

Chapter 1

“The one I loved and hated for fifty years . . . two thirds of my life . . . the most vivid personality I ever knew, reduced to a few soiled sheets. An urn of ashes.”

He sobbed.

Deep-sea anglerfish merge their bodies when they mate so the two become one, he mused. *That’s what happened to us, together for so many years, we became one.*

He staggered around the big empty house and finally collapsed.

He found himself sitting in the blue bedroom, working on the first computer he’d ever built.

Ada showed up wearing a bathrobe.

“I still hate this bedroom!” she boomed, radiating more vitality than she’d had in years.

Shocked, he stammered, “Aren’t . . . aren’t you . . . ?”

“Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated. Jesus! You look like a *smacked ass!* You shouldn’t worry so much.”

He found himself tangled in sheets.

“It was a dream,” he sighed. “Too good to be true.”

He thought of when he first spoke to her, some 50 years ago.

It was on the phone.

“I’m Ernest,” he’d said.

“Is that your name or your state of mind?”

They’d talked for hours.

She told him how her family had escaped from Communist East Germany, how they were Mormons (“But not me! I’m as un-Mormon as they get!”) living in Salt Lake City.

She worked in a hospital chemistry lab.

“I just got over job-related hepatitis. Almost killed me.”

“How do you get hepatitis from your job?” he’d said.

“You pipette bodily fluids by mouth. The other day, a co-worker swallowed a mouthful of syphilitic spinal fluid.”

That hepatitis was a ticking time bomb that ultimately brought you down.

“Don’t they have safety rules? You could use rubber bulbs to suck on the pipettes. Like a turkey baster.”

“It slows things down,” Ada had replied. “Everything we do is *stat!* That means *get it done yesterday!* Doctors call the lab constantly saying things like ‘if my patient dies, it’ll be your fault!’”

So . . . they went on a date at what became their favorite restaurant in the world, *La Savilla*, in the west Village.

One date led to another and another and another.

He proposed to her and she accepted.

They had blood tests and went to New York’s massive city hall building to get a marriage license.

Ada wanted to be married by a judge.

“Look at the prisoners being dragged off to jail,” she said. “Too depressing!”

Afterward, they went to a bar and had drinks.

Ernest ordered a Manhattan, and the female bartender said, “I figured you for that drink!”

She screwed it up.

“I figured you for that mistake!” Ada said,

Ada solved their problem: every hospital, including where she worked, had a chapel where they could have their wedding.

The chaplain insisted on baptizing Ernest.

When it came to the part of the Nicene Creed involving “rejecting the devil and all his works”, Ernest had replied “Hell yes!”

They’d recently seen the new movie, *The Exorcist*.

The wedding had been beautiful.

Ada’s parents had flown in from Salt Lake City, and Ernest’s parents had promised to stay sober.

A cloud of blue flowers filled the room, left over from a funeral.

Ernest wore a gray suit, and Ada a brown dress.

Ada’s co-workers and many doctors attended in their white lab coats, some carrying glass pipettes.

He and Ada said their vows, as Ada’s mother sobbed.

Ernest offered the chaplain a donation.

He refused it, saying, “My wedding present to you two. Just be happy!”

Their wedding “banquet” was at a local Chinese restaurant, where Ada’s mother announced that she was appalled that the best man had been “a *verdammt* hippie!”

Ernest’s father ordered a double martini.

Their honeymoon was a night at a local Holiday Inn overlooking a busy highway.

Ernest recalled a time when they were living in Binghamton, New York.

Ada had complained about a snack counter at the local Sears store.

“No one’s ever there! How can you get a snack?”

Somehow, that heartfelt need triggered in Ernest a surge of love for her, at that moment, and he kissed her passionately.

“Why did you do that?” she’d said.

“I don’t know.”

The last time he’d kissed her, her face was cold, her mouth open, and her white teeth glowed like pearls.

“Goodnight sweet queen, may a chariot of angels carry you to your rest,” he’d murmured as he’d kissed her cheek.

Was I a good husband, a decent human being? There were times I didn’t love you. There were times I hated you.

“I always tried to treat you right,” he said, to no one in particular.

Only the good die young. She was a better person than me in many ways.

The day after their honeymoon, Ada’s parents helped the new couple move into an apartment on Staten Island, near where Ada worked.

Actually, Ada’s father, Heinz Wagner, did most of the work.

He was a soft-spoken bear of a man who could easily lift Ernest’s huge couch and carry it on his back.

A contrast to his loud wife.

Their new apartment was twice as big as the hovel Ernest had occupied, and with lower rent.

Ada’s mother presented them with a loaf of bread and a pound of salt, “So you will never go hungry.”

He would have to commute to school on the Staten Island Ferry.

Commuting turned out to be a surprisingly pleasant experience.