

The Odyssey by Misha

This time it was different. Months had passed and emotions were frayed. As with any struggle, they had suffered casualties and it had taken its toll. Innocence had been lost, memories faded and for those that remained, the breaking point inched ever closer. At times they were tempted to cut and run, to head for higher ground where the slings and arrows of misfortune could no longer pierce their collective soul. But then something would happen and they'd realize yet again that they were members of a team, something bigger—stronger--than any one person could possibly be. A force to be reckoned with, a force not to be ignored. Leaning on each other for support, they dug deep, knowing that they were not alone. Together they fanned the flames of their collective conscience until the warm embers in their bellies ignited into a cauldron of fire that burned bright, turning their malaise into a white, hot inferno of passion and purpose. No longer would they entertain defeat. They would march as one, wielding the same determination and confidence that brought victory before. Their common goal emboldened them. Spirits began to lift, to rise through sheer force of will. Collectively, they set their course of action and one thing above all else was clear. The Jackson Posse would triumph.

It took weeks of emails back and forth but finally they were set. The Posse would convene in the only place that made sense; a seedy bar on the south side of town. Only there would they go unnoticed. It was after midnight before the last member straggled in. They came from all over---California to Massachusetts, Minnesota to Texas, Tennessee to D.C., and all parts in between. Only the General failed to show. Time and circumstance required that she stay close to home. But providence was theirs and unbeknownst to all, her anonymity would be central in securing the goal.

Deb yanked off her rubber gloves and unfurled a map onto an ancient wooden table that now gleamed under her protective care. A giant square shaped like a marshmallow surrounded their first point of attack.

“Ladies, please, a little decorum. You too, Sarge. One more mint julep and you're flagged.” Sal sat down slowly, trying not to jostle the gem-encrusted halo that was always with her ever since she purchased it from Susan's Angel collection.

“Gather 'round. I want to make sure everyone knows what they need to do. Jenn, you're our secretary. Take notes.”

“Excuse me but that's *Madame Secretary* and I generally deal with the press.”

“Exactly! How else are we to make sure the mags get it right when they report on our coup unless we do it for them? At the very least, you know that SID will go out of its way to get it wrong. And after what we went through last year with the rewriting of history, I don’t want any of ‘em to have the slightest chance of messing with the facts. Thank God, at least Mara gets it right!”

“Point taken” Radar replied and grabbed a pen and paper.

“Now, Rita, is the van in place?”

“It sure is. I, um, procured it from work yesterday. It’s stocked with food and should do the job nicely.”

“Perfect. What about something to read?”

“I printed out some stuff from the fan fiction site,” Bryna said. “I figured between ‘A Love Renewed’ and ‘The Boardroom’ they’d have plenty of inspiration.”

“Some of the best. And ladies, I trust you’ve all been practicing?”

“Every minute I can but between the letter-writing and this” Misha said, holding up the Posse’s most valuable piece of weaponry “my hands are a mess. Every finger has a blister on it.”

“Misha, stop!” the group called out in unison. “Not now!”

“What? What’d I say?”

“Don’t worry, guys. I have her on a tight leash” Mary reassured them.

“Look, before I entirely lose control of this group, how about we go over the plan one more time and then hit the rack. Tomorrow, we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

The next morning, just before dawn, the Posse assembled en masse on the corner of West 66th. With more than 400 in attendance, they made quite an impression on the lonely guard manning the studio’s front desk. Nervously, he picked up the phone.

“Don’t even think about it” Mel said. “One call and I’ll have Alan contact the authorities. That’s right. We did our homework and know there’s a warrant for your arrest. Honestly, if you just paid the parking tickets. . . “ The guard blanched and reluctantly opened the door. It took only a minute for the entire red shirt brigade to enter the building.

“Here, have a Danish,” Brenda offered the old coot. “I picked up a box of them this morning and they tastes like paradise.”

“Uh, no thanks” he replied. “I think I’ll just stay here, keep my head down.”

“Suit yourself” she shrugged and handed the box to Robyn and Elizabeth who promptly put it with the rest of the guests’ treats.

For the next hour, the group laid low, waiting for their prey to arrive. It was just after seven when they saw Susan walk through the door. Their careful planning had paid off and Helmut was nowhere to be found.

“Great idea having him talk to your class, Sue, even if it is summer” Pam snarked.

“My kids don’t mind. Besides, they want to show him all of their packaging ideas for Youthful Essence. They’ve been working on them all year.”

All of a sudden, an unfamiliar hush fell over the group. They turned as one and saw the object of their lust stride into the lobby.

“I love watching that man walk” Misha whispered to Mary. “And, OMG, I can’t believe what he’s wearing. Sue, Radar, Claudine—it’s the zippered black pants!”

“Don’t let me geek out. Please. Whatever you do, don’t let me geek out,” one of them muttered.

As they gaped wordlessly at Walt, a passel of smelling salts was quickly passed among the women. Soon, the room filled with a crescendo of sighs. Walt smiled broadly. “I see I have visitors,” he said to the dumbstruck guard. “Sam, I’d like you to meet the Jackson Posse. Don’t worry. They’re harmless, unless of course you’re not a fan of Jack and Erica.”

“I’m a fan, I’m a fan” the guard nodded. Slowly Walt began wading into the crowd, kissing the familiar faces and posing for pictures with some of the newer members.

“So, what brought you here this time?” he asked with a laugh. “And will I need my glasses?” Walt scanned the crowd, confirming that no one had fallen to the ground. “I take it Georgianne’s not here?”

“No, she’s um, otherwise engaged” Deb said. “And she’s going to kill herself when I tell her how you said her full name.”

“What the hell. Might as well make her completely crazy—she does it to me often enough” Walt chuckled and with as soulful a look as he could manage, he repeated slowly “Georgianne . . . Georgianne . . . Georgianne.”

“Got it!” KC chirped from the back, waving her camcorder in the air. “After all the videos G put up for us on Youtube, it’s the least we could do.” Turning to Walt she added, “We had a feeling this might come in handy.”

“Why, after all these years I still think I can outfox the Posse is beyond me” Walt said, shaking his blond head. “You guys never miss a trick. So, I repeat, what’s my favorite group of women doing here? You already got Megan fired. And Jack and Erica are thisclose to being reunited.”

“Not good enough” Lizzie said fiercely.

“Not after everything we’ve been through” Hannah added.

“Darn right” agreed Little Deb and Sandi.

“You tell ‘em!” Vonni and Jean chimed in.

“We want the games over now!” Kimberly said emphatically. “And we’re here to see that happens.”

“Not going to argue with you there though I will say that Susan and I—and Mikey have been having a blast these last few weeks. In fact, we’ve got a scene coming up—”

“Forget that scene” Mary said. “I’ve written one of my own” and forked it into his hands. “Here’s your copy. You can study it on the way over.”

“She’s pretty pushy isn’t she?” Walt asked no one in particular.

“You have no idea,” Misha confirmed.

“Hey, this is pretty damned good!” Walt said, flipping through the pages. “Did you ever think about—”

“Not you too? I barely had time to write this, much less . . . never mind. We’re getting off schedule,” Mary said checking her watch.

“So, where to?” Walt asked.

“How’d you know . . . ?” Deb asked. “Duh, the script. . . Geez, where’s the general when you need her? Honestly, I can’t think straight when I’m so near that hair of yours. I just want to . . . Never mind,” she said, stopping herself. “Um, glad to see you took my advice and went with the highlights.”

“Who are you kidding?” Walt scoffed. “That wasn’t advice. That was an order.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ve heard it all before. Now c’mon, back to the plan” Mel admonished. “We’re on a deadline and we’ve yet to make contact with Susan.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Sal said, batting her eyelashes. “She always takes my calls.”

A moment later, Susan returned to the lobby. “What’s all the commotion—”

“Hey, Susan” Walt said softly and lightly kissed her cheek. “I believe you’ve met—”

“The Jackson Posse? How could I forget our last adventure? Especially since it involved pulling the wool over this guy right--” Before she could finish her sentence, the gals reached behind their backs and began twirling thick-gauged rope in perfectly symmetrical circles. In less than a blink of an eye, both Walt and Susan were lassoed to a fair-thee-well.

“What the hell” Walt bellowed. “Get this damn rope off of us.”

“Not until you’re in the van! It’s time Jack and Erica get over themselves; I’m tired of getting caught in the middle.” Stepping out of the shadows was MEK, wearing a grin the size of New York. “That’s right. I’m working with them. Again.”

“Mike, when I get out of this thing—”

“You’ll what? Smack me? Go ahead. I’ve had worse. Heck, the only one who’s had a lousier deck of cards to play this year than you two has been me.”

“Give us a week to regroup, Michael. We promised the T&Ders that we’d make things right on that front too, didn’t we Claudine?”

“Sure did. Operation Stop Waffling Tad’s Feathers is just about a go!”

“Oh, God. Don’t tell me Tad’s gotta do the chicken suit again?”

“You want Cady back? You wear the suit!” Claudine implored.

“For goodness sakes. Enough about Dixie. Would someone please remove these lassoes? They’re ruining my dress” Susan pleaded.

“Believe me, Susan, I wish I could,” Walt said “but unfortunately, I’m a little tied up at the moment.”

“Enough with the vaudeville routine. You two need to get going” Michael said and began helping his hopping costars to the van.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you people. Handcuffs I could understand but this?”. A handful of skips later Walt tripped. With lightening speed, Deb somehow managed to wedge her body between his scalp and unspeakable horror. A collective gasp filled the air.

Instantly, a repentant Posse horde rustled him to his feet. Catching his breath, a now edgy Walt turned to the ladies and for the first time ever, raised his voice at them, as he laid down the law. “That’s it. That’s enough. Get these ropes off both of us this minute or so help me, I’ll . . . I’ll . . . I’ll shave my head!”

A wall of Posse rushed to his side, cutting the ropes so swiftly that it all but morphed into a pile of thread. Impatiently, he rubbed his wrists, motioning in Susan’s direction. “I said, her too.”

One by one they filed past her, slicing the rope, with their heads hung low.

“Sorry, Susan.”

“Our apologies.”

“Can I get you some water? Hand cream?”

“We didn’t hurt you, did we?”

“Please forgive us.”

“Don’t tell Helmut.”

“G’s gonna kill us!”

“Okay, okay” Walt said. “I think she gets the idea. Now if you had just asked, I would have told all of you that both Susan and I are more than happy to cooperate. Neither one of us wants to leave this reunion thing to chance, not after the hell we went through this last year. So, if you’ll *quietly* point us to the van . . . ”

“It’s right here,” Rita shouted from behind the wheel. At once, she barreled out of the driveway and then slammed on the brake. “Oops. Sorry. I’m still not used to this clutch.”

Susan and Walt exchanged uneasy looks and slowly began backing away when MEK came to the rescue. “Oh no you don’t. You’re not getting away that easy. I’ll drive.”

Walt raised an eyebrow.

“What? Hey, I used to drive one of these things in high school. I’ll be fine. I’m sure it’s just like riding a bike.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen you ride a bike,” Walt chided.

“It’s me or her. Take your pick.” Rita put on her most beatific smile and hoped for a reprieve. A quick consult between Susan and Walt was all it took to answer her prayers. “Sorry, sweetheart, but you can ride up front with me” Michael said as he sidled into the driver’s seat. “So, where’s the intrepid one?”

“Right here,” Mary said, a broad smile coloring her face.

“Squeeze in, you’re the one navigating” Michael said, pushing open the passenger door. Without so much as a look back, Mary hustled into the seat beside him, with a

crestfallen Rita right behind, scrambling to close the door before any more interlopers got in her way.

In the meantime, Walt swung open the back door of the van, and gallantly lifted Susan in. “Don’t worry; I’m right behind you” he said, casually stepping inside.

Just as he was about to tug the door shut, Misha hurled herself in Walt’s general direction, straightening up just enough to wave goodbye to her Posse pals. “I’m going with them,” she said without the slightest bit of hesitation. Or guilt. [Author’s note: My story, my prerogative. ;)]

Getting the “high” sign, Michael pulled away from the curb. Behind him followed a motley caravan of all manner of transportation, both four-wheeled and four-legged. The last in line was a rickety covered wagon, with a banner reading “Renew or Bust” glued to its rear.

They inched along Amsterdam until finally they were able to hang a right onto 67th. The Posse had heard tales about New York traffic but none of them expected the five-minute drive to take two hours. But now, miraculously, Central Park lay before them. Relieved, everyone plowed out of the van and began following Mary, walking en masse to the final locale. Despite the sea of red that engulfed them, it was Walt, Susan and Michael that garnered all of the attention. Putting their well-known cynicism aside, onlookers couldn’t hide their enthusiasm for these fan favorites.

“We love you, Susan.”

“Go Jack and Erica!”

“Tad! Tad the Cad” they shouted.

Soon, the ad hoc crowd began joining the procession, with the Posse Pied Pipers leading the way. Word of mouth traveled quickly and before long, helicopters began filling the sky and camera crews were rushing to keep up.

Suddenly, Mary veered off the trail and began tromping through a tall thicket of grass. Ever the gentleman, Walt scooped his lovely costar into his arms, making sure that she was shielded from even an errant blade of grass.

“Geez, are we there yet?” Michael asked a couple of minutes later. “The pollen is hell on my allergies.”

“Just a little further,” Mary replied. “It’s right . . . right here!” A tiny opening between overgrown bushes revealed a vast meadow awash in wildflowers. At its center stood a majestic willow tree, swaying gently in the breeze. “I tried to find a Banyan but this was the best I could do” she said apologetically.

“It’s beautiful, Mary” Susan said, reassuringly.

“Susan’s right” Walt said, clearly moved. “The long branches can shelter Jack and Erica from any hardships they might face.”

Mary smiled. “It’s beautiful and graceful, just like you two.”

“This place, this thing that you’re doing, is pretty damn special—just like all of you guys are” Walt added, motioning toward the Posse.

“Wait until you see what’s inside” Mary said and slowly parted its branches. The rest of the Posse followed silently behind, each of them reflecting on the wondrous journey they made to this place. Friendships had been formed; laughter and tears had been shared. And now, they were moments away from fulfilling their latest fantasy. Jackson and Erica would be renewing their vows, enveloped not just by the Willow but also by the love of the Posse.

As planned, three cameras were positioned within the tree’s umbrella. Susan and Walt—Jack and Erica—took their places near its base, with Michael—Tad—by their side. Just as the soft strains of Nat King Cole’s *Unforgettable* filled the space, the wedding official stepped from behind the trunk and gently took Jack’s and Erica’s hands into her own. “I am so proud, so honored to be a part of this very special day as you renew your vows and pledge your love for one another.”

Walt closed his eyes and smiled. “Georgianne, we’re the ones who are honored,” he said softly. Turning toward Susan—Erica—he began:

“We have already been through a lot together, and I believe it’s made us stronger, more resilient and better prepared to handle whatever life hands us. I promise to keep the good memories alive, and to let the bad ones die. I want to spend the rest of my life hearing your thoughts and seeing your dreams. I promise to do my best to make our lives better and better from this day on because I am so amazed by you.

With every beat of my heart, I will love you. This is my promise to you.”

“And I, Erica—Mrs. Jackson Montgomery, vow not to let the sun go down on our anger, and to treat each morning as a new day to love you, the gift I have been given. You’re everything I need, everything I hoped for and I promise to work at our love and always make you a priority in my life. I will not abandon you or these vows that we have made, but rather prove my love to you for the rest of our lives. This is my promise to you.”

G’s faint nod was the only signal Jack needed to take Erica into his arms and kiss her passionately. For one long, wonderful moment time stood still until finally, someone yelled ‘cut’. As the camera faded to black, Walt and Susan turned to greet a jubilant Posse. “With all of you behind us, “ he began and then faltered, his voice thick with emotion. Walt lightly kissed Susan’s hand and tried again. “With all of you behind us, each and every one of you, Jack and Erica will forever be husband and wife. For that, and for so much more, I thank you.”