

Chapter 1: Adonis

I like to think of myself as an honorable person, but once I've explained to someone slowly, in words of one syllable, why it would be cheaper for them to deal with someone else, then if they insist, I'm as happy as the next person to take their money.

At least that is what I thought when Martin Galea, the best of the best of the Toronto architectural scene came into my shop, Greenhalgh and McClintoch by name, accompanied by his timid wife and his platinum credit card, and began to spend what seemed at the time to be almost breathtaking amounts of money. We -- my business partner Sarah Greenhalgh and I -- were suffering through the doldrums of an economic downturn, a seemingly chronic turn of events, and Galea's purchase looked almost too good to be true. Which it was -- and had I been gifted with the ability to foretell the future, no amount of money would have enticed me to agree to his terms.

It all started innocuously enough though, a clear winter day in Toronto, and if there were tremors in the cosmic fabric that day that should have warned me of what was to come, I didn't notice them. Diesel, aka The Deez, the official Shop Cat, was at his favorite post, curled up in the front window enjoying the sunshine, as usual ignoring the activity of the mere mortals around him.

Even Galea's visit followed its normal course. He'd been in the store several times before, and the routine was always the same. A Jaguar pulled up in front of the shop, facing the wrong way, half on the narrow street and half on the even narrower sidewalk. Galea leapt out, and bounded up the few steps to the store, leaving Mrs. Galea -- if she had a first name, I was not privy to it -- to negotiate her way out of the car on the street side, painfully aware, it seemed to me, of the hostile looks and rude gestures of the motorists and pedestrians inconvenienced by this display of automotive bad manners.

It never seemed possible for Galea to simply walk into a room. His entrance was always a dramatic event of some kind, although I would be hard pressed to tell you exactly what he did to make it seem that way.

It helped, of course, that he was, let's face it, extraordinarily good looking. Not particularly tall, but well built, and obviously a man who worked at it, he had a very stylish look to him. On this particular occasion he wore some kind of collarless shirt -- it was silk, I think, although nobody has ever called me an expert on clothes -- black, nicely cut pants, and a black coat, in what I'm sure was cashmere, which he rather cavalierly tossed on to the front desk on arrival. The clothes went well with the perennial tan and the dark hair, cut just long enough to be artsy, but not long enough to offend his well-heeled clients. His features were almost perfect, except perhaps for a certain softness about the mouth which men, jealous no doubt, liked to call effeminate, but which women found charmingly boyish.

In any event, we all -- Sarah and I, my neighbor and our right hand man Alex Stewart, and our only other customer, a young woman in the shortest black skirt I have ever seen, black tights and boots, and leather jacket, and who was not, my instincts told me, planning to buy anything at all -- looked in his direction as he entered the shop, his driving gloves in one hand, his sunglasses twirling nonchalantly in the other. Sarah, who was a whiz on the business side but who found dealing with difficult clients troublesome, disappeared quickly into the little office in the back. Alex moved to assist our other customer.

"Ms. McClintoch," Galea smiled in my general direction as he looked about him. "I'm very glad to see you are here. I'd appreciate your advice and assistance with my latest project." Galea had a way of making you think your opinion was important to him, although my experience with him to date would indicate that the only opinion that mattered was his own.

"I'm building a house in Malta. I was born there, you know. A bit of a return to my roots. Nice little piece of property, sea view of course. I'll be needing some furnishings for it, so let us see what you have," he said, taking me by the elbow and guiding me toward the back of the store. He smelled very nice, I noticed, some exotic aftershave or men's cologne I did not recognize. "A little more Mediterranean in feel that what I usually do. A little more relaxed. More like my place in the Caribbean which you may recall."

I nodded. Of course I recalled it. The last time we had supplied some furniture for Galea, it had been for the home he was referring to, a luxurious retreat on an exclusive island in the Caribbean. The house had been featured in one of the upscale architectural magazines, and indeed had won an award for its design, and Galea had been good enough to give Greenhalgh and McClintoch a credit. It had moved us into an entirely different league, so to speak, and had brought us some very exclusive customers. The point was, I didn't need to be reminded. This was Galea's way of telling me that I owed him, and while it was true, I did, it irritated me in part because I had a feeling that pay back time was near.

"Now what have we here? Very nice -- Indonesian I believe," he said, pausing in front of a very expensive antique teak armoire and chewing thoughtfully on the arm of his sunglasses in a way that I confess I found suggestive. "I think that will do quite nicely, don't you?"

"And what about this, Lara?" he said sliding easily to a first name basis while pointing to a large old teak dining table and eight slat chairs. "What do you think?" he asked, standing much too close for comfort.

"I of course think they're perfect," I replied, backing away slightly. "But I should point out to you that the price quoted covers the cost of their having been shipped from Jakarta to Toronto, and I'd have to charge you to ship it from here to Malta. Malta, if my knowledge of geography serves me correctly, is very close to Italy, a country whose design industry is among the best in the world, so it might be better for you to shop a little closer to your new home." I tried to sound crisp and professional.

This apparently was not the answer he wanted. "What do you think?" he asked turning to our only other customer. "Miss???"

"Perez," she said, blushing from the attention. "Monica Perez. I think it's" Her voice trailed off as she thought about it. I could tell she was thinking by the way she chewed her lip and wrinkled her brow prettily. "It's lovely," she concluded.

"What do you think would look nice on the patio?" he asked her, drawing away from me and leading her toward a set of wrought iron patio furniture, leaving me feeling in some unfathomable way bereft. I found myself wondering how Galea managed to turn the act of buying furniture into a seduction. He had a way with women that went with the looks, and it was said at least some of his design commissions owed much to urging on the part of his clients' wives, several of whom he was rumored to have had affairs with.

These affairs never seemed to last long. When I wasn't falling under his spell, I liked to think that it was his incessant use of the first person singular that caused even the most infatuated to lose interest. More likely, however, it was he who did the dumping.

I couldn't hear what he and Ms. Perez were saying: they were almost whispering to each other by this time, their heads almost touching, but I couldn't argue with the results: the armoire, an antique Indonesian cabinet, the teak table and chairs, two carved mirrors, the wrought iron and glass patio set, two side tables and a large, intricately carved coffee table. The bill would be satisfyingly well into five digits, and even The Deez sat up and took notice, surprised no doubt to find a kindred spirit, someone who viewed the world as his oyster in the same way he did.

Throughout the entire performance, ignored by her husband and almost forgotten by the rest of us, Mrs. Galea stood, back to the wall, near the front door. Not once in this whole process did Galea consult with, or even acknowledge, his wife, although presumably she too would spend time in the house in Malta. Her opinion, at least insofar as furniture was concerned, did not appear to be of any consequence.

Rumored to be considerably older than her husband, she certainly looked it. She was a rather plain woman, about her husband's height, her features too sharp -- perhaps patrician would be a kinder way of describing them -- to be attractive. Her hair was cut way too severely, a blunt cut that accentuated the sharpness of her features and the square of her jaw. Her clothes -- of the powder-blue twin sweater set and pearls variety, matching pleated skirt unfashionably long, pleats sewn down over the hips -- while no doubt expensive, could only be described as dull. To be fair, I suppose, I should say that it was possible that twin

sweater sets were back in style -- where clothes fashion is concerned, I'd be the last to know -- but more than anything else Mrs. Galea gave the impression of a colorless creature intent on blending into the background as much as possible. The only feature that commanded attention were her eyes, intelligent and inquisitive. If her husband was the charmer of the pair, she was the born observer.

Monica Perez, on the other hand, whose opinion apparently did matter, was quite the opposite of Mrs. Galea, flashy and in my opinion, superficial, definitely more style than substance. And there I was to complete the female triangle, not entirely immune to his charms, but definitely wary. For a moment I had a vision of the three of us as three little planets revolving around his sun, held there by the strength of his personality and the brightness of his charm.

Then, the selections made, Galea, bored already with Ms. Perez, turned his attention back to me. His most charming smile on his face, teeth perfect, head cocked disarmingly to one side, he once again took my elbow and steered me toward the desk. I knew that I was about to learn the quid pro quo to all this money being spent: Galea's propensity to keep a mental tally of owe me's aside, there almost always is one when somebody spends that much money in the shop, and I tried to steel myself for what was to come. He was standing way too close again, and being only a little taller than I am, his eyes were disconcertingly focused directly on mine.

"I have a small favor to ask of you," he began.

"Say no," I told myself. Out loud I said, "If I can help, I will," trying to keep my tone neutral as possible.

"I am going to be entertaining some very important people at my house in Malta very soon, in about ten days, actually, and I need the place to be arranged to my standard, which as you know is rather exacting, shall we say. Unfortunately I can't go there myself right away -- I have to make a presentation to one of the banks here -- so I can't supervise the work personally. I need all of these pieces consolidated with some furniture at my house and shipped to this address," he said, handing me a slip of paper with the address neatly typed on it. "But most importantly, I need you to go over there and see that the finishing is up to snuff and that all the furniture is placed correctly. I will, of course, cover your airfare and compensate you for your time."

"I'm not sure I could be away from the store right now," I said, "and furthermore..." my voice trailed off as I searched for an excuse not to go.

"You could stay in the house, too, which is already partially furnished, and I will reimburse you for your meals and other expenses while you are there. You could look upon it as a bit of a holiday," he said in a wheedling tone and giving me the high voltage smile.

"This will be expensive, Mr. Galea," I said, but I could feel myself weakening. "First of all, the deadline means we'll have to ship by air, not sea. And why not have someone there see to the placement of the furniture?"

"There is no one over there I can trust to do this to my standards. In fact there are very few people anywhere I would trust with this task," he said smoothly. "The meeting is an important one for me," he added.

I would accept, of course. I knew it, and so did he, but I didn't want to look like a pushover to his charms.

"Here is a cheque for \$2500 as an advance on expenses. You can have the shipping and insurance charges billed directly to me, as usual," he said. "Will you do it?"

I nodded. There was no question we needed the sale. I looked at the cheque and capitulated totally. I called Sarah to come and do the paperwork, and then feeling slightly guilty, turned my attention to Mrs. Galea. She was now intently examining a small wooden carving, only three or four inches high, one of several we had in a basket at the front desk, a conversation piece and an inexpensive purchase for those just browsing.

"I'm Lara, Lara McClintoch, Mrs. Galea. I don't think we have been officially introduced. That's an Indonesian Worryman you're looking at. If you look closely you can see it is a man all hunched over. The idea is that you rub all your troubles on to his back, and he takes them all on for you."

She smiled tentatively. "You're the owner, then," she said.

"One of them," I replied. "Sarah Greenhalgh, who is with your husband now, is the other."

"You have lovely things," she said, smiling rather shyly.

At this point, her husband, his business done, turned to me and said, as if my time was now his alone to command, "Come to the house at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning to see the furniture I want shipped and to pick up a set of plans."

"Is 10 convenient for you too, Mrs Galea?" I asked, turning to her. If he wasn't going to ask her, I was. She nodded, blushing at the attention.

Ignoring her, Galea headed down the steps to the car, leaving her to follow him out of the store. As she got to the door, I rushed after her, and pressed the Worryman into her hands. If anyone needed it, she did.

"With our compliments, Mrs. Galea," I said.

She looked surprised. "Thank you," she said. "And it's Marilyn."

With that they were gone, a screeching of brakes from another car as Galea pulled away without so much as a glance at the rest of the traffic, leaving all of us, particularly Monica Perez, slightly breathless.

"Dreadful man!" Sarah sighed when Monica Perez had also left and we once again had the store to ourselves. "Imagine having a husband who flirts with other women right in front of you. That poor woman!"

"He certainly thinks he's God's gift to women, that's for sure, " I agreed.

"That expression, God's gift, implies the existence of a Being of higher consequence than Martin Galea himself, and therefore not something Galea could bring himself to support, I suspect," Alex said dryly.

"We all laughed. "I have to say I like his work, though," Alex continued, naming several of Galea's better known commissions. Galea did work all over the world.

I had to agree with Alex. Galea, despite his less ennobling qualities, it had to be said, had enormous talent to match the ego.

"You also have to agree he's good for business, Sarah," I said. "Monica Perez, who I'm sure was just browsing, was so entranced she bought a mirror similar to one Galea bought! With any luck, she'll be back for more -- furniture, I mean."

"Why do you figure a man like that married a woman like that?" Sarah mused, ignoring the compliments we'd given Galea and our rather jejune attempts at humor.

"Money," Alex replied. "McLean money to be precise," he said, naming a well known Toronto family. "Married while he was still an architectural student. Got him off to a good start, I'd think. Money and connections."

"Do you think she actually had something to say, opinions and such, before she took up with him?" Sarah went on.

"We'll probably never know," I said. "Now we better get started arranging all this. We don't have much time. Are you sure you don't want this one, Sarah? You wouldn't have to deal with him directly very much, and you might enjoy having a few days in an exotic locale."

Sarah had purchased the business from me, but had asked me to come back in with her when she found she didn't like the incessant travel it required nearly as much as she thought she might. She disliked the haggling with suppliers, the frustrating dealings with import and export officials in various countries around the world, the loneliness of being so far from home for so long.

I, on the other hand, loved it. It was why I had started the business in the first place. But I still felt a little guilty that I got all the travel while she minded the shop.

"Oh I think learning to communicate with teenagers is about as exotic as I want to get right now," she replied. Sarah had a new beau who came as a package deal with two teenaged sons.

"I'll look after things at this end, while you're over there, and we'll ask Alex to do his usual wonders with our shippers," she said.

I was happy with this, I had to admit. My partner in life, Lucas May, a Mexican archaeologist, had agreed to supervise a dig in Belize. He'd be off at a site in the middle of nowhere, out of cellphone range, for several weeks, so our regular time together, usually in Merida or Miami, had been postponed until he returned.

Unlike Galea, Lucas was self effacing, equally attractive, I thought, but quietly so. A brilliant archaeologist, an ardent supporter of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, he had a way about him that I had come to find immensely reassuring. But we were both feeling the strains of a long distance relationship and I had a sense a bit of a break might help us sort out our feelings. I thought a few days in Malta, away from the distractions of daily life, might focus things a bit for me.

I called our shipper, Dave Thomson, and understood his expressions of dismay when I told him what needed to be done, by when.

"Money is no object here, Dave," I said. "You know Galea. Just tell me how you want to do it. I'll take measurements of the stuff at the house tomorrow and mark it for you."

"Well this is a new one for me. Can't say I've ever shipped to Malta," he said. "Do they have a lot of falcons there, do you think?" he joked. "I'll have to check into routings and costs. My favorite old movie, by the way, The Maltese Falcon. Humphrey Bogart at his best, I'd say. Anyway, I'll make a few calls, find the best way to do this, and the best rate I can. It'll be expensive, though, at least \$3000, probably. But as you say, money is no object for this guy."

After some discussion about insurance and logistics and so on, he rang off, and I relaxed a little knowing that if it could be done, Dave was the one to do it. He'd performed miracles for me more than once, starting a few years ago when he found a furniture shipment lost out of Singapore, and got it to a fancy design show only hours before it opened.

I'd been the supplier to a young up-and-coming designer who'd been asked to decorate a room in the show house that was to raise money for charity. That was the event that launched his career and my business. The designer was a man by the name of Clive Swain who after that show became my first employee and then my husband. But Dave could hardly be held accountable for that, and Thomson Shipping had been my shipper of choice ever since.

When I came out of the office, Alex had already started moving Galea's purchases into our storage area and replacing them with stuff from our stock. Then we all surveyed the shop floor. Even with some replacements, it looked a little bare. Galea had certainly cut a swath through the place.

"I'd better get on to Dave about that shipment Lucas sent us from Mexico before he went to Belize," Alex said. Lucas, in addition to our personal relationship, was Greenhalgh and McClintoch's agent in Mexico. "We can fill some of the holes with the Mexican pottery and leather chairs he said he sent us," Alex said.

The next morning I drove over to the Galea residence. It was located in a part of town which had once been thought to have charm, but which now had, interspersed between the older, more gracious homes, what are commonly called monster houses, those in which ostentation and sheer size have replaced aesthetics and good taste.

In such a neighborhood, Galea's home came as something of a relief and a bit of a surprise to me, something more to the taste of Marilyn Galea, nee McLean, more old Toronto than the work of a noted modern architect. The face it showed to the street was refreshingly simple, a pleasant Georgian facade, a simple circular driveway of interlocking paving stones leading through iron gates to a European style courtyard, and a very plain door surrounded by ivy.

The door was opened by a pleasant faced young woman in a grey uniform, Filipina, I thought, and we were joined almost immediately by the unpretentious Marilyn Galea herself, dressed in the camel version of what she had worn the previous day. I stepped into an elegant octagonal-shaped entrance, all creamy marble. Even the flowers matched, a sumptuous bouquet of lilies arranged in a crystal vase on a table in the middle of the foyer.

Leading off the entrance toward the back of the house was a hallway, more art gallery than hall actually, with several works of modern art, a couple of them signed by Galea himself, discreetly lit from above. When we got to the end of the hall, I stepped into a large open area at the rear and the house's secret revealed itself.

I think I actually gasped out the word "Wow!", then immediately regretted it, such an inarticulate expression certainly not in keeping with the sophisticated veneer I liked to think I projected. Neither did it do justice to what I saw.

All the houses on this side of the street back on one of the many lovely ravines that criss-cross Toronto. But no others, I'm sure, made such exceptional use of the landscape. The back of the Galea house was two storeys of clear glass -- perhaps two and a half, since the house was built down into the ravine at the back. The house seemed to float out over the ravine with no visible means of support. The eye was drawn into the trees, then jabove them, seemingly forever, to the office towers of the downtown core. Here, for certain, was the Galea touch.

I'm not certain how long I stood there, just gaping at the sight. When I looked around I found Galea himself watching, a look of amusement in his eyes. "Like it?" he said.

"It's magnificent!" I said.

"You should see it at night, actually," he went on. "From where we are standing, all the lights in the ceiling of the living room -- there are 360 of them -- light up like little stars, and reflected in the glass, they stretch out as far as the lights from the city towers." He seemed to take a boyish pleasure in his own work and my evident admiration. "Come and have a better look."

We descended a couple of steps into the living room, to a very elegant off-white sofa flanked by cream leather Barcelona chairs. At one side of the room was a huge, marble fireplace which soared to the ceiling. Behind was the outside wall of the old house, its original red brick now whitewashed to suit its new environs in the addition of glass and steel. Most of the furnishings were antique white, and everything was done on a grand scale. Despite the proportions, however, the feeling was one of calm and contemplation, a kind of pure space.

"Would you like a tour of the house before we get down to work?" he asked.

"Sure," I replied.

The rest of the house was also lovely, the main living spaces complemented by a palette of honey, cream and buttermilk. Wooden floors were the color of pale straw, covered in some places with antique carpets, their colors worn to the same golden hues.

The dining room was spectacular. It also had a view of the ravine. But in a departure from the colors in the rest of the house, it featured a black lacquered table that reflected the myriad lights from a chandelier, designed by Galea himself, he assured me, which caught the light in hundreds of pieces of crystal, then burnished it and threw it back in sparkling starburst patterns on the wall, the table and the floor.

The upstairs hallway was the upscale equivalent of a trophy room, decorated with framed drawings of some of the buildings he had designed and was famous for. Galea had attained a point in his career where he was always referred to as the award-winning architect, never just the architect, and here it was easy to see why. I recognized a town hall that had won an international competition in Milan, a grand public space in Riyadh, a concert hall in Australia. It was all very grand. Next to these were photographs of Galea accepting various prizes and hobnobbing with assorted famous people -- politicians, movie stars and the like. He pointed each of them out to me with obvious pleasure like a little boy boasting about his exploits in the schoolyard.

After the tour was over and my genuine expressions of admiration expressed and accepted, Galea got down to business and showed me the plans for the house in Malta. His drawings already incorporated the furniture he'd purchased the day before. "There's one shipment of furniture already there, and some Oriental carpets I picked up last time I was working in Turkey. Marilyn knows what furniture is to go from here. She has the list. And we have a tight deadline. I'll be there a week Friday or Saturday."

"I'll get it done, Mr. Galea. And we appreciate the business," I said.

"Good," he said. "Now I must run. I have a meeting with the board of directors of an oil company. I'll be adding a new dimension to the skyline of Toronto soon," he smiled.

Marilyn Galea and I walked him to the front door. By this time he appeared to be in a bit of a hurry, but not so much that he couldn't stop to flirt. "I haven't mentioned how lovely you look this morning," he said to me as he took my arm. "I feel so much more confident my gathering in Malta will go well now that you have taken the house in hand." He started to go out the door, holding my arm until the very last moment.

"Martin!" Marilyn said quietly. He looked back. She was holding his briefcase and his sunglasses.

He grinned at her. "What would I do without you, my love?" he said, his arm briefly circling her waist, and giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. "My guardian angel," he said turning to me. "I'd be lost without her."

Then with a boyish grin and a wave, he was gone. Marilyn's face softened as she watched him go.

It would have been a touching gesture had it not been for the fact that on his way out he brushed past me in a certain way. It is always edifying to be in the presence of greatness, but it is unfortunate that some of those who possess it are really revolting people. I turned my attention to his wife. If she had noticed the incident, she didn't mention it.

"You have an absolutely beautiful home, Mrs. Galea -- Marilyn. You must be very proud of it."

"My husband is an exceptional designer, I know. But it is the colors I love the most," she replied. "They remind me of Italy, of Florence. It is one of my favorite places in all the world. It is where I learned to love architecture, and I suppose set the stage for my life with Martin. When I told him that, he said he chose the colors for me," she said.

Then I got down to work, Marilyn very obligingly and competently helping me by taking down the measurements as I called them out. There were five pieces of furniture ranging from a huge mahogany sideboard to a large armoire that were to be consolidated with the shipment from the shop. Most of them were in the front of the house, not far from the door. I measured each one of them, estimated their weight to help Dave out, and then marked each with a yellow sticker with my initials on it to make sure there would be no mistake when Dave's men arrived to get the furniture. I was going on ahead to Malta, and Marilyn had pointed out to me that while the maid was home every day except Wednesdays, her day off, she and Martin were normally out during the day.

"I go to my club, every day, once I've gotten the house organized. I love it there. Do you know it? The Rosedale Women's Club downtown," she said, naming a very swank women's club that I had taken out a trial membership in a couple of years earlier during a period of forced inactivity shortly after my divorce.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, getting fit in the company of women only. But after subjecting my somewhat zaftig figure and my grey jogging sweats to the scrutiny of women whose tights and headbands actually matched their leotards, and whose main topic of conversation seemed to focus on the latest color of nailpolish, I had returned to my solitary morning jog. I was surprised that an obviously intelligent but shy woman like Marilyn Galea would be a member of such a club, but perhaps she was more gregarious in other people's company, or more likely she was simply to the manor born, which I was not.

I changed the subject. "Tell me more about your husband," I said. "He mentioned he is going back to his roots with this house in Malta. Is that where he is from originally?"

"Yes, it is. Galea is a very common Maltese name. He was born in the town of Mellieha on the main island. His family was not well off -- his father had a little shop in the town. But Martin, Martin was born ambitious, I think. He and a friend of his talked their way into the international school in Malta, and charmed their way into the homes of the international set. The principal of the school recognized his talent, and helped him get a scholarship in architecture at the University of Toronto -- Canada and Malta continue to have ties because of the old British Commonwealth connection."

"Are his parents still living there?"

"No. Both of them died several years ago. Before I met him."

"Have you seen the house?" I asked.

"Not yet," she replied. "I've never been to Malta. I'm looking forward to it, to seeing where Martin comes from, the village where he grew up. He doesn't talk about it much."

"Will I see you there then?"

"No. This is a business trip. Martin is going to Rome for a couple of days to see to a project he's working on there, then he goes on to Malta. You know Martin," she smiled. "Always looking for the next big commission. He's gotten back in touch with a boyhood friend of his, who's also done very well for himself in the interim, and who hopefully will see that Martin gets connected to all the right people in Malta. Martin is entertaining some people as soon as he gets there. I'm not at liberty to say whom. But here, come and have a coffee with me in the kitchen. Would you like an espresso or a cappuccino?" she said, changing the subject abruptly.

"Sure," I said. I'd already noticed during the house tour that the kitchen was equipped with a commercial-sized espresso machine. It was an impressive space. White marble floors, brushed stainless steel counters and cupboards, and the de rigueur, in that neighborhood, huge built-in refrigerator and six-burner professional stove. "Do you enjoy cooking, Marilyn?" I asked. You could run a small restaurant out of this kitchen.

"Not really," she smiled. "Coralee does most of the cooking," she said, gesturing toward the young woman who had opened the door when I arrived, and who was now chopping some vegetables at the far end of the kitchen. "Cooking has never been my forte, neither for that matter has housekeeping. Sheltered childhood!" she smiled. I recalled her blue stocking upbringing.

After asking Coralee to make us cappuccinos, she led me off the kitchen to a small room. I say small, but it was probably the size of my living room. Here it seemed small. It was decorated quite uncharacteristically in a pink chintz, and seemed, and I do not mean this unkindly, a little worn. I noted with some surprise that the Indonesian Worryman I had given her the day before was sitting in a prominent place on the desk.

"This is my office," she said noticing my glance about the room. The room was very neat and I could see what looked to be financial ledgers, indicating to me that she was the one who looked after the smooth running of the Galea household. I found myself wondering why Marilyn Galea could not have taken on the house in Malta. She struck me as perfectly capable of managing the project as well as I could.

"The office was originally my mother's," Marilyn went on. "She died when I was very young, but I remember being in this room with her. Martin let me keep the room the way it was. You know how architects are," she said. "Even something so small as the placement of a bar of soap in the bathroom is a design feature, and one they must therefore control. It was a major concession on his part!"

"This is your family home, then, is it?"

"Yes. We moved in after my father died about ten years ago. He'd roll over in his grave if he could see what Martin has done to it," she laughed. "But it seemed to be the sensible thing to do. Martin was just getting started, and building a new house seemed out of the question. Now I think we both like it." As she spoke she twisted her pearls, which I had the impression she always wore, and I knew, somehow, that the pearls had been her mother's, and like the office meant a very great deal to her for that reason.

Coralee brought us the coffee and we began to chat. I must say it never ceases to amaze me what we'll tell a relative stranger. Here I had just met Marilyn Galea and soon we were chattering away like old friends. At least I was chattering. She asked a lot of questions. I told her all about the shop -- she was fascinated by the idea that I had just made up my mind to go into business and had done so.

I told her about meeting Alex Stewart when I moved into my little house in Cabbagetown, about how he had kind of adopted me, and how now, on a pension, he came into the shop every day to help us, out of the goodness of his heart, and certainly not because of the pittance we were able to pay him. How even in his seventies, he was a whiz on the Internet and was probably, even as we spoke, online getting me an airline ticket to Malta.

I told her about my parents, my father a retired diplomat, about my two-year relationship with Lucas, who was, I told her, probably the nicest man on the planet. In short I told her everything. Well not quite everything. I did not tell her that in the dying days of my marriage, when I was coming to realize that Clive's penchant for very young women and his distaste for an honest day's work were not a temporary aberration but a permanent condition, I had come dizzily close to succumbing to the charms of Martin Galea.

Common sense and good taste had won a moral victory then, but it was by a narrow margin, and it still caused me some embarrassment to think of the way I'd behaved. Above all, I hated to think that this down-to-earth woman in whose kitchen I was sitting, knew anything about it. It was yet another reason why Martin Galea usually got what he wanted where I was concerned, with the one exception, of course. I really wanted him to keep his mouth shut about those unhappy days of my past, and Galea, from what I'd heard, was not above using what he knew about people to advance his career. Nothing so sordid as blackmail, to be sure, just a sense that there was a little tally of past sins to accompany the list of owe me's.

While we were still chatting, my cellphone rang. It was Alex. "How do you feel about flying out tonight?" he asked. I muttered something. "I'm having real difficulty getting you connecting flights."

Essentially from here you can get to Malta through London, Paris or Rome. London is fully booked. In Rome they're having one of those regular strikes of theirs. There's a seat on an Air Canada flight that will get you in to Paris in time to make an Air Malta connection to Luqa."

"Where?"

"Luqa -- Malta's airport. I'd better get you some reading material on the country, I can tell. Will you go tonight?"

"Sure. No problem. I'll head home now and pack. Got a weather report for me too?"

"Of course. Winter. Rain gear a good idea, a jacket for evenings. But lots warmer than here. We're supposed to have an arctic blast in the next few days -- minus 15 or so at night."

"In that case, I'm on my way," I said, laughing, not realizing that even while I was thousands of miles away the Canadian deep freeze would cause me no end of trouble.

I said goodbye to Marilyn Galea, and thanked her for the coffee and her help with the furniture. I told her that Thomson Shipping would be picking it up in the next day or so, and that Alex or Sarah would call her to let her know when. She gave me the names and telephone number of the couple who were the caretakers for the property in Malta, checked to see that her husband had given me the right set of plans, and made careful note of Dave Thomson's address and phone number, as well as that of Sarah and Alex.

Then I left her. I still have a vision of her standing in the doorway as I pulled out of the driveway. A tall, plain woman painfully shy but rather nice, married to a little boy -- a disarming, talented little boy, perhaps, but a little boy nonetheless.