Fourteen—that was the exact number of jazz standards Queenie St. Laurence had sung during the first forty-five minutes of her Empire Room performance. Barry Gunderson, seated among the glittering Manhattan Saturday-night audience, was certain of his count. He’d ticked off each song with an anxious glance at his illuminated wristwatch. When Queenie removed the onstage mike from its stand and strolled toward the piano, he sensed his moment had arrived.

She lifted a card from the spray of American Beauty roses resting atop the Steinway, held it at arm’s length and announced above the clink-clink of highball glasses, “Well, mercy lord. This is just such a wonderful surprise.” Like the stereotypical Hollywood Indian brave, she shielded her eyes and searched the crowd. “Barry Gunderson, you dear southwestern renaissance man. I just know you’re out there, darlin’. You stand up right this very minute.”

Finally, Barry thought.
“Now don’t you dare be shy,” she continued. “We’re just aching to recognize you for these absolutely beautiful flowers. Not to mention the great work you’re doing to support jazz and art in far off New Mexico.” Shapely in a clinging ankle-length dress, she won scattered urbane laughter when she spanglicized New Mexico into New May-hico.

Unwinding his slim, six-foot frame, Barry stood, surrounded by white-clothed tables and the scent of expensive perfume. He acknowledged the warm audience response with a smile and a self-effacing hand wiggle that masked his serious preparation. Just before the cocktail hour, he’d chosen two-dozen long-stemmed roses from the Gotham Hotel florist. After scribbling “We-heart-you-Queenie” on his business card, he strode into the lobby and slipped the concierge a ten-dollar bill.

“Place these on Miss St. Laurence’s piano before tonight’s nine o’clock show, will you?” He shifted the roses, wrapped in standard florist-green tissue, into the man’s outstretched arms. “And make sure my card here is positioned where she won’t miss it.”

The concierge, name-badged Kelvin, responded with a Caribbean lilt. “I will take proper care of the entire matter, sir.” Barry saw himself in the hands of an experienced service provider, a silver-haired veteran who appeared to sense his need to make a favorable impression.
But it wasn’t Queenie Barry hoped to impress. It was Savitri Amin, the exotic, New Delhi-born beauty sharing his table. Barry had met this thirtyish New York art buyer when she dropped by his gallery--Santa Fe’s oldest--seeking rugged southwestern landscapes for her eastern customers.

Their business affiliation bloomed like a desert flower. Confident he’d built a strong professional bond, he’d arrived in New York aiming to win her personal affection. Since his divorce, he’d been searching for a new relationship. Eighteen months without companionship, caring, and good hard sex was too long. If tonight went as planned, it could be the start of a new life.

When he’d lowered himself into his seat, Savitri edged closer and whispered, “You never told me you knew famous entertainers.” She steered her manicured fingertips around the after-dinner demitasse cups and caressed his hand. “And jazz? I thought your whole world was built around painters and sculptors.”

Savitri spoke with the unique British-Indian inflection she’d absorbed as a child and sustained throughout her art-student days at Cambridge. The music of it charmed Barry from the first moment she spoke to him. Her hair, drawn straight back to accent her smooth forehead and delicate features, shone jet black. Her dark eyes, glistening with admiration, told him all his preparation had been worth the effort. They remained hip-to-hip through Queenie’s final number and beg-off exit. When the applause faded, the house lights rose and Barry inadvertently locked eyes with a grinning man at the next table.
“So are you one of those jazz aficionados?” Barry, certain he’d heard “afishy-ondos,” reacted with a boyish smile, his most attractive feature. His questioner, fifty-some and tieless, displayed a gold medallion nestled on a triangular bed of exposed, graying chest hair. He and his goddess-shaped female companion appeared friendly enough for Barry to launch an explanation.

“My Santa Fe art gallery keeps me pretty busy,” he said, scanning the room for the waiter and his check. “But I make time to volunteer for the hospitality committee during our annual jazzfest. I had a ton of fun hosting Queenie last year.”

With Savitri at his side, he thought it best to avoid any details of that brief, but unforgettable, encounter. It drew him and Queenie together for just enough time to reveal a mutual chemical attraction—yet with too little time to fulfill its exciting promise. Without letting on that he still kept in touch with Queenie through occasional e-mails, he continued. “I always have some idea of what’s going on in the world of jazz.”

“Art and jazz. Well, my friend, that is a fine combination. Lidajane—that’s my wife here—and I would admire to hear more about that. Why don’t you and your girlfriend come up to our room? We’ll have a drink over it.”

“Girlfriend” fell awkwardly on Barry’s ears. He hoped Savitri hadn’t heard it above the clatter of dish removal. “Thanks, but we have to leave as soon as I pay the check.”

“Now don’t you go giving that check another thought. I already paid it.”

“You paid our check?”
“Hell, it’s no big deal. Just our way of getting to meet good people.”

“Very generous of you. But you have no idea who I am.”

“Well, we’re gonna fix that right now. Floyd and Lidajane Hembroke. Sweet Home, Arkansas.” He extended his hand and smiled. “Just outside Little Rock.” His thin upper lip peeled back to expose perfectly capped teeth and a good quarter-inch of upper gum. “You come right on up, seventeenth floor. One drink, some art and jazz talk, and we’ll be gettin’ on like down-home folks. Wha’d you say your name was?”

Barry felt suffocated with obligation. He estimated his check at two hundred dollars, minimum. He considered his new acquaintance a clod for putting him in this position. But he felt he’d be the bigger clod if he stuck him with the tab and walked out. He sought guidance with a glance at Savitri. Seeing nothing negative, he addressed her, loud enough for Floyd to hear, “It can’t do any harm to stay for one drink.”

A steady rain shrouded the lights of Manhattan. From the Hembroke’s hotel-room balcony, Barry heard the hiss of late-night automobile tires speeding along the wet streets, seventeen floors below. In the distance, an East River boat glided by, its foghorn groaning, its running lights fuzzy, as though wrapped in gauze.

Chilled from the late-night dampness, Barry struggled to make conversation. “Our common love for Georgia O’Keeffe--that’s the magnet that pulled Savitri and me together.” He slid back the glass door, and stepped into the living room, eager to finish his drink and leave.
Floyd spun the ice in his glass and laughed. “Sounds like you two have Georgia on your minds.” Barry winced. He tried to catch the attention of Savitri, who appeared to be making small talk with Lidajane at the coffee table.

“You got to tell us more about these jazz connections of yours,” Floyd went on. “Lidajane and I are in the film business—always on the lookout for jazzy film scores. Something that don’t cost more than the whole goddam production.”

Before Barry could answer, the door opened. Kelvin entered, carrying a flat, silver box. He walked directly to Savitri and Lidajane, raised the hinged cover and displayed a dozen tightly rolled marijuana joints. Barry caught Savitri’s arched eyebrow and sensed her uneasiness.

While Savitri declined Kelvin’s offer with a headshake, Lidajane dipped her ring-encrusted fingers into the box. “I just don’t know how we’d get along in this big old city without Kelvin. He’s our good Samaritan.”

“He’s a Jamaican, Lidajane. How many times I got to tell you?” Floyd boomed. “And the smoothest one in this whole town—takes good care of you right down the line. ‘Course you got to take good care of Kelvin.” Reaching into the silver box, he softened. “I guess we do a pretty good job of that. Right, Kelvin?”

Kelvin agreed with widened eyes, a slight bow, and a sharp snap of a gold lighter. He extended the flame to Lidajane and Floyd, who toked and then exhaled. The grassy aroma spread quickly. Barry, sniffing as though catching a cold, broke the silence. “You’ve been more than generous, Floyd, but Savitri and I must say good night.”
“Hell, you can’t go now. Not when I’m fixin’ to offer you and your girlfriend a business proposition.” The door clicked behind the exiting Kelvin.

“I’m afraid it’s going to have to wait.” Barry strained to be polite. “We have to be at our best tomorrow. Sunday art auctions attract very competitive buyers.”

Floyd discounted Barry’s concern and ignored the deteriorating effect of the gathering smoke on his draining sinuses. “When we were down there in that Empire Room, Lidajane leaned over and whispered something about your girlfriend. She said you got something right special there.”

“What I said,” Lidajane cut in, “was that she’d make a real cute co-star in one of our films. We’d make such interesting contrasts--her dark skin would be absolutely adorable alongside my blond coloring.”

For the second time Barry saw Savitri raise her eyebrow. When her mouth turned down at the corners, he felt like a scolded schoolboy.

“My Lidajane don’t ask for a hell of a lot, but when she does, I’d re-route the Arkansas River to get it.”

“We employ the best cinematographer,” Lidajane said. “And the lighting? Why we’d make it just as soft as a down quilt. So artistic.” The words rushed out in a dramatic whisper. “So... woman-to-woman.”

“Huge appeal to both sexes,” Floyd assured. “The boys aren’t the only ones who like all that licking stuff. The gals love it, too. And with your girlfriend supplying all that dark skin and eastern mysticism, we’d have a video that would blow the doors off, worldwide.”
Lidajane rushed to support her husband. “Oh, it’s all anonymous. We don’t
give out the names of the cast, or anything like that.”

Barry abandoned all show of politesse. He took Savitri’s arm and made for
the door. Before he could open it, Kelvin, wheeling a room-service table bearing
glasses and ice, re-entered. With Kelvin blocking one side, and Floyd declaiming
from the other, Barry felt trapped.

“Hell, Barry. A man like you ought to have an interest in an art film like this.
Can’t you hear your girlfriend’s high-class accent doing Kama Sutry love poetry in
the voice-over? We’ll have one of them big Indian guitars strum up your jazzy
musical score while the girls go at it.”

Savitri shuddered. Barry circled her shoulders with a protective arm and
shouted, “I don’t know what they use for sensitivity down in Sweet Home,
Arkansas, but whatever it is, it needs redefining.” He lifted a white handkerchief
from his breast pocket to stifle his running nose. “You and your wife are a couple of
crude, tactless vulgarians.”

Lidajane smashed her marijuana into the ashtray and jumped to her feet.
“I’d like to know just what makes you so high and mighty. It’s not as though we’re
asking you to do this for nothing.”

“Goddam right. There’s a nice finder’s fee in this for you, Barry. And we’ll
work out an arrangement for your girlfriend--a capitation fee. So much for each
unit.”
Barry tightened his grip around Savitri. He squeezed past Kelvin’s cart and led her into the corridor. Stepping into the elevator, he punched the down button with a fury he hoped would speed its descent. Savitri, arms folded in a self-hug, massaged her freed shoulders. “You should not have been so quick to accept his hospitality,” she said.

“Dammit, Savitri,” Barry flared. “Don’t put this on me. I gave you every opportunity to say no.”

“You should have protected me from that beast. I am not an indentured servant--a piece of property to be bargained over. ”

Barry struggled to calm himself. He fixed on the overhead indicator and silently counted the declining electronic numbers: sixteen . . . fifteen . . . fourteen. Floor-by-floor, he grew aware that he was ending the evening the same way he began it--counting.

At street level, the hiss of the late-night taxicab tires struck Barry much louder than from Floyd Hembroke’s seventeenth-floor balcony. He hailed cab after cab, only to watch their wheels sizzle into the darkness with endless predictability.

Without warning, a white stretch limo pulled up to the curb, spraying Barry’s black, wing-tipped shoes. The side window rolled down to disclose a familiar face.

“Hey darlin’, the crosstown bus doesn’t stop here. And on a night like this, cabs don’t, either. Climb aboard.”
Barry helped Savitri into the jump seat and clambered alongside to face Queenie St. Laurence. Her warm welcome moved Barry to introduce Savitri.

“I so appreciate your saving us,” Savitri said. “This soaking rain--it’s almost a New Delhi monsoon.” The wounded look in her eyes told Barry his explosion inside the elevator had been too harsh.

“Don’t thank me, thank my hard-working agent,” Queenie said. “This vulgar display they call a car comes with his compliments. If the Empire Room doesn’t agree to provide chauffeured transportation to my apartment, he won’t let me sign the contract. Don’t you just love it?”

“We owe your agent, big time,” Barry said while the car eased away from the curb. “Now if you can get us to Savitri’s hotel, we’ll owe you, too.” He turned toward the window and watched the street lamps fly by. Like flashing strobes, they splashed their light on Queenie’s face, then quickly abandoned it to the shadows. Barry thought she looked even prettier than she had at last year’s jazzfest. With her stage makeup removed, her natural beauty brought back those unexpressed feelings. Her chestnut hair, zigzag parted, fell to the collar of the fur coat thrown over her shoulders. His roses rested alongside. Still wrapped in their standard florist-green tissue, they brightened and faded with the same metronomic regularity as her face.

Queenie reached under her fur collar and adjusted an errant spaghetti-strap. Seeing Barry dab his nostrils, she broke through his drifting thoughts. “Why, you’ve caught your death of cold waiting in all that rain.”
“Allergy,” he said, while the car drew under Savitri’s hotel marquee. “It’ll disappear as soon as I get Savitri up to her room.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Savitri’s eyes blazed. “I will have no problem finding my room.” She tightened her grasp on her evening bag, wrenched the door open, and exited with a frigid, “Good night.”

The slam of the limo door confirmed the night’s total failure. Embarrassed, Barry hurried to distract Queenie. “After that performance you gave tonight, you must be exhausted.”

“Why, to us struggling cabaret singers, this is just the shank of the evening. You come right on up and I’ll fix you a drink--help you get rid of that allergy.” She picked up the roses and plopped them in Barry’s arms. “And you can help me arrange your beautiful flowers.”

He silently congratulated himself on managing to get one thing right tonight. “They are pretty,” he said.

“Pretty? Why, they’re just supremely gorgeous. On stage, I concentrated so hard on my material that I took forever to notice them.”

“You can’t imagine how anxious I was,” Barry said. “Wondering whether you’d ever get to them.”

“Well, I am so tearfully sorry about that.”

“That’s okay. No apology necessary”
“Course, when I finally realized how beautiful they were, I just thought right then and there--that renaissance darlin’, he sure does know how to make a favorable impression on a girl.”

THE END

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