

False Fortune

by Michael J. Allen

Brunette curls shook back and forth in time with her head. The monitor's glow became now only an incidental culprit in the paling of Manuela Novus's face. Tears collected at the corners of brown eyes, held back by even she knew not what reason.

A small voice rose from the nearby floor. "Mommy?"

Manuela wiped her eyes and gave the little girl a smile. "Sammie?"

"You okay, mommy?" the four year old asked.

Manuela scooped the girl up into her lap and hugged her close. "Yes, darling. Everything's okay."

The screen pried her attention away from the smiling face framed in mirror-like curls. Her stomach clenched. She checked the time, released a sigh and took the small doll in her daughter's hands. She bobbed the doll up and down, raised her pitch and spoke through the baby doll. "You know what time it is, Sammie?"

The girl shook her head and grinned. "TV time?"

Both mother and doll nodded. "Best hurry or you'll miss your show."

Samantha bounded off her mother's lap, doll in hand, and giggled her way to the small apartment bedroom and her bright pink television. Manuela followed, each step slowed by more than their own weight. She turned on the television and tuned it for the bright eyed girl with the doll seated primly in her lap.

She returned to the computer, her heart an anchor. Bills and payment schedules chased one another around her thoughts. The game was interrupted almost immediately by the doorbell. She nodded at the clock, opened the door and stepped out of the way.

"Hello, Mani, give me a hand?" an older woman asked.

Manuela took a basket of clothing from her mother's arms. "Thank you, mom."

The old woman smiled. "Don't thank me yet. I didn't have time to get everything done, though I got your work clothes."

"Nice to have some good news."

Manuela's mother frowned. "Something wrong?"

Manuela pursed her lips. "Yes."

"Don't make me drag it out of you. I still remember where you're ticklish."

"The rent's due and some check came through last night. I'm not even sure what from. The bank put it through before the paycheck I deposited. Needless to say--"

"There wasn't enough money and they charged you a fee. What have I taught you about keeping a buffer in your account?"

"You have to have money to create a buffer. Even with both jobs I'm barely hanging on," Manuela said.

Her mother put down the basket of dirty clothes and squeezed Manuela's hand. "Don't worry. It'll all turn out right in the end. Have faith."