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Also by Rufi Thorpe

The Girls from Corona del Mar
Dear Fang, With Love
The Knockout Queen

Margo's Got Money Troubles

Rufi Thorpe



Sceptre

CHAPTER ONE

You are about to begin reading a new book, and to be honest, you are a little tense. The beginning of a novel is like a first date. You hope that from the first lines an urgent magic will take hold, and you will sink into the story like a hot bath, giving yourself over entirely. But this hope is tempered by the expectation that, in reality, you are about to have to learn a bunch of people's names and follow along politely like you are attending the baby shower of a woman you hardly know. And that's fine, goodness knows you've fallen in love with books that didn't grab you in the first paragraph. But that doesn't stop you from wishing they would, from wishing they would come right up to you in the dark of your mind and kiss you on the throat.

MARGO'S BABY SHOWER was hosted by the owner of the restaurant where she worked, Tessa, who thought it would be funny if the cake was shaped like a big dick, maybe because Margo wasn't married, was nineteen, and couldn't even drink, or because it was her professor who'd knocked her up. Tessa was an accomplished baker. She made all the restaurant's desserts herself and went all out on the penis cake: a hand-carved 3D phallus, twelve layers of sponge swirled in matte pink icing. She installed a hand pump, and after they sang *For she's gonna have a huge baby* to the tune of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," after Margo blew out the candles—why? it wasn't her birthday—Tessa gave the pump a sharp squeeze, and white pudding spurting out of the top and dribbled down the sides. Tessa whooped with glee. Margo pretended to laugh and later cried in the bathroom.

Margo knew Tessa had made the cake because she loved her. Tessa was both a mean and loving person. Once when Tessa found out the salad boy had no sense of taste or smell because he'd almost been beaten to death in his teens, she served him a plate of shaving cream

and potting soil, telling him it was a new dessert. He ate two big bites before she stopped him.

Margo knew Tessa was trying to make light of a situation that was not happy. Turning tragedy into carnival was kind of her thing. But it seemed unfair that the only love available to Margo was so inadequate and painful.

Margo's mom, Shyanne, had told Margo that she should have an abortion. Her professor had been hysterical for Margo to have an abortion. In fact, she wasn't sure she wanted the baby so much as she wanted to prove to them both that they could not bend her conveniently to their will. It had never occurred to her that if she took this position, they might simply interact with her less. Or, in the case of the professor, stop interacting with her altogether.

While Shyanne eventually accepted Margo's decision and even attempted to be supportive, the support itself wasn't always helpful. When Margo went into labor, her mom showed up to the hospital four hours late because she'd been driving all around town looking for a good teddy bear. "You are not going to believe this, Margo, but I wound up going back to Bloomingdale's because it had the best one!"

Shyanne worked at Bloomingdale's and had for almost fifteen years. The way her legs looked in sheer black pantyhose was one of Margo's earliest memories. Shyanne held out the bear, which was white with a slightly constipated face. She did a high, squeaky voice: "Push that li'l baby out, I wanna meet my friend!"

Shyanne was wearing so much perfume Margo was almost glad when she went to sit in the corner and started playing competitive poker games on her phone. PokerStars. That was her jam. She chewed gum and played poker all night long, stomping those jokers. That was what Shyanne always called them, the other players: "jokers."

There was a nurse who was rude and made fun of Margo's name choice. Margo named the baby Bodhi, like *bodhisattva*, which even her mom thought was stupid, but Shyanne slapped that nurse right across the jaw, and it caused a whole kerfuffle. It was also the time Margo felt most loved by her mother, and for many years to come she would replay

the memory of that slap and the perfect look of surprise on the nurse's face.

But that was after the epidural and the whole night of being rabid-dog thirsty, begging for ice chips and being given a yellow sponge to suck on, sponges being well-known for their ability to quench thirst. "What the fuck," Margo said around the sponge in her mouth, which tasted of lemons. It was after all the pushing and pooping on the table, and her OB looking so disgusted as he wiped it away, and Margo shouting, "Come on, you've seen it all before!" And him laughing: "You're right, you're right, I have, Mama, now let's have one more big push." And then the magic of Bodhi's slippery purple body when they put him on her chest, pressing the towels around him, his eyes pinched shut. She was instantly worried about the scrawniness of him. His legs, in particular, seemed underdeveloped in a tadpole kind of way. He was only six pounds, despite the song they had sung to her at work. And she loved him. She loved him so much it made her ears ring.

IT WAS ONLY when they released her from the hospital that Margo began to panic. Shyanne had already missed one shift to be there for the birth, there was no way she could take another day to help Margo home from the hospital. Besides, Shyanne was technically banned from entering the hospital after slapping that nurse. Margo told her mom that of course she would be fine. But driving out of that parking lot, her baby squalling in the hard plastic cage of his car seat, Margo felt like she was robbing a bank. His cries were so mucus-y and frail they made her heart race, and she was shaking the whole forty-five-minute drive to her place.

She parked on the street because their apartment came with only one designated spot, but when she went to take Bodhi out from the back, she found she couldn't understand how the lever that released the car seat from the base worked. She was pressing the button; was there a second button she was supposed to push simultaneously? She began jiggling the car seat, careful not to shake it too hard. If there

was one thing everyone had been clear about it was never to shake the baby. Bodhi was crying frantically now, and she kept thinking, You do not have the calories to expend this much energy, you are going to die before I even get you upstairs!

After five minutes of straight panicking, she finally remembered she could just unfasten him, and after fumbling with the freakishly gigantic plastic clasp that went over his chest and pressing the stupid red button of the crotch buckle with the requisite superhuman strength (seriously, she pictured a family of rock climbers, used to hanging by their fingertips off cliffsides, who then decided to design baby stuff), she freed him, but then she had no idea how she was supposed to carry this tiny, fragile thing and also all her bags. Already the stitches in her downstairs hurt like crazy, and she regretted deeply the vanity that had made her pack jeans to wear home from the hospital, though let the record show that they did fit.

"Okay," she said seriously to Bodhi's tiny body, his face red purple, his eyes shut tight, "now don't move." She set him down on the front passenger seat, so she could slip the straps of the diaper bag and her overnight bag over her shoulders, crossed over her tits like bandoliers. Then she snatched up the tiny baby and waddled up the street to the slumped brown buildings of Park Place. They weren't exactly bad apartments, tucked away behind the excitingly named Fuel Up! gas station, but compared to the cheerful, whimsically bright 1940s homes that lined the rest of the street, Park Place looked like an uninvited guest.

As she climbed the outside stairs to the second level, she was terrified she would spontaneously drop the baby, his little form, like a Cornish game hen, spiraling downward toward the leaf-choked communal swimming pool. Margo went inside, said hi to her roommate on the couch—the nicest one, Suzie, who loved LARPing and sometimes dressed as an elf even on a random weekday. By the time she made it to her room, closed the door, shucked off her bags, and sat down on her bed to nurse Bodhi, Margo felt like she'd been to war.

I do not mean to insult people who've actually been to war; I only mean that this level of stress and physical hardship was entirely outside

Margo's previous experience. She kept thinking, as she nursed him, I am so fucked, I am so fucked, I am so fucked. Because all around her she could feel the echoey space of no one caring about her or worrying about her or helping her. She might as well have been nursing this baby on an abandoned space station.

She held the perfect purse of his warm body and looked into his pinched little face, the tiny coves of his nostrils mysteriously beautiful and fluted. She'd read that babies' eyes could focus on things only about eighteen inches away, which was exactly how far away their mothers' faces were when they nursed, and he was looking at her now. What did he see? She felt bad if he was seeing her cry. When he fell asleep, she did not put him in the crib like she was supposed to; she lay down next to him in her bed, aware that the battery of her consciousness was running out. She was afraid to fall asleep when she was the lone sole guardian of this tiny being, but her body was not giving her a choice.

I'D LEARNED ABOUT the terms *first person*, *third person*, and *second person* in high school, and I'd thought that was all there was to point of view until I met Bodhi's father in the fall of 2017. The course Mark taught was about impossible or unlikely points of view. I remember one day, a kid in class named Derek kept trying to Psych 101 diagnose the protagonist of this novella, and Mark kept saying, "The main character is not a real person."

"But in the book, he's a real person," Derek had said.

"Yes, insofar as he is not presented as a cat or a robot," Mark said.

"So, I am just saying, in the book, I think he has borderline personality disorder."

"This is not an interesting way to read the book."

"Maybe to you," Derek said, "but I find it interesting." He was wearing a black beanie, and you could tell his hair was dirty underneath, lank and soft, the fur of a sick cat. He was the kind of boy who was never romantically interested in me and whom I therefore spent little time thinking about. He probably watched a lot of foreign films.

"But the character would not be interesting if he were a real per-

son," Mark said. "You would never want to know someone like this, you would never become their friend. They are only interesting because they aren't real. The fakeness is where the interest lies. In fact, I would go so far as to say that all things that are genuinely interesting aren't quite real."

"Real things are boring, and unreal things are interesting, got it," Derek said. I could see only the back of his head, but he sounded like he was rolling his eyes, which was brazen even for him.

"The point is," Mark said, "the narrator doesn't do *x* or *y* because he has borderline personality disorder. He does *x* or *y* because the author is *making* him. You aren't trying to have a relationship with the character. You are trying to have a relationship with the author *through* the character."

"Okay," Derek said, "now that sounds less stupid."

"All right," Mark said, "I will settle for less stupid."

And then everyone laughed like now we were all good friends. I did not say a word in that class. I did not speak in any of my classes. It honestly never even occurred to me that I should. Teachers always claimed part of your grade was participation. I'd learned long ago this was a bluff. I had no idea why anyone would choose to speak in class, but there would always be one or two who jabbered the whole time like the professor was a late-night host and they were some well-loved celebrity come to promote the movie of their own intelligence.

But the day he handed back our first papers, Mark asked me to stay after class.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm enrolled," I said.

"No," he said, "this paper."

I saw now he was holding my essay in his hands. I could see it had an A written on it in red pen, but I pretended to be worried. I'm not sure why. "Was the paper not good?"

"No, the paper was excellent. I am asking why are you at Fullerton junior college. You could go anywhere."

"What," I said, laughing, "like Harvard?"

"Yes, like Harvard."

"I don't think they let you into Harvard for writing a good English paper."

"That is exactly why they let you into Harvard."

"Oh," I said.

"Would you like to get coffee sometime?" he asked. "We can talk more about this."

"Yes," I said. I had no idea yet that he was interested in me. It didn't occur to me at all. He was married, he wore a ring, he was in his late thirties, old enough that I didn't think of him in that way. But even if I'd known his intentions, I still would have wanted to go for that coffee.

He was my professor, and for some reason this mysterious title made him slightly nonhuman. In the beginning it was hard to imagine that I might hurt his feelings or affect him in any way. I did not make moral judgments about him either. I accepted him as he was, as though he had earned the right to be dorky and odd and adulterous by being better and smarter than other people, better and smarter than me. Mark seemed as whimsical and mysteriously useless as the city of Fullerton itself.

Fullerton wasn't really any richer than where I'd grown up in Downey, though it had a completely different vibe because of the colleges: Cal State Fullerton and its little sister, Fullerton College. In Downey, you could eat overpriced seafood in a dark restaurant pulsing with techno or wait in line for an hour to eat Instagram-worthy sweet rolls from Porto's. Fullerton, by contrast, was like an entire town run by maiden aunts. It had so many dentists and tax advisers you'd think people did little else. Even the frat houses seemed quaint and harmless, shaded by mature elms. Fullerton's money didn't come from industry. It came from its connection to learning, the colleges reason enough to keep the rents high and dollars flowing. Mark was a part of all that. He was a wind chime in human form, dangling dorkily from the glorious tree of higher education.

In the beginning, this made me feel like the power dynamic was in my favor. His professor-ness didn't blind me to his foibles: I registered

fully the ridiculousness of his pants (green! corduroy!), his shoes (Birkenstocks!), the thumbed-through copy of *Beowulf* peeking out of his messenger bag (messenger bag!).

But it was almost like I was a character in a book to him. He couldn't get over it, the Kermit tattooed on my hip.

"Why Kermit?" he asked, the first time we slept together, rubbing Kermit's little green body with his fingertip.

I shrugged. "I wanted to get a tattoo. Everything else was, like, knives or snakes or serious things, and I'm just not a serious person."

"What kind of person are you?"

I thought about it. "A cheesy person."

"Cheesy!" he barked.

"Yes, cheesy," I said. "What, like, I believed in Santa until I was twelve. I don't know, I'm cheesy!"

"You are the most singular person I have ever met," he said wonderingly.

It was part of why I avoided ever telling him about my father. There are people who venerate professional wrestling and people who look down on professional wrestling, and I worried Mark would be the kind to venerate the thing he looked down upon. I knew my carny-ass bloodline would be an instant fetish for him.

The faker things seem the more intrigued we are by them--that was what Mark loved about point of view: the ways it was obviously fake or tried so hard to be real, which was, weirdly, another way of showing how fake it was. "The way you look at something changes what you see," he said.

IT'S TRUE THAT writing in third person helps me. It is so much easier to have sympathy for the Margo who existed back then rather than try to explain how and why I did all the things that I did.

THE THING ABOUT Bodhi's dad that was so confusing was that of course I only slept with him because he had the power, of course it was

the fact that he was my English professor, my favorite class. And yet so much of what compelled me was the way he kept insisting that I had the power. Which one of us actually had it, though? I used to spend a lot of time thinking about this.

Aside from impregnating me and kind of ruining my life, Mark helped me a great deal with my writing. He went over every sentence of my papers with me, touching on each one and how it could be better. He would give me A's, then demand I rewrite the papers anyway. "What you are," he said, "is too important not to polish." He would point out a sentence I had written, demanding, "What were you trying to say here?" And I would tell him, stuttering, what I had intended, and he would say, "Just say that. Don't pussyfoot around."

It was only after he'd been helping me this way for several weeks that the affair started. One day, I was supposed to go to his office. When I got there, he said he couldn't focus and could we meet another day, and I said sure. But then we wound up leaving the building at the same time and that turned into going on a walk together, and he vented about everything, all his frustrations about the department and his wife and kids and how trapped he felt by his life. "And I don't even deserve my shitty life," he said. "I'm a horrible person."

"You are not," I said. "You're an amazing teacher! You've spent all this time with me, helping me."

"Every second of which I was desperately wanting to kiss you."

I did not know what to say to that. I mean, in a way I had a school-girlish crush on him, but I'd never thought about kissing him. I just felt glow-y and good whenever he praised me.

It was raining, and we had been walking in circles around campus. We didn't have umbrellas, but we were both wearing jackets with hoods. We'd stopped underneath a huge eucalyptus tree.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked.

I nodded. I mean, I literally could not have imagined saying no. I would have done anything he asked. He was short, maybe five foot five, my height, and I had never kissed a boy that short before, and it was kind of nice, with both of our hoods up in the rain. But even I was like, *We are kissing openly on campus? This seems like a very bad idea.*

The thing was, by the time everything was over between us, he had behaved so childishly, and I'd had to assume so much of the responsibility for what we'd done, that I didn't feel taken advantage of. I felt . . . pissed off. If he had actually been a grown-up, the whole thing never would have happened in the first place.

THE FIRST TIME Mark came to Margo's apartment, he wore a baseball cap and sunglasses, like he was trying to dodge the paparazzi. Margo had not attempted to clean or pick up for this visit, did not feel embarrassed about Mark seeing the stained pink velvet sofa, the mess of cords hanging from the TV. Her own frameless bed, a mattress and box spring on the floor. None of this troubled her. He was here to fuck a nineteen-year-old—what could he possibly expect?

"You have roommates" was what he said.

"I told you I had roommates," she said.

"I didn't think they would be home."

"Is that beer?" Suzie asked.

Mark was indeed clutching a six-pack of beer in oddly medicinal-looking bottles. Red Stripe. It was a kind of beer Margo had never seen in her life. Certainly, they didn't stock it at her work. He was still wearing his sunglasses indoors.

"Take those off," Margo said, and tried to pluck them off his face.

He swatted her away. "They're prescription."

"Pay the troll," Suzie said, and held up her hand to receive a beer.

"What?"

"Give her a beer," Margo said, laughing at him. He was holding the bottles to his chest like a child who didn't want to share.

"How old are you?" he asked Suzie. "Jesus, Margo, I didn't mean to—"

"Old enough to tell the dean, *now pay the troll*," Suzie growled.

"This was such a mistake," Mark said.

"Here," Margo said, and slipped a beer out of the six-pack and into Suzie's waiting hand.

"The troll is very pleased," Suzie said.

"Let's go to my room," Margo said.

Mark followed her down the hall, past her other roommates Kat the Larger's and Kat the Smaller's rooms, to her door.

"Welcome," she said, holding the door open for him, "to the place where the magic happens."

EVEN THOUGH SHE was not really attracted to Mark, the sex was surprisingly pleasant. She'd had sex with two other boys before: One her high school boyfriend, Sebastian, who had absolutely the best dog, a shepherd mix named Remmy, whose head smelled vaguely of peanuts and whom she definitely loved more than Sebastian. And the other, a boy she'd met at orientation the first week of college who never spoke to her again. Mark was different in bed from either of them. He was un-circumcised, a situation that made her curious, and she never did get to explore the elasticity of his penis skin to her satisfaction. But he was also capital *P* Passionate. That first time they had sex was standing up with her pressed against a wall. It seemed impractical and uncomfortable, but Margo assumed it was part of some fantasy he had. She could not see a reason for having sex against a wall besides a fantasy really.

When it was over, he sat down in her desk chair and spun around. She went to the bathroom to pee and thus ensure she didn't get a bladder infection, and when she returned he was going through her desk drawers.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"You wander around like that in your underwear?" he said, looking up.

"They're girls," she said. "Why are you going through my desk?"

"Just curious."

She would have been upset if there were anything interesting in her drawers. If he wanted to examine her graphing calculator with the cracked screen, he could go ahead. He would never find her secrets. She didn't really have any. Or she did, but they were internal somehow, secret even from herself. For instance, she did not like him, not really, and the secret of her disdain was like a folded promise waiting in a drawer within her.

"Does your wife know you do this?" she asked.

"Uh, no," he said, and gave himself a little spin in her desk chair.

"But you've done this before?"

"With a student? No."

"With other women?"

He stopped spinning and appeared to be considering his answer. He opened one of the weird beers he had brought. He used the edge of her desk to pry off the bottle cap, and she was astonished by the rudeness of this.

"I've never told anyone," he said.

"What?" she asked, lying down on her bed, aware that even now she was trying to look cute in her underwear, her hip cocked a bit as she lay back on the pillows. From the hallway, she could hear one of her roommates throwing up. Probably Kat the Smaller, who was very much a puker. Things entered and exited her with a whimsy Margo could not imagine.

"I slept with my wife's sister on our wedding night."

Margo gasped. "Oh my gosh, you are a bad person!"

He nodded, brow furrowed. "I really am."

"But then you stopped sleeping with her sister."

"Yeah. I mean, there were a few more times after we got home from our honeymoon, but after that we stopped, yeah."

"Did you feel guilty?" she asked. It was hard to tell what men felt, she realized. She'd always wondered how her father could be so totally immune to her need for him, how he could pack a bag and be gone when she woke in the morning without saying goodbye. When she was a child, she assumed he was different with his real children, but as she'd gotten older and come to know him better, she understood he was that way with his wife and kids too. It was the wrestling life. Always getting on a plane. That was where he wanted to be: crammed in a rental car with two men who were both almost three hundred pounds, psychotically violent, and addicted to painkillers. The regular world had perhaps never been entirely real to him.

"This is going to sound so fucked up, but not really," he said. "I would just pretend I never did it. And since she didn't know I'd done it, it was like I hadn't."

HE WROTE HER poetry, ultimately almost a dozen poems, but she liked this one the most:

THE HUNGRY GHOST

In the dark, we turn to each other

Like deformed doves,

Confused that we have bodies.

I feel nothing,

Keep touching me,

I feel nothing.

I'm a hungry ghost.

We try to eat each other

But it is like trying to run in a dream,

The dark frozen ice of reality splintering around us.