

Candy Art

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The author returned for the sixth time to "the summer swelter of East Lansing, Michigan, to teach the 2001 Clarion Writers' Workshop. Maybe it was nostalgia for the heady days of my youth, when I could pull an all-nighter and laugh about it over breakfast, or maybe it was the heat, but I decided I would try to write a story, too. 'Candy Art' was composed largely between the hours of midnight and two a.m. A deeply flawed first draft was completed in time for the last workshop session, thereby affording my students the chance to see the emperor, if not without his clothes, at least in his underwear. I have attempted to put their criticisms to good use. I revised this story over the course of a couple of months, and added a new scene just before I submitted it to Gardner and Sheila."

So I beep my boyfriend Mel, who hasn't been a boy since television died and ought to be more than a friend by now, since for the last five years we've shared an apartment and a bed and a dreamscape. I tell him the news about my parents.

"They want to what?" It's four-thirteen in the afternoon and Mel is down-town at the glorified closet he calls his candy lab. His hair is a bird's nest that somebody stepped on and he sounds as if he has just woken up.

"Move back in," I said. "With me. Us."

"They're uploads, Jennifer." When I first met Mel, I thought the sleepy voice was sexy. "How can they move in with us when they're not any-where?"

"They bought a puppet to live in," I say. "Life-sized, nuskin, real speak—top of the line. It's supposed to be *my* Christmas present. Bring the family back together for the holidays and live unhappily ever after."

"A puppet." A puzzlement glyph pops up at the bottom of my screen. "As in *one* puppet?"

"It's a timeshare—you know. They live it serially. Ten hours of him, four-teen of her."

"Not fifty-fifty?"

"He's giving her the difference so he can take extra time off for his bass tournament in June."

When Mel reaches offscreen, I am certain he's about to click off. His typi-cal reaction to bad news is to hide. Instead he produces one of his favorite cinnamon-stripe pineapple lickwixes and peels the wrapper. "How long are they going to stay?"

"They didn't say."

"Probably forever." He waves the lickwix under his nose and sniffs. "With our luck."

"Yeah."

He isn't expecting me to agree. "You could tell them no." The panic glyph starts to blink.

"Mel."

"It's your life." He pops the lickwix into his mouth and twirls it.

MY LIFE! I want to screech. **MY LIFE IS PUTTING UP WITH A PSYCHOTICALLY BASHFUL CANDY ARTIST FOR ALL THIS TIME WITH NOTHING TO SHOW FOR IT BUT A SWEET TOOTH AND DIRTY TOW-ELS. I'M FORTY-TWO WASTED YEARS OLD AND**

NOT ONLY AM I CURRENTLY SLEEPING WITH A FLAB BUCKET WHO SAMPLES AS MUCH PRODUCT AS HE SHIPS BUT NOW MY DEAD PARENTS ARE GOING TO BE MEDDLING WITH MY PATHETIC LIFE TWENTY-FOUR HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, THREE-HUNDRED-AND-SIXTY-FIVE BLEEDING BLUE DAYS A YEAR.

But I don't.

Instead I say, "But Mel, sweetie, it's their apartment."

For a few blessed ticks just after Mom releases control of the facial arma-ture, the puppet is an inert thing, about as threatening as a lamp. I savor my *four, three, two, one* of sanity as the throne reloads Dad's kernel into the puppet's memory. Dad always comes up in a bad mood. He hates it that Mom leaves her wig and makeup on. She doesn't mind taking off clothes be-fore the swap; their puppet has neither primary nor secondary sexual char-acteristics. But she can't stand to strip her face before she goes down.

"God damn it!" Dad grabs a handful of twinkling, gunmetal hair and yanks. The wig comes away with a loud *scri-itch*. "How did the Celtics do last night?"

"Lost," says Mel, who is spooning bananarama crunch and milk from a bowl. "173-142."

Dad tosses the wig over his shoulder. It flops onto the floor near the re-frigerator and then scuttles up the wall to its place on the shelf beside the memory throne, shaking off the dust like a dog. "How about Microsoft?"

Mel taps at the kitchen table; its phosphors paint his fingertips in pale, blue light. "Up two and an eighth."

Dad grunts approval. "Now *there's* a Christmas present for you." He push-es off the throne but then totters.

"Easy, Dad," I say. "Just sit a couple of minutes, get your bearings."

"Ten hours, Jennifer. It's not like I have time to waste." He turns to catch himself on the kitchen sink, runs hot water over his outstretched hands and then scrubs Mom's blush from his face.

"Dad!" I say. "How many times do I have to ask you?" He's splashing all over the floor. "Would you please take it to the bathroom?"

"What the hell is she going for here?" Dad peers at the skin tint dripping through his fingers. "I've seen better looking Kool Aid."

Mel perks up. "You've seen real Kool Aid?"

Dad gives Mel a look that says something like *I may be dead, but I still can beat manners into the likes of you, fat boy*. But it bounces off, because Mel isn't being sarcastic. He'd actually love to talk Kool Aid with Dad. "What's that you're eating?"

"They're dry-roasted cocoa beans," says Mel, "hand-dipped in a nutraceutical banana slurry spiced with nutmeg and clove."

"Mel is submitting product to Bright O'Morn and Kelloggs." I stoop to wipe up Dad's spills before he slips on them. "Fortified sugar-free confec-tions are just as nutritious as frosted flakes."

Dad sniffs. "Candy for breakfast?" If Mel developed the gumdrop that cured throat cancer, Dad would find a way to disapprove of it.

"Right. But I told you all this yesterday." Sometimes I wonder whether they installed my parents' kernels backward. "Remember?"

"Which reminds me..." Mel pushes back from the table. "I'm off." He gives me a kiss on the cheek that's as dry as a roasted cocoa bean. "I'll call as soon as the samples arrive." This is as intimate as we've been since my parents arrived. It's hard enough to get Mel interested in real sex at the best of times,

impossible when my mother comes staggering home at all hours, then retreats to the guest room to watch *A Christmas Carol* for the ten thousandth time or listen to Bing Crosby gargle "Silent Night." "I'm hop-ing I can set up the taste test for around two, but I'll call." He nods goodbye at my father and waddles through the door to freedom as fast as his stumpy legs will take him.

"He's stopping by the greenhouse this afternoon," I say. "He never shows a new food design until I taste it first."

Dad settles into Mel's chair and squints at the box of bananarama. "You call this stuff food?"

Actually, I've never been a fan of reconstituted fruit, but I'm not going to offer Dad a chance to criticize my boyfriend. "It's nutritionally complete," I say. "If you were stranded on a desert island with a boatload of bananara-ma, you'd never starve."

"Desert island." He makes a lemon face and tries to refill the bowl Mel left behind. Most of the yellow crunchlets find their target, but the puppet lacks fine motor skills, and maybe a dozen bounce off the edge of the bowl and skitter across the table. "There are no more desert islands," says Dad. "So what does she say about me?"

"Who?"

"Your mother." He brings a spoonful of bananarama toward his mouth, bumps his top lip but sticks his tongue out just in time to gobble them down.

"She doesn't say much, actually," I lie. "Let's see, the other day she asked whether you watched the *Tae Kwon Do Nutcracker* she recorded for you."

He crunches in silence for a few moments and then swallows. "Nothing tastes the same." He sets the spoon next to the bowl. "They said I'd be able to eat all the steak and asparagus and chili and cherry pie I wanted. Well, so what? You know what this stuff tastes like?"

"Cream cheese," I say under my breath.

"Cream cheese," he says. "But then everything tastes like cream cheese."

"So then don't bother. It always makes you mad and since you don't need to eat anyway..."

His gaze is hot enough to toast English muffins. I can tell he's about to snap at me, except he bites off whatever he is about to say and swallows. It goes down hard. "Tell your mother thanks," he says. "I'm glad she still thinks about me once in a while."

He gets up from the kitchen table and manages to make his way into the living room without breaking anything. What with all the shoppers, I'm go-ing to be late for work unless I get going, so I swoop up the bananarama he dropped on the floor, empty the bowl into the garbage, wave it under the dishwasher and put it away.

"You put up the tree already?" Dad calls.

"It was time, Dad," I call back as I stick the bananarama in the pantry and turn off the kitchen table. "We left some ornaments for you to hang." I grab my coat and slip my thinkmate from the pocket. "Mel is coming by the greenhouse for a taste test at two," I tell it as I duck into the living room to say goodbye.

Dad is sitting on the couch next to the tree. He is wearing the red felt Santa hat that was in the Christmas box under the ornaments. It's a little too big for the puppet's head and has slipped to just above the eyes.

The eyes are the best-designed part of the puppet, as far as I'm concerned. Mom can splash all the makeup she wants on the nuskin face but the only glimpses of my dead, uploaded parents that I ever get shimmer through liq-uid crystal depths. My father looks lost in his favorite Santa Claus hat, lost and unhappy.

"I miss her," he says. "Nothing is the same."

POOR BASTARD! I want to scream. I'D LOVE TO INDULGE IN HOLI-DAY NOSTALGIA,

DAD, BUT EVER SINCE YOU'VE BECOME A SELF-ISH MOODY JERK HIDING INSIDE A PLASTIC ROBOT, IT'S SORT OF HARD TO WORK UP ANY SYMPATHY. YOU'RE AS OUT OF CONTROL AS ALL YOUR OTHER BABY BOOMER PALS, AN ENTIRE GENERATION SUFFERING FROM FULL BLOWN EGO BLOAT. YOU PEOPLE OWN EVERYDAMNTHING AND REFUSE TO DIE AND LEAVE IT TO US THE WAY YOUR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS LEFT IT TO YOU AND THEN YOU HAVE THE NERVE TO WHINE ABOUT HOW YOU MISS THE GOOD OLD DAYS? WHEN DO MY GOOD OLD DAYS START, YOU MISERABLE LEECH?

But I don't.

Instead I say, "Cheer up, Dad. Only eight more days to Christmas."

I keep nagging Mel to tell me what he wants for Christmas, only he acts like I'm asking him to donate a kidney. Or else he says something like, "I don't need more things, Jen, as long as I've got you." Unfortunately, that only earns him romance points from January through November; this time of year, it's just plain annoying. But I refuse to make a random buy for him. You know how some people expect you to read their minds at the holidays and then get all pouty when your best effort at telepathy results in a chrome bowling shirt or mango musk perfume? Not Mel. He's so certain that he doesn't deserve presents that he's grateful no matter what I give him.

It takes all the challenge out of shopping.

So I decide to surprise him at the lab late one afternoon. As I step up to the doorscan, I can hear him talking to someone inside, but by the time I'm through, he has washed all his windows and he's alone at his desk. He swivels his chair and tries to look like he's glad to see me.

"Jen. You startled me."

"Sorry," I say, although falling dust could startle Mel. "Am I interrupting? I heard voices."

"You did?" He shivers. "It was just a spambot."

"Good," I say. "Then I've come to take you shopping."

"Oh, no. No, I can't Jen, no. There's been a recall from Proznowski. Turns out their walnut flavor buds have peanut contamination."

"You don't use walnuts, Mel, never have." I reach over to pinch his ear. "You're coming with me, young man."

We noodle through the crowds on Third Avenue and cross Summer Street to the pedestrian mall. Lights twinkle, doors sing carols and signs call to us. Mel, however, isn't interested in pizza ovens or scooters or fingernail com-puters. He passes the latest wraparounds from the Dakar String Quartet and the Boston All-Uploaded All-Star Pops without a second glance. He doesn't seem to care that snow roses are guaranteed to bloom in February or that a Quick Perk brews coffee in under ten seconds. He won't have his hair preserved or his skin tinted and he's not at all interested in a weight purge. He wouldn't book a weekend in space even if we *could* afford it. Before long I am officially desperate. I keep watching his eyes; if he looks at anything for more than ten seconds, it's his. But Mel must be suffering from some holiday-induced delirium; the shyest man in Michigan is busy grinning and nodding at people as we pass.

"A pet," I say. "I hear they've been improving lemurs."

"No pets."

A little blonde girl, all knees and elbows, is trying to skip, tug her dad's coat and gawk at Mel at the same time.

"Daddy!" Her voice squeaks. "That man is so fat!"

"Ho-ho-ho," says Mel and her eyes go round as the buttons on her coat. Dad drags her across

Frazier Street. A gaggle of teenagers, twirling candy canes in their mouths, veers in front of us; they giggle and wave at someone seated in the steamy window of the Lucky Soup Shop.

"We could stop at the Virt Mart," I say, "They've ported some of the early Hitchcocks to the Mindstation."

"I'd rather dream." He squeezes my hand.

A woman pulling a folding cart full of groceries stares into the next county as she whips stiff-legged through the shoppers. Someone dressed as *Hoteiosho*, the Japanese Santa, complete with droopy earlobes and huge hairy belly, gives me a thin smile and hands me a coupon good for a free karate lesson. He looks cold. A man in a bowler hat and double-breasted topcoat mutters into the palm of his hand.

"Comfy slippers?"

"Make my feet sweat."

A lot of people are sucking on candy canes—this year's fad, no doubt. Then I see the puppets coming out of Hinckley's Hot Tub Hotel, their nuskin faces flushed. Three are dressed as women, one as a man. For a moment I think I see Mom's favorite hat, but it's only five-thirty. She wouldn't have had time to put on her makeup after the swap. Something about the way these dead people are acting turns all my Christmas spirit to ashes. They've got their hands all over one another, holding themselves up, I suppose. And they're laughing so loud that people turn and stare, which makes them laugh harder. Oh they're a riot, all right. I know what goes on at the Hot Tub Hotels of the world and all those zap parties and the Club Deads. I don't want to know but I've read all about it—we all have.

"Jen." Mel puts his arm around me and turns me away from the puppets. "You're getting that way again."

"What?" I'm ready to bite his big, fat nose off. "What way?"

"I'll tell you what I want, okay?" He walks me toward home. "A new candy aerator."

I take a deep breath. "For work?" I can't remember the last time Mel asked me for anything. "But that's not very Christmasy. Besides, what does one cost? Twenty, twenty-five dollars?"

"Oh." His voice gets very small. "Never mind then."

So of course everything wants to break down on one of my busiest days of the year. The Shepard Building has a bank of four elevators, but two of them gape slack-doored at the lobby. It's December 23 and I've got seven-teen poinsettias, half a dozen amaryllis in full trumpet, and a pair of extra-dwarf giant sequoias, each no bigger than a liter of eggnog, squeezed onto my greenhouse cart. I make the seventh floor delivery all right but according to the invoice I've got to get to Mid-American Vocal Stylings, Suite B on twelve no later than one o'clock. Problem is that at twelve thirty-eight all the up elevators are filled with people coming back from lunch. The doors open and close I don't know how many times before some guy in a green sport coat and a Kwanza candle tie recognizes my problem and pushes three of his pals out of the cab.

"It's only one flight." He holds the door while I wheel in. "We need the exercise."

"Thanks." My blood pressure drops ten millimeters. "Merry Christmas."

The door to Suite B gives me a nod that's all business. "Welcome to Mid-American Vocal Stylings." Its receptionware looks like a red-haired woman in her thirties who is wearing a string of pearls and a Santa hat like Dad's. "How may I help you?" it says with a chirpy Michigan accent from somewhere between Ypsilanti and Kalamazoo; her *a's* melt like butter on a short stack of pancakes.

"I've got a delivery of office plants here from the Garden of the Green Goddess."

The door pauses. "I'm sorry, Mr. Goddess, but I can't seem to find your appointment."

"I don't have an appointment," I say. "I'm making a delivery." I aim my thinkmate at its dataport and squirt the invoice at it.

The door opens. "Thanks for choosing Mid-American Vocal Stylings," it says as I wheel the cart in. In the lobby are a couple of couches wrapped in clear plastic, a low table and no plants: the front desk is deserted. I guess they're still moving in. The door closes and the redhead AI continues to pitch from the inside panel. "From the gritty streets of Chicago to Cleveland's sparkling Cuyahoga River..."

"Can I talk to a human being?"

"...from the roar of the Indy 500 to the hush of the Boundary Waters, we Midwesterners have a special way of speaking."

"Okay, then." I unload plants as fast as I can. "East or west-facing windows are best, but they'll stand fluorescents."

"So when you want a business presentation that says to your client We're folks just like you..."

"These won't need watering until after the holidays."

"...trust Mid-American Vocal Stylings to give your team the sound that's honest as Main Street. Ask about our..."

When I wheel the empty cart out of the office, Mel is waiting for me near the elevator. He is holding a bouquet of a dozen blue lisianthus and he looks as if he's about to wilt from fear.

"What's wrong?" I say. "Is it Dad?"

"It's nothing. I just needed to see you, so I GPSed your thinkmate."

"I'm working, Mel. What is this?"

"For you." He turns his head away as he hands me the lisianthus. Making eye contact is not one of Mel's charms. I've got a bad feeling about this. I own the Garden of the Green Goddess and my boyfriend is giving me flowers that he probably bought at the corner microbus stop. "There's something I have to tell you," he says. Sweat beads along his receding hair line.

"Mel, the van is double parked and I've got three more deliveries to make before close of business." Then I realize that he is going to break up with me. "What?"

"I can't tell you out here." He tugs me around the corner into an alcove with three vending machines: Coke, candy, and fries.

It's my parents, of course: Mom's late nights, Dad's messes. Between them, they never sleep.

Mel aims me at the candy machine. "Look," he says.

It's me—of course, it's me. He can't earn a living crafting designer candy and I can't keep my mouth shut when the bills come due.

I scan the selections absently. It's the usual mass market product—the crap that candy artists like Mel never eat: Hershey bars in dark, white, and Irish crème, Busterclusters, Fire 'N Ice, Holy Crunch, Almond Joys, Sugar Highs, and Lifesavers. What am I going to say to him? And a couple I've never seen: Red Impalas, Krazy Kanes, Fruit Squirtgums. So maybe Mel's no Rip Allgood, but I don't want to lose him. "Sweetie," I say, "I'm sorry." I glance at him then and am astonished to see him smile. He's a big man with a lot of face; his smile is not quite as wide as Lake Michigan. "I've been so frazzled lately..."

Someone taps me on the shoulder. "Please, you are the deliver?"

I turn to look down on a little man in a high-collar blue suit. He's lost most of his brown hair and is pale as the moon, except for the two roses of embarrassment blooming on his cheeks.

"I beg your pardon?"

He nods three times, speaks into his thinkmate and then shows me its screen. **MID-AMERICAN VOCAL STYLINGS.** "You have not remembering few items."

"I left everything on the invoice. What items?"

"You are make a neglection of Christmas trees, please?"

I notice Mel retreating toward the elevator. He waves forlornly. I want to stop him, or at least blow him a kiss goodbye, but Mister Mid-American Vo-cal Stylings thrusts his thinkmate at me and points at the invoice on its screen. **2 ED GIANT SEQUOIAS.**

"Giant makes a very tallness." He holds a hand over his head, parallel to the floor. "Mostly bigger." I hear the elevator door ding.

"See this?" I point to the ED. "That stands for extra dwarf." I hold my hands about thirty centimeters apart. "You ordered extra dwarf. I gave you two trees but very small."

He shakes his head. "Read American all the way." He points to each let-ter. "G-I-A-N-T. Understand, please?"

UNDERSTAND? I want to shriek. I UNDERSTAND FINE, YOU CLUE-LESS BRICK. THE MOST BASHFUL MAN EAST OF THE ROCKIES HAD SOMETHING SO STINKING IMPORTANT TO SAY TO ME THAT HE CAME ALL THE WAY ACROSS TOWN EXCEPT YOU SCARED HIM OFF WITH YOUR ABYSMAL MANNERS AND WORSE ENGLISH AND NOW YOU EXPECT ME TO SNAP MY FINGERS AND MAKE A COU-PL E OF TREES APPEAR TWO DAYS BEFORE MERRY FLAMING CHRISTMAS, PLEASE?

But I don't.

Instead I say, "I'll see what I can do."

What I like best about Mel is that he's always himself in the dreamscape. No, that's not right. He just *looks* like himself: big meaty haunches, magnif-icent belly flop, shoulders wide enough to boost a piano. He could dream himself a swimmer's body or a boytoy's face but he never does. I used to think it was because he didn't care, but now my guess is that he believes that I like the way he really looks. Maybe he's right. Anyway, he's as com-fortable when I dream him naked as when I want the top hat, white tie and tails. Comfortable. There's the difference. Mel lays a burden down when he falls asleep. If only I knew what it was, maybe I could help him carry it when we're awake.

We're tight-rope walking high above the city. It is snowing feathers. I am ahead of Mel but I don't need to look back to know he's there. I hear the feathers falling on him because they sizzle and melt like spit on a hot iron. It must be very late because all the houses are dark, although the streets are awash in daylight. I notice that the rope is geometrically small, a collec-tion of midnight points. Individual snowflakes teeter-totter on our rope. Coming toward me in the opposite direction is Mister Mid-American Vocal Stylings. He is pushing a Norfolk Island pine in a terracotta pot along our rope. It's Mel who is dreaming him; this annoys me. I glare back over my shoulder. Mel is covered in Christmas wrapping paper—a candy cane and toy drum pattern. He crinkles as he reaches up to the nape of my neck. I feel him grasping the zipper of my dress between his thick fingers and then he is unzipping me. The night caresses my shoulder blades and the curve of my spine; it makes goose flesh on my buttocks. Then we topple off our rope and my dress flaps away like a crow and Mel traces the line of my jaw and he looks sad for a moment as we fall but then our bellies touch and oh, Mel, oh, oh, *oh!*

So I'm all alone on Christmas Eve. Mom is out doing whatever dead women do at night and Mel is just plain out. He hasn't been home much since he came looking for me and when he is here he hasn't got much to say. He's probably out looking for a new apartment. Or a new girlfriend.

I hear Mom fumbling with the door around eleven-thirty. Sometimes it takes her a couple of minutes to key the access code, so I let her in. "You're still up," she says.

"Holiday tomorrow," I say. "They call it Christmas."

"Where's Mel?" She touches her wig, as if to make sure it's on straight.

"Haven't seen him." I shrug. "Maybe he's up on the roof waiting for San-ta."

"You're in a mood tonight."

"I am," I say, hoping she'll take the hint and leave me to grump in peace.

"I'll be in the living room," she says, "if you want me."

"Good. I'll be in here."

I listen to her putter around for a few minutes, which is okay, but when she starts to hum "Blue Christmas," I get up to go to my room except the kitchen table chirps. "Eleven-thirty-nine," it says. "Mel's calling."

"Answer," I say.

He's at the lab, rocking back and forth in front of the webcam. "Jennifer, there's something I want you to do." An appeal glyph appears on the screen.

"Mel, come home."

"Find the top present on your pile under the tree." He looks as if he's try-ing to swallow a golf ball. "It has your name on it; the wrapping paper is red with candy canes and drums. Open it, okay, and then...you'll know." He clicks off before I can reply.

This is odd, but very Mel. Unfortunately I must now go into the living room where my mother will leap to the conclusion that I am interested in what she has to say.

She's next to the tree, tapping a cut-glass bell. "Your father bought this for me the Christmas I was pregnant." It clinks like a spoon in a teacup.

"Coming behind you." I retrieve the present, which is flat and about the size of my hand.

"What's that?" She watches me open an individually wrapped Krazy Kane. I haven't seen one of these before. "It looks like the candy canes we used to put in your stocking," says Mom and then she sighs. "I want to talk to you about Dad."

"A party in your mouth, it says here." I do not want this conversation. "Yummy fruit flavors spiced with jolly mood enhancers. Product of Conti-ental Confection Corporation." I pretend to study the list of ingredients. "I don't get it. He hates CCC." I peel the wrapper.

"Why didn't you tell me your father was so unhappy?"

WHY? I want to wail. **BECAUSE I'M NOT GOING TO HOLD THE NAIL ANYMORE WHILE YOU TWO POUND IT INTO MY HEAD. I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WORSE, THE WAY HE HANGS AROUND ALL DAY LIKE A BAD SMELL OR THE WAY YOU GO STAGGERING OFF EVERY BLEEDING BLUE NIGHT TO DO I DON'T KNOW WHAT AND THEN COME HOME AND PRETEND YOU'RE MY MOTHER, WHICH IS A SICK ZOMBIE GAME, BECAUSE MY REAL MOM WOULD NEVER, EVER HAVE DONE THIS TO ME.**

But I don't.

Instead I stick the Krazy Kane into my mouth. At first it yields a sweet, spicy heat, which flares right to the edge of pain and then retreats with a tingling sensation that slides across the palate like mint champagne. I feel the tip of the Krazy Kane ravel and when I pull it out I can see that the red stripe is unwinding from the white peppermint base and separating into thin flavor threads.

"He left me a note," says Mom. "I found it this morning."

The kitchen table chirps again. "Eleven forty-seven. Mel calling." I rush to answer, twirling the Krazy Kane against my tongue, happy for an excuse to get away from her.

"How is it?" he says.

"It's yours, isn't it?"

He sags back in his chair and the camera catches the sheen of sweat at his temples. "It's Continental, you know. CCC. All they want is product, they could care less about art. I thought you might be mad, so I kept the whole thing a secret."

"You didn't need to."

"And then I thought you might hate the taste and hate me for selling out."

"No, it's great."

"Really?" The relief glyph flashes.

"Really."

A smile floods across his face. "You're not going to believe this, but I was so afraid you wouldn't like it that I didn't want to be there—actually I couldn't be there in case you didn't...you wouldn't..."

"I know." As the red threads dissolve, my tongue curls around cherry, raspberry, strawberry. "Come home now, Mel."

"Right." He jerks forward as if he means to dive through my screen, then remembers to click off.

"What are you doing in here?" Mom comes to the doorway, the light of the tree blinking behind her.

"That was Mel. He's on his way."

She settles onto the throne. "Jennifer, your father made a terrible mistake when he bought this thing." She fixes me with her mother's stare, as if challenging me to contradict her. "I don't why I let him talk me into it."

The kitchen table chirps again. "Twelve-oh-one. Merry Christmas. Mel calling."

"Answer." I love him, but he's starting to annoy me again.

Mel is still at his desk; he has turned his glyphs off. "Oh hi, Jennifer, there's something I forgot to tell you." He is shooting for nonchalance, but his aim sucks. "Remember the candy machine the other day? Well, I was going to buy you a Krazy Kane then. Your first." He could see that I was getting impatient and so he started talking faster. "Only that guy came out to yell at you." And *faster*. "Now you might be wondering how I knew that the machine would have Krazy Kanes, well, I looked of course, and it did, but that's not much of a surprise, because they're selling really well, actually, better than well, they were CCC's number two grosser last week and well, we're rich, well, not *rich* rich, but rich enough to afford a place of our own if you want because I know you're not that happy living with your parents so I thought it would be kind of a good Christmas present..."

"That's great, Mel. Really. But just come home. I really want you here with me just now."

I can't believe he is wringing his hands. "I can't." He stares down at them as if he can't believe it either.

"You can't come home?"

"I can, but first I have to tell you something and then I have to click off." He is pale as bananarama. "I love you, Jennifer" he says, "and I hope you love me and if you do then I think we should get married and if that's okay with you then call me right back." The kitchen table goes blank.

"Good for him," says Mom, "although I saw this coming a couple of weeks ago." She is doing her best to smile. "So what are you waiting for?"

YES, I want to shout. YES, YES, *OH YES*.

And then I do.