none of that would have affected his relationship with Penny.

‘I guess none of that might have been any different to those funny shows you watched.’

Sheldon was astounded at such a thought. ‘The Coven most certainly is not the same as Star Trek.’

‘But why would an actress get all involved with your work? Wouldn’t that have bothered you, Shelly?’ Mary stood up to walk around the yard and Sheldon followed with her. ‘Your Meemaw wants me to sell the place but it would be like giving you away. I’m not sure I am ready for that, honey. And that girl, studying your work, taking over your house, it’s like she’s taking you away from me, Sheldon.’ Mary finished her coffee and headed inside to find her mother and Penny.

Sheldon watched her go inside unsure of what to do. He didn’t understand why his mother didn’t trust Penny like him or Meemaw.
Mary wanted to see more of the house on her own before she went looking for Penny and her mother. She went back in through the kitchen where she got another cup of coffee. She followed back the way she had come through the dining room paying more attention to the changed ambiance from her last time here when Sheldon was alive. ‘The place does look better without all the wacky toys, I guess, but where did they all go?’ She appreciated the changes for what they were but she regretted who they said was gone. The dishware in the cupboard and on the sideboard was more floral and elegant than the practical things Sheldon had and there were no strange dishes from his sci-fi shows. The furnishing was the modernistic white and black Sheldon had bought but now there were more artistic touches complementing the design such as the deep red of the place settings and the black vases for the yellow roses currently on the table. ‘You would never have thought of flowers for a table, Shelly.’ Mary smelled the fragrance of the roses with a sad smile.

‘Why would I litter the house with dying plants? They belong in the garden, mother. Not to mention, Bernadette insisted there should be yellow roses since we are from Texas. It’s all too kitsch.’ Sheldon could not believe his mother seemed to approve of their presence.

Mary went around to the living room where the clean comfortable furniture was as it had always been but none of the toys or video games were around the way Sheldon would have had them. ‘It looks like they wanted to take away everything about you, Shelly.’ Instead of Sheldon’s toys the room had a number of oil paintings. They were various scenes of 19th century Parisian women, one in particular was made a centerpiece, two women ice skating. The titles said the paintings were by Jean Beraud.

Sheldon popped in to follow his mother through the house wondering how she was feeling about the changes. ‘I said that, too, when Penny and Bernadette moved everything down to the basement.’

‘I can’t say those girls don’t know how to decorate, I wonder who likes the paintings?’ Mary admired the works for several minutes trying to guess who in the house might have chosen these.

‘Penny chose them for Bernadette as a wedding present. Bernadette has often said she would like to have been an ice dancer if she hadn’t become a scientist.’ Sheldon wasn’t entirely displeased with the art though he felt his collection of sonic screwdrivers would look better up here.

Mary walked on into the library. She glanced at the bookshelves and there seemed even more science stuff than when Sheldon was here if that were possible. Mary looked along the shelves at the
bewildering array of reference works and text books and research works. ‘I don’t know what half of this is but I guess you’d enjoy it.’ She was happy to see Sheldon’s library put to good use.

Curiosity getting the better of her, Mary decided to take a peek up the spiral stairs to see the old sitting room. She smiled at the sight of familiar baby stuff and guessed she’d found Halley’s room. She looked around at the toys and decorations with fond memories of her own children. ‘Oh, Shelly, why couldn’t you have found a nice girl to settle down with and have a little one like this?’ She glanced at the sturdy baby door Howard had made with approval. ‘I hope this little one isn’t the dickens you were, Shelly.’

Sheldon looked in astonishment at his mother’s comment. ‘I remember no such thing. Wait until you hear of Penny’s larcenous escapades before you make such declarations.’

Mary didn’t want to disturb the baby’s room so she went back down to the library and used the main stairs up to the second floor. She got to the doorway to Sheldon’s study and felt a weird presence around her. She looked around the hallway almost expecting to see Sheldon next to her. She shook her mind out of her mood thinking she’d been too maudlin in her ramble around downstairs. ‘Next, you’ll be seeing Shelly’s ghost, Mary Cooper.’ She gave a knock on the door and went in to join her mother and Penny. In the doorway, she stopped in curiosity at the state of the study. The models, the swords, Batleths, Sheldon had called them, and a host of other toys littered the study. The Care Bears and Hello Kitty comforter over the desk chair had to be Penny’s since she could never imagine Sheldon with such things. She was perplexed why there was nothing of Sheldon’s things downstairs while up here, it looked like Sheldon had never passed away. She saw Penny and her mother out on the balcony chatting and glanced around the study while she went to join them.

‘Mary, did you find the coffee alright?’ Penny was starting to wonder how Sheldon’s mom was doing downstairs.

‘She did while on her tour of inspection downstairs, pavilion and all.’ Sheldon appeared by the telescope to watch his family come together up here again.

‘I found it, alright, but why’s there so much of Sheldon’s stuff up here? It’s kind of funny compared to the look downstairs.’ Mary was itching to look in the other rooms after seeing the study.

‘Oh, Mary dear, who cares how they decorate the place to suit themselves?’ Connie didn’t want the visit starting off on the wrong foot, especially after starting off so well with Penny just now.

Penny felt the tensions rising quickly so she hoped some refreshment might help smooth things over a little. ‘I guess you two might want to relax a bit after the flight. Why don’t you freshen up and I’ll put some dinner together for when you’re ready?’

Connie liked the sound of that since she could let Mary get whatever this was out of her system. ‘That would be nice, Penny. How about in an hour or so, I’d like to take a little nap. I reckon that pavilion you built would be a nice spot for supper on a nice day like this. I’d like to take a look at it after seeing those pictures you sent.’

They all agreed to have dinner in the pavilion and Penny left Connie and Mary to freshen up for dinner while she had a chat with Sheldon.

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Connie sat down on the bed and sighed with some frustration. ‘Well, get it out, Mary, what’s wrong?’
‘Are you kidding? Look at this room; it looks like Sheldon decorated it but there isn’t sign of him downstairs. Are you sure that girl is right in the head?’ Mary walked over to Penny’s bedroom to have a look half-expecting more of Sheldon’s stuff to be decorating it.

‘Mary Cooper, get out of that room this instant!’ Mary started to object but Connie put her foot down. ‘Now, Mary Elizabeth!’

‘I’m sorry, momma, but something’s just not right around here.’ Mary closed the bedroom door and came over to sit on the bed across from her mother. ‘Look at this room; it looks like Sheldon is going to walk in any moment.’

Connie chuckled a bit at that. ‘I don’t think Sheldon would have a collection of Care Bears anywhere near his precious models. Besides, you were the one that insisted Sheldon’s things be kept in the house. You’re not happy they aren’t all over the place one second then you’re complaining they are out on display the next. Penny wanted to keep some things out because you wanted a memorial for Sheldon and she’s done a fine job of it at that; let these kids have some space for themselves. The rest of it is down in a proper collector’s room according to Penny.’

‘A collector’s room, where did they put that? I didn’t see any sign of any collector’s room.’ Mary was sure she’d seen everything downstairs.

‘It’s in the basement. Penny and them did some remodeling when they built the pavilion out back.’ Connie wanted to see the job in the full since pictures and videos online really didn’t give the full feeling.

‘Remodeling! Why didn’t you ever say anything about remodeling?’ Mary was getting hot wondering what her mother might have let happen here at her son’s Los Robles sanctuary.

‘Do not take that tone with me, Mary Elizabeth Cooper, that’s not how you were raised. Now, I didn’t tell you because this is exactly how you would have reacted.’

‘Of course this is how I would have reacted. I’m sorry, momma, but this house is supposed to be a memorial to Sheldon.’ Mary fidgeted and got up to be closer to the models Sheldon had cared so much for.

‘Mary, honey, memorials are places people come to remember someone. No one ever came here and you never made it easy for anyone to come here. You haven’t been keeping a memorial here; you’ve been keeping a mausoleum.’ Connie had already buried one child and that was more than enough so she didn’t want to push Mary too hard on losing hers but she couldn’t let her daughter stay in unhealthy mourning like this.

‘What am I supposed to do? Sheldon was too bright and too special to be forgotten. Failure and suicide, I can’t let that be his memorial.’ Mary sat at the desk and started to tear up.

‘It seems you don’t have to. Penny and her friends have fixed that failure and Penny has been through enough of Sheldon’s work that she’s sure it must have been some kind of accident Sheldon fell off that balcony. God forgive me, but he was not the most coordinated boy on Earth so I can believe he fell off that balcony by accident.’ Connie tried not to grin at Penny’s idea of a bird scaring him like that chicken but it sounded so very Sheldon to her, especially after Carl and the badger.

‘And that’s another thing, if Penny had been his girlfriend or something all of this would make sense but look at this; she’s even working on his theories.’ Mary picked up a thesis outline on the desk that Penny had been working on for her M.A. application.
‘Yes, Penny was showing it to me while you were downstairs. All that science work clearing Sheldon’s name got her interested in the subject. There’s nothing strange about that.’ Connie got up and took the outline from Mary and put it away where Penny had gotten it from and held her daughter’s hand. ‘Mary, dear, you’ve got a lot to work out for your peace of mind and I hope being here will help that along. But, while you’re working that out, try to remember these kids have been Sheldon’s friends in life and after. You should be able to admit that much at least.’

‘I’ll try, momma.’ Mary sighed and chewed her lip wanting to add more but she knew her mother was in no mood to let her push the issue any further.

‘That’s fine. I’m going to wash up a bit after that flight and take a nap before we eat. You might try to do the same.’ Connie got some bath things from the dresser and insisted Mary get herself a little more comfortable for dinner. She hoped that would help Mary look at things less suspiciously if not better.

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Penny started getting out the Mexican food Sheldon had made and she was surprised at the amount he’d made. She guessed he was including Howard and Bernie and maybe Raj and Lalita since there was enough made for that many people. Penny texted Bernadette about whether they might be back in time for dinner. Bernadette said they expected to be back in an hour or two. She also texted Raj and Lalita were likely to drop by since they were worried about Debbie, too, even if Howard had been keeping them updated. They were hoping to drop by and see how Howard was doing and the say hi to Sheldon’s folks.

‘The correct temperature should be set 5 degrees higher, Penny.’

‘Life is so much easier with you running behind correcting things, Sheldon.’ Penny rolled her eyes and adjusted the temperature to keep things running without further incident.

‘My mother would often say the same thing to me. It is nice to have one’s efforts appreciated by the people close to them, don’t you think?’ Sheldon hoped his mother and Penny would find more in common during her stay.

‘Oh, sure.’ Penny was too busy thinking about Sheldon’s mother to be bothered by his obliviousness to sarcasm. ‘Sheldon, does your mom like traveling?’

‘Yes, she has frequent sojourns with her church group. She’s particularly fond of her church’s summer cruise package.’ Sheldon helped Penny get the chili going while she washed some vegetables for a salad.

‘She just seemed a little antsy when she came up to the study. I wondered if the trip here had her on edge.’

Sheldon asked Penny to sample the taste of the chili. ‘That’s fantastic, Sheldon.’

‘You should thank Meemaw since it is her recipe. However, it is not the trip which has my mother so antsy; it is you, Penny.’ Sheldon went back to the refrigerator to get the huarache out.

Penny stared at Sheldon waiting for him to continue that thought but he kept cooking like everything was clear. ‘What do you mean it’s me?’

Sheldon paused in his work. ‘While my mother was out in the pavilion, I listened to her talking to herself about the state of the house and of my work and possessions. She believes you are trying to take them away from her. Also, I believe her fundamentalist Christian beliefs are somewhat
contributing to this due to your profession and that you currently portray a witch.’

Penny frowned in thought while she started chopping up the vegetables for the salad. ‘I guess I can’t really say I’m surprised. I hardly ever talked to your mom all this time. I handled all the house questions through your Meemaw, maybe she resents that?’

Sheldon put out several trays to carry the dishes, glasses, and silverware to the pavilion. ‘That may be some part of this but I had always intended to use the house for Meemaw if she didn’t want to keep her home any longer as she got older. I believe my mother would defer to her in any changes you arranged through her. Do not let the charming Texas granny veneer fool you. Meemaw knows her mind and will express it quite clearly when need be. My mother knows that better than I do. I believe the concerns you put in your last letter to Meemaw express the problem, poaching. From what my mother said in the pavilion over her cigarette break, she believes you are too attached to me and you are taking away her last attachments to her memory of me.’

Penny loaded up the trays while she imagined being in Mary’s shoes. Too attached, she had to laugh a bit at that. ‘I haven’t been accused of being too attached to anyone since Kurt and I met back in Omaha.’

Sheldon scowled at Penny’s laughter. ‘There will be no frolics to Las Vegas, Penny.’

Penny batted her eyes and smiled. ‘So, you’d rather just stay shacked up and single with an actress? Sheldon honey, what would folks say back home?’

‘You are incorrigible, woman.’ Sheldon snorted and tossed a tomato slice at Penny.

Penny tossed a carrot slice back at Sheldon but it passed through him. ‘Hey, no fair starting food fights when I can’t hit you back!’

Sheldon chuckled and tossed the fallen carrot slice back at Penny.

Penny glared back at her preening nemesis. ‘Oh, it’s on!’ She began whistling The Yellow Rose of Texas.

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Mary looked around the study for a minute. Her mother was right about letting go of things here. Even her church group told her the same thing from time to time but sitting here surrounded by her son’s things, she could almost feel Sheldon around her and it wasn’t just because of the toys around the room. She closed her eyes and listened to her mother moving about in the bathroom. She felt too restless to lie around so she gave the bathroom door a knock. ‘Momma, I’m going to go downstairs and give Penny a hand with the dinner fixings. Do you want anything downstairs?’

Connie hoped her daughter was taking on some of her advice. ‘I wouldn’t mind a chamomile tea if they have some, thank you, Mary.’

‘You’re welcome, momma. I’ll be back up in a bit.’ Mary took a breath and promised herself to keep thinking more charitable thoughts about the Los Robles kids. Her mother was right about the good that had come about since the house got rented to Penny and her friend. Her head knew that at any rate.

Mary got down to the first floor just as a young couple with a baby came in the front door. ‘Hello, y’all, I’m Mary Cooper, Sheldon’s mother. I guess you are Bernadette and Howard and this must be little Halley?’
Howard and Bernadette both said hi but Halley said the most with her crying and fussing. Bernadette sighed and handed her to Howard. ‘I’m sorry Howie, but can you change her?’

Howard grinned at his wife and Mary as he took Halley. ‘Why not, it will take care of the hearing in the other ear.’

‘You’re not squeamish about changing a diaper, are you Howard?’ Mary could never get her George to go near the job.

‘No, I’ve just listened to my mother all day which makes this is a relief since I can put this one to bed.’ Howard went upstairs to change Halley and let her settle down for a while. Bernadette handed Howard a small cell phone looking device she picked up from the hall table and put a matching one on her belt.

‘What’s that thing?’ Mary was curious about the odd devices.

Bernadette led Mary into the living room and sat down on the couch with her. ‘These are something Howard made. The house has small cameras that let us keep an eye on Halley when we are away from her.’ Bernadette turned on the screen and they saw Howard walking into Halley’s room. Bernadette said hi to Howard and had him turn on the room’s speakers so she could sing Halley’s Polish lullaby to her.

Halley reached out towards the toy shelf and saying ‘kotki’ again and again. Howard went to the shelf and got a plush dog and tried giving it to Halley but she pushed it away and kept asking for ‘kotki’.

‘What’s a kotki?’ Mary had no idea what the funny sounding song was Bernadette had sung.

‘Kitties, the lullaby is Polish and it’s about two kitties. I think Halley might have figured that out.’ The two mothers watched Howard get a horse this time but Halley pushed that away and kept asking for kotki. When Howard came back the third time with the kitty Halley squealed and hugged the plush kitty. ‘Sof kotki… sof kotki…’

Mary drew back a bit then got closer. ‘What’s ‘sof kotki’? I guess that’s some other Polish word?’

‘I don’t know it’s not Polish. I think she just means soft kitty.’ Bernadette shrugged but Mary asked if Bernadette would mind if she tried a lullaby. Mary sang Sheldon’s old lullaby and while she sang Halley started repeating sof kotki, wum kotki along with the tune and fell asleep while Howard finished changing her.

Bernadette was delighted to see Halley fall asleep so quickly after such a busy day but she wondered why Mary was looking so pensive. ‘Halley liked your lullaby; I haven’t heard that one before.’

Mary passed the baby monitor back to Bernadette and pondered a few seconds more. ‘It’s a little tune I made for my Sheldon when he was a baby. Funny, it almost seemed like she knew it but I can’t see how. She must have just meant the doll, I suppose.’

‘Whatever the reason, thank you for getting her to sleep. We spent all day with Howard’s mother. She thought she was having heart trouble but it turned out to be exercise cramps, thank god, but Halley had a long day.’

Bernadette and Mary chatted a few minutes about Halley until Penny came into the living room with a tray. ‘Hey Bernie, I’ve got your lavender tea and there’s a pot of chamomile tea here for you and Connie, Mary.’
‘How in the world did you know that’s what I came downstairs for, Penny?’ Mary was happy at the coincidence but it seemed odd as well, especially after Halley and Soft Kitty.

Penny floundered a second. She hadn’t given any thought to Sheldon preparing the tea since he usually had a pot brewed up for her and Bernadette. She’d long forgotten to give it any thought but Bernadette saved the moment.

‘Penny’s wonderful like that. Sometimes, it is almost like she is a witch or something having just the right thing made for me when I get home.’ Bernadette lingered over the aroma and giggled. ‘I think Howard gets a little jealous over that.’

Mary paused a second in shuffling the tea and dishes to bring upstairs for her mother. ‘Why is that, can’t he figure out what you like?’

‘Howie is so sweet but he doesn’t have Penny’s touch for having things ready.’ Bernadette thought about some of Howard’s nerves about the Cottage. ‘When we first moved in here, he was sure the place was haunted. Sometimes, he still thinks there is a ghost that gets the stuff ready for me when I come home.’

Bernadette and Penny laughed for different reasons over that but Mary’s chuckle was more guarded. She thought about the lullaby and the tea and thinking she’d heard Sheldon out in the pavilion. ‘I can’t say I believe in ghosts. Jesus takes the good to his bosom and the others go you know where but Howard always used to tell us the Cottage was troubled. He said he could never get anyone to stay until you folks came along. He never said what the troubles were exactly but sometimes I did wonder if it was Sheldon making a fuss over everything that happened to him.’

Bernadette still felt rankled over the first week or so when everything kept going wrong some way or the other. ‘I sure had enough trouble here the first week whenever I was alone. I kept getting locked out, the laundry kept ruining my clothes, I started to think I was going crazy but Penny did some kind of New Age psychic stuff one weekend and everything was fine after that.’

Mary looked awry at Penny. ‘You do that funny Wicca stuff? I though all that was just acting?’

Penny laughed a little embarrassed at the misplaced praise. ‘No Wicca stuff, but I did talk to my psychic. She talked about rearranging the furnishings and using incense and stuff to make the place homier. She figured the house wasn’t used to us and we weren’t used to it, either, so a little Fung Shui and everything got better.’

Mary huffed and rolled her eyes. ‘Witches, fang-shoes, or whatever, it sounds like you can use a bit of churching up around here. I’m going to bring this tea up to momma and we can have dinner in an hour.’

Penny and Bernadette stared at each other in astonishment and then followed Mary’s march out of the living room and up the stairs. Howard came down the spiral stairs and into the living room from the library. ‘What’s up, you guys?’

‘Mary thinks we can use some churching up.’ Penny giggled at the thought. The contortions Howard’s face made set her laughing.

‘You can’t be serious.’ Howard was ready to move back in with his mother right now.

‘She sounded serious but I guess we can just plead the baby.’ Bernadette was going to make the most of being a new mom, tomorrow.

Sheldon appeared with a maniacal smile. ‘I think it is you she wants in church, tomorrow, Penny.’
‘Yeah, I think you’re right.’ Penny nodded to Sheldon and reassured Howard and Bernie, too. ‘I think Mary was a little spooked about me talking about psychics and stuff. Connie doesn’t mind any of that but Mary is kind of fundamentalist.’

‘My mother is kind of fundamentalist the way the Spanish Inquisition was kind of against witches.’ Sheldon rolled his eyes grateful he was left out of this.

‘I hope you’re right about that, Penny. I don’t mind the church bit so much but Howie shouldn’t have to deal with it. None of us should, really, but I can make her happy for one morning.’ Bernadette gave Howard a hug in support and headed upstairs to check on Halley and get ready for dinner.

‘Thanks, Bernie.’ Howard turned to Penny. ‘Do you want a hand with dinner?’

‘No, I’m OK, Howard, it’s mostly done, there’s just the warming up and such. I could use a hand in when I’m carting things out to the pavilion. I’ll give you a shout.’

‘Sure, I’ll be downstairs in the collector’s room. I found some files of Arctic videos with Sheldon. Maybe, his folks would like to take a look at them?’

Penny glanced at Sheldon and he just shrugged. ‘There is nothing very interesting to see. I never sent any videos home to Texas since the experiment turned out to be a failure.’

‘I think they might enjoy that. Let’s ask at dinner.’ Penny shoed Howard on his way and then directed Sheldon into the kitchen with her to finish dinner.
The pavilion was a delightful place for a meal as far as Connie was concerned. She was amazed Penny had made her favorite foods so well. ‘Penny, where did you ever learn to cook like this?’

‘Don’t thank me, thank Sheldon, his journals had a few recipes that he noted were your favorites. I just followed the instructions.’ Penny was ashamed to accept the praise for Sheldon’s cooking but it was quite good. She got a text from Lalita that she and Raj would be coming over in a bit so she got up to get places set for them. Mary joined her helping bring out more of the food when Raj and Lalita arrived.

Everyone was delighted to see Halley come down with Bernadette. ‘She had quite the nap so I’d like to let her burn off some energy.’

Halley was fascinated by the many faces, especially the two new faces. She was very taken with Mary as soon as she heard the Texas drawl. ‘Kotki, sof kotki,’

‘I think she might remember your lullaby, Mary.’ Bernadette moved over on the couch and Mary came over to sit next to her to hold Halley for a bit. Halley chortled in approval.

Mary bounced Halley on her lap but the baby was far more interested in the foods Mary was eating. ‘This little one is getting as grabby as Sheldon and Missy at this age. Lord, those two could eat when they weren’t starting food fights.’

‘Starting food fights, was this a regular thing with Sheldon?’ Penny was still planning retaliation after the kitchen standoff.

‘Of course not, I am not one to resort to such petty antics.’ Sheldon anticipated his mother’s agreement though Penny wasn’t counting on it.

‘He and Missy were hellions. Momma was the only one that could keep them under control. Bernadette, have you been starting her on any foods, yet?’ Mary was having a fight on her hands with Halley’s hands. She was smacking her lips and trying to get at each forkful that passed by.

‘It was Missy who kept starting everything!’ Sheldon fumed and paced in agitation.

Penny giggled at Sheldon’s frustration after the kitchen food fight today but Halley was more on her mind at the moment.
‘Not yet, Mary, but how about we try a little avocado?’ Bernadette came over and sat by Mary with a small dish where she was mashing a soft piece of avocado into paste. Bernadette ate a bit of the avocado paste and hummed happily. That caught Halley’s attention and she scooped up some of the avocado from the dish and ate it with a lot of messiness.

‘I don’t have a camera. Mom is going to kill me.’ Howard started to rush into the house but Raj had come to the rescue.

‘I’ve got it, dude. I got my phone out when Bernadette came over with the food.’ Raj and Lalita were both looking from the phone to Halley and waving at Halley.

Howard hurried over to Raj and looked at the camera’s quality. ‘Thanks man, you’re a life saver. I’m going to run inside and get mine, thanks you guys.’

Raj and Lalita kept filming Halley’s antics with the food. Raj whispered something to Lalita and she nodded and got up to go over to Bernadette. She got into an excited whispered conversation with Bernadette. Bernadette urged Lalita to go ahead once Howard got back. She didn’t have long to wait when Howard got back and set up his camera to film Halley. Holding Halley, Mary had been lose enough to hear most of the silent chatter between Bernadette and Lalita. ‘Go on. This little one has probably had as much as is good for a young tummy.’ Mary got a napkin and wiped Halley’s face and hands. Mary handed Halley back to Bernadette after she’d cleaned the evening’s newest diner.

‘Hello everyone, Raj and I came over to say how happy we are that Howard’s mom is alright and today was nothing serious.’ Everyone clapped and said similar cheers to Howard.

‘Thanks, now everyone tell my mother that.’ Howard often joked about Debbie but he had been every bit as frightened as she had been on the way to the hospital. He was feeling too relieved to do any suffering son jokes tonight.

‘We also wanted to welcome Connie and Mary back to California and we hope this trip will be a happy one. Raj and Howard were Sheldon’s friends and we all hope you will be a part of our lives.’

Connie and Mary both felt warmed by all these kids and Connie felt glad to say as much. ‘Thank you, Lalita, all of you. Mary and I can’t tell you how much everything you all did to save our Sheldon’s good name. I hope you’ll give our thanks to your sister, too, Raj. Penny’s told me a bit of what she had to go through in all that business.’

Raj was looking embarrassed by the praise so Lalita carried on with her speech. ‘Thank you, Connie. We also wanted to make an announcement. Halley will have a playmate in about eight more months.’

Everyone gasped and cheered. Even Sheldon felt an unusual thrill of happiness along with the crowd of friends and family. Connie and the other mothers of the party corralled Lalita to have a Q&A about motherhood. Mary was especially taken with Lalita. ‘Have you ever been to Galveston, dear?’

‘No, I studied Dentistry here in California. I’ve never been to Texas.’ Lalita was curious about Mary’s enthusiasm and soon learned a lot about Texas.

Penny excused herself to get some champagne to celebrate the great news. Howard asked Raj to help him with some last touches on the video surprise for Sheldon’s folks so they excused themselves and followed Penny inside.

‘Penny, could you break the surprise to Connie and Mary? You really are the closest to them after all.’ Howard guessed getting everything set up would take about a half hour. Raj had a few files to
add to the show that he could download from his cloud account for his Caltech days.

‘Sure guys, I’ll say you are setting up a surprise about Sheldon for them. That way we can show it too them here or set it up online so they can see it in Texas if they’d rather watch it later in private.’ Penny was sure they’d want to see Sheldon again but whether with strangers or not she wasn’t so sure.

Penny gathered up a couple of bottles of champagne and glasses on a tray and carried the lot out to the pavilion. She found Mary asking about a christening for Halley when she got back to the pavilion. She could feel the palpable stress coming off Bernadette as could Connie.

‘Mary, honey, we shouldn’t be sticking our noses into how Bernadette and Howard are raising their little one.’ Connie had been trying talking Mary into just the two of them going to church, tomorrow. Mary would be going come hell or high water but Connie didn’t want to impose any of Mary’s funny fundamentalist ideas on folks here. Mary kept on with saying a trip to church would be a fine time to plan a christening for Haley.

‘Bernie, I was thinking about locking up the front of the house so you can put Halley to bed when she gets tired out.’ Penny didn’t think Halley was too tired yet but it would make a timely escape story from any more church talk, at least for the moment.

Bernadette leapt at the idea. She was thankful Howard was inside and didn’t have to hear any of that christening stuff. She and Howard really hadn’t talked about religion and Haley but she certainly wasn’t going to have that conversation here with Mary Cooper. Besides, Halley had had a long day with Debbie and now here with everyone else. Bernadette was amazed at how well she had been handling so many strangers and people all day long. Halley almost seemed to thrive on the chaos and activity all day. Her fascination for everything new had never let up. All the same, bedtime was a perfect excuse to politely bow out of any more religious talk. ‘Good idea, Penny, let’s do that now. It really has been a long day for her.’ Bernadette gathered up Halley’s blanket and scurried inside as politely as possible from that impromptu crusade for Halley’s soul.

‘Oh, before we do that, Howard and Raj have a little surprise for you, Connie and Mary. They made a small home movie of some video files of Sheldon up in the arctic. Do you feel up to seeing them?’ Penny’s ploy to direct things away from Halley worked like a charm.

‘We never heard of any home movies made up there. Land of Goshen, of course we’d love seeing them, wouldn’t we, momma?’ Mary almost felt like Sheldon was inside setting the movies up.

‘Of course, we would. Are they set up, Penny?’ Connie was just as excited to see whatever Howard and Raj had to show them.

‘Howard and Raj are doing some editing; they’ll be up in a bit when they are ready to start the show. They are setting everything up in the collector’s room in the basement. There’s time to finish your drinks and I’ll lock up the front of the house and give the guys a call and see if they are ready.’ Penny went back inside to lock up and took a quick run up the library stairs to check on Bernadette and Halley. She heard Sheldon’s voice up in Halley’s room.

‘It is a kitten.’ Sheldon’s voice was a little strained.

‘Kotki.’ Halley giggled and tossed the plush kitty at Sheldon.

Bernadette sighed. ‘That’s the third time. I am not going to keep picking it up again and again, Halley.’
‘How are you doing, Bernie?’ Penny giggled at the looks on the adults’ faces, one adult and a ghost who often acted more like a child at times.

‘Fine, but Halley seems to like flying kittens, tonight.’ Bernadette waved the toy around for a bit out of the baby’s grasp and then put it in the crib with Halley.

‘For the fourth time, it is a kitten, Haley. And, I will have you know, Penny, those files Howard and Raj are preparing are scientific documents not superficial home movies.’ Sheldon put particular gravitas on ‘scientific documents’.

‘Kotki.’ She laughed and launched it at Sheldon again but Bernadette was ready this time and caught the air born toy.

Penny joined in on Halley’s game and walked behind Sheldon to wave at the baby. ‘Howard and Raj should have the ‘home movies’ ready soon. That should take Mary’s mind off of christenings for a bit.’

‘Do not encourage this perverse behavior, Penny.’ Sheldon’s voice had the deep Texas drawl of his mother that he got when he slipped out of his scientific minded teacher’s voice. Penny had grown quite fond of it.

Bernadette swooped the kitty over Halley. She laughed and grabbed for the toy. ‘I hope so. I don’t mind the idea but that’s for Howard and me to talk about and just us. I know we all agreed to have them here and they own the place but I am not having that conversation with Mary.’

‘My mother will not give up easily. You should simply direct the issue to Meemaw. That would be the simplest solution.’ Sheldon knew there would be no reasoning with his mother where religion was concerned.

Penny had to agree with Sheldon on that plan. ‘Don’t worry, Bernie, I’ll talk to Connie. I’m sure she can put it better to Mary than we can but if it comes to it, just say the word. We still have hotel reservations available.’ Penny had wanted the Texas family to stay here for Sheldon but Bernie and her family had to come first. She kissed Haley goodnight and went back downstairs to check the locks again and check on Raj and Howard’s progress in the basement.

Penny poked into the collector’s room and saw the guys scanning through some scenes on the computer. ‘Are you guys ready for show time?’

Howard gave a nod to Penny. ‘Just about, Raj had some extra files that we are adding into the movie. We’ve been trying to edit around Leonard since Mary and Connie do know about the trouble he caused up there.’

‘Yeah, and I’m not so crazy about reliving those memories, either.’ Raj was still angry for Priya’s sake even if his sister kept telling him to get over it.

‘I get it but will it be ready, soon? Mary was talking religion and Haley outside and the movie would be a good way to put an end to that.’ Penny rolled her eyes at the thought of tomorrow. She was glad Bernie and Connie were coming with her but she did feel a little guilty and abashed for wanting Bernie there.

‘Is she trying to convert you, Penny?’ Howard chuckled at Penny’s pained expression.

‘More like Haley, she was asking about christenings. Bernie brought Haley upstairs when that talk started but you and Bernie should talk over what you want to do about that. I’d love to have Connie here for their vacation but not if it’s going to bother you guys.’ Penny was sensitive to the look of
impatience from Howard and wanted him and Bernie to know Connie, and especially Mary’s stay, was dependent on Howard and Bernie feeling good about it.

Raj had to sympathize with Howard on the subject of overzealous Christians. ‘Is Bernadette still up in Haley’s room, Penny?’

‘Yes, she was still settling Haley in when I came downstairs.’

‘You should go up and talk to Bernadette. I’ve got this movie covered; I’ll finish up the last scenes while you guys think about what you want to do.’ Raj figured it would only take another ten or fifteen minutes to put in the last scenes and cue up the music choices they had talked about for the movie.

Howard and Penny thanked Raj and went back upstairs, Penny out to the pavilion and Howard to check in on Bernadette and Haley.

Penny hoped Lalita was doing OK left to fend for herself with Mary. She found them laughing over the Princess Panchali story.

‘That’s why you look so familiar. I must have read that story to Sheldon a thousand times.’ Mary hadn’t thought of the story in ages so she had no idea where she’d seen Lalita before. ‘Sheldon used to love that story so much he had it memorized better than I did. I haven’t looked at that story since Sheldon was four or five. I wonder if he kept that book.’

‘Yes, he did. Penny showed me the story the first time we were here after the wedding. Raj and I couldn’t believe how close the pictures looked to me.’

Penny sat down by Connie with relief that there was no religion talk going on. ‘The book is up in the study. We can all have a look later. That isn’t all the treats we have. Howard and Raj have put together a video of their arctic trip with Sheldon that they’d like to show you folks.’

‘That sounds wonderful. We haven’t seen anything of Sheldon up there. What do you say, momma?’ Mary was delighted with the idea.

‘That does sound wonderful.’ Connie did want to see Sheldon but she was a little wary of Mary’s happiness. Seeing Sheldon was all well and good, but she wanted Mary to get used to him being gone more than she seemed to be. ‘Are they ready to show it, Penny?’

‘Howard and Raj will be up to give us a call when we can see it.’

With the video on her mind and Lalita here Penny went back to the Panchali story and other books and toys for kids. Bernadette was happy to join in when she came downstairs. She wanted to start on a collection for Haley that she could read to her during late night feedings and changings.

‘I think you should start up a music collection, too, Bernie.’ Penny thought Haley seemed keen every time some music was played.

‘Did you see how fast she seemed to pick up on Mary’s voice and that Soft Kitty lullaby?’ Bernadette was surprised at Halley’s seeming to catch the Texas accent of the guests, especially from Mary.

The women shared out their playlists of songs growing up which covered a very long time and several continents. Bernadette thought Halley might need at least two childhoods to hear it all.

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Sheldon watched Howard and Raj setting up the last bits of the show and feeling more uneasiness than he expected. He worked to keep his agitation from affecting Howard and Raj but watching the video made him increasingly anxious and he was surprised by that.

‘That should be it. I hate to say it but I wish we could cut more of Leonard out of it.’ Howard thought back on the time he’d lost in the wilderness of real estate with some bitterness.

‘I feel you, dude. Priya keeps telling me it’s over but when I’m here with you guys… Sheldon should be here, too. He was a pain in the ass but he didn’t deserve what Leonard did. We let him down; I let him and Priya down.’ Raj got up and walked around the collector’s room and recalled the old times in the apartment down on N Los Robles Avenue.

‘My mom says the same thing. She keeps saying that kind of thinking just makes things worse. It lets the bad guys win.’

‘Yeah, she’s right. We’ve got Lalita and Bernie and our jobs back.’ Raj felt strangely relieved.

‘That’s right, and we’ve got the kids. Going to the hospital with mom, today, I had a lot of time to think, today. I guess, at this point, what Leonard did really isn’t important anymore.’ Howard felt really comfortable and at home for once in Los Robles Cottage.

The guys finished the final touches on the editing and headed back up to the pavilion. Sheldon followed them to help make sure both Meemaw and his mother took this revelation well, as much as he could. He had assured Penny that the arctic stuff was meaningless but now he thought about how much had changed. The arctic fiasco was no more. He realized he had not cared about these videos because they had been a record of his failure. Now, they showed only his science and his friends. And Leonard. Penny had told him about not letting the past destroy the happy memories. That was proving to be a lot harder than he had imagined. Both friends had done their best to minimize Leonard’s presence but he was unavoidable in some scenes. Sheldon was grateful that Howard and Leonard felt just as disturbed as he was by those old memories.

Sheldon followed the guys out to the pavilion. The party was laughing at Penny and Bernadette’s renditions from their latest film craze, Gilbert and Sullivan. They were swapping lines from The Modern Major General song and had everyone in stitches. Howard and Raj were astonished when Connie got up and joined Penny and Bernadette with equal verve. The three took a bow to their small audience and Connie shooed off the praise as much as she could.

‘I had no idea you could sing like that!’ Penny felt like she had found a kindred spirit after their performance.

‘I love those old musicals. We did quite a few when I was in high school. I even did some local theater before I got married.’ Connie remembered those days like a fantasy. She wondered if that might be why she’d taken to Penny so fast.

‘Momma was quite the song bird when I was growing up. I wish I could get her to join my church choir. They could use you something fierce, momma.’ Mary was only half serious. Her mother had made her feelings known about strident churches on more than one occasion.

‘My performing days are long behind me. What about you, dear, why haven’t you done any musicals, Penny?’ Connie hoped she might do one down the line.

‘I did a few musicals on stage before I got the TV show. They were fun but if I did another I think I’d like it on in film. The show is doing great but I wouldn’t mind stretching out into film if something came around.’ Penny didn’t think she had the voice to carry a musical in a lead part but it
would be fun to get a smaller role. The more she thought about it, it wouldn’t even need to be a musical. She’d had a few other small roles on other shows when her schedule fit the filming but a movie would be a lot more exciting. She figured she should have a chat with her agent.

Howard broke into the conversation hoping he wasn’t spoiling the fun. Penny and Bernie could get very intense when they got into performance mode. ‘Hey guys, Penny, were you able to tell everyone about the collector’s room show?’

‘Yes, Howard, we’re all set? How about it, everyone? Are you all up to seeing what these guys and Sheldon were up to way up north?’ Penny was eager to see the movie since she had never looked at any of the film footage. Sheldon had felt it was all too superfluous to the written journals and anything tied directly to instrument observation so she hadn’t delved into them.

Everyone was led by Howard into the house and down to the collector’s room. Connie and especially Mary were delighted by the ambience Howard and Penny had created. Neither woman had thought a batch of children’s toys could look like a thing of beauty but the room with the woodwork, display cases, lighting, and furniture made the room look like a true museum.

‘Howard, honey, you have got to give me a proper tour here before we get started.’ Mary had almost forgotten her anxiety about what became of Sheldon’s stuff while Howard and Raj walked her around the displays.

Connie watched the tour for a few minutes with a bit of sadness. Mary was asking a dozen and one questions about Sheldon’s stuff but she knew what Mary wanted to hear was just folks talking about Sheldon. ‘Penny, let’s get some things for folks upstairs. Maybe, Bernadette can give us a hand?’

Penny nodded at the good idea and whispered to Bernadette and Lalita who joined Connie and Penny to get some drinks and snacks for everyone. The kitchen was raided for light snacks from the pavilion fare as well as other goodies in the pantry. Connie wondered how Penny and Bernadette were getting along with Mary. While she had them and Lalita alone in the kitchen she wanted to apologize for Mary’s enthusiasm for her faith.

‘Are you girls just being polite about Mary out there going on about Halley and going to church, tomorrow?’

Penny snorted in good humor. Sheldon hadn’t been kidding about Connie speaking her mind quite clearly. It wouldn’t do to not meet her in kind if Sheldon was anything to go by. ‘Well, yes, yes we are. It’s just one day. If I can survive my family’s Christmas guilt trips, I can get through a church service with Mary.’

‘Don’t be so sure. It’s not just the church. It’s all about Sheldon. Mary wants the right sort here. Now, don’t get me wrong, she can’t do anything about you and the house without my say so, but she can be worse than a plague horseflies if she puts her mind to it.’ Connie looked frustrated by that statement but she hoped the women believed she was on their side here as much as she could against Mary’s deeper motives.

‘Do you mean she’s serious about Halley and christening?’ Bernadette bristled at that thought.

‘I am sure of it, but that’s easy enough to tell her to mind her own business. She won’t tell you how to raise your little girl though she can be a loud little peanut gallery. She wants you to be the right people around her Sheldon and this house is her Sheldon. Thing is, most of what she goes on about used to drive him up the wall, though he was too good to really say so and mean it to his mother.’ Connie sat down at the kitchen table in a puzzle about what do about her daughter.
Sheldon appeared in the kitchen sensing Meemaw’s disquiet. ‘Meemaw is not wrong about my
mother’s persistence. I do not like to admit defeat but a hotel might be the best option for everyone.’

Penny wasn’t ready to quit, at least until Bernadette and Howard had enough. ‘Mary’s problem is
what I do for a living and my psychics and just being too close to Sheldon. Going to church will
show her I’m willing to meet her half way about everything. I’m sure we can get her to talk more
about her real feelings if you’re right about this really being about Sheldon and the house.’

Connie wasn’t quite sure of that but she wasn’t going to tell Penny how to handle Mary. She’d settle
for giving advice if Penny asked for it.

The women finished putting the goodies together for downstairs. Raj came up to the kitchen to tell
them everyone was ready to start after touring Mary around the collector’s room. He helped Lalita
and Bernadette gather up the food and drinks and they headed down to the collector’s room with the
bulk while Connie held Penny back a bit to make sure they had everything.

‘I really don’t think this is a good idea, tomorrow.’ Connie got Penny alone in the kitchen for a
moment under the guise of helping her bring down a few more drinks for the movie downstairs.

‘Maybe not, but I just think meeting her half way like this would make her happier. I get the feeling
Mary doesn’t like me getting into Sheldon’s work. This just seems like a way to open a little
communication.’ Penny frowned at Connie’s resigned sigh.

‘Normally, I’d say you’re right but this business with Sheldon runs deep with her. I can’t say I
haven’t had some questions, too, but I’ve been worried you might be too attached to Sheldon for
your own good.’

‘Oh?’ Penny was surprised Connie was concerned for her like that.

‘Not now, but for a while when y’all were working on clearing Shelly’s name I did wonder what
had put such a fire under you, Penny. Howard, I could understand him, of course, even his wife, but
I did wonder why it seemed so important to you.’ Connie was still curious about Penny’s motives
even if she wasn’t so worried for her sanity.

‘You know I was married once, and my husband was killed, right?’ Penny couldn’t recall sharing
any details of her marriage with Connie other than what the websites had of general information
written for publicity.

‘That I knew; it took me by surprise you got married so young.’ Connie wanted to ask more about
Penny’s past but a dead husband was a delicate topic for a lot of folks and one so young, Connie
thought it might be even more sensitive.

‘It took my parents by surprise, too, and it did start out every bit as romantic as the fan-sites guess.’
Penny warmed her hands on some chamomile tea she got ready and poured for her and Connie. ‘Not
so much at the end, though, but that was so long ago I’ve let the bad stuff stay buried with Kurt.’

Connie took a few guesses what Penny meant by bad stuff after getting married so young. ‘Was
there some kind of shenanigans like Leonard did to Sheldon up north, there?’

Penny still found it hard to talk about the end of her marriage. She didn’t feel so angry any more
having Bernadette and Sheldon to share some of the pain with when it was too much. These days
that anger almost never came but she still didn’t like reliving the story. She sighed and nodded and
closed her eyes to the kitchen lights. ‘Yeah, there were some shenanigans. We were young and I
loved acting so much and Kurt had his work. He did love seeing me on stage. He never missed an
opening, not once. I remember my first professional role in a play. He came to see me in ‘Murder on the Orient Express.’ I saw him in the audience and it was like we were the only two people in the theater. ‘Course, our production was so bad we almost were the only ones there by the end of the final act.’ Penny still had to laugh at that first night because Kurt was so happy just seeing her up there the bad reviews didn’t matter. He was able to talk her into those acting classes, though; she couldn’t deny she had needed them. They did come at a cost in the end.

Connie took Penny’s hand to coax her out of getting maudlin. ‘It sounds like you had some happy times out here. So, what happened?’

Penny glanced at Connie with a shy smirk. ‘Oh, that’s more of a whisky conversation but, well, there are a lot more distractions out here than there were back in Nebraska. I don’t blame him anymore like I used to, still wouldn’t mind killing him sometimes, though.’

Connie was ready to let her guesses be enough. ‘Yes, I had days I could have taken a frying pan to my Sam’s head. Mary still looks up to him like he could do no wrong but I was married to the man and he was not perfect. I guess something about Sheldon’s troubles reminded you of yours, then? Maybe, that girl trouble with, who was it, Priya?’

Penny nodded and sighed. ‘Yeah, she’s Raj’s sister. I figured I couldn’t do anything about what happened to me but I could do something about what happened to Sheldon. The day Howard told me about what he knew it was awful. I guessed what happened from the diaries Sheldon had written but he never thought about the Arctic as anything but a science problem. It never occurred to him someone so close could betray him like that.’ Penny’s thoughts drifted to Sheldon and how he’d looked in the balcony window listening to Howard’s revelations. She’d had that same crushed look once upon a time.

Connie was a little surprised by the tears starting from Penny’s distant eyes and held her hand in understanding. No one could figure what Connie saw in a man as cantankerous as her Sam could be but his rock steady conviction and loyalty was worth far more than all the trouble that ever came from his temper. She had a lot of friends with stories like Penny’s, her own Mary, too, and every one of them made her value her Sam all the more. ‘I’m sorry to bring up any hard memories, dear; I was worried you were getting too lost in all Sheldon’s stuff. It did look a bit odd from down in Texas.’

Penny chuckled since she knew she had to seem a bit strange to outsiders. How many folks have a ghost for a roommate, after all? ‘Bernadette brings up getting out and away from upstairs from time to time. I tried dating some guys off and on after we moved in but I just got more happiness out of my work and my studies. Somehow, dating never felt right, anymore. Plenty of friends, but once someone starts talking about a date; I just want to run for the hills.’

Connie laughed at that since that did sound like Sheldon. ‘I came out here once because Mary had come home all fired up telling me Sheldon had found a girl.’

Penny looked surprised since she’d never heard about a girlfriend before. ‘Was this someone serious?’

Sheldon reappeared in the kitchen when her caught wind of Meemaw talking about his mother’s delight over his friend’s attempt to set him up with someone. ‘Oh lord, no, not at all. Amy Farrah Fowler was a friend that happened to be a woman.’

‘I don’t think it was on Sheldon’s side. I think he was trying to make his mother happy. He’s a good boy that way but when Mary came home talking about a girlfriend that just didn’t feel right to me. I was sure he would have told me if he’d ever found someone he’d gotten serious about. What was her name…?’ Connie thought for a few seconds.
‘Raj and Howard had entered my details into a ridiculous dating service and set me up on a blind date. She was a neurobiologist; science was the only thing we had in common.’ Sheldon had been relieved when Meemaw came to Pasadena to meet Amy.

‘Amy that was it, I never met a girl so eager to get married. I guess Mary thought they were perfect for each other because they did nothing but talk about science. Thing is, that’s all I ever heard them do. She tried being a girlfriend around Sheldon but he never let her get close to him. She never understood how to do that. His temper, he’d have run rough shod all over her and she would have made him miserable trying to make him act like a regular boyfriend. I always wanted Sheldon to have my wedding ring for the right girl. That boy was so much like my Sam, it just seemed right for Sheldon to have it. I told him he wasn’t getting the use of my ring. It didn’t take long after that before that business with Amy ended but not without some fireworks from Mary.’ Connie still remembered how angry her daughter was at her interfering with Sheldon settling down. Connie had seen enough with George Cooper, she wasn’t about to let her Moonpie make the same kind of mistake.

‘I thought my mother knew better when she met Amy. I was ready to give the relationship a try but when Meemaw said she wouldn’t let me use her ring I knew I had been right all along. I know how bad I am with feelings and figuring out social interactions but my mother thought I was just being contrary when I had a girl that was just like me. Meemaw knew that was just what I didn’t need, as you can tell. Thank goodness for her.’ Sheldon had recalled enough of that incident and was ready to leave the kitchen to Meemaw and Penny.

‘Sheldon never found anyone else, then? What kind of girl did you think was right for him then?’ Penny couldn’t imagine what kind of woman Connie could have in mind.

‘Sheldon had so much of my Sam in him. You know how some folks are ‘my way or the highway’? My Sam thought he owned that highway and you’d damn well better know it. He knew best and everyone would be better off if they just did things his way.’

Penny laughed after having put up with her persnickety ghost all this time. ‘That does sound just like Sheldon.’

Sheldon glared at Penny in astonishment. ‘When have I ever been anything but a voice of sound reason?’

Connie nodded. ‘I guess that comes across in his journals, doesn’t it. Sheldon was fussy about everything down to the smallest detail. He had a couch seat in his old apartment that he’d let no one but me sit in. Amy mentioned that when she first met me and Sheldon said she never would sit there. That’s when I knew they were wrong for each other. The only thing Sam ever cared for more than having his way was making me happy. I couldn’t tell you why he was that way but he just was. Sheldon needed to find someone he wanted to make happy more than he wanted having his own way. I wish he could have found a girl like that.’

The kitchen confab was broken by Mary coming upstairs. ‘Are you two going to watch this movie or are you going to sit up here jawing all night?’

‘We’re coming.’ Penny got up with went to the pantry. She came back out with a couple bottles and some wine glasses. ‘How do you guys feel about strawberry wine? Bernadette found this stuff last week. A local farm makes it; it’s great.’

‘Oh, lord; there will be nothing but trouble, now.’ Connie chuckled. ‘Have her tell you about the night they found her and her cheer-leading team with the football team in the high school pool at midnight.’
Mary rolled her eyes and sighed. ‘That was a long time ago, momma and it wasn’t that bad. Besides, we’d have worn bathing suits if we’d had them.’

Penny laughed at the highlights and at Sheldon’s look of horror. Penny opened a bottle and poured out three glasses before starting downstairs. ‘That sounds like a story worth hearing.’
Going to the chapel

Chapter Summary

Penny wants to reach out to Mary but sometimes life hands out other surprises.

Chapter Notes

Influenced by The Ghost and Mrs Muir. Just playing with Big Bang’s toys and not especially canon to anything.

Penny finally settled in under her duvet somewhere around one in the morning. The house was quiet and happy but she could still sense the tenseness with Mary. Their conversations had been enjoyable all day but there was always an underlying prickliness.

‘Sheldon, are you still up?’

Sheldon appeared sitting on the ottoman under the window. ‘Of course, I’m a ghost. I have no need to sleep.’

‘That’s handy. Where do you go when you’re away, then?’ Penny tried to think of how she’d handle so much time without sleep. It sounded exhausting.

‘I don’t go anywhere. I simply stop thinking about the house and focus on something else. Leonard Nimoy interviews are very relaxing as is Carl Sagan’s Cosmos series, for some examples that I highly recommend to you.’

Penny sat up and picked up her glass of water on the bedside table. ‘Thanks for that, Sheldon. Isn’t having your folks up here making it hard to do that?’

‘It would be if they were strangers but Meemaw and my mother are already a part of me so their presence isn’t at all intrusive.’ Sheldon felt his mother’s restlessness in the next room now that Penny had asked about them. ‘Are you feeling their presence too much, Penny?’

Penny sighed and got up wanting to go out on the balcony to enjoy the full moon but she settled for sitting next to Sheldon on the ottoman. ‘I’m worried Bernadette and Howard are feeling intruded on. They want this visit to work out but your mom’s church zeal is a bit much for them to take.’

‘I sympathize. I had to endure the claptrap of her church group and her own efforts to save me from perdition for a lifetime.’ Sheldon wished he had more advice to offer than to appeal to Meemaw but resisting his mother’s religious fervor was on a par with resisting the Borg.

‘I’m hoping that going to church with her, tomorrow, will satisfy her missionary itch.’

Sheldon snorted. ‘If only it was so simple. I think it would quell her enthusiasm over Halley since she should be likely to respect Howard and Bernadette’s position as parents, especially with Meemaw there with you.’
‘You still think it’s really me that is bothering her? Meemaw seems to think so.’

‘Indeed, I have been privy to some of my mother’s ruminations, particularly while you and Meemaw were counting coup over your history of destroying the Enterprise.’ Sheldon was still miffed over that revelation.

Penny couldn’t help smirking through an apology to her hurt friend. ‘I’m sorry about that, Sheldon, and Meemaw would tell you that, too. But, that’s all in the past and we didn’t mean to destroy your ships.’ She carried on quickly before Sheldon could indulge his peevishness. ‘What do you think might make your mother happier with me?’

‘Other than giving up your life and joining her church to become a Stepford Wife, I haven’t great hope for this quest, Penny.’

‘When you put it like that… do you really think it’s the witch stuff? It is all make believe.’ Penny wasn’t unused to religious folks complaining about the show. The whole cast had run into one or more online, in fan mail, or even occasionally out in public.

‘I don’t think that bothers her in any serious way, though she would like to see every show of that sort off the TV. The only thing she ever watched besides Christian TV was Rosanne. It is your encroachment on my life’s work which is truly disturbing her.’

Penny had suspected as much. It was why she’d wanted Connie and Mary to come to Los Robles Cottage. She had hoped to show she was trying to honor Sheldon’s memory. ‘You think she doesn’t like my working on your theories?’

‘Just so, she sees you as an intruder at best.’ Sheldon paused to look at the bedroom door. ‘I believe my mother has heard us, or rather you, talking. She is listening on the other side of the door.’

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‘What are you doing over there, Mary?’ Connie wasn’t asleep yet so she heard Mary get up and tip toe over to Penny’s door.

‘I think I can hear her talking to someone.’ Mary couldn’t make out any words through the door.

‘Maybe, she’s on the phone. What business is it of yours?’ Connie sighed in frustration. This was not the time for a row with her daughter. She’d die if Penny heard them much less came out to find Mary snooping at her door.

‘Who could she be talking to at this hour?’

‘My guess would be the police to come get the crazy woman prowling around at her bedroom door. Go to bed, Mary Cooper.’

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Penny glanced at the door and groaned. ‘Are you sure she’s listening to us?’

‘Yes, and she has wakened Meemaw. It seems my mother has heard your voice and she wants to know who you are talking to so late. Meemaw wants her to go to bed before you can discover my mother’s presence.’ Sheldon was anxious as to how Penny would handle this situation.

‘Is she still outside the door?’ Penny figured this was far enough. Mary was a guest not her mother. She tiptoed over to the bedside table and turned off the reading lamp.
‘Penny, what are you going to do?’

‘What do you think, I’m going out there.’

Sheldon got alarmed at that idea. ‘You cannot assault my mother with that baseball bat.’

Penny glanced at the bat behind the table. ‘I’m not going to bean your mother with my bat, Sheldon.’ Penny snorted at Sheldon’s anxiety with some humor.

‘I should hope not but after how you introduced yourself to me,’ Sheldon paused at Penny’s look of derision, ‘don’t look so shocked. I’d hate to see you in jail and besides, my mother might end up a ghost here, afterwards.’

‘Yeah, we don’t want that. Is she still out there?’ Penny stepped up to the door.

‘Yes, she is listening at the door right now.’

Penny opened the door swiftly and walked out smack into Mary. ‘Ghah! Mary? Oh god, you scared the life out of me. What’s wrong?’

Mary was too shocked by the door opening and Penny walking into her to know what to say.

‘Yes, Mary, what are you doing over there?’ Connie was glad the lights weren’t on. She was embarrassed enough, already.

Mary glanced between her mother and Penny in the moonlit room looking like she’d like to bolt and run. ‘Well, I thought I heard noises like someone talking outside, I guess.’

Penny smirked and thought Sheldon must have gotten his lack of skill at dissimulation from his mother. She walked over to the balcony doors and opened them to have a look outside. ‘I don’t see or hear anything. Maybe, it was an animal?’

‘Yeah, maybe it was.’ Mary hoped that would get her out of any more humiliation.

Penny looked up at the moon. ‘Beautiful, can’t you feel its light calling you?’

‘Calling me, it’s pretty but I don’t hear any calling. What are you talking about?’ Mary wondered if this was more of Penny’s psychic witch nonsense.

‘My psychic says the full moon is when we’re the most open to the spiritual forces around us. Nights like this are perfect for yoga and meditation.’ Penny closed her eyes and breathed deeply. ‘How would you like to do some yoga with me? That might help you sleep.’

‘Psychics and spirits? That’s all a bunch of claptrap. I thought you said you didn’t do any of that Wicca nonsense on the show?’

Penny nodded while she started doing some simple standing poses. ‘No, I don’t. The show isn’t about real Wicca. We try to respect their beliefs but we’ve always been clear the show isn’t about their religion at all.’

‘That’s not a religion. It’s devil’s work.’ Mary couldn’t stand to hear anything like witchcraft called a religion.

Sheldon appeared by Penny looking exasperated. ‘Penny, this is a terrible tack to take with my mother.’
Penny smirked at Sheldon but continued her yoga. ‘They don’t believe in the devil, either. Neither do I, but I do believe in spirits. I remember the nights when my dad and I went on hunting trips back in Nebraska. I do miss those moonlit nights camping out on the plains. It felt like the other world was just a breath away.’

‘That’s just silly claptrap. How can a grown woman believe in spirits and psychics?’

Connie got up to head off this on coming calamity. ‘You know, I would like to get an hour or two of sleep, tonight, if you two don’t mind.

‘I’m sorry, Connie. I didn’t think about your rest at all. Please, forgive me that was thoughtless.’ Penny did regret Connie couldn’t sleep but she also regretted it got Mary to retreat from the conversation. She was sure Mary and she needed to get past some issues and they had just gotten an honest start. The interruption bought some peace for the night but she hoped it didn’t build more walls between them.

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Penny looked around and expected to see Sheldon somewhere in the vast stone vaults gilt with gold. She realized she was in the Aachen Cathedral by the massive candelabra lighting the main hall. A choir sang a song from Carl Orff’s Carmina Burana. She had gotten used to telling the difference between her dreams and walking in Sheldon’s memories. She knew he had to be around here. She wandered through the vaults until she found Sheldon sitting on a stone seat that was at the top of a platform mounted at the top of a small flight of stone steps.

‘What’s up with the trip, tonight, Sheldon?’

‘This is the Cathedral at Aachen, the imperial capital of Emperor Charlemagne the Great. I visited the cathedral with my mother and my sister but I never got the chance to sit up here since it is closed to the public. Come on up, Penny.’

Penny walked up the steps and Sheldon let Penny sit down. ‘It’s a stone seat, hardly the most comfortable chair in the world. You could get some pillows, at least.’

Sheldon sighed and rolled his eyes. ‘What did they teach you about history in Nebraska, Penny?’

‘Enough to know this is the Throne of Charlemagne; I’m not a complete dunce. I’ve seen enough pictures of it, especially a picture of Napoleon viewing it. It could still use some pillows. And a foot rest, if I’m going to be Empress, here.’

‘You are incorrigible.’

Penny felt the comfort of plush cushions on the seat beneath her and an ornate mahogany ottoman with red satin pillows on it appeared at her feet. ‘That’s much better, honey, I might not have you beheaded, after all. Now, why are we here?’

‘My mother never appreciated this place. Her church is a very strict revivalist sect. You must have met some of the same kind of revivalist preachers in Nebraska that we have in Texas?’

‘Oh, yeah, my parents couldn’t stand the sight of them. They sent us to Sunday school at the local Episcopal Church but after we were nine or ten they stopped making any of us go there. My folks were never big on regular church going.’

‘How I wish that could have been my experience. The more distant my parents became the more my mother threw herself into fundamentalist churches. She went to several until she found a very strict
fundamentalist group. It was only Meemaw’s intervention that kept Missy and me from being indoctrinated there night and day. It was an escape from a bad husband for my mother and it has since become her prism for viewing everything.’

‘So, do you mean she didn’t see this place as really being a church?’ Penny could hardly imagine anyone not being impressed by the weight of history and culture all around them in this place.

‘She thought the people who built this cathedral were about one step away from being a bunch of heathen. I understand you want to have a better relationship with my mother but religion really isn’t the best way to do it, unless you want to follow hers. She really doesn’t have a lot of compromise on the issue.’

‘How about you show me around the cathedral, Sheldon?’ Penny and Sheldon went down the steps and he started telling her about the Carolingian Cathedral. Penny was impressed by Sheldon’s knowledge of the place and he was surprised by how well she knew Carolingian history.

‘I am sorry to sound insulting, but I would never have thought you knew so much about medieval history, Penny.’

‘The medieval stuff started when I read Orlando Furioso and The Song of Roland. I loved those all those kinds of stories back in school. Everything and anything about knights and horses fascinated me when I was doing rodeo. I loved the pageantry of it all and Orlando had women knights like Bradamante. I couldn’t get enough of those stories after I read Orlando. I can’t believe your mother wouldn’t love this place. Why did she bury herself so much in her church, then?’

‘My father was a heavy drinker, and a womanizer. Even with all that, my mother still loved him. Sometimes, I think she blamed herself for his misdeeds. Not unlike how you described your troubles with Kurt, I guess? The church was her escape mechanism.’

Penny nodded and ruminated on Sheldon’s explanation. ‘Did Meemaw know about any of that cheating and drinking?’

‘She did. She never liked my father from the beginning. The alcohol was bad enough but the cheating angered her at least as much as it did my mother. Meemaw never felt he was good enough for her daughter but my mother couldn’t conceive of getting a divorce. However, I have always agreed with Meemaw’s assessment.’

‘Did your mother take as much interest in your sister or brother as she does in you?’

‘Missy and George were much more mundane children. George was very much my father’s son. Missy and I were never quite as close to him as George was but Missy was far more gregarious and sociable. She did not have as many problems with our parents as I did. My mother fussed over me and my special brain. Meemaw and Pop Pop were my only relief from it all.’

Penny pondered Sheldon’s life while they circled the cathedral interior. When they got to the golden main alter with the vast stained glass windows soaring above she basked in the glorious light imagining Roland and Orlando in a place like this. She guessed Mary might have thought of Sheldon’s uniqueness like some gift from God, a reward for what she was suffering with her failure of a husband.

‘Did your mother come to visit you often in Europe?’

‘She came only once with Missy. She wanted to visit me and Missy wanted to visit The World Equestrian Festival. She has always been very keen on dressage ever since she could mount a horse.’
Sheldon still loathed that week of his life with horses.

‘You went to that? Oh, man, Sheldon, I dreamed of going to that when I was doing rodeo but we never had the money.’ Penny chattered on about the events and the renowned riders and horses that had appeared at the show over the years. She’d followed it religiously ever since her rodeo days.

‘Well, we can go to the one I went to with Missy.’ The cathedral vanished in a mist and when it cleared they were at the Hauptstadion in Aachen and in time for the dressage. Penny wrapped Sheldon up in an ecstatic hug but she was too happy crying to be at the festival to say anything. Sheldon rolled his eyes still mystified at what anyone saw in horses.

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Penny woke early Sunday morning happy with everything. She slipped out quietly through the study to make some breakfast for everyone. She ran into Bernadette coming into the kitchen with Halley.

‘Hey, did Halley let you sleep alright?’

‘She did, she only woke up three times for feedings. I want to give her some breakfast and get something for us before we get going. I was thinking we could go to the ten o’clock service at The Sacred Heart. I hope you know what you’re doing, Penny.’

Penny sighed and shrugged her shoulders. ‘There’s been a voice in my head asking the same thing.’

Mary and Connie came down a little while later and Penny served out breakfast for the Texans. ‘Which church are we going to?’ Mary was curious where Penny might go but Bernadette spoke up.

‘I thought we could go to The Sacred Heart. I go there from time to time. There are a few Polish families in the area that go there and some of their folks are from Poland. It gives me a chance to practice the language. I used to speak it a lot with my grandmother. It was like having a secret language but after she died there wasn’t as much chance to practice. My parents weren’t very interested.’ Bernadette helped Penny clean up the dishes while Connie and Mary had their coffee.

‘How about you, Penny, do you go to church with Bernadette or do you have your own church?’ Mary poured another coffee for herself.

‘I’ve never been a big church goer. The last time I went to church was the funeral for my husband, Kurt.’

‘Well, I’d say it’s been too long without staying straight with the Lord. All that witch nonsense on that show is going to go to your head if you’re not careful. Good thing you’re going even if it is with a bunch of Rosary Rattlers.’

Bernadette gripped Penny’s hand. She had never thought she was especially Catholic but she had never been around a Fundamentalist like Mary Cooper.

‘I hope last night prepared you for today, Penny.’ Penny looked around at Sheldon’s sudden appearance. He had felt the growing waves of tension coming off Penny and Bernadette.

‘I never got the feeling from Sheldon’s journals that he was much of a church goer. He seemed to find his god in science. I find mine communing with nature up in the hills with yoga and running. The spiritual world is too personal to be the same for everyone.’ Penny had never doubted her spiritual sense of the world around her even before she met Sheldon. She felt even more connected to her psychic world since moving into Los Robles Cottage.
The Lord made the Bible so people would know what’s what.’ Mary had more to add but Connie cut her off.

That’s enough of that on a Sunday morning and no one should be going to church in a snit.’

Momma, you can’t believe in communing with spirits? And Sheldon, well that boy was set in his ways but he promised to go to church for me and he did.’ Mary didn’t kid herself that Sheldon doubted her faith but she couldn’t believe he was an atheist.

That’s nonsense, Penny. I promised her annual visits to church so I wasn’t plagued by her daily reminders that hellfire awaited me among her many other delusional ramblings. I’d sooner believe in Harry Potter.’

Penny couldn’t help giggling at Sheldon’s outrage. ‘Harry Potter.’ Penny looked abashed at blurting that out but she carried on. ‘You guys knew him when he was alive but do you really think Sheldon believed in churches any more than Harry Potter?’

Mary looked at Penny in consternation. ‘Shelly used to say things like that all the time but what made you think of that, Penny?’

‘Enough of this, the both of you, are we going to this service or do you want to make poor Bernadette here sorry she ever thought of bringing you to her church?’

Penny and Mary both apologized to Bernadette and Connie for ruining the morning and finished up breakfast in some semblance of equanimity.

Bernadette parked in her usual spot at the Sacred Heart’s parking lot. She was happy to see her friend from work, Julie Parda parking nearby. ‘Hey, Julie, come meet some guests of ours from Texas.

Julie came over saying hi to Penny and Bernadette and greeting the two Texas guests. ‘What brings you here all the way from Texas?’

Bemdae and Penny here are renting Los Robles Cottage from us and Penny invited us to come visit for a few days. Bernadette says you two work together.’ Connie couldn’t help feeling there was something familiar about Bernadette’s friend.

‘Yes, Bernadette just started at Zangen Pharmaceuticals with me but we met here at church years before that. We were both looking for folks to speak Polish with. That was back when you were finishing your B.A. at UCLA, wasn’t it?’

‘It was and you and your folks were life savers. I wasn’t sure I wanted to go on with Microbiology but Julie’s dad was a great encouragement. Did your dad come, today?’

‘Yeah, he and babka came; I dropped them off at the door. I’m sure babka will love to meet you. She was born in Texas, my dad, too. They moved to California when he was a kid.’

Mary and Connie were surprised at the coincidence of Julie’s family history. ‘Mary, we knew some Parda’s when you were in high school. Hanna and her son, he went to high school with you.’

Mary remembered them well. ‘Yeah, his name was Carl. It was him that had the idea to break into the school swimming pool.’

‘Get out! I think that’s my dad and babka Hanna. They said they came from Galveston. Is that where you’re from?’ Julie and all were equally amazed by the coincidence. Everyone hurried to the church to surprise the unsuspecting pair inside.
The reunion of the old friends made the Sunday service unforgettable for them. After the service, Penny hoped everyone might get some coffee together at a shop nearby. Connie and Hanna settled the matter wanting to catch up after so many years. Carl and Mary wanted to chat a bit together before joining everyone. They sat in the back of the church enjoying the quiet.

‘I never thought I’d see you again, Mary.’

‘It’s a funny world. The last time we were in a church together was your father’s funeral. Do you still miss him?’

‘Of course, but it’s not really sadness anymore. I think I missed him most when we left Texas for here. Meeting Anna and having Julie made up for so much but I still miss Texas. What about you, Mary Cooper, what brings you out here to California and where’s Mr. Cooper?’

Mary sighed and told her old friend more about her marriage and she left out the self-defensive humor. This old friend and here in a church made the truth more right. ‘Momma never wanted me to marry George. I guess she was right but I got three beautiful children that made up for a lot. I could put up with a lot worse just to have them.’

‘What are they doing, now?’

George and Missy are still in Texas but Missy’s twin, Sheldon; well he was the most special. He was just 16 when he got his first doctorate. He was teaching out here at Caltech not long after.’ Mary sighed wondering what Sheldon might have accomplished by now.

‘Wow, that is something so what’s he doing these days?’ Carl guessed something bad must have happened by Mary’s sudden silence after his question and took her hand.

‘He passed away years back. They said it was suicide but I can’t believe that of my Sheldon. We came out here because Penny and Bernadette are renting his old house from us. Momma and I wanted to see the place. I did, anyway, I think momma just wanted to meet Penny in person. They’ve been chatting over the internet for years. It kind of worries me, that. Do you know much about her?’

Carl wondered what was troubling Mary so much. ‘I can’t say I do. Julie hangs around Bernadette a lot more than she does with Penny. I met Penny once at Bernadette’s wedding. She seems fine, why?’

‘Penny’s been so involved in Sheldon’s old work and getting to know momma so much and changing Sheldon’s house right and left with momma’s blessing. She’s taken over his house, his work, it all seems so strange why she’s doing it.’

‘You sound jealous, Mary. Was she Sheldon’s girlfriend or something?’

‘I am not jealous, Carl Parda. As far as I know, Penny never knew Sheldon. She’d been married to some fella named Kurt, Lord bless him, he was killed by a drunk driver. Penny and Bernadette moved into my son’s old place, Los Robles Cottage, a little after Kurt’s funeral so she told us the other day. Not long after, she got involved in Sheldon’s work.’

Carl let Mary go back over the story of Sheldon’s final months after the arctic and how Penny had come to get involved. ‘It sounds like she’s done nothing but right by you and yours, Mary, so why all this worry?’

‘I got worried because of how much she’s attached herself to momma. And then there’s the way she’s living, she’s got all of Sheldon’s old rooms just like they were when he was alive with all his
science fiction TV show toys lying around. I know actors can be a funny bunch but doesn’t that sound strange to you?’

‘I don’t know, maybe she likes the stuff? If the stuff is from TV, she might just feel at home with TV show stuff around, that show of hers is all fantasy and make believe just as much as any other sci-fi show.’

Carl looked around the church and remembered the last time he and Mary had sat together in a church. ‘Do you remember that rodeo prize belt my dad used to wear?’

‘Course I do, that thing was a beauty.’

‘Yeah, I kept that. I used to wear it all the time till I got too fat for it. I could have put the buckle on something else but that didn’t seem fitting. I kept it in a closet for years. Julie found it one day and wore it out on a date. When she came home I was so mad Anna laughed at me for getting riled up over a belt. She was right but the thing is, if pop ever saw me getting mad like that at Julie like that over that belt he’d of probably given me a hiding with it. I was just too attached to the thing. Did you ever ask yourself if you are just too attached to Sheldon’s stuff?’

‘Momma says the same thing, Carl, but Sheldon was so unique.’

‘I’m sure you’re right. We should catch up with the others. Our moms will be thinking we broke into another pool. First, though, we should say a prayer for your boy.’ Carl and Mary walked over to the church’s votive candles. Carl lit one for Sheldon and Mary lit another for Carl’s father and they prayed together for the folks they had lost.

Connie’s presence reined in a lot of Mary’s thoughts about Penny as did getting to know the Parda family. Penny was sure Mary had a lot more to say and while she appreciated Connie’s keeping the peace nothing would get resolved if Mary couldn’t speak her mind. By the time they got back to Los Robles the outing had turned into a party with the Parda family. Connie played peacemaker and kept her daughter and Penny from airing what was between them but it didn’t cool off the simmering issues.

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‘Hey, Bernie, you’re not doing anything this Monday you can’t get away from, are you?’ Penny found Bernadette in the library reading while Halley was playing with some blocks.

‘No, what’s on your mind?’ Bernadette hoped it was something that got them away from Mary Cooper.

‘I wanted to bring Connie on a studio tour, tomorrow. Are you up for it?’

Bernadette had taken the tour a couple of times and had gotten passes to audience tapings of quite a few of her favorite shows thanks to Penny so she had to wonder what made tomorrow so special. ‘You aren’t going just with Connie, are you?’

‘No, Mary is coming, too, but she’ll be on her best behavior. Besides, I want to air some things out with her and I don’t think I can do that with Connie around since she doesn’t want to rile up her mother too much.’ Penny paused and looked a little sheepish at Bernadette’s skeptical glare.

‘How’s that going to change, tomorrow?’

‘Remember Elizabeth, the photographer at your wedding? She’s working at the studio in publicity. I was going to get her to take you and Connie on a private tour while I got Mary alone for a while. I’m
sure Mary has some stuff to get off her chest; we both know it. It’s all about me.’

Bernadette sighed and thought Penny was just wasting her time. ‘I agree; her jabs really are more about you. I just don’t think letting her go all out is going to make any difference. Why is this thing with Mary’s opinion so important to you, Penny?’

‘Sheldon and his work, it’s important to me. I just don’t want her to think I’m trying to take that away from her.’

Bernadette sort of agreed with Mary wanting Penny to get away from the Sheldon stuff. ‘Have you given any thought to spending less time up there in that study? I know how much you love working on the physics ever since we moved in here but I worry you are trying to do too much. Acting full time and working on an M.A. that’s got to be grueling.’

‘I’m not doing the M.A. full time. It’s just something I need to do for me.’ It didn’t hurt that she had Sheldon to act as tutor when she was stuck on something.

‘I get that, Penny, but you get so serious up there. I don’t want to see you burn yourself out. I had a hard enough time doing my studies between shifts at The Cheesecake Factory. I wouldn’t want the pressure you have with the show and school. I’m sure Mary must be wondering something the same. What are you doing it all for? I guess she might not see why it’s important to you and she’s just seeing Sheldon in what you’re doing.’

‘That’s what I’d like to talk to her about without Connie making her filter what’s on her mind. My scenes are being shot tomorrow morning and they should be done by lunch. They’re on the outdoor set so Elizabeth can bring you around to watch them. I’m sure Connie will love that. You can go with Connie and Elizabeth after that and I’ll take Mary so we can hash out what’s on her mind.’

Bernadette picked up Halley and her kitty to go upstairs for a changing. ‘Well, I guess it’s OK going with Connie for you. Mary’s fine, mostly, I just don’t want to see you and her have some falling out over everything.’

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Penny got up at 4am to get ready to go to the studio. ‘Sheldon, are you there, sweetie?’

‘Of course, Penny,’ Sheldon appeared by the bedroom door. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to follow Bernadette and Meemaw’s advice?’

‘I get what you’re all saying but, I’m sorry to say it like this, but Meemaw is getting on in years. Someday, we’re just going to have to deal with your mother without her help.’

Sheldon sighed at the truth of Penny’s point. ‘Knowing there is an afterlife makes that much easier to think of, Penny, but you are correct. My mother will be solely responsible for Los Robles Cottage and this will have to be faced. I suppose it’s better to do that while we have Meemaw for back up.’

Penny and Sheldon tip toed between the bathroom and her bedroom discussing the day. Neither noticed Mary’s eyes following Penny’s getting ready. Penny went down to the kitchen to make a quick breakfast and chatted with Sheldon about today’s scenes. She read through her lines with him while she ate. Mary came downstairs drawn by the smell of coffee. She heard Penny sounding very animated and wondered who else was up at this hour.

‘Who are you jawing with, Penny?’ Mary was surprised only the Nebraskan was down in the kitchen.
Penny jumped a bit surprised and even Sheldon was a little put out he hadn’t noticed his mother coming downstairs. ‘Reading my script for today, I still get nervous just before shooting a scene.’

Mary nodded accepting that for now but she could have sworn Penny was just talking and not reading from a script. She offered to read with Penny and they shared coffee and lines in a comfortable start to the day or so Penny hoped. She looked up at the clock in surprise after a couple of reads through. ‘Holy crap, I gotta get going.’

Mary was surprised Penny was leaving so early. ‘It’s the curse of acting. Make up and wardrobe can take some doing before everything gets going. You know Jason, he plays Cristoph, that vampire/demon makeup he has to wear sometimes takes three hours or more to put on.’

‘I had no idea. Are you going to take that long, today?’

‘No, there are no special effects or anything so the work on me should go pretty quick. I’ll see you guys for lunch, later.’

‘That sounds fine. I’m going to sneak a cigarette and coffee out in your pavilion before folks get up around here.’

‘Mother, no! I am not about to see Penny compromised into supporting your drug habit.’ Sheldon’s disapproval even colored Penny’s mind for a second which she’d never felt from his aura before.

‘You don’t mind, do you, before Halley and my mother get up.’ Mary couldn’t help wondering if Penny minded her smoking here.

‘I don’t but Bernadette will appreciate it if it’s not around Halley. I guess Sheldon doesn’t like them?’ Penny grinned at Sheldon’s consternation.

Mary caught the present tense but filed it away. ‘No, he didn’t like me smoking. He was probably right but I had my reasons.’

Penny wanted to give Mary a hug but her gut said that wasn’t what Mary wanted just then. ‘Husbands will do that.’

Mary was struck by the empty note in Penny’s voice. She’d never heard her sound bleak before. Mary was aware Penny had been married but she had never thought about what that had been like for her. She was struck by realizing Penny had become a widow before she’d been the age Mary had had her first child. She said her goodbyes to Penny and poured herself some more coffee to bring out to the pavilion. She thought about the end of their conversation and Penny talking about Sheldon not liking cigarettes in the present tense. She often talked about him that way which was odd to Mary. She also was struck by Penny’s guessing her smoking was related to her husband. Penny often put her knowledge down to Sheldon’s journals but that didn’t seem the kind of stuff Sheldon would ever put in a diary or journal. Mary set herself up comfortably on her favored couch and considered the oddities of Penny.

‘I can’t imagine momma would ever talk about family things like my marriage but that girl has burrowed her way into momma’s heart. I just don’t like it.’
School is starting soon so the posting will be slow.

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