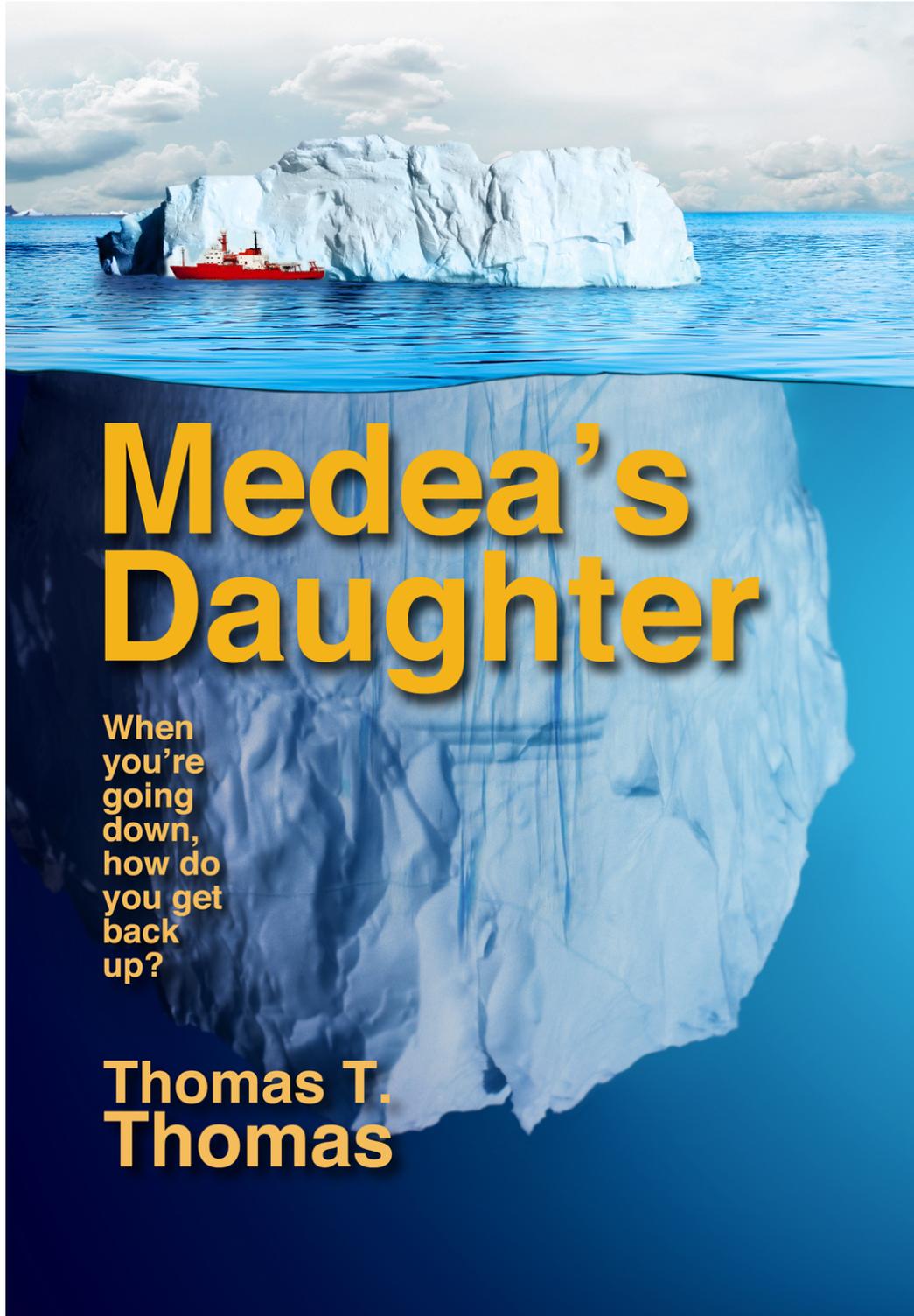


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MEDEA'S DAUGHTER
A Novel

Thomas T. Thomas

When you're going down, how do you get back up?

Graduating in 1970 with a degree in mechanical engineering, Danielle Wheelock lands a plum job at Mannheim Construction, Inc., in San Francisco. She moves into a group house on Haight Street, ground zero for the Summer of Love from 1967, and begins her career as a professional engineer. But her first assignment is more clerical than professional: tracking rebar shipments in the foundation of a nuclear power plant that Mannheim is building in Tennessee. When she discovers an anomaly that leads to the project being canceled, her career takes a sideways skid.

Dani ends up in engineering purgatory—a support group doing estimating and scheduling for the projects that other engineers would get to design and build—and it looks like her bright future has dimmed almost to extinction. But Dani still hungers to create something big and meaningful. As if stepping out of her dreams, a French hydrologist with backing from the Saudi government brings Mannheim a juicy proposal to capture icebergs in the Antarctic and haul them up to the Red Sea port of Jeddah. It turns out the only person who can make this scheme work both technically and economically is Dani, who has a creative spin on handling the bergs. She leaps at the chance to get in on the ground floor of a project to make the desert bloom. Dani quits her position at Mannheim and joins in partnership with the Frenchman and the Saudi prince who is behind the deal.

Will the iceberg project be her rescue or become her doom? Dani must work harder than ever to find out.

This third novel in *The Judge's Daughter* series, timed soon after the close of *The Professor's Mistress*, follows the third generation of the Wheelock family and its passage from small-town dealings in central Pennsylvania into the modern world of international engineering and construction ... and other businesses that are far less savory.

MEDEA'S DAUGHTER

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I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

—*William Blake*

June 1970

1. Graduation Day

With the sun beating down on her head and shoulders, Danielle Wheelock wondered why she had bothered to come to her graduation ceremony at all. To distract herself, she tried to analyze the architecture of her surroundings and figure out how the football stadium had become such a furnace.

Because of the prevailing onshore winds, Badger Stadium at the University of Lake Ontario—about sixty miles east along the lakeshore from Rochester, New York—had been constructed so that the open end of the encircling stands, where nothing but the scoreboard stood, faced *away* from the lake. This prevented either team from gaining an advantage in kickoffs, long passes, and kicks for extra points—or so she supposed. Actually, Dani had only gone to one football game in her entire college career, back when she was a freshman. But still, she understood the game’s mechanics. And she knew from her courses in structural design that architectural and civil engineers were instructed to take a building’s intended function into account as much as its desired form. Too bad they never considered today’s function in their design.

That was why she was sitting on a folding chair in the hot June sun, wearing a black robe and a mortarboard hat that collected solar energy better than a photovoltaic panel, with not a bit of breeze off the lake to stir the air inside the stadium. On top of that, she had worn her best outfit for the event, with good shoes that had fashionably narrow toes and the heels tapering down to half a square inch. Those heels had sunk an inch into the turf with every step as she filed in with her graduating class. Now the front edge of the chair’s seat was biting into the back of her thighs, because its tube legs were also sinking into the ground at an awkward angle toward the back. And the toes of those stylish shoes were starting to compress the metatarsal bones in the balls of her feet, creating more pain. It was going to be worse when she had to get up and parade in line—hobbling, no doubt—to the improvised stage to receive her diploma. So she quietly slipped her feet out of her shoes and pushed them back under her chair.

Dani hadn’t wanted to come to her graduation at all. She had planned to skip the ceremony and let the College of Engineering mail her the sheepskin. She did value her B.S. in Mechanical Engineering, along with her three-point-five grade point average, but only for where they could take her in life. The actual artifact, for all its fancy calligraphy and faux-wax seals, was just a piece of thin leather in a satin binder.

But Dani’s mother had insisted. Jane Wheelock seemed to feel personally responsible for her daughter’s finishing the last two years of college—even though she had been absent for most of Dani’s life.

“It’s not every day you get to be the center of attention like this,” Jane had told her grimly. “So make the most of it, my dear.”

The one person who really belonged up there in the stands was missing. Her father, William Henry, had done the most to care for and raise her. He had once been a full professor at the University of Lake Ontario, although that was in the College of Liberal Arts, where he had taught the classics. Still, he was Dani’s inspiration to enroll and had urged her to follow her interests and go into engineering. William Henry was the most important man in her life, and yet he could not get away from his current job—readying a holiday resort for the summer season on Lake Simcoe, up in Canada—to be with his daughter at her graduation. But he did send her a nice watch, a Rolex Orchid on an expansion band decorated with seashells. That was something.

“Your father has chosen that Welsh woman over you,” Jane had remarked with characteristic spite, referring to the woman who owned and ran the resort. “That watch is just a sop—and *she* probably paid for it.”

After the obligatory speeches by the university's president and the deans of their represented colleges, along with an invocation by the chaplain from the School of Religion, the ceremony settled into the traditional commencement address. This year the speaker was a senior vice president from International Business Machines, a U.L.O. alumnus and the person most responsible for computerizing the campus with an IBM System/360 in the basement of Helmsman Hall. He spoke—for forty-five minutes by Dani's new watch—about the country's great future, about technical advancements in science and computers, and how the graduating class seated before him could contribute to that greatness and its advancements. All the while, Dani's head was getting hotter and the sweat was running through her braided hair, down her neck, under the collar of the black rayon gown, and into the summer-print dress she was wearing underneath it.

Soon, she was not hearing the man's words at all, as they echoed out of the public-address system. Instead she just followed the rhythms and modulations of his voice. Was his oratory descending, as if coming in for a landing? Was he speaking in shorter and shorter sentences, as if his thought train was winding down? Was he using longer and longer pauses, searching the faces before him for eye contact, while imagining the lives he was changing with his prepared speech?

Finally, as her mind faded into a red haze from the direct sunlight and its molten reflection off every bit of metal on the field and in the stands, she heard the man pause for one last time, or pause without starting up again, followed three beats later by applause from the graduates sitting around her and their parents filling the first seven rows of the stadium.

Dani herself started clapping just in time to stop when the university president asked the graduating class of 1970 to come forward to receive their diplomas. The string quartet from the School of Music, amplified and made grainy by the public address system, struck up the traditional march from *Pomp and Circumstance*. People in the rows around her gathered themselves, preparing to file out onto the cinder running track and approach the stage.

When Dani bent to get her shoes, she found that the stiff leather at the back, which normally cupped her heel and helped keep her balance, had become jammed under the chair's front rung. She tried to pull them free, but her expensive Italian pumps were stuck fast. Those narrow heels had been driven deep into the turf. She tried to assume a dignified half-crouch, tilt the chair back with one hand, and work the shoes loose by pulling with her other hand, but without effect. It was already past time for her to stand up and start moving. People were pressing up behind her from farther along in the row.

So it was that Danielle Wheelock collected her sheepskin in her stocking feet with bits of gravel embedded in the soles of her pantyhose.

2. Part-Time Job

The day after her daughter's graduation, Jane Wheelock helped Dani clean out her dorm room in Durrell Hall.

She stood outside in the hallway holding a garment bag with Dani's three nice dresses and a couple of long skirts, all of them bought with Jane's money and all neatly arranged

on hangers, including the floral print Dani had worn the day before. For the rest of her wardrobe, her daughter was stuffing blue jeans, various shirts and knit tops, and underwear into paper bags. At Jane's feet was a carton containing a pair of engineer boots, a pair of cowboy boots, two pairs of sneakers, three pairs of plain brown loafers, and the Italian high-heeled pumps, again bought by Jane, which she had recovered from the football field after the graduation ceremony. The good shoes were now stained, scuffed, and broken, having been walked on by a couple of dozen people shuffling down the row after Dani had abandoned them.

It was a shame that Dani didn't have more, well, *feminine* clothes—frilly, girlish things that would attract the boys. But then, what could you expect? Her tomboy daughter had been mostly raised by her father, while Jane herself was out on the West Coast and ... otherwise engaged.

The rest of Dani's luggage was books, boxes and boxes of technical books, course textbooks in mathematics, physics, and chemistry, books filled with engineering reference tables, and one lone box of popular novels in paperback. Aside from those, there was only Dani's portable record player and a metal case containing her favorite albums.

"Where are we taking all this ... stuff?" Jane asked for the third time that day.

"First, we have to drop off my key and the room form at the housing office."

"Yes, but after that? Do you have a hotel? A friend's apartment? Anything?"

"Well ..." Dani paused and straightened up from the bureau drawer she was emptying. She was a head taller than Jane and lanky, taking after her father that way, as in so much else. "To tell you the truth, I thought I would get some response on all those job applications by now. Then I would be on my way to ... wherever."

"So! The answer is no."

"That's right, Mother."

"What will you do for money? You have student loans to pay off, you know."

"Yes, I owe the school twenty-eight hundred dollars that I'll pay off eventually."

"I suppose I could put you on at the Third Base ..." This was the bar in Byzantium, the college town attached to the university, where Jane worked six nights a week from six in the evening till two in the morning. Business was good there, at least until the town cleared out for term break. But things would pick up again once the summer session started, and the lull would give Dani time to learn the job and get her orders straight.

"Schlepping drinks isn't going to pay enough," Dani said.

"It'll do to get you started. The country's in a recession, after all." Jane paused and pointed at the bag of jeans and tee shirts. "Of course, you'll need better clothes than this."

"It's a college crowd, isn't it? They won't mind a waitress—"

"Actually, the word we use is 'hostess,'" Jane corrected her.

"—whatever! I'll be dressed like them. This isn't the fifties."

Jane decided not to argue. "We could store all this at my place, I guess. And put you up on the couch—just while you're finding your feet."

"Just that long," Dani agreed with a massive sigh.

As a student, Dani Wheelock had always worked hard. Between attending classes, reading for her coursework and tackling homework problems, and then her evening job tending the reference desk at the Engineering Library in Stones Hall, she usually put in a

twelve-hour day. But most of the work was mental, and all of it was done sitting down. “Hostessing” at the Third Base was physically the hardest job she ever had.

For one thing, Dani was on her feet for eight hours straight, aside from two breaks of fifteen minutes each, which were also the only time she was allowed to go to the bathroom. And it wasn't all mindless activity, because she had to learn the customers' faces and match them with their drink orders. Some of those orders, too, could be for obscure liquor brands and strange cocktail mixes that the college kids would think up just to stump the bartender. But her mother Jane, who captained the bar, managed to field every one of them—sometimes to the applause of the table that ordered it.

“How do you remember all that?” Dani asked her one night.

“I've got years in the business. And Tony has good stock.”

“But you've got a little black book back there, too? Right?”

“I'll tell you a secret, my child.” Jane lowered her voice. “You watch where the orders are coming from. After a table's downed two rounds, these kids don't really know what they're drinking. So you mix whatever's handy and charge for the good stuff.”

“But ...” Dani was shocked. “Isn't that ... *cheating*?”

“No. Just business. Keeping my customers satisfied.”

Dani was learning about that, too. For the first few nights, despite her mother's orders, she showed up wearing blue jeans, tennis shoes, and whatever top was clean out of the laundry. And for those days she collected maybe eighty-five cents in tips from her whole shift. But Dani saw the girl who worked the noon-to-six, a single mother named Sally, tuck away four or five dollars each day—and that was from hours when the Third Base was half empty. Dani complained about this to Jane, and her mother had another ready-made answer.

“Look at how she's dressed. Miniskirt, hose, heels, and a scoop-neck shell top. She's twice your age, but she knows what these boys like. And she uses the body she's got to her advantage. The women in the party don't count. It's the men who pay the tab.”

So Dani spent her first week's wages to buy similar clothes and wore them—although the shoes burned like hell after she had been on her feet for six hours. She also came to recognize the bar's regular customers, greeted them by name, and remembered what they were drinking. That was good for an extra fifty cents left with the change on her tray.

All in all, working at the Third Base wasn't bad—for her first job in the real world. But Dani knew she didn't want to do this for the rest of her life. Not like her mother. Not even if that was the only work she could get.

As it turned out, she wouldn't have to. When they arrived back at the apartment at two in the morning during her second week on the job, Jane collected the mail from their box. In with her own letters was one for Dani, forwarded from Durrell Hall. The return address was the Personnel Department of Mannheim Construction, Inc., in San Francisco, California. Dani took it without enthusiasm, expecting to find another rejection, like the ones she had already received late in the spring quarter, before her graduation.

“Aren't you going to open it?” Jane asked.

“I know what's in it. It will keep till morning.”

Jane snorted. “Now you're clairvoyant, are you?”

“Oh, all *right*,” Dani said, tearing the gummed flap and pulling out the single, folded sheet. “Dear Miss Wheelock,” she read aloud. “Thank you for your interest in joining our

firm, as expressed in your *blah-blah-blah ... blah ... ooh ... Oh!*” Dani stopped reading and absorbed the news.

“What?” Jane asked.

“I’ve got an interview.”

“When is it? And where?”

“Friday—day after tomorrow. In San Francisco.” Dani’s mind was already working out the timing and connections. “But that’s too soon! I’m not ready!”

“Nonsense. We’ll get you a plane ticket.”

“But ... I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Get you a business suit. And shoes.”

“But I don’t have *money* for that.”

“How about we give you an advance at the bar?” Jane said.

“I don’t know. ... How would I ever pay back that much?”

“We’ll dock your salary when you return from the Coast.”

“But suppose they take me, and I don’t ever come back?”

“Then, my dear, I’ll write it off to doing my good deed.”

Jane Wheelock thought her daughter would be coming back, all right, so she didn’t mind splurging to make her ready for the job interview. The first thing they did when they got up the next day was buy a round-trip ticket on United Airlines, leaving Greater Rochester International Airport at midnight, transferring through O’Hare in Chicago in the dark, and arriving at San Francisco—with the layover and change in time zones—at six in the morning. Dani’s appointment was for ten with the Mannheim people, so that gave her plenty of leeway to get into town, find the address, and arrive relaxed and smiling.

After buying the ticket, Jane took her daughter shopping. They chose an ensemble suit in black linen with a gorgeous sheen to the material. The suit featured a knee-length pencil skirt and cropped bolero jacket. Dani could mix and match those pieces and go anywhere—even back to work at the bar.

“But, Mother! Do I really need a jacket? I’ll be stifling!”

“Trust me, I know summer out there in San Francisco.”

They bought a plain white silk blouse, black pumps with heels that did not exaggerate Dani’s height, and a handbag that would work with the outfit.

“But I carry my wallet in my hip pocket.”

“Not in that skirt, you don’t. No pockets.”

Although Dani expected to fly back the same day, right after the interview, Jane insisted she take a bag with one of her nice dresses, a change of underwear, and toiletries.

“Plan ahead, darling. You never know what might happen.”

“Mother, I’m an engineer. We know how the world works.”

Jane chose to ignore that comment. Dani had much to learn.

Because they were splurging, and the girl’s future paychecks—come what may—would be good for it, Jane cashed a personal check for thirty dollars in walking-around money. After all, her daughter might never get to see San Francisco again.

3. Interview in San Francisco

Two years earlier, Dani had been beaten by a Hell’s Angel–type biker, Eric Bell, who had followed her mother back to Upstate New York from the West Coast after Jane stole a

kilogram of heroin from him. Or that was the story Jane told the family. Bell had found Dani while looking for Jane and conducted a savage interrogation to find out where her mother had gone. Anyway, Bell was now safely dead.

Dani's injuries from the beating included—among other things she didn't like to think about—a broken cheekbone that, despite surgery to repair, created an asymmetry on the left side of her face, about which Dani was self-conscious whenever she looked in the mirror. The damaged sinuses also gave her an excellent barometer that ached whenever a low-pressure front swept in from Lake Ontario, which happened about every third day in the summertime.

Now she found that her face pained her on airplane rides, too. It was something to do with reduced cabin pressure—she had read that, on a plane at about 30,000 feet, the pressure dropped to between eleven and twelve pounds per square inch, equivalent to about 10,000 feet of elevation and measurably reduced from the fourteen-point-seven pounds at sea level. By the time she had landed and taken off at O'Hare, then landed again in San Francisco, Dani's face felt swollen and her head was pounding. The two aspirins she got from the stewardess somewhere over Nevada didn't touch the ache.

She also felt sweaty and tired. Because she didn't have a place to change, she had worn her new linen suit to the airport. With the jacket, it was too heavy for crossing part of Upstate New York in June in a car without air conditioning. The material was just right for the cool air on the plane and in Chicago's air-conditioned terminal. And when she landed in California and stepped out onto the ramp, Dani found that the jacket was a blessing in the cold, damp air coming off San Francisco Bay.

But otherwise, she was a mess. She had slept in the suit on the plane, and the skirt was now wrinkled across her hips like an accordion and creased down the back like a set of vertical pleats. No amount of sponging—or steaming, even if she had the time—would take out those creases. Also, the armpits of her new blouse had creeping yellow stains. And she had snagged her nylons on a rough edge somewhere under the seat in front of her.

On the cab ride into the city, Dani at first gave the driver the address of Mannheim Construction, Inc., at someplace called Centennial Plaza. Then she realized no one would be in the office at six o'clock. And next she realized she was famished. So instead she asked for the address of “a nice place to get breakfast.”

From the airport, the cab at first drove on a long, straight causeway that edged the Bay, then climbed over a steep hill that separated Visitacion Valley on the left from the start of Third Street on the right—which, the driver said, wound its way past Bay View and the Navy yard at Hunters Point and up into the downtown area. But he was taking her the way that was longer but faster, he said: on Highway 101, cutting over to the stub end of Interstate 280, past Army Street, and around the east side of Potrero Hill. From that elevation, the driver pointed out the view across the flatlands of Dogpatch, Mission Bay, and South of Market to the city skyline, rising out of the mist into the sunshine. For a girl raised in a small college town on the Great Lakes, the City by the Bay looked amazing.

She clearly made out the seven hills on which it perched—like Rome on its own seven, as her father, the classics professor, would have noted. The hill slopes were outlined with row upon row of three- and four-story buildings, punctuated here and there by skyscrapers like the Bank of America, the Transamerica Pyramid, the Fairmont Tower, and the Mark Hopkins Hotel. The driver named these landmarks in turn as they

approached downtown. He also pointed out the four towers of the suspension bridge that went east across the Bay, through Yerba Buena Island, and on toward Oakland, which she glimpsed just off to the right in the morning haze.

The office tower of Centennial Plaza and the Mannheim Construction headquarters were just beyond Rincon Hill, the driver said, which was the “jumping off place” for the San Francisco end of the bridge. Then he apologized for the city’s rapidly rising skyline—“ice trays in the sky,” he called them—because they hid the famous Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill, on the far north side of the city. That place offered “the best views in town,” he said. “Or used to.”

When they got into the area around Union Square, the driver dropped her on Powell Street at a diner with the name “Sears Fine Foods.” The fare for the ride from the airport was four dollars and twenty cents. Dani didn’t feel right giving the man less than a fifty-cent tip, because he had been such an excellent tour guide. Then she felt sheepish about asking for her thirty cents in change from five dollars—but she asked for it anyway. At this rate, plus whatever breakfast was going to cost, that thirty dollars from her mother wouldn’t last long.

After eating the diner’s “world famous” Swedish pancakes—another two dollars and fifty cents gone—it was closer to eight o’clock and time for Dani to think about getting to her appointment. But first, she had to repair her appearance. She took her small suitcase into the ladies’ room, shut herself in a stall with a couple of wet paper towels, and stripped out of her wrinkled suit. She wiped her neck, armpits, and other parts of her body with the towels, then put on the same summer dress she had worn to graduation. At least it was clean and fresh. And with the black jacket over it, her appearance was *kind of* businesslike.

Finally ready to meet the day, she packed up her bag and went out onto Powell Street, looking for another cab that could take her down to Centennial Plaza. One of the city’s open-air cable cars went by with its bell clanging, and Dani was tempted to hop on. The twenty-five-cent fare was surely going to be less than a second cab ride, no matter how instructive.

But, for all the cable car’s charm, she didn’t know where it was going.

Although, truth to tell, she didn’t know where *she* was going, either.

Cynthia Hammond, a recruiter in the Personnel Department of Mannheim Construction, Inc., studied her ten o’clock appointment as the receptionist showed the tall young woman into her office. She checked the paperwork in front of her: Wheelock, Danielle Ann, June graduate of University of Lake Ontario, 3.5 GPA, and a bachelor of science in mechanical engineering. On paper, she looked perfect. But in person was another matter.

The girl was pretty enough, with auburn hair done up in a French braid and hazel eyes. A bunch of recessive genes there, Hammond guessed. She had a long, straight nose turned up at the end over a wide mouth with full lips in an otherwise unremarkable face. Unfortunately, she wore too much lipstick, and it was a deep shade of red that was meant to go with darker colors and did not complement her yellow cotton dress with its enormous orange flowers—the kind of pattern one saw on the untucked shirts of tourists returning from Hawaii. The dress was tight in the bodice with a flared skirt that ended above the knee. And Cynthia would guess that, under that stiff little black jacket, the dress was sleeveless. All the outfit needed was a pair of cowboy boots to make it truly

absurd, but at least Miss Wheelock had chosen black pumps with a low heel. So this was not a completely incompetent woman. One could at least hope she was a competent engineer.

As the girl sat down, Hammond fixed her with a steely eye. "Why do you want to come to work for Mannheim?" she asked by way of greeting.

"I heard you were the best at what you do."

"We are. And did you apply anywhere else?"

"Well, um, yes. . . . I wanted to hedge my bets."

"That was sensible. Our hiring is very selective."

Under normal circumstances, that would be true. But Personnel was also under pressure from on-high to increase the presence of women engineers in the company. It was a public-relations move, to boost Mannheim's chances at federal contracts under the new affirmative action guidelines—but theirs not to reason why. Unfortunately, the female engineers from better schools like MIT and Caltech had already been scooped up. Which left this lone young woman from a second-rate college in Upstate New York that wasn't even in Rensselaer's league. But still, Hammond refused to be hurried about these things. The company had a reputation to maintain.

She studied the girl's application, which was typed with two spelling errors. Minus points there. "I see you made the dean's list in your last two years."

"I worked hard for that."

"No one thinks you didn't."

In the résumé section under "Special Achievements" Wheelock had included an interesting fact. "And you wrote a paper on Joseph Strauss and the Golden Gate Bridge. Was that for one of your mechanical engineering courses?"

"It was a class on structural engineering."

"You know we do mostly civil work here, don't you? Buildings and infrastructure, rather than mechanical projects."

"That's why I mentioned the paper. And I do understand that Mannheim's area of expertise is not exactly my specialty. But I figure most of your industrial projects also have mechanical systems, things with motors and pumps, like elevators, water supplies, heating and ventilating. So you must have some mechanicals on your staff."

"As a matter of fact," Hammond said, "we do have an opening for an engineering analyst in our Power Division. They assure me that, aside from the foundations and the administrative offices, those things are *all* mechanical." She watched the girl's face to see how she reacted to the lowly position of "analyst."

"That sounds *very* interesting," Wheelock said with a smile.

"Then I will arrange an interview with the project engineer."

"I'm looking forward to working here," the girl added.

"I am sure you are." Hammond smiled in return.

The Hammond woman in Personnel had told Dani to report to another building some distance away at two o'clock that afternoon, which left her four hours for lunch. She ate at a small Italian café on Steuart Street—another three dollars gone!—and spent the rest of the time walking on the Embarcadero, which was a Spanish word for the city's waterfront.

It was an industrial landscape made up of the landward façades of the numbered piers, with glimpses of open water and pilings in between. The piers were more like big, noisy warehouses than docks, and when Dani stuck her head into the open door of one, she was quickly chased out by a man driving a forklift. The street running along the waterfront was overshadowed by the pillars of an elevated, double-decked freeway that seemed to ring the city and obstruct the views of all but the tallest downtown office buildings. A city guidebook she had picked up at the restaurant—another twenty-five cents—said the famous Fisherman’s Wharf, a place of fine seafood restaurants, crab shacks, a waxworks, and a penny arcade, was located at the upper end of the Embarcadero, about two miles to the north, but that was too far for her to walk both ways, and she didn’t want to pay for the cab ride back.

Dani got back to her appointment at two o’clock and signed in with the guard at the security desk. The Power Division—or at least the part she was visiting—was on the third floor of an older building in the South of Market area that had probably been converted from a factory. The interior was open space filled with drafting tables and desks inside a maze of waist-high partitions. By asking three people in succession, Dani found her way to the cubicle of Michael Manuglian, the man she was going to see. From the expressions on the faces of the people directing her, she guessed he was not popular with the staff.

At the indicated desk, she stood before a burly young man with dark hair and hard eyes. He was in his shirtsleeves with his tie pulled down and his shirt collar unbuttoned.

“Yes?” he said, glaring up at her.

“I’m Danielle Wheelock. Miss Hammond sent me?”

Manuglian shook his head and looked around the room, as if expecting Miss Hammond to suddenly appear and explain everything. “All right,” he said when he didn’t find her. “So?”

“I’m supposed to interview for the engineering job?”

“Tell them we don’t need a secretary,” he replied.

“I’m not a secretary. I’m a mechanical engineer.”

“Huh!” He blew out his cheeks. “But you’re a woman.”

Dani decided there was no nice way to treat this man. If she was going to lose this job opportunity—her only job opportunity at this point—and go back to the Third Base and serve drinks, then she would lose it standing on her own two feet and fighting.

“That does not automatically make me a moron... sir. I graduated in the top ten percent of my class. I have a degree in mechanical engineering—which is the position you’ve got to fill.”

He shrugged at that. “Where’d you go to school?”

“At the University of Lake Ontario,” she replied.

“Never heard of it. So ... is that place any good?”

“Two from my class went straight to NASA this spring. A third enrolled in the graduate engineering program at Berkeley. I decided to come to Mannheim because I want to build power plants.”

“You know we do a lot of nuclear work,” he said with a hard look, as if he was trying to discourage her.

“So?” Dani replied in turn. She really had no opinion about the politics of energy supply. “Steam is steam, isn’t it?” she said. “Do you want me to sit down and calculate a heat transfer to prove it?”

He sighed and waved her into the chair opposite him across the desk. Then he took up a folder from a pile at his left hand. Inside was her application and hand-typed résumé.

“You’re a tough kid, aren’t you?” Manuglian said.

“When I have to be.” She was still in full fight mode.

“You’ll need it to survive around here. Especially from me.”

Dani looked him straight in the eye. “Well, I do like a challenge.”

From that point on, the man seemed to relax, and he conducted a relatively normal job interview. He asked about her coursework and her professors. He talked about the projects Mannheim had in hand and the jobs they were bidding. The one thing he didn’t discuss was the duties of the position on offer.

“What do you expect from me?” Dani finally asked.

“You do what you’re told. You work the hours we need. You come up with the right numbers, and you check your math. You ... cope.”

“That’s the analyst’s job?”

“No, that’s engineering work.”

“You know I won’t make coffee ...”

“Everybody here pours his—or her—own.”

But still, Manuglian appeared to be undecided. He said he would need time to think about the position and get back to her. She was in town for the weekend, right? So, he said, she should leave a local number with the Personnel office. And with that Dani was out on the street again.

She hailed a cab and asked the driver to take her to a “nice enough” hotel. He drove her up Market Street, turned off on Geary, and then left on Mason Street, dropping her and her suitcase in front of the King George Hotel, a narrow building in red- and green-painted stonework with a high, ornate cornice at the roof line. The awning that extended from the front door to the curb showed the silhouette of a bearded man. The taxi ride with tip cost her another three dollars.

Inside, at the registration desk, she found that a room would cost her twenty dollars a night. That was going to exhaust her “walking around money” two days before she ever got to Monday morning. But Dani was too tired to go look someplace else and afraid of what she would find closer to the financial district or in the dark places along the waterfront.

Before she went up to her room, she called United Airlines to change her return flight. The reservation clerk wanted an extra thirty dollars on top of her hundred and fifty dollar round-trip fare because, he said, she was extending her stay over a weekend, and that was the holiday rate. He gave her the address of a downtown office where she could pay the extra amount and exchange her ticket.

She then asked the hotel concierge where the nearest Western Union office was, and he gave an address around the corner on Powell Street. The next morning she would have to contact Jane and ask her to wire more money. Dani realized she was getting in over her head, incurring a debt that would take her months to pay off.

That night, she went to bed without dinner in a seventh-floor room with a charming bow window that overlooked Mason Street. She listened to the hum of traffic in the city and the distant rattle and clang of the cable cars along Powell Street until she fell asleep.

Dani spent Saturday arranging the wire order, changing her ticket, and then riding the cable cars and visiting Coit Tower, with its 1930s-era Work Projects Administration murals, because the admission ticket was just a dollar. The views of the city itself weren't as interesting as the panorama of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Marin Headlands, Alcatraz, and a hundred little sailboats beating back and forth between them. She ate a hotdog from the stand in tiny Pioneer Park, at the base of the tower, as her only meal that day. She spent Sunday in her hotel room reading a book she had brought along, because she was effectively broke and was saving for cab fare on the trip back to the airport.

At eleven o'clock on Monday, three hours before her flight to the East Coast, Dani got a call from Miss Hammond. They were offering her a starting salary of \$12,500 a year to work as an engineering analyst—which was more than her father had made in any one year as a full professor. They wanted her to begin work in a week. Dani asked if she should come into the office and sign anything, but Hammond said, "No, we'll mail you the paperwork." So she need not have stayed the weekend after all. "Have a nice flight home," Hammond told her.

As she was being driven out to the airport, Dani collected her impressions of the place where she was going to live and work for at least the next several years. It was colder than she had ever experienced in June. It was also not the fabled city of "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll" that she had expected. Instead, San Francisco seemed stiff, hard, and buttoned down. Like a miniature New York City, but with a bit more charm.

4. Continuing Education

It happened every year. *Sensei* John Schumacher would see his Wednesday and Sunday night karate classes evaporate, from thirty-odd students down to about ten, as most of them went home for the summer term and did not return until the fall. And then there was the percentage who graduated from the University of Lake Ontario and went away forever. One stalwart, however, was Dani Wheelock. She had been a regular, year-round student and, even after graduation, had kept on attending his classes. Although she had an evening job at one of the downtown bars the other five nights of the week, she took time off, sacrificing pay and tips, to make it to class.

Schumacher remembered how she had come to him two years ago, and that had been during the summer, too, between her sophomore and junior years. Her face had been bashed in by a crazy drug dealer named Eric Bell—although not that Dani was involved with drugs in any way—and she was still healing from the surgery. She said she wanted to learn to fight back.

"You know karate isn't necessarily going to do that for you," he had told the tall, lanky young woman. "It takes years of training for the average student to become a match for even the most casual street fighter." He paused. "Longer for a woman, because of differences in size and strength."

"I don't want to be a victim," she had insisted. "Not ever again."

"You can learn mental discipline, perhaps. You'll just go down fighting."

"But, then too, I *might* win," she said, jutting out her chin. *Tough girl.*

"You would also get hurt. Maybe even worse, because you resisted."

“Yeah, but I would be getting hurt on *my* terms.”

So Schumacher had accepted Wheelock's class fees, put her in the back row, and forgot about her. Most students dropped out in the first six weeks, when they discovered how much boring repetition karate training required. And how minutely technical it was, to the point of distraction.

The beginning student had to learn how to place and hold his feet, balance his weight between them, and regulate his breathing in order to relax his muscles—and do all of this at the same time. Performing the simplest of side blocks entailed dozens of small movements, controlling the positions of shoulder, elbow, fist, and knuckles, in order to create an exact, mechanical, sweeping arc every time. Performing strikes and kicks required perfect alignment of the striking surface with wrist and elbow, or ankle and knee, shifting balance without committing it to forward motion, keeping the joints from locking bone-on-bone, and tightening the muscles of the body core and the striking arm or leg, in sequence with the breath, while keeping the rest of the limbs in a state of relaxed readiness. Even the toughest, most aggressive, most eager male students found the training too tedious. But Dani Wheelock had stayed with it. She took to all this like a ballerina doing pliés at the barre.

Sensei Schumacher had personally trained her on the first of the forms, called *katas*, that simulated a mock battle with a set of invisible opponents: a precise choreography of blocks, punches, and kicks. She moved with the grace of a cat, gliding across the floor on her bare feet. And so he began to take notice of her, sparred with her occasionally to check her range and timing, and gave her moments of special attention as she advanced through the ranks, denoted by the stitched-cotton belts worn with the pajama-like uniform called a *gi*, progressing from white to green belt. After two years, Wheelock had completed the eight hand-and-foot *katas* in the Isshinryu style and was ready to test for brown belt. After that, she would train with the style's weapons, the short swords called *sai* and the long staff called *bo*. And eventually, in another year or so, she might pass for black belt. It was a shame she had begun training so late in her academic career, because Schumacher wanted to take this young woman to that level, which most students thought of as an end point, but for the adept was really the starting point.

When she missed her first Sunday night class in two years, he thought Dani might have moved on, like all the other graduates. But there she was again on Wednesday. After the class period finished, he thought to ask her about that. Instead, she approached him.

“*Sensei* ...”

“Yes, Dani?”

“I'm going to be leaving town now,” she said.

“Oh? I hope you're going to someplace good.”

“I have an engineering job in San Francisco.”

“That is ... a long way away. I wish you luck.”

“I was hoping, before I go ...” She twisted one toe against the wooden floor of the workout area. “If you would test me for brown belt? I know it's presumptuous of me to ask. But it would help if I wanted to join a *dojo* out there.”

“You know the belt rank doesn't mean anything,” he said.

“I know. It's just a personal marker. But it might help me get accepted.”

“I don't have to test you. I've watched you for months now. You pass. Go buy yourself the belt.”

Her face brightened at that, and she started to thank him.

“But,” he said quickly. “Even if you can find another Isshinryu school on the West Coast—and I haven’t heard of any—they won’t recognize your belt. They may advance you faster, based on what you’ve learned here, but they will have their own belt classifications. And their own standards of training.”

“Then could you help me find a *dojo* with a good teacher?”

“Sure. It’s the least I can do. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow. I have to be at work on Monday.”

And then *Sensei* Schumacher did something he had never done with any student. He placed his hands on the young woman’s shoulders, leaned in, and gave her a light kiss on the forehead. “Be well, Dani. Take care of yourself.”

5. Interview on Haight Street

With another loan from her mother—one she now knew she could pay back, and get started on her student loans—Dani bought a one-way ticket to San Francisco for the following Saturday. She also had enough extra to keep herself until the first paycheck came in, which wouldn’t be for at least two weeks.

This time she would be traveling in daylight. She had booked a window seat on the right side of the aircraft fuselage, out of the direct sunlight as the plane headed west. She spent the flight gazing down, from a height of seven miles in the air, as the countryside unrolled beneath her.

Dani found that, for all she had read, and everything other people said, about how vast the continent was, she had never understood how empty it also was. Once they were out of Chicago and had passed the farmlands and small towns of Iowa and Nebraska, the land seemed to be swept clean. She followed the thin, beige lines of isolated roads as they crossed dark-brown scrub and low hills, stretching for miles without a crossroads or a farmhouse in sight. Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada—when she could guess that her plane had crossed a state line—were the emptiest: just wrinkled black mountains and flat gray-brown desert. It was a relief to arrive in California with more green forests, fields, and orchards. But perhaps the change was due to the jetliner descending slowly and bringing the ground more into focus.

From the airport, Dani again took a taxi. Rather than going into the downtown area, this time she headed toward the center of the peninsula, a hollow lying between the city’s prominent hills and the long slope down to the ocean. Her mother had given her an address on Haight Street where she said Dani might find a room.

The cab dropped her and her suitcases in front of a narrow old Victorian-style house, one in a row of such houses along that side of the street. It was three stories tall and no wider than the doorway itself and the big bay window beside it; so Dani hoped it went a ways back into the block, with an air shaft or something to let in light along the sides against the neighboring buildings. The first floor was above street level, up a flight of cracked, terrazzo steps, and she humped her bags up to the arched and colonnaded doorway.

On closer inspection, the place was less encouraging. The exterior clapboards were dented and chipped, with dark streaks where nails had been driven to hold them together. The white paint curled away from the ornate dentils and scrolled woodwork around the

door and window frames. The windows themselves were uncurtained and deep in dust. Dani wondered if anyone still lived there.

She pressed the painted-over button that should have rung a bell somewhere inside, but nothing happened for a long time. As this was the weekend, she thought the residents—if there were any—might all have gone to the beach, or something. But finally the door moved, bumped against some obstruction inside, and opened a crack.

“Yes?” said half of a young woman’s face, with a blue eye and frizzy yellow hair.

“I’m inquiring about a room,” Dani said politely.

“A room?” the woman said. “Do we have a room?”

“I’m told you do,” Dani replied. But she was becoming uncertain. She suspected her mother’s information was by now some years out of date. After all, there was no sign outside saying anything about rooms to rent. The house might have changed hands.

“You’ll have to speak to the Chairman of the Housing Committee,” the woman said.

“I see. And is he available?” Dani asked reasonably.

“Yeah, I guess so.” She turned away from the door and bellowed. “Adrian! You have a visitor.” Then she turned back to Dani. “Takes him a minute to put his pants on when he’s stoned.”

With that, the young woman disappeared down the dark interior hallway, leaving Dani standing on the steps and the door swinging slowly open under its own weight. After that minute, she heard footsteps drumming on inside stairs, and a middle-aged man in jeans and a tie-dyed tee shirt, barefoot, and with a gray ponytail pulling back on his scalp, stepped into the open space.

“Yeah?” He studied her through bleary eyes. “Do I know you?”

“Are you the housing chairman? I’m looking for a room to rent.”

“Room ... yeah.” He straightened. “Six is available. I think. Or will be, when Darryl decides to get his shit together.”

“And when do you think that will be?” she asked.

“Five o’clock. Maybe four, if we push him. He’s moving down to Carmel.”

“Oh. All right.” She had thought it might be a week, with notice. “May I come in?”

“Sure thing.” Adrian backed out of the doorway, let her enter the hallway, and pointed to the first door on the right, which was more of an open archway. “This is the common room, where you can hang if you want.”

Dani set her suitcases by the wall and squatted on a beanbag chair. The thing was completely sacked out and quickly rearranged itself to deposit her rump on the hardwood floor. She was glad she had decided to travel informally, just jeans and a top, rather than in her suit or a dress. “What’s Number Six like?” she asked.

“Second floor in the back,” Adrian said, dropping into lotus position on a stretch of thin carpet next to her chair. “You overlook the community garden and rabbit hutches. It’s got a bed and a dresser. Mattress not too bad. You bring your own sheets and towels, of course.”

“Of course,” she said. “Does it have a bathroom?”

He gave her a funny look. “You share with the back half of the house. Work out morning schedules among yourselves. Or take it up with the Grievance Committee.”

Dani wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. “Are the people here ... nice?”

“Agh ... s’not a bad group. Most of them have good dope, and they’re willing to share. But, really, you’re like, three years too late to the party.”

“What party was that?” she asked.

“Sixty-seven? Summer of Love?”

“Oh, yes. I have heard about that.”

“Beautiful time, man! Reality sucks.”

“What is the rent on that room?” she asked.

“Yeah, right. All business. Sure. House dues are thirty bucks a week. Fifty, if you expect to eat here, and then you help with cooking and washing up. That’s a hundred and twenty a month, without the food. Two hundred, with.”

“That’s a nice break.”

“How so?” he asked.

“Well, there are four and a third weeks, average, in any month. So basic dues should be a hundred and *thirty*, on average. And with board, more like two hundred sixteen and ... sixty-five cents.” Four years of engineering courses had made Dani quick with numbers in her head.

“No kidding? Four and a half weeks?”

“A third—well, you’re close enough.”

“I never knew that,” he said. “Maybe we should put you in charge of house finances.”

“It’s just simple arithmetic, really.”

“Turns out, we’ve been shortchanging ourselves for years,” he said with a frown.

“What’s your name anyway?”

“Dani—short for Danielle—Wheelock.”

“Wheelock? Where’ve I heard that name before?”

Her mother, of course. But best not to mention it.

“Have you?” she said. “I don’t know. I’m from back East.”

“Shoot!” He shook his head. “It’ll come to me eventually.”

About the Author

Thomas T. Thomas is a writer with a career spanning forty years in book editing, technical writing, public relations, and popular fiction writing. Among his various careers, he has worked at a university press, a tradebook publisher, an engineering and construction company, a public utility, an oil refinery, a pharmaceutical company, and a supplier of biotechnology instruments and reagents. He published eight novels and collaborations in science fiction with Baen Books and is now working on more general and speculative fiction. When he's not working and writing, he may be out riding his motorcycle, practicing karate, or wargaming with friends. Catch up with him at www.thomastthomas.com.



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