

Twisted
21st Century Stories

by

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Part I

Philosophy of Success

The phenomenon originated in a small classroom at a community college in northern Indiana. Within two years, sheer numbers forced the administration to relocate it to the modest auditorium, and discussions were held whether to construct a whole new wing on the main building to accommodate the demand.

This new semester, a throng of students congregated in the corridors, until the first buzzer sounded. A lone, aging maintenance worker shuffled toward them, keys in hand. No more had he freed the deadbolt on the auditorium door, than the young people rushed inside to find the best seats.

“Hold on!” cried a voice within the unlit chamber.

The students froze in their tracks.

One by one, banks of fluorescent lights sizzled. On the podium at the foot of the ramped aisles stood a slender woman in t-shirt and jeans, with long brown hair and wire-rimmed spectacles. “If any of you plan to bring books, backpacks or computers into this room, think again,” she announced.

A gasp traveled from the front of the group, out the door through the remainder of the enrollees.

“That’s right, boys and girls. All electronic devices - your PDAs, cell phones, computers and mp3 players - will be consigned to the row of lockers at the back of the auditorium for the next 75 minutes. Anyone who thinks I won’t know something’s been smuggled into the seats is sadly mistaken, and will pay for that assumption by leaving the room - permanently.”

The students filed to the stacks of square metal cubicles. Whispers circulated and, in the midst of the confusion, the woman sat, meditation-style, on a wooden chair, watching.

By the time the second buzzer sounded, the auditorium seats were filled. Silence had enveloped the room, because a hundred pairs of young eyes had noticed the lone phrase written in chalk on a portable blackboard: Success is not about money.

Magda Ewell anticipated their reaction; that’s always how her Philosophy of Success class began.

She rose from her brief meditation. “For those of you who have heard about this course from previous students, and elected to sign up anyway: Welcome. Those of you who may have gotten the wrong impression five minutes ago, when I told you to ditch your backpacks and computers, that this is some kind of a basket-weaving class, you’ll soon learn you’re gravely mistaken.

“Over the next four months, you’ll use your mind in ways you never thought possible. Every bit of it will occur in this classroom. You may have tried to buy the required textbook at the same time you dropped a hefty sum for your biology and calculus hardbacks. The bookstore manager hates me, because I believe the only textbook you need is the life taking place on all sides.

“You won’t be able to download my syllabus from the college’s website, nor will you submit homework assignments via e-mail. All notes will be written long hand, and the journal you will eventually be responsible for keeping will be a spiral-bound notebook you can pick up at the dollar store.”

“If you’re serious about learning what I’m here to teach, you’ll have your butt in your seat two days a week, at this exact time. And you’ll find, in the end, you’ll have a more fulfilling life for the effort.”

A hand was raised in the center section.

“Yes?”

“Professor Ewell, isn’t that a subjective statement?” a fresh-faced boy asked.

Magda bristled. “Let’s get this straight right now: do not call me ‘Professor’. While I am considerably older than most of you, do not address me as ‘Miss’ or ‘Ms.’ Ewell. My name is Magda, and that’s the only salutation to which I will respond.

“And that serves as a perfect lead in to our first topic: the false nature of titles.”

If Magda seemed to rail at her students during that initial session, she had the experience to confirm her attitude. For three decades, she had witnessed the folly of humanity, and how their society-sanctioned quest for the false ideal of success did little but ruin their lives. Jobs as an accountant, restaurant manager, journalist and military electrician - among others - combined on a resumé impressive enough to earn her a position at the college, even without so much as an associates degree.

“The letters ‘B.A.’ or ‘Ph.D.’ behind your name on a fancy framed diploma hung on an office wall mean absolutely nothing in the greater scheme of life,” Magda explained. “Just read the newspaper or listen to the nightly broadcasts, and you’ll discover how many formally educated people betray their alma maters, preferring criminal activity ranging from minor embezzlement to murder.

“The same holds true for those who insist on being called ‘Doctor’, ‘Senator’, ‘Reverend’, ‘Officer’ and, yes, ‘Professor’. If you haven’t the self-worth to feel comfortable using your own name, then you’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Though they'd taken no notes, and received no homework assignment other than, "Think about it," at the end of the class, the students emerged from the auditorium, buzzing with enthusiasm. Like all the semesters before, and those which would come after, Magda had ignited a new flame in the youngsters' souls.

She would repeat the miracle three more times that day, and twice a week until December.

During the break, she walked across Cedar Street to the bakery opposite the campus. A lot of her energy was transmitted during her tirades, and she replenished it with a combination of donuts and - oddly - garlic toast.

Reaching for a bag of the crusty bread, Magda collided with a middle-aged man. She withdrew her hand and glanced up with an apology.

"My fault," he countered.

The pair stared at each other for a few moments. Like she read everyone she met, Magda took his measure immediately. Shaggy black hair with salt-and-pepper sideburns, steel gray eyes and well-healed scars on his left cheek and chin, he stood nose to nose with her.

"You're Magda Ewell, aren't you?" he ventured.

"How'd you know?"

"A lot of students hang around the bookshop after class. Days like today, you're the hot topic."

Magda queried, "Bookshop?"

"The Dusty Cover, about two blocks from here."

"I've never been there."

"I know."

"You own it?" Magda continued, crossing to pay for her purchases.

He followed. "No, I'm the manager - the sole employee, really. The owners live in Texas."

"If you want me to endorse your shop, I'm afraid I borrow whatever books I do read from the library." Her change and a paper sack in hand, Magda retraced her steps to the college. As she pulled on the handle of the glass main door, her new acquaintance restrained her arm.

"What do you *want*?" she snapped.

"Might I buy you a cup of coffee later, or lunch?"

"I don't drink coffee, and I have a faculty meeting at noon. And, don't try the line, 'Some other time, then.'"

He chuckled. "Fair enough. It's just that I've been curious about you for over a year now, and I'd like to know more."

"If you want to get to know me, sign up for my class."

She left him on the threshold.

And saw him again Thursday afternoon, seated at the rear of the auditorium during her last class of the day.

She didn't let his presence distract her. "How many of you have a father or mother - or both - whom you'd consider to be workaholics?" she polled the students.

Half raised their hands.

"My father worked for 30 years at the same company, and when deadlines loomed, he'd be in that building as much as 20 hours a day, seven days a week, until the job was done. We didn't see him at all for long stretches. I will tell you in no uncertain terms, that is no way to raise a family. We might have lived in a nice house, in what could be called a 'safe' neighborhood, had clothes and toys, and attended a prestigious private school, but there was this huge, gaping hole in my heart where my father should have been.

"If any of you ever plan to become parents - or may already be - remember these words. If your life revolves around a time clock, or a paycheck, or some silly deadline, you are *not* a success."

With that food for thought, the session concluded. Magda returned to her wooden chair and her meditation position as the students filed noisily from the room. When she opened her eyes to the silence, the bookshop manager remained in the shadows.

"Questions?" she prodded.

"No."

"Comments?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"Dinner."

"Sorry." Not having to gather any notes or books, Magda vanished through a side door.

He returned the next Tuesday, and she wondered if he had actually paid for the class. Checking with the registrar, she discovered Simon Ashton was auditing the class, courtesy of his friend, the dean of admissions.

In truth, Ashton proved more faithful in his attendance than the students, who missed only if they were desperately ill. He never flinched at the occasional swear words she used and, though he wore a dress shirt and slacks most days, didn't seem to object to her sweat shirt, jeans and sneakers.

"Clothes do not 'make the man', as they say," she lectured during one Tuesday class. "I've traveled extensively - most of the lower 48, and Hawaii,

Canada, Mexico, Europe, and Africa. I think I learned more about human foibles watching the animals during a photo safari in Kenya.

“The people there wear few clothes, but do more damage to the environment than the naked animals. And we think we’re intelligent. The animals have far more intelligence than we do.”

“That’s blasphemy!” shouted one female.

“No, my dear, the blasphemy is that human beings have destroyed the very planet on which we live - destroyed it not just for future generations, but for every living thing. Consider the behavior of animals. What do they do all day? They sleep, eat only as much as they need to survive, make use of natural shelter, and mate. They raise their offspring, sit in the shade, or stroll around the grassy fields, and don’t bother others unless provoked.

“Conversely, what do humans do? We overplant, overeat, overtax the natural resources, overproduce. Instead of being responsible for their actions, humans believe ambition, greed and materialism are acceptable, and ‘anything goes’ if it earns them a bigger salary, bigger house, or designer clothes.

“Fault can be found with the so-called environmentalists, too. They preach about lessening our ‘energy footprint’, using renewable sources of energy. For crying out loud, the corn supply in Indiana, instead of feeding animals and humans, is being trucked to ethanol plants! To lessen our energy footprint, people need to park their cars and walk, ride bikes, or horses!

“Other opportunists use human compulsions to amass vast fortunes for themselves. They invent gimmicks, either to help overweight people shed their fat, or ordinary people get everything they want out of life. Some use religious concepts, other use ‘the power of positive thinking’. What a load of crap.”

Magda joined in the wave of laughter. The kids were learning.

“Here’s your assignment: I want each of you, during the next week, to spend a minimum of 30 minutes talking to a complete stranger. What I mean by ‘complete stranger’ is someone who is not in any way affiliated with this school, and who you’ve never met before. I want you to find out as much as you can about their daily life, their job and, if they’re even willing to discuss it, their personal philosophy. Whether or not you tell them you’re doing it for a class assignment is up to you.

“Based on what you’ve been taught so far this semester, I want you to then write an essay on that individual’s flaws, and how they might improve their existence by applying the philosophy of success.”

Slipping out the side door to avoid the bookshop manager’s recurring invitation to dinner, Magda was waylaid after class by a news crew from the local

Fox affiliate. She'd had countless voicemail messages from them in recent months, requesting an interview, and now they were evidently trying more forthright methods.

"Miss Ewell," greeted a blond reporter with a huge, fuzzy microphone and cameraman at her elbow.

"Magda Ewell, yes."

"We'd like to talk with you about the success of your class."

"Sorry, no."

Edging along the wall of the narrow service corridor, Magda strode toward the lit green "Exit" sign. The news crew pursued her.

"Why won't you let us interview you, Miss Ewell? It's been said you're a genius..."

Magda refused to rise to the bait. Fortunately, the pair abandoned the chase in the college parking lot, when she slid behind the wheel of her red 1990 Honda Civic and sped away.

She sensed someone else following her, though, as she drove through rush hour traffic to her modest two-bedroom bungalow in what was politically termed a "poor neighborhood". Each time she glanced in the rear view mirror, she noticed the blue Mustang either directly behind her, or trying to conceal itself in a row of SUVs.

An impossible task: if Magda had a weakness, it was for the '70s era Mach series Fords, especially that darker blue. If it had been pitch dark, she would have known the shape of the headlights, just by touch.

When she braked in her driveway, the Mustang parked around the corner. She walked as far as the porch, then turned abruptly. Simon Ashton stood with the driver's door open, waiting.

He's persistent, she thought. Better to get it over and done...

"Come on in," she hollered.

A decided spring in his step puzzled her. He might've been athletic once, or was it merely anticipation?

The interior of the house was as stark as Magda's teaching style was blunt. The living room was populated with a battered green second-hand sofa and sheet-covered recliner, a small television and video player. The worn pine floor could've used a coat of varnish, if not wax.

Magda closed the door and spun on Ashton. "Well?"

"I've been getting to know you for five weeks."

"And?"

He grabbed her and kissed her. She didn't struggle, having long since rejected the games men and women play during relationships. If two people were attracted like a iron to a magnet, there was no need to buy trinkets, write poetry or spend evenings in polite conversation.

Built like a lion, Ashton's touch electrified Magda. Neither slept that night, nor were they exhausted the next morning. Invigorated would have been more appropriate.

Simon departed before breakfast, promising, "I'll be back."

The statement made Magda smile. Was it coincidence her next lecture dealt with the male-female dynamic?

"Some people believe they are successful if they are loved by others," she commented. "These erroneous ideals can run the gamut from being cherished by a group of friends, to the public adulation conferred on Hollywood celebrities. Whatever kind of love you may personally prefer, if your life revolves around it, you are *not* a success."

Magda left the podium, continuing to speak as she roamed the auditorium aisles.

"When it comes to interacting with other human beings, it's not about getting their attention, or having influence over them. 'Love' is not a 'many splendored thing', it is a fallacy. If any of you, ever again, look at someone and your first thought is, 'I could love that person,' I'll go back and change your grade to an 'F'. And I don't care if I find out about it ten years from now."

She paused beside one student, who quickly hid his hands.

"Cough it up, kiddo," Magda demanded.

The young man feigned innocence, unsuccessfully. Then, he passed Magda an open cell phone. She closed it, and tucked it in her hip pocket.

"You'll get it back after I've had the photos or video you took erased." She scanned the room. "I won't have my face and my words distorted on YouTube, or other internet sites." She faced the errant student. "Get out."

As she descended the aisle, he retrieved his backpack from a locker and left.

Class proceeded, as if nothing unusual had happened. "Interpersonal relationships, on the successful level, start with mutual respect. To backtrack a moment, respect starts with the self. If you cannot be honest with yourself, knowing who you are - based on the previous events of your life - then you cannot respect anyone else. You will find yourself one of the millions of addicts on the planet, be it addicted to drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, food, sex, or what have you.

“The sole purpose served by an addiction is to compensate for a lack in a person’s life - a lack of self-respect. Frankly, if you cannot look at yourself in the mirror each day and respect yourself - it doesn’t matter if you were sexually abused as a child, scored poorly on your SAT, or weren’t the star football player-slash-cheerleader at your high school - then you have a lot of work to do before you’ll ever be successful.

“When you decide to take responsibility for yourself and your actions, then you’re on the path to success. That means respecting your body enough to not abuse it with nicotine, beer, or the half-pound bacon cheeseburger at the greasy spoon down the street. It means respecting your mind enough to always be willing to learn. And it means respecting your soul enough to never set your faith in concrete, dictated by some man-made organized religion.”

A horrified muttering reached her ears from the top row.

“Put your bibles away, people!” she chided. “I’m not anti-Christian, or anti-anything. I am a proponent of individual fulfillment. And when another person tells you what to believe, or how to act - without letting you decide for yourself - that person has no respect for your intrinsic value as a human being.

“Back to the subject at hand: once you respect yourself, and understand your own value, you can respect others. When it comes to men and women, that means not putting on your best face just to impress someone. If you can’t tell a person to whom you’re attracted, ‘I want you,’ without getting your face slapped, then you should recognize that person has no self-respect. If you have to cajole them with gifts, subtle conversation, and statements of ‘I love you,’ or ‘I need you,’ then run, run, run in the opposite direction, because it’s a disaster in the making.

“Another disaster looms when someone tries to sink their claws into you, because they feel that’s the only way they can keep a hold on you. They will try to guilt you into remaining their friend, or their lover, gushing how you make them feel ‘whole’. Their self-esteem is so low, caused by a myriad of situations, they fear being alone.

“To be successful, you must never be afraid to be alone.”

Magda ended the class on that note, gathering the handwritten assignments and, once the auditorium emptied, tossing them in the trash basket.

“I saw that,” Ashton scolded.

“Does it shock you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

They drove in separate cars to Magda's house, but didn't get past the living room sofa before stripping off most of their clothes.

"You realize the ripple effect this class is having," Ashton muttered during a break in their passionate antics.

"My critics tell me I'm disrupting the established social order."

"You're nurturing a generation which may truly bring positive change to the world."

"That's the general idea." Magda brushed a strand of long brown hair off her face. "Is that why you're here? To bask in the limelight?"

"No."

"Good."

She pulled him on top of her and bit his earlobe.

"Ah, so you like it rough," he growled.

"Sometimes."

"You'd like me to hurt you?"

"Without pain, pleasure is an illusion."

And so it went. Twice a week, Magda lectured; twice a week, Ashton accompanied her home. One cloudy Thursday, Ashton convinced Magda to stop at The Dusty Cover en route to her house. It was her first time in the bookshop and, contrary to its name, there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere.

Magda browsed while Ashton checked the answering machine and returned a few calls. Besides shelves of used college texts, an impressive collection of obscure fiction occupied a former bedroom of the converted yellow brick bungalow.

"So, this is your domain?" she smirked when he hung up the phone.

"Six days a week."

"Always liked books, did you?"

"Hated 'em when I was a kid. When my grandfather died, though, I inherited his vast library. To be certain I didn't sell the first editions and rare volumes too cheap, I did a lot of research. Became an unintentional expert."

"Which got you this job?"

"Better than working for an accounting firm, or micromanaging an assembly line."

"What's your degree?"

"I'm a CPA with an MBA."

"A big waste of money, wasn't it?"

Ashton nodded. "I promised myself I'd never be so foolish again."

With a sly grin, he backed Magda against a ceiling-high rack of old comic books.

They never did make it to her house that evening.

These encounters did not become an expectation for the woman, in fact, she expected the relationship to end when the semester concluded in December. Since no final exam was required in her class, the last session would break all ties with her students, which is how she planned it. Those who tried to hang on, coming back to see her, hadn't learned the most important lesson.

Magda concluded every term with a vital message: "Live what you learn; live what you believe. The example of how you live will teach others more assuredly than any book you might be tempted to write, any monologue from a pulpit. All I've tried to do here is give you an outline for your future. Each of you has the opportunity to fill in the singular details. If you allow someone else to do it for you, you are *not* a success."

Ashton was buttoning his shirt late that night, sitting on the edge of the mattress while Magda dozed. "So, now you know everything," she mumbled.

"I know what I want."

"And what is that?"

"You."

She straightened. "Huh?"

"You and I are equals, Magda. When it comes to self-respect, neither of us is what you would call needy. We do what needs to be done, fulfilling our obligations at work, paying the bills, and enjoying what life has to offer the rest of the time.

"We respect each other, and understand each other. I won't interfere with what you're doing, and I don't foresee you interfering with me. We don't need some idiotic piece of paper issued by the state, or the blessing of some priest to stay together. And, if we grow tired of each other's company, we can go our separate ways without any regrets."

It was the first time in Magda's life someone so completely mirrored her own views. To have him around on a consistent basis would be a boon, after dealing with administration-induced headaches and those who sought to use her for their own aggrandizement.

She sealed the deal by twining her hand through his. "Come back to bed, then."

Vacation in Chicago

In almost every culture, philosophy or religion, an ever-present need exists for seekers to rely upon a wise guide during their journey of growth. An equally old concept enjoys broad circulation, whereby the teacher appears when the student exhibits sufficient preparation.

Or frustration.

The nightly national news reported increasingly poignant stories of financial panic, crimes motivated by desperation, and massive scale environmental devastation. As foreclosures and unemployment increased, and stocks plummeted, Dena Howard couldn't bring herself to worry. She rented a modest, furnished apartment in Fort Wayne, didn't own a car, and worked as a CPA for an accounting firm. She had little to lose if the bottom fell out of the economy.

A hurricane battered the Gulf Coast the August Saturday she left on her annual vacation; tanking up her Kawasaki 250 never cost more than fifteen dollars, anyway. As she sped northwest on U.S. 30, bound for Chicago, she looked forward to the new exhibits at the Museum of Science and Industry, Shedd Aquarium and Adler Planetarium.

Traffic flowed smoothly on the four-lane highway, despite an occasional stop light. Passing through Warsaw slowed her progress a bit, moreso when she noticed the 70s-era Volkswagen Beetle on the gravel shoulder near State Road 15, its engine smoking.

No cars stopped to help. The driver stood behind his vehicle, staring at the open hatch, watching hoses consumed by the blaze. Dena braked and lowered her kick stand. Removing her helmet, she shook loose short black curls, then pulled a mini fire extinguisher from one saddle bag and strode to the dying classic.

"Gas leak?" she ventured, spraying foam over the hot metal.

"Probably." A thick, veined hand ran through his brown mop. "And I just emptied my savings account to restore it."

"Ain't that the way. Murphy's Law strikes again."

He chuckled, a pleasant sound. "Thanks for playing fireman."

"No problem. It's not I was ever a Boy Scout, being prepared and all that. My last bike caught fire, and nearly toasted my feet." She set aside the canister and wiped her hands on leather chaps. "Where you headed?"

"Chicago. If I can get this thing towed."

“I’ll give you a lift up the road to make the arrangements. Once you’re done, if you want, I’m headed that direction.”

He studied her oval, serious mien. “Aren’t you afraid I might be a serial killer?”

“Driving that?”

Besides, she mused, he didn’t look like a criminal. A shade under six feet tall, his well-defined torso strained the black t-shirt bearing a photo of four armed Native Americans. The caption read, “Homeland Security, fighting terrorism since 1492.” His lean, tanned face boasted deeply-etched lines, a combination of age and laughter, she guessed. The color of his eyes couldn’t readily be determined, seeming to change from blue to gray to brown, depending on how the light struck him.

“Grab anything valuable, and let’s go,” she urged.

A backpack, a couple books and a Cubs ball cap accompanied him to the motorcycle after he secured the red compact as best he could.

Dena offered him a helmet.

“Must I?” he objected.

“No, but it saves having to scrub the bugs off your teeth at day’s end.”

“True.” He tugged the visor over his eyes. “By the way, I’m Jake Bailey.”

“Dena Howard.” They shook hands before she slung her leg over the seat. “A bit of Indian blood somewhere in your ancestry?”

He settled behind her. “My maternal great-grandfather was a Jicarilla Apache. My full name is Jacob Little Eagle Bailey.”

“A western tribe, weren’t they?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Mostly Potawatomi in northern Indiana.”

“Are you…”

“No, but I’ve been going to their yearly pow-wow up in Michigan the past few years. Nothing better than listening to the elders speak. So serene, so wise.”

“While many of the younger ones resent the curious white usurping their heritage.”

“I know. I’ve been trying so long to find…”

“The truth?” Jake finished when her voice faded.

“Exactly.”

“Then you’ll want to meet a friend of mine when we get to Chicago.”

Dena smirked, starting the engine. “At the Cubs game?”

“Where else? Everybody’s hoping they’ll go all the way this year.”

“My dad spent his life hoping. They never did.”

“Wait and see.”

Further conversation was pointless, with the wind filling their ears as the Kawasaki roared back toward Warsaw to locate a full-service gas station.

Even with the delay, they made Chicago by 1:00 PM. Wrigley Field, not one of Dena's original destinations, overflowed with baseball fans, given the Cubs' winning record since the All-Star break. The motorcycle squeezed easily into an awkward parking space three blocks from the historic park, facilitating the brief jog to the will-call ticket window.

Along the third base line, they found their seats just as the National Anthem began. They had to step past a wizened, Oriental elder, gnarled fingers resting on his heart in salute. Dena smiled at the patriotic image.

Cheers and applause accompanied the singer's prolonged, final note. From then on, havoc reigned.

Dena had never attended a live sporting event, and the spectacle astounded her. Jake swore at the home-plate umpire for bad calls, and shouted praise when the Cubs hit well, or made a double-play. Trying to communicate proved impossible, because of all the clamor, but between innings, he managed an introduction.

“Dena, this is Nathan Chang.”

The woman's head swiveled toward the older gentleman in the next seat. “Nathan?” she echoed dubiously.

“My mother went into labor after eating a Nathan's hot dog at Coney Island,” came the accented reply.

“Then, you were born in America?”

“And raised in China. My father had been on assignment at the United Nations, but chose to return to his native land to ensure my upbringing beyond... capitalist influences.” He snickered.

“Nathan spent ten years as a monk in the Shaolin temple in the Songshan Mountains,” explained Jake. “He doesn't teach, per se, but many visit his shop in Chinatown to...”

“Talk,” Chang concluded.

“What kind of shop?” queried Dena.

He replied, “I repair musical instruments.”

The discussion ended there, when the first curve ball of the fourth inning soared over the left field bleachers onto Waveland Avenue. Cries to replace the Cubs' current pitcher were met with inaction by the general manager, his confidence justified when the occupant of the mound struck out the next three batters.

Trips to the concession stand for beer and brats, and the infamous seventh inning stretch - "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" sung by Chicago's mayor on this particular day - preempted additional discourse between the trio. It took 45 minutes after the Cubs secured their victory with a grand-slam home run to reach the Kawasaki, where Chang attempted to take his leave.

"We're going to dinner, aren't we?" Jake protested.

"You have other plans..."

Dena corrected, "No, he doesn't. We're not..."

"This was my ride to the game, after my car died," explained Jake.

"Dinner is a go, as far as I'm concerned. The tough part will be finding a way back to Huntington in time for work on Monday."

"Your transportation home will take care of itself in good time," Chang predicted. "As for your chauffeur: we cannot exclude her from our meal, if she desires to grace us with her presence."

The city's museums already closed for the day, Dena accepted the invitation. Three riding the bike wouldn't work, and the prospect of leaving it unattended as night fell made the woman uncomfortable. Nathan drove Jake in his battered Honda Civic, while she followed them to the Loop.

Donatello's on State Street enjoyed a healthy business this Saturday night. Tables arranged in a series of angular rooms decorated with old world flare, however, allowed for privacy without having to shout over the din. As they considered the bill of fare, Dena tittered softly.

"What?" prompted Jake.

"This reminds me of those politically incorrect jokes. You know, ones about A priest, a rabbi and an imam flying to California. Ours would start, 'An Apache, a Chinese and a Jew walked into an Italian restaurant.'"

Chang smiled. "I sometimes think, if Confucius were alive today, he would be a comedian. They reflect the attitudes of the world with humor - and the prejudices."

"Comedy would have an entirely different face if people understood all humans are the same," affirmed Jake.

"All equally valuable, not the same," Dena noted. "I remember the motto of an organization which never quite got off the ground in Fort Wayne: 'Diversity within Community.' Nathan can probably attest how some musicians have more talent than others, and some of those who build the instruments can't play a note. Such differences make it possible to create everything from symphonies to jazz."

The elder's grin redoubled. "A quick mind coupled with beauty. You will be a treasure among those I call my friends."

Touched by the sincerity of his words, Dena raised the menu to hide her blush.

The lively exchange of ideas wound its way through the appetizer, salad and the main course of pasta and veal. By the time the last noodles had been cleared from the plates, none of the three had room for dessert.

“Will you stay the night at my home?” Nathan suggested.

Jake responded, “I’d planned on it.”

Dena consulted her wrist watch; her hotel reservation would have been canceled when she didn’t check in by 6:00. “Do you have enough space for both of us?”

“Plenty above the shop,” Nathan assured her.

Once again, the convoy traveled south to Chicago’s Chinatown. Though she visited the Windy City at least once a year, Dena had never spent time in this particular district. In the dark, the streets reminded her of old movies where a black-clad assassin wielding a sharp katana would leap from an alley and slice off the head of his victim.

Wedged between a bakery and a tailor’s on South Princeton Street, the bars on the front windows of Chang’s Music Shop proved the neighborhood lacked security. “I would not bother with such precautions, except for the priceless instruments in my care,” Nathan answered Dena’s unspoken question, unlocking the door at the base of a staircase leading to his second-floor dwelling. “Northwestern University would be very upset if their trumpets and clarinets were stolen or damaged.”

The steep flight led to another door, which opened on a spacious, comfortable living room. Dena had envisioned more... traditional furnishings, mildly surprised by the overstuffed sectional sofa, wall-mounted high definition television and leather recliner.

“When I can’t make it to the Cubs games, I watch them here,” beamed the owner. “Please, make yourselves at home. I have soda, juice or coffee...”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” refused Jake, flopping on the couch. “I didn’t realize how beat I am.”

Setting her helmet and backpack beside the polished end table, Dena also declined. “I should hit the sack, too.”

“The guest room is down the hall, on the left,” directed Nathan. “Right across from the bathroom.”

“Where will Jake sleep?” the woman puzzled.

Bailey yawned. “Right where I am, thank you.”

The thought of robbing Nathan’s close friend of his rightful bed agitated Dena. She started to protest; Nathan waved her into the kitchen.

“He even sleeps on the couch in his own apartment,” related the older man. “The studio is so tiny, he can barely fit that, a table, chair, and his television.”

“Then, he deserves a comfortable bed for a night or two.”

“To him, it doesn’t matter. He would rest in a wilderness clearing if he couldn’t find a hotel, or lay on the floor, having no choice - and it wouldn’t faze him a bit. He’s a very... well adjusted individual.”

And he was snoring.

Loud.

Dena peered through the kitchen doorway. “If he keeps that up, neither of us will get any sleep tonight.”

“If the sound disturbs you, just roll him onto his side.”

Did she detect a playful note in his voice, realizing how difficult it would be for someone of her limited size to maneuver nearly 200 pounds of limp flesh and bone?

An hour of tossing and turning, though, changed her mind about attempting the feat. She shuffled along the dim corridor, nearly tripping on an umbrella, and stubbing her big toe on the coffee table. Biting back expletives, she stuffed her hands beneath Jake’s torso and yanked.

He resisted, in the midst of a dream. She ducked his wildly swinging left fist, caught by his right elbow when he twisted to avoid an unseen punch. She reeled from the impact, and knocked over a jar-shaped table lamp, which shattered on the floor.

“Damn!” she swore.

Jake rolled off the sofa and raised his head, befuddled. “What the hell happened?”

Bending to retrieve shards of glass and plaster, Dena growled, “You snore.”

“And?”

She sank on the waxed wood; a tear trickled down her cheek. “I’m exhausted.”

Studying her tousled hair and hunched shoulders, Jake made the connection. Contrite, he reached toward her. “God, I’m sorry...”

“It’s not your fault,” she moaned. “If I had ear plugs, or knew how to remove your adenoids with a spoon...”

He guffawed outright, dispelling her doldrums. She squeezed his hand; he lifted her fingers to his lips.

Their eyes met, and she laid the broken lamp base on the table. “Look, the bed in there is big enough for both of us. With a couple pillows under your head, you might sleep more... quietly.”

“Good idea.”

They helped each other off the floor, and tip-toed past Nathan’s room. Their host found them sprawled on the queen-sized mattress when he rose at 7:00, wondering what they wanted for breakfast.

“This, not what I expected,” Nathan remarked.

Dena’s lids blinked open. Her brain initially digested the unfamiliar surroundings. Then, she noticed her arm slung around Jake’s waist, as he faced the wall. She bolted from beneath the sheets, her t-shirt and gym shorts fortunately intact.

“I... we...” she stammered at Nathan, accompanied by random gestures of helplessness.

“Do not concern yourself. Judging others by some outdated moral code is not my priority. More important that you slept well.”

“Once he stopped snoring, yes.”

“I am pleased. I’ll be cooking eggs and bacon this morning, if you care to join me.”

“Excellent.” She grabbed a robe from her backpack. “What about him?”

“Let him be. He’ll wake when his body is sufficiently rested.” Nathan led the way to the kitchen. “Besides, it will give us a chance to talk.”

“About what?”

“Who you are. What you seek.”

A challenge, if ever Dena heard one, which she might fail. Revealing her innermost thoughts came hard. Once too often, she’d been betrayed by someone considered a friend, and had learned the tough lesson of reserving her trust.

“Admirable,” Nathan commented following a period of silence. “Those who rush to answer seldom speak the truth, for they know it not.”

“The truth is what I seek, but it’s a very... subjective quest.”

“Indeed.”

“As for who I am... I... am.”

Nathan’s gray-tinted eyebrow twitched. “Do you meditate regularly?”

“No. Shutting down my brain is almost painful sometimes. So, I ignore the stream of ideas and... try to enjoy the moment.”

“Given there is no right or wrong method for meditation, you may actually be practicing a form of the art when you do so.”

Dena shrugged, pulling four slices of bread from the toaster and slathering them with butter.

“You are in your late thirties?” prodded Nathan.

“A common mistake. I’m 46.”

“In good health?”

"I think so. I'm not certain. I haven't seen a doctor in ten years. I won't pay to be a subject for experimentation."

They sat on opposite sides of a metal and laminate dinette table and served themselves from steaming platters.

"So much food," stated Dena.

"Not a bite will go to waste. Jake eats like a..."

"Horse?"

Nathan bowed his dark head slightly in affirmation.

Bare-chested, clad in cutoff sweats, Jake appeared then. "Good morning."

The pair, mouths full, mumbled a greeting in return.

"We *are* working out this morning, aren't we, Nathan?" queried Jake.

"Of course."

"Usually, you hold breakfast until we're done."

"I didn't feel it fair our new friend should starve until you woke," their host quipped.

"It's only 8:30."

"On a warm Sunday. Once the dishes are washed, we can enjoy a walk and stretch our muscles while the food is absorbed. I will work you twice as hard, after."

"What kind of work out?" Dena wondered.

Jake supplied, "Authentic Shaolin kung-fu."

The idea excited Dena. "May I watch?"

"You may join us, if you wish," said Nathan.

"I... don't know a thing about martial arts."

"Not necessary. To be in tune with your own body is the first step. The movements flow from within."

Chinatown by daylight: far less intimidating. Jake added a tank top to his sweat pants for their jaunt; Dena chose a polo shirt and jeans. Nathan's dress shirt and tan slacks seemed out of place, but suited him perfectly.

Having lived on Princeton Street for 20 years, the elder could tell humorous stories about his neighbors, friends and fellow business owners. The trio laughed incessantly during the two-mile trek, a workout in itself.

Nathan escorted his guests through the repair shop, well-lit by the plate glass windows facing east. Through a door which might have led to a store room, Dena instead entered an incredible temple-like chamber, wall sconces providing gentle illumination of the beige walls and faux-marble tiles.

"Take off your shoes," muttered Jake, jerking her backward.

"Oh, sorry."

Nathan chuckled, "It's not so much the room is sacred; I hate mopping floors."

"It's fantastic! More square footage than my entire apartment!"

"Room to move." Jake commenced a routine of lightning-fast kicks, punches and blocks which propelled him around the entire expanse.

"Is this why he visits you?" asked Dena.

"This, and the Cubs," replied Nathan. "When we met at Wrigley Field in 1984, the Cubs were playing the Padres for the National League Championship. He got drunk during the game, and was robbed by hoodlums on his way to his car. I witnessed the attack, and brought him here to recover from the beating. He told me of his Native American heritage and traveling to the New Mexico reservation where his great-grandfather had been raised. What he found there troubled him deeply. He began searching for some meaning in his own life, and our discussions helped him focus."

"This goes beyond discussion, in my opinion."

"The fruit of discussion. Words are inadequate; they must be translated into action. The ancient philosophies are manifest in the precise forms taught by the Shaolin - another type of meditation, integrating discipline of body and mind."

Dena's green eyes widened. "Wow."

"The forms are repeated, over and over through a course of years," Nathan continued. "They become as much a part of a person as breathing. Then, when they are executed, the mind is freed of the day-to-day turmoil, so it can concentrate on what's truly important."

"Which is?"

"Existence. Being. The connectedness of all life."

Nathan threw Jake a towel from a recessed closet when the latter ended his series of movements with a slight bow, left hand curled over his raised right fist. Perspiration dripped from his temples, sweats drenched. His eyes burned a brilliant blue.

At least, Dena now knew how her accidental companion stayed so fit.

She doubted her own ability to handle such training.

"Try it," Jake insisted, seating himself cross-legged on the floor.

"I'm... too old to begin."

"It is true, those who wish to be monks come to the temple young," acknowledged Nathan. "Age is just a number, though. You are only limited by your own fears."

Contemplating the idea momentarily, Dena straightened her spine. "All right."

Dance lessons in childhood enabled the woman to learn the choreographed movements. The session ran late into the afternoon; the trio lost track of time, skipping lunch entirely. The ringing phone penetrated the ceiling, finally disrupting their activities.

Nathan excused himself and climbed the rear stairs with amazing speed. Jake and Dena rested, mopping their brows with fresh towels.

"I feel like a kid again," the woman panted.

"Exhilarating, isn't it?"

"You've been doing this more than 20 years?"

"When I can. My apartment is too small to do more than basic forms. I'd love to have access to a school gym after hours, but I haven't been able to arrange anything. Going to the park early in the morning, I've been stopped by the cops, who think I'm some kind of child predator."

"I may have the same problem, when I get home," Dena admitted.

"You've got a whole week to enjoy.. this." Jake's arms seemed to embrace the room.

"I... can't stay all week. I had lots of plans, and to impose on Nathan's hospitality..."

"Whatever your plans, change them. You'll benefit more from a few days with him, than from any museum exhibit."

"What about you? Have you figured out how you're going to get home?"

"I'll rent a car."

"Too expensive."

"What choice do I have?" demanded Jake.

"I can drive you."

"And drive all the way back here?"

"No. Go home." She averted her face from his intense brown orbs.

"I've... got some serious thinking to do."

His calloused hand stroked her cheek. "Will I see you again?"

"Would you want to?"

"Of course. It's been a lonely journey for me all these years. Those who understand the challenges, or the inner peace which is nurtured, are rare. Having someone who shares a similar frame of reference..."

Dena sighed. "Huntington isn't that far from Fort Wayne."

"Good." He leaned forward and kissed her.

She'd just begun to respond when the steps creaked beneath Nathan's weight. The two parted abruptly.

"Is everything okay?" Dena asked, scrambling to her feet.

“My neighbor called to gloat about the Cubs losing today’s double header. I have been negligent in my care of you. Come, I have started dinner.”

Taking turns in the bathroom, Jake and Dena showered and dressed. Nathan served steamed fish and vegetables over rice. All three had voracious appetites, and the bowls were soon emptied.

Sun descending in the west, the visitors took their leave of Chinatown. Nathan hugged both, advising Dena, “You’re always welcome. If the Cubs make it to the World Series, we’ll be having a party every night...”

“If the weather’s warm enough to ride, I make take you up on the offer,” she replied. “Otherwise, maybe next summer.”

The Kawasaki cruising south along I-94 toward U.S. 30, Dena’s attention wasn’t on the light traffic. Jake’s arms holding her waist felt good, and if he invited her to spend the night in his apartment - whether or not he owned a bed - she suspected she wouldn’t refuse. They’d talk into the wee hours about many subjects, because her life suddenly had a new vitality.

Whether the weekend’s events had been a grand coincidence or pure fate would be something she wouldn’t decide for many months to come.

Hentzau in Exile

When young Rupert of Hentzau arrived in Paris that summer, I had no idea of his checkered history, or where Ruritania lay on the latest map of Europe. He took a modest apartment on the top floor of a building some distance from where nobility traditionally dwelt during the season so, when the agency sent me to present my references as manservant, I had difficulty locating the address.

His lean frame attired in white linen shirt and brown trousers, he answered my knock personally. He neither asked my name nor opened the envelope I offered, instantly issuing orders to unpack his luggage and lay in a store of the finest wine.

He threw himself on the divan while I worked, toying with a riding crop and chattering incessantly. Less than a quarter century old, he must've enjoyed a spoiled upbringing, expecting everyone to attend to his rich, baritone voice. I could tell from his thick, curly hair and elegant features, he would not be at a loss for feminine attention, though he might be at a loss for funds.

"I must make the appropriate social connections within a fortnight," he muttered, to himself more than me. "Whispers in the right ears will fill my purse and finance my cause."

"What cause is that, my lord?" I inquired casually, hanging a heavy winter coat in the wardrobe.

"Vengeance, my man, vengeance."

Ah, I thought silently, he has been wronged by his family, disowned for some misdeed. "Revenge can be a dangerous business, sir."

"More dangerous for the one who finds himself on the end of my sword." Agitated, he rose and paced between the window and the bed. "Leave that for now, and fetch the wine."

He tossed a few coins at me; I didn't turn fast enough and ended up groping on the warped wooden floor to retrieve them. With a bow, I departed, leaving him peering through the window at the unsavory crowds milling on the lane below.

Fortunate, perhaps, I was born in such a neighborhood. Dressed in my uniform, I anticipated jeers and ridicule, even the odd stone aimed at my head. I walked more than a mile to find a vintner selling better than the cheapest swill, knowing the Count's palate would be satisfied with only the best.

Maybe not even then. He cringed after gulping the '88 Burgundy, and I truly believed he was about to strike me. He held out the glass, though, for me to refill.

“Why did you leave your last position?” he snarled.

“Family responsibilities, sir.”

“Ha! Dismissed for siring a bastard by the scullery maid?”

“No, my lord. My father fell ill in Marseilles, and later died.”

My tame tale disappointed him. From that brief exchange, I could tell he lacked the decency common to his rank, and would be more comfortable playing cards with street pads and thieves than taking tea with the genteel sort who paraded along the Champs Elysees on Sunday afternoons.

I filled the goblet a third time. “What’s your name?”

“Guillaume Dumas.”

“Well then, Dumas. On the morrow, you will set up accounts for me with the most fashionable tailor, the purveyor of this delightful wine, and a dealer in carriages. I need clothes, a coach and four, and the best cellar in Paris...”

“They will require letters of credit, my lord.”

“I am Rupert of Hentzau. That should be sufficient!”

It wasn’t, and it made the first month trying, whether more for myself or the young Count, it would be hard to say. His letters to former ambassadors and dignitaries introduced at dinner parties and balls in the Ruritanian capital of Strelsau were returned, unread. Attempts to call on old friends resulted in doors unceremoniously slammed in his face.

“News travels quickly,” he lamented one evening. “Already, they know of the debacle in Zenda.”

Helping him into a worn frock coat, I ventured, “What debacle is that, sir?”

“The untimely death of Duke Michael, the King’s brother... among other intrigues.” He emptied his second bottle of wine that day. “Where can I get more of this?”

“Those were the last the vintner had in stock, my lord. Two streets north, however, is a tavern...”

Before I could finish, he marched out the door.

In my employer’s absence, I admit to taking my ease. He didn’t seem to mind if a layer of dust coated the furniture, nor did I. As long as I served breakfast and dinner at his command, and kept his glass full, he didn’t care about anything other than finding the money to execute a plan to regain his rightful place in Ruritania.

His noisy return in the wee hours roused me from slumber in the cramped chamber adjoining the sitting room. My hand on the knob, I heard two voices in animated conversation. I opened the door an inch, to discover Hentzau - more like a desperate suitor than a gentleman - kissing a buxom bar maid.

By rights, I should have shut the door and gone back to sleep, but what happened next held me transfixed. Hentzau deftly unbuttoned the girl's blouse, exposing her ample breasts. All the while assaulting her lips with his hungry mouth, his left hand fondled her nipples; his right hand slid up her skirt.

He had her supine on the sofa in a matter of minutes. The back of the piece toward me, I couldn't see what he did, yet I didn't have to guess. From the girl's impassioned moans and his coarse language, I knew he was merely sating his masculine impulses.

Similar encounters took place, on average three times a week after that. Hentzau needed only to stroll through the park, and some succulent female would accompany him to the apartment for the night. Some, he never heard from again. Others would send notes requesting a second clandestine rendezvous.

These, he ignored.

"They are fine for a few hours," he remarked to me. "But there's no future in it. If I can find no other way, I will charm a lady of status, and she will be so enamored of me, all I ask will be granted."

Had I been in a position to offer my opinion of this scheme, what could I have said? I had loved, and spurned, my share of women in my four decades of life; I knew it would transpire just as he predicted.

What I didn't know is how cruelly he would treat her.

His cruel streak penetrated his debonair mask in rare moments. Once, in the street, he slapped a man who passed too close to him. I'd been with him, carrying his parcels, and witnessed the deed.

He tripped a lad on the stairs for daring to deliver a note from one of his paramours without the proper courtesies. And, he twisted a girl's arm so hard while having his way with her, she screamed. He laughed and gripped her all the more tightly.

"Dumas, I have met her!" he gloated the following Sunday.

I marveled at his ability to play the cad through the week, yet saunter into the Cathedral de Notre Dame to receive the Sabbath sacraments.

"Who, sir?"

"Her name is Katherine Bennett. She's the daughter of the Duke of Kent, and wife of Sir David Bennett..."

"Wife?" I echoed.

"Indeed. Surely that does not shock you? He is attaché to the British ambassador, and has crossed the Channel to tend his ailing mother in London. Katherine despises her mother-in-law, and has remained in Paris to study art at the Louvre.

“Ludicrous how women vie for my attention,” he continued. “Her eyes never left me, all through the Mass, and afterward she deliberately shoved her companion into me, giving me no choice but to acknowledge her. We dine together this evening.” He glanced disdainfully around the sitting room. “You have two hours to make a palace of this rat-hole.”

Then, he *had* noticed my lax housekeeping.

No matter what I would have done, the humble apartment would never have been worthy of the quiet beauty who glided over the threshold. Well supped and mildly intoxicated, Katherine Bennett giggled like a school girl when Hentzau squeezed her waist in the course of removing her delicate lace shawl. Still, I could tell she had passed her thirtieth year. She wore a pink satin gown, with a diamond pendant, matching earrings and bracelet. Any of the three, discreetly pawned, would have kept me content for the rest of my life.

Long brunette tresses cascaded freely over her bare shoulders. As I retired to my room after serving the wine, I wondered how long it would take the Count to have her dress off.

Surprisingly, he didn't. They chatted and drank until midnight, then he summoned me to close the door when they left. From his forced smile, I knew it wasn't love or respect restraining his lust. Greed and ambition stayed his hand, until he won my lady's heart and could manipulate her affections to his own ends.

He scraped together a few francs the next day - I eventually learned he sold his fur-trimmed winter coat - sending me to buy the finest roses and deliver them, and a carefully worded note, to the Bennett residence personally. His ruse worked, for she agreed to lunch with him on Wednesday, and invited him to share her box Friday at the Comedie Francaise.

His impatience grew by the hour, nonetheless. A chance meeting in a tavern on Thursday sent him into a rage, babbling about “that idiot King Rudolf” and the wrongs done him by men named Sapt and von Tarlenheim. He dashed off a letter to a cousin, the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim, demanding he travel from Ruritania to Paris with all haste.

Letters move slowly, and time slower still. Hentzau had sold his hand-crafted leather riding boots, his military uniform and decorations, and had only two shirts and an extra pair of trousers in the wardrobe when his luck finally changed.

Katherine Bennett slipped a ruby ring on the Count's finger to celebrate a fortnight since meeting him. “I find myself dreaming of you when I sleep, and yearning for your touch every waking hour,” she related.

I'd been watching through a knothole I'd widened in my door.

He drew her close and kissed her with uncharacteristic tenderness. The following morning, the silver band had been exchanged for a purse heavy with coins.

A pledge of devotion from a woman does something to a man. Hentzau distanced himself from Madame Bennett after that, delaying replies to her perfumed letters, postponing their meetings.

“The more she aches for me, the more generous will she be,” he sneered, waving her latest missive as I placed a plate of sliced beef and potatoes before him.

“Do you expect her to write you a cheque on a whim?”

“Of course not, Dumas. I have it from reliable sources the lady’s husband is due in Paris within three days. She will fear for my safety - and her reputation - and willingly finance my supposed flight from the city, or...”

“Or?” I prompted.

“Or risk being blackmailed.”

“You would sink so low?”

“It is the way of the world, Dumas. The lady was foolish to consign her affections to paper. She will not wish those sentiments to fall into her husband’s hands or, worse, those of her father, the Duke.”

The payment received from Katherine Bennett would have sufficed for Count Rupert to take a luxurious apartment and spend the next year in comfort. He did not waste the windfall on material objects, however. A series of letters were sealed and posted - not to dignitaries seeking their favor - but to the dregs of humanity: spies, thugs, traitors, informers. They called on him at all hours to receive their orders and gold coins for delivering the latest intelligence from the court at Strelsau.

The Count of Luzau-Rischenheim reluctantly fell in with Hentzau’s scheme, so dominant and persuasive was Rupert. Showing his cousin the sights and wonders of Paris - women included - Hentzau impressed upon him how tantalizing life could be, when power and wealth lay at one’s fingertips.

“Rupert, you are depraved beyond redemption,” I overheard Rischenheim chuckle one afternoon as they sipped cognac together.

“And, that is a bad thing how?”

The argument was convincing enough, evidently, before boarding the return train to Ruritania, Rischenheim cashed a cheque drawn on his own account, double the amount of what Katherine Bennett had paid.

Hentzau drank far less when occupied with his minions, but frequently entertained himself with women of no particular class. Even while pretending to

be Madame Bennett's knight in shining armor, he had brought various trollops to the flat, sometimes leaving them bruised and bloodied for their trouble.

"What kind of an animal is he?" one girl wept as I bound her wounds after Hentzau abandoned her on the sitting room carpet in favor of retiring to his bed.

I shrugged.

So things went, and months passed. Hentzau became well known in the meaner circles of Parisienne society; his services with sword and dagger were in high demand. He would disappear from the apartment, without notice, for days at a stretch - I would later find train tickets for Berlin, Rome, Brussels and elsewhere in his coat pocket. For his talents he was abundantly remunerated. He continued to pour every sou into taking revenge on the Ruritanian king and an Englishman named Rassendyll.

No communication from Katherine Bennett had reached us for well nigh six months; I believed she had forgotten her dalliance with Hentzau. When she burst into the apartment late one rainy night - her eyes red with tears, her formerly lithe figure well along with child - I pressed my face closer to the knothole.

The Count raised himself from the sofa, where he was entwined with a plump wench from the Follies Bergere.

Katherine's jaw dropped at their state of undress.

"How dare you waltz in here like queen of the May," Hentzau bellowed.

"I..."

And, as she hovered near the door, searching for words, he lowered himself to the task at hand.

His deed concluded, young Rupert sent the dancer packing before she could fasten her skirt and straighten her bodice. He remained half-clothed himself in confronting Madame Bennett.

"So, you've come to tell me the bastard's mine, I suppose," he scoffed.

"I..."

He backhanded her across the cheek. "Speak up, woman!"

She hastily recovered her composure. "When the doctor informed me of my... condition, I begged him to... but he refused. David thinks it is his child, because I lied about being less far along than the doctor said. I thought, since we cared so deeply for each other, you would... you..."

"I never cared for you, fool. It was all a game, with one object in mind."

"Satisfying your vanity?" she accused him.

"Filling my pockets!" he guffawed. "How sheltered your life must be, to be so naive at your age."

With a heart-wrenching sob, Katherine sank to her knees.

Roughly, Hentzau seized a handful of her brown hair and yanked her upright. Then, he slammed her against the wall. His body wedged against hers, he kissed her viciously.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” he hissed, ripping her coat in half. “You enjoyed being doted on like a china doll, but you longed to be ravished like a whore...”

She managed to raise her fists and beat on his broad chest. “No! No!”

He retreated two steps, breathing hard. “Then, get out, and don’t come back.”

Madame Bennett bolted from the room. The corridor unlit, she tripped and tumbled down the stairs.

I heard her terrified shriek, and threw open my door, rushing past Hentzau to her aid. I slid down the bannister and bent to the unconscious woman. On the landing above where her broken body lay, the Count laughed devilishly.

A dog cart proved the sole means of transporting Katherine home, since my employer denied my plea for the price of a carriage. She refused to let me take her to the hospital, though I could see her right arm was fractured, and two or more ribs protruded from her skin. Worse, still, I suspected the baby in her womb had been irreparably harmed.

I never expected her to die. The newspapers carried the headline in the daily edition.

Rumors reached my ears - and, undoubtedly, Hentzau’s - in the days which followed. The story involved a dashing young foreigner who had wooed the British attaché’s wife and then rejected her. Heartbroken, she had committed suicide. Count Rupert would have ordinarily found such a tale humorous, I’m sure, had not his confidants intimated Sir David Bennett had sworn out a warrant for the young man’s arrest, on a charge of murder.

He was stuffing the barest necessities in a battered portmanteau when I returned from the market with a salmon for dinner.

“Pack your belongings, Dumas,” Hentzau ordered.

“Why, my lord?”

“We are away, to Spain, or Germany.”

“If it pleases your lordship, I decline the invitation. I will stay in Paris and secure another position...”

Instantaneously, his dagger probed my throat. “You may come with me, or die.”

“My lord, I...”

“You have been privy to the intimate details of my plans, and I’ll not risk you selling the information to Sapt or von Tarlenheim, to save King Rudolf’s dubious honor!”

Not one would have branded me coward had I confessed to living in fear of my life in the wake of this threat. No such confession would be forthcoming.

Rupert of Hentzau didn’t frighten me; he repulsed me. He was little more than a spoiled child in a man’s body, intent on a certain toy, and content with nothing less. The machinations which sprang from his keen mind intrigued me, and I wanted to see how they played out in the grand game to which he’d committed himself.

Then, there were the women. I was no voyeur, as a rule, but the way females from their teens to nearly middle age fawned over Hentzau’s rakish good looks could be both amusing and pathetic. That they permitted him to brutalize them confounded me. Having no sisters, I did not understand if these women were raised to disdain their intrinsic value, or if the fallacy called love blinded them to the truth behind the Count’s twisted smile.

By a network of contacts across the continent, Hentzau and I traveled from Paris to Copenhagen, east through Germany and south to Vienna, in a succession of carriages, open traps and on horseback. The train, he reasoned, was too public when the authorities had a price on his head. We slept in weather-beaten hovels, stables and cheap hotels, trusting no one.

Lying on a pile of straw in a barn beside the Rhine one night, I tried to stave off the cold wrapped in my cloak. Hentzau, however, kept warm with the blonde farmer’s daughter in the loft. I lay awake, wondering how many illegitimate children he had sired since coming to manhood.

We passed through the town of Dresden weeks later, and my mount almost collided with the Count’s when he pulled up suddenly.

“Excuse me, your lordship,” I apologized, righting myself in the saddle. “Is anything wrong?”

“I could have sworn...” he muttered.

“Could have sworn what?”

“The man entering the hotel ahead was Rudolf Rassendyll!”

I knew snippets about the Englishman from unintentionally eavesdropping on Hentzau’s meetings with his agents. Could I shut my ears while pouring the wine?

Hentzau and Rassendyll had met in Ruritania. Young Rupert had attempted to assassinate Rassendyll, whose relationship to King Rudolf V of that country remained unclear to me. The two men had crossed swords after Hentzau

killed the king's half-brother, Duke Michael, his rival for a French woman living in the castle at Zenda. Coming under fire, my employer had fled into exile, leaving Rassendyll wounded in the forest.

He held his finger to his lips before I could protest, and steered his mount into an alley. Leaping lightly to the ground, he directed me to remain with the horses until he returned.

Deft hands checked the position of his dagger in its sheath as he rounded the corner and vanished from my sight.

A half hour standing in the chill air numbed my feet and reddened my nose. Frustrated breath from the horses shone as steam in the dim moonlight. Being merely sensible, I tethered the animals to a post and crossed the street to a well-populated beer hall.

I sat near the window, to have a view of the hotel. A saucy German girl in brightly-colored, embroidered tracht brought me a stein of local brew, which I sipped, watching for Count Hentzau to show himself.

He did, but not on the street. I glimpsed his silhouette swaggering along the corridor of the building's second floor, the glass doors leading to the balcony uncurtained. He approached a door and knocked. He withdrew after three attempts, his summons unanswered. I assumed the room vacant, because no lights shone through those windows.

Gulping my drink, I threw a coin on the table and rushed back to the alley. Hentzau seemed in no hurry to continue our journey.

"I've taken a room," he announced. "See to the horses; bring up the luggage."

"Yes, my lord."

The room he occupied was directly opposite the door on which I'd seen him knock. He left our door open, waiting for the mysterious neighbor to return. When he retired at midnight, he ordered me to take over the vigil.

I did, to no avail. Not a soul entered or left the suite until sunrise. Aggravated, Hentzau signaled me to pack, and we departed without even breaking our fast.

Fetching our horses from the stable, I would've taken an oath a tall, red-headed man watched us from that second floor room, through a gap in the curtains.

Arriving in Vienna, Hentzau met his cousin, the Count of Luzau-Rischenheim, who replenished our coffers and promised even more. "I've heard of a prominent personage in the city with need of your... skills, Rupert," he commented.

Instructing me to remain at the remote inn, Hentzau accompanied Rischenheim to a tavern. Returning only to sleep, my employer was absent from dusk 'til dawn the rest of the week.

Late Saturday, he rushed into the suite. A flurry of activity commenced, with me packing our bags and our horses being saddled in a rush. As we galloped from the stable, a crowd of police nearly intercepted us. Only through Hentzau's prowess - and my sheer luck - did we avoid trampling anyone, or being thrown ourselves.

We bore west, outdistancing our pursuers by morning. Hentzau did not reduce the pressure on his stallion, keeping up a pace which would have killed a lesser animal. It did, in fact, injure mine. Pausing long enough to feed and water his horse, and purchase a new one for me, we rode on, unrested.

The panic of a man who has perpetrated violence on another can be exhausting for those closest to him. Casual acquaintances might not have recognized the flash of fire in Hentzau's dark eyes, but I knew its source. He had no remorse for whatever his evil deed; the prospect of being apprehended and imprisoned terrified him.

That is why he could laugh about killing Duke Michael - none in Ruritania would dare touch him. Confiscate his property and seize his funds, perhaps, but bring him before a court of law? Never.

Salzburg is a pleasant city and, if I'd had my liberty, I would have made my visit thoroughly enjoyable. Count Hentzau, however, was intent on hiding himself among the populace. And an interesting populace he chose: the Benedictine nuns of the millennia-old Nonnberg.

"Disguised as a priest and a humble brother, no one will question us," he reasoned approaching on foot from the Kapitelplatz Square.

"Where will we get the proper attire?"

His disdainful sneer confirmed his opinion of me as an imbecile. He shoved me through the massive wooden doors of Maria Himmelfahrt, the convent church, following on my heels.

Lighting every statue and casting eerie shadows, thousands of candles burned in the side chapels and the main sanctuary. Scattered among the pews, a half dozen old women knelt in prayer. To the left, a teenaged girl emerged from the ornately carved confessional - Hentzau's victim sat in the center cubicle, behind heavy draperies.

"Pretend you are a penitent," the Count hissed. "When the priest slides the partition open to hear your sins, the distraction will give me time..."

Already, his dagger lay in his hand. My reluctance did not stem from the prospect of hell's flames, just the notion of murdering an innocent soul.

The cleric died without a sound. Hentzau's blade had been carefully placed, not ripping the fabric of the black cassock, nor staining the white clerical collar with blood. A tailor might have lowered the hem two inches to compensate for young Rupert's additional height, but otherwise, the fit was perfect. Even the broad-brimmed hat sported by many priests hung on a hook inside the confessional. Except for his superior demeanor, an entirely believable chaplain for the community of nuns stood before me.

Killing another in our quest for costumes sat ill with me and, fortunately, was not necessary. In shirts and trousers, a crew of men from a neighboring monastery were painting a fresco in the side nave, having shed their black robes to protect them from stains. Hentzau snatched one from the ladder where they hung, and we made our exit to the street.

I slipped the Benedictine habit over my traveling clothes as we traversed the length of the complex to the main gate. The Count tugged at the bell-pull, and we waited.

A hunched old woman garbed in a voluminous garment, white wimple and black veil limped toward us from the portress' cubicle. She squinted at us - she in darkness, we in brilliant daylight. A tiny smile crept onto her pursed lips when her old eyes registered our appearance. "May I help you, Father?" she cackled.

"I am Father Strauss, and this is Brother Wilhelm," Hentzau began, selecting a pseudonym for me which was the German equivalent of my French name. "We have been assigned to tend the spiritual needs of your congregation."

"Praised be Jesus Christ!" the woman gushed, her gnarled fingers working the lock on the wrought iron gate. "We have been praying for the bishop to send someone to assist poor Father Kleinschmidt. Our numbers have increased so in recent years, it is more than one man can handle by himself..."

How ironic, as we followed the nun into the cloister, we passed statues of St. Rupert of Salzburg, Nonnberg's founder, and his sister, St. Erentrudis. No saint, Rupert of Hentzau, nonetheless, these isolated women would believe him one as the days progressed.

We were shown to the chaplain's apartment which, the old nun explained, hadn't been used in some time, since Father Kleinschmidt preferred a monastic cell near the infirmary at the far end of the structure, in case he was needed during the night. An airy, yet austere sitting room conveniently connected to the convent's courtyard, so the women could seek spiritual direction from the resident priest without having to leave the cloister. Beside a second door hung a hand-sculpted,

excessively graphic crucifix. That entrance gave access to the church sacristy, where the priest would dress for daily Mass and devotions. A cramped dining room was hidden behind a narrow door, where our meals would be served by the portress. Along a short hall, two doors led to tiny bedrooms with desk, chair and bed. A sixth door was neatly concealed in the stone wall, possibly forgotten, and provided access to the street.

“Perfect!” Hentzau muttered as I set his portmanteau beside the marble fireplace. “I chose wisely, Dumas. The Vienna police will never think to seek us here.”

Nor would the nuns think their priest was leading a double life. He hadn’t the slightest scruple about donning the vestments, approaching the altar, turning the key in the tabernacle that very evening before Vespers, and placing the host in a jewel-encrusted monstrance. Turning to face the kneeling congregation, he raised the object in benediction, a wry smirk on his face. I watched from an alcove behind the stone image of the Virgin Mary, aghast at the sacrilege.

Nonnberg’s Abbess, Mother Gertrude, came to greet us after the prayers ended. A stout, middle-aged female of regal bearing, she scrutinized Hentzau not sternly, but gratefully. “We are so glad you have come, Father,” she said. “Poor Father Kleinschmidt will finally be able to rest...”

“Where he has gone, he will get plenty of rest,” mumbled Hentzau.

“He has left us?”

“His health had reached the breaking point. That is why the bishop sent us.”

“Ah!” The Abbess inclined her head in comprehension. “Anything you need to make yourself more comfortable, please, do not hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” replied young Rupert.

What he needed at that moment, no religious under vows could supply. Once the group had shuffled quietly from Maria Himmelfahrt to the refectory for a light meal, Hentzau scrambled to the confessional, where “poor Father Kleinschmidt” had stiffened in a sitting position due to rigor mortis.

“Let’s get him out of here,” directed the Count.

I countered, “Where will we put him?”

“There has to be a graveyard nearby. We’ll find some shovels...”

“What if we’re seen?”

“We’ll wait until after dark, then.”

How the cot in my room was volunteered to hold the corpse, I cannot recall. Hentzau was glad to have the body where no one could chance upon it by accident. This situation was too ideal to ruin by carelessness.

Before dawn, Gregorian chant woke us both from sound sleep. It hadn't been necessary for us to dig a grave for the priest in Nonnberg's cemetery; one of the elderly nuns had died just the day before, and her resting place had been prepared by the part-time caretaker. Little did those good women know, their Father Kleinschmidt preceded his spiritual daughter six feet underground, wrapped in my blanket.

Hentzau presided at the funeral Mass, robed in black with gold piping, and at the graveside service. I never would have guessed at his proficiency with Latin, then again, I also would not have guessed he'd spend his nights paying messengers to contact his agents, and drinking down the hill in a sordid tavern.

He actually slept most days, retiring after Mass, rising minutes before Benediction. I found myself offering spiritual advice to the nuns who tapped at the door, sitting before a cozy fire in two well-stuffed armchairs.

That is, until Hentzau glimpsed the young, fresh-faced postulant who consulted me one blustery morning.

"You knave!" he scolded. "Why didn't you tell me they were so lovely?"

I retorted, "Most of them aren't. Especially the older ones. Quite hideous, in all honesty."

"Then, you may continue to share the fruits of your wisdom with those repressed cows. From now on, the pretty ones shall be my exclusive domain."

"You can't be considering..."

His accusatory glare silenced me. "Why should I not enjoy my time in seclusion? Is not love a gift of God?"

My blood curdled when he roared with laughter.

He treated them like goddesses, at first. Not yet twenty, the six he cast his eye upon, and quite impressionable. He instructed them to live fully and enjoy every moment with which God blessed them. No knothole in my door this time, I would usually eavesdrop from the dining room, where I would pretend to read books or write letters, leaving the door open an inch or two.

They would kneel for his blessing at the end of the session - an honor which I, portraying a lowly monk not ordained to the priesthood, was not accorded. Hentzau would cup their chins in his hand, and mumble a "prayer", raise them to their feet and kiss both their cheeks.

Not one recoiled at the more-than-friendly contact, and the Count knew he would soon coax one, if not all into his bed.

If time permitted. More and more often, Hentzau brought news from his nightly excursions - news which wasn't encouraging to his plans. The Viennese authorities had notified their counterparts in other Austrian cities to search for the

murderer of a prominent banker, offering a substantial reward and a frighteningly accurate description. A blessing, indeed, the nuns allowed no newspapers within the cloister, and the letters they received were censored of all “worldly” gossip and scandal.

Hentzau could create scandal without the help of the police or newspapers. He gleefully sat in the confessional three afternoons each week, listening to the sins of the nuns - envy of another’s rosary beads, or anger at the favor shown the Novice Mistress by the Abbess - and those more serious committed by the locals - theft, lying and adultery. Not bound by the seal of his office, he recited the litany of offenses to me over the evening meal. He even included some in his sermon as practical examples of how not to live. Salzburg’s own burgermeister fell victim to Hentzau’s scorn, being anonymously vilified from the pulpit for drinking too much. I saw that very man turn beet red in the front pew, while those nearby eyed him with contempt.

One Sunday, bored with the same day-to-day rubrics of the Mass, Hentzau inserted some very impious Latin statements during the Confiteor, and again before elevating the host at the Consecration. It was widely accepted, most Catholics didn’t comprehend the language used in their primary form of worship, choosing to pray a rosary in their native tongue during that hour, or merely watch the gestures from their pews. Of nearly 200 women, only three raised their heads when the offending phrases were uttered.

He bit back a chuckle while genuflecting before the altar. I retreated to my room in disgust.

“Play actor!” I spat when he returned to the apartment. “Corruptor of the sacred!”

He still wore a smile. “Nothing is sacred. And, before your righteous indignation gets the better of you, remember you are not what you seem to be, either.”

When Sister Consortia, the portress, delivered our breakfast a short time later, she scowled openly at Hentzau. “I heard what you did at Mass,” she grumbled.

“What, gossip among the nuns?”

“Not gossip. Fact. Only a handful within these walls may understand more than the Latin used in the liturgy, but I happen to be one of them.”

“How so, with your limited education?”

“Never assume we are uneducated, *Father*. I spent my early years at the university in Berlin, where my father taught the classics - both Latin *and* Greek. You are no priest.”

Hentzau glared at the stooped oldster. "Dumas, take care of this."

"Take care of this, how?" I replied.

"Nearly two years in my service, and you don't know..." He rose, while I remained with a forkful of egg half-way to my mouth. As Sister Consortia poured tea into my cup, he slipped behind her and, in one skilled motion, snapped her neck.

She crumpled to the floor in a bony heap.

"That is how you take care of this," he boasted.

I dropped my fork.

"Get her out of here."

"Where?"

"Drag her to the infirmary; I don't care. As old as she is, they'll think she died in her sleep."

And so they did, mourning the woman's loss. Hentzau could not hide his disdainful smirk during the funeral Mass, but then, his back to the congregation, I may have been the only one to see it. Returning to the sacristy, he cast off the vestments and sauntered into our apartment.

Young Augusta, one of his proteges, awaited him in the sitting room.

"Father, I am troubled," she murmured, settling in the armchair.

He oozed, "Tell me your troubles, my dear."

Having restored the hand-made priestly garb to its hangars, I secured the door to the sacristy and quietly retreated to the dining room for a cup of tea and buttered bread.

"The last time we talked, you told me life is to be enjoyed," Augusta continued. "Sister Mathilde, the postulant mistress, does not agree. She tells us every day our lives are to be filled with pain and suffering, like that of the Christ."

"I'm afraid Sister Mathilde is mistaken." He spoke with such confidence, who could help but believe him? "Christ did not suffer every day. His years on earth were filled with many joys. The wedding at Cana, for instance."

"I see..."

"Besides, why would the world be filled with such beauty - look at the mountains, the roses, the trees in spring or autumn. They burst with life, and to fail in our appreciation of those gifts is to deny why we are here."

Augusta was breathing in shallow gasps. I raised my head from refilling the tea cup and glanced through the partially open door. Hentzau had her half-way out of her habit, kissing her neck and caressing her thighs.

I reached out and pushed the door shut.

That incident, I suppose, was the beginning of the end for me with Count Rupert of Hentzau. We should have left Nonnberg by mid-summer, but we didn't. The Viennese police had given up their search for the banker's killer, assuming he'd fled the country long since. Agents from Ruritania confirmed reports of King Rudolf V's ongoing illness, and Queen Flavia's discontent. The Count of Luzau-Rischenheim sent money on a regular basis via a trusted courier, so our movements were not restricted by lack of funds.

Augusta had abandoned the postulancy, not returning to her home in the south, however. She remained in Salzburg, often appearing at the secret door, or in the tavern where Hentzau met his contacts. He had used her, shunned her and shifted his attention to the next female he could ruin, leaving the poor child to sell her favors on street corners in order to survive.

I took to stealing - Hentzau had stopped paying my wages when we left Paris, so I had no money of my own. I knew where he kept his purse, and would lift two or three coins at a time, and pass them to Augusta when I saw her. She would kiss my hand and scurry away, like a mouse finding a tidbit of cheese.

"Wintenberg," announced the young Count one evening as the fire burned on the sitting room grate.

"Wintenberg?" I echoed.

"We shall be leaving for Wintenberg in a fortnight."

"I'm glad."

"You do not ask why?"

"I do not care why, just so we leave these women in peace, while they have a chance to cast off your foul influence before it destroys them."

"What if I told you we were going to kill a man, and embark upon a course of blackmail which will bring down the Elphbergs of Ruritania?"

"I would not be surprised in the least."

Perhaps my frankness offended him. He scowled and threw his empty glass against the wall. "Out of my sight, fool!"

Reclining on my cot in the tiny cell, I vowed not to accompany him to Wintenberg. He'd had his men tracking the whereabouts of von Tarlenheim and Sapt, and the red-haired Rudolf Rassendyll for well over a year. My supposition Hentzau intended to finally enact his vengeance on the trio was only logical.

And I would have no part in it.

That Tuesday morning, I noticed Augusta at Mass, huddled in the last pew, well out of sight of the Mother Abbess. Slipping from my alcove through the chaplain's quarters, I was able to intercept her on the steps of Maria Himmelfahrt as Hentzau was delivering his final "blessing".

“You have no coat?” I asked.

“No, brother.”

I unfastened my cloak and wrapped it around her trembling shoulders, leading her away from the church. “Have you money to buy food?”

“A little, from what you gave me last week.”

“Will you never give up your feelings for... Father Strauss?”

“No, brother. I love him, and would die for one kiss...”

“If I told you he was no priest, merely an impostor?”

Her blue eyes grew wide. “You cannot mean that! He is the most devout, wisest...”

“Have you ever known any other priest to speak as he does, or behave as he does?”

“No, I...”

“Trust me, Augusta, though I have no right to beg your trust. You see, I, too, am an impostor.”

“What?”

“The man you know as Father Strauss is really Count Rupert of Hentzau, a murderer and debaucher of many women before yourself. My name is Guillaume Dumas, not Brother Wilhelm. To my eternal shame, I am the Count’s servant.”

Hentzau had warned me what would happen if I exposed his secret, but I saw this as an opportunity to free the child of her misplaced affections, and myself from his domination. Together, we could put Salzburg behind us...

Except, Hentzau came up behind me, and thrust his dagger between my ribs. As I collapsed, Augusta screamed. The Count left me for dead, there on the cobbles.

I never saw him again, and heard only vague rumors of his fate at the hands of the sickly King Rudolf V. After a lengthy convalescence through the winter months, Augusta and I were married in the spring. We now live in Paris, where she tends our three children, and I own the same vintner’s shop where I purchased Hentzau’s first bottle of Burgundy so long ago.

A Heart Given

Sipping vintage chianti paled in comparison to kissing her. Their bodies pressed together, Adam Jamison devoured her lips. The possibility of being caught in the judge's chambers heightened his excitement.

"Charlie's on vacation," she assured him, pausing to catch her breath. "He won't be back until Monday."

This casual attitude toward the most powerful man on the county's bench amazed Adam. Then again, he couldn't deny Eve Featherstone possessed many amazing qualities.

He'd noticed some of them while serving on a jury in Judge Charles Kwan's courtroom a month earlier. The sandy haired court reporter's fingers flew on the singular keyboard, recording every statement from prosecutor and defense attorney. During a brief recess, he caught her green eyes staring at him, and her smile melted his heart. They'd first spoken in the corridor near the restrooms, and her pleasant contralto voice struck his ears like music.

The ensuing weeks brought discoveries of her intelligence, playful wit and natural beauty. Another quality which enthralled him: her unabashed honesty. Coupled with an innate kindness, she could make the most devastating statement sound encouraging without resorting to white lies.

They broke from their clinch when Adam's cell phone chimed in his jacket pocket. He hated the contraption, but his boss required him to carry it. "Hello?"

So upsetting was the announcement on the receiver, he slumped against the judge's desk. "Are you sure?"

He stared at Eve, watching him with empathetic curiosity. "I'll be right there," he concluded.

The phone restored to his pocket, he pecked her on the cheek.

"What's up?" she queried.

"I've told you about Dean Terrell, haven't I?"

"The guy who spends his weekend with a bottle?"

"Right."

"What about him?"

"He hasn't been to work for a few days, and hasn't called in. The shift manager went to his house this morning to check on him, and found him dead."

Eve's face blanched; Adam thought she might faint. Odd for someone who sat through the most hideous murder trials, unaffected.

"What..." she stammered.

"They think he fell down the stairs. His neck was broken."

On that note, he laid his hand on the gold door knob. She brushed it aside, drawing the panel inward and peering through the crack down the hall. Confirming everything clear, she planted one more kiss on his greedy mouth, then shooed him back to his duties.

Not that Adam, as quality control manager, could do anything to assist with the police investigation. He was questioned about his knowledge of Terrell's habits, as were others in the department at the factory. Thinking the matter a simple accidental death, Jamison was shocked when the detective's background check on the employee turned up a string of convictions for child molestation.

And the homicide task force took over the case.

"He'd been with the company five years, running the CNC lathe," remarked Adam, seated at the bar beside Eve that evening. The front page of the evening newspaper - discarded by a previous customer - carried a six-column photo of the deceased, along with the sordid details of his past. "A nicer guy you couldn't meet if you tried."

Eve stirred her martini. "That's the way it goes with those types. They hide their secrets well."

"Have you... sat through many such cases?"

"Fortunately, no. What seems to happen is the offenders move here after being released from prison. They think they'll blend in, and their parole officers won't find them when they don't update their listing on the sex offender registry."

"Do they get caught?" Adam prodded.

"Not if they keep their noses clean. Sometimes, they slip up, luring a neighbor kid into their home. Then, all hell breaks loose."

"You think one of the parents might've killed him?"

Eve shrugged. "Who knows?"

Adam ordered another round of drinks while they waited for their table in the restaurant's crowded dining room. Friday nights were always like this, the superior Italian cuisine drawing patrons from as far as Indianapolis.

He contemplated their reflection in the mirror behind the bar. More than once, he'd overheard casual observers comment what a fine couple he and Eve made. He couldn't deny his feelings on the matter. A difference of barely three inches in height, her delicate complexion offset his deep tan and laugh lines. Her upswept tresses countered his wavy brown mane, her mischievous blue eyes balancing his smoldering brown orbs. Both slender and fit, her clinging yellow dress accented definite curves, and the black turtleneck beneath his tan sport coat hid the thickness of his neck.

More important than their appearance together: the emotions she generated inside him when their hands touched, she stood beside him in a movie line, or she smiled. He hadn't yet uttered the three words many men find fatal to their freedom - "I love you" - knowing already in his heart, he would eventually marry her.

After dinner, they walked through the park along the river, hand in hand. Her stories of the daily court proceedings made him laugh until he thought he'd collapse. He could visualize the prosecuting attorney rushing in with his trousers unzipped, or the defendant who was trying to mask his identity from a key witness having his toupee fall off in the middle of testimony.

Nothing that happened in the quality control department he supervised was half so interesting.

A trend which developed outside both their workplaces did catch his interest, though, and keep it. On average, one accused/convicted/paroled child predator, molester or abuse was dying weekly, of other than natural causes - including two former priests. Someone had taken upon themselves the role of vigilante, administering justice not meted out in court.

Normally, Adam paid little attention to such events - local or national. His favorite uncle, however, had been falsely accused of related crimes. The defense forced a young Adam to take the stand on the man's behalf, giving the prosecutor an opportunity to hammer the child with confusing and misleading questions. Ever since, he'd followed similar cases, when they were publicized.

And these strange deaths were being increasingly well publicized.

Each new report drew so many to the sex offender registry website, the server crashed. Newspapers added extra pages to their opinion section to handle the influx of angry letters to the editor. The police chief's admitted the clues were few and far between - no fingerprints, no murder weapon - "The killer used his bare hands, we assume," the official stated at a press conference.

Powerful hands they must've been, to subdue men weighing as much as 300 pounds, mused Adam. And someone who could gain entry to homes without breaking glass, using a crowbar to jimmy a door, or setting off an alarm system.

Oddly, he and Eve didn't discuss the case much during their dates. He wanted to keep his obsession secret, fearing it would frighten her. He also wanted to be sensitive to the fact she spent her days listening to criminal testimony, and probably wouldn't want to hear about an ongoing investigation.

Many were the times when they sat across the table from each other, not eating, just holding hands and gazing in each other's eyes. Adam felt like a teenager again, and couldn't understand how he'd been so lucky to find this exceptional woman.

She didn't drink, smoke or do drugs. Her maturity level surpassed many women in her age group. She had no children from previous relationships. Why she hadn't been snatched up by a far more deserving man, he couldn't guess.

He'd noticed only one flaw in her personality: a tendency to work long hours. When court wasn't in session, she had to download the transcripts into the computer, and make certain the print-outs were accurate. She'd canceled dinner dates more than once because some glitch in the software converted a witness' statements into gibberish. Having to recreate the questions and answers manually required laboring long into the night.

Not until he saw her yellow Mustang drive past the burger joint where he'd stopped to get a quick bite that Friday - moving *away* from the courthouse - did he suspect anything wrong. Her attentiveness to his moods had never wavered; if she was seeing another man, there would've been signs.

Uncertain, he hurried to his old Chevy pick-up and gave chase. Fifty miles along the interstate highway, she cruised up an exit ramp in the middle of nowhere. Another half hour elapsed before she turned onto a dirt driveway leading to a ramshackle farmhouse.

Adam braked on the side of the main road, shut off his engine and waited.

He couldn't see much in the dark, and was startled when the Mustang reappeared ten minutes later, headed back in the direction of the city.

The Chevy pulled up beside her as she reached the apartment complex where she rented a modest townhouse. Eve pretended to be delighted to see Adam as she alighted from the car.

"I was going to call you!" she greeted. "I just got off work."

"No, you didn't."

He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to the door. She fumbled with her keys to unlock the deadbolt, then he shoved her over the threshold.

"What were you up to out there?" he demanded.

"Out where?"

"Don't play innocent with me. I followed you to that farm. Were you delivering a subpoena?"

"Not my job." she replied, kicking off her shoes. "And none of your business."

"It is my business, if we're going to be married."

"When did *that* subject ever come up?"

Adam bristled. "It would've, as soon as I made it to the jewelry store to pick up an engagement ring."

"Well, you would've been disappointed, because I would've said no."

This declaration stunned Jamison. His mouth hung open, but no words issued forth. He stared at her hands - the soft skin he'd caressed, the fingers he'd entwined with his own. Could they have snapped a man's neck so callously?

Eve shooed him toward the door. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm tired."

They parted on these hostile terms, and Adam drove home in a state of total confusion. He switched on the living room light, yanked a beer from the refrigerator, and punched the remote control for the television.

All three networks ran the same top story: one county over, another child abuser had been murdered. He'd been found by his sister when she returned home from grocery shopping. The house showed no signs of forced entry. Detectives couldn't even find tire tracks or footprints on the dirt access road leading to the dwelling, though one neighbor reported seeing an older model Chevy pick-up parked nearby around the time of the incident.

It took Adam two years to recover from the shock. He erased Eve's phone number from his Blackberry, and had no second thoughts when she didn't call him.

He assumed she was administering some perverse type of delayed justice, and the fact she was never arrested meant either the police condoned the actions - a possibility which prevented him from turning her in - or she was just too good at what she did.

Never again would he trust another woman.

Fate of the Truth

A winter storm raged that January Friday evening across the midwestern United States. Oblivious to the weather conditions, anthropologist Terri Richardson sat at her desk in the corner of the Mooney Science Complex archeology lab, surrounded by ancient bones and other artifacts of prehistoric human civilizations. Her shock of prematurely white hair bowed over her laptop computer, she typed a few last thoughts, repeatedly consulting a grayish photocopy of primitive hieroglyphs and their translation beside her on the blotter.

“In the beginning of man's intelligence, he asked questions about the wonders of the world around him. He was driven to seek answers as to why the sun rose each morning, and set each night. What caused the rain, determined the rivers' course, and how did fish populate the seas? Why did the sky not fall, and how came there to be so many different manner of animals?

“Finding not the knowledge he sought with his eyes, man therefore created a being in his own image, invisible yet omniscient, sharing identical traits - both benevolent and cruel - perfected. Man looked around and saw his creation was good, giving illusory purpose to life, imagined parental love and discipline, and mysterious answers to all unanswerable questions. He called this creation by many names in different lands, foremost of which was 'god'.”

Pausing to push wire-rimmed glasses up her nose, the 32-year-old professor rotated her sore neck. Anyone who saw her in the sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers might have mistaken her for a raw freshman. Years of sifting through chips of pottery and tattered scrolls had jaded her, though. She finished typing the phrase, “Evidently familiar with this document, the writers of the Book of Genesis and other early religious texts attempted to refute the sage's statements, to discourage non-believers and control the mindset of the ever-increasing population. The attempt continues to this day.”

She saved the file in an encrypted directory, leaned back on the swivel chair and sighed. Reaching for a chipped ceramic coffee mug, she discovered it empty. With a groan, she rose. Not bothering to lock the deadbolt, she left the classroom and walked toward the elevator.

Preoccupied with her work and her thirst, Terri didn't notice the darkly-clad figure concealed in a recessed doorway, who waited until she vanished inside the lift before creeping toward the open lab, a shaft of light reflecting off the prominent cleft in his chin.

Inside the elevator, Terri greeted a short, solidly built Oriental gentleman, attired in designer suit and dark turtleneck sweater, a winter coat draped over his arm. The well-groomed figure introduced himself as they slowly descended, a slight accent enriching the sound of his words.

"I am Bai Huang. May I ask if you plan to venture outside without a coat?"

Terri replied, "No, I'm just going down to the lounge for a cup of coffee."

"Good. The weather has turned treacherous."

"Really?" queried the scientist. "When I walked across campus around 3:00, there were only a few snowflakes falling."

Bai stated, "My driver told me at least six inches of snow has fallen in the past three hours."

"That's not much, considering."

"Where I am from, it is."

"And where is that?" prodded Terri.

"A small town in Southern China."

"I spent three years on an archeological dig in Southern China, researching my doctoral thesis. What on earth are you doing here?"

"I flew my nephew back for the new semester, on my way to Chicago for a business meeting."

"What's his major?"

"No, he is Professor Tan Ming. He flew to the mainland during the holiday for a family funeral, and since I was traveling this way... He just finished giving me a tour of his lab."

A violent explosion disrupted the exchange, and rocked the entire building. The elevator jolted to a halt, and Terri bounced against Bai, who steadied her. Once the lights stopped flickering, the woman stepped back, apologizing.

Fire alarms penetrated the concrete and metal lift. Terri grew frustrated when the elevator doors refused to open. Bai, conversely, maintained his calm. Muttering under his breath, he speculated they were near the third floor. Strong hands struggled to separate the doors from the inside. Grasping the limitations of her own strength, Terri joined him in the effort. Together they managed to create a narrow gap and squeeze themselves onto the floor three feet below.

"Are there stairs?" wondered Bai.

Terri nodded and led him along a corridor barely illuminated by emergency lights. The stairwell equally dim, the pair descended cautiously to the main level, alarm bells deafening.

They groped their way to a shattered glass exit, finding spectators gathered in the quad, despite buffeting winds and heavy snow. Fire trucks, ambulances and police cars had converged, red and blue lights flashing as officials rushed hither and yon. Terri stopped beside a campus security guard, who stared up at the science complex in shock.

“George, what happened?” she inquired.

The man babbled, “I was sitting there, watching the monitors... And then, an explosion... From one of the labs on the fourth floor...” He fell silent as Terri and Bai gazed at him.

Terri shook her head to clear it, then strode into the night. She mumbled obscenities under her breath as Bai pursued her.

He wrapped his overcoat around her shoulders. “What is wrong?”

“The fourth floor! That was my lab which exploded!”

“Can you be so sure?”

“I was the only one up there, and I didn’t close the door...”

“Who would do such a thing?”

Terri halted. “Crackpots, vandals, I don’t know. But I’ve been feeling like I’m being followed lately. Ever since the local news ran the story about the scroll...”

“What scroll?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I would relish hearing it, except my plane leaves at 10:00 for Chicago.”

Bai scanned the ivy-covered dorms on all sides. “What will you do now?”

“Call a cab and go back to my apartment, I guess.”

“I do not believe a cab could reach the campus; the roads will be blocked because of this incident. Please, let me drive you to your apartment.”

Terri accepted her companion’s offer. They strolled to where a black Cadillac limousine idled near the sports arena. During the ride to her off-campus apartment, Bai questioned her about her suspicions.

“Why would anyone wish to follow you, or harm you, because of a news report?”

She exhaled loudly. “The report dealt with what I found last summer in the Vatican’s secret archives.”

“Another set of bones providing a missing link to modern man?”

“Not bones. A papyrus scroll, carbon-dated to an era preceding Moses. Written by a very wise elder, from what I can tell. He lived during the period

when human beings began to question the purpose of their existence, and could find the only answer in creating the gods.”

“I... don’t understand. Why would such a discovery be a threat to anyone?”

Terri shrugged off the idea. “I’m probably wrong. Just getting paranoid, I guess, because I’ve been sitting at a computer 12 hours a day for the past month, finishing my research paper.” She peered out the tinted window. “Here we are.”

Bai helped her from the limousine. She thanked him and walked to the center door of the multi-unit structure, slipping her key in the lock. He waited until she passed inside before directing the chauffeur to depart.

The anthropologist didn’t even bother to remove her clothes before flopping on the battered print sofa, asleep. A long day’s work, coupled with the destruction of her lab, had drained her.

The sun hadn’t yet risen Saturday morning when a noise disturbed her slumber. Groggily, Terri pressed one green eye to the viewer after hearing the tentative knock a second time, startled to see Bai Huang’s features distorted by the scratched lens. She unfastened the chain and pulled the heavy door inward.

“I didn’t expect to see you,” she greeted, waving him across the threshold.

“I wanted to be sure you were all right before I leave.”

“I thought you were flying out last night.”

“All flights were grounded, because of the snow. I am glad, too, for this chance, after what I read in this morning’s newspaper...”

“What?”

“The fire inspector reported your lab had been - what is the word? - ransacked before the explosion destroyed the building. Our discussion led me to believe they did not locate the object of their search. They may make another attempt here...”

“They already did,” admitted Terri, closing and turning a key in the lock. “Last week. I finally got everything put back in place yesterday morning.”

“If they know where you live, and where you work, you risk your life remaining...”

“Of one thing I have no doubt, Mr. Bai: if they kill me, they’ll never find what I’ve hidden right under their noses. I’m perfectly safe.”

“I disagree. My suggestion would be that you leave, immediately.”

“I... can’t.”

Bai favored her with a sullen stare. “In my country, when one person saves the life of another, the two are linked for eternity. Such a link was formed between us last night, in the elevator. If you do not heed my advice, I will be unable to continue my journey, knowing you are in danger.”

The two stood, eye-to-eye, in silence. Then, Terri cracked a smile. "I suppose a little vacation wouldn't hurt. Give me a minute to grab a few things."

She snatched a duffel from the closet, dumping the contents on the worn carpet. Bai followed her into the bedroom, where she stuffed a few sweaters, jeans and other essentials - including a passport - into the bag.

"Would you hand me that picture frame?" she requested, jamming a bundle of socks atop a toothpaste tube.

Bai complied. She hesitated, regarding the face of a youngish man, with long, wavy hair and sparkling brown eyes.

"Someone you will be leaving behind?" asked Bai.

Terri sniffed, "He's already gone. He died in a car accident about six months ago." Slender fingers ran through her tousled white mop. "One of the reasons this happened. My hair used to be as dark as yours."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. He was my best friend, different from anyone I'll ever know." She tucked the frame into the canvas bag, continuing, "He was a computer science major here, but had a deep spirituality, incredible insight and wisdom beyond his years. He inspired my research."

Tumblers shifting in a deadbolt caught the pair's attention. They returned to the living room to locate the source of the grating. Bai recoiled slightly when Terri rushed toward the tall, lean figure who opened the door, embracing and kissing him warmly.

"You're okay?" inquired the cultured baritone, running nervous fingers through his disheveled wavy mane.

She nodded.

"The one night I go to bed early, disaster strikes. I could've kicked myself when I heard it on the news this morning."

"You can't blame yourself. You're not my body guard," Terri chuckled. She tugged him by the arm toward her other guest. Her scientific mind noticed an odd comparison of the two - both could be described as having black hair and brown eyes but, beyond those features, they were totally different in physical appearance and demeanor, all because of their origins half a world apart - the charming American male and the classic, dignified Asian. "Kieran Leach, this is Bai Huang. He saved me from the stalled elevator after the explosion."

Leach shuddered. "You mean, you were *in* the building when the bomb went off?"

"I'd just put the finishing touches on the research paper."

"All gone now."

"Not exactly."

“Huh?”

“I don’t trust technology, as it is, so I’ve got a copy saved... elsewhere.”

Leach’s expression confirmed his discomfort at this announcement. He also noticed the duffel near the bedroom door. “Where are you going?”

“I’m... taking a little time off. Will you water the plants for me while I’m gone?”

“Sure.”

Terri smiled toward Bai. “Kieran lives next door, and keeps me out of trouble.”

“It is good to have a trusted friend so... close at hand,” remarked Bai.

Without warning, Terri’s muscles visibly tightened, and she doubled over, sinking on an overstuffed armchair. Her expression betrayed excruciating pain.

Leach knelt beside her. “Again?”

It took a few moments for Terri to recover her composure and breath normally once more. “I... must’ve pulled a muscle or something, crawling out of the elevator.”

“It’s no pulled muscle,” growled Leach. “Every time your cheek twitches that way...” He faced Bai. “I’ve tried to convince her to see a doctor...”

“Damned doctors can’t do anything.” Terri snapped. “If it’s not a pulled muscle, it’s really bad indigestion.”

With a wan smile, she rose and yanked a parka off the coat rack. Zipping the bag, she turned to Bai. “Would you be willing to drive me to the airport, with a stop along the way to pick up some cash?”

“I would be honored.”

Leaving the apartment, Terri locked both the knob and the deadbolt. Bai continued outdoors; Kieran’s powerful arms encircled the diminutive woman. He kissed her passionately.

“Don’t be gone long,” he said.

She ran a trembling finger along the vertical cleft in his chin. “I’m not going far, and I shouldn’t be away more than a week or two. I’ll give you a call...”

He didn’t release her hand until the last possible moment, a blast of icy wind driving him backward as the exterior door blew wide. Moments later, Terri detected his forlorn mien peeking between the living room curtains of his apartment. Bai instructed the driver to take them to the airport when they were settled on the limousine’s rear seat.

“You’ll pass a First National Bank along the way,” added the other passenger. “Please stop there, as well.”

Beneath the branch's drive-thru canopy, Terri approached the ATM machine. What should have been a routine transaction merited error messages once, twice, three times. She slammed the machine with her fist, before returning to the Cadillac.

"A problem?" Bai puzzled.

"Someone has closed my account. That leaves me with ten dollars to get... no where." She slumped on the stitched leather upholstery.

"It's of no consequence. I just heard on the radio aircraft, busses and trains are still not moving, due to extreme low temperatures and blowing snow. Besides, traveling by commercial means would allow you to be easily tracked, since you must use your name when purchasing a ticket."

"You're right," Terri conceded. She reached for the door handle. "I guess I'll just have to hitch a ride."

Bai gripped her arm. "No, wait. As I said, I have business in Chicago. You may ride with me that far and, if you don't mind waiting a few hours, I will then fly you anywhere you wish to go."

"But, you just said commercial flights..."

"My private jet," explained Bai. "When the weather clears, it will meet us at Midway."

Terri studied him. Her suspicion melted into gratitude. "Thank you."

The limousine cruised onto the slush-covered highway.

Sun poured through the windows of the Lear jet Sunday morning, while Terri rested her weary bones on a plush blue suede recliner. The sound of wood repeatedly being impacted by force roused her from slumber. Taking a moment to recognize her surroundings, she stumbled past a poker table, the galley and a cluttered desk.

A gymnasium of sorts occupied an area directly behind the cockpit. Bai's forehead dripped sweat in the midst of an energetic workout. Terri observed the activity from the doorway, until her host glimpsed her and abruptly ended his exertions.

"I apologize if I disturbed your sleep."

"It was the best rest I've had in weeks," admitted Terri. "You've studied martial arts?"

"A family tradition."

"I wish such traditions were deemed important in America. I studied Okinawan karate as a kid, then moved into other styles. I found practicing the *kata* a good way to relax after a day of college classes. I don't know if I could defend myself, though."

“The forms teach methods of defense,” Bai explained. “If you do them often enough, your mind is trained to react without thinking, should you find yourself in danger.”

“As an anthropologist, I thought the worst kind of danger I’d ever face would be scorpions in the desert, or snakes.”

“The monks of the ancient Shao-lin temples did not expect danger, but trained, regardless. For them, it wasn’t so much about the forms themselves, as transcending to the formless. They wished to be like water, able to avoid obstacles, or wear them down gradually. If you wish, I will show you how simple it is.”

Removing her sneakers, Terri watched Bai demonstrate how the movements from the animal-inspired kung fu styles integrated both defensive and offensive techniques. The pair engaged in a series of exercises, each more realistic. At one point, Terri landed against the bulkhead, a spinning kick from Bai’s powerful legs propelling her across the chamber.

He rushed to her. “I’m sorry. I thought you’d block...”

“I’m... fine.” Chest heaving, she glanced through thick plexiglass at the blue ocean far below. “By the way, where are we headed?”

“We will be in Hawaii within the hour. I thought you might enjoy dinner in a relaxed setting while the plane is refueled. Then, if you choose, you may accompany me to Hong Kong.”

Terri’s jaw sagged. After her shock eased, she resigned herself to the proposal. “I don’t suppose they’d ever find me there.”

“Do not be so certain. Those who wish you harm may not rest until the scroll is destroyed.”

“Which means I’ll be a fugitive for the rest of my life?”

“Some people fear the truth,” offered Bai. “They do not understand how it frees the soul from ambition, greed and competition. It is a sad fact.”

Terri bowed from the waist. “I respect your wisdom, Bai Huang. I’ve always known those from the East treasured the truth. Those in the West, however, prefer to hunt me.” She smirked. “And this hunted woman needs to shower and change clothes before we land.”

Bai indicated a luxurious bathroom adjacent to the gymnasium. He resumed his martial arts practice while running water was audible through the walls.

After a smooth landing on Oahu, Bai and Terri disembarked, taking a limousine to an open-air beach-front restaurant. They sat beneath the thatched roof, leis dangling from their necks, talking as they sipped wine and awaited their meal.

"You are not like the stories I have heard about anthropologists," commented Bai. "They talk about nothing but their work, and have dirty fingernails."

"I've had dirty fingernails plenty of times," Terri snickered. "Deciding on my major in college, I made sure to buy a good, stiff nail brush. For me, anthropology isn't so much about science, it's about truth. Even as a kid, I searched for a deeper meaning to life. In a million years, I never would've guessed I'd find the ultimate truth buried - and rejected - in the Vatican's own archives. The way every human being lives could be utterly transformed by a few insightful sentences scribbled on a tattered sheet of papyrus."

"You are a mystic," Bai stated.

"No. Just a seeker. If you are a Buddhist, I think you know what I mean."

"Buddhism was another family tradition, but it is difficult to integrate those principles into the business world. I have become, I suppose, a philosopher more than anything."

"A philosopher with a deadly roundhouse kick," Terri acknowledged.

Bai smiled, then spied a vaguely familiar image along the moonlit beach. He sobered. "Your friend - what was his name, who I met at your apartment?"

"You mean Kieran Leach?"

"Yes. How well do you know him?"

"Well enough, I suppose. Why?"

"Would you have any reason to suspect his intentions are less than honorable?"

"Mr. Bai, you're making me nervous," Terri shuddered. "What makes you think..."

"I apologize. If you look - discreetly - to the left, you may see something which will make you even more nervous."

All the woman saw was a dark head vanishing behind a stand of palm trees. "You don't believe..."

"How long have you known this man?"

Terri deliberated. "Kieran moved into the vacant apartment next to mine around the time I returned from Rome, but that doesn't necessarily connect him to what's been happening..."

"What is his business?"

"Our relationship hasn't really gone... in that direction," she muttered, blushing. "He mentioned something once about a lot of traveling, so I'd think maybe he's in sales."

"Or tracking wayward artifacts stolen from the Vatican archives."

A waiter approached the table, bending to Terri's ear. Just as swiftly, he retreated.

Bai sat patiently, knowing his companion would speak when her tongue composed the words.

Two minutes passed before she spoke. "I've been invited to a luau at the governor's mansion. An official motorcade is waiting outside."

"How could anyone know you are here, if not for..." Bai pondered, staring toward the broad stretch of sand

Terri shrugged. "Whatever connections they've got, they're damned thorough."

"We leave at once."

"But, if they know I am traveling with you, you are in danger, too."

"That does not concern me."

"Well, it concerns *me*. Putting others in danger is a line I will not cross. What I'll ask you to do is loan me some money, and I will check into a hotel while you continue back to Hong Kong."

"I do not feel that is wise. This island can be awfully small when one is hunted," advised Bai.

"I can't put you at risk. You've helped me more than anyone I know, and I'm eternally grateful. Let's get out of here."

Together, they made their exit across the beach.

A short time later, the sleek black limousine braked beneath the portico of a modest hotel. Bai and Terri, immersed in a lively debate, ignored the chauffeur, holding open the door. Finally, Terri acquiesced to Bai's recommendation. With her duffel slung over one shoulder, she mounted the steps of the hotel, not reaching the top. An agonizing spasm tensed all her muscles. White knuckles seized the wrought iron railing, to prevent her from collapsing. Inhaling, she soon straightened and proceeded inside as the Lincoln vanished along the circular drive.

At a private air strip, under cover of darkness, mechanics already had the Lear jet prepped for take-off. Bai alighted from the limousine at the base of the steps and climbed aboard, followed by the flight crew. The pilot donned a headset in the cockpit. Grinning sheepishly, Terri shed the co-pilot's cap and jacket in the galley. The door secured, engines hummed to life.

"That worked quite well," affirmed Bai, seated behind the desk.

Terri snorted, sliding the coat onto a hanger. "For now. What happens when we get to Hong Kong? As soon as I present my passport, it will be possible to trace me."

"Not if you wear a disguise."

“What kind of disguise? In a city of Asians, I’ll stand out like a sore thumb, no matter how I’m dressed.”

“You will be difficult to trace dressed as a Buddhist nun,” Bai suggested.

“Excuse me?”

“With their saffron robes and shaved heads...”

Terri squealed, “Shaved heads!”

“It will only be temporary.”

“Temporary? As in, until my hair grows back? That’ll take months! No, thanks.”

The plane descended into Hong Kong as the sun rose. Bai and Terri exited the plane in a hangar farthest from the main terminal. Checked quickly through customs, they discovered three women sitting placidly in a passenger lounge, ready to escort Terri, carrying the canvas bag, into the ladies room.

Bai departed the airport in a limousine, confident in his plan.

When the four women emerged from the restroom 30 minutes later, no one could have distinguished Terri from her companions, even with the duffel creating a weird bulge beneath her robes. As if from nowhere, six other Buddhist nuns appeared, encircling the anthropologist as they shuffled from the airport in silence.

Some distance from the heart of Hong Kong, Terri found herself one among five score Buddhist nuns in a modern brick temple. The building inspired a sense of awe within her, dampened by her failure to understand the dialect spoken by the others. It had been too long since her days in China. Fortunately, she comprehended the sign language directing her into the room where a meal of rice and vegetables was being served. She positioned herself on the floor among the group, tentatively tasting the food.

While Terri acclimated herself to Eastern monastic life, Bai returned to his downtown Hong Kong high-rise. One entire wall of the penthouse office boasted windows facing east, overlooking the city. A group of advisors distracted him from the view, relaying messages and relating problems in Cantonese. He answered their inquiries concisely, interrupted when a prim secretary appeared on the threshold. She announced an American visitor and his lawyers in the waiting room.

“Who is he?” queried Bai, in English.

The secretary replied, “He gives his name as John Smith. He claims to have a letter of credit from the president of Silicon Holdings in San Francisco.”

Bai voiced his apprehension. “Why would he need attorneys to present me a letter of credit?”

The woman gave no reply.

Bai dismissed the others, signaling the secretary to grant the visitor entry. The businessman seated himself at the hand-carved, laquered desk.

Three men entered the office. Smith strode the length of the carpet; the other two - giving the impression of body guards rather than attorneys - remained near the door.

“Bai Huang?” Smith greeted.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m John Smith. I’ve been sent by Silicon Holdings in the States as a consultant for your firm’s upcoming server upgrade.”

Bai frowned. “I’m sorry, Mr. Smith. There must be some mistake. We are planning no changes to our computer system.”

Smith leaned forward, hissing, “Well then, maybe we’ll upgrade your face for dragging us thousands of miles, chasing that heretic anthropologist.”

“I suspected as much,” Bai snarled. “I must ask you to leave.”

“Not until you tell us where she’s hiding.”

“I have no intention of telling you anything.”

Smith grabbed Bai’s shirt collar across the desk. Bai adroitly twisted Smith’s wrist, freeing himself. The bodyguards quickly advanced.

Bai defended himself using fists, feet, a variety of bric-a-brac and office equipment as projectiles. Eventually, he subdued the two faux-lawyers, and trapped Smith in the corner, just conscious enough to answer questions.

“Who has ordered you to hunt this woman?” Bai demanded.

Smith laughed, blood trickling from his swollen lower lip. “That doesn’t matter. If we fail, others will succeed, and kill you for interfering.”

“There is no need...”

“We’ve downloaded the files from her laptop, her hand-written notes are ashes, as are all copies of the scroll. But the original papyrus and a backup computer file are still in her possession...”

The office door opened, and six security guards presented themselves, followed by the secretary. Bai withdrew from the corner, ordering the three men removed. As they were ushered from the penthouse, Bai collapsed on his desk chair.

The secretary approached. “Are you all right, sir?”

Bai rubbed his temples. “Have my limousine ready in ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

She departed. Bai crossed to a door leading into a bathroom, washing his face and hands before leaving.

Terri sat in the garden of the Buddhist temple, the afternoon sun warming her face. Scattered on stools nearby, the nuns spun cloth, or read, others hoed rich

soil. She heard a deep-toned bell, surprised when no one altered their activities in response. A few moments later, a young woman appeared from the temple and waved Terri to join her.

Mutely, Terri was guided into a modest drawing room, where Bai rose from a bamboo chair. A bruise darkened his cheek.

“They came for you?” she gasped.

“Yes. It seems you are not safe anywhere, as long as the scroll exists.”

Bai’s eyebrows raised when Terri began giggling, plopping onto the chair. She rested her face in her hands.

“You find this humorous?” puzzled Bai.

Her breathing gradually regulated, she raised her head. “No, no. I’m just astounded how stupid these people are. They can follow me across the ocean when I don’t leave any real evidence of my whereabouts, but they can’t break the encryption code on a file...”

“Where is this file stored? Those who destroyed your lab stole your laptop.”

“I loaded a copy into an Internet briefcase linked to an e-mail account I seldom access. The only people I’ve told are you and... Kieran.”

Bai didn’t catch the implication of her statement. “Can you download it to a disk, which could then be secured in a safe?”

“It’s safer where it is, evidently. No, I just want to get out of here.”

“You are safe here,” Bai objected.

“I’m putting these women at risk. Even though our beliefs differ, I understand why they find peace in this life. To have a gang of murderers raid the place would be a disgrace.”

“I insist you remain...”

The pair glared at each other. Terri saw the determination in his eyes. “All right, but just until tomorrow.”

Bai bowed in agreement.

Watching the chauffeur close the limousine door, she scratched her bald head, staring at the faint reflection in the window. “I’m glad they don’t have any mirrors around here. I’d probably die laughing.”

An idea struck her, and she glided through the temple to her assigned guest room. Digging in her bag, she extracted a red bandanna.

Later that night, wearing a nylon windbreaker, jeans, with the bandanna tied pirate-style around her head, Terri wandered the teeming streets of Hong Kong. She located a restaurant with a sign in English, choosing a seat with a view of the entrance.

A huge hamburger dripping with condiments satisfied her palate. While she ate, two imposing males confronted her, having crept through a side door she hadn't noticed.

"Fancy meeting you here," said the first from behind his sunglasses.

Terri nearly choked on a bite of meat. Feigning nonchalance, she spat, "Hey, guys. What's up? Want a burger? It may be a guess, but I think it's real beef. No dog."

The second man, blond and blue eyed, slapped away the sandwich. "You're causing a lot of trouble for a lot of people. We've come to put a stop to it."

Terri reached for a napkin to wipe her hands. "Trouble? Me? What could little ol' me do to cause any trouble?"

"We're just the messengers," replied the first man. "You know what you've done."

Terri's fingers stealthily closed on a set of squeezable ketchup and mustard bottles. "I hate to cause even more trouble, but you can take this message to your bosses."

She squirted ample streams of yellow and red in their faces, before leaping up and sprinting toward the side door. Not hesitating once on the street, she zig-zagged through the nighttime revelers as fast as her feet propelled her.

It took the two men a few moments to grope for napkins, wipe their eyes and recover their sight. All too soon, though, they pursued Terri through city by-ways. Coming up beside an empty bicycle-cab, she scrambled aboard. The driver eyed her uncertainly, as her pursuers neared. In vain, she urged the driver forward, but he wagged his head in refusal. Terri jumped from the vehicle with an expletive and ducked into an alley, the men on her heels.

A dead-end alley. She spun on the thugs, for a moment seeing no hope. Then, the lessons Bai had taught her during the flight to Hawaii recalled, she raised her fists.

"C'mon, woman. We don't have time for this. The plane's waiting," declared the first man.

Terri inched toward him, smirking. "Gee, I thought you were going to off me here in Hong Kong. After suitably painful tortures, of course. The Chinese have some wonderful traditions."

"After what you did back there, you deserve a good dose of pain," the blond sneered.

His partner concurred. "You got that right. We'll just tell them she refused to come willingly." A switchblade snapped open in his hand as he lunged at Terri.

She blocked the attack with her arm. "Tell who?"

"If you come with us, you'll find out." He slashed at her torso.

A backhand to the side of his skull drove him away temporarily. Terri retreated also, muttering curses and rubbing her aching knuckles. "Damn! Practicing kung fu forms doesn't hurt like this!"

"So, just because we're in Hong Kong, you're gonna play chop-socky girl?" mocked the blond. "I don't think so."

He rushed Terri, but she sidestepped. Behind him now, she kicked his posterior, and he careened into a pile of trash, striking his head. Pushing his sunglasses up his nose, the other attacked anew.

Terri shrank from the blade, her body pressed flat against a corrugated metal wall. As the man gloated in triumph, she braced herself, kicking outward from the bricks and shattering his kneecap. He collapsed on the pavement, yowling.

Scurrying from the alley, she rounded the corner and collided with Kieran Leach. Instantly, she resumed her fighting stance, aiming her fist at his dark, shaggy head.

Leach deflected the punch with surprising agility, clasping her fingers in an iron grip. He tugged her thus into the light. Recognizing him, Terri blushed visibly, and lowered her hand.

"What the hell..." she panted.

"I could ask you the same thing. When I saw you streak past the shop window back there, I couldn't believe my eyes. Didn't you say you were going to Chicago?"

"No, I didn't. I never planned to cross the Pacific, but circumstances beyond my control..."

He snatched the bandanna off her head. "Made you shave your head?"

She wrestled the cloth square away from him, retying it around her cranium. "Don't chastise me, Kieran. I'm just humoring Bai Huang. He thought it best I stay with Buddhist nuns until..."

"Are you sure he's not setting you up in a trap? You don't know him from Adam, yet you travel with him half-way around the world."

"I'm a fairly good judge of people."

He wrapped her in a tender embrace. "When the news about your discovery first broke, I promised I'd protect you, but you wouldn't let me. Come with me now, somewhere fear doesn't reach."

Their eyes met; so did their lips. Breathless, Terri soon pulled free. "You know how I feel about you, Kieran. I'd love nothing better than for us to

run away together. First, though, we have to think of a way to throw those idiots off my trail.”

“What idiots?”

She tugged his shirt sleeve, and he accompanied her to the intersection of the dead end alley. Two sets of angry eyes whipped toward the motion.

“Took you long enough!” grunted the one crawling from the trash heap, blood dripping from his ear. “Now she’ll get the lesson she deserves!”

Suspicious aroused by the odd remark, Terri stole a glance at Leach. Had he raised a silencing finger to his mouth, or was he merely scratching the cleft in his chin?

She had no chance to question him. A spasm of pain jarred her body, and she collapsed, unconscious, in his arms.

With the rising sun softly lighting Bai as he dozed on an armchair, Terri stirred on the antique sofa. She semiconsciously raised a hand to her aching head, pulling the knotted bandanna over her face. Green orbs scrutinized the room; she leapt upright.

“What the...”

Bai roused abruptly and patted her shoulder. “You are safe. Mr. Leach reluctantly surrendered you into my care late last night.”

“Surrendered?” she echoed.

“When the nuns realized you had left the temple, they contacted me. I was searching for you when I chanced upon Mr. Leach carrying you from the alley. He feared you were injured during your fight with those men, and told me he was taking you to a doctor. I offered to have my personal physician examine you, instead. After he placed you in my limousine, he refused to remain, claiming to have urgent business elsewhere in the city.”

“Strange,” Terri breathed. “What was the doctor’s verdict?”

“You suffered minor bruising, but that is all.”

Terri stretched her aching muscles, and gingerly crossed to the full-length windows, to bask in the dawn’s changing colors. “You don’t trust Kieran?”

“He did not fly to Hong Kong on any of the commercial carriers, nor on any of the private aircraft properly registered with the local authorities.”

“What right had you to check on him?”

“My rights as your host, sworn to ensure your safety.”

Bai circled his desk, punching buttons on the phone. He spoke briefly in Cantonese, then replaced the handset in its cradle, before swiveling the chair toward Terri.

“Arrangements have been made for a more secure - and comfortable - place of concealment for you. Hopefully, you’ll not be tempted to venture out alone again.”

“I apologize for that,” Terri retorted. “Right now, I need to get my hands on a computer.”

“May I ask why?”

“I need to check my e-mail.”

“Isn’t that... rather unimportant, considering your present dilemma?”

“I set up a system where the IP address of anyone who tries to hack my account is logged into a database. I may be able to determine who’s after me by checking who’s tried to find that encrypted file.”

Bai slid aside the gleaming surface of his desk, revealing a laptop computer. Terri bent over his chair, and typed in a password. She paged through screens of messages which appeared, snorting in derision. “That’s just great.”

“May I ask?” prodded her host.

“My teaching contract with the university has been canceled. Nice of the dean to notify me with three terse sentences.”

“Could your pursuers have so much influence?”

“Maybe, but I think the explosion was a convenient excuse for the science department to get rid of a fly in the ointment.”

Terri read a few more posts, then her level of concentration deepened as she reviewed the list of access attempts.

“My God!” she grumbled through clenched teeth. “It looks like a who’s who of governmental agencies and religious organizations.”

Bai sighed. “I have made the situation worse by bringing you here. I should have flown you back to the United States when it became clear the plane was being tracked. You would have been able to hide more easily there.”

Terri smiled at the businessman. “I appreciate all you’ve tried to do. Right now, I just want to slap some sense into the jerks who think one old scrap of papyrus will rob them of millennia of power... Don’t they realize my research is just a drop in the bucket?”

“A drop in the bucket which will create many ripples, and endanger their lifestyle,” countered Bai. “I fear you will not be safe until your research is published and the papyrus stored in an impregnable vault.”

Terri closed the laptop. “Do you honestly think I’d let it out of my sight?”

“Then you will have to stay in hiding forever.”

She stared out at the city, thinking.

“You do not like that idea.”

"Of course, I don't." She groaned, then an idea crept into her brain. "What if... I made my research public now? Not in print, but... on television, or something? Via satellite, around the globe? They wouldn't dare try anything underhanded then, would they?"

Bai replied stoically, "Remember Salman Rushdie..."

The secretary knocked and entered. "The car is here, sir."

"Thank you," Bai addressed the already closed door.

He faced Terri. "I must remain here and make a few more phone calls. My driver will take you to a place no one will look for you."

Terri planted her feet on the carpet. "Where?"

"The Japanese gardener who works for my sister has a small cottage in a quiet neighborhood of Kowloon. The only restriction is: you will have to remain indoors during the day."

Defeated, she shuffled toward the door, then paused. "Before I go..."

"Yes?"

"Please teach me more..." Her lips twitched pleadingly to offset his scowl. "Just in case?"

Removing his pinstripe jacket, Bai led Terri in a few basic kung fu movements. A furious sequence seemingly pinned her against a chair. Standing close enough to kiss her, if he wished, she managed to shove him away, seized a glass vase and tossed it at him.

"Think fast!"

Bai caught the expensive crystal, avoiding Terri's attempt to sweep his legs by tossing it back to her. She fumbled the awkward shape, simultaneously trying to recover her balance. He chuckled as she set the object on his desk. "Very good. Distracting one's opponent may give you enough time to escape when trapped."

Both pleased, they bowed to each other, and Terri made her exit.

That evening, Terri rested in the midst of a beautiful, Oriental style garden, behind a traditional cottage of the region. She made one last adjustment to the picture frame on her lap, flipped it over, then sipped a glass of pineapple juice, enjoying dusk transition through a series of tranquil pastels.

As she laid aside the frame, a hand brushed her shoulder. She nearly fell off the wooden bench.

"I did not mean to startle you," Bai apologized.

Terri, heart pounding, wiped her bald head with the bandanna. "It's just... I thought I was alone."

"I'm sorry." He presented her with a plain yellow box.

"What is this?"

“Now you must no longer pose as a Buddhist nun, I thought you might wish to have hair once more.”

Terri removed the lid to find a pale blonde wig, similar to her own former hairstyle. “Thank you, but you didn’t have to come all this way...”

“I also grew concerned when the gardener’s wife informed me you had not eaten all day.”

“I’m just sore and tired, I guess. I’ve been contemplating the peace and quiet.”

“Nonetheless, I’ve made arrangements for dinner. Come.”

“Give me a minute.” Terri waved the wig at him. She hurried into the cottage, emerging a few moments later looking more normal.

“Come,” repeated Bai.

Terri followed Bai to an area of the garden hidden by a row of neatly-pruned shrubs. A low table held bowls and plates heaped with food. He directed her to one cushion, and seated himself opposite.

Tentatively, Terri tasted an entree blending native vegetables, rice and meat. Bai ate with gusto; Terri hid her dislike for the fare with conversation.

“I’ve had many people tell me what a pain I am over the years, Bai Huang, and I feel I’ve been a really big pain to you.”

“Not at all. In my business, there is little in the way of excitement. This has been a pleasant diversion.”

“What business are you in, anyway?”

“Fortune cookies.”

Terri’s eyebrows arched. “Fortune cookies?”

“My company is one of the largest suppliers of fortune cookies and Oriental foodstuffs to the West. If you wish, I will take you on a tour of our factory. It’s not far from here.”

She grinned broadly. “You’ve made a fortune from fortune cookies. A tour sounds fun.”

“After dinner, then.”

As Bai took another bite of food, he detected Terri’s anguished expression. He released his fork and shifted to his knees. She waved him back onto the cushion.

“Please, tell me what is happening,” he insisted.

Cringing a smile, Terri confessed, “I suppose the easiest way to explain it is: I’m going to die.”

“I will do all I can to prevent that.”

“I have cancer.”

Bai lowered his eyes.

“There’s nothing you can do. I’ve known about it since Simon died. I was in the car with him the night of the accident, and I ended up in hospital afterward with a concussion. When I recovered, I not only learned my best friend had been killed, but that the doctors had run a battery of tests on me while I was unconscious. They discovered stage four pancreatic cancer, which had spread to the liver and the stomach.”

“Did you not take treatment for it?”

“And have the chemotherapy kill me even faster? No. I’d seen my mother die that way. I wanted to finish my research paper, to secrete the papyrus where... certain people will never be able to destroy it. The physical symptoms have only become problematic in the past few weeks, as it is.” Terri sighed. “It’s kind of humorous, actually. I’ll soon be silenced, whether or not those thugs find me.”

No longer hungry, Bai rose from the table. “Come, let me give you that tour.”

Terri grasped his hand and allowed him to pull her upright. “Thank you.”

To avoid being trailed, the pair skulked along narrow, deserted lanes on foot, Bai’s chauffeur dismissed for the evening. Terri had to admit the huge facility, with its vast assembly line - including commercial size mixers and packaging equipment - would have rivaled any American manufacturing plant. Only a few of the machines operated at that hour, still creating a substantial din. Bai and Terri walked beside a conveyor belt carrying fortune cookies to be stuffed and folded.

“I always wondered how they got their shape,” Terri laughed.

Approaching another row of machines, armed men blocked their path. Bai stepped protectively in front of Terri, but she slipped past him, barking, “Oh, hell, you guys. Can’t you lay off?”

From behind the men resounded a stern baritone. “That doesn’t sound like the words of an educated scientist.”

The muscular toughs separated, revealing a Catholic cardinal, wearing a black suit, red shirt and Roman collar. He was accompanied by a Jewish rabbi, also garbed in black, a yarmulke crowning wispy white hair. A bearded Muslim imam in white robes, red jacket and green turban stood out among the collection of other officials.

Towering above the rotund cardinal, a familiar ebony head - Kieran Leach - sported his own Roman collar.

Terri’s stomach churned. “Geez, Kieran! A priest?”

He winked playfully.

“And you couldn’t understand why I’m an atheist, when you so callously broke your vows?”

“It was part of my job to gain your trust...”

“Well, your methods suck.”

Bai intervened, “What is it you wish?”

“The same thing we’ve always wanted. The computer file, the papyrus, and this woman’s silence,” stated the rabbi. The imam drew a thick envelope from his inside pocket as the rabbi continued, “We are willing to pay well...”

Terri snorted. “You want me dead and my research destroyed, and don’t deny it. My death is imminent, so your wrecking crew won’t even have the pleasure of ripping out my tongue, or whatever medieval tortures you had planned. I guarantee, though, you’ll never see the file or the scroll, if you spend the rest of your lives in the quest.”

“Why are you being so obstinate?” demanded Leach.

“Because the truth is worth defending.”

The cardinal, rabbi and imam exchanged glances. The cardinal nodded to the entourage.

Terri assessed the situation and placed her left hand over her right fist in salute to Bai before assuming a defensive posture. “Bai Huang, you have been a good friend, but this is not your fight. Save yourself.”

“You cannot defend yourself against six men. In your condition...”

The verbal wrangling ended when a punch arced toward Terri’s head. Bai intercepted and deflected it, while Terri shifted her attention to two others who had worked their way around the rear of the machinery, blocking the sole route of escape. The clerics, in the meantime, retreated from any danger.

In the process of defeating their assailants, Bai and Terri scrambled over the conveyors, using food cans, plastic wrapping, tools and other equipment as weapons. As Bai knocked the last man unconscious with a broom handle, Terri tripped on a pile of fortune cookies and landed hard on the floor. Bai squatted beside her, while the religious retinue hovered nearby.

Gently, Bai raised Terri to a sitting position. “Let me call a doctor.”

“Too late,” she rasped, caressing Bai’s cheek weakly. “In a perverse sort of way, I’ve never had so much... fun.”

The cardinal droned, “We will take her into custody now.”

“Over my dead body,” responded Bai.

Terri tugged on his shirt cuff, managing a chuckle. “You mean, *my* dead body.”

Bai observed the severity of twitching in her cheek muscles, unable to console her. A cadre of uniformed factory workers appeared, dragging the

semi-conscious attackers from the building. Three others confronted the cardinal, rabbi and imam.

“Help me up,” Terri directed Bai.

Slipping one arm around her waist, Bai supported Terri’s weight. She forced herself erect, glowering at Kieran Leach.

“You hypocrite!” she raged. “One way or another, the lies your kind have propagated over the millennia will be exposed and, sooner or later, humanity will evolve beyond needing people like you to tell them how to live.” Her voice gradually faded. “You’ve wasted a lot of time and money hunting me, and I just want you to know: if you’d practiced the patience you preach so eloquently, you could’ve used the wasted cash to feed all the poor in New York.”

She crumpled in Bai’s arms; Leach rushed to her side.

“What...” he stammered.

Bai spat, “She is dying, and not because of anything you or these men have done.”

The rabbi looked from the cardinal to the imam. “Well, then, we face no further threat from her.”

“There are still the file and the papyrus to be recovered,” protested the cardinal.

The imam placed the envelope of money on a cluttered ledge near Terri.

Leach cradled her hand gently in both his. “Tell me the password, and where you’ve hidden the scroll, and they’ll leave you in peace.”

With her last ounce of strength, she pitched the envelope at Leach’s face. Her contralto dropped to a whisper. “If I believed in such a place, I’d tell you to go to hell.”

The rabbi retrieved the envelope from the floor. “What did she say?”

Bai rumbled, “She said, ‘Go to hell.’” He signaled the workers, who escorted the trio to the exit. Leach lagged behind, repeatedly looking over his shoulder.

Terri’s spine went limp, and Bai stretched her on the concrete. He instructed another employee to summon an ambulance. Terri adamantly shook her head. She clutched at Bai’s hand.

“Look inside... the picture frame,” she gasped. Her chest heaved violently, and her eyes closed.

The factory resumed normal operation after this altercation; Bai returned to the gardener’s cottage. He located the photograph of the deceased young man where Terri had left it on the wooden bench. He examined the glass and the wood closely, eventually removing the cardboard backing. Concealed within, the ancient papyrus was sealed inside a plastic sheet protector. The password and

encryption code for the computer file containing all the anthropologist's research were scrawled on an electric blue sticky note.

The Madwoman's Keeper

It could be said they saw eye-to-eye, but only from a physical perspective. He stood her equal in height; beyond that...

Which is why so many questioned his decision to work for her.

The day he emptied his desk at NASA, his department supervisor appeared on the threshold of the office. "I haven't turned in your resignation paperwork yet. You can still reconsider."

"I won't. This is too good an opportunity to let slip away."

"You won't even be working in your chosen field. You'll be little more than a flunkie, answering to the whims of a..."

Charles Wyvern watched the man's face contort as he struggled to find the right description. "Crazy woman?" he supplied.

"To put it mildly," his boss agreed.

"I'm willing to give it a try, nonetheless, and see what happens."

"We'll be sorry to lose you. You were one of the best aeronautical engineers I've worked with in the last 20 years."

"I appreciate the compliment."

Not everyone was so complimentary.

"Yes, it's a fine organization," said his wife, more than once. "It has an excellent reputation for fairness and innovation. But, that woman would drive a saint to drink! You're being a fool!"

"She's not so bad," he countered. "She's just eccentric."

"Insane, you mean. Open your eyes for once! You're endangering the security and well-being of the entire family!"

Charles smiled placatingly, letting the mother of his four children have the last word. He selected a cigar from the glass humidor on the coffee table and walked through the French doors to have a smoke on the deck, while the sun set over the river winding twenty feet below.

He saw no risk in this career move. From the moment he'd walked into the rambling one-story brick complex in the suburbs - its innocuous exterior concealing a phenomenal secret - he knew he had to become part of their team. The interview with his prospective employer was held in the middle of an open air, Japanese-style garden, of which every office had a view from full-length windows.

"We hold most of our meetings out here," explained the human resources director as they strolled flagstone paths between expertly landscaped shrubs and flowers. "Even in the rain."

"In the rain?" Charles echoed.

“She put an incredible amount of thought into every aspect of the building, and the business.” A switch on a remote control unit activated a plexiglass roof, which slowly created a dome over the entire garden.

“Ingenious!” whispered the applicant.

“She is that. You should see her desk. Only with close examination can a person find the drawers. They’re so cleverly constructed, it’s almost impossible to detect a break in the grain of the wood.”

“Why does she...”

His voice trailed off, and his companion smiled. “It’s been reported she has an I.Q. of 195. She sees even ordinary activities as a challenge for her intellect. Once, she spent a week studying how people climb in and out of their cars, and whipped out a design which is more... body friendly, you could say. Both Ford and Toyota are considering its implementation.”

“Sounds a bit like a young Howard Hughes,” Charles remarked.

The interviewer halted mid-stride. “Oh, don’t ever mention his name in her hearing. A reporter once compared her phenomenal acumen in the business world to that of Hughes. An allusion to similar... mental aberrations followed in the next paragraph. The man was fired from his post the day after the magazine hit newsstands.”

“They accused her of being... unbalanced?”

“I will be completely honest with you, Wyvern. I’ve never met a saner person in my life. She has an unusual and unexpected way of doing things, is all. And she doesn’t play the corporate game.”

“But, to make billions, you have to...”

“She’s proof that you don’t, which is why vacancies within the company are so rare. We are free to speak our minds here, without having to worry about sucking up to management. Our customers are a rather diverse bunch, and they find our approach refreshing.”

“Why hire a COO now?”

The human resources director shrugged. “She announced last month that we need one. We’ve got so many projects in the works, I guess she needs help keeping everything organized.”

“One person can only do so much.”

“You’d be surprised how much *she* can do. Before most of us arrive at 8:00, she’s done a full day’s labor, and more. Never takes a lunch hour, and stays at her desk long after we’ve all gone home.”

Charles was intrigued by the picture painted of the company’s owner. That first interview concluded, he waited anxiously for a call scheduling a second

meeting. When the phone did ring two weeks later, he'd all but forgotten about the job he'd never really intended to apply for - he'd held in his position at NASA for ten years, and wasn't really looking for something else.

"Do you like donuts?" a husky contralto asked.

The question took him aback as salutations go. "Yeah. Sure."

"Chocolate or glazed?"

"Either."

"You bring the coffee, and I'll have the donuts ready. I take mine with two sugars."

"Um. What time?"

"Six AM, of course."

Only then did he realize who the unidentified caller was. Before he could say, "See you then," the connection was broken.

The darkly paneled walls of Severina Huber's office were accented with numerous and bizarre mementos from a youth spent traveling. Her father had been undercover CIA, posing as a wealthy diamond merchant. His only daughter had studied in Rome, Australia and Japan, summered fishing on Thunder Bay in Canada, skied the Alps, climbed Everest, and officiated at the Olympics in Moscow. Most of the research for her doctoral thesis was done first-hand among the indigenous tribes of the Amazon basin - a paper she never bothered to defend.

He'd learned these tidbits from a *Rolling Stone* article about a garage band of now-ex-employees and their meteoric rise to fame, thanks to her sponsorship. He recognized her from the lone image caught by the magazine photographer - another prohibition strongly enforced against cameras in her presence - though her short, unkempt, curly black hair had begun to gray in recent years. Dressed in a tie-dyed t-shirt, jeans, wool socks and Birkenstock sandals, she reminded him of a hippie from the 60s. Wiry, and exuding a nervous energy, her brown eyes scanned his Armani suit before turning toward the mysterious mahogany desk.

"I don't see on your resumé you're ex-military," she began, offering him a tray of still-warm Krispy Kremes.

"What makes you think I'm ex-military?" prodded Charles.

"Not many guys wear their hair that short, unless they got used to it in the service."

She plucked the gold-rimmed spectacles off his face with the deftness of a pick-pocket, inspecting them closely. "You ever wear contacts?"

"No."

"We're experimenting with an ultra-thin polymer which will reduce lens thickness by 80 percent," she declared.

“One of many projects, from what I’ve heard.”

She paused and scrutinized him intently. “Indeed. So, you’ve done your homework on us, have you?”

“There’s not much available, to be truthful.”

“Intentionally so. Not that I’d care so much about corporate espionage, since all my designs are trademarked and copyrighted before the majority of employees ever see them, but the man on the street hasn’t the slightest conception of what goes on here. If the media caught wind that we have explosive materials on site, or dangerous chemicals - all handled per OSHA regulations, mind you - they’d still raise a stink, even though we’re only using them in controlled experiments.”

One thing Charles noticed: she spoke with a rapidity requiring the utmost attention to keep up with her train of thought. Already, he felt exhausted, and simultaneously exhilarated. He finally took a bite of the donut he’d been holding, and sat in the chair to which she pointed.

“Your job would entail monitoring corporate security and progress on various development projects. Everyone in the building would answer to you, except for me. I would rely upon you to give me honest feedback about both important and trivial matters - everything from the annual employee picnic to the latest top secret government contract.”

In that, she did not lie. His first Monday in the expansive suite adjacent to her office, he found a series of meetings scheduled, at which he would preside. She attended the gatherings, seated with the rest of the respective departmental staff on plump cushions in the garden - an uncomfortable position for Charles’ inflexible legs. She stared at him throughout, ever so much resembling a marble statue - unblinking, barely breathing.

Her outward demeanor startling enough, he soon discovered how her mind functioned. With all the technology of the 21st century at her command, she never summoned anyone into her presence. She would walk to a particular office and knock or, if the matter were urgent, holler down the corridor for them to join her outdoors.

In such a laid-back atmosphere, Charles accomplished much pulling together a comprehensive picture of the company’s current and future growth. From the medical field to transportation, music and films to agriculture, the ten-acre facility touched the lives of millions world-wide, with the potential to double or triple its realm of influence and impact in the coming decade.

When he returned from lunch with his wife one afternoon, the report he’d been expecting from the military equipment research and development group lay

on his blotter. Stretched out on the Edwardian-style sofa, he read the proposal with enthusiasm. An odd plunking noise, however, distracted him half-way through the document. Its tone different from dripping water, his curiosity was aroused. He set aside the report and ventured out to the garden.

A bit louder amongst the flora, he still couldn't trace its origins. He moved past the various offices, receiving cheery greetings from the employees, but finding nothing.

Finally, he slid open the glass panel into Severina's office. No lights burned; she'd gone to lunch, Charles assumed. Yet, here the steady beat was most audible. It seemed to be vibrating the paneling.

Switching on the crystal chandelier, he inspected the smooth wood section by section. In the far corner, behind her desk, he felt an indentation; a door popped inward.

He peered through the crack into a stark chamber. The walls white-washed, only a twin bed and spinet piano could be seen. Seated on the bench, she repeatedly hit the same black key.

To interrupt, or not interrupt? That was the question. Her vacant stare concerned him, nonetheless, so he stepped into the room. "Is everything okay?"

"Don't you hear it?" she grumbled. "It's off pitch."

Not knowing how to respond, Charles remained silent.

She persisted, "I called you two hours ago. Where are your tools?"

"I..."

"Come. Play. You'll see I'm right."

She rose and signaled him to take her place. There was no excuse for her not to recognize him, but somehow...

"Play!"

He'd retained enough memory of childhood piano lessons to form a few minor chords. He heard nothing off-key. "It sounds fine to me."

"Nonsense!" She shoved him aside and ran a chromatic scale up the entire keyboard. "The humid summer is taking its toll on the frame. If it's one lesson my father taught me: entropy happens. Her head swiveled toward him, then, and the expressionless cast of her narrow face caused him to involuntarily shudder.

"Worst of all: the entropy of the human mind."

Charles excused himself politely and left the room, unconcerned whether the door closed properly or not. En route to the human resources office, he wondered if - five minutes later - she would remember he'd been there at all.

Seated across from the department's director, Charles asked, "Are all employees required to have an annual physical?"

“Not all. Certain departments, based upon the sensitive nature of their work.”

“What about for insurance purposes? Is senior management obligated to have regular check-ups?”

“No, that would only apply to Mrs. Huber.”

“How often does the doctor see her?”

“Actually, he hasn’t been ‘round for six months or so. She keeps rescheduling the appointment.”

As Charles suspected. “I’ve noticed she’s rather pale. Does she get out much?”

“I’ve been here seven years next month, and I’ve never seen her leave the building.”

“What?”

“She has a comfortable apartment which connects to her office. She feels its safer for someone to be on the premises at all times...”

“That’s why security guards patrol the grounds,” muttered Charles. “Have you ever seen this apartment?”

“No one has. We respect her private space.”

“Doesn’t she go grocery shopping, or anything?”

The human resources director chuckled. “A woman in her position? That would be like the Queen of England pushing a cart through Wal-Mart.”

“The Queen doesn’t sequester herself inside the walls of one palace and never leave,” Charles stated ominously. Thanking his colleague, he made his exit, positive something was terribly wrong.

Maybe his wife had been right.

“I’ve been hunting high and low for you, Charlie,” Severina chided in a perfectly normal voice as he approached his office. “Have you seen the R&D report?”

Taken aback, he stammered, “I’m not quite through reading it.”

“Be quick about it. We’ve got to submit it before 5:00.”

Passing through the outer office, where his secretary busily typed on the computer, Charles repeatedly glanced over his shoulder, while Severina stared after him. Did she know what had happened, or didn’t she?

“She’s gone,” whispered Janet.

Charles stopped. “Eh?”

“She does that to people. Watching them like that. She means no offense.”

“All the time?”

“Not all the time. Now and then. If I believed in werewolves and the like, I’d guess it had something to do with the full moon.”

In an effort to encourage confidentiality, Charles drew one of the waiting-area chairs up to her desk. “Explain.”

“You should grasp by now that Mrs. Huber lives by her own rules,” the youngish red-head commented.

“There can be no doubt.”

“Every now and again, she becomes... erratic in her behavior.”

“Erratic, how?”

“In the middle of a perfectly coherent conversation, she’ll stop talking altogether, or abruptly change the subject.”

His fears were coming true. “What else?”

“She’s been seen by the night shift, wandering the halls, carrying a candle and calling for her dog.”

“She doesn’t have a dog, does she?”

“Not any more. He died ten years ago.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“Since I was a kid. I got lucky. My dad was head of the music division, and got me in to do the filing during my summer vacations. Mrs. Huber paid every cent of my college tuition, and hired me full time when I graduated.”

“Has her condition worsened over the years?”

“Actually, it’s about the same. She’s always been a strange fish, but the people who work for her are as loyal as the day is long. And she’s very good to them.”

“Except when she’s...”

“Even then, she’s never hurt anyone. It’s as if her mind goes blank for short periods. If I were a doctor, I’d be testing her for Alzheimer’s.”

“But, she won’t see a doctor.”

“She’s funny that way. Know what it says in her living will?”

“How would *you* know what it says in her living will?”

“I typed it up when her lawyer insisted she have one on file.”

Logical, Charles admitted silently. “What does it say?”

“If she’s diagnosed with cancer, or any terminal disease, she’s not to receive any life support or medical treatment.”

“What about psychological illness?”

“No way! She’s a genius!”

“Geniuses are usually the first ones to crack.”

Janet squinted at him. “That almost makes sense, then.”

“What?”

“Why they hired you.”

“Huh?”

“I was taking the minutes at the board meeting when they voted to hire a COO. Mrs. Huber was vehemently opposed to the idea. She got pissed and came back inside.”

“What, even the board meetings are held in the garden?”

“Supposed to keep everybody calm, smelling the flowers and all. Anyway, the board members voted unanimously to create the position of COO or, as they called it, the ‘madwoman’s keeper’.”

Charles leaned back on the chair. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. You’re essentially the front man to keep the world from finding out about her...”

“Insanity?”

“Or Alzheimer’s.”

The conversation ended there, when a shrill “Charlie!” echoed along the corridor. He continued into his office, grabbed the R&D report and hurried to the garden.

“That’s not why I called you,” Severina smiled weakly. “Something needs to be done about building security.”

“How so?”

“People can waltz in and out of here as they please, and it’s potentially dangerous.”

Charles masked his feelings and bit his lip. In order to get into the complex, employees needed a photo badge, and access codes for the computerized door locks.

“As we speak, there’s a piano tuner wandering somewhere, and Lord knows what damage he could cause.”

“A piano tuner?”

“He was in my room an hour ago, but he sneaked out when I wasn’t looking. There’s no record of him ever leaving, because the surveillance tapes aren’t properly maintained.”

“Mrs. Huber, there was no piano tuner.”

“I called one this morning.”

“Then, he hasn’t yet come. I was in your room an hour ago.”

“Impossible! Employees aren’t allowed in my room.”

“It was an accident, and I apologize. I didn’t realize you had an apartment here, and I heard noises...”

“Impossible,” she murmured. “Do not lie to me.”

Charles had enough college-level psychology to realize this situation might become explosive if Severina’s personal viewpoint were too strongly disputed. He conceded, “I’ll have all departments put on alert. If the piano tuner is found, he’ll be searched thoroughly before being ejected from the building.”

“Good.” She increased her pace along the path, as he slowed.

“Remember, there’s a board meeting tomorrow morning.”

An opportunity for him to tender his immediate resignation proved the thought which instantaneously popped into his head. Suggesting the collection of industry leaders and politicians insist she subject herself to a complete physical and mental examination came second.

A spectator at his daughter’s little league softball game that evening, Charles paid little mind to the score or the key plays. He’d already called his former boss at NASA, who confirmed the position he’d held had not yet been filled, and there was a good possibility the whole ordeal could be written off as a temporary leave of absence, if he made his decision by the end of the week

The board was already feasting on donuts and coffee when he emerged in the garden the next day. “I thought the meeting wasn’t scheduled until 8:30.”

“That’s what we told Mrs. Huber,” replied the local congressman. “We wanted to speak with you privately.”

He hadn’t slept well, and wasn’t in the best of moods. Sarcastically, he challenged, “So, the madwoman’s keeper is entitled to an opinion?”

“We don’t deal with her day-in, day-out,” the president of a prestigious university said, running nervous fingers through her blonde locks. “We’ve been hearing stories, but want a more... experienced assessment.”

“I’m not a psychologist,” asserted Charles. “I’m a businessman.”

“That’s what we mean. From a business perspective, is Mrs. Huber a danger?”

“You mean, can she destroy the business?” Charles snorted. “I’ve known saner people who’ve run their companies into the ground. One main asset Mrs. Huber enjoys is the intense loyalty of her employees. Unless she were to actually harm herself or someone else, I don’t foresee anything changing within these walls.”

“Then, you agree to stay?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“We’ll double your salary,” offered a retired movie producer.

“Money has nothing to do with it.”

“Then, what?”

“The results of her physical and mental assessment will determine what steps need to be taken.”

“She’ll never submit!” the congressman objected.

“Then, she must be forced.”

When the vote was taken, all agreed the move was necessary. None dared look at Severina when she appeared a short while later for the “official” board meeting.

“So, you think I’m mad,” came the harsh accusation after the gathering had dispersed.

“No,” Charles assured her. “It’s important to be certain you’re in good health - body, mind and spirit.”

“You sound like one of those quack doctors on the infomercials.”

“Humor me. If you trust me enough to run your business, trust me in this.”

“As the madwoman’s keeper, it’s your task to cajole me and keep me happy, is that it?”

“I would not insult you by doing that. I don’t see myself as your keeper. I didn’t initiate the term. I’m just doing the job you hired me to do, and that’s to keep the business on a solid foundation with an eye toward future growth.”

She suddenly appeared quite tired. He caught her as her knees buckled and settled her on his office sofa. Bringing her a glass of water, she drank greedily.

“You know, I haven’t slept through the night for months,” she confessed. “I live on peanut butter and jelly... and donuts.”

“See the doctor, then, and we’ll get you where you can sleep and eat, and be well.”

Eventually, she was able to stand unaided, and left his office with a gentle pat on his arm. He settled behind his desk after the door closed, knowing he was bound to remain and help one of the era’s great geniuses continue her reign among the world’s premier business leaders.

Even if a host of doctors diagnosed her as a raving paranoiac.

Better to be mad and keep life interesting, after all, than sane and bored.

Left in Her Wake

An observer of humanity by virtue of her profession, Jenna Carey discovered the Irish take three aspects of life seriously: their drinking, their music and their privacy. On an extended walking tour of the Emerald Isle, she had spent many a night in village pubs, listening and watching - and being watched by suspicious, rheumy eyes set above drink-reddened noses.

In most locales, after a few successive evenings quietly nursing a double whiskey at a corner table, an off-duty Garda would approach and ask her business.

"I'm on vacation," the plain, bespectacled woman would reply.

She came to expect the next question. "You have family hereabouts?"

"Not a living soul."

"Where are you lodging?"

"A little cottage down by the river." A standard answer, which they didn't usually make an effort to verify.

Thus assured she wasn't a vagrant or a troublemaker, they would leave her alone. The next morning, she would continue her journey, stopping in another town.

An exercise in psychology, for the most part, Jenna relished the sideways glances and hushed tones which claimed the room when a stranger entered the premises. The publican always put on a friendly face, hoping the tourist would spend a decent sum, but the regulars would clearly express their offense at the intrusion through their body language.

Meanwhile, she relaxed in the shadows near the turf fire, chuckling under her breath at the insecurity of the species.

Her mirth erupted fully one particular Tuesday evening in Tuam, north of Galway. Jenna already recognized the faces of the steady customers occupying stools at the polished walnut bar on her third visit to O'Leary's Pub, in Vicar Street. Three construction workers - by the looks of their clothes and calloused hands - huddled together, swapping unsavory stories, while a pair of twenty-something businessmen played games on their cell phones between sips of Guinness. An elderly couple ate dinner at a linen-draped table near the roaring fireplace, no longer in love. A gaggle of college students laughed together at a longer board near the door.

Then, he crossed the threshold.

Wearing a worn, heavy wool sweater and jeans, he might have been another laborer, and was heartily greeted by that trio, as well as the others. He

ordered a pint of stout, but before the bar maid had the chance to fill his glass, the pub's owner drew him aside.

Supposedly discreet gestures brought a smirk to Jenna's thin lips - they were discussing her presence. The newcomer shook his close-cropped sandy head in refusal more than once, then, tiring of the exchange, agreed to the request made of him.

His narrow face betrayed discomfort as he drained his glass, then accepted a second pint and a smaller tumbler of whiskey. With a resigned nod, he approached Jenna's table, holding both.

"May I join you?" came the nervous tenor.

"Sure."

He slid onto the wobbly chair opposite and deposited his burden.

"American?"

"Yes."

"On holiday?"

"You could say that."

"Not really the right season to travel these parts. Summer is best."

"I don't mind."

"You really should have a coat..."

"I do."

"With you, I mean."

"Why don't you stop beating around the bush," Jenna remarked. "What do you want to know?"

"Not me, personally. My curious friends over there."

"Fine. What do *they* want to know?"

"Who you are, and why you're here."

"What gives you the right to ask? You Garda?"

"No. The local curate."

That's when the laughter burst forth like a geyser. "You come to invite me to morning Mass, too?"

"Not necessarily."

"Good." She emptied the whiskey glass in one gulp and shoved it toward him. "On your way, then."

He half-rose, then paused. "You haven't answered my questions."

"To get a few, you have to give a few." Nothing more diverting than debating the clergy, in Jenna's mind. Preferring a philosophical approach to life, rather than filling a pew for an hour each week, she liked to make them think about the tenets they so blindly preached.

He resumed his seat. "I can't go back and admit you told me nothing. They... wouldn't be pleased. So, go ahead."

"Why'd you become a priest?"

"I thought I could do some good in the world."

"What good have you done in this burg?"

He leaned back on the chair. "Besides befriending the residents, not much, frankly."

"At least you're honest. Your turn."

"Your name?"

"Jenna Carey."

"Irish?"

"My great-grandfather was born in County Cork."

He seemed satisfied. "They may not welcome you," he admonished, rising. "But you'll have your peace."

His prediction proved correct. The rest of the evening - and the week - the locals reveled in their stories, music and drink, ignoring her entirely.

Except the priest. The publican's startled greeting when he appeared two nights in a row confirmed he was not a frequent patron of O'Leary's. He mulled over his pint at the bar, brown eyes gazing at her when not focused on the froth floating atop the ale.

The next morning, Jenna glimpsed him at the side door of the stone church, monitoring her progress through the adjacent graveyard. Noontime found him peering at her through the window of a café on The Mall. If he'd been sent to spy on her by his pub companions, he wasn't very circumspect.

He made his intentions clear Friday afternoon. She was enjoying the warm sun on a park bench, when he strolled up and deposited his lanky frame beside her.

"You're an odd duck," he began. "I'm worried about you."

"No need."

"Where do you hide your sleeping bag while you roam the streets?"

Impressed by this bit of detective work, Jenna bit back a caustic comment. "There are plenty of places."

"Some of those places are private property, and the owners could have you charged with trespassing. Have you no money for a room?"

"I like the outdoors."

"Not when the temperature drops below freezing..."

"Remember, if I answer questions, you must do likewise. My turn. What's *your* name?"

"Liam Fitzgerald."

"It suits you."

"Thanks, I guess. Just this morning after Mass, two people offered their spare rooms at no charge for tonight - you can take your pick. It's going to storm, and the winds will be gusting hurricane strength."

"Two people? That's what I call a small congregation."

He averted his gaze.

"Such kindness is appreciated, but I have to decline." Jenna turned her attention to a pair of crows fighting over a dead squirrel beneath a pine tree.

Defeated, Fitzgerald shuffled back to the church.

Such behavior tickled Jenna's funny bone anew. Nothing intrigued a man more - or bruised his ego - than an independent woman.

The clouds rolled in at dusk, and the gentle breeze accelerated to gale force. O'Leary's was all but deserted, even those who normally stopped by for their daily reviver content to stay dry at home. Jenna sniffed the stagnant air, tinged with cigar smoke and stale beer. A little quiet was refreshing.

When the priest blew through the door, none of the handful at the bar thought it odd when he joined the slender American in her corner. The publican tossed him a bar towel, and he dried his dripping face and hair before dropping onto the chair.

"You can't still be considering sleeping outdoors tonight," he greeted.

"It's what I do."

"Do you, at least, have a tent for shelter?"

"I did, but that storm a few weeks ago ripped it to shreds."

"I have one I insist you let me loan you, then. That is, if you won't accept the hospitality of my sofa."

"The tent, I'll accept."

They remained at the pub until last call - discussing personality traits of Tuam residents and Ireland, in general - both hoping the weather would calm. Conditions seemed only to worsen, however, and they eventually splashed down the dark lane to the tiny brick house behind St. Andrew's Church, arriving soaked to the bone.

Fitzgerald yanked a stack of towels from a cupboard and offered Jenna one. "If you prefer, you can jump in the shower, while I dry your clothes..."

"No, thanks."

"A cup of coffee, at least, or tea?"

"Hot chocolate?"

He searched the compact kitchen and found a tin of cocoa, sugar and pulled a bottle of milk from the refrigerator. While he prepared her drink, she studied the artwork in the rustic living room.

“I would've thought you'd have icons or reproductions from the Sistine Chapel on the walls, not Monet and Degas,” she mocked.

“The parish sold this house a couple months ago, to finance a new roof for the church. I'm only living here until my apartment is ready, a couple blocks up the street.”

“So, you're new to Tuam?”

He delivered a steaming mug. “Only been here five weeks.”

“Not fresh from the seminary?”

“Do I look that young?”

“Men become priests at all ages now. Some see it as a second career.”

“Maybe in America. Here, the few who do answer the call are usually ordained by their mid-twenties.”

“And do they stay faithful to that calling?”

“Some do, some don't.”

Jenna swallowed a mouthful of the warming sweetness. “Back in the States, three different priests broke their vows because of me.”

“They must have been weak men.”

“No weaker than any others. Knowing me raised doubts in their minds about their beliefs, and their vocation. Rather than seek consolation on their knees, they ran to the arms of the very one who created the confusion in the first place. The experience tore them to shreds, mentally and spiritually.”

“Priests aren't immune from falling in love.”

“Love is a myth, Liam. Sex ensures the perpetuation of the species and provides physical pleasure. Emotional entanglements only cause pain.” He glared at her, and she grinned. “You're aching to prove me wrong, but there's no time. I should be going.”

Jenna strode toward the door, Fitzgerald on her heels. “You can't go. It's still pouring...”

“How will you stop me?”

For a moment, he said nothing, didn't move. Her hand on the knob, though, convinced him she wasn't merely taunting him. He grabbed her shoulders, spun her around and kissed her roughly.

The town had been washed clean by sunrise, and Jenna departed Liam Fitzgerald's dwelling before he could wake and offer her breakfast. She retrieved her backpack and sleeping bag from their hiding place behind an alley trash bin, and headed east, a satisfied smile lighting her face.

The blue compact braked beside her on a dusty roadway two days later. She hadn't actively been trying to hitch a ride, and assumed the driver was just

being kind. Before she could bend to the passenger window to decline, Liam Fitzgerald leapt from the other door and confronted her.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he spat.

“Enjoying my vacation.”

“Do you know how much trouble I’m in because of you? And you just run off...”

“I didn’t run. I can’t run. Bad knees.”

Her levity aggravated him further. “One of my conscientious neighbors happened to see you leave Saturday morning, and promptly phoned my archbishop. He showed up at Mass on Sunday, demanding an explanation. I told him the truth, but he didn’t believe me.”

She snickered.

“What’s so funny?”

“Doesn’t it strike you as humorous how the people who are supposed to live most righteously are the ones who judge their fellows most harshly?”

“Only because they know we’re human, and prone to... sin.”

“Sin and guilt are myths, same as love,” Jenna expounded. “Life is the only reality, and should be lived to the full.”

“Is that why you seduced me, and ruined my future?”

“I’m no fashion model. I’m not even what most men would consider pretty. No one would ever believe I seduced you.”

“Then, you’re a witch, or a succubus.”

“More myths. Why are your kind not given a thorough grounding in reality?”

“Right now, I don’t know, and I don’t care. Right now, I’ve got to take you back to Tuam, so you can corroborate my story for the archbishop.”

“What story?”

“That we met just a few days ago, and spent only the one night together.”

“What, he thinks we’ve had a prolonged affair?”

Fitzgerald nodded.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to stand up to him alone? To tell him where to go when he denounces you as a liar? How can you remain loyal to an institution which treats its own like errant children? Instead of sustaining and encouraging you in the work you’re assigned, their intent is to humiliate and demoralize you...”

“Please, Jenna.”

She sighed. “Are you going to attempt to restrict my behavior, if I do agree to meet this man?”

“Would it do any good?”

“You’re learning, at least.”

“I will say this: the archbishop is... accustomed to being obeyed without argument. If you walk in ready to butt heads with him, you’ll do neither of us any good service.”

“I promise, I’ll be pleasant and polite, until he crosses a certain line I let no man violate.”

Unslinging the backpack and sleeping bag from her shoulders, she handed them to the priest. He tossed them in the rear seat, then hurried around to the other side. Performing a U-turn on the deserted by-way, he pressed the accelerator to the floor.

“I’ll never get used to being on the wrong side of the road,” Jenna commented. “It makes me feel like I’m going to die in a head-on collision.”

“I spent a week in Chicago a few years back,” retorted Fitzgerald. “I felt the same way about how Americans drive.”

“You’re lucky you’ve never been to Los Angeles.”

Fitzgerald didn’t ask for an explanation, and the rest of the journey passed in silence. Braking on Church Street near his temporary quarters an hour later, he left Jenna’s bags in the car and ushered her inside.

The archbishop rose from the green plaid sofa when they entered the living room. He, like Fitzgerald, wore casual clothes. He might’ve been a sportsman taking a break from fishing or hunting, with his paunch and florid countenance - an aspect Jenna had noticed about every Irish man over fifty since she’d come to the Emerald Isle. A steady diet of alcohol over many years caused the effect, she knew. She’d watched her father die that way.

“Is this the woman in question?” snarled the cleric.

“Yes, Your Grace. This is Jenna Carey. Jenna, this is Archbishop Ian O’Banion.”

“I can’t say I’m glad to meet you, Miss Carey. Your presence in Tuam is responsible for what may prove to be irreparable damage to the local Church.”

“The Church’s reputation, on the whole, was irreparably damaged centuries ago,” Jenna snorted.

Fitzgerald laid a warning hand on her sleeve.

“The present generation is making great strides to correct past... indiscretions,” said O’Banion. “Liam, why don’t you make some tea?”

An obvious ploy to get the priest out of the room, Fitzgerald nonetheless complied. O’Banion resumed his seat, waving Jenna to the matching armchair.

“How long have you lived in Ireland?”

“I don’t live here, technically,” she responded. “I’m on a year’s sabbatical from university.”

“Isn’t it common those on sabbatical spend the time doing research?”
“What makes you think I’m not?”
“Liam told me he met you in a pub.”
She marveled at the stupidity of his interrogation. “Researchers need to eat.”
“He also mentioned you’ve been spending a lot of time in pubs around the county.”
“Many counties, as a matter of fact. I started from Dublin, and have walked a good portion of the island.”
“Why?”
“It’s what I want to do.”
“It’s a waste of time.”
“How so?”
“Wandering hither and yon, with no purpose - you’re inviting the devil to be your traveling companion.”
“I have a purpose. I’m studying humanity.”
“There are thousands of books...”
“Some of which I’ve written, Bishop. There is more to be discovered about human behavior in a pub than from rehashed garbage on the printed page.”
“You’re a psychologist?”
“A philosopher.”
“Then what, philosophically, was your purpose in dragging Father Fitzgerald to bed with you?”
“A point needed to be made.”
“What point?”
“From his perspective: love is not a myth, and priests do fall in love. From my perspective: sex is merely sex.”
Fitzgerald heard this, returning with a tray of stained mugs and a ceramic tea pot. He halted in mid-stride. “Jenna!”
O’Banion ignored him. “Who ended up proving their point?”
“Both of us,” she answered.
“Is that true, Liam?” queried O’Banion. “Are you in love with Miss Carey?”
Jenna interspersed, “Infatuated, perhaps. I have that effect on men of the cloth. The fact I am secure in my lifestyle and my beliefs irritates and attracts them. They admire me, in some ways, because they cannot break free of the dogmatic shackles confining them in a lightless dungeon of futility.”
“Is this true, Liam?” O’Banion repeated.
Befuddled, the priest shrugged his bony shoulders.

“See? He doesn’t know his own mind,” declared Jenna. “I tell you what: let him travel with me for two weeks. He’ll either come back to you totally rededicated to his vocation, or seek a dispensation.”

“No.” Not the bishop who spoke, but Fitzgerald. “I couldn’t.”

O’Banion’s bronze head tilted quizzically. “Why not, Liam?”

“There’s always been one Gospel passage I feared having to emulate: when Christ sent out his Apostles by twos, with no provisions and the mandate to eat what was set before them, and sleep wherever they could. I went hungry as a child, when my dad was unemployed, and we nearly lost our home. As a priest, I don’t have to worry about such matters. To go with her... No. I won’t.”

Jenna favored O’Banion with a triumphant sneer. “If all the curates in your archdiocese express such a deep faith, I pity you, and I feel sorry for their parishioners.” She rose. “Now, since you cost me three days’ travel dragging me back here, I’d appreciate if you’d return me to the quiet dirt road where you found me.”

Fitzgerald retraced his steps to the kitchen with the untouched tray. O’Banion followed Jenna to the door.

“There are many priests who are grounded in their love for Christ and intent on serving His people,” the archbishop assured her.

“Liam Fitzgerald is not one of them. I will tell you this much: the priests who broke their vows with me in the States did so after months of sincere friendship. To succumb after only a few hours... If you do not rid yourself of this man, he will be a source of constant scandal for you.”

“You think so little of me, Jenna?” Fitzgerald whined, snatching his jacket and keys off the coat hook.

“Once you drop me sixty miles south of here, I’ll not think of you at all, except as a statistic in my next research paper.”

“I’m headed south,” stated the archbishop. He’d noticed an almost violent anger smoldering in the priest’s brown eyes. “Allow me to drive you.”

They departed together, leaving Liam Fitzgerald framed in the living room window. Jenna sat beside Ian O’Banion on the stitched leather rear seat of his limousine, content Friday night’s incredibly passionate sex amply compensated for the subsequent loss of her time.

Truth and Beauty

During the 15 years Jill Reed labored to pay off her parents' debts, what leisure time she stole from her days were spent reading in her minimalist, attic studio apartment overlooking the railroad tracks. Her fascination with the duality of the human spirit, and the symbolism of beauty as virtuous and ugliness as evil - when, often, the truth often proved opposite - kept Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* atop the stack holding a place of honor on her night stand.

She also developed a keen sense of observation, often pondering her customers' personalities during long shifts at the coffee shop a block from the state university.

All ages, all types frequented the source of the best java in the moderately-sized city. From unlocking the door at 5:30 am, a steady stream of bodies approached the counter until closing at 10:00 pm.

Jill - an atheist - thanked God the entrance hadn't been fitted with sensors that triggered a bell, chime or buzzer each time it was pushed inward.

She would've gone deaf - or insane - hearing such noise for hours on end.

College students, professors, administrators, staff... along with lawyers, judges, elected politicians, police and fire fighters had specific drink preferences. She'd become acquainted with hundreds of the regulars, enjoying friendly banter as they waited for their orders, while reveling in new faces: parents visiting their offspring, fans attending sporting events.

That's how she met Oliver Roberts, the rather jaded Philosophy 101 instructor. At six feet tall - compared to her 5'6" - she had to look up to him but, these days, many of the younger crowd had surpassed his height, causing him to look up at them.

He had a wrestler's build: broad shoulders, a bull neck, barrel chest, muscular arms. Sometimes, as the evening clientele thinned, she would notice a crowd gathered in the corner away from the comfortable sofas and electric fireplace, engaged in arm wrestling matches - from which Roberts always emerged victorious.

His dark mane never seemed combed; a heavy brow topped intense blue-grey eyes. A slightly bulbous nose hinted at ample alcohol consumption. Thin lips and square jowls gave him a menacing air. Most significant - to Jill, at any rate - were the scars creating an abstract pattern on the left half of his face.

She'd often heard whispered comments about this disfigurement from both men and women alike, after they'd hustled past him, and she scorned their derision.

She'd been born with a deformity, herself, and dealt with insults her entire life.

The most beautiful people could be the most heartless...

And fortune could play the most ridiculous tricks.

The very Tuesday Jill wrote the last check toward her parents' lingering credit card bills, she'd impulsively purchased a lottery ticket at the pharmacy that doubled as a post office. Wednesday morning brought the news she'd matched all the numbers and scored herself \$10 million a year.

The vultures descended once she claimed this windfall: accountants, investment counselors, attorneys intent on "protecting" her from unscrupulous sorts, nonprofits touting their charitable endeavors desperately seeking donations.

Her understanding of the human mind raised laughter in her throat with each phone call or letter received. She banked the lot, not even bothering to quit her job, purchase a new car, or buy a house.

Her boss praised her decision, as she was the most reliable employee on his crew. On the other hand, he regretted when she asked for her hours to be cut by half.

She'd decided to enroll as a freshman at the university.

Delaying her education had been the primary sacrifice she'd made after a sleeping semi driver's tractor-trailer struck Mark and Sarah Reed's Mazda head-on the night before Jill's high school graduation.

She could finally fulfill her dream, not having to worry about applying for grants or student loans.

That's how she ended up in Oliver Roberts' Philosophy 101 class for the fall semester.

She limped into the room that first day, almost late because - though she'd lived near the campus for three decades - she'd never been inside any of the buildings and had gotten lost. The genuine freshman, 18 years old or thereabouts, snickered openly at her unbalanced gait.

Roberts whisked in from the hall as she settled on a molded plastic seat in the back row; silence fell like a hammer. In a casual setting, he might be jovial and loquacious; his demeanor during work hours reflected all business.

Naturally, Jill was last to leave the chamber when the session ended. Roberts checked email on a laptop at the podium as she navigated desks that had been shoved out of alignment by fleeing students.

He glanced up at her slow progress. "Ah, Jill!" he hailed, his basso profundo less stern than five minutes previous, when he reminded the group of their reading assignment. "Need some help?"

“No, thanks.”

He rose, easily removing obstacles in her path. “I’d seen your name on my roster, but didn’t realize who you were until I recognized you, cowering behind the football players.”

“Not cowering, Ollie - or should I call you ‘Professor’? It was the only empty spot when I got here.”

He grinned, skewing his scars into an alternate configuration. “If it’ll be easier, I can switch your place to the front.”

“Not necessary, but I appreciate the gesture.”

“It’s not just a gesture,” he countered, urging her onto the nearest chair and sitting opposite. “I’ve watched you for years, busting your ass every day while in tremendous agony. I’ve heard the jokes too many of the insensitive jerks make about you after you’ve served their coffee with the sweetest smile imaginable. You deserve the best...”

“I could say the same about you.”

Long, thick fingers stroked the scars. “Yeah, I know.”

“How’d it happen, if I may ask?” Jill ventured.

He chuckled. “Sheer stupidity on my part, actually. My twin brother became an alcoholic well before his twenty-first birthday. On summer break, he spent most of his evenings at the neighborhood tavern. Mom would send me down around midnight to fetch him home. One night, he got into an argument with another drunk at the bar. The guy threatened him with a broken bottle. When Reg ducked, I caught it full in the face.”

“Oh, wow,” Jill gasped.

“Some good came out of it, though.”

“How so?”

“Reg stopped drinking, and hasn’t touched a drop since.”

“I’d guess that you didn’t?”

“Up to that point, I hadn’t. The pain from my injuries required... medication. I gave it up, though, when I had a bit of a health scare awhile back.” He scrutinized her rather awkward posture. “What about you?”

Her turn to snicker. “I was born with a misshapen pelvis, my left leg shorter than my right. The orthopedic surgeon my folks consulted could’ve corrected the problem surgically, but they didn’t have enough money to cover the expense. So, I limp.”

“It’s impressive you find humor in it...”

“Oh, the humorous part is: from the time I learned to walk, I wanted to be a ballet dancer.”

Roberts glimpsed the tear that broke from the corner of her eye and trickled down her slender nose. He reached out and drew her into a gentle embrace. He soothed, "The world can be so cruel..."

"And people, even moreso," she muttered into his starched shirt.

He waited patiently until Jill recovered her composure, running trembling digits through her sandy curls as she straightened. "I must look a fright."

"You look fine." He stood, towering over her. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

They both laughed.

The pair's relationship, going forward, transformed from that of barista and customer or professor and student to close friends. Besides seeing each other three days a week for academic purposes, Roberts spent even more hours at the coffee shop, remaining after the arm wrestling bouts until Jill ended her shift, then walking her home.

They discussed more personal philosophies than found in textbooks. Roberts, for his part, despised teaching - the students retained only what was needed to pass the next quiz or exam. They never applied what they learned to their own lives.

"Why didn't you pick another career?" Jill queried.

"Again, stupidity. I'd earned an undergrad degree, a master's, my Ph.D. and done a post-doc gig. By then, there wasn't any other choice but to accept a tenure-track post."

"You're a fantastic teacher. Isn't the point: if you have an impact on just one kid..."

"Yeah, but I don't see where I have."

"You have, on me."

"You're no kid."

"I'm a... throwback. I'm doing now what I should've done long ago."

"But, you took responsibility for your dad's excessive spending and made things right. You should be very proud of that. These days, it doesn't happen much. The majority of kids are too willing to take, take, take, and when it comes time to give, they bolt."

"Thanks, Ollie. That helps."

By Thanksgiving break, rumblings circulated - especially at the coffee shop - that changes were in the offing. As finals week commenced, Roberts was summoned to the dean's office for a conference.

Jill couldn't mistake his dejection when he arrived mid-afternoon and ordered a large double latte.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“Later.”

Her stomach in knots until 8:00, she spilled three drinks and earned some nasty looks from the manager. Once she punched the time clock, she signaled Roberts to meet her outside.

They strolled to the park, their coats scant protection from chill winter winds.

“Can’t we go somewhere warm?” Roberts hinted.

“We can go to my place, or yours.”

“Either. It doesn’t matter.”

Jill halted, glaring at him. “We’ve joked about it often enough, but you know it’s against the code of conduct...”

“They’re not renewing my contract,” he stated bluntly.

She sank on a frosty bench, unconcerned if the moisture would soak her jeans. “Oh, God. Why?”

“The provost believes you and I have been... engaging in an illicit affair.”

The giggle welled in her throat and broke forth as a raucous guffaw. “To hell with them!”

The whole scenario reenforced her conclusions that even beautiful sorts, influential sorts, were shallow and, in order to gratify their own self-importance, imposed their evil presumptions on the innocent.

“But, Jill, if they give me the boot, I’ll have a really tough time finding another teaching job...”

“To hell with that, too!” She leapt upright. “Why waste your knowledge on dolts who don’t value it?”

He turned away. “I never thought you’d mock me...”

Due to their height difference, she climbed on the wooden bench slats and tugged his parka toward her. “I’m not mocking you. I’m liberating you.”

She planted a kiss on his lips that sparked a passionate response. Before Christmas, they had relieved themselves of their respective apartments and furnishings, relocating to a 200-acre ranch in a remote section of Oregon, where they interacted minimally with others, bred horses and reveled in each other, along with the natural beauty of their surroundings.

That beauty, too, could be cruel - with snow storms, scorching heat and blistering winds - but the underlying truth that these weather patterns were retaliation for the devastation humanity had wrought on the planet left the couple content to live fully each moment of the day.

The Billet

Ask any Scot of the mid-16th century, and they'd profess their frustration with the English, the taxes, the battles. Those on the eastern coast - just to keep a (leaky) roof over their heads and food in their stomachs - engaged in wholesale smuggling, constantly in danger of being apprehended by King Henry VIII's soldiers who patrolled the cliffs, day and night.

Squads billeted themselves in the villages, thoroughly unwelcome in the cottages and barns. Some tenant farmers took it upon themselves to murder the interlopers in their sleep, only to be hanged the next morning in the public square when the corpses were discovered.

Sally MacBride watched her father be treated so, though his neighbors had wielded the daggers thrust into the slumbering bodies. With her mother dead in childbirth years earlier, the unexpected orphan scarcely had time to pack a few meager belongings before being evicted from the only home she'd known - and not much of one, at that.

Fleeing threats from a sergeant and his minions, she burst onto the street and into the arms of a rather scraggly figure.

His red doublet and trunks tattered and faded atop broad shoulders and a barrel chest, his hose sported holes at the knees, brown leather boots scuffed. A dark mop hung lank over a heavy brow; his chin whiskers needed trimming. Piercing blue-grey eyes, a bulbous nose and thin lips blended with deep scars on his left cheek.

"Why the hurry, girl?" chided his deep, very English bass.

Flustered, all she could do is point to the men on the threshold, muskets on their shoulders.

"What's the problem here?" he directed at the sergeant.

The terse retort, "We have confiscated this property."

"Is that so?"

"Its occupant was convicted and executed for treason..."

"He was innocent!" the girl wept.

A soothing arm encompassed her. "Quiet, girl."

She recovered her composure as the discussion continued, no hope of reclaiming this dwelling since the government granted females no rights of inheritance.

Surprisingly, she was soon ensconced once more in the dim structure, her unwitting protector claiming it for himself - as a captain of the occupying army - and escorting her inside.

“I thank ye, sir,” she gushed, setting her bundle on the warped plank table. “May I serve ye tea?”

“I don’t suppose your father kept any spirits about.” The new master sank on a bench, unfastening a wide, hand-tooled belt and laying his sword on the fireplace mantle.

The jug of locally distilled brew appeared from a cupboard, with a dented metal tankard.

Sally poured a generous portion, which vanished in a single gulp.

Her green eyes widened, impressed. Even her father hadn’t...

“What’s your name, girl?”

She dropped a curtsey. “Sally MacBride, sir.”

“I am Miles Hendon.” He slammed down the tankard, rose and stretched.

“Is there a bed handy?”

She thrust her arm toward a rotting ladder.

“And, where do you sleep?”

Trembling fingers repeated the gesture.

“Come, then. Up with you.”

Her weak soprano squeaked, “Wouldn’t ye like some supper first?”

“I’m that exhausted, girl.”

Having overheard wizened gossips lamenting how the soldiers treated women in their custody, she swallowed hard as she mounted unsteady rungs.

Hendon flopped onto the straw mattress supported by ropes lashed on a primitive frame, leaving Sally to her usual corner. She didn’t dare remove her simple blue dress: the more material between her and this... man, the better.

He snored until dawn, meaning she laid awake through the night. When he roused himself, he demanded breakfast; she prepared biscuits with remnants of the flour and fried the last slice of beef over the open fire.

Coins spilled onto the table before he departed to fulfill his military duties. “Buy a plentiful supply,” he instructed. “When this day is done, I shall be ravenous.”

Shelves emptied at the shops by the British without paying the proprietors, Sally found little on which to spend her bounty. She picked fruit from overgrown trees in the vicinity, and wheedled a pound of flour from the baker, a distant cousin of her mother.

She worried about the lack of meat, until Hendon deposited two large rabbits in her arms upon his return. “We’d intended to shoot some traitors but, when they slipped past our traps, I shot these instead.”

Sally had plenty of experience preparing wild game; she and her father had survived many winters on what he poached. Hendon devoured all but the small portion his hostess carved for herself, draining the jug, as well.

When they retired to the loft, she watched him disrobe, petrified.

“Well, girl? Do you not remove your clothes before bedding down?” he grumbled.

She backed against the slanted wall. “I...”

“Come here.”

This order could not be ignored. She approached with trepidation; he spun her around and started to unlace her bodice.

“Flesh needs airing, to prevent sickness,” he rationalized.

Her frock slid to the floor, and she bit her lip as he assessed her figure.

“You’re shivering, girl. Are you cold?”

Her red tresses bobbed stiffly.

Hendon seized her arm and pulled her beside him on the mattress. The ragged quilt covered them both. “Better?”

“Aye,” she managed.

“G’night, then.”

She presumed his consumption of spirits had intoxicated him sufficiently that... any carnal desires... dissipated. Whispering a thankful prayer, she rolled to her left and dozed.

He didn’t even snore.

The days ran together in this rather dull routine, until the Saturday when Hendon arrived at the cottage in a foul mood.

“What’s happened?” Sally inquired as she poured from the jug he’d brought with him.

“Our regiment is moving south tomorrow.”

Conflicting emotions tightened her youthful features into a scowl.

“Will you be sorry to see me go?”

“Aye, primarily because ye ensured I can keep m’father’s house.”

“No other reason?”

“I’m that grateful for the food and the money...”

“Nothing else?” he persisted.

She couldn’t fathom what he expected her to say.

Rising from the bench, he towered over her slight frame. “Have you no feelings toward me?”

She could only stare into those blue-grey eyes, at a loss.

He lifted her so their mouths met in a fiery kiss. Two partridges roasting over the flames burned to a crisp as he led her to the loft and smothered her with passions he'd restrained for weeks.

At first light, he donned his clothes without a word. She detected regret in his posture, though no remorse plagued her soul.

"Oh, Edith, my dearest," he moaned, sliding into his boots. "After these long years of waiting for you, I never meant to be unfaithful..."

Sally propped herself on one elbow. "Ye are married?"

"No," he barked. "Betrothed, to the most beautiful, loving and tender woman a man could seek to wed."

"Then, why..."

"A man... has needs... urges... And you were here."

She inhaled slowly. "If all I am is just a way to satisfy your lust, then be gone, and good riddance."

No breakfast preceded his departure. In fact, Sally spent the entire day in bed, weeping. She'd planned to take a husband when she came of age, but now - despoiled by a British soldier - what son of the village would seek her hand in marriage? Only one alternative for her future remained...

Sally MacBride did not join the congregation that Sunday for services, so the vicar called round to check her welfare. He found her dangling by a noose from the kitchen rafters.

As they buried her in the church yard, her neighbors blamed the British, and rightly so.