

Chapter 1 : Victor's Last Felix

A few months after he killed Warren's mother, Victor thought about spending some time with him. There was nothing for it but to talk his best friend Roman into driving to the house.

Warren was probably bored, being in the incubator, and he was short a parent. Victor's latest wife Veronica was gone for good, with baby girls. Veronica wouldn't let Victor see them since he'd named the babies after himself – Victoria and Victoria – while Veronica was unconscious.

Victor was in a baby mood. He and Warren were a perfect fit. Victor was going to listen to the nominations with Roman at a hotel bar in downtown LA, but once he thought about what a great idea it was if he was with Warren too, bonding with him, he knocked the drink right out of Roman's hand so that Roman could drive.

The roads were quiet and the seashore was dark.

Victor's cottage was at the knob-end of a black ridge overlooking Santa Barbara. The baby was in Victor's own room, overlooking the sea cliff, surrounded by avocado trees and Victor's prize-winning lily garden, because it had the only doorway wide enough for an incubator. It opened into Victor's office in one direction, and Veronica's bedroom in another. The nurse was asleep in Veronica's room.

Roman lay down in Veronica's bed and fell asleep.

Warren's room was striped with early morning sun.

Victor closed the door to the nurse's room and set up his pocket radio.

"How are you?" he said to the baby.

Warren woke up, so Victor felt encouraged.

"I had dinner with Ferd last week. Yeah. Your daddy Ferd! He looks good.

Yeah! Your daddy looks good!"

"I mean, considering."

He saw himself in the baby's shiny eyes. His muscular, heavy body had a tan as dark and scuffed as a camel's, and he wore velvet over white linen pajamas. His profile was sharp in the light and the rest of his head, still in the dark, was slick black. He had a square brow with bulging eyebrows, apple green eyes, and a famous triangular beard full of cigarette ash.

"Hey kid, can I tell you something?"

The baby said nothing and Victor trusted him. There were still six minutes left before the broadcast. Victor paced out a circle and his face went from light to dark to light.

"Can I tell you something? Can I tell you something? My first movie, *Bathysphere*? My wife's stupid sister – my wife Olivia, my second wife? Her sister Isobel? She was such a whore... She tried to steal the take from my first saxophone gig on the *Evening Hour*... Did you know that? And I mean whore because she sure took that fifty dollars when she..."

The phone rang.

Horrified by its shattering noise, Victor grabbed up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Victor? Victor?”

It was Stella Grattecon-Swyve, the 'collaborator' the studio had tried to force on his screenplay for *The Holographic Forest*.

“Victor, I had nothing to do with it!”

How had she found him?

“Yeah?”

“Don't be that way! It was my son! I'm just as upset as you are!”

She made him tired.

“Yeah?”

“It's just disrespectful – and childish! I want you to know it wasn't my idea! I told him not to!”

“Yeah... you said that.”

“But... what do you want to do about it? If you call them right now, yourself, maybe you can fix it!”

Victor glanced at the brass ship's clock by Warren's crib. The nominations would air any moment.

“No time. I gotta go,” he said.

“Don't you care!”

Victor sighed.

“Look, lady, who is this?”

The boy began to cry.

“I gotta go,” he said. He picked up the crying baby. Victor had held many babies and it was easy. “I was telling you,” he crooned, “about Isobel...”

He hung up on Stella.

“Shows her,” Victor sang softly, “pick betweeeeen... a five thousand, dollar, sax-o-phone... gimmeee by Ornette, himselfff, and a fiteeeee dollar bill... She takes the moneeeee... because she, doesn’t know, what a fucking, sax-o-phone, is!”

Warren's cries softened into anguished gasps, and Victor lowered his voice even more.

He murmured, “I made my first movie, with the money I made blowing that fucking thing, yeah, little guy, it was a real Mark VI, and she never blew right even when I paid her. I paid her fiteee dollars. Not that I care about money now, your nanny charges a hundred bucks to... And that’s, not, the point.” He trailed off.

“The point is, I deserve this, I worked hard, nobody gave me anything. I mean, I go in and pitch a picture and I say, it’s based on the legend of Cardenio and Luscinda, and the college boys say, who the fuck’s Cardenio? Can you believe it?”

Victor laid the boy in the crib and sat on the diaper-changing bench.

“So Veronica left me?”

He said it like he was asking for a glass of water.

“Third wife to give up? Goddamn leave me alone?”

The baby gave him such a scornful look that Victor collapsed. “No, no, I know! I’m sorry! I know what I did to you and Ferd was wrong! I didn’t know I could kill! It

was basically an accident! I'm sorry! I'll protect you, okay? Money. Nurses! Heck, you can keep this nurse as long as you want! Stay in there another year! I don't care! Money can't bring your mother back..."

Warren was in the incubator for six months already, in an orange stucco room overlooking chaparral brush, valley and ocean. The longer the baby baked, the lawyers said, the better it sounded in all the lawsuits. Plus there were two lazy medical nurses, a wet-nurse, and a new illegal maid who did most of the work for the least money.

"It... was an accident, you know? I didn't know how great I was..."

Victor opened the window and sat in it. He tried to light a cigar with a fireplace match but it wouldn't take. He bit off the end and spat it out, tried to light it and bit it again, spat.

The cigar unwrapped itself and fell apart into dust.

"Warren! Did you see--"

Victor sadly lit a dry little cigarette.

"JFK gave me that cigar. I was saving it."

The sun squeezed into the horizon and onto his back. Victor opened the shutters to blow out his smoke.

"Genius... is so often cursed, you know? I really came to love your mother at the end. It's my fault she's gone."

He looked, for the first time in months, at his prize-winning lily garden.

"Oh... Oh!"

He saw a silver swarm of dirty, shaggy, stinking, hungry, chomping unicorns.

“Oh no no no no!”

Victor called about his lilies every day but was still shocked by how bad they were – squashed and brown. Wild unicorns liked nothing better than celebrity baby gossip and were idiotically fascinated with Warren. They ganged up below the window, sniffing the crib, flipping their manes and giggling like girls trying to get backstage. They stomped his grounds and shat in the mud. Victor’s gardener defended the unicorns, saying the glittering orange crap was worth a fortune and he was mulching it into fertilizer, but Victor privately thought he was in fact stealing the shit to sell by a highway on-ramp. Victor had also guessed that if he wanted to keep his own shit that he’d have to give his gardener a raise, and he’d be damned if he was giving a raise for a garden full of pests.

“Get away! Get off my property!” Victor yelled, throwing himself out the window at them. The pack scattered. “Those lilies are going to win the Lytell Cup!”

Now he was lying to unicorns.

He lit another cigarette and blew smoke at the lily-scented crap.

He was tired.

He watched the big pineapple-yellow sun rise. The hills were quiet. He liked it here. He should come down more often.

Behind him, he heard Tasmia Mallor's cultured voice saying, “--actress in a supporting role, Celeste Yarnall, in *The Mechanic*; Eve Channing, in *Sleuth*; Carol Connors...”

The Felix nominations! The Awards! She started without him!

Victor threw down his cigarette and hauled himself back in the window.

“Did Tas say, did Julia get it?”

Warren stared back at him, bored.

“...for best performance by an actor in a supporting role, Christopher Meadowbrook, in *200 Motels*; Michael Greene, in *Aspirins for Three*...”

Victor lit his cigarette, sniffed, smelled smoke. Mucky smoke. Oh Christ, the cigarette... He saw a little burning heap in the middle of the unicorn footprints and dry brush. He climbed back out the window and stamped the old cigarette. He'd already lost one house to a flash fire.

He stuck his head in the window.

“Did you hear if Nick Lenore got supporting?”

“For best performance by an actress...”

“This one's for Veronica, Warren. If she doesn't get this I'm going to make a snuff film starring me.”

Warren burped.

“Pam Grier, in *Women in Cages*...”

“Come on, come on...”

“...Darlene Duralia, in *The Incredible Transplant*...”

Victor bit through his cigarette. The coal fell in his sock. Squawking and jumping he barely heard, “...Veronica Dannreuther, in *The Holographic Forest*, Shiela Fraizer...”

“YES!”

He flung his smoking sock over his shoulder. Warren burst into tears.

“Oh, oh, kiddo, sorry!”

Victor climbed in the window, picked Warren up and danced with him, one hand behind the baby’s head, the other supporting his fat little back.

“Best actress, *The Holographic Forest*,” he sang to Warren. “That’s me, best actress, *Holographic Forest*, that’s me.”

He looked for a phone so he could call Veronica, and missed the best actor nominations.

“Hush hush, kid,” he whispered. Warren put his dark little head on Victor’s shoulder. “This is it. Director. Me! Here I come! Best Actress, Director, Screenplay, Picture. Four nominations! Four is okay!”

They were announcing best director.

Gerardo de Leon.

“Gerardo?”

Woody Allen.

“Woody, yeah...”

Al Adamson.

“AL!”

Tony Palmer.

“TONY!!! TONY!!!”

Paul Bartel.

“PAUL! PAUL! PAUL! PAUL! PAUL!”

They moved on.

His category was gone.

Victor kept stumbling around, yet cradling Warren, protecting the baby's neck and head.

“Screen play based on material previously produced or published--”

“Paul...”

Veronica's machine finally answered.

“Veronica Dannreuther, best actress nominee for *The Holographic Forest--*”

Victor hung up in disgust.

“The nominees are, Stella Grattecon-Swyve, for *The Holographic Forest--*”

Victor stopped still.

Had he misheard?

“—based on *Baron Guillermo and the Enchanted Grove* by Stella Grattecon-Swyve—”

“Stella?”

“--based on *Aspirins for Three* by--”

Was that smoke in the garden?

They had credited Stella for his screenplay.

But, he wrote *The Holographic Forest*.

He leaned out the window, sniffing. Lilies, shit, tobacco, baby milk.

They had credited Stella for his screenplay!

Was his house on fire?

THEY HAD CREDITED STELLA FOR HIS SCREENPLAY!

He laid the boy in his crib.

Stella! Stella wouldn't even – That bitch had nothing to do with the screenplay!

He went out the window again while watching for a hint of smoke.

The genesis of *The Holographic Forest* was an old Italian folio he found on honeymoon. It was smack on the center of his desk. He could see it from where he stood, sparkling in the fog. Stella only came in because his producer wanted a big name – and then she wouldn't let him use it! It ended up pure Fishfire just like it should!

He barely heard the announcements for Best Picture – *The Touch of Melissa*, *Aspirins for Three*, *Women in Cages*, *200 Motels* and *The Incredible Transplant* – because the unfairness had clawed at him like an iron hook. He was dazed, helpless.

It was over. The announcements were over.

For one brutal moment he was going to jump from the top of the house, over the fence, over the black cliff, onto the rocks. Unicorns swirled around him. They smelled the baby. They were laughing.

He knew how good *The Holographic Forest* was!

“GET AWAY FROM ME YOU GOD DAMNED ANIMALS!”

The unicorns giggled and ran in all directions.

Victor sat down in the mud.

He doodled the opening credits of *The Holographic Forest* in the dirt.

He said:

“Pauline Kael said *The Holographic Forest* was 'one of the most charming and entertaining movies ever made.' I out-grossed *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*. There is no question I am absolutely the best.”

This was punishment.

Because he had killed Warren's mother. He had killed Perpetua Pax with his greatness.

He looked one last time through the window at baby Warren.

“Oh, crap.”

The flaming sock was on his desk, in a nest of papers. He could smell the leather folio burning. As he watched, the flame clambered up the curtains and dripped down the dry ivy edging Victor's windows, into his garden.

Victor unwound the garden hose.

The other actors had been loyal and been rewarded with big new pictures, from him, from his studio. Veronica alone broke away and spoke against him. The others had profited, but she, she was given honor.

He took off his shirt and soaked it. He climbed in the window, shut the door to his office, and laid his wet shirt against the lintel, to protect the baby.

And they credited Stella with his screenplay...

He soaked his desk, inside and out, with long strokes. Then he moved outward in widening strips of water until the grass and green was entirely wet. The burning unicorn shit smelled of roses.

His lilies were drowned.

Everyone had turned against him.

They had convicted him.

He rolled up the wet hose.

They would deny his genius its due rewards.

Screenplay and nothing else! That was how they said you were – you were pretty enough to fuck but not good enough to take home!

He wrote a note and left it in Roman's hands.

MAKE SURE HOUSE IS NOT ON FIRE AGAIN.

THX – VICTOR

He went out, pushed the doorbell three times to wake everyone, got in his car, and drove back to the city. He turned the radio off. He heard them already.

They had said: Get Out.

He Got Out.

He left the cars and the houses, and packed up his goldfish. He bought a ship ticket.

Victor Fishfire, boy wonder, wouldn't make another picture for thirty years.

When the lawsuits were resolved enough, Warren was deemed fit to travel. He and Ferd drove home to Larkin, British Columbia, Canada. Victor kept paying the nurses, so they went, though they were annoyed to lose Victor's fabulous house. They drove back in the van, Ferd driving, the nurses dozing and caring for young Warren. Though Warren had no memory of this, as an adult he always had a nostalgic homey feeling in gas station bathrooms.

Chapter 2 : Hamadryad's Retirement

John's cousin Hamadryad came to live in Larkin because when she was eleven she got tits and so had to retire.

Hamadryad had wanted to go to Larkin her whole life. She had always wanted to meet Warren Pax.

Hamadryad's mother was Veronica Dannreuther, who was by then married to Zeus Botticelli, who had co-starred with her in *The Holographic Forest*. She was also having an affair with Victor Fishfire.

When she got pregnant, she told Victor immediately. "The baby's yours," she insisted.

"That's great!" Victor said. "I want her to have the most wholesome upbringing possible, hon. She'll be on *Sunrise Trail*. And then, *Aloha Panda's Adventures in Swyveland*. I can't have a career anymore, but she will."

Hamadryad learned to dance, sing, mime, play the violin, and speak to doves. By her eleventh birthday she had been promoted to Briga-Deer over the entire Aloha Panda regiment. This meant her party would be held during the opening of a brand-new Swyveland, in Vancouver, in Canada. The fresh Aloha Panda hotel was like the throat of a glittering lily, with the shining, clattering arms of the amusement park curled out around it. Wrapping high to one side was a walkway to Guillermo's Flying Carpet, which one approached from a broad wooded avenue leading out to the front entrance.

And beyond the gates, on the grass, were a pair of colorful orange plastic tarps, heaped with Aloha Panda merchandise. The tarps were magic, but everything else – especially the money – was real.

“T-shirts! Getcher t-shirts! Backpacks, calculators, pencils, socks! Stuffed Aloha Pandas! Hwaaa-aaaaah!”

Three East Indian teenage girls and two East Indian teenage boys, all in jeans and crisp Aloha Panda t-shirts, none older than fifteen, were doing a steady stream of business.

“Aloha Panda fishing flies! Mira, do we have any Lady Vampire vanity sets left?”

“Sorry, Durvasa, I broke the last one. Bad luck! Sir, how about a Snowflake Princess snow globe? Contains actual snow!”

Mira – tall, thin, high-shouldered, with waist-long black hair – handed the man a snow globe. He gave her some money and she put it in her pocket.

“This is a nice little bear,” said another woman to her husband.

“Best in town,” Mira said. “Our Aloha Pandas are hand stitched with the finest silk thread. Comes with a complimentary sewing kit!”

Mira expected to clear twenty thousand dollars that night by selling counterfeit toys off a tarp that was enchanted to look like a legitimate park kiosk, even to other park employees. No one would know they'd been there except the people who were happy to get such quality merchandise at such low prices. She was radiant.

Inside, the Lady Vampire brought in Hamadryad's glowing birthday cake, Ffilis brought in Hamadryad's presents, and Mother Swyve kissed Hamadryad on both cheeks. Hamadryad was at the center of dozens of beautiful boys and girls, and she presided like a beautiful child queen over the lot of them. She commanded popular songs and elaborate dances. Like tennis nets, the other children stiffened and rose when needed, and during breaks, all sank to the ground.

“Are you having a good time, sweetheart?”

Veronica, with auburn hair heaped in disoriented curls and long, lovely body wrapped in almond lace, dropped a transparent tissue-wrapped box of Veronica Dannreuther's Bottle of Dreams perfume onto the heap of Hamadryad's gifts.

“Oh, mother, it's lovely. I rode the Self-Raising Flower cups and the Princess in the Ocean mermaid boats. They're wonderful!”

“That's nice... I'm so glad. I'm going upstairs for a drinkie now dear. Send someone up if you need me... Lainey! Lainey! Elaine!” Veronica frowned. “Where is that girl? Have you seen her? She has my purse!”

Elaine was Veronica's assistant.

“Send her along when you see her, dear.”

Veronica plunged majestically away between the beribboned tables.

“Aloha Panda acne cream! Guitar picks! Guillermo Granola bars!”

Mira and sisters each carried huge wads of cash and chattering sacks of gold and silver coins. A careful girl, though she didn't believe they would be caught, she stationed

lookouts, and so when the police actually did arrive to sweep them away, they were long gone. Her brothers had swept all the goods up into bindles – the orange tarps had a modest nonmagical brown plastic underside – and her sisters had gone away even sooner with the money. Mira herself, flummoxed by the cops, chose to push further in. She wanted to know how they had been seen.

There was something funny about the whole place, but that happened sometimes, in areas designed to make people react a certain way. Mira was not very experienced at navigating it yet. So she went to basics. She closed her eyes and sniffed the air. She allowed her primitive brain to collect it all, and squatted above, sorting, watching for a red thread to follow. When the thread emerged strong enough, she popped it from her mind and walked along it like a tightrope artist.

At the end, it was cold, and she felt she was very high. She opened her eyes and glanced down. She was at the top of a tree, a hundred feet above the ground.

Still following the thread, she ran across single leaves on the tiniest branches, until she had to jump. With both hands she grabbed a balcony ledge, and hung there. She looked up, into the startled eyes of a man in evening dress.

“Hi,” she said. “I think I know you.”

A small row broke out about lighting the final number, and someone called, “take ten, everyone.” Hamadryad stood, stretched, cracked her arms and legs, and trotted quickly to the executive ladies room. She found plump Elaine snoring quietly in a white tub chair, with Veronica's squarely enormous brown leather bag resting gently in her lap.

At first Hamadryad only wanted some aspirin, and so opened her mother's purse. Then she found a beautiful rose red lipstick in a gold tube, and so dabbed it experimentally on her wide, soft mouth. She had worn makeup before – hundreds of peach, pink, mauve, purple glitter gloss. But she was eleven now – nearly a teenager. The red turned her mouth into a woman's mouth.

Hamadryad locked the door and dragged the purse over to the table by the gold-edged mirror. She found a pair of huge round black sunglasses and put them on, and then a scarf around her hair, like she'd seen in some old pictures. Near the bottom was a hard plastic box about the size of a pencil case, with a woman in her bra on the cover. It contained two wobbling, soft plastic shapes, like unmoulded puddings, which were slightly sticky and knobby on the back. Hamadryad had never been alone with them before and at first had forgotten what they were for, until she touched one. They were breast forms.

She glanced back at Elaine, and then down at herself. Her dress was fitted pink taffeta with spangles, and it would not tolerate a sudden change of her shape. Hamadryad tore more into the handbag, looking for a change of clothes, and finally turned up a slender roll of black silk that shook out into a thigh-length sheath that was only slightly wrinkled, and some webbed underclothes. That would do. She folded it all up – the lipstick and a few other cosmetics, the sunglasses, the dress, and the forms – and wrapped them in the scarf. Then she wiped off the lipstick and woke Elaine.

“Mother's looking for you,” she said, and turned briskly away. When she got back to her birthday party she tucked the bundle into one of her own gift bags, and waited

until the event ended. Then she went back to the ladies room, locked the door, and stepped out of her little pink dress.

The thong fit her well enough; the bra was a bit loose on the smallest setting. She snapped a thigh-high stocking onto each leg. She tucked the first form over her left breast and meticulously adjusted it until it moved naturally. The right was easier. Then she put on the lipstick and some green and copper eyeshadow. She stepped into her shoes, which were small silver slippers with a lower heel than she had wished, and now paused to look at herself critically in the full length mirror for the first time.

The heel was high enough to give shape to her legs, and though the forms hadn't seemed like much in the box, now that she was wearing them the bra was nearly too tight. She adjusted the seam at the back of her stockings, loosened the bra, and looked again.

She didn't know what she was seeing. She had become someone she no longer knew. Her confidence began to shrivel, and she decided to put on the dress. That made it easier. She'd worn her mother's dresses with tissue stuffed in the top before and this was not so much different. Besides, it was her party, and all those adults had taken it over. She was entitled to be at her own birthday party!

She patted down the dress and practiced walking in front of the mirror. The movement of her breasts was both pleasing and unsettling. As she moved more they felt more natural and she convinced herself that it was just another role. It was just a costume like many she'd worn before.

She put on the sunglasses, wrapped the scarf over her hair, and went out.

She followed the lights and the sound of laughter, but the hotel was huge and confusing, and she was afraid to ask for directions in case her voice was recognized. She climbed a huge split staircase and went down a plush carpeted hallway toward, what she thought, was the party, and found two doors.

She listened at the left, and at the right, and finally chose the left.

She walked into a large, darkened living room, and for a moment was annoyed at choosing wrong. Then she saw a handsome man, smoking, out on the balcony, in the moonlight, and, holding her breath, walked forward.

She could conquer one attractive man easier than an entire room, she thought. But he wasn't looking at her. She saw him in profile, looking down.

He was tall and thin, in a fitted white tuxedo. He wore black wire glasses on a long pointed nose and had thick, gleaming auburn hair. At first Hamadryad thought he was sixty or even older, though he had a good figure, because he had such deep lines around his eyes. As she came closer she saw they were not wrinkles, but scars, tattoos, suns cut and dyed into his face. He looked like he'd had a broken dye bottle beautifully ground into each eye.

He was terribly good-looking.

She knew him at once. Everybody knew him. He was Swyveland CEO Andrei Grattecon-Swyve.

He raised his polished foot.

Slowly, as if in a dream, Andrei brought it down, and Hamadryad saw, he was stepping on a girl's fingers. She was hanging from the edge of the balcony, but seemed as unconcerned as if she was on an exercise bar, not a hundred feet above cobblestones.

“I'll call security,” he said.

“Oh come on,” Mira said. She snatched her hand away from under his foot and blew on her scraped fingers. “I'm not a cat burglar or something. I'm like you, sort of. Why did you call the police? We should be in business together. Our kind should co-operate.”

“You want to *work* with me...”

He looked thunderstruck.

Hamadryad stopped moving, even breathing.

“Well yeah,” she said. “Why not? I can give you good merchandise and you can have a cut of the counterfeit profits. Don't you want another way to make money?”

He started to giggle like his throat had cracked and sound was spraying out.

“In *business*?” he squeaked.

Mira nodded.

There was a long moment where both girls could see Andrei thinking.

“We'll have a meeting,” he said. “Here.” He put a business card in her scuffed hand.

“Thanks,” she said. “I'll be in touch.” She gripped the edge of the balcony and swung, forward, back, forward, back, up, and onto the balcony railing. She saw

Hamadryad – their eyes met for a moment. Mira smiled, then leapt easily away, into a nearby tree, and swarmed down into the dusk.

Andrei leaned on the rail, watching and shaking.

Hamadryad coughed very softly.

Andrei turned around and looked at her.

With an excellent French accent, Hamadryad asked for, “your adorable American smoukes, je t'aime.”

He looked puzzled for a second, then snapped open his cigarette case.

“Of course.”

He put the cigarette between her glowing teeth and lit a fresh one in his own mouth. It trembled a little. He took Hamadryad's shoulders in his hands and turned her the way he wanted. He leaned toward her. Those terrible scars were closing in. The wavering, searing light at the end of his cigarette approached her shiny red mouth.

The door opened.

It was Victor Fishfire.

“Andrei, Veronica asked me to see if you need a drink?”

Then he saw them, and Veronica came in behind.

Victor broke the cigarettes.

Veronica came in and broke his teeth.

Then in came all the paparazzi who had wangled tickets to what was now the hottest party in town.