

# **Caught Between Extremes**

*A Collection of Stories*

by

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## Tortured Mind, Tortured Body

When it came to travel, Henry balked at any type of vehicle: bicycle, train, horse-drawn brougham, trap, gig, cart, landau, or hansom. Bumping uncontrollably over uneven surfaces turned his stomach - literally.

He preferred horses, by far.

A freedom existed in becoming one with a creature galloping across open fields, soaring over hedgerows... a means of releasing the constant mental turmoil caused by being the one sane member of an otherwise notoriously eccentric family.

That glorious autumn Friday, he'd ridden to Leeds on estate business. Treating himself to a delicious lunch and a pint of ale at his favorite pub, he urged his bay gelding to full speed past farmers engaged in the harvest, the rhythmic motion soothing his soul.

As he approached a conjunction of two roads, another horse barreled along - a thoroughbred in training, he surmised, given the tiny figure hunched in the saddle.

Just for fun, he veered alongside the animal, strides evenly matched.

They traveled thus for two miles, neck-and-neck, before reining the mounts to rest them. Henry slid to the ground, this stranger in work clothes and flat cap grinning down at him.

"A fine specimen," he praised. "Are you from the stables north of town?"

Kerchief drawn from a trouser pocket to wipe perspiration coating cheeks and forehead, the hat floated to the ground revealing this supposed jockey to be female, blonde and thin.

Henry hid his embarrassment by stooping to retrieve the lost item and restoring it to the owner. "Where'd you learn to ride so well?"

"Necessity. This is my sole means of reaching my destination." A raspy contralto didn't fit her appearance.

"You shun other conveyances, too?"

"They are... inconvenient."

He'd forgotten his manners. "I'm Henry Watson."

"Dru... Drusilla Bledsoe."

They clasped gloved hands.

"Won't you join me?" he invited, pointing to a pastoral setting beside a trickling creek. "That tree offers some welcome shade after our exertions."

"No, thank you."

"Ah, you're in a hurry?"

Her expression sombered. "No, it's..."

“Please.”

Dru sighed, unfastening a sturdy walking stick tied along her horse’s flank. She eased herself down, supporting herself with the hewn wood.

“I’m so sorry!” Henry apologized. “I had no idea...”

She stepped gingerly, linking her arm through his. “No need, Mr. Watson. Many folk find it ironic that a person can sit a horse so skillfully, yet not walk.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but may I ask...”

“I was a nurse in Mafeking during the war. The... enemy’s wounded required just as much care as our boys so, in a raid unequalled for its daring, they kidnaped three of the women for that purpose. When I tried to escape, they... smashed my kneecaps.”

Henry swore, “Those rotters!”

“Indeed. My one joy is riding. It’s the only time I’m not in pain.”

He lowered her atop a gnarled root. “That’s totally understandable.” A silver flask appeared from his vest pocket. “Would a sip of something... invigorating help?”

She accepted the gesture and swilled a quantity of whiskey that raised Henry’s eyebrows.

“It was either liquor or morphine,” she responded to his astonishment. “I chose the lesser of two evils and avoided a crippling addiction.”

“Spirits can be addictive, I’ve heard.”

“Not with discipline, Mr. Watson. This is, in fact, the first drink I’ve taken in six weeks.”

He sank beside her, studying her windblown curls, fresh features and boyish attire. Had he left it to a guess, he’d have calculated her age as no more than 22, but the Boer War had ended eight years previous, so she must be at least 30.

In the silence, Dru contemplated Henry’s profile. Tousled hair the color of unrefined chocolate, slightly sunken yet brilliant green eyes, straight nose, thin lips and tapered chin, open-collared white silk shirt, leather vest, wool trousers and wide belt, scuffed boots... when he noticed her scrutiny, a minuscule, self-conscious smile - the corners of his mouth twitching upward for barely a second - raised a chuckle in her throat.

“Race you back to Leeds?” she suggested.

“I’m... on my way home, actually.”

“Where’s home?”

“Shepherd’s Rest.”

Her countenance transformed. “You’re *that* Watson?”

“I’m not quite sure what you mean,” he bristled, “but I’m one of them.”

Confident fingers reached over and patted his shoulder. “No offense meant, certainly. It’s just, my grandfather served as trainer for your family back when some of top racing stock filled your stables.”

“So, you’re one of *those* Bledsoes?” he mimicked her tone, only with a sharper edge.

“If you’re referring to that little debacle...”

“Your people drove my father into receivership!” he growled. “The horses in which he put so much faith are... yours now.”

She snickered, “Or, their progeny, anyway.”

Henry rose, miffed. Such a pleasant lady - his sworn enemy!

Clutching her walking stick with every ounce of strength, Dru raised herself upright, nearly tipping sideways over the tree roots. A reflex action, Henry gripped her by the waist to steady her.

“Thanks.”

Hobbling toward their mounts at a snail’s pace, Dru tried to appease her companion’s rage. “In all honesty, Mr. Watson, I’d be more than happy to return some of your family’s horses.”

“Why would you bother, with your record of derby wins?”

“Because I think Granddad’s scheme amounted to theft, pure and simple.”

Henry, towering over the diminutive figure, met her gaze. “Do you have the authority to make amends for such diabolical dishonesty?”

“As mistress of the house, of course.”

He recoiled. “You’re...”

“My father died last summer. My older brother was killed in the war, and my younger brother died in a hunting accident three summers ago.”

“I’m... that sorry,” sputtered Henry, untethering the horses.

She declared, “There’s only one problem.”

“What’s that?” He’d suspected Dru would renege on the agreement, or add unreasonable terms to the deal.

“I can’t get in the saddle.”

They simultaneously burst into laughter.

“How can I assist?” he finally queried.

“Our stable has a special... ramp. I’m wheeled up in my chair...”

A wheelchair? he gulped.

She continued, “And I use my arms...”

Quite muscular despite his lean frame, Henry squatted and lifted her as if she were a feather - which, weight-wise, she was. She swung easily into the saddle, and he secured her feet in the stirrups.

Reins encircling her palms, she turned the thoroughbred; he caught the bridle.

“May I call upon you to... finalize the arrangements?”

Her smile reflected genuine pleasure. “You’ll always be welcome.”

A flick of her wrist set the animal off at a canter. Henry watched until she vanished over a nearby hill.

That night at dinner, a casual observer would’ve thought a volcano had erupted on the Watson estate. Henry’s father boasted of the brace of pheasants he’d shot that afternoon, while his sisters argued about their purchases of the latest fashions for a ball Saturday week. His paternal grandmother gummed her gruel, muttering aimlessly about the sky turning purple.

When the son of the house finally managed to speak, his announcement that the Bledsoes would be returning their horses resulted in shouted insults, protests at the expense, and hatred for the former trainer’s descendants.

Henry retired to his room, ears still ringing. He slept fitfully and, rising with the sun, shuffled out to inspect the stables, which had become a dumping ground for all manner of detritus.

The cost, truly, would be prohibitive to refurbish this crumbling structure.

He saddled his bay and rode west, skull throbbing.

A nurse in white starched uniform answered his knock just after 10:00. She ushered him into the drawing room, where a high-backed wheelchair sat in the corner.

Dru occupied a red velvet-upholstered throne with ivory inlay, brass accents and intricate scrollwork.

Henry’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Don’t judge me too harshly,” the woman quipped. “Admittedly, this was Granddad’s symbol of his triumph over tyrannical landowners after he became a sort of king in his own right. In my case, it’s the only chair that is comfortable.” She extended her hand; he approached and clasped it. “Good to see you again so soon.”

He confessed, “I had no choice.”

“Bad news?”

“We won’t be able to take advantage of your kind offer regarding the horses.”

“Really? Why not?”

His explanation prompted her levity. "Irony of ironies!" she sniggered. "When Granddad took possession of your stock, his greatest expense was building the stable we have today!"

"I don't find it humorous."

"Oh, c'mon, Henry. Don't you see? Both our families went through hell because of some prime horseflesh. That money could have been spent helping the poor, or feeding the hungry!"

He sobered. "Very wise for one so young."

"Young?" she smirked. "We're the same age, you and I."

No way she could be 36, he mused.

"You don't remember, do you? The day your father sent you off to that posh boarding school, a little girl, chasing a puppy, almost hit by the carriage..."

The memory flooded his brain. He'd been six years old, and the girl - Dru - had been the same, as they discovered when the coachman halted the team to check on her safety. They'd given her a ride home, with her spaniel pup.

She straightened with a moan of agony.

"If we went for a ride..." Henry urged.

"Later, perhaps." She signaled him to sit beside her on an identical, but smaller, throne - possibly used by the late Bledsoe's wife on formal occasions. "What if you could still have access to the horses, without the expense?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Take over the stables for me."

"Eh?"

"I haven't been... satisfied with how our staff operates since we lost the Grand National last year. I've been looking to hire someone..."

"It'd be a long haul back and forth each day," Henry opined.

"You'd have a suite here, naturally. The whole south wing, if you like. Your wife and children..."

"I... don't have any."

Dru's "Good" slipped out, and she blushed.

"Don't the other servants sleep... below stairs?"

"You wouldn't be a servant. You'd be... an equal partner in the enterprise."

"But, I'm a total stranger."

"You're a lover of horses, for reasons purely your own, and I respect that. You'll be in full charge of acquiring stock, breeding them, supervising their training and sharing the box at the track to watch them compete."

A bizarre proposition, but better than remaining in close proximity to his relatives at Shepherd's Rest, slowly going mad. "When do I start?"

"Tomorrow too soon?"

That smile lit his features momentarily. "Not soon enough!"

Provisions documented on paper, Henry Watson never mentioned his new position to his father or siblings, packing his clothes into a portmanteau and strapping it to his bay after breakfast. Trotting through the rusted gate, he never looked back.

Bledsoe Farms won three races the following season, and seven the next. Dru could often be found in the saddle, exercising the horses, happy beyond measure, with Henry impressed by her gentleness and technique. Had she been male, she would have been an ideal jockey: the animals loved her, and she loved them.

Henry learned not to pity the woman - essentially a cripple, but able to fend for herself via creative innovations. The unique bond between the pair deepened over time, their respective wealth increasing as winnings were split 50/50.

A winter cold snap enabled the spread of a particularly nasty flu as both neared their 45<sup>th</sup> year. Dru fell ill, developed pneumonia, and succumbed to the ravages of the virus, her already weakened system unable to counter the infection. Henry remained at her bedside in the days prior to her death, distraught he could do nothing to save this incredible friend.

With her last, wheezing breath, she thanked him for alleviating the anguish of her tortured body through his solicitous care.

When her will was read after the funeral, Henry learned she'd bequeathed him the horses and her property, with her fortune going toward a charitable foundation she'd organized to build housing and provide food for the destitute.

The relief of owning a home and continuing to improve the Bledsoe stable - the name would not be changed - as well as not having to return to Shepherd's Rest, where his family had fallen on hard times due to their own follies, finally eased his own tortured mind.

## Double Lives

Villages along the English Channel boasted some common traits in those early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, smuggling being primary.

Any stretch of shoreline - especially if sheltered from the militia's ready view - served as a landing site for longboats offloading wares transported by frigates traveling between Britain and France or Spain. More men earned their keep by night in these endeavors than labored at legitimate trades in the daylight hours.

Raids were frequent; many died.

Bonnie Pickford grew up in the midst of this turmoil, only child of Shrillsby's renowned wine merchant. Honest to the core, Charles Pickford kept the region's nobility in their cups, while the lower classes satisfied themselves with Continental swill.

Her father's expertise with rare vintages did not extend to keeping track of his money or his customers. For that reason alone, Bonnie complied with his educational requirements, learning to read, write and do ciphers, for starters. Despite disapproving glances from village matrons - who believed the energetic blonde should engage in more homey pastimes in preparation for marriage to one of their foppish sons - she pursued additional knowledge, gaining an understanding of banking practices, investments and even tending grape vines.

Six days a week, she occupied a desk in the cask warehouse's corner office, windows allowing her to watch the sunrise and warm herself on chilly afternoons with the southern exposure. She wore a simple black frock with white starched collar, seeing no need for extravagant attire.

Her evenings were spent in the tavern opposite - unbeknownst to Charles - the proprietor being his first cousin. Not that she imbibed the liquors assembled from around the island nation - and beyond - she tended bar while young Edgar, sickly since birth, languished from a constant series of illnesses.

His father, in fact, had pretty much given up on the lad but, not wishing to give local gossips more fodder for their scandalous rumors, Walter garbed Bonnie in Edgar's baggy shirt, leather vest, leggings, stockings and shoes, with a tri-corn hat concealing her hair.

In other words, the same men who interacted with the Pickfords during business hours failed to recognize her when they gathered for a tankard after supper, or to avoid their nagging wives and talk a little treason.

Bonnie chuckled each time she poured rum or gin into grog cups. She heard more explicit jokes than any respectable woman; at least, she wasn't the object of playful - and not so playful - advances, like young Mary Tyler.

Mary, another of Bonnie's cousins, earned coppers "entertaining" the revelers. A fiddler and piper provided what some might call music; the teen would dance on a triangular platform erected in the corner. Some talented performers, others rank amateurs, would step up between numbers and sing, or tell stories, only to be shouted down in favor of a glimpse of Mary's petticoats and lovely legs.

Bonnie considered the display disgusting. After locking the doors at midnight, she trudged to her father's spacious domicile, often falling asleep fully clothed in her mother's former bedchamber.

That woman had died five years previous, trampled by a runaway horse hitched to the carriage of Shrillsby's most prominent family, the Fairingtons. The patriarch of that clan, Nathaniel, had been more than apologetic about the tragedy: the animal had been spooked by a snake, reared and bolted. The Fairingtons had paid for the funeral and grave marker, and remained staunch customers of Pickford and Company, Wine Merchants.

The son of the house, Jeremy, associated with a circle of friends from an exclusive boarding school, the lot believing themselves entitled to the best of everything - whether they paid for it or not. Bonnie had, unfortunately, nurtured a crush on him since childhood: his longish dark chocolate hair tied in the style of the era at the base of his neck with a wide black ribbon, forehead sloped over slightly sunken bluish-grey eyes, a slender nose with flaring nostrils, thin lips, tapered chin and sculpted ears. He stood a full head above her by the time he celebrated his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, and would glower at her no differently than some errant mongrel.

When Jeremy came of age, he joined his father's army regiment, as was expected, serving in reserve status - meaning he resided in Shrillsby except when called upon to participate in actions against the smugglers or dress in his uniform for parades honoring civic holidays. His nocturnal disdain toward those he judged inferior did not compromise his upstanding behavior through the days.

Bonnie discovered the youth's potentially egregious secret within a week of assuming Edgar's duties in the tavern. Not that she disapproved of his double life; she envied him.

Following a sumptuous dinner with his family, Jeremy would "retire" to his room, sneaking out the window and down a rope ladder onto the lawns. He kept extra clothes in the unoccupied gatehouse, swapping elegant attire for the garb of common laborers, the better to mingle freely with those who... shed their inhibitions more readily than the rich.

That included fraternizing with the crowd at the tavern. Hair dangling over his shoulders, churchwarden pipe clamped between his teeth, shirt open, his thin frame attracted the attention of women who plied their trade along the street - periodically one or two would accompany him across the threshold and join him at table. Their treatment at his hands was... less than respectable, Bonnie noted.

He drank to excess, as well. A chance remark could instigate a brawl with any of the brawnier toughs, though Jeremy held his own in most bouts.

He never realized Bonnie deliberately diluted his rum as the night progressed, either.

Rumblings of another war escalated as her 21<sup>st</sup> summer approached. Charles Pickford received a missive from London, requesting his services as ambassador to Russia - a true honor, while demanding a relocation to St. Petersburg.

"If I go, you'll accompany me," stated her father when she announced she would not leave Shrillsby.

"What about your business here?"

"Walter will take it over."

"He can hardly keep the tavern from falling into receivership!" Bonnie retorted. "I spend hours keeping his books..."

"Child, you will mind me, or you will leave my house!"

For the moment, she acquiesced.

Only for the moment.

That same night, Jeremy Fairington and his cohort raised a ruckus in the tavern, shouting over the music and insulting Mary on the stage. In the course of shoving and jostling each other, Jeremy was propelled forward, and Mary's high kick caught him on the chin.

He spun from the impact and crashed into a nearby wine rack, cracking his skull.

At the bar, Bonnie froze mid-pour. Setting aside the pitcher, she hurdled warped wood and squatted beside the unconscious figure. His friends had fled and other patrons retreated for fear of being blamed for his injuries.

Mary's petrified expression as she towered over the scene forced Bonnie to restrain a giggle. "C'mon, girl," she directed. "Let's get him up to your room."

"My room?" squealed the dancer.

"Or, wherever there's an empty bed."

Hooking her hands beneath Jeremy's armpits, Mary led the way up rickety steps, with Bonnie hoisting his feet. They steered their burden into a vacant store

room, the sole contents a pile of cushions from when children of the previous owner had been reduced to sleeping on the floor.

Jeremy stretched out, Bonnie instructed Mary to fetch a candle. With that limited illumination, the wine merchant's daughter could see half-congealed blood coating his exquisite features, neck and garments.

"He'll need a doctor," she stated.

Mary, aghast, said nothing.

Bonnie sighed. "Go on with you. Take over the bar until I'm done here."

Thus dismissed, the teen scurried along the balcony and down the stairs. Bonnie nudged the door closed, hunting for a reasonably clean cloth to cover the wounds.

She ended up borrowing the ceramic pitcher and basin from Mary's room, along with a stack of pathetic excuses for towels. No more did she apply the damp rag to Jeremy's head than he shot upright with a horrifying yowl.

Bonnie clutched his shoulders and eased him onto the make-shift couch. "You'll be fine, just be still," she assured him.

"Where..."

His cultured baritone sounded sober; she couldn't see his eyes in the gloom.

"Muldoon's tavern. You had... an accident."

A groan confirmed the severity of his pain.

"Lay quiet, and I'll take care of you."

Uncertain digits groped the air, dislodging her tri-corn. Blonde tresses tumbled down her spine; she felt herself flush.

"Bonnie Pickford?" he gurgled.

"Yes, Jeremy."

"What the devil..."

"The devil of necessity."

"You could be arrested..."

She protested, "For helping my cousin feed his family?"

"You know the law..."

"I've already broken it, working for my father."

One towel gradually soaked up the blood, leaving two nasty gashes for the doctor to suture. Tearing the second rag into strips, she folded remnants into squares for bandages, securing them to his cranium with the last.

"Better?" she queried.

"My head is throbbing!"

"It will, for quite some time, I'm sure."

His fingers caressed her neck. "You're mocking me."

"Because you're an idiot, wasting all the advantages your parents have given you..."

"There's one advantage I won't waste."

A split second later, Jeremy drew Bonnie atop him, assaulting her lips with fiery passion. The young woman had dreamed about being in this situation for so many years, the reality took her completely by surprise, and she responded with every fiber of her being.

As dawn cast pastel hues across the sky, they lay side by side, staring at the slanted ceiling. A slender gold band bearing the Fairington crest encircled Bonnie's right index finger. Jeremy had removed it from his left pinky, presenting it as a token of his affection.

Finally, Bonnie reassembled her cousin's outfit, adjusting the leggings and shirt before heading out to fetch the doctor.

Jeremy had fallen asleep, snoring lightly.

En route to the wine warehouse from her errand, she overheard a pair of early risers - or those going to their rest very late - discussing the call to arms that would send Shrillsby's soldiers to Russia within the week.

Bonnie halted abruptly, flesh still tingling from her encounter with Jeremy. Just when her infatuation might amount to something more tangible...

Not eight hours elapsed before she saw the young man again. He'd accompanied servants from the Fairington estate to collect a special order for that weekend's formal ball - to which she, of course, was not invited. He strode across the plank floor like a king, bandages notwithstanding; she confronted him outside the office and wrapped her arms around his trim waist, brushing his mouth with a quick kiss.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed, baritone sharp, thrusting her aside. "How impertinent!"

That reaction raised her temperature. "Don't even think you can treat me so, after..."

"After what?"

She waggled the ring at him. "You know full well!"

"You're barmy," he growled, wrestling the band from her finger. "Thief!"

"I've been accused of many things in my life, but never thievery!"

"Have you any witnesses to prove I voluntarily surrendered this heirloom?"

"Don't play that game with me, you silly sod! There's no way you could forget..."

He snapped, "The doctor informed me I'll have difficulty recalling what led to my injuries until I'm fully healed. He diagnosed it as a concussion."

"So, you're saying what happened last night..."

"Nothing happened last night."

Glaring at him with outraged brown orbs, she hissed, "I was going to beg you not to go to Russia with the regiment. But, now..."

"Russia? Who's going to Russia?"

"Then, you haven't heard?"

"Not a thing."

Spinning on her heel, she warned, "Oh, you will. Especially when I tell your mother about your double life: dandy by day, reprobate after dark."

His demeanor immediately transformed. He pursued her and clutched her sleeve, murmuring. "Please, don't. It would kill her if she knew..."

"You should have thought of that before you decided to..."

Jeremy tugged her past a row of gigantic burgundy casks to a shadowy aisle. He pinned her to the wall and pressed himself against her. His warmth thrilled her and she struggled to repress a scream of delight.

"Then, you do remember!" she muttered, resting her cheek on his chest until their breathing resumed a normal rate in the wake of such frantic exertion.

He brushed tangled strands off her face, then cupped the signet ring in her hand. "All I remember is wanting you for years."

Whether he'd actually forgotten the previous night's tryst, he'd disclosed his feelings openly.

"If I must go to Russia, will you come with me?" he pleaded.

She lamented, "Russia is a long way from here, poor, dirty and you don't even know the language."

"Then, we'll go away - to America." He kissed the ring where it glistened on her finger.

A throat peremptorily cleared interrupted the discussion. Charles Pickford stood where he may or may not have seen their embrace.

Jeremy bowed tersely and withdrew, his servants having already loaded the assorted kegs on the cart.

Charles scowled at his daughter. "How dare you behave like a cheap wanton!"

"I don't care!" Bonnie proclaimed. "Now, you *can't* take me to Russia without risking public disgrace!"

Whether the Fairingtons sanctioned their son's marriage - or Jeremy reneged on his pledge - it didn't matter. She'd be able to live as she saw fit,

including dressing as a boy to tend bar at the tavern, or catching a ship to the colonies, living on the memory of the ways he'd touched her that no other man could equal.

## A Stroll Along a Country Lane

“This may be the last time.”

Donna sat beside Sebastian on the molded plastic bench, listening to the birds as he toyed with his ivory owl-headed cane.

They'd grown up together, next door neighbors in an era when families living in such close proximity could actually become friends. They'd attended the same public school - Sebastian two years older - walking four blocks each way with a gaggle of other youngsters. They'd played football and tag in the sad excuse for a park and, most of all, traveled together on summer vacations.

That third week of July, mandatory time off for most of the locals employed by the parts factory, they'd load tents and sleeping bags into the Ford station wagon and head off to see a new region of the country.

From those earliest days, Sebastian and Donna didn't really enjoy squatting around a campfire, swapping stories, or swimming in the lake. They would explore the woods, find a quiet trail or access road and stroll, hand-in-hand, sharing their dreams.

The year Sebastian graduated from high school, Donna wept profusely at the prospect this tradition had reached its end. She'd watch her soulmate mature from a scrawny kid into a tall, dashing young man - dark hair, pleasant features - and he'd soon be off to university on a scholarship, intent on studying computer and software engineering.

He'd meet a entirely different set of people and the memory of her would dissipate.

“I could never forget you,” he promised on the outdoor deck after his party, contemplating stars in the brilliant night sky. “I'll be home in the summer, and we'll take our stroll on a country lane, like always.”

Donna thought, like so many of her peers, he was bluffing just to quell her angst. True to his word, though, Sebastian returned after his spring term. They drove to Michigan in his beater of a Chevy pickup, walking along the shore of Lake Michigan in the tourist enclave of South Haven - even stopping for an ice cream at a shop on Main Street.

Her own graduation, Sebastian arriving late for her celebration, prompted fresh doubts. She wouldn't be going to college; she'd tired of classrooms and wanted to pursue her writing, despite her mother's warning she couldn't earn a living in such a profession. Still, her experience with the high school paper netted her an internship with the daily in St. Louis; she'd already stuffed her belongings in her dad's moth-eaten Army duffle bag and would be on a train the next morning.

“You won’t be eligible for any vacation so soon,” Sebastian remarked when she announced her plans.

“Drive down, and we’ll make a weekend of it. There are lots of small towns along the Mississippi...”

And so it went as years slipped into decades. Sebastian moved to Silicon Valley, employed initially as a software developer, then an executive with the corporation. Donna worked her way up the ladder to an editorial position, then took over as publisher.

The pair kept in touch via phone and letter in the early days, then email as technology evolved. They’d pick a place at random and make travel arrangements, booking rooms at a convenient hotel and meeting to determine their itinerary. They trod paths in remote areas of France, Italy, Greece, Mexico, Canada, South America, India, as well as 49 states - except Alaska.

Through all this, neither had married, busy with work and, thanks to the values instilled in them as children, dedicated to sharing their abundance of both tangible and intangible possessions with those who had less.

Sebastian taught immigrants English while also connecting them to the world via secondhand laptops and tablets, for instance. Donna spearheaded charitable endeavors that provided permanent housing for those impacted by business closures, and treatment for those with substance addictions.

On their strolls, they chatted about these efforts or remained silent, reveling in the exquisite beauty surrounding them.

Sebastian’s wavy mop greyed as he aged, though he remained fit and slender. Donna kept her brunette curls without the aid of dye, though random white strands added unique highlights. She, too, kept her trim figure, laugh lines deepening around sparkling violet eyes.

“It’s been seventy years,” she chuckled quietly. “We’ve retired from our jobs, perhaps it *is* time to retire from...” Her words faded as she glanced at his bowed chin. “Sebastian?”

His lips twitched upward at the edges into a fleeting grin, his customary expression of emotion.

“Oh, no...” Donna gasped. “Cancer?”

He countered, “Kidney failure.”

“Eh?”

“My dad died of it, remember? Some hereditary enzyme deficiency...”

“There’s always dialysis.”

“I’ve been on it three times a week since...”

Donna's jaw dropped as she grasped the import of his statement. "By coming on this trip, you..."

Sebastian averted his gaze. "The doctor already told me it wouldn't be much longer. I wanted to see you, face-to-face, once more."

She scooped up his hands and drenched them with her tears. "Oh, God..."

He planted a gentle kiss on her cheek. "We knew this wouldn't be forever," he whispered. "At least, we'll have closure..."

"We can say what we need to say..." Donna concurred.

They rose, entwined their fingers and continued slowly along the gravel path between ancient oaks and wildflowers.

Sebastian cleared his throat self-consciously. "I've... always admired your gumption, your willingness to ask total strangers questions that many would find intrusive. Being an introvert, that would make me so uncomfortable."

"I'm an introvert, too," she snickered. "I just force myself to do what needs to be done to get the story."

"Earning yourself a Pulitzer Prize in the process."

She squeezed his arm. "Your analytical brain has always fascinated me. How you connect the dots to create something that benefits the world..."

"It's like solving a mystery, fitting the pieces together. A... natural talent."

He blurted out an addenda. "I love you, Donna. In my entire life, I've only found peace in these moments with you. No where else have I been so content, and I thank you for keeping me grounded."

Donna halted and studied his tranquil features. "You are my heart, Sebastian. Knowing we would be together, even just for a few days, fueled me through empty months when I operated on auto-pilot, a workaholic completing task after task. While my life has been words, I have none to convey what you've meant to me."

The setting sun reminded them of the need to retrace their steps to the taxi that would convey them back to their lodgings. They enjoyed a leisurely dinner in a cozy bistro, then retired to their respective rooms.

Sebastian passed in his sleep. A maid discovered the body on her housekeeping rounds; the manager notified Donna.

The rest of her vacation was spent supervising his cremation and filing paperwork to transport the remains back to the States. She took an extra week, flying to California to oversee disposition of his apartment and assets, since his will bequeathed her the lot - and having no close relatives eliminated the chance his wishes would be contested in court.

She could not explain her somber attitude and depleted energy levels to her co-workers at the paper as autumn colored leaves gold and red. She honored Sebastian's birthday, November 3, by lighting a candle at St. Louis' old cathedral beneath the historic arch - having heard such was the custom in some religions. In lieu of a prayer, she wished him well in the afterlife.

That night, she joined him there, and they strolled along a country lane, hand-in-hand, the magnificence of which defied description.

## Fixing Mr. Nightingale

Peter Nightingale and I had known each other more than 20 years: since the days we apprenticed together in the press room of the Bath *Sentinel*.

It cannot, however, be said that we became friends, due to a primary difference between us: his father owned the newspaper; mine labored as a dustman in the city - when he wasn't drinking away his wages in the neighborhood tavern.

Not that Peter was given preferential treatment by the senior employees. Major Lucius Nightingale mandated that his offspring familiarize himself with every aspect of publishing, so the heir got his hands dirty - literally.

Even the last time I saw him that fateful day, ink stains still discolored his fingernails.

Peter was what can be best described as kind and well-mannered, yet timid. He never refused coins to the beggars on street corners near the *Sentinel's* offices, always tipped his top hat to ladies in passing. If the waiter at the restaurant we frequented for lunch made an error in totaling our bill, he would not assert himself to correct the matter.

When it came to women - and there were many who contrived to catch his eye - he was hopeless.

He dressed simply in an open-collared white shirt, black trousers and frock coat during work hours. Taller than average, with square, erect shoulders atop which sat a marvelous head covered by ample hair a shade darker than chocolate, his eyes slightly sunken and twinkling bluish-green, nose straight but with a lump where it had been broken when he fell from a tree as a child, lips thin above a tapered chin, more than one female pretended to drop her parasol or lace-trimmed handkerchief near him.

He ignored them all, until well into adulthood.

By then, the quality of his attire had vastly improved, as had the amount of coins jingling in his pocket. He remained generous with the poor, courteous to his underlings and ethical in how he expected the news to be reported.

He took over editorial and executive duties when his father passed unexpectedly at his desk while working late, shot from across the street by an angry politician whose career had been ruined via a series of *Sentinel* articles exposing his financial misdealings.

I felt a bit guilty after the death rated a six-column headline the following morning, since I'd been responsible for obtaining much of the information for those stories, going undercover in the MP's household for six months as a servant.

Peter, nonetheless, rewarded me for my diligence by promoting me to the position of managing editor.

Not that I still couldn't be found covering my former beat, sitting in court as criminals were tried and convicted of everything from petty theft to capital murder.

Human nature, as a whole, confounded and intrigued me.

Magistrates and judges had grown accustomed to seeing me before their bench, sometimes even joking audibly with their bailiffs about my presence. "Must be a serious case coming up," they'd quip. "The *Sentinel* is here."

Peter's attention to detail and conscientious administration created a smoothly-functioning organization within the vast brown brick complex on the city's perimeter, and he gained prominence throughout the country. I anticipated a rise in my salary that summer, before everything abruptly changed.

I'll be the first to admit I talk to myself - especially when writing - and always have. This comes, possibly, from being an only child. When I approached the door to Peter's chamber that June afternoon, hearing voices through the heavy oak panel startled me.

"Is he in a meeting?" I inquired of his assistant, seated protectively at a modest desk in the ante-room.

"Not that I'm aware."

A knock preceded my entrance. Peter stood behind his father's chair - red velvet upholstery on a throne-like frame - staring at the dormant fireplace as if engaged in an animated conversation.

I paused on the threshold. "Peter, are you all right?"

He didn't seem to hear me, continuing to discuss facets of some unspecified truth. He, of course, received no response to his frustrated inquiry that I could detect. Then, he threw back his head, jaw agape - as if silently screaming - remaining in that terrifying position for a full minute before shaking himself free of the clutches of whatever possessed him.

Possessed is, perhaps, the principal descriptor for this ordeal.

Our close acquaintance permitted me to grab his shoulders and shake him back to his senses - whereas, he seldom even clasped hands in greeting or parting from business associates.

Almost black, fiery orbs scanned my face, as if I were a complete stranger.

"What... day is it?" he stammered, his voice altered from its reedy tenor to a sharp baritone.

"Tuesday."

"We should go."

A bizarre assertion from one who never left before 7:00.

“Go where?” I prodded.

“Wherever you like. Wherever fancy takes us.”

Peter’s usual smile amounted to a slight upward twitch at the edges of his mouth, instantly vanishing. Now, he wore a broad, mischievous grin, teeth well in evidence. He strode toward the door, brooking no delay. I hurried to catch him up, concerned and frightened by this sudden alteration of his natural demeanor.

The stable behind the *Sentinel*’s main structure sheltered two dozen horses, one of which belonged to Peter and another to me. The matched roans were saddled; Peter jammed his boot in the stirrup, straddling the animal, and took off at a full gallop.

Fortunately, my mount had a racing spirit, coming astride of its sibling within minutes. I could tell by the road we traveled our destination was the Nightingale mansion north of the city.

He marched into the vast dwelling like a king, casting his frock coat at the puzzled butler with uncharacteristic disdain. From the magnificent great hall, he detoured into the drawing room, aiming for a sideboard with its selection of decanted wines and liquors at the ready.

I swallowed hard. Peter, even at his most social, did not imbibe.

Yet, in that moment, I witnessed him drain a crystal goblet filled with port in one gulp.

Treading lightly - both physically and mentally - I approached him. “Peter, are you all right?”

That smoldering mien chilled my blood. “Take off your clothes.”

Not a prude by any means, I shuddered at this command. “What...”

“Close and lock the doors, and take off your clothes!” he raged, his voice a knife penetrating my heart.

I steeled myself against his escalating and inexplicable wrath. “And if I refuse?”

“I tire of you dressing as a boy, when you are everything I’ve always wanted in a woman.”

He’d never mentioned this ruse over the course of two decades. “You know damned well why I did so!” I retorted. “The only way I could support my mother was by apprenticing myself...”

“Under false pretenses!”

“Why bring this up now?”

His empty glass shattered on the fireplace grate as he backed me past a grand piano, sofa and chairs toward ceiling-high bookshelves. “Because I want to taste life fully, not plod through my days like... like...”

“Your father?”

“My father, my grandfather, and his father!”

Indeed, I knew the Nightingales’ history, from the days when Josiah produced his weekly sheets on a hand press in the storage room of a Salisbury pub. His son moved the enterprise to Bath, and it had flourished, but at what price? Generations of arranged marriages to secure funding to keep the venture afloat...

Fulfilling obligations without enjoying the activities their wealth could offer.

Just as suddenly as this... malady, for lack of a better term, had taken hold of him, he convulsed violently and crashed to his knees before me. His soul might have been fighting for its very existence, or his mind for the last vestiges of sanity.

I wasn’t going to stay and learn who emerged victorious.

A pair of vices caught my arms before I crossed the foyer. From behind, I could feel his hot breath on my ear as he whispered in that gentle tenor, “I’m so sorry. Please, don’t go.”

My lungs heaving, I panted, “If only I understood what was going on...”

“I... don’t understand it myself.” Twirling me toward him, his countenance had softened, his eyes resumed their lighter shade. “Please, I have a gift for you...”

“A gift?” At this stage, admitting my curiosity had piqued is no crime.

He released me, intertwining his fingers with mine, and leading me up the curved marble staircase. Along a balcony overlooking the incredible sculpted ornamentations of the great hall, he ushered me into what must have been his mother’s bedroom, with its pink and yellow decor.

He traversed a colorful Persian carpet to the wardrobe, extracting a gorgeous satin gown accented with pearls set in gold. He spread it on the embroidered coverlet of the hand-carved four-poster bed.

My jaw gaped.

Elegant digits closed my mouth. “I’ve been meaning to give you this.”

“It... was your mother’s?” I sputtered.

“Oh, no. I bought it on a trip to London for your twenty-first birthday. I... never had the courage...”

Sweet, shy Peter.

I’d rid myself of all feminine finery long since, eliminating the temptation to divulge my secret. Now, I ran a tentative finger along the fabric - so expensive!

He pressed himself forcefully against me from the rear, reached around and tore wide the starched shirt, buttons spraying in all directions. I wanted to struggle, but he exerted a strength belied by his wiry frame.

It may have been the result of his assault upon me, muddling my senses and leaving every nerve tingling, but when I awoke beside him on the mattress after nightfall, I saw two identical Peters in the candlelight: one peacefully slumbering with an angelic visage, the other towering over me, sneering viciously.

My hand fastened on the prone Peter's left wrist, rousing him.

"What the devil..." I hissed.

His head rested on my breast. "I cannot explain it, my dear," he practically wept. "My perpetual fear of human interaction, of love, of death has, perhaps, created this... insidious monster, who violates the very morals instilled in me since childhood. For many months, I have been able to stave off his influence but, today, in a moment of weakness..."

A laugh, hideous and petrifying, reverberated within the walls - this... alternate Peter exerting his power over a man for whom I'd maintained an abiding fondness beyond our professional relationship. The entities merged, terror contorting Peter's face, before tantalizing caresses and kisses drove me to the heights of pleasure once more.

This... anomaly evidently sated, as well, he snored quietly beside me soon after our bodies separated.

My own garments now rags, I donned the gown illumined by a single candle and escaped this madness as dawn tinted the sky with pastel hues. Had anyone seen me riding astride, rather than side-saddle - as a proper female should - it might have caused a scandal of major proportions.

I, frankly, didn't care.

In the stark flat I called home, I sat beside the open window, reveling in the cool morning air. The past 12 hours smacked of a nightmare: I was ill and feverish, or barmy.

But, no. Bruises on my flesh from where Peter had seized my arms confirmed the situation's reality. A mirror suspended above the chest of drawers reflected purple and black marks on my neck and right shoulder, where his mouth had sucked voraciously on my flesh. Leaning forward to exam the damage, when I straightened, Peter stood behind me, that ominous smirk deriding my inner turmoil.

"Don't deny you enjoyed every second," he drawled.

Whirling to strike him, my fist swatted empty space.

A ghostly apparition?

This confusion making my temples throb, I arrived late to the *Sentinel* for the first time since my father's death. Peter did not appear, at all.

"Did he send any word?" I queried his assistant.

"No."

"Have you sent anyone to the house?"

"No."

Dreading the outcome, I grumbled, "I'll go myself."

That foreboding proved well warranted. Three of Peter's servants - the butler, cook and a scullery maid - had been murdered before I arrived, their corpses strewn about the great hall like so much detritus. By the looks of the females' uniforms, they'd been raped prior to their demise, with the butler's presumed attempt to intervene his own cause of death.

I sent one of the stable boys for the constables, climbing the back stairs to Peter's chamber. There, he lay abed in his nightshirt, soaked in perspiration and twitching randomly.

Sinking beside him, I tapped his cheek. Bluish-green orbs popped open; he bolted upright, then sagged against me.

Once he regained consciousness, I held his chin level with my own. "Peter, you've got to hear me! You must be rid of your... demon before he brings you to ruin!"

"Don't you think I know that?" he sobbed. "I haven't the strength..."

"Then, we'll do it together."

"You saw how he treated those who... oppose him."

"Because they were incapacitated by panic. I... am cut from hardier cloth."

"That, I have always known," confided Peter.

Rising from the mattress, I yanked off the quilt and urged him to his feet. Forcing him to meet my gaze, I outlined my logic prior to asking, "Do you love me, Peter Nightingale?"

"I *do* love you, my dear," he murmured.

"Say it again, louder."

The volume of his tenor barely increased as he repeated the phrase.

"Louder!" I prompted.

He complied, nearly deafening me.

With arms linked, we stood defiant. "Come, if you dare, you devil!" I bellowed.

A translucence congealed in tangible form. Its arrogance undiminished, it moved to join with Peter, emanating evil.

Peter's shoulder nudged insistently, he declared, "You shall not pass! I no longer fear the unknown, the future, because the woman I love more than life itself stands with me."

"Will you love her when you discover she has been impregnated while I inhabited your body?" the biting voice challenged.

Peter's hesitation could not be countered by any action of mine. Finally, he proclaimed, "Yes, I have loved and will love her always."

"You will suffer for your obstinacy, and not only in leading a life more dull than your forebears, but by losing what you hold most precious before enduring a death more agonizing than your cringing spirit could ever conceive!"

He dissipated in a cloud of acrid smoke; I felt my knees turn gelatinous and slumped on the bed.

Peter, revitalized, flashed his minuscule smile and bent to delicately kiss me. "Thank you for sharing your strength of will."

I stroked his cheek. "Don't thank me yet. If that being makes good his threat, we could be dead by morning."

Or, a different tragedy befall us.

A messenger from the *Sentinel* burst in on an impromptu supper in the mansion's kitchen an hour later. He gushed, "Mister Nightingale, the building's on fire!"

We didn't waste time saddling the horses, galloping bareback to the city. While fire brigades poured water on flames engulfing the block, Peter and I watched from the nearest intersection, where constables had erected barricades to prevent bystanders from being injured by falling bricks or beams.

Focused on this spectacle, I didn't see Peter slip away. He evidently breached the barrier through the alley, evacuating the horses from the stable before ascending a ladder to his office, one partially crumbled wall revealing the interior.

An elderly woman shrieked and fainted, her husband preventing her from striking her head on the pavement. I looked from her to the source of her dismay: Peter and his... twin locked in combat.

The flooring beneath them collapsed, and both pitched into the blaze.

It was left to me to rebuild the *Sentinel*, per Peter's will. With the estates and fortune he bequeathed me, having no other heirs, I could have ensured the Nightingales' legacy, but I had neither the energy nor the motivation.

As Peter's doppelganger had predicted, I had become pregnant during our passionate interlude at the mansion. The stigma of being unmarried, however, spurred me to sell the Nightingale property and move east, where I could raise my child in the guise of a respectable widow.

From his earliest days, the boy resembled Peter in the physical sense, though not in temperament. And his smile... broad and toothy, rather than fleeting and tentative, caused me to ponder what the future would bring.

At this juncture, I can only wait and see.

## A Mechanic's Passion

"Joey?"

Within the double bay garage, a charcoal grey coverall-clad figure half-visible beneath the hood of a red '69 Mustang grunted, "What?"

"I'm hoping you can assist me."

This accented baritone prompted the mechanic to abandon tightening bolts on the alternator. Straightening, oily hands were wiped on a shop rag dangling from a tan suede tool belt. "How so?"

The potential customer - tall and distinguished in a black turtleneck and trousers - recoiled at the sight. "You're Joey?"

"Correct." The female, sandy hair cut in a boyish style and wrapped in a tie-dyed bandana, figure hidden beneath the baggy uniform, led the way to a cluttered office. She transferred a stack of Chilton's manuals off a folding metal chair. "Have a seat."

"I... really don't have time. My car died about four blocks from here, and I need it towed."

Sprawled on a battered swivel chair, Joey wagged her thumb at the large metallic sign suspended from warped paneling above her desk: "Carburetors Only."

"It's a Studebaker Golden Hawk," he supplied.

Her jaw dropped.

He reached across the blotter and closed her mouth.

"Sorry," she chuckled, recovering her composure. "You must get that a lot."

"Indeed."

She shoved a yellow legal pad and a pen at him. "Write down the address. I'll get right on it."

"Thanks."

"You know what's wrong with it?"

He scribbled directions as he spoke. "They were flushing the fire hydrants and I ran through a deep puddle..."

"Cracked distributor cap."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"I'll need to send for the part.. Pretty pricy to overnight, if you're in a rush."

"No need. I have three more." He straightened.

Joey stiffened. "Three *more* Golden Hawks?"

“Oh, no. A ‘72 Corvette, a ‘67 GTO and a ‘70 Dodge Challenger.”

“Jesus!”

His mouth twitched upward at the corners in a fleeting smile. “I wrote my mobile number on the sheet. Please call me with an estimate...”

“Sure thing.”

As he departed, she snatched the sheet and read upright script documenting the corner of Main and Fifth, the car’s license plate number and his phone. His name: Liam Carmichael.

Owner of the largest grocery distribution company in the state.

“Bob!” she bellowed, plucking the tow truck keys off a rack near the door.

An hour later, the classic had been offloaded in the second bay of the converted gas station. Joey’s father - the original Joey - had balked at the expense of converting fuel dispensers to computerized models, had the tanks drained and removed, and focused on repairing cars built prior to the inception of electronic fuel injection.

His daughter, Josephine, took over what had become a niche market by the time he retired. Quite a niche, though. Those who enjoyed the experience of classic vehicles had the money to cover the restoration costs and maintenance.

One guy she knew had a facility custom built on a former high school football field to hold his 30 treasures.

He relied on Joey to keep his engines in top condition.

When she rang Liam that evening, she had a list of repairs the Studebaker required priced with a minimal amount included for labor.

If she earned his trust, the end result would be another steady stream of income.

Not that money was her primary motivation for running the business. She’d started wrenching on lawnmower engines as a kid, advancing to Volkswagen Beetles before she joined the ranks of the grease monkeys in the high school’s auto shop.

In fact, she passed her more academic courses by tuning her teachers’ cars for free - and doing a fantastic job.

She might’ve been hamstrung by prejudice in an era when females didn’t pursue mechanics as a career, but her dad was no misogynist. He treated her no differently than the rest of his crew, yelling obscenities when deadlines weren’t met or body repairs didn’t meet his standards.

These days, Bob served as her sole employee, doing the heavy lifting - figuratively and literally. He could drop an engine with ease, or manually realign a front end in half the time it took a computer.

They'd been classmates at the local technical college, and she hired him a month before their graduation.

The pair also shared the converted barn at the back of the property as a way to reduce expenses. Joey was, after all, a good cook and Bob wasn't too particular about what he ate, as long as it filled his stomach.

If Bob and Liam had stood side-by-side, Joey mused while the television droned the national news, Liam would definitely win for looks. Bob had become a bit of a lump, a baseball player gone to seed. Still, he had an engaging grin and twinkling blue eyes, and hands that could deconstruct a dashboard with amazing speed.

Joey had no romantic inclinations, anyway. She'd discovered that speed - flying along a country road at 100 miles per hour or more - was far more satisfying than playing head games with someone who just wanted to maneuver her into bed.

The disclaimer below the "Carburetors Only" sign - in relatively small print - made it clear she reserved the right to test drive any vehicle she serviced "to the fullest extent."

That meant she'd peg the speedometer if at all possible.

If it wasn't possible, the engine needed additional work.

She'd never wrecked one, the owners really didn't complain, and the sheriff's deputies who patrolled outlying roads ignored her.

She'd attended school with most of them, and repaired their personal vehicles when necessary.

These newer models - she despised the inability to reach components without tearing the whole engine to pieces. Carmichael's Golden Hawk, for instance, had enough room beneath the hood she could've crawled in and taken a nap without undue discomfort.

As she hung up the desk phone from placing her order with the Studebaker parts warehouse in Indiana - the one location in the country OEM replacements could still be obtained - she heard the rumble. She estimated it had just left the supermarket parking lot a quarter-mile along Oak Street, heading her direction.

Liam Carmichael's GTO.

God, it was gorgeous!

Sky blue paint, no rust, and a manual transmission that would allow a skilled driver to leave a substantial patch of rubber on the pavement when taking off from a stoplight.

Except for one thing: the body frame slanted downward on the left two inches.

“Yes, I know,” Carmichael affirmed when she mentioned the discrepancy. “The previous owner ran it into a concrete barrier and, despite repeated attempts, could never remedy the situation.”

“I can,” proclaimed Joey.

“Doubtful.”

She raised her hands in submission. “Time for a tune-up?” she hinted.

“No. I just stopped to make a payment on the Hawk.”

Cash up front never hurt.

On an invoice of \$700 for the proposed repairs, he paid \$400. She printed a receipt via the computer - her one concession to modernity - and he tucked it in his jacket before cruising west.

Envyng him - she envied all her customers, for that matter - she resumed replacing the water pump on a 1965 Chevy Impala.

Joey had never owned her own classic. She'd learned, early on, that caring for other people's cars ate up the bulk of her energy. The joke that a mechanic's car never ran proved quite true in her case. She went through a series of old beaters, until she found a reliable VW Bug to get her around town.

Worrying about something for long distances wasn't an issue; she never traveled.

Frequent car shows didn't merit her patronage, either. She'd seen most of those on display in pieces on the garage floor. The washing and polishing that went into that kind of upkeep meant little to her.

The engines, however...

No circuit board could compensate for 400 horsepower finely tuned. She recalled the idiot who bought a 70s era Corvette with the intention of converting it to EFI. He tore it apart and experimented for more than three years - at which time, his wife divorced him due to the endless nights he spent on his back on the concrete instead of making love to her. He was obliged to reassemble the motor and sell it to settle their debts.

A small package arrived in Saturday's mail; despite closing at noon, Joey spent the afternoon finishing the Golden Hawk. By 4:00, she was on the road out of town to a stretch of road where she wouldn't be bothered.

Unfortunately, Liam Carmichael's Corvette passed her in the opposite direction on Spruce Street. He made a U-turn at the next driveway and tailed her, stunned by this supposed abuse of his trust.

She rounded a corner and braked; he hung back 100 yards, curious what she would do next.

The Hawk burst forward, accelerating like a bat out of hell. Carmichael gave chase, but could not catch her up until she slowed after five miles, approaching a fork in the road.

Joey had already reversed direction when he pulled up beside her, rolling down his window.

She did likewise. "How's it going?"

"What the devil do you think you're doing with my car?" he raged, his baritone sharp as a knife.

"Mandatory test drive."

"You never said..."

"It's clearly posted..."

He calmed his respiration. "I couldn't catch you."

"Of course not." She smirked. "That beast needs some work before it's this good."

"Meet me at the garage," he snorted disdainfully.

A more leisurely speed meant the trip took twice as long. The two vehicles parked side-by-side in front of the bay doors, Carmichael exiting the Corvette with his jaw set.

Joey inspected the Golden Hawk. "I'll give it a wash before you pick it up on Monday."

"You're phenomenal," he acknowledged, almost humbly.

"Damn straight."

"Do you think you can get the GTO squared away?"

"Sure."

"And... this?"

"It just needs a little TLC."

Carmichael sheepishly extended a manicured right hand. "Deal."

Before accepting the gesture, Joey wiped her oil-stained palm on the leg of her coveralls.

## A Soldier's Duty

Bentley men always had a keen eye for comely wenches.

As fifth son of that prominent northern house, Joshua could attest as much. Born of Myles Bentley's fourth wife - the patriarch's tenants coarsely joked their landlord "ruttet his women to death." He'd consummated his sixth marriage the previous summer.

With no hope of receiving an inheritance, Joshua pursued a military career. His stellar service earned him commendations and promotions and, after eight years, reassignment to the squad charged with guarding the government's most valuable secrets.

Not that such duty smacked of glamour. Standing beside a sturdy, reinforced oak door half-way along a lengthy corridor for four hours, muzzleloader at the ready, bored Joshua no end. At least, the wall of windows opposite his post offered a charming view of landscaped gardens.

The room within had been designed in the style of a banker's safe: side and rear walls appeared to be elegant varnished paneling, but covered six feet of stone quarried from hills 20 miles distant and hauled on carts by ill-paid peasants. Locked cabinets were anchored to the floor around the perimeter, filled with paperwork of a most sensitive nature. A heavy walnut desk with brass trim made it possible to review files while seated; wrought iron stands held candelabra for light.

Sole access to the chamber could be had by the guarded door, and only with signed authorization from the highest levels.

Joshua's regular watch required his presence from noon to 4:00 each day. No married men were allowed on this detail, to prevent irate wives from demanding their husbands spend sabbaths in church or at home with their children. The soldiers lived in a barracks on the grounds, offered decent amenities to compensate for a prohibition against seeking diversion in nearby villages.

When not in uniform, young Bentley indulged himself by reading books or playing whist.

A congenial enough existence, since his duty did not involve standing absolutely still, like guards outside the king's palace. He could move, and speak to the servants who passed from the west wing of the structure to the east.

A sunny April Tuesday added a new face to this list of the few he encountered. A quarter-hour prior to being relieved, he glimpsed a curvaceous form approaching from his left. She wore a stylish, floral-patterned frock, with upswept golden tresses and pearl ear-bobs. Her delicate features glowed with a

combination of youth, eagerness and innocence. She glided as if her feet never touched the marble floor, the scent of rose perfume preceding her.

No doubt a lady, she scrutinized him with brilliant blue eyes, an amiable smile seeming to find his height, trimness and impeccable uniform enticing. She paused to drop a slight curtsey before continuing her trek.

“Good afternoon,” greeted Joshua with a salute.

He did not question her presence in the restricted area, knowing his comrades - stationed at the entrances - verified the documents of all visitors. His orders specified he request papers only from those who wished to enter the vault.

His replacement marched toward him moments later, and he meandered to the dining hall for an early supper without a second thought about the woman.

Until the next day, when she again paraded along the hall just prior to the end of his watch. Their little exchange was repeated: she curtseyed and he saluted.

What business could she have that brought her daily to the compound? he mused.

By the end of the week, he'd grown accustomed to seeing her at that same time. He did notice, however, her curtseys gradually grew more formal, lower, until - poised at attention - he had a clear view of her ample cleavage within the revealing bodice.

Her vantage point provided a direct line of sight to his reaction.

He felt his heart racing as she breezed away.

As this ritual persisted, Joshua Bentley broke with his evening routine to seek comfort with wantons who frequented the village tavern.

His superiors noticed the disregard of their standing order but, since his performance did not falter, they chose not to reprimand him.

Soon enough, the woman took to kissing Joshua lightly on the cheek - though she needed to stand on tip-toe to reach him. As the month of May brought a myriad of blossoms to the garden, she planted her lips tantalizingly on his mouth. He'd decided to track her down and learn why she behaved in such a promiscuous fashion yet, by the time his relief allowed him to leave his post, she'd vanished. The soldiers at the entrance of each wing knew nothing of her, since they had just replaced their predecessors and she'd already come and gone.

Joshua's red wool uniform equaled a heavy burden that warm, humid Friday. As bells signaled 3:30, elegant digits ran between his collar and neck, perspiration soaking both. He struggled to distract himself from the heat by concentrating on multi-colored blooms beyond the glass, to no avail.

There!

He heard her graceful footsteps and spun toward the rhythm. She might've been an angel in that moment, draped in white satin and lace, almost floating.

Joshua scolded himself for the thoughts that assailed his brain. Once in arm's reach, nonetheless, he permitted her the curtsy before encircling her with his arms and responding fully to her advances.

"Why are you doing this?" he murmured between kisses.

A melodious soprano retorted, "You need to ask?"

"You... set me afire, and I don't even know your name!"

"Names don't matter. Where can we go?"

Lifting his head, his neck swiveled to and fro above her tousled hair. "I can't. Not here. Not now..."

"Why not? No one will be the wiser if we..."

Her hand groped for the polished lever behind his back and they practically fell across the threshold into total darkness.

Before Joshua could renew his objections, the woman had struck a match and lit a lone candle on a nearby table. She silently closed the door and steered him toward the desk.

Blotter and ink well crashed on the flagstones as Joshua mounted her. His passion quickly spent, a blow to his skull knocked him to the floor, as well.

Ten minutes elapsed before he was discovered - unconscious, his uniform in disarray - cabinets open and vital documents stolen. Joshua Bentley's court-martial affirmed his disgrace; he was summarily stripped of rank, and dishonorably discharged.

Before surrendering his pistol and collecting his personal belongings from the barracks, he trudged into the garden and shot himself in the head, falling in a bed of yellow roses.

## The Nun Job

Two men sat at a wobbly round glass-topped table outside the coffee shop, seemingly watching morning traffic inch along Lexington Avenue. A row of three story converted brownstones opposite provided space to mid-priced attorneys, avant-garde magazines, nonprofit foundations and social service agencies. When the center door opened, the pair stiffened.

“See her?” grumbled the senior, with his balding pate, silver wire-rimmed spectacles and off-the-rack suit, lifting his insulated cup toward a lanky, ponytailed figure in jeans and a blue hoodie.

His companion’s sharp British accent dripped with incredulity. “Her?”

“Yup.”

“She’s not a nun.”

“Sure, she is.”

“Where I’m from, nuns wear those ridiculous black floor-length outfits, heavy beads and hide their heads inside...” He gestured randomly to make his point.

The senior chuckled, “Wimples and veils. Quite a few orders are going back to that over here, but hers still goes with secular clothes.”

“How is she any kind of threat? The boss didn’t...”

“She runs a homeless shelter in condemned hotel a few blocks north, a food pantry, soup kitchen and thrift shop. The boss has been trying to buy the property cheap, so when the developer who’s designing an office high-rise for the site gets planning permission, he can make a fat profit on the deal.”

“He’s willing to kill a nun for *that*?” queried the Brit.

His answer: a solemn nod.

“And, rather than have one of his local crew handle the contract, he brought me over first class?”

Their eyes tracked the woman along the sidewalk after she spoke briefly to an aging figure in tattered garb pushing a misshapen shopping cart filled with overstuffed green trash bags. “She’s crafty, that one.”

“You mean, your guys have tried, and failed?”

“Right.”

“When you say crafty...”

“She grew up in Brooklyn.”

The foreigner didn’t grasp the innuendo, but didn’t voice his doubts about this assessment. He gulped his espresso and rose, adjusting the pistol in a shoulder holster beneath his tweed jacket. “How soon do you need it done?”

“By Friday.”

“That’s only 48 hours.”

“Hey, the boys in London said you’re the best. That shouldn’t be a problem...”

“Only if you want it to look accidental.”

“Not necessarily.”

“You’ve made my reservation for the return flight?”

“You’ll get those details and the boarding pass with your payment.”

Touching his chocolate-brown forelock in mock salute, the tall, lean assassin set off, paralleling his quarry.

For someone who’d taken out government officials, key witnesses, double-agents and tyrannical generals over the course of a decade, he’d never trailed anyone like this nun. Everyone she encountered knew her - and seemed to enjoy chatting her up. Even at a distance, he saw her infectious smile and how it transformed those with whom she interacted.

It would be a shame to end her life for another man’s greed.

Still, \$500,000 wasn’t chicken feed.

Jobs had been few and far between lately, given security crackdowns in many countries; a 2,000 acre estate near Salisbury and his custom Ferrari were in danger of being repossessed if he didn’t make good on his payments.

Crossing at the intersection against the light - meriting a cacophony of horns from irate commuters - he strode along the concrete until the woman passed a queue of hungry individuals waiting to be fed a modest lunch and veered into a decrepit red brick structure.

A hand-printed - and colorfully decorated - sign in the storefront window declared, “All are welcome!”

That’s a start, mused the Brit.

He received a few judgmental glances as he joined the line, his tailored attire quite different than the cast-offs worn by the establishment’s other patrons. Once inside the homey dining room - formerly an upscale restaurant, perhaps - he sensed the perky manager noticed him, too.

Cheerful volunteers dished out portions of baked chicken, home-made bread, salad, steamed vegetables and lemon cupcakes to those filing past the counter. Loaded trays were deposited on long plastic tables; metal folding chairs didn’t provide much comfort.

But, that wasn’t the point.

He positioned himself at the end of a crowded table, with a clear view of the exit and the kitchen crew through an open swinging door. The food served its purpose: rather bland but filling. The salt shaker was well used by his fellow diners.

The nun circulated through the chaos, greeting familiar faces and introducing herself to first-time visitors. He overheard her name: Meredith.

Those who expressed gratitude for the sustenance addressed her as “Sister Meredith.”

He’d cleaned his plate before she reached him, intent on departing to avoid an awkward exchange.

Especially when the couple beside him took their leave, making it possible for her to drop on the bench.

“How are you today?” she asked, her solicitude genuine.

“Grand, thanks.”

“Ah, you’re from across the pond!”

“Indeed.”

“Is there some way I may be of assistance?”

“I...”

“New York is a very... dangerous city, sad to say,” she remarked. “If your luggage, or your wallet, has been stolen, we have resources...”

A very trusting woman, he marveled.

“No... nothing like that. My... business associates are setting up a fund for charities in Manhattan, and we’d heard about your... endeavors.”

Blue eyes studied his features, her own youthful countenance a mask of serenity. “I’d be more than happy to show you around.”

“That would be fantastic,” he replied.

She relieved him of his plate, utensils and cup, placing them on a conveyor that led to the dish room. While she prattled about the challenges of scheduling volunteers and obtaining food donations, he surveyed the surroundings for security systems, locked doors and fire escapes.

“Our capacity for overnight is only 75. I wish it could be more, given how desperate the homeless situation is right now,” she stated as they descended stairs from the housing area.

“Do any of the... staff stay in case of emergency?” he wondered.

She tapped her chest. “That’s me.”

“Every night?”

“My motto has always been not to ask anyone else to do something I wouldn’t do myself.”

“That’s got to be... tough.”

“It’s a labor of love.” Meredith directed him to a cozy parlor, waving him to a lime green naugahyde-upholstered chair. “As a kid, I experienced homelessness. I know how these people feel, and want to do everything I can to help them get back on their feet, like others helped my family.”

“You... didn’t have to become a nun to do that.”

She flashed a smile, which he felt his own mouth echoing. “You’re correct, of course. But the Franciscans have always ministered to those on society’s margins, and I felt that was my call.”

Suddenly agitated, he rose. “I... appreciate your time, Sister,” he sputtered. “I hope we meet again soon.”

She extended her hand; he clasped it. “Drop by whenever you’re in the neighborhood, Mister...”

He’d long since dropped the practice of using “Smith” or “Johnson” as pseudonyms. “Bill Short.”

A lilting chuckle escaped her throat and she blushed.

“What?” he puzzled.

“It just struck me: by the time you hit six feet in school, I bet your friends gave you a lot of flack.”

The corners of his mouth twitched in a fleeting smile. “Indeed.”

“No offense meant, Mr. Short. It’s just that, my last name is Greene, so you see...”

“Ah, yes!”

Youngsters could be cruel, he’d learned many years earlier, even with those they considered close chums.

Meredith escorted him to the street, where he got a glimpse of a mother and her children carrying boxes of food from what resembled a grocer’s.

“The need is so great,” he reflected.

“So great, Mr. Short. Any support your company decides to send our way will alleviate even a small part of that need.”

“I’ll... be in touch.” He bore south, hailing a taxi on the corner.

The key to this job would be gaining access to Meredith Greene while she was alone, he deliberated later, stretched on a king-sized bed in his suite at the Waldorf. The constant movement of residents on every level would make that difficult.

He’d glimpsed a computer-generated sign tacked beside the door of what must be her private apartment on the fifth floor, overlooking an alley; if he could determine what time she retired, he could be in and out via the rickety metal fire escape in less than two minutes.

Any second thoughts he entertained as to the injustice of this contract he quashed by reminding himself of his stellar reputation in his chosen field. Meredith would understand, since she'd been impoverished and homeless - as had he, and he'd never succumb to such destitution again.

The one possession his father retained when the bailiffs came to evict the family from their home in a poorer section of Birmingham: his British Army pistol. He'd passed it along to his eldest son, who used it to commit suicide after being convicted of a fraud scheme. Bill laid claim to it - and a box of ammunition - while still a teen, tramping out to a nearby field for target practice. His proficiency on his school's skeet team brought him to the notice of certain... parties.

He pocketed 5,000 pounds for his first assignment, and his fees increased from there.

In this instance, though, using a firearm would not be feasible, he decided. With individuals, couples and even children in rooms adjacent to Meredith's, the complications would be too unpredictable.

He enjoyed a light meal ordered from room service before venturing out at 10:00. The first cab took him west, a second backtracked, and the third dropped him a half-mile from his destination. He maintained a casual air strolling the remaining blocks.

Other than a single fixture over the edifice's main entrance, and a couple random bulbs in the food pantry and soup kitchen, the building might have been vacant. He circled to the alley and swung himself onto the fire escape, creeping upward, silent as a ninja.

Meredith's open window invited easy ingress. A screen mostly torn from its frame, the mesh didn't prevent flying or crawling insects - or him - from invading her space.

A crucifix hung on the wall above her twin bed, illumined by diffused light from a neon pawn shop sign across the street. He repressed a laugh, reminded of old movies where the villain abandoned his murderous plans via the reminder of eternal punishment.

No such change of heart would occur for this atheist.

He dared not use his pen light as he crept toward the slumbering form; her furnishings amounted to a desk, chair and night stand - more like a hospital room than a home.

But then, he knew nothing of how nuns lived.

A floorboard creaked, and he quickly retracted his foot.

"Sweetie, is that you?" came the muffled contralto.

He froze, aware those under vows shunned intimate relationships.

Meredith rolled onto her left side, eyes half open. "I looked for you before I racked out, but you didn't answer me, you naughty kitten."

Bill slowly exhaled at this revelation. The cat must come in and out through the damaged screen.

He inched closer; his shadow shifted over her face.

She bolted upright. "What the hell.."

Instantly, he sank on the mattress and covered her mouth with a gloved right hand. "Don't scream," he warned.

She recognized the accent and loose brunette tresses bobbed affirmatively. When he released her, she hissed, "Mr. Short?"

Shit! he swore inwardly.

"What's going on?" she persisted, switching on a gooseneck lamp. "You conned me into giving you a tour so you could case the joint, and steal what little we have?"

"Nothing so simple, Sister."

"Then, what?"

He debated telling her; that pause proved his undoing.

He hadn't been watching her hands, which had maneuvered beneath the quilt. One adrenaline-fueled upward thrust flipped him onto the waxed pine boards. She leapt atop him, flannel nightshirt hiked above her waist; surprisingly powerful fists pummeled his head and torso.

In the few seconds he lay prone, he tasted blood in his mouth. He outweighed her by 50 pounds, and managed to trap her wrists and roll her onto her spine, spitting a glob of red past her ear. "Now, wait just a tick," he gasped. "I thought your kind practiced nonviolence."

"In New York?" she scoffed. "Are you kidding? I come from the streets, and I'm not gonna let someone do it to me or those I care about, if I can do it to them first."

"You've no idea what I was going to do."

"Like hell." She wriggled to free herself, unsuccessfully. "You've gotta be McAllister's flunky. I knew he wanted this property, but I never thought such a reputedly devout Catholic would resort to murder."

He settled on his haunches. "Then, you're not as street-smart as you contend."

Shifting her hips, her knee bashed his groin. He pitched backward into the desk, cracking his head on the corner and collapsing with a moan.

The pistol in his shoulder holster clattered to the floor; Meredith scooped it up and aimed at his mangled countenance.

“You’ve got less than a minute to get your ass out of here,” she snarled. He fumbled onto all fours, pain radiating through his limbs. “You’re no killer.”

“I wasn’t always a nun, Mr. Short - if that’s really your name.”

“Had to... defend yourself against the boys?” he wheezed.

“I defended... others who wanted to escape the cycle of drugs and prostitution, one of them being my little sister.”

Bill retorted, “Admirable.”

An orange tabby appeared on the window sill, meowing. Meredith, momentarily distracted, diverted the pistol.

He lunged and knocked the weapon from her grip, pinning her arms against the cracked plaster wall. He caught sight of himself in a mirror propped on the chest of drawers and cringed at the extensive swelling of his jaw and cheeks.

“Listen to me. You’ve got two options: sell or die. Either way, McAllister will get what he wants.”

“In hell, maybe!”

He admired her gumption, futile though resistance be. Before he finished his task, he might as well get a little personal enjoyment from the ordeal. “You’re quite lovely for a nun.”

He bent to kiss her; she bit his lip - hard.

Earning her a backhand that sent her toppling over the desk.

He scooped up her semi-conscious form and stretched her on the bed, using a pillow to smother her.

When the police arrived, they would presume she’d struggled with a burglar, and lost.

He climbed through the window onto the fire escape, lofting the kitten gently toward its food dish in the corner. Some of his colleagues would’ve strangled the animal for good measure and torched the dump, ignoring the hazard to dozens sleeping within the walls.

He wasn’t completely heartless.

Dawn was breaking over the Atlantic when he connected with McAllister’s lieutenant at the Waldorf, receiving a briefcase of cash and documents for his flight from JFK International to London. He transferred the money into a concealed, x-ray proof compartment in his rolling case before grabbing a taxi to the airport.

A week later, he had to chuckle when reading an online follow-up to the murder. McAllister had ultimately been thwarted in his purchase of the homeless shelter, outbid by the developer whose approval for the new construction had already been issued.

Bill had just burned the mortgage for the vast manor and secreted the title to his Ferrari in a safe behind the dining room china cupboard.  
He wouldn't be refunding any of his fee, for certain.

## The Question, the Answer and the Consequences

...and the one called God by those of the Abrahamic religions spoke thus unto the old man in the desert: "If you had one day to do entirely as you pleased, be any age and in place you preferred on your planet, in the company of anyone you chose, the sole stipulation being you would need to face the consequences of your actions, would you accept such a gift from me?"

The man, who had been handsome in his youth and took pride in his intellect and acquired wealth, while in his later years suffering the ravages of a dissolute lifestyle - smoking, drinking, partaking of recreational drugs and siring many bastard children by numerous women - considered this offer in all seriousness.

"Your proposal is tempting, but vague, O Lord," he responded. "For instance, when you say 'one day,' do you mean 24 hours, or just from dawn to dusk, or some variable in between?"

God deliberated, clarifying the day would run from 12:01 AM to 12:00 the following midnight.

"That's not reasonable," objected the man. "There's nothing to do in the middle of the night, so I'd be wasting the first six hours..."

In truth, God had seldom dealt with such a detail-oriented creature. He amended the time to begin at 6:00 AM.

"Thank you," the man acknowledged. "If I provide you the age, the place, and other specifics, would that be where I'd start the day?"

"Yes."

"Will you give me time to discern my options?"

The man was granted one hour, a palm tree provided to shield him from the blazing heat.

Not much, he mused, but sufficient.

Especially when he recalled one location he'd visited in early adulthood that he'd not truly appreciated and always intended to return: Cannes on the French Riviera.

There, he could relish a sumptuous meal, lie peacefully on the beach with the sun shining overhead and a gentle breeze wafting the scent of the blue Mediterranean over his tanned flesh, a certain woman in his arms.

He had, after all, found her - a paragon of virtue, a classic beauty - yet never attained her favors. Others paled in comparison, being used simply to sate his periodic lust.

Having written the exact parameters of his wish - for, was it not as if he were Aladdin and had rubbed the lamp? - he left the shade and presented the list to God.

“You will seek no addenda or change your mind?” pressed the deity.

“No, Lord.”

“So be it. Be prepared on the morrow.”

“Yes, Lord.”

Excitement and anticipation bubbled in the man’s soul, preventing him from sleeping that night in the posh condominium he called home. Though he’d set his alarm for 5:30, allowing him to shower, shave and dress, he rose at 5:15 and completed his ablutions, every muscle tense.

Nothing untoward occurred, causing the man profuse disappointment. A knock as the mantle clock chimed the hour puzzled him but, when he opened the door, he recognized the portico of the Carlton International Cannes hotel, the street beyond and white sands leading down to the water.

God definitely works in mysterious ways, he chuckled silently.

He grabbed a quick breakfast in the restaurant before venturing out to the temperate summer morning. Other than a few employees, the area was devoid of annoying tourists and locals who might disrupt his idyll. He kicked off his shoes and socks as he approached the sand, wiggling his toes on the warm grains with child-like delight.

Passing a mirror hung on the concrete block structure where skis could be rented, he recognized his 30-year-old self: dark hair slicked off an unwrinkled forehead, square shoulders and lean frame.. He stripped off his shirt and trousers in favor of blue bathing trunks, taking a dip in the waves to ceremonially cleanse his body, mind and spirit of past frustrations.

Splashing back to shore, he noticed a large terry towel sporting the hotel insignia slung over a chaise lounge. In an identical striped seat sat that trim vision of loveliness Justine, curves visible despite the modest one-piece flowered bathing suit, ebony tresses flowing down her back while she read Nietzsche.

Boldly, the man tore the book from her hands. “It’s too marvelous a day for that,” he scolded, lifting her off the cloth and forcefully embracing her. She did not struggle nor resist - as she had decades earlier - and responded in kind to his ardent caresses.

With no one else around, he lowered her onto his beach towel and repeatedly made love to her until he’d exhausted himself. She echoed his satisfaction, her innocent hazel eyes and charming smile beaming at him the way he’d always imagined.

They didn't bother to dress for dinner - the usual custom in this luxurious enclave - draping oversized bathrobes over their swim wear. The waiters expressed no objections as each course was served, paired with the most expensive wines.

After a delicious dessert of triple chocolate cake sated the man's sweet tooth, the couple retired to the penthouse. They showered together to remove stray grains of sand before renewing their passion over and over through the night on the king-sized bed.

The man had brought no timepiece so, when 6:00 came, he abruptly found himself staring at his own textured ceiling, Justine's voluptuous body vanished mid-cuddle.

Still, he could live on the memories of being with her for the rest of his life. All five minutes of it.

Another knock compelled him off the mattress; he wrapped a monogrammed grey plaid robe around his nakedness and unfastened the deadbolt.

The panel slammed inward. A microburst of celestial wind swirled about him and conveyed him toward heavenly judgment.

"My disappointment stems from your failure to choose ways to do good for others in the hours you were allotted, to share your abundance with those who have less. You could have opted to construct houses for the unsheltered, feed the hungry, visit the sick. Instead, you selfishly decided to pursue your own pleasure," came God's summation.

The man did not protest this verdict or beg for a second chance. He'd made a deal and would abide by the terms.

He couldn't restrain a laugh, nonetheless. In a pinch, free will could really suck.

## Somebody Always Dies

The instructor leaned both elbows on the oak podium, fists in the air, staring at the lone student in the auditorium. Dark brown strands highlighted by grey streaks dangled over his sloped forehead; his nostrils flared. A British-tinged baritone reflected exhaustion. "I don't get it, Mike. When you took my dual credit course in high school, you were the most promising student I'd had in years. Now..."

Thick digits raised a stack of computer printouts and waved them. "While I can't exactly call this trash," he continued, "there's a... morbid quality I can't fathom."

"Neither can I, Professor," came the distraught contralto.

"Have you even seen death, to write about it so vividly?"

The young woman's chin bowed. "Oh, God, yeah."

Mike - the preferred nickname of Michelle Desmond - felt tears on her cheeks.

"Explain," Laurence Barrington persisted.

"My dad's father died on Christmas. A classmate was hit by a car on her way to school the first day after winter break, and one of my teachers dropped dead right in front of me, not forgetting the 12-year-old kid with cystic fibrosis who died after spending a lot of time in the hospital ward where I volunteered."

"How long ago?"

"Over the past decade."

"Have you spoken with anyone - a professional - about this? I mean, it's sort of a delayed reaction to start writing about this after... all the wonderful, upbeat stories you cranked out above life, love, and hope three years ago."

The demure redhead rose from her seat half-way toward the back on the left aisle. "Maybe I've finally realized that fantasy is no substitute for reality."

Barrington's concern redoubled at this statement. "If you really mean what you say, I strongly recommend you set an appointment with a counselor at the clinic."

"Oh, geez, Professor." Her sarcastic chuckle stunned him. "Don't take it so hard. If you read the news, or watch the evening broadcasts, someone always dies, don't they?"

"Well, sure..."

"So, I've simply been exploring the broad spectrum of death. Is there anything wrong with that?"

The tall, lean figure stiffened. "Not if you're Stephen King."

“Maybe my stories will succeed his in popularity, if that’s what appeals to the public.”

“Didn’t you once tell me you wanted to inspire people to better themselves?”

“Another fantasy.”

“What about that kid - the math nerd - you were thinking about marrying after graduation?”

“He’s gone off to MIT and I haven’t heard from him in six months.”

Barrington thumped the papers with his index finger. “So, these are really the result of a broken love affair.”

As she strode toward him, her green eyes blazed in an unfamiliar fashion. “Don’t demean me, Larry! You don’t know a damned thing...”

For a brief moment, he true fear enveloped him. This once promising author had descended into mental illness, and could be capable of any manner of violence...

The key to escaping such a confrontation unhurt: remaining calm. He inhaled slowly and flashed his minuscule smile - the edges of his mouth twitching upward briefly. “I’m sorry, Mike. You’ll receive passing grades on these, certainly...”

“Don’t grade them based on pity, dude. In a world filled with deceit, I’d enjoy honesty from at least one person.”

Barrington stepped off the platform. “Have you ever known me to be anything but truthful?”

She paused, smirking. “Sometimes to the point of cruelty.”

“Exactly.” Firm hands grasped her spindly shoulders. “What I say now comes from my heart: please go straight from here to the clinic and ask to see Doctor White. Jenny White. She’s... helped a dozens on campus deal with how life impacts creativity. She’ll be able to guide you...”

“With drugs?”

“In your case” - he assessed her thin frame - “she’ll probably recommend a healthier diet and other changes in your routine.”

“Like sleep?”

“Definitely, sleep. Without it...”

Mike’s voice adopted a wistful quality. “I haven’t slept more than four hours a night in months. The stories just keep pouring out of me like a fountain...”

If he battled a lack of energy, he marveled that this teen could even stand upright, plagued by such turmoil. “I’m sure Jenny will be able to...”

The student’s head whipped upward. “You know an awful lot about her.”

“I’ve recommended quite a few enrolled in my courses to her.”

“Because you think they’re crazy?”

Barrington’s nerves tingled at the edgy accusation. “No. Everyone needs someone to talk to about their... problems now and then.” He glanced at his wristwatch: 5:30. “You’d better get going. The clinic closes in 30 minutes.”

He studied her face, the window to a soul cycling through conflicting emotions. He suspected she’d entirely lost touch with the present moment - as too many writers could, in the throes of their obsession with plots and characters.

“Would you like me to walk you there?” he hinted.

She exhaled and forced a grin. “No, Professor. I’ll be okay.”

Barrington released her and patted her cheek, turning toward the podium to collect his belongings.

He initially didn’t feel the knife penetrate his ribcage. Instead, an inexplicably weakness overwhelmed him. He sank to his knees, then toppled on the tile, blood oozing in an arc around his torso. He managed to raise himself for a split second as Mike towered above him.

“Why?” he croaked.

The reply was delivered with chilling matter-of-factness: “Somebody always dies.”

As Barrington breathed his last, he saw her diligently wipe her fingers and the pocket knife - blade and handle - with a handkerchief, tossing the linen and the murder weapon beside him. She strolled toward the auditorium exit, whistling Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, not a care in the world.

## The Chocoholic's Chase

It's one way to use up frequent flyer miles.

And, to be sure, Penny had quite the stash - given that she existed in a bi-coastal realm of possibilities.

As head of promotions for a major Hollywood movie studio, she flew from Los Angeles to New York and back on average twice a week.

Not that she couldn't work remotely some days. When dealing with highly paid actors, though, the personal touch counted on press junkets.

Her assistants handled booking details for daytime and late night talk shows, special events for charity, radio interviews and podcasts, but Penelope Wharton made certain things ran smoothly onsite during hectic and exhausting tours.

Meaning: her bank of available miles exceeded five million.

Being Penny's one loyal high school chum - after others in our crowd went their separate ways - convincing her to take a long overdue vacation required two years of patience and persistence. I'd always wanted to travel around Europe, but never had the cash reserves to afford such an expense. Penny assured me we could use her miles and do everything in style; I yearned for such an adventure while young enough to immerse myself in the diverse cultures.

Besides, I knew her weakness: chocolate. She shunned vegetables and fruits, living on a diet of meat, potatoes and chocolate. How she retained her slender figure remained a mystery, given the quantity of sweets I'd witnessed her consume since we'd met in fifth grade.

I'd have sold my soul for her metabolism.

This addiction could be justified by the stressful nature of her job, of course. Actors' personalities run the gamut from down-to-earth to entitled and, at the conclusion of a chaotic succession of personal appearances, even the most dedicated professional needs a way to relax. Penny once described a triple chocolate cake recipe that - like its name - was "better than sex," a viable alternative to drinking alcohol in a bar or snorting cocaine. She definitely experienced ineffable joy in a large bite of Mackinac Island fudge or a chocolate covered donut.

Hinting that Paris and Switzerland boasted the most acclaimed chocolateries in the world piqued her interest; her main internet search when arriving in a new city brought up locations of local candy shops so she could secure a "fix" without too much trouble.

We met for dinner at In-and-Out Burger that June Saturday - a brief respite before she headed for New York on the red-eye. I plopped a calendar on the table and told her we were going to set definite dates for the trip. I wouldn't let her make excuses, so she scrolled through her phone and actually discovered two weeks in October where she had no scheduled events.

"Lock it down," I told her. "We'll get together next week to book the flights and hotels."

She chuckled, a lilting sound. "God, Margie, you're a tyrant."

"Bullshit," I responded. "If you weren't such a procrastinator..."

My heart soared at the possibility of staying at Paris' George V, and five-star lodgings in six different cities as the itinerary spawned a plethora of emailed confirmations.

Then, I learned the truth.

My intention to see the sights in our respective destinations, enjoy local fare and mingle with the natives, Penny had another agenda.

She'd joked periodically about a chocolate underground, connections with a global network of connoisseurs who tracked innovative chocolatiers - one-person operations where phenomenal culinary experiments took place beyond the limelight.

Penny confessed to me half-way across the Atlantic that she'd heard about a specific, elusive individual. She was bound and determined to meet him and taste his creations.

The issue: he hailed from the Romani, and never stayed in a given place more than a few months.

My temperature rose as I tried to restrain myself from letting loose with a stream of expletives by watching some inane sit-com on the seat-back video screen.

The flight attendant delivered a straight double-whiskey and I fell asleep, hoping to ease the tension.

Once settled in our suite at the George V, Penny invited me to scope out the Champs Elysees as the sun set. I really wanted to punch her far-too-perfect face, but took a deep breath instead.

"Fine. Whatever."

At least, I managed to climb the Eiffel Tower and visit the Cathedral of Notre Dame over the weekend. Penny, in the meantime, hunted up obscure addresses in sketchy neighborhoods, to no avail.

The Romany had not been seen in the city for six years.

On to Geneva, the weather cool but pleasant. We made the rounds of chocolate shops - and there were many! - then I nursed my stomachache with a day in bed.

So it went, this “vacation”. I wasn’t totally disappointed when we boarded the flight from Berlin to Chicago, an unexpected change from Los Angeles - but Penny beamed with the lead she’d unearthed in Bonn: the Romany had been plying his trade in a posh suburb of the Windy City for almost a year.

“You’re certifiable,” I scoffed as we were served a rather bland lunch at 35,000 feet. “After dealing with rabid fans of those actors you escort hither and yon, you should know better.”

“This is no different than attending a wine tasting to sample the driest Chablis, or touring Kentucky distilleries for the finest bourbon.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“That’s because you swill your whiskey like a sailor who’s been at sea for a year.”

With a sarcastic sniff, I shifted in my seat and closed my eyes.

There can be no denying: the romp in Chicago proved more lively than our meanderings in Europe. From O’Hare International, we spent that afternoon and the next morning in a succession of cabs. The ethnic enclaves of Rogers Park, Lincoln Square, Little Italy, Greektown, Humboldt Park, and even Chinatown opened my eyes to how immigrants preserved traditions away from their homeland. Though I enjoyed the food we purchased at delis and bakeries, Penny struck out in her search.

Until a seemingly random teenager in ratty red sweatpants and a Chicago Cubs t-shirt intercepted her as we emerged from an Asian restaurant at mid-day.

“You’re looking for the Romany?” he queried, brown orbs alert to his surroundings.

Penny nodded.

“He lives in Lake Forest with his grandmother.”

I gulped, pretending not to eavesdrop. Said grandmother must have a few bucks.

Considerably more, it turned out. The granite mansion sat in the heart of 15 acres of landscaped gardens, with a tennis court and outdoor pool, to boot.

Dropped at the base of a winding drive, I tugged Penny’s sleeve.

“Don’t you think we should swing by our hotel, shower and change into something more presentable before ringing the doorbell?”

“Too late.” Penny wagged her thumb toward the gardener, wearing a mud-smeared army green tank top that displayed musculature sculpted by Michelangelo, jeans and scuffed boots. He leaned on his rake, staring at us.

“Maybe he’ll assume we’re lost tourists.” I swallowed hard; I’d seldom encountered a more attractive male, even on the beach at Malibu.

No such luck.

Tall and tanned, dark hair mussed, he abandoned his tool and marched across the plush lawns. I retreated toward the street; Penny seized my arm and held fast.

I could feel her hand trembling.

“The photos I’ve seen don’t do you justice,” came an uncharacteristically cultured baritone.

Penny croaked, “What photos?”

“Certain... friends of mine warned me to expect you.”

“You?” I feigned a cough.

He snickered, the corners of his mouth twitching upward in a momentary grin. “You imagined an old geezer in a bandana, gold earring and holding a violin?”

The innuendo could not be ignored: the “typical” Romani costumes from old movies.

He extended a calloused hand. “I’m Bass Hornbeck.”

“Hornbeck?” I echoed.

Penny scowled at me in gratitude for embarrassing her.

“My mother’s family is Romani. My father’s side fled England in the early 1700s.”

That explained his atypical features.

And, believe me, I’m not prejudiced, especially when it involves someone so damned handsome.

His shaggy mane wasn’t black, more the tint of dark chocolate - which Penny didn’t eat unless absolutely desperate. Thick eyebrows topped intense, slightly sunken grey-green orbs. A straight - once broken - nose and thin lips were separated by a bushy mustache, his tapered chin clean shaven.

“You... do marvelous things with chocolate,” Penny stated, clasping his fingers.

“Ah, so you’re one of those.”

She squinted at him.

“Ever since I attended school in Paris, I’ve been hounded...”

When Penny blushed, she resembled an innocent child. "I'm sorry," she muttered, inching away.

Hornbeck clutched her forearm - and mine. "You're more than welcome," and as an afterthought, "both of you. In fact, I've been devising something entirely new... especially for this occasion."

On the move at a fast pace; I had difficulty matching his gait.

"I don't mean to be presumptuous, but how did you come by your name?" I panted, pausing beneath a willow to catch my breath.

"Bass?" His eyes twinkled. "It's short for Bassanio. My maternal grandmother loved Shakespeare, and had been an actress on the stage in her roamings through Europe. She promised she'd curse the lot of us if we didn't honor her wishes."

Whether true or not, an engaging tale.

Hornbeck escorted us to the columned portico, where a formally attired butler pulled arched double doors inward. Ceiling-high windows lit the main hall; I was flabbergasted by the opulence of the decor.

"Your... grandmother owns this?" I inquired.

"She lives here. *I* own it."

Suddenly, I felt awkward and dumpy, my very presence defiling this monument to affluence.

"An inheritance from my father. He was an investment broker."

Penny interspersed, "You... haven't spent much time here."

"Blame it on my Romani blood. I wanted to see the world, taste life to the full... When Grandma fell ill, I came home to see she was well cared for until she passes."

"Then, you'll be off again?"

"I don't know, frankly. Travel has its drawbacks, constantly packing and unpacking - even though I carry only one bag."

"I know what you mean. I run from L.A. to New York so often, I've worn out the wheels on half a dozen cases."

Veering right, we entered the kitchen, and my jaw dropped. The most prestigious gourmet restaurant couldn't touch this equipment.

"Welcome to where my career started," Hornbeck declared. "Concocting snacks for my classmates after school made me quite popular."

Propping myself on a padded barstool near the sinks, I let the pair talk chocolate. Penny - who, for some unknown reason, Hornbeck decided to call Nell - savored an array of confections, her smile so huge I thought her face would crack. When my stomach grumbled, I checked my cell phone: 7:30.

Penny glanced at me, curious.

“If it’s okay with you two, I’m gonna scoot,” I announced. “I’ll grab a bite and meet you later at the hotel.”

She left Hornbeck dipping bonbons and drew me into the shadowy corridor. “I... won’t be flying to L.A. with you tomorrow, Margie.”

“What? You’re coordinating an unveiling Friday on the Hollywood Walk of Fame!”

“I really apologize for the deception: I quit my job.”

This violation of our friendship proved the final straw for me. I practically dragged her to a book-lined parlor, demanding the truth.

She confessed, sandy head bowed, using her corporate frequent flyer miles before she lost them played a major role in why she let me pressure her into this journey. If she hadn’t been able to locate Hornbeck, she would’ve arbitrarily picked a city and taken up residence in an effort to reinvent herself.

“But, now,” she concluded, “my dream has come true.”

“What dream?” I prodded.

“I’m going into business with Bass.”

I bit my lip so hard, blood trickled down my chin. “You’re crazy.”

“No, I’m not. In addition to producing the finest chocolates, our idea is to contribute to the food bank in each customer’s locality.”

My skepticism must’ve shown in my expression.

“Not just some paltry amount, either. If an order amounts to fifty dollars, we’ll donate forty.”

“That’s eighty percent!” I spat.

“Bass admitted it’s been tough to effectively himself of this fortune. Our plan will accomplish his goal. Bringing joy to the world one chocolate at a time.”

I grumbled, “Catchy motto.”

Penny squeezed my shoulders. “Wish me well, Margie. This will be far more worthwhile than putting high-priced actors through their paces.”

“They’ll probably be your first customers, if I know your promotional skills.”

She shrugged.

“What about... where you’ll live?” I puzzled.

“Here. There’s plenty of room.”

“Will you... marry the dude?”

“Doubtful.”

“And, you mapped out this project in just one afternoon?”

Penny smiled with a tranquility I’d never seen before.

“Oh, all right.” I gave her a quick hug and strode toward the exit. “All the best, kid.”

The flight to the West Coast seriously bummed me out, but I recovered in due course.

Penny - who now goes by Nell - and I still keep in touch. She offered me a position as regional promotions director after the charity got on its feet, but I declined. Better to maintain a bit of distance - beneficial to a healthy friendship - than working together day-in, day-out and spoiling the relationship through excessive closeness.

Bass and Penny must've grasped that concept, too. They continue to live in different wings of the mansion, and never married.

While I didn't ask, I believe if she didn't wander into his room periodically to spend the night, she was nuts.

A guy that hot, I sure would've.

After all, chocolate is great - in my opinion - but nothing is better than sex.

## Sex and the Shotgun

Barbara Sparks had kept her late father's shotgun for sentimental reasons, though she'd been known to blow holes in random objects - a privacy fence, a billboard, a chicken coop - while taking target practice.

At that moment, she desperately wanted to blow a hole in Dino Pirelli.

The former college basketball star wedged herself against yellow bricks at the corner of Eighth and Walnut. American National Bank's ATM kiosk - and an early winter sunset - hid her from view as she surveilled the King's Inn columned entrance 50 yards west on the opposite side of the street.

Ginny, her younger sister, sprinted toward the intersection, auburn tresses tangled by the wind. "You can't do this, Barb!" she panted, stumbling when the older woman extended her arm to create a blockade.

"Like hell, I can't!"

A silver Porsche convertible braked at the curb as Barbara watched, the red jacketed valet exiting as Pirelli - tall and lean in a skin-tight charcoal t-shirt and jeans - emerged from the nine-story structure. She stepped boldly onto the sidewalk, raising the barrel to aim.

As she rested her cheek on the stock, squinting along the sights, Ginny grabbed the weapon in an attempt to avert cold-blooded murder.

The raptort of both barrels simultaneously firing echoed between the buildings. Projectiles penetrated the hotel's granite facade, sending stone shards crashing to the pavement.

A sizable chunk shattered the vehicle's windshield as Pirelli recoiled, scanning the block for the source of the attack.

Barbara had already retreated along Walnut, cursing Ginny for disrupting her plan. "I'll never have a better chance."

"You did enough damage, didn't you?" retorted the senior biology major en route to her rusty Volkswagen Beetle. "He'll get the point."

"Wanna bet? Guys like him never learn."

Sirens in the distance prompted Barbara to stash the shotgun under a moth-eaten picnic blanket on the compact's rear seat. She flopped onto the passenger seat; Ginny revved the engine.

Clutch depressed, the shifter slammed into gear. "I don't understand why you've made such a... a..."

"Big deal out of this?" supplied the elder Sparks.

"Yeah."

She swiveled on the bucket seat, facing the fresh-faced young woman. "Because, Ginny, when Dad died, I became head of the family. If he'd been alive during your ordeal, he'd have said the same thing: no one disgraces my flesh and blood like that asshole disgraced you."

"Dino didn't disgrace me..."

"Like hell, he didn't. Him, a university administrator, and you, an underage freshman..."

"But, it was consensual..."

"Not according to the law," Barbara snarled.

"Then, why didn't you file a police report?"

"Because, he's the influential type who would get off with a slap on the wrist. That's not justice, in my book."

Ginny steered along Main Street toward a white-washed Victorian-style dwelling where the pair grew up, parking in the driveway. Barbara followed her across the porch into the foyer, seizing her arm.

"Slow down, for Christ's sake!"

"Why?" Tears moistened hazel orbs. "So you can berate me until I admit you're right?"

Barbara tugged her into the parlor, shoving her onto a black leather love seat. "Chill out, kid." She settled on the matching recliner. "I know casual sex is a given on campus, but for him to get you pregnant and simply disappear..."

Ginny's chin drooped. She'd nearly dropped out of school because of that... debacle. Then, in the course of training for the track team, she suffered a miscarriage. An understanding coach managed to fudge the records by claiming a badly sprained ankle had kept the sprinter from competing for six weeks, allowing her time to recover and keep her scholarship.

"He never once checked on you," continued Barbara. "To me, that's intolerable."

In fact, Barbara had spent more than a year tracing Pirelli, who'd relocated to upstate New York. She'd almost resigned herself to not fulfilling her vow when, just a week previous, she'd casually overheard two university alumni association staff members chatting in the coffee shop: this defiler of innocense would be resuming his position after an extended leave of absence.

That spurred her to retrieve the shotgun from the attic and thoroughly clean every part, purchasing a box of ammunition at the sporting goods store.

Ginny rose as her sister ruminated. "I'd better get dinner started."

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, I am."

To distract herself from these morbid thoughts, Barbara knelt before the fireplace grate, crumpling old newspapers and mixing them with dry kindling to offset the increasing chill in the room. She'd just struck a match to ignite the pile; a knock on the front door interrupted her.

The cops, she presumed.

Or, not.

The panel yanked inward, her brown eyes widened at the sight of Dino Pirelli scraping his Adidas on the welcome mat.

For a brief instant, Barbara grasped why her sibling found him attractive. Forty-ish, he looked younger due to the shaggy brown mane, smoldering green orbs, chisled features and trim physique. His shirt was coated with residue from splintered granite; jeans bore splotches of mud where he'd fallen to avoid the impact of falling debris.

"What do *you* want?" Barbara greeted tersely.

He crossed the threshold and slammed the door. "You, bitch."

"Eh?"

"My eyesight is twenty-twenty. I recognized you when you popped out from behind the bank and tried to take a shot at me."

"Oh, really?"

Pirelli scrutinized her like a savvy buyer inspecting a pre-owned car. She didn't flinch, despite her tousled brunette curls, grimy blue flannel shirt, sweatpants and sneakers.

"You've always been jealous because I preferred Ginny to you."

She retorted, "Bullshit."

"Don't lie to me. I caught you - frequently - ogling me as I walked from the lecture hall to my office while you shot hoops on the quad."

"It's good to know you're a narcissist, as well as an absolute dick," she chuckled. "You think every female..."

The edges of his mouth twitched upward in a momentary, sardonic grin.

"Frankly, the only reason I ever gave you a second thought was to avenge my sister's good name."

"Oh, please..." he grunted.

"You have no idea what you did to her, do you?"

"We had... a bit of fun, is all."

Barbara's palm raked his cheek. "Bastard!"

Rubbing the red imprint, he scowled. "If that's not proof you're jealous..."

"She was seventeen, idiot! Whether or not you both... consented, it's considered statutory rape! And, getting her pregnant..."

Thick eyebrows arched as bewilderment twisted his countenance.  
“Pregnant?”

“Yeah, and don’t pretend you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t!” he professed. “The day after we... I got a call that my father had been in a serious car accident back in Rochester, and wasn’t expected to live. I rushed home and, once he passed, I had to handle the funeral arrangements because my mother was in no condition...”

“Excuses, excuses.”

“I wound up her caregiver these past couple years. She had a debilitating stroke less than a week after we buried Dad...”

Barbara couldn’t read whether he spoke the truth or a pack of lies. She, nonetheless, refused to let her guard down. “You could have called, written, emailed...”

“And risked losing my job?” he guffawed. “You know as well as I: fraternizing with students is against university policy.”

“You didn’t seem to care at the time.”

A slight flush mottled his tan. “Ginny had a lot going for her. She was hot, smart...”

“And easy,” added Barbara.

“Not really.”

“Getting her drunk...”

“Neither of us drank anything more than soda that night,” he asserted. “We met quite by chance at the pizza parlor, and shared a table because the place was so crowded. We talked about a lot of different things, and I... invited her back to my place for dessert.”

The elder Sparks snorted at the innuendo.

Ginny appeared from the kitchen at that point, holding a casserole with oven mitts. “Dinner is...” - she halted abruptly - “Oh, shit.”

The pyrex dish exploded on the polished floor. Ginny’s bare left foot oozed blood where a large fragment pierced the flesh.

Barbara leapt into action, accustomed to tending her sister through all sorts of scrapes. She smacked the transfixed Pirelli, jarring him to his senses. “Carry her upstairs,” she instructed. “I’ll get the bandages.”

Fifteen minutes later, Ginny rested quietly on her bed, a nasty gash sutured by the trained nurse and covered with gauze. Barbara promised to clean up the ruined shrimp alfredo and prepare a peanut butter and jelly sandwich - a childhood favorite - with a large glass of chocolate milk, since the younger woman had been a “brave soldier.”

When Barbara descended the stairs, she discovered Pirelli had already swept and mopped the hall, leaving no sign of the incident. After tending to a couple tasks, she found him in the parlor, lounging near the roaring blaze.

“Thanks,” Barbara croaked reluctantly.

“No problem. It was... partially my fault.”

“It was *all* your fault.”

His baritone projected a knife-like sharpness. “I... won’t argue with you.”

“Good.” She sank on the sofa, hands extended to warm them.

He maneuvered toward her. “So, what must I do to resolve this squabble?”

She didn’t immediately respond.

“Don’t even say I have to marry Ginny.”

“It’s rather late for that, isn’t it?”

He bristled. “I’ve explained the circumstances. If I would’ve stayed, we might’ve dated on the sly for a few months, but it could never have been a permanent relationship.”

“You should have thought of that before you...”

“You’re not going to let it go, are you?”

Her reply bit. “No. Once again, you’ve jeopardized her future. She won’t be able to train for the spring meets because of this injury...”

Pirelli hoisted himself into a squatting position, inches from Barbara’s nose. “There’s not much I can do of a practical nature...”

“So, you think I should let you off the hook?”

“We all screw up, and forgiveness is supposed to be a virtue.” His edgy tone softened. “I’m willing to beg pardon...”

Barbara felt her temperature rising, and not from the heat generated by logs crackling behind an ornate screen. If slipping his arms around her waist amounted to an apology, she couldn’t accept the gesture.

His lips smothered hers with a tantalizing passion.

All she could think: how good that Ginny couldn’t walk in on them as they exerted themselves on the braided area rug.

His caresses, his body... confirmed a superior degree of experience. Both sated, he lay beside her - no lamps switched on as dusk fell - watching flames create abstract designs on the tin ceiling tiles.

Barbara couldn’t resist a dig. “What the hell was that about?”

“If I may amend my earlier statement: I didn’t see you ogling me while you went three-on-three with the guys; I ogled you. I didn’t have the courage to violate the policy, however, being in line for a promotion.”

“So, hitting on Ginny years later was next best?”

“I swear, that was pure coincidence. I didn’t even know her name until... the next morning.”

This confession did not alter his fate. She righted herself, buttoned her shirt and moved behind the furniture. There, the shotgun waited, reloaded.

The police report, and subsequent media coverage, indicated Barbara Sparks had fired at Dino Pirelli, believing him a burglar. No witnesses to the deed, and no evidence to the contrary - along with her history of mishaps with the shotgun - the county prosecutor warned her to use greater caution in future and refused to indict her.

Ginny believed her sister’s story that Pirelli had departed the house, returning unannounced upon realizing he’d forgotten his keys. In the darkness, Barbara mistook him for an intruder.

He’d gotten his just desserts, and she regretted none of her actions.

## An Elevated Viewpoint

Describing the unique perspective Aengus Óg developed about humanity over the course of his existence would be problematic, at best. He'd initially encountered indigenous tribes of the region on solid ground, facing them eye-to-eye. If not his equals, they radiated a nobility and wisdom borne of many generations living in harmony with creation, and he admired them.

Aengus witnessed the territory's changing landscape: construction of a fort - where he occupied a chamber high enough to see past the thick log wall to the horizon. The supposedly intelligent beings who waged war on those from foreign countries - and the valiant souls who'd stewarded the land - disgusted him.

Recurring battles led to a tenuous peace treaties, repeatedly violated, commingled with discrimination, racism, local conflicts. He'd again moved up, into a fifth story apartment in a brick tenement. Through smudged casements, pedestrians traversing the street began to resemble mindless ants.

He distanced himself from them, and they from him.

Thus he continued his rise, eventually residing in a luxurious penthouse on the 25<sup>th</sup> level of an elegant metropolitan hotel. Vehicles below reminded him of brightly colored Matchbox replicas. People amounted to specks on an abstract landscape.

That's, also, how they considered him.

Idling near full-length windows on this glorious spring morning, silk maroon robe covering a blue henley shirt and black Dockers, Aengus' ruminations were interrupted by a tapping on the study door.

"Enter." Though he spoke in a near-whisper, the command penetrated solid oak.

A lithe brunette figure in "War is Not the Answer" t-shirt, frayed jean shorts and Birkenstock sandals, her beauty exquisite yet natural, glided across the carpet and genuflected as his chiseled mien swiveled toward her.

"There has been a disturbance?" purported Aengus, stroking a rather scruffy beard, dark chocolate-colored mop feathered across his smooth forehead from a left part.

The woman did not rise, her eyes focused on his polished black loafers. "How... did you know?"

"You never make the solemn obeisance unless you fear my anger upon hearing your message."

She lifted anxious features to gaze into his smoldering green eyes. "I humbly beg pardon, Lord..."

He bent, snatched her hands and drew her into a standing position - albeit six inches shorter than he. In the style of European greetings, he kissed both her cheeks, then brushed his lips over her mouth in a more amorous token of affection.

Her scent reflected interactions with the masses.

“You have nothing to fear, my dear Zia,” his resonant baritone assured her. “Tell me what troubles you.”

Hesitantly, she muttered, “Bombs.”

“Bombs?”

“The media reports renewed incidents of explosions across the country. Rumors are rampant that a new war has begun.”

Aengus guffawed, scanning the cityscape to the west. “Will they ever learn?”

“I fear not, Lord.”

Sobering, he shuffled toward a purple velvet divan near the marble fireplace, above which hung two crossed swords and two spears. He stretched himself upon the cushions. “Since they have no qualms about killing each other, what if I propose to wipe them out *en masse*, with a plan to start fresh?”

Zia’s already pale complexion blanched. “Oh, my Lord! Please, no!”

“Why not, my dear? You care for them so deeply?”

“I... am one of them, as well you know.”

“Indeed, I still recall that fortunate day when I glimpsed your innocent face among the orphans from that ludicrous massacre across the river. You are the sole reason I have yet to destroy the lot.”

“For my sake, stay your anger, Lord.” She knelt beside the couch, clutching his fingers and moistening them with her tears.. “Whatever you desire, I shall do, if you but show mercy...”

His lips twitched in a scowl as he extricated his digits and caressed her neck. “Beg not for these... fools, who place no value on their own lives,” he rumbled, a sharpness to his tone that boded ill. “Think, rather, of your joy being mother to an entire race - pure souls unsullied by avarice, lust, sloth, pride and other vices.”

“I... am not worthy, Lord.”

“You, of all the creatures who have found favor in my eyes, are most worthy.”

Zia had served him faithfully since childhood, a mere slip of a girl, not yet eight. He had lavished her with kindness, educated her in a broad swath of subjects - ancient and modern - and set her above his other subjects, those who still maintained hope for the world.

Her knowledge of his history did not engender the degree of fear so many others entertained when allowed into his presence, or even from afar. A god of youth and love, he honored integrity among the people - though such a virtue proved more and more rare - while arbitrarily exerting his control over life and death when his temper flared.

And no moreso than on that particular spring night.

They sat together on the divan until well after sunset, listening to the cacophonous symphony of what some deemed “civilization”.

Abruptly, silence enveloped them. It sent a chill up Zia’s spine, and she shivered in Aengus’ arms.

“My dear?” he muttered.

“It’s nothing, Lord. I’ve... never before experienced a total absence of sound.”

“The earth goddess is resting before she restores the planet to its original state.”

“What will happen to the... buildings, the technology...”

“Gone. All gone.”

“Then, where shall we live?”

“As our kind intended in eras long since. Our feet firmly planted on the ground.”

As Zia soon discovered, not all humans met an ignoble fate by his wrath. Indigenous cultures remained, and when Aengus’ first son sat with the tribal elders, absorbing their insights, the prospect of a lasting peace grew with him.

Unlike his father, though, he and his numerous siblings shunned being worshiped as gods, content to nurture harmony through community around the globe.

Aengus didn’t quite approve of this dynamic. Nonetheless, he and Zia - always ageless - watched evolution bear fruit and progress, ever the proud parents.

## Into the Depths

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord...”

Never did I suspect the opening line from Psalm 130 would be my plea, being the type who - all my life - rushed in where angels fear to tread. I'd always been able to extricate myself from the trickiest scrape, accepting responsibility for my actions and outspokenness, risking a comfortable future more than once on a perverse whim.

My goal in these endeavors had little to do with being a savior of body, mind or soul - my own or others' - though I was often heralded as such. I saw what needed to be done, I did it, and to hell with the opinions of the authorities or my community.

Those who viewed reports circulated by the media, when my deeds accidentally leaked to the public, presumed some official affiliation with the police, fire department, local government, medical profession or institute of higher education. In fact, my status as an ordinary citizen who frequently managed to be in the right place at the right time added an almost superhero-like preeminence to my stature.

Offers of priority service in restaurants, free tickets to concerts and theatre performances - among other perks - cluttered my email inbox and voicemail, all deleted.

My daily routine did not alter, except when open eyes, open ears and an open mind - blended with insights gained from decades of experience - prompted me to intervene in precarious situations.

To this day, I wish I'd ignored the alarm clock that particular April morning and stayed in bed. I should've kept my eyelids shut, stuffed cotton in my ears and pulled the blanket over my head.

Despite an abiding exhaustion, thanks to bizarre dreams - a recurring issue for me - I forced myself off the mattress and into the shower, dressing in a grey short-sleeve henley and black yoga pants, pulling my brunette mane into a ponytail, sliding into my Birkenstocks and sailing out the door, a heaping tablespoon of peanut butter, a squirt of chocolate syrup and a tall glass of milk serving as breakfast.

My deep blue 2005 Mustang rumbled as I backed from the bungalow's garage. No electric door, I paused on the cracked driveway and yanked the aluminum panel closed before steering toward downtown.

A courteous neighbor, I tapped the accelerator, instead of burning rubber - certain retirees hated that at 6:00 AM.

Cruising through mostly deserted streets, I appreciated the lack of traffic, and availability of parking spaces in the lot opposite The Emporium, which I'd operated for the absentee owner since the late 1980s.

One of the ground level storefronts anchoring a high-rise apartment building, The Emporium occupied the southwest corner of Oak and Cherry Streets. The name belied its purpose: a pawn shop. For zoning reasons, however, the official designation in city records read, "Variety Store."

Variety, indeed. Musical instruments, jewelry, computers, gaming consoles, cameras and a myriad of other items filled shelves and display racks, with each having its own story.

I'd listened to those stories, many genuinely heart-rending: mothers scrambling for quick cash to feed their children, gamblers desperate to pay their bookies, amateur bands giving up on recording the next hit rock 'n roll song, photographers adversely impacted by the rise in technology.

In rare instances, The Emporium's counter proved the last stop for an individual en route to the roof-bound elevator. I had no qualms about hanging the "Closed" sign in the window, locking the deadbolt and following the aching soul, the prospect of a second chance tempting.

Words were sufficient, sometimes. In two cases, I employed to another tactic: a lariat. I'd spent summers as a youth on a cattle ranch, and learned to lasso stray animals. When a person inched too close to the structure's edge, the rope would thwart a fatal plunge.

An efficient method, especially since I'm afraid of heights.

The subjects of this effort might be angry in the moment but, reflecting upon the underlying humor, they welcomed professional assistance to resolve their inner turmoil. I dismissed the excuse of tight finances, often paying for their counseling myself.

Gratitude played a major role in these interactions, but not friendship. Those who've hit bottom and transcended despair don't generally prolong an association with their rescuer, which can be an impediment to healing.

That didn't really bother me. At the close of a long day, I preferred solitude and quiet.

Switching on overhead fluorescent fixtures after unbolting the recessed door, how could I predict my schedule was about to be permanently disrupted?

Two youngsters who regularly popped in to buy candy with their allowance on their way to the public junior high a block east had just departed when the bell suspended from the lintel tinkled anew. I turned from dusting laptops I'd refurbished - another acquired expertise - and saw a form silhouetted by glaring

sun. A reminder to wash the windows, the city's dirt encrusted on the glass enveloping the customer in abstract shadows.

"Good morning," I greeted, tossing the rag beside the register "How may I help you?"

He shuffled into the light, a tragic figure. Thin to the point of malnourished, his clothes might have been salvaged from a dumpster, fitting him ill. His cheeks sallow, lips pursed, strands of hair the color of dark chocolate dangled across a furrowed brow. Yet, within slightly sunken sockets, piercing green eyes transfixed me.

"You... buy things?" he stammered, though I detected a richness to the tweedy baritone.

"Yes."

From inside a moth-eaten World War II army overcoat, he extracted a gold pocket watch on a filigreed chain. Trembling digits placed it on my extended palm, then retracted quickly.

Repressing my eager smile took considerable energy. This Patek Philippe hunter-style timepiece retailed for over \$45,000 brand new.

And this was new.

"I... don't deal in stolen goods," I stated.

He groped in threadbare trousers and pulled a slip of paper from an otherwise empty brown leather wallet.

A sales receipt from a prestigious New York City jeweler detailed the purchase two weeks prior.

Enterprising thieves could easily forge this type of document. "Do you have any identification?" I queried.

He produced a Connecticut driver's license. The photo showed a more composed, dignified image of the man before me. His name: Jeremiah Petersen.

Not a suspicious sort, usually, I had to concede my doubts. "How much... are you hoping to get for this?"

"Whatever you're willing to pay."

Had a bomb exploded inside my skull, the realization would have been no more jarring. Someone who didn't care about the value of a incredibly expensive trinket, bought with cash, wasn't just down-and-out, he was in the midst of a mental health crisis.

Best to tread lightly. "I was about to brew some coffee, Mr. Petersen. Would you like a cup?"

A bland, "Sure."

Leading him to my cluttered office, where unopened mail and recent acquisitions got dumped, I presented the box of pods. "Take your pick."

"Whatever you're having," he mumbled.

Definitely struggling with severe depression.

I plucked two French Roast and filled hand-made ceramic mugs. He refused cream and sugar, sinking onto the straight-backed blue naugahyde desk chair I indicated.

Little mysteries always intrigued me. From excessive extravagance to utter despondency in a matter of days... along with traveling more than 1,000 miles lacking resources...

Bi-polar disorder.

"Are you just passing through?" I ventured between sips.

"I... don't really know where I am."

"Do you remember how you got here?"

Face downcast, he hesitated. "The train, I think."

And not as a passenger, either. He vaguely recalled wandering into a freight yard somewhere outside Chicago - while on a business trip - and hopping on an outbound graffiti-decorated box car. His presence discovered after half a day, he was ejected beside a Kansas cornfield, walking 50 miles over mostly unpaved roads.

"May I make a suggestion, Jeremiah?"

Those incredible eyes met mine. "I'm only Jeremiah when I'm in trouble."

"Yeah, I used to be Yvonne Mathilda when my mom was angry." My sheepish grin lightened his mood a bit. "Are you Jerry to your friends?"

"Jeremy."

Providing Jeremy with shelter in the bungalow's spare room and, perhaps, persuading him to visit a mental health clinic where staff could examine him and prescribe appropriate medication wouldn't inconvenience me too much. Better than worrying about him wandering aimlessly through unknown territory...

The bell heralded another customer, and I left Jeremy nursing his now-lukewarm coffee. A steady stream of buyers - and sellers - kept me at the counter until well past noon. Between transactions, I sneaked a glance through the office window; he didn't budge.

That a person could be so immobilized by depression made me shudder.

"You okay, Vonnie?" queried Hank, who'd stopped in to reclaim his Fender bass guitar - pawned the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month and redeemed the following payday.

I blamed a cold draft.

Rousing Jeremy from sleep took a quarter hour once I'd secured the premises at 7:00. A detour along Cherry Street netted us dinner, an assortment of respectable clothes and various toiletries. We piled oversized bags in the Mustang's trunk, the trip home lit by a pastel hued sunset.

My guest was escorted to the bathroom, upgraded from my grandmother's clawfoot tub and cast iron sink to more modern amenities. Large towels draped over the rack, I allowed him privacy while I freshened up the spare room with clean sheets.

At the kitchen table in front of take-out containers of Asian fare, his demeanor hadn't improved in conjunction with his appearance. His hair dripped on his plate as he watched me attack a bowl of rice and teriyaki chicken with steel chopsticks. Annoyed, I abandoned my place and snatched a towel from the linen closet, treating him like I had my younger brothers long since, approaching him from behind and vigorously rubbing his cranium.

A strikingly strong left hand seized my wrist. This physical contact generated a peculiar sensation: a tidal wave of desolation washed over me, and I felt myself imprisoned in a space of eternal darkness, not a glimmer of illumination visible. Terms to describe this consuming terror eluded me; all joy had seemingly been sucked from the world.

"Don't ever do that again." Jeremy's soft voice had instantly transformed to a scathing tone as he shoved me away.

My throat stifled an expletive, realizing I'd committed a phenomenal error in judgment by bringing this man into my home. If what I'd endured in less than a minute amounted to 10% of his disorientation, God have mercy on him - and, on me for being such a fool to render him aid.

Returning to my meal, I'd lost my appetite thanks to a dense cloud obscuring my innate optimism. Jeremy ate nothing. To hell with coddling him, I decided. I would go about my business, and he could hunker down for the night, to be deposited at the clinic first thing the next morning.

He retired to the living room after I gathered the dishes and carried them to the sink. When I'd finished consigning the leftovers to containers in the refrigerator, he'd stretched himself on the mauve sofa, snoring.

My nerves jumpy, the gloom of his emotional upheaval weighed on my shoulders like a yoke. I skipped my regular sitcoms and the late news, sacking out in the same room where I'd been born - but not on the same bed, of course! Unlike some aging sections of the city, which had deteriorated as factories closed and opportunities for skilled laborers declined, this neighborhood had remained stable

and safe; leaving a ground floor casement open to catch the cool spring breeze posed no danger.

My dreamless slumber extended beyond midnight, when I sensed something amiss - more than a fight among stray cats audible through the window. My eyes blinked as I regained consciousness, an ominous figure hovering above me.

On reflex, I bolted upright. "What the hell..."

Jeremy, green orbs gleaming in the dimness, snapped, "Where am I?"

Unmistakably agitated, his fists clenched and unclenched. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought him an athlete waiting for the starting pistol at a track and field competition. He presented a healthier facade than mere hours ago: color restored to his cheeks, squared shoulders, erect bearing.

"Oh, shit," slipped out before I could bite my tongue.

He'd fluctuated from profound depression to manic intensity - an anticipated cycle of his ailment - compounded by being in unfamiliar surroundings.

His fidgeting convinced me he couldn't be still discussing his plight. I grabbed a grey hoodie off the footstool, pulled it over my tangled hair and slid into my sandals. Who would care that I wore plaid pajama bottoms in public at this hour?

"Let's go for a walk."

Keeping pace with him as we covered the distance to the park taxed my lungs, and urging him to reduce his voice's volume involved futile warnings about those who would be rising early for work and school. We traversed asphalt-paved paths six times before he was satisfied with my explanation of what had transpired since his arrival.

"Where's my watch?" he snarled, interrupting my narrative.

"At The Emporium."

"Why?"

"You sold it to me."

His raucous laugh reverberated between the trees. "Why would I be stupid enough to part with something I just bought..."

Barely had I touched his arm, than a jolt of elation ripped through me, mimicking his mania. My heart thumped in my chest, breaths rapid and shallow.

He brushed off my fingers with a violence that surpassed menacing.

I croaked, "You've... been... having an episode..."

"Oh, that again!" his laughter persisted. "What a load of horse manure."

A bipolar individual who isn't cognizant of the illness... my brain screamed, "Run for your life!"

“You have a car, correct?” came the next question.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll pay you to drive me home.”

“To Connecticut?” I, at least, had the wherewithal to not add, “Are you crazy?”

“Money is no object.”

“I can imagine.” Trying to slow my pulse, I inhaled cautiously. “There’s a rental agency downtown, or you can fly from the airport...”

“I... don’t seem to have my credit cards with me.” An abrupt shift in topic. “I need some decent clothes.”

“We’ll... take care of all that come daylight,” I tried to assure him. “There must be someone you can phone...”

“Who’d believe this outlandish tale?” he mocked. “If the papers should get wind of it, and plaster it on the front page...”

Jeremy whipped toward me and clutched my arms in iron vices. “Let’s go for a ride.”

His failure to stay on track equated to a pinball machine, the steel orb bouncing between rubber bumpers. He strode toward the house; I had to jog to catch him - and I don’t have the knees for any kind of speed.

He’d raised the garage door by the time I panted to a halt. His position on the driver’s side indicated his plan to take the wheel.

“Oh, no, buddy,” I objected. “This is my treasure, and no one drives it but me.”

A flicker behind his eyes preceded him circling the vehicle and flopping on the passenger seat. I revved the engine, and the corners of his mouth twitched in a momentary expression of pleasure.

“How fast does she go?”

“I’ve pegged the speedometer once or twice.”

“Don’t waste all that power...”

“Where do you want to go... besides home?”

“I’m hungry.”

He resented my grunt. “There’s plenty of food in the ‘fridge,” I announced.

“Gone. All gone.”

Consulting the dashboard clock, I was dismayed to read 4:45. A few of the fast food restaurants would be opening on the hour...

We had time to hit the country road where I liked to let the Mustang run free.

Jeremy beamed as we topped 120 miles per hour along that eight mile stretch. His level of energy nearly matched that of the engine, as if united by some ethereal bond.

When I slowed for the T-stop and made a U-turn, he demanded, "Again!" We'd darted past 90 going the opposite direction before he hollered, "Stop!"

Both feet on the brake pedal, I thought he'd seen a deer, elk or an opossum veering toward the pavement.

Seatbelts can be a true blessing, because neither of our heads went through the windshield.

"What?" I hissed, gaping at him.

Sliding his arm around my waist, he tugged me across the shifter and kissed me with a fervor to which I hadn't been subjected since college.

Minutes elapsed before I regrouped and loosed myself from his embrace though, I admit, my entire body tingled from the awkward fumbling as I adjusted my hoodie and restarted the engine.

We cruised into McDonald's drive-thru, and Jeremy ordered three breakfast combos - for himself. He spread the lot on the kitchen table once we got home, shunning proper manners as he devoured the English muffin sandwiches, croissants, hash browns and containers of orange juice.

"You have a phone?" he prodded as I collected the empty wrappers.

"Sure."

"Let me have it."

"Who are you going to call?"

"Whoever answers."

Another red flag: in this mode, Jeremy understood his quandary, and that friends and relations might disregard his summons - due to his aberrant behavior, or his sense of entitlement? I pondered.

Unable to recollect even one number saved on the device he'd left on the foyer table of a mansion he described as having 15 bedrooms and 17 baths, I opened my laptop and allowed him to type search parameters.

Finally, he located a toll-free listing for his father's investment firm and punched the tiny keypad with quivering digits.

The subsequent conversation smacked of the ludicrous; I heard it all on speaker mode, since his agitation made it impossible for him to retain a grip on the case.

A switchboard attendant refused to connect him to the executive suite, even after he'd identified himself. Frustration heightened the sharpness of his baritone; he signaled me closer.

"Tell this bitch who I am!" he seethed.

My customer service background kicked in, knowing his efforts might be foiled if he insulted the woman who was trying to be polite yet resolute. My right hand clamped on his shoulder, not yielding to his resistance.

"Calm down, Jeremy. Rudeness will get you nowhere." Into the phone, I spoke evenly, sharing the facts of how the thirty-something Petersen had wound up in the Midwest. The tipping point was my mention of the gold watch.

"His father thought it had been stolen..." remarked the operator.

"No. It's here. But he doesn't have his credit cards, so he can't arrange a mode of travel back east," I concluded.

"Hold, please."

Another female picked up the line, then transferred it to a gruff bass, who claimed to have filed a missing persons report ten days earlier.

A corporate jet would be airborne within the hour, I was advised, estimated to land locally at noon.

That didn't satisfy Jeremy. "I want to go to California. I want you to come with me. We can buy a place in Malibu and have a fantastic life together."

"My life is here, and I have no plans to change a thing."

Three hours is a long, long time when a mentally ill man is fixated on a certain outcome. Rather than fight him verbally, or physically - when he outweighed me by 40 pounds - I complied with his demands for coffee and sandwiches, straightening every picture to precise specifications using my father's old level, and more. When I crawled from bed, I left him a sobbing, broken shell, my own well-being a shambles.

He'd spent his adrenaline on me, reverting in that short span to an all-consuming depression.

Jeremy refused to let me transport him to the airport, opting for a taxi. I trusted him - a bad choice - and when my cell blared the *1812 Overture* just before 4:00 pm, I learned the Cessna had returned to New York without him.

The pilot had not been supplied my address - I hadn't given it to the elder Petersen during our exchange - and the only reason anyone had my cell number was due to caller ID. One of the city's police detectives, a former high school classmate, showed up at The Emporium with a list of questions, having swung by my now-empty bungalow.

Unable to assist him with his inquiry, he exited at the same moment the downtrodden Jeremy entered the store.

Complicit in his evasion by not alerting the sergeant, I resumed sorting through a box of game cartridges careless students had rummaged through seeking new distractions.

“I’m so sorry to bother you.” Though clad in the same attire, he resembled a deflated balloon. “You’re the only one I know around here.”

“You missed your flight home.”

“Home?”

A mantle clock chimed 4:30; I could still get him to the clinic before they closed, and his disposition would be up to them. I left the cash register unsecured and locked the doors, leading Jeremy to the car.

My bubble burst during the clinic’s admission process. Because I wasn’t Jeremy’s next-of-kin, no care could be authorized.

Energy depleted, I ushered him to the Mustang. Abandoning someone in dire straits didn’t coincide with my ethics.

Mid-week, his manic phase resumed, though he made no mention of New York or Connecticut. He focused completely on me, urging me to adopt more feminine attributes: dresses, designer stilettos, make-up and a new hair-do. I rejected his ideas, triggering his rage with terrifying consequences.

My arms and legs hadn’t borne bruises that large since I’d fallen out of a tree at age eight.

The following Monday, he begged me to marry him, refusing to take “No” for an answer.

Acquainted with most of the sitting county judges, I explained my bind to the courthouse staff; a faux license would be printed, a “wedding” held, but due to Jeremy’s mental instability, the marriage would be deemed invalid.

Being forewarned, a squad of police converged on the ceremony in the Ionic columned facility Tuesday afternoon, my would-be groom taken into custody. Why they hadn’t pursued the missing persons report more thoroughly, they didn’t explain. More to the point: why Jeremy’s father hadn’t come himself to fetch his son has never ceased puzzling me.

I can only suppose the ongoing stigma and scandal of mental illness would have adversely impacted the family’s reputation with their investors. They had the wealth, though - and probably the medical insurance - to afford the costs of Jeremy’s proper treatment, allowing him to potentially live a quasi-normal life.

A legal filing confined him on the hospital’s psychiatric ward as an indigent ward of the state. Once I made peace with the trauma I’d suffered from his manic

abuse - and the mysterious connection by which I mirrored his inner turmoil - I was his sole visitor. Medication sort of balanced his emotional swings but, perhaps, he'd been left untreated too long to achieve a full recovery. On good days, he greeted me lovingly as his "wife," with kisses and tender embraces. He would regale me with plans for his discharge, joining me at home...

Bad days for Jeremy left me drained, his anxiety transmitted to me with the merest sympathetic hug. He rambled about his fear of me divorcing him, and being unworthy of my love and forgiveness.

He escaped from the unit on a mid-December Saturday. Area churches, hoping to brighten the patients' holiday season, delivered home-baked goodies and decorations; he'd donned a set of clothes stolen from the staff lockers and blended in with carolers parading through the corridors.

He did have a marvelous tenor voice; as my uninvited guest, I'd heard him singing in the shower at intervals 'round the clock, and while haphazardly reorganizing The Emporium's storeroom when he'd accompanied me to work.

A rather bawdy rendition of *God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen* assailed my ears that midnight, and I regret with all my being that I hadn't locked the garage door after settling in for a quiet winter's evening.

Jeremy accessed the Mustang, honking the horn at 4-second intervals.

Being a courteous neighbor, I leapt from bed to investigate.

He stood beside my pride and joy when I yanked wide the kitchen door.

"Let's go for a ride," he smirked.

My phone in the bedroom, I could not raise the alarm. He twirled my car keys on his index finger - he'd already been in the house.

At least, he respected my wishes regarding who was allowed to drive the Mustang. He surrendered the D-clip with an ardent kiss, almost dispelling my consternation. Then, with gentlemanly panache, he closed my door and hurried to the passenger side.

My only hope was to attract the attention of police on graveyard shift patrol. Rather than observe the speed limit within the city boundaries, I deliberately left rubber patches at traffic signals, and raced along the thoroughfares.

Wouldn't you know it: no luck.

They must've all been on break at the 24-hour diner.

Jeremy ignorant of the street layout, I veered through a subdivision, doubling back to the intersection nearest that establishment.

To my credit, it was the best patch of rubber I ever laid.

Ford Interceptors lagging behind, the Mustang shot down the country road like a bat out of hell, Jeremy oblivious to my ploy. He yelled for me to stop at the

same spot he'd done so on our first outing, again giving rein to his impulse to seduce me.

Multiple sets of flashing lights didn't preclude his lust. He defied an emphatic bass, augmented by a bullhorn, directing us to step out of the car with hands raised.

When I resorted to biting Jeremy's lip; he slapped me - hard - but I was able to manipulate the door handle and roll onto the gravel shoulder.

Two officers hustled to assist me, ambushed by my companion with a shout of, "Keep away from her! She's mine!"

The pair tussled to subdue Jeremy; the rookie, believing his safety threatened, fired six rounds into the older man's torso.

Astonished green eyes fixed on me, Jeremy's mouth twitched in that momentary grin, an entreating left hand thrust toward me...

I collapsed, to be informed in the hospital's emergency room that I'd fainted and might have a concussion.

The anguish of my soul far exceeded the throbbing in my head. My physician sent me home after a 12-hour observation period, and deemed my physical recuperation complete - assorted bruises and contusions - after three weeks.

As if the emotional roller coaster to which Jeremy Petersen succumbed somehow infected me with an incurable virus, it required another two months of self-imposed isolation, curled in a fetal position on my bed, before I could even motivate myself to change out of my pajamas. Stuck in a veritable bottomless pit of cloying black tar, I'd eaten little, abandoned any attempts at personal hygiene, my phone battery dead. I became a shadow of my former vibrant personality.

Not until late April did the mania spark within me. The Emporium reopened; I rearranged the entire inventory, painted the walls, cleaned the windows, waxed the linoleum flooring. Dealing with customers left me terse, a bundle of frayed nerves.

Five years and counting, I plod along, day after day, managing the pawn shop and turning a tidy profit. Never sure whether despair and nightmares will plague me, or frenzy goad me to lose the last vestiges of self-control, I ache to salvage the sanity so brutally ripped from my being via some surreal affinity with a certifiable lunatic.

A more chilling notion: what if I'd been mildly bipolar my entire life, and interaction with Jeremy caused me to recognize the manifestations more clearly?

However my present dilemma evolved, those who previously praised me for infinite courage and a solicitude toward others now deride me as an anti-social hermit, a blight on the community.

They have no clue a certain expensive gold pocket watch, displayed in a locked glass case, symbolizes the fragile tightrope on which I must balance, avoiding risks, and not letting strangers get close to me in order to function with a degree of relative normality.

My cry from the depths has gone unheeded.

## Down the Rabbit Hole

The contents of a white legal pad on the professor's desk might have appeared to random students as no more than a series of doodles or disjointed thoughts.

Anything but.

"Publish or perish" continued to be the mantra of higher academia, and Deidre Nutsch needed to submit the topic for her next paper before week's end.

This, while struggling to update exam essay criteria for her graduate level philosophy courses.

She'd become fascinated in recent years by an enduring phenomenon, predating her own youth. From the earliest days of the printing press, in fact - and before, thanks to copyists in medieval monasteries and elsewhere - the attraction of texts featuring sex, violence and death drove the industry. With Thomas Edison's invention of moving pictures, stories featuring those aspects of humanity contributed to the corruption of modern society, despite the subsequent Hays Code and other attempts to limit what Hollywood could bring to the silver screen.

Blood, gore, nudity, raunchy humor filled multiplex theaters, despite the rating system.

Video gaming systems transformed passive spectators into active participants, virtually inflicting harm in their own living rooms.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century expanded the field with the proliferation of the internet, allowing anyone with a computer or smart phone to access materials promoting society's ills.

Entire industries amassed huge profits by pandering to the demand of warped minds.

Deidre could not subdue the gnawing question that screamed day and night in her brain: "Why?"

On quiet evenings in her studio apartment a half-mile from campus, the slender brunette lecturer deliberated how human beings, who rated slightly higher on the evolutionary scale than apes or many other mammals, continued to be hampered by such base instincts. One of the few "intelligent" species on the planet, they were supposed to rise above the cycle of birth, survival, procreation and death to engage in more meaningful pursuits.

Or, did any such exist on a realistic basis?

What defined "meaningful," after all? Deidre puzzled. Attaining power, with its sense of entitlement regarding sexual exploits and abusive control over

spouses, children, subordinates? Using coercion and violence to acquire and hoard wealth?

If, as the saying went, “You can’t take it with you” - material possessions and even thoughts fleeting - what was the point of life, at all?

She yearned to dig deeper into these mysteries, to venture down the rabbit hole and discover the origin of these flaws.

Yet, she feared the prospect.

Pausing while grading term papers on a chill April Thursday, Deidre stretched in her chair at the cluttered kitchenette table.

No, she decided.

She would approach this project from a unique angle.

A subject would be selected on a whim, and she would spend the summer months gathering data.

Sort of how St. Francis of Assisi used Christian scriptures to determine the way of life he and his early followers would observe - a story often told at university assemblies on his very Catholic campus of which the 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian was patron - she would mimic the technique.

Not that religion, faith or spirituality played a role in her life; she’d been raised by fervent evangelicals and rejected such nonsense before her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, preferring a practical atheist mindset.

This straightforward view, unencumbered by the guilt inflicted on the masses via rabid clergy and skewed doctrine, freed Deidre to view human beings as equals, each worthy of respect regardless of their circumstances. She felt no need to judge, though she longed to comprehend their foibles.

Arriving for work Friday morning, briefcase overstuffed with assignments to be distributed during class, hazel eyes glimpsed a full-color glossy news magazine on a table in the lobby. It traveled to her office bent in twain and stuffed in the back pocket of her stone-washed jeans.

She inserted a flash drive into the laptop on her walnut desk and printed six pages of grades, posting them on a cork board in the corridor. Term papers were unceremoniously dumped on a folding table inside the auditorium door.

A knot in her stomach caused her to postpone making use of the weekly magazine until the lunch hour. She placed no trust in concepts of “fate” or “destiny” - and could always change the method of choosing her guinea pig, except that integrity spurred her to stick with her plan and maintain absolute objectivity.

Deidre - not through any personal obsessive compulsion or sense of ritual - laid the magazine, back cover facing up, exactly in the middle of the green blotter. She’d wheeled the black button-leather chair against the wall, standing above this

faux-altar like a primitive priestess. Three deep, prolonged breaths with her eyes closed preceded rifling the periodical's pages and thumping her right index finger atop the exposed section.

When she looked down, laughter burst from her throat.

The article's title: "Impact of Being on the Sexy 100 List."

Brown eyes peered up at her: Scottish actor John McLeod.

"Shit."

She tossed the magazine in a wicker trash basket after scanning the 12 point font - that referenced McLeod's inclusion in the "Top Ten Nicest Celebrities" poll - and, sinking onto the chair, missed the cushion and slammed on the plastic mat meant to protect a worn, utilitarian grey carpet.

A harsher expletive escaped her lips just as the dean cracked the door and poked his head through the gap.

"Dee, are you okay?" he queried, bolting toward her and offering his arm.

She accepted the gesture, rising with a sheepish smirk. "Damned chair rolled away from me."

"You should head over to the infirmary to be checked."

"No need."

"It could wind up a worker's comp issue, if you hurt your tail bone, or broke something."

"Thanks, Bob." She muttered a curse as she jerked the chair forward and gingerly settled on it. "Did you need something?"

"Just double checking you're coming to graduation on Sunday."

Deidre bit her tongue, tasting blood. She'd missed the university's commencement exercises for two years, seeing no sense in all the pomp and circumstance. With one of her own students joining honorees on the dias as valedictorian, though, she would be expected front and center.

That could be a research paper all its own: the distorted emphasis placed on higher educational degrees.

She'd write it in the run-up to her retirement, two or three decades hence - because such an exposé would definitely result in her termination.

"I'll be there."

"Great." He reversed course. "If you're in pain later today, be sure to let the doctors have a look."

"Will do."

The door closed, and she managed a chuckle. If she fell asleep during the speeches, Bob would be mortified - and she wouldn't care one whit.

She snatched the phone off its cradle and punched numbers on the keypad.

“City desk,” came a gravelly contralto over the line. “Featherstone.”

“Tess, it’s Dee.”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“I need everything you’ve got on John McLeod.”

A tobacco-induced cough. “Huh?”

“McLeod, the Scot. I need his vital statistics, upcoming in-person appearances...”

“You gone fangirl on me, kid?” quipped the news editor.

“It’s a research paper.”

“Don’t pull my leg.”

“Honest, Tess.” A gagging sound forced Deidre to hold the instrument away from her ear. “Damn, woman!”

“Good thing you never took up smoking,” rumbled Tess. “I’ve got another call on hold. I’ll get back to you, okay?”

“Before Monday, if possible.”

“Not in any hurry, are you?”

Deidre could not mistake the sarcasm. She drawled, “We’ll talk soon.”

“Right.”

Shoving the phone aside, she typed parameters in the laptop’s search engine. More than 1,750 pages of links and 10,000 photos confirmed John McLeod - a 40-ish, long, tall drink of water - had earned quite the reputation as a sex object, playing romantic leads, villains, psychotics, frustrated husbands and gender fluid roles.

The married father of five was currently in rehearsal for a revival of *Macbeth* on Broadway, with a new movie releasing over Memorial Day, and a television series premiering in time for the May sweeps, eliminating the need for Deidre to travel across the Atlantic.

She could gather the statistics she needed in New York City.

“You’re out of your stinkin’ mind!” Tess practically bellowed into her cell phone Saturday afternoon. “Do you know how much you’ll spend living in the Big Apple for two months?”

“Not a problem.” A tense pause before Deidre continued, “But it would help if you knew someone...”

“With a spare bedroom?”

“A vacant sofa would work. I don’t mind couch surfing.”

The editor hissed through clenched teeth. “And you just plan to follow McLeod around town like a puppy, and hope he doesn’t report you to the cops as a stalker?”

“I can be discreet, for Christ’s sake. If I... tell him what I’m doing, it’ll change his behavior and invalidate the observations.”

“Or, worse, he’ll refuse to cooperate.”

“Better to ask forgiveness than ask permission,” quoted the professor.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...”

Fortunately, Deidre had enough airline miles banked to cover a first class flight to JFK International the following Tuesday. She hopped a train to Manhattan, where Tess’ college roommate met her at the station.

“I’m glad I teach high school,” Gina joked on the rear seat of a Yellow Cab. “From what Tess told me, the hoops you guys jump through to keep your jobs is ridiculous.”

“Between you and me, I agree. A person should have the option of teaching at the university level, or being a full-time researcher. No one should have to do both because of some antiquated code.”

“Who reads what you write, anyway?” asked the New York native.

“That’s anybody’s guess.”

A modest two bedroom apartment would suffice for Deidre’s needs, and Gina benefitted by having someone to cover half the rent while her regular roommate was studying in Paris for the summer. The visitor dumped the contents of her single bag into a three-drawer chest, leaving her blue tie-dye fedora on a hook behind the door.

Taking a day to adjust her internal clock, Deidre struck out early Thursday to explore Central Park before heading to the Ed Sullivan Theater, where a taping of Late Night was scheduled for that evening. She had tucked a digital recorder in the pocket of her green windbreaker, to capture both the general clamor and individual interviews: concrete evidence of the frenzy’s roots.

If she managed to locate a decent vantage point, she could also shoot video of the throng with her phone.

A massive crowd of females blocked the stage entrance well before 2:00. Security guards kept the peace and, at the appointed hour, cleared a path for black stretch limousines delivering the guests - among them John McLeod.

Chants and screams of, “I love you, John!” nearly deafened Deidre, despite her perch above the fray on a metal fire escape. Her years playing soccer, then serving as assistant coach while a post-grad, had kept her fit, so she easily climbed across two dumpsters and scaled embedded lengths of barbed wire to access the emergency stairs.

All she could see of McLeod: his weirdly styled bronzed head as he emerged from the vehicle. He was instantly mobbed and, considerately, inched

toward the building, signing autographs and pausing for selfies. His handlers lost patience, finally tugging him inside against his will.

Few fans exited the alley, giving Deidre an opportunity to mingle and pose plenty of questions. Perhaps due to the adrenaline rush, or their youth, many could not supply a logical reply to her inquiry about their attraction to this ordinary man.

“I just want to hug him,” was a frequent statement, along with, “He’s so handsome!”

When she mentioned the violent characters he sometimes portrayed, they discounted her theory that his authenticity in abusing women, or committing murder on screen might inspire other unbalanced souls to perform copycat crimes.

One college freshman she drew aside explained, even though she had a steady boyfriend, he didn’t hold a candle to McLeod.

Fantasizing about the unattainable, seeking absolute perfection - fairly common pastimes for centuries - seemed preferable to reality for these... fanatics.

Three hours elapsed before the security detail emerged from the massive structure and the limos reappeared. The crush of bodies was parted like the Red Sea, but that didn’t stop them from surrounding McLeod, pens waving like flags.

This time, Deidre was caught in the midst of the action. She retreated to the wall, mounting a stack of bricks - possibly being used to repair damage to the edifice from overzealous enthusiasts. Again, she could just glimpse the actor’s crown, bobbing back and forth on a trek more hazardous than climbing Everest.

A young woman in a lime green spaghetti strap top pitched toward her, copious tears of joy blinding her. The left strap hanging loose over her arm, being in close proximity to McLeod had sent her into hysterics. The figure, black hair dyed to match the shirt - or, vice versa - swooned and would have been trampled had not Deidre leapt down and dragged her to safety.

The girl’s lungs heaved as she hyperventilated. Deidre glanced around for a paper bag among the trash that littered the alley. One presumably environmentally conscious fan had a fast food sack folded and tucked in the pocket of her spandex shorts; the professor snatched it without receiving so much as a reproving glance.

She shook it open and covered a thickly lipsticked mouth, encouraging the girl to breathe slowly.

A short distance away, shrieks arose when another female fainted, hitting the asphalt with a thud. As a cadre of friends stooped to assist her, Deidre raised her head to determine the best escape route. McLeod, taller than the twits jockeying for his attention, simultaneously glanced toward the fracas.

Their eyes met for a scant second.

Frustrated by the debacle, guards hustled him to the limousine.

Most of the mob accompanied the vehicle to the street, leaving Deidre and her unwitting charge to recover their wits in relative peace.

The researcher squatted beside the younger woman. "Are you all right?" Blue orbs, still moist, were focused elsewhere. "Is it smeared?" she squeaked. "Did they smear it?"

"Smear what?"

She angled her shoulder toward Deidre. "The autograph!"

The woman's jaw gaped at the illegible signature scrawled across that bare shoulder; she swallowed hard. "No, it's fine."

"Oh, thank God. Thank God!"

"You know that's a permanent marker."

The girl scowled. "Of course! I came all the way from Florida for it!"

"Why?"

"A friend of mine is going to make it into a tattoo."

Deidre mused over the insanity of risking life and limb for such nonsense. "C'mon, I'll buy you something to drink. You need..."

The girl rose. "I'm fine. Thanks for your help."

She flounced away like the winner of a multi-million dollar lottery.

Deidre sank on the bricks, exhausted, as a maintenance crew paraded from the building with push brooms and a rolling bin to clear away massive amounts of debris.

She approached a stocky male with close-cropped blond hair. "Excuse me..."

"Sorry, missy, I don't know nothin'."

"I'm... not... Look, is anyone still inside?"

"They're shutting down for the night."

"Thanks."

Deidre slipped through the gap of the propped-open door before the worker could stop her. She stepped into the gloom and groped her way forward.

A technician replacing bulbs in an emergency light fixture fielded her inquiry by pointing toward the production booth. Deidre stormed in that direction, nearly colliding with a casually dressed trio.

"Who let you in?" demanded the tallest of the three.

"No one. My name is Deidre Nutsch..."

"I don't care who you are. You won't find any souvenirs to sell on Ebay here."

The second man made a grab for her arm; she dodged. "Do you know that two people nearly died outside a few minutes ago?"

“That’s none of our business.”

“Bullshit!” She planted her feet, halting their egress. “I’m on the faculty of a prominent Midwestern university, where we, at least, assign someone to offer first aid at any event where more than fifty people gather.”

The short, wiry, white-haired producer brushed her aside. “Nice to know, but we’re not liable for any injuries sustained beyond these walls.”

“What about human decency?” she shouted after them.

The trio whirled in unison. “We don’t authorize them to behave like fools,” spat the producer. “They do so of their own volition.”

They vanished into the bowels of the theater as she grumbled, “Heartless bastards.”

Another point to raise in her paper: failure of event staff to protect the deluded and vulnerable from their own reckless enthusiasm.

Deidre trudged to Gina’s apartment, ready for sleep. Another early morning awaited her; McLeod would be reading children’s books at the New York Public Library.

Oddly enough, security at that prestigious location boasted better organization than the previous evening. Those wishing to enter were required to scan an active library card. While Deidre did not possess those particular credentials, she flashed her university ID. Visiting faculty were granted unlimited privileges to the collections.

She stood at the back of the auditorium, where McLeod sat on a dias, hordes of children in a semi-circle around him. He made the stories come alive with his rich Scottish burr, altering his pitch to create the characters’ voices.

Afterward, parents converged to express their appreciation - and obtain autographs - in a dignified manner. McLeod glanced up as he scribbled; Deidre’s tie-dyed fedora caught his eye.

He didn’t avoid more rabid fans, either, who loitered on the sidewalk when he made his exit at 11:45.

Deidre sat on the library’s renowned steps, filming clips of the commotion, until the chauffeur merged with traffic at 1:15. Her befuddled brain could not justify how people could waste the better part of a day in this fashion.

Another facet she’d need to investigate: how these fans knew where the object of their affections could be found at any specific moment. She had Tess Featherstone, cherished high school classmate and intrepid newswoman with infinite connections in every field, to pass along his daily schedule. These fans, however... they were strangers to each other, yet up-to-date information was transmitted between them, almost on a telepathic level.

But, Deidre didn't use social media. Her cell phone was a phone; she rarely sent texts, irritated by the small keyboard, or used the camera for photos or video.

She couldn't deny seeing many in the crowds typing frantically on these devices - had they organized their own "secret network" to keep McLeod under constant surveillance?

She jotted "whereabouts" in a spiral bound pocket notebook.

Rehearsals for *Macbeth* proved an excellent example of her point. Deidre actually enjoyed patronizing the trendy coffee shop across the street from the theater, monitoring comings and goings. Someone had to be on duty outside the hotel where McLeod lodged, to notify his groupies of the exact moment he departed, and his ETA at his destination.

An inside job, perhaps? A fangirl among the housekeepers?

Whatever the source, females from teens to 50s awaited him at the stage door, morning and evening.

Making the rounds of early morning news shows the third week Deidre spent in New York, McLeod encountered the early birds: women in business suits, anxious for a glimpse of him en route to punch the clock. They ranged from lawyers to shop clerks, waitresses to government employees.

A network studio, situated on the ground floor of a high rise, permitted passersby to peer at the live broadcast through tall windows. Two score had their noses pressed against the glass that rainy Wednesday; Deidre, standing at the intersection, didn't envy the crew who had to wash off the greasy prints day after day.

When the tussle erupted, she captured six tourists clawing at each other and yanking chunks of hair as they wrestled for a clear view of McLeod. A total of 18 were shackled and escorted to the nearest police precinct, bicycle patrol officers clearing the rest from the vicinity with orders not to return.

The program's anchors ignored the disturbance, as did their guest. When a commercial break paused the on-air discussion, McLeod swiveled toward the street, where Deidre and her singular fedora observed from a distance. He touched his tousled bronzed forelock in salute.

He must tire of this grind, Deidre pondered after that scuffle, sipping a cappuccino as droplets cascaded off the coffee shop's purple awning. Inclement weather, in fact, deterred less avid fans: getting soaked wasn't worth a soggy autograph, yet scores queued at the box office opposite to purchase tickets before the performances sold out.

She wasn't exactly startled when McLeod breezed inside at 9:30, throwing back the damp hood of his zippered grey sweatshirt and ordering a double shot of

espresso to go. Seeing him unencumbered by a cluster of frenzied women, the professor could properly register his height, a somewhat malnourished physique and uncombed, spiky hair.

At the pick-up counter, brown eyes scanned the establishment's sparse clientele and paused at the sight of her. He cracked a broad smile, thin upper lip curling over his gums to display straight, white teeth, and informally saluted her by raising two fingers to his temple.

She nodded in acknowledgment, as a dozen women draped in cheap slickers scurried through traffic, having recognized him while in line beneath the theatre's flickering marquee.

McLeod yanked his hood over his head and ducked out the back door as the barista activated an automatic door lock just long enough to give him a head start.

Deidre stifled a chuckle when the disappointed clique raged at the manager, who retorted that all customers were entitled to their privacy.

Most left in a huff, but five remained to fortify themselves with warm cups of customized brew. They sat at round tables near Deidre, who struck up a conversation and gleaned significant input about the fans' reasons for behaving like mindless idiots.

"Wouldn't you hit that, if you had the chance?" gushed a redhead.

Deidre queried, "What makes you think you'd ever have the chance?"

"Actors have affairs all the time. Getting noticed is half the battle..."

That women still nurtured an obsolete notion of being fulfilled in life by having sex with a desirable partner made Deidre almost physically ill.

"What about his intelligence? His talent as an actor?"

A buxom 20-something plumped her breasts within her crop-top. "A nice bonus, but not essential."

Alone in the corner, a mousy creature, grey streaks interspersed with a waist-long ebony braid, hunched timidly over her latte. Deidre'd had enough of the... nymphomaniacs; she left her chair to chat with this solitary.

Who abruptly shot off her seat and ducked out the side door, leaving a half-full cup behind.

The others migrated toward the street, as well.

Good riddance.

"How's the research going?" prodded Gina that evening over a dinner of frozen pizza and beer.

"It's really bizarre how people become fixated on a certain personality, for a specific reason. And the media plays into those fixations and profits by them."

“You mean, the fan magazines?”

“That, the tabloids, the internet...” She bit into dry crust sprinkled with cheese and sausage. “Incredibly talented, considerate people are objectified...”

“Worse when it’s a convicted serial killer, receiving letters from women desperate to marry them before their lethal execution.”

Deidre’s hazel eyes widened. “How do you know...”

“I had a crazy aunt who...”

“Really?”

“She’d been abused as a child, and believed her only value lay in being victimized.”

“Low self-esteem could be a big part of this whole trend. Unless you’re noticed by someone important, you’re worthless.”

Gina smirked. “Could be.”

“In that case, there must be a huge percentage of women with low self-esteem out there.”

“You ain’t kiddin’.”

Before bed, Deidre reviewed her digital folder of photos, videos and recordings, as well as hand-written notes filling three legal pads. Already mid-July, she decided to leave for home on Sunday.

Thursday would be McLeod’s final dress rehearsal for *Macbeth*, and Deidre was curious to see how his fans reacted to the “night shift.” Over the course of weeks, she’d begun to recognize certain faces, acquainting herself with them and mining them for genuine gold perspectives. A few took advantage of McLeod’s obliging nature to acquire dozens of autographs - on t-shirts, magazines, photographs - making a comfortable living selling them online.

This ulterior motive, though, did not stop them from aching to get him alone for five minutes of intense... horizontal gymnastics.

She’d napped through the afternoon, arriving at her duty post in the coffee shop at 5:00 pm. The baristas knew her on sight, and a double shot of espresso jolted her into full consciousness as the cast trickled in by car, taxi, bus, or on foot.

McLeod arrived at 6:30, his loyal congregation preceding him by ten minutes. Deidre had tracked the information leak to his hotel, thanks to a teenager who reveled in divulging secrets. The evening concierge had created an app so, when the actor rang for his car, the alert reached everyone who had downloaded the software to their phone.

Deidre saw no harm in this, really, except the enterprising hack disseminated apps for no fewer than 80 celebrities, and readily accepted “tips” from those grateful to be able to hound their favorites while in Manhattan.

The dress rehearsal ran long, though theater standards usually required the show to progress straight through, with notes shared after the curtain. Midnight at the stage door harkened back to the Late Show disaster, bodies crammed together like sardines in a can.

Deidre waded in as minor players departed. Deft maneuvering scored her a spot three rows from the steps, beside the timid, middle-aged gal who'd fled the coffee shop that rainy day.

A forward surge when McLeod crossed the threshold jostled her hat; she crouched to retrieve it, choking as she glimpsed the pistol.

Reflexes, sympathy... Deidre couldn't pin down what prompted her to lunge toward the actor a split second before the shot reverberated between the buildings.

The bullet ripped through her left shoulder - just about the spot where McLeod had signed his name for the girl who'd hyperventilated weeks earlier. Propelled into an unyielding multitude, she slid to the pavement like a snail's slime trail.

Semi-conscious, the commotion reached her eyes and ears in a vague jumble as irate women subdued the would-be assassin. McLeod was spirited inside by the doorman, police summoned.

A sizable puddle of her blood stained the cement before an ambulance trundled along the alley. The throng had been dispersed, leaving her to stare between brick bulkheads at a narrow strip of stars... and John McLeod.

Deidre attempted to raise herself on her right elbow; the actor eased her back onto the stickiness.

"Be still," he muttered with that delightful Scottish burr. "Help is on the way."

"What..."

"You saved m' life, and I'll be forever in your debt." He tugged a phone from his jeans. "Is there anyone I should ring?"

Her mouth dry, she couldn't even whisper. "I..."

Paramedics interrupted the exchange, performing a cursory examination and applying thick gauze to the wound before lifting her onto a gurney for transport.

A summary argument ensued when McLeod mounted the ambulance's running board.

"If you're not immediate family, you can't..." barked the medic.

He snapped, "If not for her, it would be me in there."

The vehicle raced to the hospital, sirens blaring. McLeod clutched Deidre's hand with twig-like long fingers as an intravenous needle was inserted in her other arm.

"You've been watchin' over me the past couple months," he stated.

She gasped, "I've been watching you or, rather, your fans."

"You knew somethin' was goin' to happen?"

"Research for an academic paper."

He flashed that singular smile, which eased her anguish. "Never thought I'd rate a mention in *that* kind of publication."

Weakness overwhelmed her; she fainted.

She awoke in a curtained cubicle, air scented by disinfectant. McLeod sat on a molded plastic chair next to the bed, half-dozing.

"What..." she croaked.

"They took you directly to surgery and removed the bullet," he explained. "Every little thing is gonna be all right."

"Thanks... for staying with me."

"My pleasure." He rose. "Besides, I don't know your name."

"Deidre... Nutsch."

"I want you to know, Deidre: anything I can do for you, all you need to do is ask."

Hazel eyes glanced around the space. "Where's... my stuff?"

"It's safe. A recorder, your phone, keys and wallet..."

She sighed in relief. "When I'm... feeling better, may I interview you?"

He tucked a slip in her hand. "That's my private number. Ring me anytime."

Lingering effects of the anesthesia, possibly, but she started to laugh. That she should achieve, by accident, what hundreds of women would've given their teeth for tickled her funny bone. Her lungs rebelled at the strain, however and, suddenly, she couldn't breathe.

Nurses rushed in, securing an oxygen mask over her mouth. McLeod saluted her and withdrew.

Flitting in and out of consciousness, Deidre realized hours later she lay in a private room filled with vases of roses, carnations, wildflowers and potted plants.

She learned the morning papers - stacked on the rolling tray beside the bed - and televised news carried the incident as the lead story. Reporters must have trolled fans for cell phone video, and paid well for it, if those females had any mercenary inclinations. Blurred optics viewed a vertical recording on the wall-

mounted screen, her fedora evident among the bare heads, falling off, then the shot and chaos.

She fell asleep to the droning.

“Smells like a funeral parlor, eh?” remarked McLeod from a maroon naugahyde armchair when her eyelids fluttered open well after noon. A gift basket from the coffee shop had been added to the tray; he warmed his palms on a cup bearing the logo.

“Christ, who...”

“My fans and, now, yours.”

“Ecstatic you’re not dead?” she quipped groggily.

He nodded, hair so thick with product, not a strand moved.

“I hope you haven’t been here the whole...”

“I swung ‘round to check on you before heading to the theater.”

“Kind of early...”

“We need to tweak the blocking on the first act.”

From behind the raised half of the mattress, McLeod revealed a dozen red roses, and an envelope.

“I’ve discovered, when I don’t have a script in hand, it’s difficult to translate my emotions into words,” he declared. “Thank you, Deidre, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Don’t get mushy, John,” she smirked, plucking two box seat tickets to *Macbeth*’s premiere from the envelope. “Where’s my recorder?”

He extracted it from the night stand drawer; she activated the microphone.

“I know things have changed in the last twelve hours,” she grunted. “How do you feel, though, about the adoration of your fans?”

“When my career took off fifteen years ago and my popularity soared, I knew there were... consequences for my privacy. I never thought... anything like this would happen.”

“Have they interrogated the woman...”

“She’s catatonic, confined to the psychiatric wing of a facility across the river.”

“Then, we may never find out...”

“Correct.”

Deidre used controls on the railing to adjust the bed’s angle. “How do you feel about being on lists like the Sexy 100, or the Top Ten DILFs?”

“Before last night, I thought it a compliment, though I’m really only worried about what my wife thinks in that... regard.”

“Good for you.” She punched her pillows. “What about never being able to go anywhere on your own, knowing there are spies tracking your every move...”

McLeod bristled. “Eh?”

“You... weren’t aware?”

“Not at all. I thought it was... purely by chance.”

Deidre offered details of the intricate network that could pinpoint his location at all times.

He shuddered. “It’s as if I have a GPS tracker stuck to my shoe.”

“Precisely.”

That thin frame slumped on the armchair. “I’ve always tried to be considerate of the fans’... exuberance. I’ve spent hours...”

“I know. I saw a lot of it.”

“I hoped, if I respected them, they’d respect me.”

“They’re too wrapped up in their little fantasies to grasp the concept. Just like those who crave power don’t care if their underlings are homeless or starving, as long as they can stuff their pockets with ill-gotten gains.”

“Or, when society shuns those with lifestyles different from their accepted norms, who face discrimination and violence.”

“To be sure, people need to change - and the sooner, the better - but they can only change themselves.”

“They haven’t been raised to value and respect themselves, so they don’t value or respect others. I’ve tried to lend my voice to the cause...”

“And, what did it get you? Someone with mental illness, who should never own a gun, takes a shot at you.”

McLeod squeezed Deidre’s hand. “Recovering from this ordeal is gonna take... a long time.”

“For both of us. But, I’m nothing special, so I won’t have people smothering me with attention. You... may end up experiencing panic attacks in crowded situations, through no fault of your own.”

“God help me.” He exhaled slowly.

“If you believe he will, then he will.”

The night stand vibrated violently; McLeod passed Deidre her cell phone. Tess Featherstone had sent 16 text messages since 6:00 am, worried about her friend.

“Anything else you need?” inquired the actor.

“On your way out, tell the candy stripers to distribute these flowers to patients who have none.” She cradled the roses. “Except for these.”

McLeod bent to kiss her lightly on the lips. That brief contact sent chills up her spine, and she understood a fraction of the fans' mindset.

"Remember, if you ever need me - if you have more questions as you write your paper, say - you have my number."

She grinned. "Maybe we'll invite you to give next year's commencement speech, and award you an honorary degree."

"I'd like that."

Her fingers gripped his for a final second. "Stay grounded, John. Stay safe."

A nurse entered to take Deidre's blood pressure and change the bandage on her shoulder. McLeod raised his fingers to his temple in salute before the door closed.

Left alone, she phoned Tess - easier than trying to text with a bum arm.

"You'll be getting a hero's welcome when you fly in," pronounced the editor. "Everyone is so proud of you."

"I'd prefer not. Last thing I want to be is a celebrity, even on a small scale."

She couldn't quash the fervor that heralded her as "the woman who saved John McLeod's life," nonetheless.

Her manuscript, analyzing the links between low self-esteem and fantasies about celebrities, exacerbated by obsessions with sex, violence and death, appeared in a prominent philosophical journal the following February - praised but mostly unread.

Deidre submitted her resignation letter to the dean five minutes before the graduates processed into the fieldhouse for the May commencement. She was glad John McLeod had been unable to shuffle his schedule to be part of the ceremonies. Instead, he'd invited her to England, sponsoring her sabbatical at Oxford University.

To her amazement, students on that historic campus attended her lectures only to see the scar from the bullet intended for the actor.

Her quest down this rabbit hole rattled her to the core; she reconciled herself to the fact human beings would never evolve beyond their animal impulses.