

Chapter 3

Sabrina

Enrolling at Columbia University was a transformative experience for me. For the first time in my life, I would be living away from home, although Columbia was just a one-hour drive away. I would also be living in Manhattan, which is the center of the universe for New Yorkers. I had been to Manhattan many times, but only to visit or compete in sports. Now I would be living there, with the freedom to come and go as I pleased. Life in Manhattan was life in the fast lane for a yokel from Queens like me.



Manhattan 1970

Manhattan Island is small, only 23 square miles. But there is more action and excitement crammed into that little island than anywhere else in the world. There is Wall Street, Greenwich Village, Tribeca, SoHo, Chinatown, Little Italy, the Lower East Side, Times Square, Columbus Circle, Central Park, Upper East Side, Upper West side, Harlem – you could go on and on. I had visited many of these iconic places, but now I would be a regular.

More than anything, I fantasized about the beautiful, glamorous women that I would be meeting and hopefully, bedding, in Manhattan. I had seen the stunning, fashionable New York City beauties in the movies, on TV, and in magazines. What a difference from the pallid, conservative prudes in Queens. The women at St. John's had one objective – to find some sucker dumb enough to marry them, settle down in Queens, and live out their miserable existence there. Ultimately, that would probably be my fate, but I wanted to taste the delicacies of Manhattan first.

One of my great weaknesses has been my unrealistic assessment of my limited personal qualities and abilities. First, I thought that Captain Kirk would somehow single me out from the other eight million inhabitants of New York and beam me to Hawaii. Now, I thought these glamorous New York City beauties would be so overwhelmed with my animal magnetism that I would have women on demand. At 21 years, I was a sturdy young buck, make no mistake. I also had no money, dressed like a slob, talked like a rube, and displayed few redeeming social qualities. I had recovered from mono and curtailed my non-stop drinking, smoking, and carousing, so I no longer looked like I escaped from a concentration camp. Other than that, I didn't have much going for me.

By September 1970 I was ready to start my freshman year at Columbia University Dental School. I had found a roommate, Aaron Waterman, who was also a freshman at Columbia. We lived in a two bedroom flat on 171st Street and Fort Washington Avenue that had been condemned as uninhabitable by the city. The slumlord owner of the building paid off the City inspectors and continued to rent it to

unsuspecting Columbia students, old ladies, and drug addicts. This place was so bad, even the rats and cockroaches boycotted it. On the other hand, the price was right, and it was walking distance to Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, so we took it.

During registration week, I was walking on the crowded sidewalk in front of the Fort Washington Armory, where I had spent so many formative weekends in high school, on my way to check in with the Student Health Center. I was looking at all of the people, most of whom were either students, staff at Columbia, or homeless. All of a sudden, I noticed this stunningly beautiful woman walking towards me. She was dressed in a fashionable purple suit, her hair was stylishly cut, and her right arm rested on the designer briefcase that was draped over her right shoulder. She didn't notice me at all, of course, as I looked like all the other riff-raff on the street, and proceeded to walk resolutely past me. But I noticed her. The first thing that crossed my mind when I saw her was she was the type of Manhattan woman that I had dreamed about.

After checking in with the Student Health Unit, I was directed to the medical center to get a locker. And who should be checking into the locker next to mine but the woman in purple (I later learned that the suit was mauve, but anything in that color range is purple to me). Her name was Sabrina Lockhart and, as luck would have it, she was also entering the freshman class at Columbia Dental School. I introduced myself, and learned that Sabrina was from Pennsylvania but had been living in Manhattan for the past two years while she attended Columbia University's Dental Hygiene program. Unfortunately, as I discerned from the twinkling diamond ring on her finger, Sabrina was engaged to be married. She had graduated the previous semester and had been heavily recruited to enter the incoming dental school class at Columbia. She had been working in Manhattan for the past three months and making good money as a dental hygienist, so she could afford to dress fashionably and have stylish haircuts. She was coming from her job when I passed her in the street.

Sabrina and I spent the remainder of Registration week hanging out together - getting ID's, attending orientation sessions, touring the facilities, and meeting faculty. When classes started, we attended these together. Her fiancé was in the military and stationed in Texas, so she had spare time, much of which we spent together. From the moment we met, Sabrina and I became fast friends.

The freshman class at Columbia University Dental School was small, having only 40 students. The class could be divided into three groups. First, there were the Nerds. These were sanctimonious assholes that deemed the dental profession a calling to which they would devote their lives. They would study hard and suck up to the faculty to gain any advantage they could. Then, there were the Pragmatists. These guys were serious students who wanted to be respected professionals, but they were no sycophants. Unlike the Nerds, who prowled the faculty for any hint of exposed buttocks to which they could firmly affix their lips, the Pragmatists just wanted to get on with it. Finally, there was the Back of the Room Gang. These were the marginal, the non-conformists, the misfits and ne'er do wells who disdained any traditions, were contemptuous of authority, and wanted to do as little work as possible in the shortest amount of time so they could get their degree and start making money. You can guess which group I fell into.

I found kindred spirits in the Back of the Room Gang. Aaron Waterman, Stan Robertson, Ian Spader, Matt Laverne, and Pablo Teitelbaum were all marginal students with checkered backgrounds and little ambition beyond making money without working too hard. They all had long hair and beards, dressed in jeans and boots, liked to smoke pot, and listened to rock music. All entered Columbia's freshman dental class in September 1970 with me. When Sabrina surveyed the landscape and saw how much fun we were having, she became a charter member of the Back of the Room Gang.

I had a lot in common with my fellow members of the Back of the Room Gang. Stan Robertson was elected Treasurer of our freshman class and promptly embezzled the funds. When money was collected, he didn't even bother to deposit it in a bank account. He stuffed it into his desk drawer at home and used it as needed. When he was assigned to make preparations for a "mixer" (a social event whose sole purpose was to meet women and get laid), he pocketed the money to buy vodka for the punch. Instead, he found some laboratory grade pure 100% ethanol in the biochemistry lab and mixed it with the punch. When he couldn't find a utensil to stir the concoction, he rolled up his sleeves, stuck his arm into the punchbowl up to his elbow, and stirred away. That would not have been so bad had he not been scratching his balls prior to rolling up his sleeve. Much like me during my senior year at St. John's, Pablo Teitelbaum's excessive marijuana intake made him relatively dysfunctional. One time he managed to get himself invited to the Playboy Club in Manhattan, but smoked and drank so much that he passed out on the dance floor and the bouncers threw him out on his ass.

Hubris has always been my nemesis. When you have as few redeeming qualities as I do, excessive self-confidence can get you into trouble. I had the arrogance to major in Chemistry in college, because I thought I was smart, and it almost killed me. Then I had the arrogance to enroll at Columbia, even though it was the most rigorous dental program in the nation and exactly the opposite of what I could handle. Now I would pay for my hubris again.



**Gross Anatomy Lab
Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center**

The first two years at Columbia were dedicated to the study of the basic sciences – Gross Anatomy, Histology, Biochemistry, Physiology, Neuroanatomy, Pathology, Genetics, and Pharmacology. For economies of scale, the medical and dental school classes were merged and we took the courses together. These were difficult courses, at least for an ersatz scholar like me. In Gross Anatomy, we had to dissect a cadaver, which revolted me. I don't like death and I don't like dead bodies; nor do I like internal body parts that tend to be red in color and damp to the touch for that matter. I was

hoping there would be enough students assigned to each cadaver so I could disappear in the background and get a free ride. Not at Columbia. There were four students to each cadaver, so there

was no place to hide. I had to take my turn dissecting, cutting, and severing. I have a gag reflex when I see something that revolts me. I spent a lot of time gagging in that anatomy lab. But after a while, seeing dismembered body parts became routine. It was unexceptional to see a student walking around with a leg in one hand and a liver in the other. I even got accustomed to watching one student who had become adept at juggling heads.

In the physiology lab, each week we were presented with an anesthetized cat that had its heart or brain or kidneys or some other unrecognizable organ dissected and exposed, with electrodes connected to it. Then we had to deliver some drug or other stimulus to measure how the organ reacted. I hate cats and they hate me. When I saw those cats splayed on the lab bench connected to those electrodes, my reaction was "Let's see what happens to those electrodes when I wring that cat's neck." My lab mates always demurred. When the experiment was over and it was time to euthanize the cat, they let me pith its brain, which I did with relish and great fanfare. I hate cats and they, as a species, hate me.

I never studied as hard as I did my first year of dental school. We were in class eight hours a day and studying another five. Whenever we had time, the Back of the Room Gang would head out to sample the sights and sounds of Manhattan. We had a ritual – first we got high, then we took the A train downtown to our Manhattan destination. We'd get a bite to eat then go to a concert or club to listen to music. Sabrina always came with us. Her fiancé was deployed to Vietnam, so she had time on her hands. She was getting very comfortable with the Back of the Room Gang and its errant ways.

The members of the Back of the Room Gang were definitely known more for their partying than their academic performance. Our grades were passable, but we weren't a threat to anyone on the Dean's list - until we enrolled in our Pathology course. Pathology is the branch of medicine that deals with the laboratory examination of samples of body tissue for diagnostic or forensic purposes. The tissue usually came from diseased organs or dead people, two things I wanted to avoid like the plague. In class, we were shown pictures of diseased lungs and livers; faces horribly disfigured by tumors and necrotic diseases; limbs distorted by traumatic injuries. In the forensic pathology lectures, they would show crime scene victims with stab wounds, gunshot wounds, and heads bashed in with blunt objects. The entire course nauseated me.

Our Pathology exams were multiple choice, but with a deceptive twist. Each student was given a blank answer sheet with four ostensibly empty boxes per question. Each box had an invisible letter – A, B, C, D – written in indelible ink that could not be seen by the naked eye. Each student had a special marker which, when swiped over one of those boxes, would reveal the indelible letter in the box. For the first exam, they told us "Today the answer is C." If you selected a multiple choice answer, swiped the first, second, third, or fourth box that corresponded to that answer with your special marker, and a "C" appeared, you had answered correctly. In the next exam, the correct answer might be "B" and so on. The insidious thing about this system was that, if you swiped a box and the correct letter didn't appear, you had to keep swiping other boxes until the correct letter did appear. You could have up to three incorrect answers for one question. Those bastards!

When the blank answer sheets were passed out for the first exam, I was sitting in the back of the amphitheater, of course, directly underneath a light. As I perused the blank sheet, I noticed that, if I turned the answer sheet at a certain angle against the light, I could see the “indelible” letters in each box. That was not supposed to happen, but I could see them! Then they passed out the exam. For the first question, I knew that the fourth multiple choice option was the correct answer. When I looked at the answer sheet and angled it against the light, I could see the “C” in the fourth box. When I swiped the fourth box with my special marker, a “C” miraculously appeared. And on it went for all 50 questions. I could see every answer before I swiped it with my marker. When I was done, I had answered all 50 questions correctly. To avoid suspicions of foul play, I marked one or two of the questions incorrectly. I still aced the exam.

I couldn't wait to tell the rest of the Back of the Room Gang about this scam, but even those scoundrels didn't believe me. When the exam results were posted and I had the highest grade in the class, however, they knew that this was not a reflection of my natural brilliance. What is that saying about a leopard not being able to change its spots? Now, all they wanted to know was how I did it. We called it the “see through” exam.

When the next exam rolled around, the Back of the Room Gang were all strategically placed at the back of the amphitheater beneath a light. This time the correct answer was “D.” When they received the answer sheet and angled it against the light, they could see the indelible letters in each box, too. The entire Back of the Room Gang aced the exam. For the ensuing exams we decided in advance who would get an “A” grade and who would get a “B” grade to avoid suspicion. Since I discovered this scam, we agreed that I would ace each exam.

As the Pathology course neared its conclusion, my grade led the class. The Dean for Academic Affairs called me into his office to see who this Cashman fellow was whose grades topped the class. My bowels rumbled when I heard this. He must be on to me, I thought. When the jig is up, a true coward looks for the nearest exit. I began preparing excuses, but none of them were convincing. I was in trouble now.

When I got to the Dean's office, he was all smiles and welcomed me warmly. “Cashman, my boy, please come in. On behalf of the Dental School faculty, I want to congratulate you personally on your stellar performance in the Pathology Course. Your grades in other courses have not been extraordinary, but you have really excelled in Pathology.”

I could not believe my good fortune. I expected to get busted, and this knucklehead was congratulating me. I had two choices now. I could take the path of humility, acknowledge his felicitations, attribute my performance to hard work, and get the hell out of there. Or I could boast and dissemble.

My arrogance got the best of me again. “I have a deep understanding of the anatomical, histologic, and physiologic antecedents of these pathologic conditions because of the solid technical foundation I have received in the basic science courses. I also have an innate affinity for the subject matter and unbounded empathy for the people suffering from these diseases.” I should have shut my

big mouth right there, but I was on a roll, and the bullshit was flowing effortlessly. "I'm seriously thinking of devoting my professional career to the study of Pathology."

The Dean was beaming. He looked like he came in his pants. "Bravo, Cashman," he applauded. "You are the kind of principled and dedicated student that makes Columbia such an outstanding institution. You can expect our full support in your pursuit of excellence." I had never received such adulation. I was brimming with confidence.

That confidence was seriously eroded when I arrived at the final exam and couldn't see the answers. No matter how I turned the answer sheet to the light, I couldn't see the letters. Fortunately, I had studied for the exam to cover my bases, but I was not going to "ace" the final. Neither were the other members of the Back of the Room Gang. We all passed, but our final exam grade fell off precipitously. As it turned out, Pablo Teitelbaum had gotten loose-lipped during one of his bouts of marijuana intoxication and word got out about the "see through" exams. We were all in big trouble and needed excuses if the Dean called us in. Sabrina would attribute her poor performance to having her period. Stan feigned illness. But I was the one the Dean wanted to see.

He was agitated when I walked into his office. "Cashman, your grade on the final exam dropped off dramatically from your previous exam scores. The Dental School faculty was proud that one of our students was leading the class in Pathology. After all that enthusiasm about your deep understanding of the pathologic conditions and your innate affinity for the subject matter, I was expecting another superior grade. Can you explain your poor score on the final?" The bonhomie from our previous meeting was gone. He suspected foul play and was clearly pissed.

I fumbled around uncomfortably, still unsure whether I should proffer my lame excuse. "There was a death in my family and I was overcome with grief. My brother's wife, a fine buxom lass of only 22 years, succumbed to a mysterious illness that left me grief-stricken and heart-broken. I couldn't study for the final. Her death left me listless and morose." I just blurted it out. The lie rolled off my tongue.

Upon hearing this response, the Dean's face turned red. He was livid. "Cashman, you are an unconscionable liar. I know for a fact that your brother's wife did not die. In fact, in your bio-data it says that your brother is not even married. Have you no conscience? Do you not have a better excuse?" He caught me red handed on that one. Now I needed to think fast. I couldn't tell him the truth. And another lame excuse would sink me. I needed to find a middle ground.

"Dean, I didn't want to admit this, hence the excuse I just offered. The truth is I choked on the final exam. The pressure of receiving all those 'A's on the previous exams finally got to me. I knew everyone at the Dental School was expecting me to ace the final, and I choked. I froze. I felt like a basketball player walking to the foul line at the end of a game who has to sink two foul shots to win the game." I liked the basketball analogy and the Dean seemed to be buying it, so I charged on. "And I missed those fous shots because I choked and my team lost the game. I am so embarrassed at losing the game for my team." The only reason tears weren't streaming down my face as I unwound this fictitious tale was because I was laughing on the inside at this ingenious fabrication. A coward's first inclination is to cut and run. But when caught red-handed, a coward must have the resourcefulness to think on his feet.

The Dean was taken aback and bought my excuse. But he pressed on. "What is this speculation about 'see through' exams and students being able to see the answers?"

It was now time to play the righteous indignation card. “Yes, I have heard this rumor. There may be an unsavory element in the class who would stoop to such depravity. As for myself, I can assure you that I would never be associated with such chicanery.” I stated this with enough indignation to indicate that I took offense at his insinuation.

To my relief, the Dean backed off. “Well, Cashman, I will accept your excuse for now. And we have no evidence that students could see the answers. But I will continue to investigate and expect your full cooperation.” I assured him that he had it. And then I got the hell out of there. That was a close call. With my freshman year drawing to a close, I decided to lay low and play it straight for my sophomore year, and that is what I did.

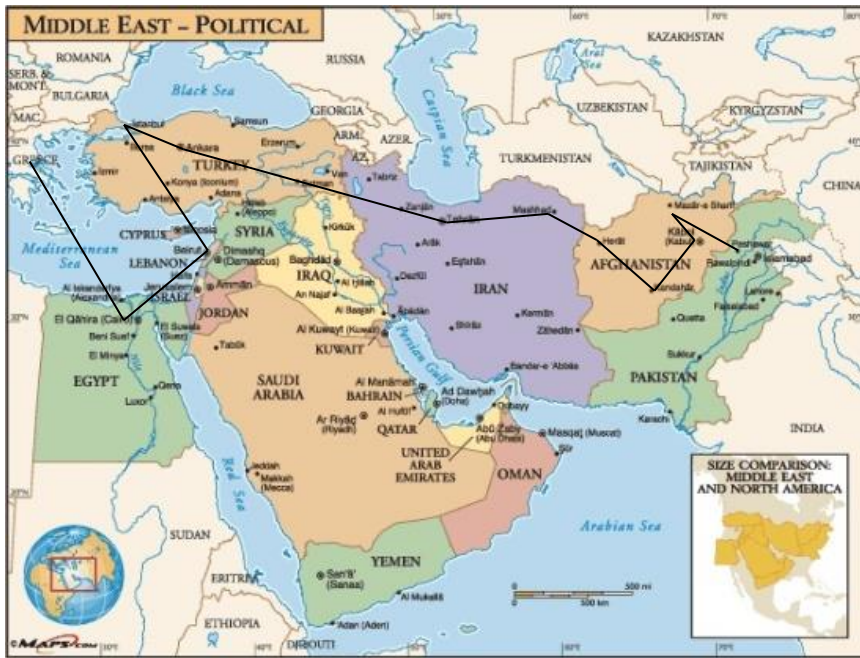
Sabrina Lockhart was a dreamer. All she could think about were the exotic places and traditional cultures around the world that she longed to see. There were ancient cities in Europe with their palaces, castles, churches, and medieval architecture. There were Asian countries where Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim religions produced syncretic cultures rich in mythology, customs, and traditions. There were the islands of the Pacific, with their white sand beaches lined by palm trees overlooking azure seas. As a child, she watched a TV program called “Adventures in Paradise,” and its scenes, of the stunningly handsome skipper sailing his schooner through the South Pacific and visiting exotic places populated by ornately dressed people from mysterious cultures, were indelibly imprinted on her psyche. She dreamed about traveling to all of these places and seeing the world. I listened sympathetically when Sabrina discussed her dreams. I had similar dreams, although mine were less grandiose. All I cared about was getting to a warmer climate. She wanted to see the world.

Sabrina and I mused about all of the exotic countries around the world where we wanted to visit. Most of all, we wanted to see the islands of the Pacific, she because of “Adventures in Paradise” and me because of the warm weather and wahine I saw on TV every February during the Pro Bowl. There was one big difference between Sabrina and me. Where I was a serial procrastinator, lacking even a shred of ambition, and whose plan to get to Hawaii relied on Captain Kirk beaming me there, she was determined to see the world and had a concrete plan. When Sabrina was determined, nothing could stop her. By the end of our freshman year, Sabrina had laid the groundwork for her adventures. First, she jettisoned her fiancé. Then she quit Dental School at the end of our freshman year. Becoming a dentist would not get her any closer to seeing the world. She would work as a dental hygienist for a time, make money, and then travel the world. She went to Europe in the summer of 1971 and loved the mystique of travel and adventure. Now she wanted to see more.

I was sorry to see Sabrina leave. She and I had become very close in our year together. Being a typical 22 year-old, shallow male, I initially sought out female companionship for one reason – sex. But being with Sabrina was completely different. We enjoyed hanging out together, going to restaurants and museums together, even going to class together. But I never tried to dissuade her from leaving. In fact, I encouraged her. It was clear that the travel bug had bitten her. She would never be happy until she got it out of her system.

For the next six months, Sabrina worked in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania as a Dental Hygienist. She would come to New York occasionally to see me, but was in a hurry to get back to work and make money so she could travel. Then in January 1972 she came to New York on her way to Athens. She would travel to Greece and decide where to go from there. She had a round trip ticket with an open-ended return. When we parted at the airport, I did not know if I would ever see her again.

Over the next several months, I received occasional letters from Sabrina. After Athens, she went



Sabrina Lockhart's travels through the Middle East 1971

to Beirut and Cairo. Then she hopped a train and traveled overland through Turkey. After that, she and a group of fellow world travelers entered Iran. This was before the Islamic Revolution in Iran and westerners could still travel freely to any part of the country. As such, they traipsed to Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Mashad. Tehran was a modern city, but the others were still primitive bastions of Shiite Islamic conservatism. After Iran, the next stop was Afghanistan – visiting cities like Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and

Kabul. Once she got to Kabul, there was radio silence. While I was stuck in New York City, Sabrina was exploring Afghanistan. Our paths were diverging. I figured I would never see her again

Then one night, four months after Sabrina left for her travels, I was in my apartment with Aaron Waterman doing our usual weeknight routine – studying, smoking pot, and watching basketball – when the phone rang. I picked it up, and there were unfamiliar buzzes and beeping sounds as a connection was made. The phone lines in New York were bad, but connections were usually made faster than this. And then Sabrina's voice came on the line. "I'm in Athens and getting on a plane to New York. Can you pick me up at JFK airport tomorrow night?" I couldn't believe it was her. I thought she had forgotten about me. I told her I would be there.

When Sabrina got off the plane, I hardly recognized her. She was dressed in Afghan mufti from head to toe. She wore a tribal vest, long Afghan skirt, and had a multi-colored bandana tied around her head. The only thing she lacked was the veil. Sabrina had returned to the US because her sister needed major surgery and her mother demanded that she come home. It was hard to believe that a mother's command could bring a daughter home from Afghanistan, until I met Sabrina's mother. She was not sure how long she would stay. She had left friends back in Afghanistan and wanted to return there.



A shop selling false teeth, Afghanistan 1971

Sabrina and I picked up right where we left off. We were pretty much inseparable. On weekends, I would visit her in Lancaster, Pennsylvania or she would come down to New York. After a month, her plans to return to Afghanistan had vanished. When the summer break arrived, I went to Lancaster to stay with her. We were both very happy.

After several months of being together like this, a time that we both remember as one of the happiest in our lives, Sabrina asked, "What is the plan when you have to return to Columbia in September?" I hadn't given this much thought. I usually didn't think more than one or two days ahead.

"We can return to New York and live in my apartment. You can get a job as a Dental Hygienist and I'll go back to school." That seemed like a reasonable plan to me.

Immediately, Sabrina got this stern look on her face, one I have since learned means business. "Look, Cashman. I know you better than anyone. I also know what an unreliable loser you are, and the dissolute lifestyle you live in New York. There is no way I am going to New York to live with you unless we get married."

I was 23 years old at the time, and the concept of marriage had never entered my mind. Now here was this beautiful woman, whom I truly loved, who not only wanted to marry me, she would leave me if I didn't marry her. I considered my options. In fact, I had none. Sabrina was the best thing that ever happened to me. Without a nanosecond of further thought, I responded, "OK. Let's get married."

Then another thought came to mind. "What about your plans to travel and see the world?"

Sabrina had already figured this one out. "I'll just have to take you along with me." I didn't know it at the time, but that is exactly what she did.

When Sabrina told her family we were getting married, her mother, Gertrude, was vehemently opposed. Gertrude was a stern and conservative puritan, and she hated city slickers from New York who came to Pennsylvania to steal their innocent maidens and take them to the Big Apple to engage in nefarious activities. She was also an astute judge of character and found my long black hair, thick burly

beard, unkempt appearance, and swarthy complexion the opposite of endearing. Despite my best efforts to suck up to her, she saw right through me. “He’s lazy, unprincipled, and good for nothing,” she warned Sabrina. “You’ll regret the day you married him.” Sabrina was having none of this. She proceeded persistently with the plans for our wedding.

About three days before our wedding, Gertrude called and wanted to speak with me. In person!! She knew that Sabrina had gone to Harrisburg for the morning and that I would be alone in our apartment. Just the sound of her voice was enough to strike fear in my heart. My innards churned like the time the Dean called me in to his office after I bombed the Pathology final. As usual, my first instinct was to cut and run. Gertrude’s voice was so terrifying that I gave this option serious thought. But I loved Sabrina and would have to face the music.

When Gertrude knocked on the door, my bowels started to rumble. This was the first time I had ever been alone with her. She sat down, looked me in the eye, and cut right to the chase. “Don’t marry Sabrina,” she said. “She is never satisfied and there is nothing you can do to make her happy. She’s always looking for something else, something new.”

“But we love each other. We’re getting married in three days.” I sounded as earnest as possible.

But Gertrude was insistent. “You’ll save yourself a lot of trouble if you cancel the wedding. You still have time.”

It was clear that Gertrude wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. I wasn’t cancelling the wedding and neither was Sabrina. Gertrude and I had reached an impasse. Then a mischievous but humorous thought came to mind that could resolve our standoff, but might further damage Gertrude’s opinion of me. This is another fatal weakness of mine. When I have the upper hand and have a chance to twist the knife in my opponent’s side, I always take the opportunity, despite the consequences. Since there was no way that Gertrude’s image of me could be any worse, I decided to have a little fun.

“You seem determined that Sabrina and I should not get married,” I retorted. “Perhaps you had a ‘figure’ in mind?”

At first Gertrude was perplexed by my reference to a “figure.” When she realized what I was alluding to, she was furious. “You would consider a monetary payoff? You are a low-life and scoundrel of monumental dimensions. I don’t know what Sabrina sees in you.”

Sure enough, that got rid of her, and Sabrina and I were married as planned three days later and just four weeks after our “engagement.” From that time on, there were daggers in Gertrude’s eyes every time she looked at me. I had gotten off on the wrong foot with Gertrude Lockhart. In the years to come, there would be hell to pay.