

Seven Cities of Greed

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The Goose With the Golden Eggs

One day a countryman going to the nest of his Goose found there an egg all yellow and glittering. When he took it up it was as heavy as lead and he was going to throw it away, because he thought a trick had been played upon him. But he took it home on second thoughts, and soon found to his delight that it was an egg of pure gold. Every morning the same thing occurred, and he soon became rich by selling his eggs. As he grew rich he grew greedy; and thinking to get at once all the gold the Goose could give, he killed it and opened it only to find nothing.

Greed oft o'er reaches itself.

Aesop's Fables

To Skip

I embark upon a journey in this year of our Lord 1539 with Father Marcos de Niza. The priest will lead an expedition through uncharted lands north of New Spain where we will search for the Seven Cities of Cibola, the Cities of Gold. I have heard that compared to these cities, Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital destroyed by Cortés, was a village of paupers. My life began in poverty, but it will not end the same way. The Spaniards can have the land. I will have the gold.

Chapter 1

An almost forgotten child's face startled Jackie as it appeared through the haze. "I'm asleep," she muttered, basing her hunch on decades of experience with the unconscious state. That knowledge failed, however, to explain the ghostly image. If it meant to resolve a real life problem, as dreams often did, understanding the message might require a course in dream analysis or code breaking.

Pale yellow hair, soft as corn silk, flowed over the young girl's shoulder as she knelt to wave a reproachful finger. The air around her moved in a suggestive flutter, like gauzy curtains at the first hint of a storm. It gave the scene a fairytale quality and reminded Jackie of a fable she'd read long ago. In it, an evil witch imprisoned three maidens in a cave and forced them to spin flax into golden threads. The spun gold hair of the child fit nicely, but her voice sounded harsh beyond its years. "You weren't supposed to come here anymore. Don't you remember what happened last time?"

Other senses stirred. Noxious fumes of rubber and oil stung Jackie's nostrils to gain entry and cast doubt on the sleep theory. For as long as she could remember, rose and lavender scented the air of her bedroom, not petroleum products. There were noises, too soft and muffled to identify, but they echoed as if in a small space. *Maybe I'm in the garage*, she considered through the mush. *Why would I be on the garage floor?*

Jackie stretched, or tried too, only to find vague unresponsive lumps where she remembered arms and legs. Something flickered—a memory—or perhaps a movie she'd seen. A woman stepped from her car searching her purse for house keys when a noise distracted her. Before she could react, a thick arm wrapped around her neck and pressed a hand over her mouth. The scene fast-forwarded and a needle punctured her sleeve. Almost at once, her vision darkened and the house blurred. *They drugged me. Why? Where the hell am I?*

The slab beneath her began to vibrate and she recognized a new sound. *Oh, dear god, no. I'm in the trunk of a car. This isn't happening.* She renewed her struggle to break free—not from a dream, but from a nightmare even sleep would not allow.



“Geez.” Pat smashed the remote’s power button in disgust and tossed the control to the coffee table. Her limited budget allowed her to watch only those stations attracted to the television’s archaic rabbit ears. Even more depressing was that after dutifully attaching the analog-to-digital converter box, it failed to improve the content of a single show. “How bad does this crap have to get before I stop watching?” She cleared a space on the table

for her glasses and shifted to face the couch's coarse fabric. Anything was better than the offending screen.

At one hundred and eight pounds, Pat's five-foot-two-inch frame defined petite. Her lack of body fat had little to do with watching what she ate. She simply didn't think about food. A tap on the top of her head drew her attention from the drab green upholstery to the pushy black paw of her cat, Zodiac. The feline stretched across the back of the couch in a potentially hazardous pose with Pat directly in striking range. One of Zodiac's many duties was to remind her distracted human when they needed to eat. Sometimes a quick swat proved the most practical solution.

She lifted the cat to her stomach. "Hi, Zoey, did my whining disturb you? Sorry." At fifty-three, Pat had a comfortable grasp of her priorities. When the phone rang, she closed her eyes and scratched a furry black ear to wait for the machine to retrieve the call and identify the caller. Only a rare voice could tempt her to move once she'd snuggled in with Zoey.

"Patricia, pick up. It's Gwen. Pick up the phone. It's important."

One of those voices belonged to Gwen, a person who seldom sounded anxious or upset. Pat sat up and placed the cat on her perch to dig around the coffee table for the phone. "This better be important," she told Zoey and pressed talk. "Hi, Gwen. What's up?"

"Jackie's missing."

Patricia Sexton, Dr. Gwendolyn Garcia-Wilson, and Jacqueline Tracy co-owned 'Zodiac's Rare & Used Books', named after their not always silent partner. The meager profits didn't support any of them, but they all loved books and somehow kept the doors open.

Gwen, a semi-retired psychiatrist, continued to see a few patients and do the occasional lecture. She and her husband enjoyed a comfortable life and it calmed her to putter around the bookstore. Jackie worked in finance, an occupation equated with witchcraft by the other two women, and Pat and Zodiac made their home in an apartment above the store. Pat managed day-to-day operations and supplemented her slim share of the profits doing freelance computer graphics. When in the proper mood, Zodiac graced book buyers with her stately presence. Opening the bookstore had been Jackie's idea, and her friends knew why. Besides offering a space to nurture her lifelong love affair with books, it gave her an opportunity to help someone she loved.

"What do you mean she's missing? We saw her less than four hours ago. If she stopped for dinner or had some other business she might not be home yet."

"No, she went home to change and planned to come back and pick me up for dinner. She never showed. Pat, that's not like her."

Gwen was right. Jackie's nature did not allow for bad manners. She was punctual to a fault and expected the same of others. If she found herself running late or saw she'd be unable to make an engagement, she notified the waiting party as far in advance as possible. "It is a little out of her norm, but what can we do, Gwen? I don't think the police will even look into it until she's been missing twenty-four hours."

"The police?" Pat pulled the phone from her ear at Gwen's louder than normal response. "Should we call the police? Do you think she's in trouble?"

"No, I didn't say we should call the police. You tried to reach her at home, right?"

The doctor took a breath. “Yes, I’ve been calling for an hour. I keep getting a notice that they can’t connect to her voice mail.”

“Maybe she had a family emergency or one of her business associates had an urgent situation and she’s been in a conference.”

“I suppose anything is possible in that business, but Beth is her only family and she’s in Europe. Patricia, I have a terrible feeling.”

Gwen’s near hysterics convinced Pat to share her concern. “Why don’t you pick me up and we’ll take a drive to Evanston and see if she’s home. Maybe she spaced out dinner and turned the phones off to take a nap.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Pat rubbed Zoey’s neck as she retrieved her glasses. “Madame Zodiac, I need to step out. Your Aunt Jackie has gone missing. You’ll stay out of mischief while I’m gone, I trust.” The cat stretched, directed two yellow eyes in her mom’s direction, and blinked. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Late November in Chicago meant cold temperatures, although not cold enough to warrant the heavy down coat Pat grabbed from a hook as she left the bookstore. Along with no cable TV, her unfortunate financial situation did not allow for an additional lighter coat during those weeks between denim jacket weather and heavy coat season. Pat decided long ago, if the choice were hers, she would rather be too warm than cold. The chill she felt as she waited had more to do with her missing friend than cold temperatures. She tried not to consider that Gwen had good reason to panic. Jackie would never forego dinner without a call.

The previous day, Pat and Nicole arrived at her house ten minutes late for Thanksgiving dinner and had to listen, hushing growling stomachs, as she gave her ‘the importance of punctuality’ speech. Luckily, they heard a shortened version because their catered dinner waited on the table and Jackie had indulged in a glass of wine.

When Gwen pulled to the curb, Pat put a gloved hand on the door handle and decided not to worry until she knew a problem existed. Her confidence deteriorated when she opened the door and found the drive had done little to calm Gwen. “This is so not Jackie.”

“It’ll be okay,” Pat reassured her as she buckled her seatbelt. “Huh. How’s that for role reversal? Me telling you it’ll be okay.” The doctor’s warm smile reflected off the windshield as she merged into traffic. She’d helped Pat through a difficult time of her life, and in her eyes, Gwen Garcia-Wilson was part woman and part angel. If Jackie was missing, Pat couldn’t think of better company than her friend, Gwen the psychiatrist, except maybe her friend Nicki the detective.