



*Reluctant Press* presents:

# Pen Name: Linda

Philippa Peters



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## A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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***Reluctant Press TG Publishers***

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# PEN NAME: LINDA

by **Philippa Peters**

## I. LINDA IS BORN

I love to write. I always have. I've written just about every type of article and story for both magazines and newspapers. My agent, Liz Gregory, was the one to tell me that I was too prolific. She had too many articles and pieces from Thomas Henry, me that is, to place in everything from science fiction magazines to women's periodicals. She was the one who suggested that I come up with different names for the styles of writing I was doing.

So I became Heinrich Muller for the science crowd and Hank Miller for the sci-fi addicts. I was occasionally John Bentley and, because Liz said it would sell better, I was Jane Goren when I wrote how-tos for the women's weeklies. I used to write a lot of short stories then; some weren't quite science fiction, in which I had ambitions to astound the world. Liz suggested another female name would work for the fiction that she could place in women's magazines. I laughed over how serious she was at that lunch in the very expensive Winchester Bar and I agreed that she could try Linda Thomas as the author of the ones she thought were romantic enough to grace such magazines. I should never have laughed.

Imagine my surprise when Paulson-Clark, the publishers, asked Linda Thomas, through Liz, if she would write a full-length novel, 'in her usual style.' If it was suitable, they would publish it.

"They've been getting enquiries, you see," Liz told me over the phone. I had retreated, as I often did, to my cabin in the mountains where I did little else but go for long walks and write. It also made me save money which went through my fingers like water whenever I was in any big town. There was always so much to see and do!

In between struggling with *Alien Empires*, a novel I am absolutely going to finish and publish some day, I tossed off *Emma's Passionate Secret*, laughing all the while at the senti-

ment I was heaping on the protagonist of the story. I thought nothing more of it and, having despatched it to Paulson-Clark, never mentioned it to Liz on the few occasions when I talked to her or e-mailed her other articles and stuff I was writing.

I didn't ever think of it, to tell the truth. I was in a hurry to finish a do's-and-don'ts article about Christmas trees—never, God forbid, 'holiday' trees—and was embroiled in an argument with a politically correct editor over the issue. If it hadn't been for the thousand I would get for the article, I'd have told her where to go.

I laughed out loud when I got a copy of *Emma's* in the mail and even more at the advance check of twenty thousand Liz sent me. It meant a chance for a little time off. I could go south. I could do some first-hand writing about Florida, sharks and alligators which I had always wanted to write about. I could visit Canaveral for a first time and I felt the inspiration for an article and a short story coming on.

Liz got to the point right away when I called her from Miami, about to head out for a day of deep-sea marlin fishing. "I like the stuff you've sent me, and I can place it easily, the travel articles under your Charles Sutton identity, and the Hank Miller story in *Sci-Fi Tales*," she said and I could hear her tapping her teeth, beautiful, straight, white teeth with her pen, which she did when she was pensive, "but this is really chicken feed for you, Tom."

"Chicken feed?" I asked with a laugh. "Liz, this is my bread and butter."

There was a silence on the phone for a moment. "Tom, have you looked at the best seller's lists recently?" Liz asked.

I hadn't. Why should I? It wasn't as if anything I wrote was ever going to be on such lists. I mean, I did look at them sometimes to see if my favorite authors were doing as well as I expected and if there was something new that I ought to be up on. But I hadn't seen a list in ages.

"You should get a paper," said Liz. "The one I am looking at puts your Linda Thomas book at number six, rising from eight last week. Virginia Layton at Paulson-Clark, says that they are going to bring it out in paperback with a million copies in the first printing and she was wondering when I will get Linda's second novel to their editors for which she is willing to pay a hundred thousand as an advance."

I was stunned. "That was just a one-off," I protested, shocked as never before.

"Right," said Liz. "Now, you just make it a two-off and I can think about putting a down payment on that Aston Martin you keep telling me I should be buying."

Liz was chuckling as she said it. A woman in her mid-forties, a bottle blonde as she called herself, Liz was every young writer's friend. She loved spy stories and Ian Fleming. I had tried writing something like that for her 'to buy her a James Bond car' but it hadn't worked well for me. It wasn't satire that I wrote. It just wasn't very good so I dumped that project and moved on.

The first twenty thousand had run out faster than I thought it would and back in the Alleghenies, Liz called me again, almost begging me to write another Linda Thomas novel.

"Oh, all right," I told her, "but I have some serious stuff I want to write as well that will take up most of my time. But I'll try to squeeze something in."

Actually, I actually got interested in *Sunshine Blonde* and it turned out considerably longer than the first book I had sent her. Never mind, I thought. Let the editors at Paulson-Clark sort that one out and where was my advance money?

I got a check for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars from Liz and an order to meet her at the Winchester again to set up a real financial plan for me and the money I was going to make. I was so stunned by the size of the check that I didn't even argue and went into town to meet Liz like a good, little boy.

I gave Liz the manuscript of the realistic novel I had been working on, the one that was going to make me a 'real' writer at last, and she promised to try to place it. Then she told me that Paulson-Clark loved the new Linda Thomas book. The editors there were certain that it was going to go to Number One on all the lists and they wanted two things from me. They wanted to publish all Linda Thomas's future books and they wanted a biography of Linda Thomas to insert in 'her' third novel.

"People are interested in her," said Liz with a smile. "I've had Virginia in my office telling me that I *have* to get you on the talk shows. What kind of a lousy agent am I, anyway, she wants to know, not getting you all that easy fee money, and incidentally pumping up the sales of the books she is publishing?"

"What did you tell her?" I asked, amused.

"About Linda Thomas?" asked Liz. "I told Virginia that you were something of a recluse and very shy. The rest of the biography, young man, I couldn't let on about because you haven't written it yet."

I laughed then and so did we both as we created the character of Linda Thomas over a bottle of cognac in the Winchester Bar and Grill before retreating to Liz's bare 'modernistic' apartment where my blonde, partly drunk, literary agent allowed me into her bed, called me "James", and we had a thoroughly nice time drinking throughout to the health of the timid, newly-born, ex-librarian, Linda Thomas.

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## II. LINDA IS PICTURED

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My serious novel was published and disappeared without a trace. Liz told me sourly that Hutton Press were refusing her calls after dropping over fifty thousand printing a novel about which they couldn't even get one decent review.

Linda Thomas' novels had no trouble being reviewed and no trouble in selling. By the end of the year, I could afford a new SUV for myself and, when I went in to see Liz after the fourth Linda Thomas was published (the fifth was on computer disk in Liz's office), I wasn't surprised at all when she parked the Aston Martin beside my Nissan.

"You can't be serious," I told her as she got out, grinning at me. "In this climate? An import like that? The mechanics are rubbing their hands in glee at the money they'll be making off you."

Liz threw back her blonde hair and laughed at me. She was very well groomed for a lady her age. "Come on," she said amicably. "Let's go into the bar and pretend you're my boy toy again. Carlos hasn't forgiven me yet for the act we put on last time."

Carlos was the maitre d' at the Winchester. Liz seemed to know half a dozen in the city by name. We'd been seated next to these very snooty Manhattanites last time I had come in. They had jumped to the conclusion that I was a gigolo right away. Liz had been so amused by their conceit that she had gone along with the gag but, when we left, I heard one of the women we'd been seated next to berating Carlos for seating people such as us and lowering the tone of the whole establishment.

I hated that. Liz's 'good time' became a penalty for those left in the wake of our deception. I wanted to go back and explain and apologize but Liz would have none of it.

"Of course, you could have signed her copy of *Peaches with Honey*, darling," Liz said, holding onto my arm and brushing my cheek with her hair while a man holding the elevator for us looked at me stonefaced. She was a flirt in the elevator all the way up to the suite, yes, a suite now, which she had taken for our conference. We could afford it, she said grandly, and I knew that meant that I was paying for it.

"I know that we didn't need to eat in the restaurant," Liz said as she led me into the bedroom where my luggage, a gift and a match for hers, was already in 'our' bedroom, "but, when I saw that woman walking in clutching our book, I just *had* to follow her in. I thought she might actually say something about it but of course she didn't."

She had the latest lists of books, the trade papers with the real sales figures listed. The first two Linda Thomas books were in paperback and both were in the top ten in sales. Liz went over the sales figures carefully with me.

"You know what it means, don't you?" she asked me.

"What?" I asked her.

"It means that I have achieved another of my life goals," Liz said loftily. "I am at last sleeping with a millionaire."

I had to laugh at that as well and I didn't let her down. Besides, I liked making love to her. I wasn't very experienced at all. Hey, who is at just twenty-three? She, my clever agent, was a student of sex. She brought in the books she had studied, and helped to sell to various publishers, and showed me what she wanted.

"Can you do that?" she would ask. "Can we try this out?"

So we did and, somehow, it all got worked back into the Linda Thomas novels. Liz noticed and encouraged me to write more about what we did as if it had happened between the protagonists in my novels. She critiqued the way I described some of the practices she put me through but always from her point of view.

"I didn't feel like that," she protested at several passages in the sixth Linda Thomas book. "If you were the woman, you'd know better than to write that. I hated *that*, and I wasn't panting in desire when we did *this one*. I couldn't catch my breath the way you were pressing down on me."

So that all became grist for the mill of the next novel. She began to write me little notes about what she and her girl friends had thought of the 'erotic' passages I had written and how they laughed at our poor, little librarian, Linda.

"She must still be in convent school," one told Liz, according to her, while another said that Linda Thomas must be getting all of her experiences through just reading about them.

Wait till they read that in my next one, I thought laughingly, thinking about the coffee klatch I would feature in that one, doing a running commentary on all the events in the novel. It worked really well, too, and I got, or rather Linda got, our best reviews for *Convent School Secrets*. The title promised one thing but it was actually quite fun to write about an innocent, young girl adrift in a world of people like, well, like Liz and her bitchy friends. They were, of course, the oversexed commentators on my heroine waif who had been through the convents; one of them, the very randy Joan Parker, having once actually having been a nun. I just hope Liz didn't recognize herself in what I described Lady Joan doing in bed.

"What all my friends, and Paulson-Clark, have in common, though," said Liz thoughtfully as we ate our mousse desserts in bed together, "is that they want to know what Linda Thomas looks like. Virginia, in fact, insists upon a picture of Linda for the next hardback release."

We had discussed this before. There was no way now that we could reveal who the real Linda was. Not unless we wanted the sales of her novels to drop off catastrophically. *I do so like eating my dessert in bed, in a suite at the Winchester*, I thought to myself. I wanted to keep the good thing we had going for as long as we could and I thought I had an answer to the problem.

"So, we pay some model for her time," I said, "and send her picture off to Virginia Layton, and, Shazam, it's the wonderfully fantastic, new and improved Linda Thomas. It's what we agreed on, isn't it?"

Liz was very thoughtful for a time. "There are some practical difficulties," she said as she took our dishes and parked them on the night table on her side of the bed. Then she snuggled down in the satin sheets and put her arm about me. "I think Virginia is beginning to suspect me. Connecting Hank Miller and Heinrich Muller was easy for her on my client list, but when she was over in my office the other day, she was reading the piece you did on the wild marlin which we ran under Charles Sutton's name. Do you know how much it's like Linda's description of Annette fishing with Jesse in *Sunshine Blonde*?"

I hadn't thought of that. I hadn't thought that someone might compare my writing style. I mean, Charles Sutton was absolutely correct in his use of English while Linda Thomas was downright chatty.

"Virginia was apprehensive about us being sued by Sutton," Liz said, frowning. "She was afraid that you had plagiarized the Sutton article and I had to assure her that you hadn't. I had to tell her when you, Charley Sutton, were in Florida, when you submitted your article. I told her that you'd gone fishing with Linda and suggested she use the experience in the book she was writing. But it was all the pen names that Sutton uses that intrigued her. I didn't dare to tell her that Sutton is really Thomas Henry. Why oh why did

we have to think it was so clever to use your first name as your last when you became a woman?"

"Here, here," I said, a shiver going up my back.

"Which brings me to the larger problem," said Liz. "Who could we ever trust to pose as Linda Thomas and have her picture put on your books? We can't trust that even someone from another country wouldn't be found out. Not now that Virginia has taken out copy-right in all the English-speaking world and is negotiating for the French-speaking rights as we are here in bed together. No, there's only one person we can absolutely trust to be photographed as Linda Thomas, my love, and you know who that is."

"Who?" I asked stupidly.

Her blue eyes gleamed. "You, of course," she said.

Liz wasn't joking. She had actually thought about it and had worked out how we could do it. I protested and categorically refused to do it.

"Hey, I'm not asking you to lower your male dignity to actually putting on panties and stockings," Liz said, "though I'm sure you'd look lovely in them. Look, you wear one of my sweaters and one of my wigs. You stand in the doorway over there or you get behind the table here. I put makeup on your face and I take your picture. We only keep one, or possibly two, for a later edition, and there we are. Linda Thomas lives and you can scoot right back to your tiresome mountains and write a sixth, a seventh, and an eighth Linda Thomas novel.

"Oh, and don't forget. There are over a hundred letters on Virginia's desk asking when the next Annette and Jesse novel is coming out. One hundred letters! Do you know how much of a reader response that is? This Linda Thomas thing is going to be worth millions and millions. But if it gets just too uncomfortable for you, I swear we will just kill off the silly bitch and you can go back to writing about how to find the perfect holiday tree."

Her eyes gleamed as I reacted to that one. I didn't want to do it, have a photograph taken of me as Linda. It was stupid. Liz wanted to make love again and halfway through, she got me into an impossible position. I was laughing and hurting and loving her all at the same time. And in that weak moment, she made me promise to let her take my picture the following day as Linda Thomas.

If I had only known what it was all going to lead to, I would have said "No," most definitely I would. I would have missed out on the most excruciating experience in my life, one I don't regret at all today. But at the time? Well, that was quite another story.



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### III. LINDA PLAYS A GAME

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In the morning, Liz insisted that I had to take off any hair across the top of my shoulders and chest and off the backs of my hands and lower arms. I argued with her but she insisted. Modern photography was just too good, she said, changing films in her Nikon. My photographs as 'Linda' were only going to go on the new roll.

I was stripped to the waist in just my pants after showering and shaving very closely. I have very fair skin and I don't have much to shave at the best of times. Liz slathered lotion all over my face and put something like wax on my eyebrows which made them flat to my forehead and almost non-existent eye ridges. They were practically invisible under the foundation cream, I think that was what it was, on my skin. The lotion on my hands and chest smelled of roses and I wrinkled up my nose.

"Oh, don't be a baby," said Liz, sitting in front of me in the hotel bathrobe. "I wouldn't mind if you took off all your body hair, you know, especially on your legs. It would be really something to make love to someone as soft and smooth as me."

"Another woman?" I asked as she worked creams onto my face and neck and shoulders. She grinned. Without makeup and concealer, the lines on her face were revealed and Liz looked, I have to say, older than I had thought her.

"I'm no lesbian," Liz said with a grin. "Can't you tell, Miss Thomas?"

I put my arms about her waist. She said to look at her and, as I did so, she began to brush makeup onto my face as if I was a woman. I wanted her to stop.

"Shush," she said, absorbed in putting white, grey and black eyeshadow on my lids. "You promised and we need this picture. Think of the millions we are going to be making."

"You already have your Aston Martin," I protested as she began to attach false eyelashes to my upper lids and then started with liquid eyeliner on my lids.

"Soon I'll be able to make my last payment on it," Liz quipped. "Then there's my apartment. It's going co-op and I would like to buy it outright. Failing that, you can lend me the money from your share of the royalties. After all," she gave me a brilliant smile, "after today, I'll be able to blackmail you for anything anytime, won't I?"

She wiped the excess lotion on my hands and shoulders and I was amazed how much hair came off me in rolled-up little balls. "Be very still now," said Liz as she worked on the huge batwings in front of my eyes; then she made some kind of arcs on my brow ridges, mine are very flat there, before beginning to apply rouge to my cheeks.

"You're going too far," I protested. But that, apparently, wasn't far enough by any means. She began to put lipstick on my lips and that was something to make goose bumps rise on my skin, especially when I got to hold the tube while she blotted my lips and red lips, beautifully-shaped, formed on her tissue.

"Yes, that's you," Liz said with a grin. "You have beautiful lips for a woman. In fact, you are going to make a very lovely young woman, just you wait and see."

"No, I am not," I retorted and she laughed and told me, as if I was the one acting up, not to be so silly.

She powdered my face for a long time, saying that she had to do it, to fix the makeup and so that I wouldn't be shiny for the photograph. I regretted it already. I should never have agreed to it. I should have just said, "No," but it is very hard to say "No" to Liz, no matter who you are. It's what makes her such a good agent.

I didn't see why I had to wear the bra about my chest but Liz insisted. "You need to have something in front to shape my sweater and my blouse," she said. "Women have breasts and we park them in one of these."

"This is going too far," I protested. "I'm not one of those kinds of guys."

"What kind of guys?" she asked as she fastened the bra backwards about my chest and then swung it around in front of me.

"I don't get aroused wearing women's clothes," I protested.

"Oh no?" she asked. "So, what is that, pressing against my knee, a banana in your pocket?"

I laughed myself. "No, it's you," I said. "Being this close. Taking in your perfume."

"I'm not wearing any," she said with a smile. "You are, Linda darling."

Liz pulled the white, thin straps of the bra over my shoulders, working fasteners so that they didn't pinch tightly into me. Then she began to fill the bra with my handkerchiefs and socks until she was satisfied. I put on a powder blue sweater of hers with a round neck, and boy, was it odd to look down at my chest. It did look like I had breasts. I felt rather queasy just looking at them.

I wanted to see myself in a mirror but Liz made me sit still while she put a liquid gum on my fingernails and then attached the most feminine, scarlet, pointed and shaped nails I think that existed. Instantly, they made my hands change from mine, the hair had all disappeared as well, to a girl's hands.

"You see," said Liz. "I told you that you had a musician's hands, long and thin. They don't give you away as most men's hands do by being short and chubby."

"We don't need these," I protested, wiggling the nails while she opened a jewellery box. In no time, I had rings on my fingers, bracelets on my arms, a gold chain at my neck and clip-on earrings at my ears.

"We must get your ears pierced," Liz said. "Most men we know have had it done, haven't they? If you had, then you could wear some of my prettier ones like these pendants." She held up earrings that looked like golden tassels. She put them back in the box and went across to her dressing table where she had several hair pieces.

She came back with the short, brown wig, which was a relief since I had felt myself tightening and tensing when she had rested on the long, blonde fall. I had half expected Liz to want to see me in that and it was a little disappointing to have the dark

brown hair fitted to me like a cap. She combed and brushed it about my face and I felt a thickness at my ears and neck that I wasn't used to.

"Wow," she said, coming around in front of me, with her camera. She reached over and turned back her closet door, the one with the mirror on it so that I could see myself.

I wasn't me. I was someone else. I really did think that it was a poster she had hung on the door until she flashed her camera and the girl moved, as startled as I was. 'She' was me.

"Wow is right," I croaked, gawking at the pretty girl, with her scarlet lips, shaped eyebrows, short, stylish hair and huge, glinting earrings that were starting to hurt my ears. The camera flashed again and again.

"I'm only taking pictures of you from the waist up," said Liz. "So let's go into the office area and pose your hands. I want to get them in as well."

It was quite disconcerting to stand up and move with Liz's bra on my chest. I didn't know what to do with my hands as she warned me not to touch anything and not to knock off any of the red nails.

"We should have had you wear a dress or a skirt," she said as I eased myself down onto the computer chair in front of the computer screen. "But still, you don't look bad in those pants, not with that sweater and that shape to your chest."

"Oh, Liz," I reproached her as she snapped me several times. Then she had me put my hands beside my face and lean on my elbows and smile while she clicked away. She took more of me at the computer, pretending to type on the keyboard, then standing at the window in profile. Not until I saw the proofs did I realize that Liz had taken me in profile down to my waist so that my wavy hair, my earrings and my shapely, girlish figure were also featured in the profiles she took.

"Let's change that top," she said, taking my hand and pulling me back to the bedroom. Somehow, Liz got her arms about me; then she was kissing me, rather firmly on my sticky, red mouth.

I never minded kissing Liz. She had full, firm lips and co-operated willingly in any kind of kissing I felt in the mood for. I wasn't used to being kissed so strongly by her, she setting the pace, forcing her tongue into my mouth as I nearly always did to her. We fell onto the bed, her on top of me. She put my arms about her neck and when I tried to move them, she put them back.

"Oh no, little girl," she whispered. "It's Mommy who's in charge now and you have to do whatever Mommy wants."

It was a new game. Mommy wanted to make love not to her little boy, as she had had me be before, but to her little girl. She kissed and kissed me as I struggled beneath her, finding it so distracting when she played with the bra straps at my back and chest and pushed her tongue deep into me.

I was ready to have sex with her when Liz arose and looked down on me. "Oh, Linda," she said. "I've ruined your beautiful makeup." She rolled from me. "Well, we have to change your top anyway for the next photograph. You won't go tempting Mommy again, will you? You're such a good little girl, Linda."

"Liz," I insisted, my erection and desire obvious. "I am not a little girl."

Liz smiled. "I know," she said. "You are a young woman of twenty-and-one, that's what we'll say, Linda. Every pretty girl takes a few years off, you know. Now, you will have to forgive Mommy for thinking of you as the little girl you used to be. I loved dressing you up so prettily then. I hate the way you are dressing now."

"Mommy?" I asked doubtfully, looking at this older woman smiling at me, appearing so much more lively than she had when we awoke earlier. I didn't really want to play any kinky games even if I was getting really turned on, the more she spoke to me like that. "You want me to call you Mommy, Liz?"

"When you are dressed in pretty clothes, darling Linda," said Liz, handing me a blouse with no sleeves. "Shall we get these other pictures, darling, and then we can talk about it while Mister Henry returns and makes Mommy very happy."

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#### IV. LINDA MAKES MOMMY HAPPY

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Liz was seriously demented. She giggled and said so herself. "Oh, yes," she said over lunch. "I really did get turned on by the appearance of Linda. I didn't know that the Mommy game was in me at all. What an improvisation! Didn't you like it at all? I think you did. Your bendy thing has never been so big before and it's so much better for me if I get to be the top."

It had been quite something for me as well. I mean, I know women get better orgasms of they are on top or not being pressed down upon by the man in sexual congress. I've heard, too, that it is the only way that a man can reach the G-spot as well and give a woman the ultimate in penetrating love. So, I didn't mind Liz on top of me.

No, what was disturbing to me, well, sort of disturbing, a feeling that this was somehow not right was when Liz managed to get me out of my pants. She didn't let me take off the flimsy, lacy blouse I had been very doubtful of wearing with the longer, brunette hair and the clip-on earrings with masses of golden rings that shook against my face and neck as she assaulted me and we made love. Her hands were caressing my bra as she thrust down more and more firmly and gurgled that I had found it, that that was it, that this was the greatest it had ever been. Then her passionate mouth had taken possession of mine before she kissed my upper chest, reaching a climax like I had never seen in any woman before.

It had frightened me. It had made me feel a little perverted. Heck no, it had made me feel a *lot* perverted. Liz had been in no hurry to let me go when she came down and I had released as well. She had played with the bracelets on my arms and the pretty, lilac-colored blouse I wore. She had caressed my hair and my earrings and had clamped herself to me to prevent my retreat from penetration.

That had done no good and so we eventually got up. I had a glimpse of myself sitting up, the blouse open to the bottom of my chest. The long hair had curled over my shoulders and across my chest most suggestively, obscuring the lines of padding. I looked like a

woman who had just made love, traces of lipstick on my mouth, the liner evident. My eyes were dark holes, my lashes thick and vividly slashed, my eyebrows were delicate arcs. My earrings still jiggled at my ears and I didn't want to take them off.

I saw Liz's hand extend across my bra as she sat up and looked at me over my shoulder. She looked quite an old woman though she was laughing at me, staring at myself. I was the younger woman by far and I was much prettier than her.

"We'll try it in stockings next time," Liz whispered. "That will be *so* much fun."

I fled then to the shower followed by her peals of laughter. I tore off the wig and wiped and washed off the makeup as best I could till she came in with makeup remover. I was at last able to get the lines that I thought in panic were going to stay there forever off my eyelids.

"We *have* to do it again," Liz said seriously as she packed away a huge Reuben sandwich at lunch. "I'm forty-eight years old, Tom, and I've just had the greatest experience of my life. Can I come up and see you in Shangri-La?"

She sometimes called my mountain cabin that. She had never been there. She probably thought it was like one of the very comfortable Colonial Inns in and about the Poconos and Southern Alleghenies, but my cabin wasn't historical at all. Shangri-La it definitely wasn't. Yes, it did have running water but sometimes it froze and wouldn't run in the winter which is why I liked to be in Florida in the cold months.

"No," I said, keeping my voice down and wishing she would as well. Made-up, her hair combed, wearing 'my' earrings and smelling of 'my' perfume, Liz Gregory looked years younger than she had in bed.

"I'm going to have a facelift," Liz said suddenly, "and have my saggy boobs firmed up. So it won't be for a while yet. But can an old lady come up and convalesce? I won't be able to seduce you anyway, not until my doctors give me the okay. And I wouldn't dare try anything with Linda. She would make me lose control and make me have to go back for surgery again. But, can I come and see you?"

I looked at her sharply and suddenly thought of her spare, almost empty, very small, box-like office, and her spare, almost empty, box-like apartment. She loved the expensive suite at the Winchester for its sumptuous decorations, the flowers and the paintings and the padded chairs that she said she had no time to bother collecting at home and in her business.

I knew she had no partner and that most of her clients, like me, contacted her over the Internet. I had a sudden vision of a lonely, older woman, sitting at home or in her office, conversing with other people solely by e-mail or telephone. How many did she meet like me when I came into town? I had casually taken her up on her offers to meet, to stay with her at the Winchester; she had never pressured me. It was if she had been prepared each time for a rejection which I had never given her.

This was the first time Liz had ever asked anything of me of a personal nature. I didn't count making love to her. If I had said "No" to her at any time in that regard, I don't think it would have hurt her as much as saying "No" to her now would have. It was as if Liz was asking for some kind of personal commitment, which she never did when we made

love. She might have tried blackmailing me but I somehow knew that she would never do that, no matter how she joked about it.

"All right," I agreed. "You will be welcome to come and convalesce. Should I hold all the articles and stories I'm writing now until I you get there or should I send them to your office computer?"

"Just write a new Linda Thomas novel," Liz said, relaxing visibly at my acceptance of her visit. She grinned at me and there was a tremulous note to her voice as if she spoke in relief. "Then, we'll be able to buy you two or three magazines to publish anything you want to in the future."

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## V. LINDA MAKES ANOTHER APPEARANCE

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A month later, I picked up a battered and bruised Liz Gregory on the road outside Paterson. Her doctor helped her to enter my SUV and shook his head and told her she was crazy not to stay at his clinic. He made sure that I had emergency phone numbers as well as what seemed to be a year's supply of painkillers for Liz. She had brought with her up several enormous suitcases, more like an old actor's trunks than modern suitcases. It took Doc Beddings and me quite a while to pack them in the back of my vehicle and I could see why she had insisted I bring the Pathfinder and bring it empty.

"There are clothes stores out there," I said, "and I do have a washer and drier. I even have an iron and an ironing board."

Liz laughed, the bandaging across her face mostly covered by artfully arranged scarves. "But when does the maid come in to use them all?" she asked lightly. "I certainly don't use such things. I send my clothes out. Can I do that from where you live?"

"Sure," I said. "It's only fifteen minutes to Manton or Dell, or a couple of hours, if the traffic's right, to make it to Hagerstown."

"We'll have to take turns taking in the laundry," Liz said. She waved as we headed off to the West; her doctor turned back into town. I didn't know the reason for all the secrecy but she had asked me to dress roughly when I picked her up. I was in jeans and a leather jacket and hoped soon to get an explanation.

"Oh, have you seen the new book?" she asked. I shook my head. "Funny," Liz mused. "I did ask my new office girl, Anita, to send you a copy."

"You gave her my address?" I asked her in alarm. We had decided long ago not to send anything for Thomas Henry, or any of my aliases, directly to me. My address should not be in her office. Liz would discreetly send anything on to me from her home and rely on her memory for my address.

Liz laughed suddenly. "No, I didn't," she said. "She must be turning my office inside and out looking for your address and I wouldn't doubt that Virginia Layton is helping her. No, I've never sent you a thing of Linda's from the office. I send yours, and hers, mail and e-mail, to my home and wait a week or so before I deal with it over the Net, as I can."