

# DISCOVERIES

*By Annie Warren*



*ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS*

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A 'SPECTRUM' NOVEL

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## MY KIDS

### ***Meeting them more than half way*** **By Annie Warren**

“Go ahead, Tully, try for the job.” Ethel looked over at me and smiled. “You know you like kids, and the deadline is day after tomorrow.”

“But, Ethel,” I looked over at her sitting in her soft, comfy chair as I adjusted myself in my larger, harder, leather-bound “executive” chair; well, it was comfortable to *me*. “I was a CEO of a large corporation with over a thousand employees. I run big companies, not childcare. What do I know about kids?”

“In your time you raised a batch that came out okay,” she smiled back. “In spite of the time your beloved corporation tried to take you away from them. You’re retired now. You need something to do, and this is a perfect job for you.”

She smiled again and I, of course, smiled back. I couldn’t help it. She was my wife and helpmate, had been for many years, and her smile could still affect me the same way then as it did back when I had first proposed to her. God, how I loved that woman, and still do. But that she was now asking what I was thinking was odd if not just plain obtuse.

“Some retirement... On some trumped up medical grounds I have been pensioned off and sent down to the farm.” I’m sure I must have scowled. It was true, though. I had given them the best years of my life and then they cut me off, just because of some stroke. “My heart is as good as it ever was.”

“I know your heart is in the right place, Tully, but this isn’t a farm. That heart attack was a warning that *they* took heed of, even though *you* weren’t so inclined. Now it is time to settle down, time to give up being the high powered, macho executive driving the corporation that we both lived with for so long. You can work with the kids and relax, and you know you will enjoy yourself.”

“Humph!” I sat back a bit and also thought it out a bit. I was no longer in the prime of my youth but was also nowhere near being an oldster. I had been told that the pressures of my job had almost killed me, and the board had voted me this exceptionally early “reward for exceptional services”. Yeah, I didn’t retire but *was* retired, so to say. I guess they thought the job would kill me if I stayed; I had no intention of stepping down and told them as much. So here I am, in the peak of health, or so I feel, out of the company, out of the mainstream, even out of the slipstream... An outsider from all I loved to do. It had been stressful, yes, but it had also been challenging. I felt I was moldering...

After such an active life, to suddenly stop was almost as devastating as the heart attack, only not as physically painful. Nevertheless, I had daily medications that Heather, our family doctor and a close friend of Ethel's, prescribed to "keep me in check", i.e. as a maintenance program set out by the hospital and managed by Heather.

Well, now, let's continue. As Ethel had so easily seen, I was bored silly. And when this offer came in via Ethel and her volunteer work, she decided we should talk about it. She did not work at that particular center but knew others who did. When she heard the position was open, she asked if I could fill it. They had said they supposed I could, if I were good with kids and did not have too macho an image. They knew of my previous job.

Image? I had my image: The lean, mean power machine was what I liked to think I had. Ethel, however, said that she knew me a lot better and that I was more of a pussycat. A supposed hard grained super boss, in reality I had a heart of gold, and my employees all knew it, though they reacted to me as if I were the hardened boss, as much as if I were *really* "hard as nails." I was saddened and probably showed it, when I saw that to a person they had been truly sorry to see me have to step down. I had been a leader that they had followed, not some despot that had them kowtowing and scraping the floor for my scraps while planning my overthrow. But image? What did that have to do with it?

When we discussed my image, I suggested getting my hair cut. In the days when I had been *The* CEO, I had made my own rules, and I had always liked the "cowl" look of hair that came down to the top of the nape of my neck, brushing but not really touching my collar. I had always had to "grease" it well, lest it curl up, ruining the effect; it was sort of like a red helmet. But it usually held up during the day. Now it had grown and, since I no longer greased it, it was down well below my collar. It was wavy to boot. I suggested to Ethel that I should get a haircut *if* I were to "*apply* for the job". I would want to look my best, since first impressions are so important.

She looked at my hair with what looked like a critical eye and said that the "helmet" look I had cultivated might have been fine for working with and lording over the company executives, but that these were kids. She convinced me to just let my hair be and to comb it out neatly. The longer hair, she explained, would go over far better with the kids and the interviewer. In a way, that seemed to make sense.

I ran my hand through my hair and felt its fullness. I remembered greasing it for a week after retiring, but now it was *au naturel*. And yet I could feel that it was almost fluffy, curly. I decided, however, to yield to her logic and so left off getting the "buzz cut" I had thought of. Not liking such haircuts, I was just as happy to leave it as is. Or as was...

Of course, if I were going to apply, what would or should I wear? I knew that my power suits, remnants from my previous job, were out; but what? When I hinted at going to the interview, as so often in the past, Ethel had an answer.

"I'm happy you decided to try for it."

*I did?*

“Well, Dear,” she continued, “you want to impress them, but not as a CEO would. Let’s see... I’d say some neat, comfortable slacks and an equally comfortable shirt should do just fine. Remember, this is for working with kids, *not* with some high powered corporate managers that are trying to out do or out dress you. What you have on now would probably be just fine.”

I looked down at my casual slacks and shirt. I would not have worn these to my old job even on a dare. But she was right. What would I want to impress a bunch of kids with? Definitely it wouldn’t be with a three-piece serge suit; slacks and a shirt could be comfortable on the job. Oh, I had been comfortable in my standard three-piece corporate uniform, but in an entirely different way. Comfortable in my power.

“Yes, I think your logic of what to do with myself in my ‘retired’ state is a good call. And I *do* need something to do to occupy my mind as well as my body. It could be fun, too. You’re right that I did not have enough time with the kids, especially Jimmy. Maybe this way I can sort of pay them back *in absentia*, so to speak. I’ve decided that I will go and apply and see if they need or even want me.” Remembering Jimmy and his untimely, accidental death at 14 years of age was always a bit painful, but these were “new” kids.

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And so it was that I dressed casually and comfortably: grey slacks, white shoes, white shirt, *no* tie. This was for kids, and who can impress a kid with a tie? And thus attired, I went for my first job interview in I don’t know nor even want to think about how many years. Actually, it was the proverbial piece of cake, with a couple of snags. The most obvious happened during a familiarization “tour.”

I had not really questioned the facilities. Ethel had told me about the setup, but only in a more general way. I really had to go see for myself. In any case, the first introduction to the full setup was impressive. It was larger operation than I had imagined. There were a number of rooms occupying the majority of the building, with its outside playground included; and there were kids all over the place. As we walked through on the introduction, most of the kids looked at me oddly. A sizable number actually shied away when we came near. It wasn’t until I noted that all of the workers there were women that I began to see some of the why. It was like they were reinforcing my own concept of men not working in such a facility.

I was called again three days later by Mary Gains, their director, and given their answer. “Ah yes, Mr. Merchason, we think you’ll do fine here, if you still are interested in working with us. We usually hire only women, as they seem to get along with the kids better. But having had a family, sorry for the loss, you are no stranger to children. Just remember... Looking at your back ground, you are more of a partner to the children, not their boss.” With those words I realized that I had not been a shoo-in. There had probably been few applicants, and so, when I accepted, I found that somehow, indeed, I had managed to be hired.

**O-O-O-O-O**

Thus it was that bright and early, well, sort of, that I showed up for “work.” I had worn essentially the same outfit as when I had been interviewed. As I was working my way into the job, learning the schedules, learning where the supplies and toys were kept and such, I noted that all of the women, while they were as a rule not beautiful, were all well groomed. They also wore dresses or skirts and with them wore shoes, all with some level of elevated heels. They all had simple hairdos and the like. It looked sort of like the Center had raided the local PTA or Lady’s Auxiliary for recruits. They probably did have connections there...

To my surprise, I found that the work was actually somewhat light as work goes. It was quite interesting, and was definitely NOT a desk job, nor was it highly paid; but, with my more than adequate pension, that was not what I was in it for. Surprisingly, I found it to be challenging, a lot more than I would have expected. It was not full time by any means but could tire me out on more occasions than I would ever have expected, especially if I “let” it, when playing or working with the kids directly.

Somehow, as I had casually noted in my initial walk through but now confirmed while getting into the organization, so to say, I seemed to be the only male worker in a force of women. While all wore shifts, skirts or dresses, as I said, I wore simple slacks and short sleeved shirts. My clothes were comfortable, utilitarian and just sort of all around practical. I worked primarily in the mornings, coming in after most of the children had been dropped off, and I left before they were picked up. Thus the parents never saw me unless they dropped off late or picked up early. When they did, their reactions to me were generally somewhat quizzical, but not overly so. If I was carrying a child, playing with one or more or the like, it was usually just a friendly smile. It was a nice set up, and, for the most part, I was enjoying myself.

For some reason, however, there was what could be called a bloc of kids that shunned me to the point of exclusion. If I even looked in their direction, they would move off. This puzzled me for a long time, until I asked why they were giving such reactions. The Center’s psychologist, Joanne Phips, had the answer.

“Well, you see, um, Tully, these children are left with us primarily by their mothers, almost all of which either work or are students at the University. No doubt, this is no surprise to you. But the reason many of them work, not all of course, is that they come from broken homes, where the mothers are in the University to gain a degree to advance themselves to get good positions. Or where they have to work to support the family. Those that you’ve observed giving you the shunning reaction are primarily children where the father either molested them, beat them and/or their mother. It is not a pretty situation, and I have my hands full working with a good number of those that you observed were shunning or otherwise avoiding you.”

I had never considered this. The psychologist went on, however. “I had actually hoped that your presence here in this peaceful environment with you showing the care that I have seen you giving, that your actions might ameliorate these conditions and help lead to a healing of their pain. I’m sorry that it has not worked out as I had hoped, but you have only been here a short time. Perhaps it will still help them.”

After some more discussion I more or less had my answer. I could see why they would shun me, but *I* had done *nothing* to them. This would take some thought. In the mean time I let them be. I was not about to push any aspect of it. If they didn't come to me, then that was their choice. One of the last comment-suggestions was that perhaps I should wear shorts and soften the "macho" side of my image. None of the women wore pants or slacks and, of course, they had no problems approaching any of the children. On the other hand, *they were women*.

**o-o-o-o-o**

So, in spite of it being cool at times, I switched to shorts. I did notice a slight change in the attitudes of the hold backs, but it was minuscule, not what I would have termed a measurable margin. In several of them I thought I could even detect a bit of momentary confusion, but it passed quickly and they returned to their stony rejection. In the end, the standoffishness remained unabated. So much for attempt number one.

After a week in this "outfit," I talked it over with Ethel; she suggested that perhaps I should get more feminine. When I asked her what she meant, she replied, "You could emulate the other women. If need be, you could even wear a skirt." She smiled and added, "It wouldn't be painful." At the time I totally missed the reference to "other."

"Ethel, I'm a man! I can't just go traipsing in there wearing a skirt. Why should I?" I looked over at her. She was smiling one of her warmer smiles. I knew it had been a serious suggestion.

"Look at it this way, Tully: This group of youngsters is bugging you because they are avoiding you. This is not a corporate situation. You can't force your will or use any of the practices that I'm sure you used at the office. To reach them you have to reach out to them; try to come to *their* terms. The term that is holding back the most is the fact that you are a man, perhaps too macho for their adjusting. If you bend to their unspoken will, and cease to be so macho, then you might be able to reach them."

I hated to admit it, but she was right. She, however, took things into her own hands. She went to see Heather, our doctor, and explained the whole situation to her. It was decided to alter my demeanor by modifying my medications to include a relatively strong estrogen component. In other words, together they put me on hormones! After due thought and consideration, it was decided that it should be done without my full knowledge, so that the effects could be observed and measured independently and, if necessary, adjusted for best results. It was not all that "tricky" nor was it dangerous, since I had to see Heather fairly often anyway. Ethel picked up the new medications at the chemists and did the necessary substitutions.

As you can well guess, it was not the last I would hear of it, even though at that time I hadn't really "heard of it" yet. Of course, in the Center there was that ever-present knot of children who were simply unapproachable. I tried to ignore them, but Ethel was right; I was being bugged by the fact that I was being rejected "just" because I was a man.

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Oddly, it was shortly after the switch that my chest got a strange but very pleasant sensation in it. Was it from some side effect of the heart attack that had waited until now to show up? As it was not painful, in fact was most pleasant, I ignored it and let it be. In a couple of days it seems to have passed, or most of it had. At my next run in to see Heather to have my normal quick check, a visit that usually took under 10 minutes, I mentioned it. She said it was a side effect of the medication and not to worry unless it got really painful. I was satisfied and departed, not really knowing the truth. It wasn't really hurting me either, as hormone therapy had actually been a part of one of the alternate treatments for my condition.

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The topic of my rejection seemed to suddenly come up with more frequency with Ethel. I'd sit there in my shorts and try to argue male. She'd state that it was a dead end policy for the kids, as had been shown over the weeks. I had not won a single one over to me, in spite of my simple change of attire. When I asked if she meant that I should wear makeup and jewelry and do my hair, she smiled and said simply that those would help.

The more I mulled it over, the more I wondered what the big deal was. These were only children. It wasn't like I was trying to sway the board of governors or rule a corporate empire. Those I had done with the fist that had at times been iron sheathed in velvet. But this was different, and no less challenging!

Ethel, of course, was not at all helpful. She's say that if I did not want to put on a skirt, then I could always just wear a dress. Some logic *that* was...

In a discussion with the administrator at work, she agreed that going more effeminate could just possibly work. But she then laughed and added that it shouldn't be necessary, then smirked and added again — "Unless you want to." At that we both laughed, but she continued in a serious tone that the softer my image, the more womanly I look, the better the chances that the kids might accept me.

As chance would have it, that afternoon I went to see Heather for a checkup. She said all was well, and we discussed how my life was going. When I told her of the Center and its peculiar needs, she agreed with Mary and asked if I wanted help adjusting to the kids.

In spite of my discussions with Ethel, I hadn't quite thought of it that way. My corporate mind was still bent more on their adjusting to me. When I agreed, she smiled broadly and said that I was on my way. She was thinking of the hormones for which she now had a justification and a tacit "go ahead." But she also knew that I could yet fight them. So she did not go into details or even mention the hormones. Rather, she said that I should give strong consideration to what the Mary and Ethel were suggesting: changing my lifestyle in a big way.

I was not ready to wear any sort of a skirt, not even a kilt. Well, not yet. But I decided to try to compromise by switching to pants, a style more like Ethel's: long, smooth, no back pockets, almost invisible slash front pockets, no fly... In essence, I

switched to women's slacks. She also managed to replace over half of my trews with knickers. I would never have survived in business if this woman had been sent against me. Not with what she was now accomplishing in changing my life, almost against my will. Almost...

Ethel said these "changes in wardrobe" were a step in the right direction but were not going to be enough. And so we had a tussle, skirmish, or whatever you want to call what then ensued with her. In her way, the result was that she managed to also pierce my ears. To this day, I do not know how she succeeded in accomplishing that operation. I don't mean the physical part, that was clear; but how did she manage to get it done or past my resistance?

Now, lots of executives in the business world have pierced ears. I had avoided it because of the "macho" and "chief" side of my image. But now she did it to me; however, since it was a part of the "image" softening, she did it, as the saying goes, in spades. I ended up with double pierced ears, with small balls "floating" on my lobes. She gave me the admonishment not to remove them for at least two weeks.

I felt ridiculous, but this minor change did get two of the kids to come to me. We had a good time, though they were still guarded in their openness. It did give me grounds for a lot of thought on the subject. I still balked at any other changes. *The pants and the ears are the limit*, I more or less told myself!

My new appearance drew compliments from my fellow workers, and the children I had been working with sort of took it in stride. Over the next few weeks, as I said, one or two more kids "loosened" up, while the other "wins" returned to the block who still held back. No more than two at a time seemed to want to risk my presence, shunning me when their visit ended.

Unknown to me, since I wasn't really "monitoring" it, my waist had started to reduce its girth as my hips and butt had begun to increase theirs. I was sort of filling out my women's slacks as they were meant to be filled. My chest, of course, maintained its sensitivity even as my nipples started to grow and protrude a bit. But that was a transient side effect that would eventually go away, wouldn't it?

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Strange though it may seem, I did find that with the kids, my attitudes were also slowly changing. I noted that I was caring more and was feeling less the chief administrator and more the partner and nurturer. I did not come to a sudden discovery of this but noticed it more in retrospect, remembering as I did Mary's original advice. I seemed to be getting more emotionally involved somehow. I had never done this with my companies. My ruling, previously by "iron fist," seemed to be eroding and turning mushy. Oh, it was not as terrible as I seem to be making it out to be, but it was definitely quite different. If anything, it helped more than it hindered.

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In spite of my change in clothing and demeanor, and of course the added earrings, I was still an object to be shunned by the not inconsequentially sized group of kids. As I

said, I could have just ignored them and worked with the majority of the kids left over, but it had become a challenge to me, one that the CEO still inside me could not leave alone. Maybe I should have; it would have meant quite a different existence than what I eventually gained from that “work.”

Once again, when Ethel and I were eating our dinner and I was discussing my “work,” she added in her comments that I could always go that one bit further and put on a skirt or a dress. I, of course, balked again at that. My refusals, however, were slowly diminishing in power and conviction. She was “wearing me down.” This slip of a woman was doing what whole corporations had failed to do; she was wearing down my resistance to her proposals. It was still totally and unquestioningly not feasible. But, on the other hand, I understood it could help my relationship with the kids...

Seeing that that line of reasoning had not succeeded over so many weeks, she decided to switch tactics and suggested that I need not wear a skirt to be more presentable and less threatening to the children. I could always just wear a bit of makeup, enough to soften my image. As when she suggested and carried through on the ear piercing, I eventually gave in.

Next morning, before I left, she reminded me of our agreement. She put some mascara on my eyelashes and lightly dusted my lids with a blue shadow. *I* knew that I could see it, but I also knew that it was but a dusting and would not be too obvious. The black mascara on my red lashes was something else, but it was not that bad either.

She very patiently showed me how to apply them and had me remove the shadow and then apply them both myself, so that I wouldn't be dependent on her. *Yeah, like that was going to be a problem.* Of course, that doubled the mascara, which was waterproof (I'd find that one out later). I felt it was just an experiment anyway; so what could it hurt?

Well, at first I thought it was a flop of an experiment; however, the staff were all smiles and complimented me on the new addition. They remarked on how I now fit in better. The kids did not react vocally, but some of them did look at me quizzically for a while until they adjusted to it. As far as the holdouts were concerned, there did seem to be some sort of loosening. That was heartening; however, it was almost but not quite immeasurable. Though *it was noticeable, to me at least.*

It did not take deep thought to realize that this additional step was in the same direction as the other steps. But did I want to walk more in that direction, on that path?

Next morning, I applied my makeup and went off to work. About midmorning I was called in to see Mary, the director. She complimented me on the various changes and said that the Center's psychologist, Joanne Phipps, had also noticed and was sort of tracking what was going on. She added that Joanne had a suggestion that perhaps if I were to speak a bit more softly and maybe raise the timbre of my voice a bit, it might also help, among other things. She did not elaborate on the *other things*, and I did not ask. I didn't really want to. And so I tried that too, and found that, although not great, it also had a positive effect. Where *was* all of this leading?

When I got home, I was still using my “soft speak,” which Ethel immediately picked up on. Once I explained it, she insisted that I continue using it so that I could be “in

practice” for the next day and, of course, the day after that and so forth. Ethel would gently remind me if I slipped out of it at home. Thus it arose that I gained a strong habit of using that soft speak all of the time.

Every so often, in the beginning while building my new habit, I pondered what I would have accomplished in my board meetings if I had used soft speak before those hardened executives. Probably I’d have been laughed out of the boardroom. But here it was gaining me a recognition that I had been looking for. But it was with the kids. It was almost as if I were a rising executive, striving to succeed in a new endeavor in a company I had recently joined. To succeed, one does what one has to do.

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In spite of all of the things that I had done to change, there was still a number, a very evident (to me), unabated and ever present knot of kids who persisted in avoiding me. After this much time, I still realized that I could have simply avoided them and let it go. But it had become a challenge. I wasn’t trying to get Mary’s position, not hardly, but, as in my “long” corporate career, I was striving to be the best in whatever I was doing.

In the meantime, my chest continued to give me problems. Yes, it hurt, but not deeply, nor enough to complain to Heather about. It had also gained a sensitivity that, despite the pain, was actually quite pleasant. It was like a love-hate relationship. To make matters worse, they had also begun to protrude, as some sort of hard lump seemed to have formed beneath each nipple. I thought of asking Heather for her medical opinion but never seemed to get to it. It continued its development in small, incremental expansion, even as my upper body strength slowly and (to me) imperceptibly waned.

Nevertheless, all was going well, better than I had dreamed of, in my “new profession”. I was learning the ropes at the Center, as well as advancing in my own self-image that it seemed to be requiring of me. And, through it all, Ethel was always there to support me. Yet, my morning mirror showed someone who was definitely *not* a CEO.

My face seemed to be softening and hair on my head seemed more fluffy, yet growing at an almost alarming rate. My beard had gone by electrolysis when I was just out of school. I had done it to perfect the “executive look” that meant that I would never have a stubble, should time press me in preparing to come to work or staying late. It had not been heavy anyway. Of course, Ethel pointed out rightfully, it helped my current image as well. Also, despite the waves and almost curls that my hair now exhibited, it had grown down to my shoulders and seemed to be working hard on growing more. My ears, now that they had long since healed, most often sported a hoop and a dangler, at Ethel’s insistence. They almost always managed to peek out from beneath my hair.

No, this wasn’t a CEO look, I mused; however, with a pinstriped suit complete with modest skirt and high heels, it could well be the image of a female CEO. Interesting idea, but it passed quickly. Though it did come back to haunt me periodically.