

BETWEEN THE LINES

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Gail stared into the ashtray. A brown-papered cigarette smoldered, preceding nine others that lay untouched beyond the second drag. Smoke spiraled upward and splayed into a mushroom cloud as it swirled around the dome of a small desk lamp. She mashed out the cigarette. Gail scratched her wrist. She looked back at the monitor, felt satisfied with her work, and gave a heartfelt good-bye to her protagonist. *THE END*, she typed and saved the work to her flash drive.

“Good-bye, Sommer Rayne. I’ll miss you.”

At least until she developed new characters.

Gail printed and boxed the final hard copy. She burned three copies onto CD and packaged everything for her editor. Steven wouldn’t be happy that Gail had ignored some of his suggested changes, but she decided to stay married to her words. If he didn’t like it the way she had written it, she would return the check and worry about the contract later. They could argue about it over lunch, and she would make certain it was an expensive lunch.

Gail shut down the computer and snapped the laptop closed. She looked around the room and took a deep breath. She was tired.

“I’m tired of thinking, tired of developing new characters, and tired of building plots.” She stopped and considered her words. “I *never* thought I’d hear myself say that.”

Normally, Gail treated herself to a month in Europe after completing a novel. This summer, she would be a woman of leisure, lazily entertained at home. Sunny days meant gardening, evenings

meant watching DVDs. If something changed those plans, she might go with the flow.

“World, meet Gail Prescott. Official couch potato,” she said, eager to forget the electronic quill. “I might even gain ten pounds for the fun of it.”

Novel complete, hot coffee and Maureen O’Hara were the next things on her mind. Gail turned on the TV and TiVo, then clicked through the appropriate buttons to *The Quiet Man*, recorded earlier in the week. She clicked PLAY NOW and turned up the volume. Gail then headed to the kitchen to brew a fresh pot of hazelnut coffee.

A sudden ring from the phone startled her and she spilled coffee grounds on the counter. “Shit,” she muttered and picked up the phone. “What?” She brushed the spilled grounds onto her palm, then into the filter.

“Hello. I’m calling Gail Prescott.” The woman’s phony British accent irritated Gail.

“I’m Gail.” She poured the final scoop of grounds into the filter and swung the basket into position. Gail turned on the coffeemaker, positioned the carafe, and leaned against the counter.

“Good evening, Ms. Prescott. I’m Tannen Albright.”

You have enough nerve to impersonate a famous actor? Gail laughed, but was irritated with the unwanted conversation.

“I’m sorry, but a certain society of Swedes is pounding at the door, eager to hand me a Nobel Prize for literature.” The response amused Gail, but all she really wanted at that moment was a fresh cup of Joe. She would have insisted the Swedes wait. She was that adamant.

“Really, Ms. Prescott. I *am* Tannen Albright and, tossing aside protocol, I wish to speak with you.”

Gail was a connoisseur, as she liked to call it, of English accents. She gravitated to them but never dared to mimic the sound for fear of sounding as ridiculous as the woman sounded on the phone. A perfect British accent mesmerized her. A false sound turned her off completely.

“Toss it elsewhere, sweetheart. I—No, wait! Streep and Hoffman live close by. I’ll give them a call and we’ll do this in conference. Please hold.”

Gail was ready to click the off button when she heard more.

“Maybe this will go better if I contact your publisher.”

“No, better would be if you sound like you’re from the British Isles. A good Julie Andrews or even Eliza Doolittle would have been *better*. At least then, I might have enjoyed a decent flirt with you. And do you know why I would flirt?” Without waiting for a response, Gail continued, “Because I am abso-bloomin’-lutely charmed by the sound.” Gail turned off the phone and tossed it on the counter. “Whoever that was, she receives an A plus for originality.”

The warm aroma of hazelnut coffee relaxed Gail. She filled her mug, added cream, and quickly settled in front of the TV, just as John Wayne suggested a walk into the village of Innisfree to Maureen O’Hara. “It’s only five miles. Just a good stretch of the legs,” he said.

Gail stretched her legs. “John,” she said to the screen, “Maureen is gorgeous. I wouldn’t have minded stretching my legs with hers. I’m very jealous of you.”

When the movie ended, Gail paged through the guide and noticed a Tannen Albright film on the Sundance Channel. She tuned in for a few minutes and patted herself on the back by noting the caller’s voice compared poorly to the voice Gail heard in this film. Gail watched Tannen while she shouted at her co-star, called him a cheating bastard, then flicked her cigarette at his chest. The smoldering tip of the cigarette exploded into a miniature firework display. Tannen stormed to the door, paused long enough to say “Dolt,” then walked out without slamming the door.

“Classy exit, Tannen.”

It was past two in the morning when Gail turned on some classical music and snuggled under the blankets. Mentally and physically exhausted, she drifted to sleep before getting through the first Bartok piece. In what seemed like minutes, Gail was startled into consciousness by the ghostly ring of her telephone.

Gail reached blindly for the phone. “Hello.” She opened her eyes to the reality of daylight and looked at the clock. It was nine twenty.

“Good morning, Gail. How’s my best writer this morning? Is the manuscript ready?”

Good God, Steven. Must you be so cheerful in the morning? Isn’t there some type of law that states one must keep one’s lips sealed until the rest of the world has awakened?

“Yes, Steven. I’ll bring it tomorrow.”

“That’s fine. One more thing—”

“No more things. Let me wake up and I’ll call you back.”

Annoyed when the phone rang again, she pulled her pillow over her head. “Stop!” Gail threw the pillow to the foot of the bed and grabbed the phone. “This better be good,” she mumbled into the mouthpiece.

Steven’s voice had an edge to it. “Gail, it’s nearly one and I need to talk to you.”

Shit. I’ve been sleeping forever. She rubbed her eyes with one hand.

“I’m sorry, Steven. What’s going on?”

“I received a call this morning from Tannen Albright’s manager. She’d like to talk with you.”

Gail chuckled and groaned, remembering the conversation. “That really was her.”

“I heard about that conversation. She took it well.”

“What does she want?” She rolled onto her side and pulled the blanket over her shoulder.

“Something about an early novel you wrote. I think she said *Tenfold*.”

“*Tenfold*? That’s an interesting choice.”

“I have her number. It’s her Manhattan residence and she’ll be there after seven tonight.”

She sat up and scribbled the number on a notepad. “Thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon with the manuscript.”

Gail stripped and stepped into the shower. Four showerheads shot hot water and pounded her body awake while mint bath gel awakened her senses. She considered what she knew of Tannen Albright.

Tannen began her career as a stage actor and gained acclaim in an award-winning production of *Antigone*, directed by David Pierce. They were soon married. Over a decade later, David died from a prolonged illness, and Tannen moved to the United States.

“Tannen Albright. Let’s see—Oscars, BAFTAs, Golden Palm, Golden Globes.” She grinned at how often she had seen Tannen in nude scenes. “*She* certainly has golden globes.” Gail rinsed her hair. *Golden Palm: an award or an attribute?*

Gail stepped from the shower and dried off quickly.

She made a quick lunch of natural peanut butter on white bread. “This should begin my quest for ten pounds,” she said and took the sandwich and a glass of milk out to her greenhouse. Gail set the glass

on the table, near a tray of begonia seedlings. After inspecting their shafts, she decided one tray was weak. She took a bite of the sandwich with one hand as she grabbed the tray with her other hand and emptied the seedlings onto the table. She sat on the table, next to the mound of dirt, finished her lunch, then sifted through the trashed flowers. Gail decided to mix a different fertilizer to the soil and begin again.

She worked until early evening, mixing nitrogen, phosphorous, potash, and other chemicals into the soil. When satisfied that her new mixture would stun the gardens of the world, or at least her private garden, Gail replanted the ailing begonia seedlings, headed back to the kitchen, and placed her milk glass into the sink.

She searched for the paper that had her scribbling of Tannen's number. Gail found it under the bed and then walked to the pool. She stepped onto the first step, enough to wet her feet, and sat. Her neighbor's gold tabby lumbered up and sat by her side. Gail poked Tannen's number into her phone and waited. "Hey, Jimmy." Gail scratched under Jimmy's chin, evoking a generous purr from the feline.

After three rings, Tannen picked up.

"Tannen here."

Gail heard the same false British accent.

"Ms. Albright, I'm Gail Prescott." Tannen's silence was enough to make Gail want to fling the phone, along with herself, into the pool and pretend last night had never taken place. Four seconds of dead air felt agonizingly long. "Ms. Albright, are you there?"

"Ah, Ms. Prescott. Would you like me to sing something from *The Sound of Music*? Or would you prefer *My Fair Lady*?"

Gail laughed with anxiety.

"I hope you'll accept my apology for the conversation last night. You don't sound British."

"I'm completing a film that requires me to speak American accent English. Occupational hazard causes me to sometimes bring it home." Tannen's casual voice pleased Gail, but still lacked the sound that Gail enjoyed.

"That's too bad. I find the English sound very charming."

"So you've mentioned. Then I'll switch, because I need to charm you."

Gail smiled when she finally heard Tannen's natural voice.

"Now you're much more convincing," Gail said. "If you're still

willing to charm me after my tirade, the proper thing is for me to ask why.”

“I’ve recently read one of your novels and I want to talk about acquiring film rights.”

“My editor mentioned *Tenfold*. Is that the book?”

“Yes.”

“Why that book?” Gail pulled her feet from the water, stretched out on the concrete, and crossed her ankles. Her arm acted as a pillow. Jimmy hopped to Gail’s stomach and kneaded her belly.

“I’ve never been so emotionally involved with a novel. Your characters were far too real, and you made me cry for at least ten minutes after finishing.”

“Good. I wanted readers to blubber about it for days.”

A crackling sound caused the cat to stop and turn toward the woods. He sprang from Gail’s stomach and ran toward the intruder.

“I suspect many were stirred, Gail. The story often comes to mind, and the writing...” Tannen was silent for a moment. “I simply couldn’t close the book until I’d completed it.”

“Have you read others I’ve written?”

“I’ve read *Double Fault* and *Braxton’s Game*. *Fault* was good, but I had a tough time with *Braxton* and never finished. He seemed too angry at the world.”

“I think it would have been worth your time. *Braxton* had some redeeming qualities and became a hero by the end.”

“How good for him, and I won’t have to finish reading it.”

Gail laughed. “Without question.”

“Could we meet to talk about my idea?”

“Tannen, I thank you for contacting me, but filming *Tenfold* isn’t an option.”

“A few minutes of your time are all I ask. Just listen?”

Gail sat up just as Jimmy returned from the woods. A brown field mouse dangled in his mouth. With infinite feline pride, he dropped his prey at her side, meowed once, and headed toward his home.

Gail wrinkled her nose. “Yuck.”

“Yuck? Is my idea so repulsive?”

“Sorry. A cat has just presented me with something furry and dead. Talking with you is not repulsive.” Gail walked to the cabana and grabbed a can of diet soda from the fridge. She popped the top and

pictured Tannen at the other end of the phone. At the very least, would it not be worth meeting the woman who was probably Hollywood's most famous female actor since Garbo?

"I'll be in the city tomorrow," Gail said. "Would you like to join me for a late lunch?"

"Yes. What time and where?"

"One thirty at Talley's. It's on the corner of Madison and...hmm... I've forgotten."

"Leave it to me. I'll see you then." Tannen paused. "You're a fine writer, Gail. I look forward to meeting you. Good night."