

Twisted
21st Century Stories

by

Eugenia Lucas

Part III

Table of Contents

Lion of the Sea	1
The Madness of Enlightenment	9
The Shirt	20
Tangled Vines	23
Ripples of Truth	40
The Phony	47
Desperate Tactics... ..	55
Riptides of Grief	69
Without Orders	87

Lion of the Sea

“They must be really brave to go out there,” whispered one man.

“Or nuts,” another added, as they milled about the sandy beach and watched wooden skiffs move through the choppy bay waters.

Magda stood among the spectators, and heard the comments. They were probably right, she knew, because the call for volunteers this particular morning had only seen two lads in their 20s step forward. A third was needed, however, and none of the effort’s organizers seemed willing to set an example for the assembly.

How many had died, after all, in recent weeks? The community which lived near the tiny bay on the Oregon-California border had lost count. Newspapers listed the total as “dozens”. That included only those who had ventured out of their own free will. The number of others which had been attacked - while water skiing, fishing or riding jet skis - amounted to far more.

One survivor of a mangled pontoon boat confirmed the creature was not a shark, nor a whale. What manner of beast had invaded this usually peaceful length of Pacific coastline remained unknown.

Not for long, organizers pledged. An oceanographer and a biologist from the University of Oregon had been recruited to monitor the bay, while retired whalers and other hunters had devised an elaborate trap. Attempts to send out unmanned dinghies proved unsuccessful. Somehow, the creature knew whether the boats were occupied or empty. Thus, every day for the past month, three volunteers had set out, essentially serving as bait for the attacker.

“C’mon, folks, we need one more!” shouted portly Avery Bennington, who had introduced himself as the Harbor Chamber of Commerce president, promoter of tourism in the town closest to the bay.

Hundreds of feet retreated on the sand. Magda, mingling with the locals, suddenly found herself exposed.

Why else did I come? she mused. Isn’t this as good a way as any to...

Bennington strode to her and triumphantly held up her hand. “We have our volunteer!” he yelled. She was rushed into the last row boat and pushed onto the water.

It took a lot of strength to gain any momentum using the oars. Moving further from shore, she took up a position south and west of the other two craft, roughly forming a triangle. The hope - of the trap’s creators, at any rate - was to capture the beast as it swam between the three objects, intent on destruction.

At least, the sun was warm, Magda thought, as the boat drifted lazily. As hours passed, the mob on the beach multiplied, she noticed, even though nothing happened. She began to wish she'd brought along a book or a magazine to read, when something stirred in the water.

The first skiff, to her north, was shattered and disappeared beneath the surface so quickly, its occupant had no time to scream for help. Whatever was submerged moved inland toward the second boat. The trap should have been sprung, but the mechanism failed. Recognizing a life cut short, the man in that dinghy dove overboard and swam toward the shallows.

He never made it.

On the sand, organizers were arguing loudly about the cause of the trap's malfunction, blaming each other. Then, one of the spectators hollered, "Look!"

He was pointing toward the bay's south bank, where a stand of spruce trees provided habitat for rabbits, birds, deer and a few bears. It was no animal, though, visible among the greenery. It was a man, quite tall, with a fringe of white hair, and the remnants of a whaling net tangled around his leg. Water dripped from the t-shirt and jeans covering his brawny frame as he struggled to conceal himself in the woods.

Bennington, accompanied by the wiry Harbor police chief and five men who had brought guns to the daily spectacle, captured the fugitive as Magda observed. In fact, they forgot about her, dragging the shackled figure past the throngs and forcing him into a patrol car for the ride back to town.

By the time she secured the boat at the pier, the beach was deserted. So much for her plan.

Hope was not lost, however. When she arrived at the Harbor Inn, a two-story brick hotel dating from the 1890s, a commotion spilled onto Main Street. Edging through the press, many of whom she recognized from the day's events, she overheard snippets of the town's dilemma: no jail.

"You can't keep him here!" cried the bespectacled innkeeper behind the lobby desk.

"There's no other place to maintain a constant guard," reasoned Bennington. "It's only until the county and state investigators get back from that damned convention in Chicago on Monday."

"But, what about the other guests?"

The question brought laughter from the officials, which Magda didn't understand.

Bennington muttered inaudibly, and the innkeeper bowed his head. "All right," he breathed.

Resistant every step of the way, the prisoner - freed of the net - was shoved up a broad marble staircase and along the left balcony to a vacant room. Magda gasped; it was right next to hers!

People began to depart the hotel, excitement over for now. Magda was able to traverse the lobby and request her key.

The innkeeper passed it to her absently.

“Will it be safe, do you think?” she asked.

He shrugged. “No way of knowing. They have no idea who he is, or what he was doing out there...”

As Magda climbed the stairs, the police chief emerged from the prisoner’s room. He bellowed from the balcony, “We’re going to need some clean clothes.”

“For who?” retorted the innkeeper.

“Don’t be stupid, Jake. Run down to Cindy’s and grab a couple shirts and sweats, size large.”

“Who’s paying?”

The police chief snarled through the closing door, “We’ll reimburse you!”

This answer obviously did not satisfy the innkeeper. He dallied at the desk, idly reviewing the guest register.

“I’ll go,” Magda offered, retracing her steps to ground level.

Jake’s wan face brightened. “Would you? I’d really appreciate it. I don’t have anyone to cover for me if I left...”

Magda smirked. If he vanished for an hour, the world would not end, nor would the inn’s business cease. A town this small...

Its size would soon grow. Word spread quickly of the arrest, and the suspicious nature of the prisoner’s appearance following the death of two more volunteers on the bay. News crews from California and Oregon, even national networks, rolled into Harbor by nightfall.

Magda cared little for this. Fortunately, the police chief and a collection of impromptu armed deputies barricaded the Harbor Inn, allowing only authorized residents and staff access.

She returned with a large plastic bag bulging with grey sweatpants and shirts, underwear, socks and slippers. If she excelled at one thing, it was guessing the size of people’s clothes. She had no better use for her money, anyway.

Knocking at the prisoner’s room, she wasn’t surprised by the sound of multiple deadbolts retracting. Two green eyes peered at her through a narrow crack.

“Who are you?”

“I... I’ve got the clean clothes for the prisoner,” Magda stammered.

The door was pulled inward. Two men, weapons at the ready, kept their attention on their captive, who stood a good six inches taller than his jailers. A towel was wrapped around his waist, as if he'd just emerged from a shower. His broad shoulders and muscular arms made Magda smile. She realized he could've killed these men with his bare hands, if he'd wished...

He met her gaze. Piercing blue eyes held a secret and, somehow, she grasped its import. She found herself at a loss for words.

The lead deputy pawed through the bag's contents. "Thanks," he muttered. "You thought of everything."

With a nod of acknowledgment, she retreated across the threshold, and the door slammed in her face.

Yes, hope remained.

She descended to the dining room, which provided home-cooked meals for the guests. Sitting alone, as always, she didn't really taste the roast beef, mashed potatoes, gravy and salad. She'd read too many Sherlock Holmes stories as a kid to detect the false veneer of propriety.

The prisoner in the room next to hers was a murderer, she was certain. He had been in the water when the men in the two other row boats had been attacked and killed. The source of their demise, though, could not have been merely human.

Logical deduction concluded the prisoner was not merely human.

That deduction didn't strike Magda as feasible. Only in ancient myths or fairy tales did creatures live beneath the waves and, alternately, take human form. It could not be...

She glanced up, sensing movement. The captive was being led to a table in the far corner. One officer sat opposite him, with two others at tables on either side. He stared at her with an expressionless face.

Though platters of food were presented, he ate nothing. His guards devoured every bite their forks could reach, especially since it was free. Stuffing their gullets, they ignored Magda's trek to the dessert cart near their seats.

Cheesecake, double chocolate layer cake, apple pie and cherry torts didn't tempt her in the least. She spoke toward the wall, fully aware the prisoner was still eying her. "I know what you are."

"That is why I did not kill you."

Had he spoken the words aloud? she puzzled. Neither the deputies nor anyone else within earshot reacted to the incriminating statement.

"I wish to die," she stated, studying a Monet print between the windows.

The *basso profundo* boomed, "It is not yet your time."

She shook her head, reflecting the desperation which had seized her soul seeming ages ago following a chilling revelation. "My time has passed."

The prisoner did not reply. His companions' bellies sated, they signaled him off his chair. Magda marveled how they avoided direct contact. They continued to fear him, despite the steel shackles.

She sat on her bed through the evening, despondent. Mere plaster separated her from her goal. Mere plaster, and armed men. If it were possible, she would breach that barrier, and present herself to him on bended knee, begging him to crush her skull between powerful fingers...

Laughter drifted through the flimsy wall; the deputies were playing cards. She envisioned their captive seated, like herself, tormented by this frivolity.

Much later, when a noisy uproar commenced, Magda assumed she must've fallen asleep. Repeated shrieks from the chamber on the opposite side brought guards running from the prisoner's room.

Its occupant, a girl in her late teens, lay dead on the rumpled bed.

That much was clear from the conversation Magda overheard upon opening her door. The next statement startled her even more, "Some john must've been dissatisfied with the service," the police chief, who had returned to the Harbor Inn in response to the alarm, told his men. "He's probably long gone by now."

"But, what about the prisoner?" objected one deputy.

"It couldn't have been him," the police chief countered. "Unless you let him out of your sight..."

The reassurance came immediately, "No, sir."

So, the prisoner was safely confined, and a prostitute had been murdered by an irate customer. For Magda, the pieces didn't fit.

She wondered if her unwilling neighbor would hear her ruminations. "Did you do it?"

Telepathy, indeed. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Why not? Was she not just another worthless human?"

"Worthless?" Magda echoed.

"Of course. Ruining everything they touch, bringing nothing but harm."

Too well, Magda understood his logic. As the night progressed, and other women using the Harbor Inn as a quasi-respectable brothel died, she came to ignore the tumult.

At breakfast the next morning, the dining room was empty, except for the captive, his retinue, and Magda. Instead of hot cooked meals, cold cereal and milk

were served by jittery staff. Even the cook would no longer come near the building.

Deputies oblivious to their conversation - through whatever enchantment the prisoner cast upon them - Magda questioned him in her anguish. "You killed them, but you will not end my life. Why?"

"I kill them because they care only for their own pleasure. Once, thousands of my brethren inhabited this bay. The humans butchered them, either with weapons or by littering the beaches with trash and polluting the water with oil, gasoline and chemicals. They continue to murder indiscriminately, both their fellow species on the planet and each other. It has been determined they must be stopped."

"I have known this for many years," agreed Magda.

"Which is why your time has not come. When my work is done - and that of others like me - the earth will be left to ones such as you, to inhabit peacefully with us."

The flaw in his statement rang within her head. "That will be many centuries in the future. I will be long dead."

"No, good woman. It will be less than a decade, provided the humans do not first annihilate each other with their toxic bombs."

The discussion ended there; the guards had concluded their meal. As the prisoner was escorted from the chamber, he instructed, "Meet me on the beach at sunset, and I will reveal truths your mind has yet to fathom."

Considering what had transpired in the last 24 hours, Magda did not doubt this being could elude his jailers at will, and fulfill his promise. In the interim, though, she aimlessly strolled the quaint settlement of Harbor, avoiding videographers toting SteadiCams and reporters shoving microphones in residents' faces.

She contemplated the creature's words and her ideals. She'd been a journalist for many years, privy to inside information about government, business and religion, and came to see the meaninglessness of countless machinations, power plays and corruption. Even the ordinary citizen was infected by the concept of humanity's "superiority" and control of nature's resources. By the time she resigned her position, she comprehended humanity's fate.

Hiking along isolated gravel roads to the bay, Magda might've been shedding the final vestiges of her former existence. The beach had been cleansed by high tide, though she was the lone bi-ped to enjoy its beauty. No fishing boats trolled the water, nor did any swimmers dive into the waves.

She sat on the sand, the sun descending in the west. A few wispy clouds were highlighted pink by the rays, and she felt a peace she hadn't experienced since childhood.

"You understand the purpose of life well," came the liberated prisoner's voice to her ears.

"I understand animals have the right idea, abiding by the natural order."

"Exactly. You must spread this message."

Magda chuckled. "You know that's impossible. The human ego does not allow them to heed the insights of the wise."

"You are correct. They are stubborn. Too stubborn to see their survival is at risk."

"Some have asserted as much, but far more believe the earth is at their disposal, and not vice versa."

He towered above her, clad in the t-shirt and jeans he'd been wearing the previous day when captured. She accepted the hand he extended, and rose.

"You are leaving," she stated.

"They cannot hold me."

She dropped to one knee. "I beg you: leave me dead on this spot, or with some remembrance to sustain me..."

Lifting her upright, he considered. "I will not end your life, good woman. As for the other, there are a number of possibilities, many of which you would find humorous. I could leave you with child, but another human brat on this planet would be ignored, though his message would be vital. Besides, too many stories have been written of such births in your history for another to be considered anything more than a calculated fraud.

"I could present you with a token of my world, a talisman, but your scientists would do little more than waste decades analyzing its mysterious composition. I could teach you the use of those hidden parts of the human brain, where true wisdom lies, but others would merely view your feats as those of a skilled illusionist."

He fell silent. She waited, her anguish unbearable. "Is there nothing?"

"There is nothing tangible for me to leave you. The remaining option is for you to come with me."

Her eyes widened. "For me..."

"The transformation we undergo is a result of our advanced evolution. You have reached a point in your personal journey which would allow you to join us."

He pondered her face as it reflected an array of emotions. “Your refusal would be entirely justified. It is a frightening experience the first time, and human physiology is frail...”

Magda turned toward the stretch of dunes, rocks and trees. In her heart, she knew she had no reason to walk off that beach, nothing connecting her with any town or city, relatives or friends. Unable to find a place of peaceful co-existence with the earth, she had decided death was her only choice. To immerse herself in the sea with this exquisite being, to be one of them...

“I will go with you,” she murmured.

He smiled his approval; she felt she’d been embraced by a warm blanket. Hand in hand, they ambled toward rippling waves. Then, abruptly, they were swimming. Magda looked down and saw her own limbs had become flippers. Beside her, a sea lion, twice the normal size, cut a path through the current.

Thoughts of dying left her as she followed the shape shifter through murky depths, past schools of minnows, jellyfish and an occasional shark. With absolute clarity, she knew her choice had been the right one.

Her life’s purpose would be found in this spectacular fluid realm.

The Madness of Enlightenment

“I was sitting there, finishing my lunch, when he wandered in, closed the cell door behind him, and took a seat on the cot. He hasn’t moved, spoken or eaten for three days.”

Such was Sheriff Ralph Snyder’s explanation of the man’s presence to the West Virginia State Police sergeant, and Father Emmanuel Grove. The trio gazed through the tiny rural jail’s iron bars at the lean figure sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, on the lumpy mattress, clad in blue flannel shirt, dusty jeans and black leather boots.

“Yes, he’s one of ours,” said Grove.

Sergeant Jeff Benjamin asked, “What’s he doing here, then?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“He can’t stay here. You’ll have to take him home.”

“What, you expect me to pick him up and carry him?” The balding, bearded priest-monk was in no mood for stupidity. The community of brothers had been searching for this errant member many weeks.

“You’re his... superior, aren’t you?” countered Snyder. “He has to obey you.”

“Our vows include obedience, but no one can force another person to comply, if conscience dictates otherwise.”

“Please, do *something*. This isn’t a hotel, or a monastery. He can’t stay here.”

“Leave me alone with him for a few minutes. I’ll see what I can do.”

An old fashioned, heavy key unlocked the cell door before the two officials retreated to an adjacent office. The thick-set cleric entered the cell and settled on a straight-backed chair beside the bed.

“Michael, can you hear me?” Grove began.

The voluntary inmate replied, “My senses are perfectly intact.”

“Where the hell have you been? We thought you might’ve fallen off a cliff, or been mauled by wild animals...”

Smoldering brown eyes, flecked with gray, popped open. “If I had, why concern yourself? Wouldn’t it have been the will of God?”

The comment jarred Grove’s sensibilities. “Well... yes, but we wouldn’t want your body lying around, being eaten by wolves...”

“The body is merely a shell. Once the soul abandons it, why should it not nourish the earth?”

This was not the attitude the priest expected from a monk who had lived an exemplary life these past twelve years, after leaving behind his journeyman electrician wages for a hermitage nestled among the Appalachian foothills. Nor the appearance, frankly. While the Brothers of Monte Cassino did not wear the formal robes of more conservative Benedictine congregations and their offshoot communities, they always greeted visitors in presentable attire - clean shirt, slacks and sandals. Michael Tandy's sleeves were stained with what looked like dried blood and mud; the same with his knees. His brown hair had grown longer than the norm, billowing off his forehead in unkempt waves.

"Every believer deserves a decent burial," remarked Grove. "We couldn't stomach the notion you were lost on the mountain and, possibly..."

"I wasn't lost. In fact, my quest led me to my chosen destination: the truth."

"What truth?"

"The truth Zeke Epstein charged us to seek when he chose this place after World War II."

Father Grove knew the story; he'd helped compile the recently published history of the Cassinians. The community's founder, U.S. Army corporal Zacharias "Zeke" Epstein, had experienced a profound conversion of life atop Monte Cassino in Italy, while the Allies were reclaiming that territory. He'd returned to the States and built himself a hermitage in the Appalachians, where some of his former Army buddies later located and joined him. They adopted the Rule of St. Benedict to their lifestyle, welcoming guests to share solitude and discover peace within their own souls.

The group remained small - less than two dozen - until the 1960s, when Epstein invited Zen Buddhist monks to visit and introduce the brothers to the benefits of meditation. Many religious congregations had integrated the practice into the daily horarium during that era, however, post-Vatican II reforms saw a severe decline in vocations, and other matters took priority. The Cassinians were one of the few groups who retained the blend of extended prayer and Eastern meditation at their West Virginian retreat into the 21st century.

Epstein, until his death in 1999, recognized how the supplication and praise of the Psalms meshed with periods of mental calm and focus to enlighten the mind. He charged all his brothers to pursue the path of truth in their tiny cabins on the hillside.

"What does the truth have to do with you sitting in a jail cell?" Grove pressed.

“Because the truth dictates we are all criminally liable for the destruction of God’s creation,” responded Tandy. “Every human being on the planet should be imprisoned. We have been given chance upon chance to acknowledge and remedy our behavior, yet have refused. Allowed enough rope to hang ourselves, the noose grows tighter by the second.”

Grove had counseled many brothers through these dramatic shifts in consciousness over the decade he had served as Cassinian superior. “Have you eaten lately?”

“Before coming here, every day. Exquisite delicacies from nature.”

Some of them mildly poisonous, or hallucinogenic, Grove suspected. One aspect lacking in the men’s training: basic survival skills. They could’ve used a few Boy Scout manuals to teach the difference between edible plants and toxic ones.

“Have you slept?”

“Like a child, each night.”

“Where? You haven’t been seen near your hermitage for almost a month.”

Tandy’s tranquil features were transformed by a disturbing half-grin, augmented by laugh lines around his eyes and along his cheeks, deep enough to resemble furrows in a newly plowed field. “On the opposite face of the mountain, up about 2,000 feet, the land of paradise...”

A light heart integral to the monastic way of life, the priest expected his brothers to display their joyful smiles and genuine laughter. This expression so uncharacteristic, he studied the younger man’s whiskered face closely. He’d glimpsed hints of insanity in the random facial ticks and muscle twitches of some weaker souls; he couldn’t determine Tandy’s mindset from the intense, steady gaze.

“Come back with me,” Grove insisted. “We can talk more in the chapter house.”

“Talk accomplishes nothing. Life must be relished to the full.”

“How else do enlightened masters teach their students, if not by their words?”

“By their actions. Around the world, pious sermons are delivered from pulpits on Sunday mornings, yet if those ministers do not live according to the lessons they cram down their congregation’s throats, their words are empty and hypocritical.”

“We’re not hypocrites, Michael.”

“No, Emmanuel, not yet. To be content where one sits, though, and make no progress on the journey toward the ultimate, is very near to being a hypocrite.”

“Our journey is not a literal one, as you well know. We aren’t required to travel the byways and dirt roads to find the truth.”

“Perhaps not, but it helps. To leave behind the security of food and shelter, and rely upon oneself... No experience is more powerful.”

“Come, share your insights with the brothers. They will be glad of the chance.”

“Come with me, first. Let me show you paradise.”

Grove agreed. He rose and knocked at the door dividing the tiny cell block from the sheriff’s office. “We’re ready to go.”

“Good,” growled Snyder.

Benjamin added, “Will he be all right?”

“I hope so,” Grove stated.

The two monks departed the building, a strange pairing. Tandy lean and 5'10", skin weathered from days in the sun, his elder a bit shorter, robust and ruddy, with bespectacled pale blue eyes. Grove paused beside the Cassinians’ lone car - a battered Ford Taurus station wagon parked along the gravel roadway - but Tandy strode beyond the dusty village toward the mountain casting afternoon shadows across the buildings..

“Couldn’t we drive?” queried Grove.

“We’re in no hurry. All too soon, the world will realize internal combustion engines must be abandoned and natural forms of transportation employed.”

“That’s a bit too much of a hike for these old bones, Michael.”

“Nonsense. The mountain intimidates the faint of heart, but the path slopes gently upward.”

Tandy’s description proved accurate, but the gradual ascent took far longer than a steep climb might have, and strained Grove’s knees. Worse still, a light mist began to fall after an hour and, lacking an umbrella, droplets streamed down the priest’s glasses, making it difficult to see the narrow trail bordered by vertical rock on one side, and a sheer cliff on the other.

“How did you find this paradise?” the Cassinian superior inquired.

“I made a habit of roaming the mountainside to find different spots for my afternoon meditation. Seated beneath an ancient blue spruce, I glimpsed a ramshackle cabin along the hill face. On my way back to the hermitage, I stopped to investigate, and found the perfect shelter for a troubled soul.”

“You never mentioned your soul was troubled, Michael.”

“My soul has always been troubled - by our insular habits. There is no risk in what we do, and risk is essential to nurturing faith. Unless one is willing to step

out boldly with full knowledge there exists the possibility of hunger, thirst, even harm, what point is there in taking the vows?"

Grove had to admit, secretly, the younger monk was correct. When it came to communal living, however - though all the members dwelled in their own private hermitages and came together for prayer or meals only on specified holy days - maintaining a stable environment was essential to freeing the soul to soar the heights of heaven.

Such thinking flew in the face of Gospel mandates, and the vow of poverty, yet nothing was personally owned, instead held in common for the use of all.

"What makes this place different from your hermitage?" Grove persisted.

"It rains on my head in the middle of the night; I feel the heat of the day without relief. There's no mini-refrigerator to raid when I feel like eating, no hot shower to sooth my aching muscles, and my facilities are the woods outside the door."

"And you've chosen to live there on a permanent basis?"

Tandy retorted, "Is that against the Rule?"

"No, but it would've been more appropriate to inform someone..."

Unruly mane dripping and blown by the increasing wind, Tandy halted and turned toward his companion. The strange light kindled in his eyes sent a wave of fear along Grove's aching spine. "Enlightenment transforms a man, Emmanuel. Mere words can't sufficiently describe what happens when every door of understanding is thrown open simultaneously. The last thing I was worried about was telling anyone where I was."

Grove kept his composure, struggling to prevent his voice from trembling. "From what I've read over the years, those who have attained enlightenment are the first to acknowledge they have far to go on their journey."

"No truer statement can be spoken, but when enlightenment occurs, it cannot be denied. The person so blessed spends the rest of his life trying to wrap his head around the revelations, so profound and deep are they."

"Which is why you came out here?"

"To immerse myself in the wonder of it all."

They resumed the steady pace upward. That is, until Grove detected movement where the path widened crossing a broad, densely-wooded plateau. His arm restrained Tandy from proceeding.

"What?"

"Something up ahead. Have you seen any bobcats or bears while you've been living at this altitude?"

"Of course, but that's no animal."

“What is it, then?”

“It’s Stella.”

“Who?”

“My companion.”

Grove didn’t know how to respond to this declaration. Among the most controversial of the vows professed by Cassinians - and other religious communities of men and women - was chastity (or celibacy). One reason Zeke Epstein had, for decades, refused to open Cassinian membership to females involved the dangers of close association with members of the opposite sex. That Michael Tandy had moved from his assigned hermitage and, now, admitted an obviously close relationship with a woman, violated two of the tenets he claimed to hold dear.

“Michael, how could you forsake your beliefs so easily?”

Seeing the lithe figure emerge from the trees helped Grove understand the temptation to which Tandy had succumbed. Long, sandy hair framed a quietly pretty, oval face, from which brilliant violet eyes shone like beacons.

“Beliefs are only forsaken when allowed to stagnate and lose their importance, instead of evolve and grow,” said Tandy.

“And this is your version of evolution?”

Stella smiled as she approached the two men. She extended her hand to Grove. “You must be Emmanuel. Michael’s told me so much about you.”

The Cassinian superior couldn’t tell whether she meant this in a positive or negative way. He clasped her fingers, regardless. “How do you come to be so far from... civilization?”

“My grandmother was born in the cabin just beyond that stand of pine trees. She only left the mountain when she married a man with driving political aspirations. After he died from the stress of life in D.C., she came back and finished raising her family near her beloved home. While the others fled the seclusion and primitive habitation for the big city, I chose to return after seeing the stupidity which exists in today’s world.”

“So, you are a hermit of sorts, too.”

“Not in the strictest sense. My place, down in the valley, has all the amenities. I come up here a couple times a week to check on Michael, especially after it rains. I was quite worried when I found him gone, and his few belongings left behind...”

Had they bothered to notice, Grove’s relief at hearing of Stella’s living arrangements separate from Tandy’s was evident on his weathered countenance. He imagined the younger monk scolding him, as he’d done in the past: “We’re

supposed to believe in the goodness within human beings, yet you always seem to assume the worst about everyone.”

Being superior of the community, he’d heard sordid confessions on a fairly regular basis, and the influence of those ideas ran deeper than Grove liked.

“Michael decided to take the environmental sins of the world on his shoulders, and turn himself in to the authorities,” declared Grove. “They didn’t want him.”

“With the right contacts, it could’ve been one hell of a public campaign,” Stella sniffed. “The cable news networks would’ve picked up the story…”

“Are you a journalist?”

“She’s the voice in the wilderness,” Tandy supplied. “Crying out for people to break free of their mindless conformism and think about what they’re doing, to themselves and to the earth.”

Grove wasn’t quite certain what the statement meant. Stella clarified it with a smirk. “I used to be a syndicated political columnist. Gave it up when I realized no one was heeding the call for reform and intelligent action.”

“Ah,” nodded Grove.

“Come to the house. If you’re not desperately hungry, I know you must be thirsty after that wet climb.”

Gratefully, the older Cassinian followed his guide to where the trail forked downward. Tandy veered left, toward the cabin.

“You’re not coming?” Stella called.

“No.”

She chuckled conspiratorially, strolling between the trees. “Michael’s quite anti-social, and really opinionated.”

“I’ve had doubts about his vocation for some years. Had not our founder insisted he be admitted to perpetual vows…”

“On his deathbed, with the prospect of his life’s dream being deemed a failure…”

“How’d you know?”

“Michael related the entire last conversation, verbatim. He thinks Zeke Epstein the only man who ever fully trusted him.”

“He may be right, after this.”

“You mean, abandoning the compound for…”

“Multiply your concern over his absence twenty-fold. We thought he was dead.”

“He’d be better off dead.”

“Why?” queried Grove, stunned.

“Because the long stretches of meditation have driven him insane.”

“What background have you to make such a diagnosis?”

“Anyone who’s lived in New York more than a few months can recognize the symptoms.”

“He claims to have reached a state of enlightenment.”

“Enlightenment. Insanity. Is there any real difference between the two? The brain becomes overloaded and, basically, short circuits.”

“That’s an awfully harsh assessment.”

“We’ll double back to the cabin in an hour or so, and you’ll see for yourself.”

This mysterious promise curbed Grove’s appetite, though he did drain two full glasses of water standing in Stella’s utilitarian kitchen no more had they reached her green-shingled bungalow at the mountain’s base.

“I’m sorry, but I’m done climbing for today,” stated the priest.

Stella chuckled, “Out of shape, eh? I thought hermits tended their gardens, ate little but healthy, and took long walks.”

“I’ve been superior for five years, so my eremetical routine has been sorely disrupted. The one practice I haven’t neglected is meditation.”

“That’s where the problem lies for your boys. Western minds don’t have the strength to handle the mental doors meditation throws open. I’m surprised more of the monks aren’t borderline nuts.”

This concerned Grove. He remained silent, considering the implications. “They may well be, only I’d never see it, since I seldom see them.”

“You’d better start, then, to prevent either a mass exodus into the hills, or a mass murder.” Stella slid a portion of scrambled eggs from the skillet onto a plate. “Sure you won’t have any?”

“I’m sure.”

“When I’m done eating, I’ll fetch Mathilda and we’ll head for the cabin.”

“Who’s Mathilda?”

“My mule. Comes in handy when I go to town for groceries. You can ride her and save your precious legs.”

Feeling mocked for his weakness, Grove nonetheless muttered, “Thanks.”

Mathilda, an ornery beast - as most mules are - moved slower than the average human up the mountain trail. Grove feared, with the sun setting, they would be stuck in Tandy’s ramshackle cabin overnight.

And that was before he heard the laughter.

Not the sound of one reacting to a funny joke, this hysterical chuckling rose in volume and echoed madly between the rock faces, jarring Grove’s nerves.

“What *is* that?” asked the Cassinian.

Stella replied calmly, “*That* is Michael Tandy.”

“It can’t be.”

“It happens while he’s meditating. His mind touches... something - the universal consciousness, maybe - which sets him off. I don’t think he even knows he’s doing it, he’s gone so deep within himself.”

Rounding the last curve in the path, Grove dismounted when he saw the tilted, wood-slat cabin in the fading light. A twig snapped beneath his feet, and Tandy’s cackling abruptly ceased. The total silence which enveloped the mountainside frightened the older man more than the laughter.

Then, a wild, shadowy figure appeared, leaning out the doorway at an angle, one hand on the frame for support. “Oh, it’s you,” Tandy greeted.

Grove countered, “Are you all right?” before Stella could warn him.

The glow from a kerosene lamp inside the structure lit Tandy’s face when he shifted his weight. His mouth set in a sidewise grin, flecks of gray glimmering in his brown eyes added to the insane aura. Grove recoiled.

Stella shoved him forward. “Go on inside. He won’t hurt you.”

“How do you know?”

“Have faith.”

“There’s faith, and there’s practicality.”

“I’m not Nero throwing you to the lions,” she quipped.

He muttered under his breath, “This could be far worse.”

The fifteen-foot square dwelling was well ventilated - no glass in the windows, and gaping holes between some of the wall boards. A wood stove in one corner could offset the creeping evening chill, and be used to cook simple meals. Tandy crossed to a small table, scraping his whiskers with a straight razor solely by instinct - no mirror to provide a reflection - rinsing the blade in a cracked porcelain bowl, the pitcher set aside. Evidently, the inhabitant slept on an unsteady army cot near the door, covered by one stained quilt. So much for the furnishings.

“My God, Michael, how can you stand this?” Grove blurted.

The younger monk favored his superior with that ominous half-smile. “It’s more than the homeless enjoy, and I need nothing else.”

“But, what if you get sick, or injured? No one would know; there’d be no one to care for you...”

“Stella cares for me just fine.”

Tandy pulled the woman to him and kissed her passionately. Grove averted his eyes.

The vows had been broken, after all.

Neither inhibited by Grove's proximity, nor embarrassed at the affectionate display, Stella responded to Tandy's overtures with enthusiasm. The pair separated only after the visitor had withdrawn from the building.

Taking the lantern and plunging them into darkness.

Grove's rationale was he'd need even this limited illumination to make it down the dark mountain. Yet, when Tandy crept up behind him, pinning him in a choke hold, he released the handle and the glass shattered on the hard ground.

"You shouldn't have done that, Emmanuel," hissed Tandy. "You were welcome to stay."

"And watch you two have sex?" His head jerked backward by the force of the sinewy forearm, Grove felt like his spine would snap.

"What if we did? Part of God's creation involves propagation of the species. I have come to see: self-denial is the real sin. We should eat to live, work with our hands to grow food and nurture the earth - not destroy it - and revel in all things beautiful, including women."

"And kill?" Grove challenged.

Tandy's arm tightened around his captive's neck. "Why would I want to do that? Have you done me some harm, or threatened my life?"

"No."

"Then, all I've done is give you a few things to contemplate in the quiet of your hermitage." Freed, Grove's knees buckled. Tandy continued, "Lack of control over others, for one, and the need for more educated faith, free of sentimental illusions based on nonsensical mandates written by shallow, power-hungry men."

"Is that what you have here?" demanded Grove, clutching a tree trunk while slowly rising.

"I have nothing. I simply live."

"If that's how you want it, fine. When I return to the retreat, I'll strike your name from the records."

That mind-numbing laugh accompanied Grove along the gloomy trail. He realized Tandy no longer cared about such trivial matters as membership in a religious community, or any aspect of daily existence important to most humans.

Tandy would return to his cabin, fornicate with his mistress, and sleep like a baby. Such was the lot of the mentally unstable. No guilt, no second thoughts.

Or, could the man have truly achieved enlightenment, and be worthy of spreading his message to the far corners of the globe?

Grove dismissed the idea as ludicrous. Too many people following such unconventional ideas would destroy civilization and religion, and lead to anarchy.

He strode on, confident God would not let him falter on the path.
Still... Tandy's maniacal laughter would reverberate through his dreams for many a year.

The Shirt

Blame it on the internet age, Mel chuckled, shutting down her computer. Still, the ideas - ludicrous as they were - amused her.

People lived their private fantasies on various websites, while others made thousands of tangible dollars selling them virtual clothing, real estate and even hairstyles. On-line auctions sold just about anything, for as little as a penny, or millions.

Some enterprising individual had set up a “trading” website, where people could trade one item for another. The story which made headlines told how a young man started with a paperclip, and ended up with a house.

If it could be done in cyberspace, Mel reasoned...

Smoke billowed from the windows as streams of pressurized water doused the flames. The owner of the Kilkee Museum watched the scene from across the street, silently mourning the loss of a century’s worth of local treasures.

The tiny seaside town on Ireland’s west coast would survive without the artifacts, but decades of scholarship and love had gone into the collection. As Basil Wainwright shuffled through the smoldering ashes later that afternoon, he found a few items intact, and one completely destroyed.

Encased in glass to preserve it from humidity, dust and other natural elements, Wainwright could only conclude the linen period garment had spontaneously combusted, thanks to the intense heat of the fire. He entertained no notion of testing the rubble for cloth fragments, as insurance adjusters might have - had the museum been insured.

The sort of man who never thought disaster could happen, Wainwright opened the museum to tourists for free. He’d earned enough during his years as an architect to afford the hobby.

Traveling the world, he’d gradually brought bits of Kilkee history back home. The shirt, though, had been hanging in a closet of the old inn he’d purchased on the edge of town. It had been left behind after a 1960s Hollywood film crew finished location shooting for a 17th century historical drama along the River Shannon.

A tag sewn on the hem identified it as part of the wardrobe created for the male lead in the movie, Oliver Swann. Its discovery prompted fans of the deceased flamboyant actor to travel specifically to Kilkee to view the shirt.

Now, it was a total loss.

Mel read the brief article about the Kilkee blaze while waiting for the train at Paddington Station. That news, at any rate, was a tragic surprise.

Two hours later, she strolled along the shops in Nottingham, England, enjoying the flavor of the city made famous in Robin Hood stories. That fame, in fact, had brought a film crew from London to shoot exterior footage for yet another adventure movie about the outlaw. She'd seen their equipment trucks parked outside the walls of Nottingham Castle.

Allan Treadwell was bound to be with them.

And Mel had read in the Fleet Street scandal rags of Treadwell's obsession with Oliver Swann. He'd played in more remakes of Swann's old black and white epics than any other British actor. Tall, dark and attractive, he emulated Swann's eccentric behavior, almost as if he was that man's reincarnated self.

But, then, Treadwell had enough personal skeletons in his own closet to outshine Swann's rowdy lifestyle.

Lost in thought, Mel bumped two men walking in the opposite direction. Her leather jacket unfastened; she pulled it tight around her, to conceal the secret within. Turning toward the pair, her jaw dropped. She couldn't speak the apology on her lips.

She was face to face with Allan Treadwell, and his burly bodyguard.

"Are you hurt?" Treadwell inquired in his rich baritone.

Mel shook her head. Then, she glimpsed the green hose peeking from beneath his long belted trenchcoat. Could he be in costume, on a break from filming?

"We were in a hurry to get a bite," he explained. "We were more busy looking for a pub, than watching for people. Can I, at least, buy you a drink?"

Not about the pass up this opportunity, Mel agreed.

Slipping into a cozy tavern around the corner, Treadwell and Mel occupied a corner booth, while the body guard sat near the door, to prevent curious fans from interrupting the meal. The barman brought two glasses of beer and swiftly withdrew.

"I'm glad I ran into you," Treadwell stated, by way of a toast. They clinked glasses, and drank.

Mel didn't really like beer, and she tried not to cringe at the taste. "I'm glad, in a way, we ran into each other."

"Why is that?"

"Because I have something to show you."

Treadwell's steely gray eyes narrowed. "You're not going to serve me a writ naming me in another paternity suit, are you?"

Mel laughed. “Nothing like that.”

“All right, then, what?”

The jacket opened, and Mel worked the shirt’s hem free of her jeans.

“Um...” Treadwell objected. “This is neither the time nor the place to... disrobe.”

Mel positioned the tag on the wooden table. “Read this.”

Self-consciously, Treadwell pulled a pair of spectacles from his coat pocket. He leaned over the tag. “Oh, my God. Where’d you get this?”

“Let’s just say, I have my sources,” Mel retorted coyly.

“Who saved it from the Kilkee Museum fire?”

Her reply: a non-committal shrug. “Are you interested, or not?”

Smiling, Treadwell nodded.

“We’ll make a trade,” Mel suggested.

An hour later, Mel strode from the pub. The keys to Allan Treadwell’s red Ferrari jangled in the pocket of her jeans.

Tangled Vines

Once, Luc Teyssier reveled in the after-harvest quietude: workers gone from the fields, grapes at the winery being prepared for the delicate fermentation process. He and his lively blonde wife, Kate, and their tow-headed son, Marius, would sit on the porch of their homey stone cottage each evening, watching the sun set over acres and acres of sloping vineyards.

Not this season.

The freakish auto accident had robbed him of his *joie de vivre*, of his reason for living. His entire life, he'd spent battling his brother, Antoine, for supremacy on the family's land. Then, finally achieving his goal of buying his own vineyard - with the unexpected help of the delightfully playful Kate - he'd been content.

Kate had insisted on driving eight-year-old Marius to town for school clothes that fateful August day. Two stray dogs had run into the road and, when she jerked the steering wheel to avoid a collision, the Volvo had careened into a ditch, rolling three times before stopping upside-down in the mud.

The pair had been declared dead before the ambulance arrived on the scene.

Luc hadn't smoked since marrying the young American; stretched this humid evening on the cottage's steps, he puffed furiously in protest at unbidden memories.

The triumph of winning France's most prestigious wine competition two years in a row - with Antoine's entry earning second place - paled in the light of his tragedy. Always a free-spirit, Luc had his share of women since his early teens. He'd let himself love Kate, and was suffering for it.

No more would Stone Cottage Winery produce "Kate's Special", a singular red she'd discovered while tasting the first barrels years earlier. Luc had envied her palate: able to detect hints of the many herbs which flavored the soil and scented the air around the vineyard. This favorite wine had become popular throughout Western Europe for its distinctive dry boldness unlike any competitors' best product.

In fact, he felt like torching the entire estate, burning every vine to ash, and using dynamite to transform the house where he'd spent so many happy days into rubble.

The mere mention of happiness made his ass twitch. He'd never put much stock in the notion, for good reason. He muttered in French, "If I'd have listened to my own advice, my ass wouldn't be twitching now."

Nimble, expressive fingers flicked the cigarette butt in the dirt. The phone was ringing; he tried to ignore it. His father and sister-in-law - Antoine's wife - called almost daily to check on him. How often did he need to tell them he didn't want their pity?

Trudging into the house, he snatched up the receiver, grumbling, "What it is?"

The voice which reached his ear was distantly familiar. "Luc? It's Jean-Paul."

Teyssier wasn't sure how to react to this announcement. If not for Police Inspector Cardon's interference so long ago, Kate would've flown back to Canada, and he would not presently be experiencing this soul-searing devastation.

He might've ended up serving a lengthy jail sentence for theft, instead.

"Hello, old friend. What can I do for you?"

"I called to warn you. The food and wine agency will be issuing a cease-and-desist order by month's end for your winery. They've been sent information your irrigation water supply is tainted with lethal mercury levels."

"What?" Luc stormed. "I've had the water tested every year..."

"Antoine gave them the tip."

"Thanks, Jean-Paul." The connection broken, Luc sank on the nearest chair. Not a welcome warning, but when the papers were served, he'd understand why.

He and Antoine had fought publicly in the streets of La Ravelle, and privately on their father's land, for decades. Luc couldn't fathom his brother's abiding resentment, unless Antoine secretly wished to live more the bohemian lifestyle he had long practiced.

To continually harass and hamper Luc's success smacked of an obsessively competitive spirit. His sole recourse might be to kill his brother...

Which would never happen.

Tense fingers ran through Luc's mop of longish brown hair.

He cared too much for his sister-in-law to make her suffer such a loss.

A tentative knocking shattered this reverie. Luc feared the government agents had already descended upon his operations.

He yanked the door wide. A bewildered twig of a woman met his angry glare, recoiling and almost stumbling off the porch.

Luc's quick reflexes - nurtured from years as a thief - caught her arms and pulled her upright before she fell.

"*Pardon, Mademoiselle,*" he said. "I was expecting someone else."

She admitted in perfect French, "So was I."

“Eh?”

“I’m looking for Luc Teyssier, the gentleman vintner, not some raging bull.”

“Antoine Teyssier is the ‘gentleman’ vintner,” countered Luc. “Ask anyone in town. I’ve always been a raging bull.” He waved her to a woven cane chair. “Why would you be looking for me at this hour?”

“I’d like an interview.”

“An interview? For what?”

“*Wine Connoisseur* magazine.”

He chuckled. “Wine magazines are more about publishers’ advertising profits than about printing the true vintner’s story. I don’t read them for that very reason.”

“I’m not here to sell you an ad. I covered last summer’s Paris wine competition. My readers are dying to know how you, an upstart in the industry, came from nowhere to surpass even your own brother, the reigning champion.”

Finally, he recognized the inflection in her blunt contralto. “You’re American, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

He switched to English. “Your French is very good, but your accent is a bit off.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she responded in her native tongue.

“What is your name?”

“Nell Richmond.”

“You are the owner of this magazine?”

“Owner, editor, sometime reporter.”

“A small periodical?”

“We have five million subscribers, world-wide.”

Impressed, Luc’s mouth screwed itself into a wry smile beneath his bushy mustache. “It is late to begin such an endeavor. Where are you staying in town?”

“I... hadn’t thought. I took the afternoon train from Paris, and arrived just an hour ago.”

“You are welcome to... the spare bedroom.” Hard to call the space where his son had slept like an angel by such a term.

“My luggage is still at the station.”

“I will send for it. It will be here when you awake in the morning.” He led her across the threshold. “Until then, you may borrow one of my shirts...”

If the sandy-haired female was stunned by the offer, she didn’t show it.

“Did you eat on the train?” he queried, passing into a rustic kitchen.

She confessed, "I can't eat while moving - trains, cars, airplanes..."

"Come, take some wine, and prepare yourself a sandwich."

"*Merçi.*"

Her reaction to the glass of red liquid he poured matched Kate's assessment during their first impromptu visit to Luc's family.

"Hints of rosemary, mint, and mushrooms."

"Very good," he praised.

She concurred. "Excellent."

While she savored a light repast, Luc ventured into Marius' room, to arrange fresh sheets and a quilt on the mattress. He choked down his emotions, reinforcing his strength with rage against his brother.

He plucked a clean black t-shirt from a chest in what had been the master bedroom - seldom entered since Kate's death. Being over six feet tall, himself, and this slip of a magazine owner a mere 5'7" or so, the hem would likely hang past her knees, the sleeves to her elbows.

Pointing out the renovated bathroom - Kate had preferred showering indoors to a more invigorating swim in the nearby creek - Luc left Nell Richmond to her own devices. He stripped to his boxers and sprawled on the lumpy blue living room sofa, where he'd struggled to sleep these months without dreaming of his beloved wife. His clothes were heaped in a corner beside the television; he could not stomach inhaling the lingering scent of Kate's shampoo, seeing the feminine touches on the night stand or vanity. The mere thought of replacing the bed they'd shared nearly a decade made him cringe.

He lay awake most of the night, pondering how to retaliate against Antoine for his latest outrage. Money had changed hands along the line, no doubt, for the water tests to be so blatantly falsified. The hardest part for Luc would be raising equivalent cash to convince government officials to reverse the order. He'd spent much of the winery's profits on luxuries for Kate and toys for Marius, besides the expense of their double funeral.

The only option might be the same one he'd employed to buy this very vineyard - theft.

A niggling sensation confirmed Jean-Paul Cardon's call meant the police inspector had already crawled inside Luc's head and anticipated this decision.

Luc had saved the man's life so long ago, but did that mean they were to be linked for eternity?

A shuffling noise caused Luc to raise himself off the cushions and scan his surroundings. When Nell appeared from the kitchen with a half-full glass, he remarked, "Are you all right?"

The rich baritone piercing the darkness frightened her. She screamed, dropped the glass and collapsed on the floor.

Luc leapt the back of the sofa and rushed to her, his bare right foot stepping on a shard of glass. He swore in French and, holding the doorframe for support, ripped the offending fragment from his flesh, blood spurting.

Nell recovered sufficiently to snatch a towel from a rack above the sink and apply pressure to the wound once Luc hopped to a chair. "I'm so sorry," she sputtered. "Unfamiliar surroundings and all that."

"It's okay," he snarled. "It doesn't hurt as much as a black eye."

Not grasping his reference to fights with Antoine, Nell ignored it. When she drew aside the blood-soaked towel, she shook her shaggy head. "You're going to need stitches."

"There's a sewing kit in the linen cupboard," he directed.

"Huh?"

"By the time you'd fetch the doctor, I'd be dead. You'll have to do it yourself."

"Without anesthesia?"

"Wine is the best anesthesia."

She took some convincing, but finally agreed. A bottle of Stone Cottage's popular Cabernet uncorked, she sterilized needle and thread in boiling water while Luc imbibed freely.

The result resembling a badly patched sock, Nell tied off the last stitch and amply wrapped Luc's foot in gauze. Her limited bulk made helping him to the sofa difficult in his drunken state. He flopped on his pillow like a dead fish, left hand firmly clamped around the bottle.

His right would not release her fingers.

"Stay with me, Kate," he whispered deliriously in French.

"I'm not..."

"Don't go. The pain is terrible."

So tight his grip, Nell couldn't rise from her knees. Luc shifted his weight, inadvertently drawing her closer.

"Kate..."

Their lips met, and Nell didn't know how to react. The urgency of his mouth, the nearly naked lean physique and his mustache tickling her cheeks softened her resistance...

Until his entire body went limp, and he snored.

She left him curled on the cushions, sweeping up the broken glass and scrubbing blood smears off the floor tiles before returning to bed herself.

When Luc woke with the sunrise, his throbbing, bandaged foot puzzled him, as did the pounding headache. Smelling eggs and toast cooking reminded him of another presence in the house.

He righted himself, and glimpsed the empty bottle beside the end table. Staggering to the kitchen, Nell greeted him with a smile.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” she stated.

“No, thanks. My stomach...”

“There’s a distinct difference between wine as anesthesia and wine as intoxicant.”

“Eh?”

She let it go. He reversed a chair and sat, leaning elbows on the table and burying his head in his hands.

“Where do you keep the aspirin?” she asked.

“In the pantry.”

She located a plastic bottle and delivered two tablets with a glass of apple juice.

“*Merci*,” moaned Luc.

“I get the feeling you’ll be in no condition for our interview today. Once I’ve cleaned up here, I’ll walk into town, claim my luggage and check into a hotel. We can meet later in the week...”

“I may... not be here.”

“You’re traveling?”

“*Oui*. Important business... in Rome.”

“How long will you be gone?” she prodded.

“I don’t know.”

“I’m not flying back to New York until the 29th.” She scribbled a phone number on the wall calendar. “This is where I’m staying in Paris. Call me when you get back, and I’ll come down.”

“*Oui*.”

Analgesics coursing through his blood, Luc fell asleep once more, not waking completely until mid-afternoon. His mind, relaxed by the wine, had concocted the perfect heist from an Italian jeweler who’d designed a pendant he’d bought Kate for their fifth wedding anniversary. Smuggling his take on a train would be easier than flying from Toronto to Paris, transporting the necklace which had financed his purchase of the vineyard, when first he’d met Kate.

Still, traveling to America to fence the items there might be preferable, rather than doing so in Europe. News of thefts traveled quickly these days, so those close to home likely to give him a good price would be suspicious the

moment he appeared in their shops. Any of the smaller cities in the States, however...

Nell Richmond had mentioned her flight on the 29th. Could he not plant the merchandise on her, as he had on Kate, to pass more easily through customs?

The plan had flaws. He and Kate had been thrown together by chance, seated beside each other on the flight. For Luc to coincidentally board the same plane as Nell might arouse her curiosity.

Unless he pretended to romance her beforehand.

The idea repulsed him, his passion for Kate undiminished, yet he had little choice. As much as moments of frustration spurred him to destroy his life's work, he must rely on his superior wits to fight Antoine to keep the vineyard from being reduced to seed.

Swinging his feet onto the floor, he immediately realized he wouldn't be going anywhere soon. A uncharacteristic scream escaped his throat when the stabbing sensation originating in his wound shot up his leg.

Luc managed to wriggle into faded black jeans, but the swollen appendage would not fit into his boot. Annoyed, he recalled a pair of sandals his son had given him for Father's Day weeks prior to the accident. They'd never left the box, stashed on the master bedroom's closet shelf.

He hobbled in and out of the memory-haunted chamber in less than a minute.

To aid his motion, he shook the dust from a seven-foot long walking stick, used by his grandfather in his declining years. That esteemed patriarch of the Teyssier winemakers had lived to be 90. Luc had chosen the crooked, polished birch branch from all the mementos offered to his offspring, because of the animated conversations he'd shared with the old man scampering beside him as a child along dusty trails beyond the vineyards.

The sturdy wood bore Luc's weight well. He maneuvered to the porch, where he sat through the night, smoking and devising his strategy.

When his sister-in-law phoned the next morning, he acknowledged his incapacitation. She insisted on driving him to the doctor's office in town; he conceded to silence her nagging.

A professional bandage and prescription for pain killers accompanied him home. He spent four days in a narcotic haze, until the phone's incessant ringing penetrated his stupor.

"What *is* it?" he snapped into the receiver.

"It's Nell Richmond, Monsieur Teyssier."

His harsh tone eased. "Ah, Nell. *Bon jour*. And it's Luc, please."

“I called to apologize again for what happened the other night, Luc, and to check how your foot is healing.”

“It’s fine, fine. I was going to phone you today, as a matter of fact. I had an idea for the interview. Instead of sitting at my kitchen table, asking me questions, would it not be more interesting - both for yourself and your readers - to accompany me through a day or two, to see what is really involved in wine making?”

“Are you back from your trip already then?”

“No, I am leaving tomorrow. I was going to invite you along.”

“I have a bit of business to finish here in Paris, but I think I could meet you at the station in time.”

“*Bon.* I’ll see you at 8:30. *Au revoir.*”

Not only would she transport the jewels to the States for him, she would be his distraction at the jeweler’s, delaying discovery of their missing treasures.

Subtlety would be necessary in this enterprise, to be sure. Kate had described in disdainful terms the American woman’s opinion of Frenchmen, so Luc would not risk openly seducing the magazine owner. Random kindnesses and comments would attract her, and he might not have to ever kiss her. He prided himself, after all, on the ability to dispense bullshit no differently than exhaling a lungful of air.

He chose to wear a blue turtleneck - Kate had bought him a drawer full of the sweaters, finding him irresistible in them - dress slacks and the brown leather jacket stolen from Antoine the day he left La Ravelle after losing his half of the family vineyard in a poker game. The train arrived at the station five minutes late, and Nell waved from her compartment.

Luc flicked his half-smoked cigarette on the platform and crushed it with his boot. She’d chosen a non-smoker.

Pleasant banter occupied much of the trip. Nell revealed her background as daughter of a Michigan vintner, and choice not to succeed her father in the business. “I was offered a soccer scholarship to Michigan State University, and he thought I’d be an ag major. He was disappointed and decided not to retire when I graduated with a journalism degree,” she concluded.

“Yet, you write about wine.”

“It’s what I know. My editors at the Chicago *Sun-Times* had me covering the criminal courts, writing theater reviews and human interest stories for two years before they found my niche. I went from there to being wine critic for a series of magazines, hating to see carefully worded articles torn to shreds in the interest of space and advertising. So, I started my own.”

“You’ve been publishing how long?” queried Luc.

“Ten years.”

“Admirable for one so young.”

“I wouldn’t call 38 young,” she retorted. “Besides, you’ve had Stone Cottage just as long, and created phenomenal wines envied by vintners with generations of experience.”

“Like you, I grew up with wine, so I knew what I wanted to do with the grapes long before my wife and I bought the vineyard, just after we were married.” Nell’s prim face fell. “You’re married?”

“I am a widower.”

“I’m sorry.”

He chided mildly, “With the research you’ve done, I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

“I don’t usually include personal details in my interviews, unless they play a major role in a winery’s success.”

“You would’ve wanted to include Kate, then. Without her, Stone Cottage would not exist.”

“Tell me about her.”

Luc’s head tilted. “Aren’t you going to take notes?”

“For the same reason I can’t eat on a train, I can’t write, either. Motion sickness. Believe me, though, I’ll remember every word.”

They arrived at the Rome Termini around midnight. Luc, familiar with the city, welcomed crowds milling around the piazzas. Nell marveled at the throngs of natives and tourists.

“It’s the middle of the week, and they’re out so late?”

“It is their way,” noted Luc. “Come, I reserved rooms at the Hotel Ferraro.”

In the midst of old city, Nell and Luc settled into adjacent rooms, meeting mid-morning in the ground floor restaurant.

“What’s on your agenda today?” the woman inquired.

“I must consult with my Italian importer, then dine with a German acquaintance who may be able to convince a Bavarian hotel chain to add our label to their cellars.” So smoothly did he speak, she didn’t detect the falsehoods.

“This afternoon, I must call upon a jeweler on the Via del Corso, to buy a present for my sister-in-law’s birthday.”

“Why not buy her something from a French jeweler?”

He chuckled, “It means more when it is created by hand in a foreign land, for some silly reason.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Would you come along, and help me make my selection?”

“Sure.”

He promised to meet her at the hotel about the time the city revived from its daily siesta. Rather than attending to business, Luc positioned himself across the bustling street from the jeweler’s, observing security and customers.

Strolling with Nell past ruins and historic sites in the autumn warmth, he buried recollections of similar jaunts with Kate. He guided his companion on a circuitous route, verifying options for concealment, should his plan go awry.

“Why don’t we take the bus?” complained Nell, bending to massage her knees.

“If you wish your pocket picked, we can.”

“Huh?”

“Rome is full of thieves, and many prey on tourists riding the busses and trams.”

That the jewelry designer recognized him breezing through the shop door did not fluster Luc Teyssier. He explained his purpose, and admired a variety of diamond, ruby and sapphire creations laid on the glass counter.

Nell’s green eyes widened at the posted prices. “The vineyard must be doing well,” she murmured.

Luc sniffed, “If I told you the whole story, you would laugh.” Another display seemed to catch his eye, and he motioned Nell toward it. “What do you think of those?”

She sidled toward the 24k spun gold and emerald collection, the salesman close at hand. “Fantastic!” she breathed.

Unobserved, Luc reached for a five-carat diamond brooch, his fingers suddenly encompassed in a friendly handshake.

The Frenchman’s head jerked around to find the balding, goateed Jean-Paul Cardon standing beside him. “What are you doing here?” demanded Teyssier.

“Louise and I are on a second honeymoon. You’ve told me so much about this place, we decided we’d buy our daughter something special for Christmas.”

Luc suspected otherwise, but said nothing. The police inspector had ways of fouling his best laid plans...

Nell had rejoined him. “There’s an incredible bracelet your sister-in-law might like,” she recommended.

“Ah, *oui*. Nell Richmond, this is an old friend, Jean-Paul Cardon, and his wife, Louise.”

“*Enchante*,” oozed Cardon, clasping her hand. Luc guessed he assumed Nell didn’t understand French, his next allusion blatantly impolite. “Is this your new woman?”

“No such luck,” Nell giggled. “I’m interviewing him for my magazine.”

“*Pardon*. I thought...”

“It’s okay,” hissed Luc through clenched teeth. “Now, if you’ll excuse us...”

Nell gushed, “What about the present...”

“We’ll come back later.”

They left the Cardons admiring rings in a much lower price range.

Nell halted down the block, panting from the rapid pace. “What goes on?” she wondered.

Fist clenched, Luc whipped around and punched a brick wall. “*Merde!*” he swore. “I am lost!”

“Calm yourself,” soothed the publisher. “What is lost?”

“Everything. My life, the vineyard... Antoine has won, at last.”

Nell tugged him by the arm down a narrow lane to Trinity College, an Irish pub. Enshrined at a corner table, she ordered two double whiskeys. “Now, what’s the problem?”

This lie would be his greatest, and most regrettable, perhaps. “Ever since my wife and son died...” Luc spun a tale of past-due mortgages on the land held by his brother, the need to buy new equipment for the winery, and production delays due to a poor grape harvest. “I thought, if I bought something nice for my sister-in-law, she would intercede with Antoine to not foreclose...”

Moved by the narrative, Nell squeezed Luc’s calloused hand. “And you didn’t want your friends to know the truth?”

“*Oui*.”

“There are other jewelers.”

“No. Best we catch the night train back to La Ravelle. I have monopolized your time too much.”

“Nonsense. I’m thinking you don’t want any of this included in my article, so I need to focus on another aspect of your operations.”

His chin sagged, causing his mustache to droop, as well. “There is nothing else. The heart has been torn from me, and I am helpless.”

“Finish your drink, and we’ll head to the hotel.” Nell paid the bar tab and waited for Luc to follow.

In his jacket pocket, tingling fingers encircled an exquisite diamond pendant.

The uneventful journey north through Italy served only to resurrect Luc's memories of Kate's first kiss, in a similar compartment. He'd been trying to retrieve a necklace from her knapsack. Dreaming, she'd rolled toward him and, muttering, "Charlie" - her fiancé at the time - stirred emotions he believed dormant.

The mental vision seemed distorted somehow. It wasn't Kate stretched on the seat, but him, and he was kissing Nell in an intoxicated blur.

"*Mon Dieu*," he sighed.

Nell glanced at his reflection in the window. "You all right?"

"*Oui*." The ruse must continue, since he needed her to smuggle far more valuable jewels across the Atlantic. "A twinge in my foot."

"When was the last time you changed the bandage?"

"I..."

Horrified, she probed, "Don't tell me it's still wrapped in that bloody gauze?"

"No, no. The doctor tended it the day after... He thought highly of your stitches, too. They will be removed in a week." He leaned toward her. "You apologized to me for what happened, but I think it should be me begging your forgiveness. I... behaved foolishly from the wine. Your husband would be right to seek vengeance."

"I'm not married, and there's nothing to forgive." She met his burning gaze. "I've never been kissed like that in my life. I'll never forget it."

"Why, not married?"

"No time. Running the magazine takes 18 hours a day when I'm home, and there's too much traveling to maintain a relationship with anyone crazy enough to care about me."

"You are wrong to belittle yourself. You have a quiet inner beauty, definite strength of spirit, and could make the right man very happy."

"Trouble is, looking for the 'right man' isn't top priority for me, and he hasn't bothered to hunt me down, either."

Luc ventured, "This man would have to be handsome, wealthy, intelligent?"

"Not necessarily. It'd be more important that he share an interest in wines, and is secure enough to give me the space I need to work without hounding me with jealous questions every time I get off a plane."

"Are American men like that?"

"Rarely."

“They are idiots. A woman with your brains and initiative should be permitted to achieve her goals, unhindered by childish expectations of romance.” This, to his own consternation, he meant sincerely.

“Amen, brother,” she chuckled. She wiggled her empty ring finger in the air. “That’s why I am free.”

“You’ve been asked, but refused?”

She sobered. “Never asked, actually.”

“Indeed, they are idiots.”

“Thank you.” She planted a grateful kiss on his unshaven cheek, but didn’t pull back immediately. “You loved your wife, didn’t you?” she asked.

“*Oui.*”

“And she loved you?”

“She told me so many times.”

“I can see why.” A lone tear trickled down Nell’s nose and she twisted on the seat to hide her embarrassment.

He had her where he wanted her, hesitating only an instant, smothering his conscience. Kate would not want Antoine’s machinations to cost him the vineyard. Her spirit would forgive him these lies.

Luc moved beside her, sliding his arm around her waist. “Nell, do not be upset.”

“I’m not upset with you. I’m angry at myself for being so stupid...”

“Stupid, how?”

“Hoping for the impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible,” Luc assured her. He caressed her pale neck, and she shuddered.

“You wish me to stop?”

“I want...”

Something inside Luc couldn’t allow her to finish that statement. He’d expressed his desire for Kate with those very words, and to hear someone else utter them would be intolerable, shattering his resolve.

His mouth devoured Nell’s as if she were Kate reincarnated, seizing handfuls of her blouse as if to never let her go.

Two hearts pounding like jack hammers, chests heaving, they separated when the conductor peered through the glass door. “Paris in fifteen minutes,” he announced.

Nell puzzled, “You didn’t get off in La Ravelle?”

“I was... preoccupied,” Luc smirked. “I will stay in Paris tonight, and return home tomorrow.”

“It’s for the best,” lamented the publisher. “I’m flying home myself tomorrow.”

“You... cannot postpone?”

“The reservation was hard to get, as it is, with airlines reducing the number of flights. I have a deadline for the next issue.”

“Perhaps, when you return to France, you will visit me.”

She did not respond, which boded well in Luc’s estimation.

“Or, if I come to America...”

“Come with me tomorrow,” she suggested.

He bit his tongue to suppress a shout of victory. “I... have no ticket.”

“Leave that to me. I... don’t want to lose you just when... when...”

“Let us agree to consider it at the hotel. We both need sleep, and things may look different in the morning.”

“I pray they do not,” she stammered.

An arm around her bony, trembling shoulders, the other toting her vinyl duffel, Luc escorted Nell through the Paris terminal to the taxi stand.

“Hotel du Louvre,” she instructed the driver.

Luc remarked, “Extravagant.”

“Tax deduction,” she clarified.

“Ah!”

They rode in silence through the Paris night, fingers entwined. Alighting at the curb beneath the imposing four facades of the posh structure, she invited Luc, “My room has a fantastic view of the Comedie Francais. Would you like to see?”

“*Oui.*”

The lift took them to the third floor, a suite which dwarfed Luc’s stone cottage. Through tall windows, the couple admired one of the city’s most famous sites.

“Too bad I cannot take you,” said Luc. “The performances are magnificent.”

“In college, I enjoyed going to the theater. Since my days as a critic, it’s been ruined for me. I do nothing but anticipate the flaws...”

“You do the same for wine?” he pondered.

“In ten years, I haven’t been able to drink a glass purely for pleasure. It’s pathetic, really.”

His height intimidated her, he could tell. He led her to an armchair and knelt before her, their eyes now at the same level.

“Nell, I didn’t come here to... to...”

She patted his hand. "I know. Best we both hit the sack. My stomach is still a bit queasy from the train. In the morning, we'll talk more."

She vanished behind the bedroom door, and he settled in the seat she'd just vacated, contemplating how different she was from Kate - more mature, more self-confident.

He'd lied to her about the "quiet inner beauty", knowing how many women lacking physical attractiveness described themselves so. Yet, he hadn't really lied. He sensed in her an intense loyalty to those she called friends, a willingness to challenge injustice...

Earth-stained boots wore a path in the carpet from his nocturnal pacing. When he heard the shower running, he realized he hadn't changed his own clothes in three days. Boarding the plane that afternoon, he would have no luggage, but he would be returning before week's end with enough money to pay whatever fines, or bribe the necessary officials to make Antoine's false charges disappear.

Things came to a head sooner than Luc anticipated, however. Eating breakfast in the hotel's café before checking out, he noticed over Nell's sandy head an unwelcome visage. If one person in the entire world made Luc Teyssier lose control of his temper, it was Antoine. Luc threw his napkin into his omelette, and charged across the dining room.

"You dog!" he raged. "You always were one to kick a man when he's down..."

Antoine had not the reflexes to block the incoming punch to his abdomen. He doubled over to the gathering crowd's excited chatter, then Luc finished the battle with a knee to his brother's nose.

Antoine dropped to the floor, blood spraying from his nostrils.

Two hotel security guards shoved through the throng, pinning Luc's arms to his sides. As they dragged him across the lobby, Nell gave chase, pleasantly startled when Jean-Paul Cardon intercepted the parade near the revolving doors.

"Release him," he commanded, flashing his badge.

Reluctantly, the stocky pair retreated.

Luc glared at Cardon. "You've been following me."

"Only because I know how important the vineyard is to you, and how your mind works," grinned the inspector.

"What's he talking about, Luc?" queried Nell.

"It's nothing, *cherie*. A long-standing... disagreement."

Cardon hailed, "Mademoiselle, it is good to see you again. I was calling upon you this morning to request your assistance in a small matter involving your friend, here."

“What assistance?” It was Luc, not Nell, who spoke.

“It seems your friend’s livelihood is at stake, thanks to his brother,” continued Cardon, ignoring Luc.

“How so?” Nell asked.

“A water sample tainted with toxic levels of mercury was supplied to the food and wine agency. They believe Luc is shipping poisonous wine around the world under the Stone Cottage label.”

“Ridiculous!”

“I agree. Depending on the extent of the bribes, however, it will be difficult to trust French officials to accurately retest the sample.”

Nell glowered at Antoine, towel wedged against his nose, being ushered from the building by two paramedics. “Three certified American chemists can fly here on my father’s private jet in 12 hours, if need be,” she promised. “Or do you want to admit you made... a mistake?”

He cursed under his breath.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Cardon confronted Luc. “I’ve arranged to send that trinket back to Rome, since you won’t be needing the money.”

Teyssier signaled his surrender with raised palms. “It’s not in my pocket, if you care to search.”

“Then, where?”

“The lady’s suitcase, tucked in a pair of purple socks.”

“What the hell...” squinted Nell.

Luc donned his most contrite smile. “Forgive me, Nell. I acted in desperation, not wishing to lose what little I have left of importance.”

“And you would’ve stood by and let me be arrested if customs found stolen goods in my bag?” she stormed.

“Ah... *oui*.”

“Just wait until you read what I print in my magazine, you bastard!”

The last woman to call him that had been his wife. Maybe the insult fit, after all.

“It wouldn’t be the first time an unsuspecting woman fell victim to Luc’s... deception,” interjected Cardon. He steered Nell toward the lifts. “Luc is a good man, and my friend, despite our... different approaches to life. Your anger is justified, but in many ways he is like a child...”

Luc stepped between the pair, growling, “I don’t need your help.”

Cardon withdrew. “*Pardon*.”

“I’d heard from various sources you were no ordinary wine maker,” Nell declared. “Now, I grasp what they meant.” Conviction lit her face, and Luc could not deny she looked quite pretty in that moment. “This is one trip I won’t soon forget, even those falsely-given kisses.”

Extending her hand to Cardon, Nell led him into a vacant lift, so he could retrieve the stolen necklace from her luggage. Luc watched the doors close, only for the second time in his life feeling remorse for hurting an innocent soul.

Somberly, he hailed a taxi to the terminal, catching the afternoon train to La Ravelle. The long trek home made his foot ache. Jean-Paul Cardon had once offered him a happy ending to a true love story: Kate. With Kate and Marius gone, that dream had dissolved. He retained ownership of his vineyard, until the next time Antoine’s schemes threatened his success.

Would he then resort to the same tactics? Would he steal and scam Nell after Nell until he finally landed in jail?

He smirked, lighting a cigarette as he approached the stone cottage. He’d once joked to Kate, “I’m an asshole, what can I tell you?”

No more truthful words had he uttered. Whatever pleasures life offered him to offset the myriad pains, Luc Teyssier would always be just that.

Dropping on the porch steps, smoke curled toward the night sky as he stretched his legs and shrugged at the stars.

Ripples of Truth

A long, arduous process, reviewing the applications, interview transcripts and dissertations. Jeannine had sat amongst piles of paper on her battered living room sofa every day for months, the sole judge of this bizarre contest. Knowing what she knew - and knowing the world at large would not accept the truth - she'd made a game of her search for the most genuinely spiritual individuals in northern Indiana. Media outlets spread the story via satellite, internet and wire service, until parcels were arriving from every country around the globe.

Her meeting with the finalists would take place at a new retreat facility on the Carmelite monastery grounds in Springfield, Missouri. The site had been chosen for its central yet remote location, and the fact its doors had not yet opened to the general public. No extraneous onlookers would interfere with their discussions, and access by reporters and news videographers would be limited to the main lobby.

The conference hall furnishings had not yet been delivered, which suited Jeannine's penchant for simplicity. The chamber boasted a highly polished pine floor, cream-colored stucco walls and an exposed, peaked pine ceiling crossed by thick matching beams. Wall sconces cast a pleasing light. Full-length windows provided a magnificent view of rolling green hills to the east.

Jeannine supplied the spacious, empty room with four large, blue cushions around a low pine table. She never considered the finalists might be too old to sit on the floor. She assumed the Catholic priest was accustomed to kneeling, and the Buddhist nun spent many hours each day in meditation. The Jewish cantor was young enough to be flexible.

Yes, she'd been vilified in the press for the narrow scope of the selections. "What about Hindus, Muslims and other Christian sects?" they cried in editorials. She'd tried to explain this wasn't an interfaith gathering, with hundreds of bodies present and little accomplished. It wasn't about religion at all, for that matter. Spirituality, in her mind, had nothing to do with the organized hypocrisy called religion. It was about being open-minded, willing to learn and grow...

To be honest, Jeannine didn't believe in God, or any unseen super-human power described with grandiose virtues and flaws.

That August Friday evening, she stood beneath the retreat center's limestone columned portico and watched three limousines cruise up the steaming asphalt drive. The limos weren't her idea; they'd been donated - like the meeting place, food, and airfare - by wealthy philanthropists, with an eye to exclusive

articles or documentaries for the respective publications and news channels in which they held controlling interests.

She was not alone in her wait. A crowd lined the circular approach, and moved closer to the entrance as the vehicles slowed. Flashbulbs popped in rapid succession as a trio of formally dressed chauffeurs opened the rear doors simultaneously, as if on cue, and each finalist emerged.

Commentaries on the 11:00 PM news and Saturday headlines would describe them as a “motley looking group” when they posed for photographers. In Jeannine’s estimation, their lack of expensive or socially-dictated attire confirmed the suitability of her choice.

Thin and bespectacled, Rev. Len Grabner - pastor of St. Casimer’s Catholic Church in Willow Creek, Pennsylvania - wore a white, short sleeve dress shirt, tan Dockers and black loafers. His brown mane was combed forward to hide a receding hairline. He towered above Jeannine’s 5’5”, and she hoped to be able to look up to him in more ways than just that one.

She grasped his hand warmly, then bowed in Asian fashion to the petite Marianna Yu, from Bangkok, Thailand. The Buddhist nun had shed the voluminous saffron robes of her office in favor of a green t-shirt, blue jeans and leather sandals. Her thick black hair framed a tanned round face, from which beamed excited brown eyes and a brilliant smile.

“Welcome, welcome,” greeted Jeannine, who found herself the recipient of an enthusiastic hug.

“So glad for this,” muttered Marianna in halted English. “Thank you for picking.”

One factor Jeannine had not previously considered: any potential language barrier. She’d never noticed any lack in the Thai’s comprehension of English, not in her writing or her speech during the long-distance phone interview. Might it just be the stress of the moment which made her sound... well, foreign?

Best to deal with that later, Jeannine decided, turning to Isaac Cohen, the cantor from Warsaw, Poland. He wore the customary black suit and wide-brimmed hat of the Hasidic Jews, with the black curls in lieu of sideburns. A scruffy beard hid most of his face, but he was obviously well-fed from his girth.

“Shalom,” he rumbled, nodding his head.

Jeannine replied, “A pleasure to see you.”

She signaled them to face the cameras one last time, then led them through the sensor-activated glass doors. A crush of reporters followed a short distance behind.

Urging them into a small dining room past a dormant fountain, Jeannine held up a restraining hand to the media. “If you’ll allow us a few minutes for some coffee and a snack, we’ll be back to answer all your questions.”

Sated, the horde eased its surge. Jeannine joined the others serving themselves from a buffet-style selection of coffee, tea, juices, cookies and pastries.

“I know you’re all tired from your travels,” she stated. “Dinner will be served at 8:00, after a brief session with the reporters. You are free to tell them anything you wish, on any subject you choose. Since there’s no political agenda to this meeting, it doesn’t matter what the masses are led to believe, or what they think about what I’ve done.”

“What, precisely, is your purpose for bringing us together in this place?” inquired Isaac, whose yarmulke was pinned to his curly head to prevent it from falling. Instead of a 35-year-old man with a decided Polish accent, he stuck Jeannine as a raw teenager, eager to learn.

“I want to share what I have discovered in my spiritual journey with those who will best understand, because their own immersion in personal faith has been similar.”

Len asked, “And when will you share these insights?”

“Tomorrow, after breakfast. We all deserve a good night’s sleep.”

Stuffing a huge double chocolate chip cookie into her mouth, Jeannine washed it down with a bottle of mineral water before heading back toward the lobby and the throngs hovering in anticipation of their prey.

Dinner passed in silence, not due to any restriction - written or unwritten - but because the participants understood there was no need to force polite conversation just to kill time. Jeannine watched the three, a slight smile playing across her lips. She’d chosen wisely.

Breakfast on Saturday was informal, each enjoying the buffet of eggs, bacon, sausage, potatoes, fruits and pastries upon rising. The sun bathed the dining room in warmth, a further welcome on such an auspicious occasion.

Those same shafts of gold lit every corner of the conference hall, and Jeannine had the sense to shift the table on an angle, so no matter where they sat, no one would have to squint against the glare pouring through the east windows.

She couldn’t tell if they were amused or dismayed by the furnishings. Without a word, they entered and lowered themselves onto the plump cushions, setting their coffee mugs, bottles of water and tea cups on the table.

“If it meets your approval, I’d like to start the day by having each of you talk about how you came to this particular point in your spiritual quest,” Jeannine

began. "I think we will soon see how, though we all come from different backgrounds and parts of the world, we have a common reason for being here."

All eyes fell to Marianna. She lowered her head modestly and composed her thoughts before speaking in perfect, unexcited English.

"I grew up among the poorest of the poor in Bangkok. My parents knew, because we had no money and few possessions, the prospects of arranging a decent marriage for me were slim. I was sent to the Buddhist monastery before my tenth birthday. The nuns educated me, taught me meditation, fed and clothed me. Deep in my heart, though, I knew there had to be more to life than the daily routine of sitting, begging, eating and sleeping.

"Disenchanted with the life, my thoughts would wander during meditation. One humid afternoon, I found myself concentrating on a fly buzzing around my head. It struck me how no one knows what a fly thinks as it soars on its crazy course to nowhere. Bees have a purpose - pollinating flowers and making honey. Spiders spin their webs; other bugs and insects do what they must do. But, flies?

"That's when enlightenment occurred," Marianna continued. "Thinking is over-rated. Having a purpose, following rules are over-rated. It is more important to live each day to the full, even if it's just winding our way along some crazy course to nowhere. From that day, my life has changed completely."

Len and Isaac nodded as she concluded by lowering her eyes. Jeannine shifted her focus to the Jewish cantor.

His hand automatically went to his yarmulke, to ensure it was still pinned in place. He sipped his coffee and cleared his throat. "I'm used to singing in public, not speaking," he chuckled. "Please forgive me if I stumble over myself."

"Take your time," Len encouraged him.

"Let's see. I don't know where to start." Isaac pondered a few moments, and the others respected him enough to show no impatience. Finally, his mouth pursed. "Being a Hasidim, I've always been sensitive to the disrespect shown by one man to another. Our community in Warsaw honors those who survived the Holocaust, and we try to learn tolerance from them. Those of other cultures and other religions do not always tolerate us, however. I cannot count the number of times I've been walking along the street, minding my own business, and heard insults or unkind comments from those I passed.

"I had no choice but to dwell on this problem. Every week, the churches were filled with people praying according to their preference, to the same Lord whom I worship on the Sabbath. Yet, they seem to forget about their faith the rest of the week, allowing greed, pride and other faults to have sway over them.

“I could only come to one conclusion: humanity does not yet grasp the true meaning of faith - that it should be a constant in their lives, instead of occupying only an hour of every seven days. All too soon, I began to recognize the same tendencies among my own people, and it hurt me deeply. They would quibble over the silliest things, shun those who crossed imaginary lines of conduct they had created themselves. I came to see faith as an evolutionary process, a road on which some have moved farther than others. Those lagging behind make it difficult for others. They try to hold back the more advanced, afraid of what may happen to their way of life if the truth is discovered.”

Marianna favored Isaac with a broad grin. Len muttered, “Amen.” At ease, Isaac relaxed his bulk on the cushion.

“I’ve been a priest nearly fifty years,” Len ventured without being prompted. “I started my religious life in a small monastery which, due to a lack of new blood, folded in the late 1970s. I wasn’t comfortable there, as it was, because of the constant clashes among the men who were supposed to be brothers, confreres, all pursuing the goal of oneness with God.

“I transferred to an active religious order, hoping to be a missionary. I spent a year in Africa, but caught some bug which laid me low. Since then, I’ve been chaplain for a retirement community. The fear of death among the elderly, their struggle to stay alive in the face of debilitating illness, shocks me some days. They’ve been so indoctrinated into believing their smallest sin will be judged against them, they would rather live and suffer agonizing pain than take their ultimate rest.

“Those nights when I haven’t been wakened to give someone last rites, I’ve sat up in the small apartment I have on the complex grounds, contemplating what these trends mean. I seriously began questioning the wisdom of religious doctrine being drilled into young minds, until it warps their thinking in later years. Even scientists are motivated by this fear of death and judgment, laboring decades to find cures for diseases, so people can stave off the end of days.

Impassioned, Len’s voice rose. “It’s ludicrous. There are days I just want to scream at them, ‘Death is a part of life! There’s no reason to be afraid!’”

Jeannine patted his arm as he concluded.

“I’m sorry,” Len apologized. “It’s clear you’ve all felt this kind of frustration.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Marianna.

Isaac added, “How foolish is humanity.”

“Based on your stories, do you ever feel separate from others, like you’re not exactly part of that humanity any longer?” Jeannine queried.

The trio nodded in unison.

“Though you’ve tried to convince them of your views, they reject you?”

Again, affirmation.

“Then, my efforts have been a success. You see now, even though great distances separate us on the physical plane, you are not alone. Individuals living simply around the globe are stepping beyond the conventions of religious tenets and society as a whole, living their beliefs, albeit in silence.”

“That is true,” Marianna said. “But you haven’t told us your story yet.”

“My story is not so dramatic as yours,” admitted Jeannine. “The best way I can summarize it may startle you, too.”

Len prodded, “Don’t keep us in suspense.”

“A few years ago, my youngest son asked me a question I never would have dared ask my own mother. He wanted to know why I was such a bitch.”

Marianna gasped.

Jeannine laughed. “I know. I must tell you, though, I never denied being a bitch, and didn’t really see it as an insult. There’s no doubt I was hard on my sons in some areas where other parents let their children have their own way. In other things, I trusted them more than most adults. Anyway, when I answered my son on that particular day, my own words reflected something I’d jotted in my journal during the late 80s. I told him, ‘Because I am.’

“Two simple words. ‘I am.’ Often used as part of a person’s self-description: ‘I am an American,’ or ‘I am a student.’ But, as my spiritual journey progressed, I saw where human beings use titles and descriptions to give themselves prestige - even to give their god credence. The very effort smacks of falsehood.

“In the process of ridding myself of the tendency to describe myself with a variety of terms, I also ended up casting off my emotions, most of my possessions and my money. A Latin phrase sums it up well: ‘Liberavi animam meam.’”

“‘I have freed my soul,’” Len translated.

“Exactly. While most would call me an atheist because I don’t hold with a supreme being, I’ve found, only by freeing the soul from the constraints of human expectations - whatever they may be - can we truly live to the full. Only then can we be content with, ‘I am.’”

Isaac objected, “But, those are the words the Lord used to name himself...”

“You mean, the goal is for human beings to become gods?” Len, less stunned, interspersed.

“The term ‘god’ is a subjective one,” Marianna responded. “If I understand correctly, the goal is to become whole.”

Jeannine beamed. “When an individual can say, ‘I am,’ the example will shine like a beacon for others, though they may be too blind to see. The wholeness, though, will prove infectious, even if just one or two grasp the concept and apply it. The evolution will take centuries - millennia, perhaps - but it has to start somewhere. I believe it has begun here.”

She rose, and the others followed suit. Silently, she shook each hand in turn, and departed the conference hall. The three remained there, staring at one another for no little time. Eventually, their eyes betraying this new-found knowledge, they made their way home.

The Phony

The kitchen had finally cooled down after a long night's cooking; the clatter of pots and dishes had ceased. While Rod Compton reveled in the aroma and excitement of a crowded work space, he needed this quiet time to gather his thoughts and make preparations for the next day's meals.

The 38-year-old chef never expected two yuppies in black sweat suits to kick in his L.A. restaurant's back door and overpower him. He caught a glimpse of their tanned, clean-shaven faces before being conked on the head with a pistol butt.

He awoke, thinking himself still dreaming, blackness on all sides. Pain in his skull affirmed his consciousness, however, as did cramps in his arms and legs. He couldn't move in the uncomfortable chair.

"What the hell..."

Rod heard a door creak and the squeak of rubber soles on tile. The three spotlights burst to life, blinding him. He squeezed his blue eyes shut, the brightness penetrating his lids. Someone untied his bonds and placed a coffee mug in his hands.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Compton, but we had no choice." A man's voice, full of gravel and disdain.

"Who's 'we', and where am I?"

"We can't tell you that."

"Oh, brother..." chuckled Rod.

"You've been brought here because you spent three years studying in Vienna and speak fluent German and Russian."

"I studied cooking, for Christ's sake. I wasn't the least bit interested in their politics."

"Be that as it may, a situation has developed..."

A sarcastic contralto interrupted, "Oh, cut the crap, Danny. Get to the point."

Compton strained to see beyond the perimeter of lights. "Beth?"

"It's okay, Rod. Trust me," she replied.

"Trust you? What the hell's going on?"

"If you calm down, we'll tell you."

"Not like this, you won't." Rod dashed the ceramic mug on the floor.

"Turn off those damned lights and act like human beings."

"There goes everything," grumbled Danny.

Beth retorted, "I told you the clandestine tactics wouldn't work. Let me handle this, okay?"

Two sets of shoes departed the room. Fluorescent ceiling fixtures were switched on, the spotlights extinguished. Beth and Rod sat in a cozy, whitewashed office.

"Get yourself another cup of coffee," the 33-year-old brunette suggested. "This may take awhile."

"Don't play games with me. I want the whole story, now."

"Man, lighten up. Something's happened, okay? And you're the only one who can help."

"Beth, where *are* we?"

"Cincinnati."

"What?" erupted Rod.

"Oh, Christ. If you shut up a minute, I'll explain."

Compton frowned at her.

"Two days ago, the President received word a former East German officer was flying from Berlin to Washington. He planned to go from there to New York, and turn over details of a coup attempt to the United Nations..."

"So?"

"The guy suffered a fatal heart attack five minutes after he deplaned at Dulles yesterday afternoon."

Beth took a long sip from her mug. Rod's patience couldn't tolerate the delay. "Well?"

"We don't want his superiors to know we don't have the plans. We were ordered to find a substitute."

"Me?"

"Dammit, Rod, blame me! I saw what I thought was your picture on Danny's desk. I assumed you were in trouble. I opened my big mouth and shot you in the ass. I'm sorry."

"You mean, I look like this dead ex-Red, so I'm going to be set up?"

She nodded.

"No."

"You don't have a choice. We need you."

"Who the hell are 'we'?"

"The C.I.A."

Red's jaw fell; he couldn't speak. He glared at the slender female opposite.

"I'm *sorry*," she repeated.

"Somehow, I had a sneaking suspicion you didn't make the big money selling Avon," he muttered, rising. He scanned the room, hopeless. "I wouldn't do it if you weren't my sister."

Beth Compton leapt from her seat and hugged her brother's broad shoulders. "I swear, everything will be okay."

From there, Danny took charge. Rod had to be briefed, dressed, hair cut, made up with a full beard and his German accent perfected before 8:00 that evening, when Captain Hans Grunwold would address the United Nations Security Council.

"The state dinner starts at 7:00," announced the massively built Danny while their Cessna flew over Pennsylvania.

Beth squeezed Rod's hand. "You're safe. I promise."

"But..."

"None of that. Security'll be so tight, you'll have an escort to the john."

"Where will you be?" her brother queried.

"I can't go. God help us if someone saw us together and made the connection. I'm just your ordinary Avon lady, remember?"

"How the hell did you get into this?"

"Uncle Chuck."

Rod entertained vague images of their father's brother, a rough and tumble truck driver for a Chicago supply warehouse. "Why'd he involve you?"

"I guessed his secret. No one ever pretended so hard to be Joe Average. I knew he was hiding something."

"And now you're hiding the same." smirked Rod. "I may never see you again."

"Keep that attitude."

"Why?"

"Pessimism is a trademark of Eastern Europeans."

When the private jet landed at Kennedy Airport, the siblings parted company. Danny and two other agents escorted Rod in silence through the terminal to an official limousine.

"Bullet proof?" Compton quipped as they pulled away from the loading zone.

"How important do you think you are?"

The group soon discovered their answer. Taking a route through a residential district, the limousine stopped frequently at traffic signals. The chauffeur kept checking his rear view mirror and soon informed his passengers they were being followed by a brown Chevy Caprice.

"You're kidding," snapped Rod.

Danny peered out the window. "A couple hard-line former KGB operatives, I'd say, acting without authorization."

"I don't care about authorization. Do they carry guns?"

"Sure."

"Stop the car!" Compton wailed.

The limousine braked. Before Danny could countermand the order, the bogus German officer had fled the vehicle at a dead run.

Past a row of brownstones he sprinted, not looking back. Danny watched two Russians make chase and designated the younger of his companions to pursue them. The limousine could monitor his progress via walkie-talkie.

What Beth heard on her portable scanner shocked her into action. Rod didn't know New York like she did - Avon conventions had guaranteed her knowledge of the metropolis. She floored the rented Lincoln's accelerator and swerved through evening congestion toward Manhattan.

Rod's brain churned as fast as his feet moved along the streets and alleys. He thanked God he jogged ten miles every morning through Beverly Hills; he rounded a corner - half a block ahead of the Russians - and ducked into a tailor shop.

The grisdled proprietor emerged from his work room. "May I help you?"

"I'm looking for a pinstripe, double breasted suit, 38 regular."

As the squat figure led Rod to a display rack, the KGB agents raced past the window. Compton heaved a sigh. A hanger bearing an expensive jacket and trousers was thrust into his hand.

"If you like, you may try it on in the dressing room."

The "dressing room" amounted to no more than an oversized bathroom. Rod wasted no time debating his next step. He shed the German uniform and, wearing the new suit, peeled off the false beard. Opening the window activated an alarm, but he had vanished by the time the shopkeeper jimmied the door lock.

Nonchalantly, Rod strolled to the corner. He hailed a cab and slid onto the rear seat of the yellow Chevy which pulled up beside him.

A woman at the wheel grinned in the mirror, bad teeth well in evidence.

"Where ya headed?"

At a loss, Compton considered La Guardia Airport, then had the good sense to check his pockets. Nothing. No money, no identification, no lint. He exited the cab. "Forget it."

The car squealed away; he stood on the sidewalk, thinking. Safe for the moment, he had to contact Beth. Spy novels and movies had made him aware he

couldn't simply pick up a phone and call the C.I.A. He didn't have two quarters, anyway.

He turned north, for no particular reason. Walking with bowed head, he didn't see the two distracted Russians on a collision course. The sheer force of the impact knocked Rod to the concrete.

With profuse apologies in their native tongue, the errant spies helped their victim to his feet. An old habit, Rod replied in Russian, "It was an accident. Forget it."

He continued on his way. The mistake worked through the fog of his confusion at the same instant the Russians cried in unison, "Grunwold!"

Compton breezed by the C.I.A. agent, still following the KGB. The American radioed the course change to Danny when he saw the foreigners approaching.

Beth heard the report and did a U-turn in the middle of Fifth Avenue. Almost sunset, she'd have to work fast. If she remembered her brother's logic - from countless games of hide-and-seek and tag as kids - he would zig-zag block to block. The Continental steered onto a quiet lane and, 30 seconds later, Rod came into view.

One button unlocked the passenger door. Beth laid on the horn. Rod discerned the vehicle 40 yards away; a final spurt of adrenaline closed this gap quickly. He fell onto the leather seat, gasping. A patch of rubber on the asphalt left the KGB men at a loss upon reaching the site.

The C.I.A. underling saw his prey despondently abandon the chase, and relayed the information to Danny. "I was too far away to see the car Compton got into," the rookie puffed. "I thought you said he didn't know anyone in New York."

"Except his sister. Damn her and her scanner," growled his superior.

Due to his excellent physical condition, it didn't take long for Rod to recover his composure. Beth drove toward the United Nations building.

"Where are you taking me?" Rod asked.

"We've got to stick this out. You're going to the dinner, then the Security Council meeting."

"Are you crazy? Let's go home."

Beth's knuckles whitened around the steering wheel. "Look, Rod, you've blown our cover by letting those goons see you without Grunwold's beard. We've got to make them believe they targeted the wrong man, and Grunwold is still a threat."

"But, the clothes... the beard..."

"Danny will already have had his boys pick them up and pay off the tailor. No doubt, the crew will meet us at the U.N."

"Hell, this must be one efficient organization."

"It can be, when the stakes are high enough."

Rod stretched out on the wide seat. "Just what are the stakes?"

"I'm not supposed to know, and neither are you. Something along the lines of a KGB resurgence in Russia and Germany, threatening to restore the Socialist regime."

Her brother let himself be silenced by this statement. When they arrived at the United Nations, Beth flashed a phony press pass for the guard's inspection. She'd provided Rod with a camera so he could pretend to be her photographer. In the lobby, the woman saw Danny's men trying to look inconspicuous near the men's room. She sent Rod in their direction.

Danny intercepted her en route to the phones. "We've got everything squared away. You can scam," he directed.

"No way. I'm sticking close."

"You'll blow the whole operation..."

"If you order me to leave, Danny, I'll blow the roof off this building. That's my brother in there."

The agent shrugged. He couldn't comprehend loyalty of this sort, having no family of his own. Together, they watched Captain Hans Grunwold leave the men's room and cross to the elevator. Beth shuffled toward the stair well, mounting the metal flights by twos once the door closed.

She beat her brother to the fifth floor dining room, gaining access to the assembly with her press pass. During the five minutes Rod mingled, Beth was introduced to him by a journalist from the *New York Times*. The fake Grunwold spoke in dignified, yet hesitant English, accent so thick she never would have understood him if he hadn't winked.

"You have been working for newspaper how many years, Fraulein?" inquired Rod.

Beth lied, "Not long."

"In Germany, before the Wall came down, beautiful women did not write for newspaper. I think... I like America."

"Thanks."

Rod crooked his arm for his sister. A bald man, wearing black tie and tails, frowned in disapproval. Compton patted Beth's fingers.

"This one, she sits by me, right?"

"I'm afraid, Captain, all the places have been assigned..." came the explanation.

"Somebody can move."

Rod stalked away; he and Beth could barely restrain their laughter. Then, the impersonator stopped short.

"What is it?" puzzled Beth.

"I hope you have a gun in your purse."

"My coat pocket. Why?"

"Those two goons who chased me are here."

"Don't worry. They won't risk exposing themselves in public."

"How can you be so sure?"

She chuckled. "Hold that expression. It's perfect."

"Damn you. You got me into this; it's up to you to save my skin."

"Shut up."

Rod spun on Danny. "What?"

"You're not here to impress these guys with your perfect English. Where's the accent?"

The phony Grunwald clicked his heels together. "Yawohl, Herr Bastard."

Beth pulled him forward. Those present were being ushered to their seats; the Comptons found places at the head table.

"Who are all these people?" asked Rod, between sips from his water glass.

"You expect me to know? Mostly German dignitaries, I suppose."

"What if one of them throws a curve at me?"

"A curve?"

"A question I can't answer."

"That won't happen," Beth remarked. "After you eat, you'll go straight to the council chambers. No one should interfere with you."

That didn't mean one or more people wouldn't make an attempt to interfere. In removing the fruit cup from the table, the waiter spilled Rod's wine. Naturally, Compton jumped to his feet when the chilled liquid hit his legs. A second waiter jammed the barrel of a luger in his ribs.

"Mach schnell," growled the gunman.

"Beth..."

A well-aimed foot kicked the first man off balance and, while his comrade watched him fall, she wrenched the weapon from the other's grasp. Danny and his boys had the pair in custody before a minute elapsed.

Rod sank into his chair, thoroughly rattled. Beth, on the other hand, wore a delighted grin.

"Good job, Rod," she praised. "You can take off the beard now."

"Huh?"

"It's all over."

"What do you mean, it's over? I've still got to..."

"No, you don't. We told you that so you wouldn't panic when the crisis really occurred. We knew someone would try to kill Grunwold before he talked."

"Why, you..."

"Hey, that's the C.I.A. for you. Lies, games, but they get the job done. Those two Krauts will spill their guts about every covert KGB activity in progress. Just what we were after."

"You're saying: this is it?"

"Sure. Do you think the U.N. would actually throw a dinner for some traitor?"

Rod glowered at her. "I ought to..."

"Too bad you can smile now. You're getting real good at looking morose," Beth taunted. She rose. "You ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"To go home."

"You got that right." The beard dropped into his soup bowl. He threw the German uniform jacket atop a tray of salads. The elevator whisked the couple to ground level. Arm in arm, they paraded past Danny's agents, waiting for their car at the building's main doors.

"Hey!" hollered the senior official. "He needs to be debriefed..."

"To hell with that," Rod shouted over his shoulder. "You think I'll breathe a word of this to anyone? They'd think I lost my marbles."

He followed Beth to the Lincoln, and they drove into the New York night.

Desperate Tactics

Treating patients in a psychiatric ward requires a special temperament.

Over the course of two decades, Rupert Mason, Psy. D., had consciously observed his temperament change. He could no longer tolerate the random behaviors of Memorial General Hospital's sixth floor inhabitants, yet his latest contract did not expire for another 18 months. The level of stress driving up his blood pressure made him wonder if, before his retirement date, he would be committed to the very ward where he now worked.

He despised intake assessment more than any other duty; his seniority didn't exempt him from the rotation. Newcomers to the ward made use of every possible deception to convince the doctors of their sanity, and the challenge to detect various ruses drained one's energy.

What intrigued Mason about his last intake that particular Monday was her bearing. She sat in the two-way mirrored room - the layout reminded the psychiatrist of a police interrogation chamber - as if awaiting her lunch order at a local deli. Sandy hair was tied back in a pony tail, her face lean, her body fit. No fear, no trepidation shown in her brilliant green eyes; this woman had a purpose, and would not back down from her goal.

The man committing her sat in the visitors' lounge, equally purposeful. Full brown hair combed back from his forehead, his oversized, tinted glasses harkened back to the 70s. The hard set of his jaw beneath a bushy mustache and goatee bothered Mason - as if he never smiled.

Both would tell their stories in the course of the next hour. Mason had endured eight rounds of he-said, she-said that day alone, and wasn't really in the mood for more.

Unlike his colleagues, he didn't begin with the "responsible party" and complaints about their relative's mental aberrations. He didn't even review the file, usually forwarded from the outpatient therapist who had reached wit's end experimenting with available drugs and treatments. Best to trust his instincts and experience, and see what developed.

He entered the cubicle, carrying only a small notepad and pen. Anything which might be used as a weapon was left in his office; if a patient became violent, the most ordinary objects could inflict fatal damage to the human body. Mason removed his necktie, even the belt from his trousers on these days, because he'd known an intern who'd been strangled by a patient with the length of stitched leather ripped from its loops.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted, sitting in the molded plastic chair on the opposite side of the anchored metal table.

“Nice to hear the accent,” replied a cultured contralto. “Picked it up at Oxford, right?”

His interest piqued anew. “How’d you know?”

“I did a complete background check on this joint, and the staff, before I agreed to Tim bringing me. You’re Rupert Mason, 52, doctor of psychiatry, fellow of this, that and the other, degrees from Harvard and Oxford, Rhodes Scholar, single, no children, no hobbies. Better looking than your photos, but not as tall as I expected.”

She’d obviously found a copy of the Harvard alumni directory on-line. Resourceful, but not impressive. Still, “You’re being admitted voluntarily?”

“Sure. Better than being killed.”

Mason’s left eyebrow arched. An honest answer, but sparked by paranoia? Best not to jump at a diagnosis; he flipped to a page of standard questions.

“Your name?”

“Elise Capshaw.”

“Address?”

“Which one?”

Odd. “You have more than one?”

“My apartment, Tim’s condo, and my parents’ old house on Key West.”

“Where do you spend most of your time?”

“In hiding.” She must’ve recognized Mason’s confusion in his steel-gray eyes, because she cracked a winsome smile. “Relax and listen; I’ll start at the beginning.”

“Please do.”

“My dad owned a small grocery store on the south side. He never got rich, but he earned a comfortable living, with all the neighbors shopping there. I grew up knowing Mick Donovan, Tim’s dad, who was the beat cop. When he was killed chasing a bank robber, my dad sort of adopted Tim. Tim had a bad influence on my dad, even though he was 20 years younger. He convinced my dad to convert part of the store room into a bookie joint. When my dad died three years ago, I sold the store to a chain, and Tim lost the safe haven for his... business. He wasn’t happy. Ever since, he’s alternately tried to romance me and murder me.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“First time I met him, he was ten, and I was six. He kissed me, innocently enough. Two days later, he stabbed me with a steak knife when I wouldn’t

surrender his football. Now, I've got the money, and he doesn't, so it doesn't take much to put two-and-two together."

"Why did you agree to let him bring you here?"

"From my perspective: it's safe. His rationale is, if you guys pump me full of drugs, he can slip a power of attorney past me, then drain my bank account. Or, better still, I might OD on the medication, and his troubles would be over once and for all."

"You don't see yourself as having any psychological issues, then?"

"Tim wants me to think I do. He's been adding hallucinogenics to my salads - when he thinks I'm not looking - and doing his best Charles Boyer imitation from *Gaslight*. I've been playing along, to keep him from getting more desperate."

"When I asked your address, you included his as one of your many abodes..."

"He likes to keep me close and, when he tracks me down, he drags me back there."

"Otherwise, you're in hiding."

The sandy head nodded.

"I'm getting the picture now," declared Mason.

"But you don't believe me."

"It's a fairly outlandish tale."

"But easily verifiable."

"Most of the ones I hear from my patients are."

Elise countered, "Have it your own way. Will you be showing me to my padded cell now?"

"We don't use padded cells anymore. The patients tended to pick the insulation off the walls and eat it. Hard cement blocks, now."

"Darn, and I was looking forward to bouncing around like a basketball."

She grinned, and Mason felt himself smiling, too. He decided, after speaking with Tim Donovan, he would corroborate what parts of her story could be readily checked.

"I'll be back shortly," he remarked, rising.

Elise chuckled, "Typical doctor."

Down the corridor, Donovan set aside the day's *New York Times* when Mason approached. The two men shook hands, standing almost eye-to-eye, though Donovan's polished boots added to his height, while Mason wore flat loafers.

"If you'll come into my office..."

“Will this take long?”

“Are you in a hurry?” Mason prodded.

“No. Getting here at 11:00, though, and it’s now past three... I’m quite hungry.”

“Understandable. Would you like something to drink?”

A grating quality harshened Donovan’s voice. “Coffee, if it’s fresh.”

“I can’t guarantee what’s in the staff break room.”

“Skip it, then.”

Mason sank on the utilitarian swivel chair at the metal desk - the hospital’s budget allowed for nothing fancy - while Donovan chose a battered velveteen armchair.

“Tell me about yourself, and your relationship with Miss Capshaw.”

“Me? I’m not worth talking about. I’ve known Elise more than 20 years. Her dad and mine...”

“He was a police officer?”

Donovan snorted. “One of the ‘city’s finest’. Shot by a two-bit thug, leaving me an orphan. His death benefits barely covered the funeral expenses.”

“What happened to your mother?”

“She died when I was three, giving birth to what would’ve been my little brother.”

“So, it was just you and your dad?”

“Just me, most of the time. They gave Dad the crap shifts, the slots no one else wanted. It was their way of sticking it to an honest Irishman.”

Mason consulted his notepad. “His name was Mick?”

“Who told you that?” Donovan bristled.

“Miss Capshaw.”

“Sure, everybody called him that - a slur no different than the n-word. He was born Pdraig Colin Donovan, in the tiny village of Churchtown. Came to America after he married my mother.”

“She was Irish, also?”

“No. From Cincinnati. They met when she came over on a trip with a few of her high school friends. Married five days later. I was born before Christmas.”

They’d gotten off-topic, nonetheless a useful diversion. “So you grew up knowing Miss Capshaw...” prompted Mason.

“Her dad felt responsible for me after my own passed. She had a school-girl crush on me, and I humored her. Lately, though, she’d been getting obsessive, not letting me out of her sight...”

Not the same as Elise's narrative. Donovan mentioned her slicing her wrists when he threatened to leave, and taking half a bottle of tranquilizers, after seeing him with another woman.

"She sees things which aren't there," he concluded. "She even tried to walk off the balcony of my condo last Saturday, thinking it connected to a stairway leading to the clouds."

Balancing the two versions, Mason didn't know who to believe at that moment. He excused himself, directing Donovan back to the lounge, himself returning to the intake room.

Elise wore a long-sleeved, pale pink blouse. Without a word, he grabbed her left arm and unbuttoned the cuff, rolling the material to her elbow. No scars to be seen. The same with her right appendage.

"Told you I attempted suicide, huh?" she quipped.

"Yes."

"He brought a knife in the bedroom one night and, if I hadn't awoken, I would've been dead from the wounds. He dissolved a couple sleeping pills in my soda, and thought I was out for good. I dumped the glass in the toilet while he was watching a football game on TV."

"Why subject yourself to such treatment?"

"For very practical reasons, summarized by the old saying, 'Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.'"

Mason understood. "Ah!"

"Besides, did you notice what Tim was wearing?" Elise continued.

"A blue business suit."

"A shoulder holster, with a Colt .45."

"A pistol?"

"No, a can of beer," she snarled. "If you refuse to admit me, this hospital will be rubble by morning."

Considering options, Mason stared at his reflection in the mirrored wall. Elise left her chair and stood beside him. Average height, she possessed a natural beauty along with extreme self-confidence. Still, even the most normal looking individuals could have disturbing mental conditions...

"I'll have to give you a battery of tests; it's policy for all new admissions," he explained. "I'm reluctant to house you with the general population, though."

"Because of Tim, or because you don't think I'm nuts?"

"We don't use that word."

"I know full well the words used in a place like this. I've taken those damned tests before, too. Scored too high for the results to be valid."

“You’ve been in treatment before?”

“I minored in psychology at Stanford.”

“What was your major?”

“Fine arts.”

“You paint?”

“Can’t hold a brush. Clay is my preferred medium.”

He found himself studying her hands. The earthy material was embedded in her skin; her palms slightly discolored by the effect. Yes, he could see her at a potter’s wheel, turning a vase, mug or bowl, or sculpting images free-style.

“Let me run my logic past you, Doctor,” she insisted. “Tim is going to think I’m securely locked inside this little vacation resort, and if you tell him the tests and initial course of medication will take a week, we won’t see him for seven days. That’ll give him plenty of time to go through every nook and cranny in my apartment, the bedroom I use at his place, and drive down to Key West to see what I’ve hidden down there.”

“You really think he’d do that?”

“He trusts everyone but me. Some days, he thinks I’ve got evidence to turn him into the cops. Otherwise, he thinks I’m cheating on him.”

He repeated the earlier question: “Why do you stay with him? Are you one of those professional victims?”

“I figure it’s safest for society in general to go along with his games. This is one he won’t win, however. Since he’ll be content to leave me be for a week, take me home with you. I’ll cook and clean. Days, I’ll come back here and help you with the other patients.”

“That would be rather risky, don’t you think? What if you’re lulling me into believing you’re perfectly sane, and you murder me in my bed?”

“I could say the same about you. Most professionals in this field are mentally unstable, themselves.”

“That’s a harsh assessment,” commented Mason, mildly offended.

Elise tenderly brushed a lock of jet black hair off his forehead. “It’ll only be for a couple days. While Tim isn’t dogging my every step, I can withdraw a chunk of money from the bank, hit the safe deposit box to grab my passport, and head north to Canada.”

“It’s a violation of every rule...”

“Fine. I’ll flunk your tests, you can pump me full of drugs, and I’ll walk around like a zombie the rest of my life.”

Mason sighed. “I’ll square it with Donovan.”

Which was easily done, actually. The pair, again seated in Mason's office, scrutinized each other like opponents awaiting their bout in the boxing ring. Mason now recognized the slight bulge beneath Donovan's left shoulder as the hidden weapon. "The problem, Mr. Donovan, is that you're not related to Miss Capshaw in any way, am I correct?"

"Correct. She thinks we're engaged to be married..."

"That's not good enough, I'm afraid. Federal regulations regarding patient confidentiality are strict and binding. I can't release any information about Miss Capshaw's condition to you, or anyone else, for that matter, without her written permission. Having her sign any legal papers now would be... unethical."

"You're implying her case is serious."

"Take away whatever you wish from this conversation, Mr. Donovan. I can neither confirm nor deny anything. I can tell you: after we assess the scores of the preliminary tests, appropriate medication will be prescribed, but sometimes there are adverse reactions, and the dosage must be adjusted. To prevent any disruption in this process, Miss Capshaw will be allowed no visitors for the next week."

Donovan accepted the news with no outward display of emotion. Mason had dealt with blubbering wives, desperate to see their husbands every day, and children uncertain the care being given their parent would be adequate, demanding frequent updates. The psychiatrist judged Donovan as having no real bond with Elise, beyond the money.

When Mason returned to the tiny room, he had his trench coat slung over one arm. "C'mon," he directed the slender female. "I'm more than ready to get out of here."

"Me, too."

A modest apartment in a downtown high-rise welcomed the couple with the aroma of garlic and flowers. Mason employed a butler, part-time, to keep the dwelling clean and cook the evening meal. The confirmed bachelor hated opening cans or popping frozen dinners in the microwave. "But, I hate cooking, as well," he chuckled.

They enjoyed the lasagna and tossed salad, followed by rich chocolate layer cake. Stretched on an overstuffed sofa in the living room, offering an exquisite view of the sunset, they chatted over the nightly news broadcasts. Mason suggested Elise choose a movie from his DVD collection; she opted for bed.

He ushered her into his guest room, sparsely decorated yet comfortable. Not having any luggage, he loaned her an oversized nightshirt. Sipping a glass of

scotch while searching for a pre-season football game on cable, he soon heard her snoring peacefully.

"I haven't slept that well in weeks," she stated, wandering into the kitchen the next morning.

"I'm surprised. That mattress is old and lumpy."

"Didn't matter. Just the fact no one would try to poison me or slit my wrists made all the difference." She filled a ceramic mug with coffee. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Will you be ready to go in a few minutes?"

"Sure."

The black Avanti pulled out of the parking garage at 7:30, traffic already heavy. Waiting for the light to turn green at one intersection, Elise glanced around, then gasped.

"What is it?"

"It's Tim."

Mason's head snapped to the right. "Where?"

"The café."

Indeed, Tim Donovan sat beneath the canopy at a cozy table, sharing breakfast with a voluptuous blonde.

"He gets around," commented Mason.

"She's nobody. One of his..."

"What, he's a pimp?"

The car moved ahead. "In a manner of speaking. He's more a loan shark who's diversified his interests."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"After I sold the grocery store, Tim was severely short of cash. He pursued the gamblers who hadn't paid their debts, but some didn't have enough. Out of the kindness of his heart" - she swallowed hard at the distasteful words - "he offered to extend their time to pay, for a small fee. Others heard what he was doing, and started coming to him, rather than a bank."

"Stupid move, I take it."

"Very stupid move. Tim has no heart, you see. Cruelty flows in his veins, not blood. He can be very persuasive when there's a profit to be made, but those who've crossed him have learned how dark his true nature really is."

"So, what about that girl?"

"She took a loan from Tim - something about needing medicine for her infant son, if I remember. When she didn't make her payments on time, he... convinced her to change careers."

"Prostitution?"

Elise shrugged. "He ignores the women, as long as they pay his cut when its due. In a way, he'd be a great boss, leaving the employees to their work, only concerned if they didn't meet their deadlines."

"You knew all this, yet you stayed..."

"He didn't know I knew. If he thought I knew, he would've killed me outright. If he'd discovered my dad included him in the will as secondary beneficiary - if I died, he'd get the money - I would've been dead long ago."

"You could've traveled the world, lived anywhere."

"My home is here. I don't have the energy to familiarize myself with new surroundings or people, a new culture or language."

"You told me yesterday..."

"I don't have the energy, but I no longer have a choice," she supplied.

Mason guided Elise through the hospital's employee entrance, showing her the security measures on the locked access doors en route to the psych ward.

"You'll have free run of the place, and I trust you not to be a threat to my job."

"Noted."

He passed her a white lab coat, and they started the day's rounds.

It didn't take long for Mason to be impressed by Elise's bedside manner and her insights into complex psychological problems. Her recommendations matched his own, in many cases, the only caveat being how the medical staff was hamstrung by the hospital administration. Reducing medications and increasing one-on-one therapy did not fit into the annual budget. The sole option was to keep the patients docile with drugs.

Elise made her protests known during the drive back to Mason's apartment. He fully agreed. "Why do you think I'm counting the days until my contract expires?" he said. "Those are human beings, and they're treated like animals."

Neither ate the sumptuous meal prepared by the butler. Mason drank one too many glasses of scotch; Elise stood by the full-length windows, contemplating the sunset.

"You should start your own clinic," she suggested. "People would be willing to pay well for proper care of their loved ones."

"Actually, they're not," Mason drawled. "Nor are the insurance companies. As long as a person isn't out on the streets, killing others or harming themselves, how they're treated doesn't really matter."

"Pathetic!"

"Indeed." He tried to stand, but fell back onto the sofa cushions. Elise crossed to help him. Unsteady on his feet, she held him by the waist - not easy for

one of her limited size and weight. When he bent his head to kiss her, she tasted the liquor on his lips but didn't push him away for fear he'd fall.

"You're an extraordinary woman."

"And you're extraordinarily drunk."

She led him to his bedroom, and peeled off his shirt and shoes, reminiscent of handling her father in the days after his cancer diagnosis. The older man had kept a bottle in hand for a week, the depression so overwhelmed him.

In the morning, she was cooking bacon and eggs when Mason shuffled into the kitchen. She didn't object, though it stunned her when he kissed her lightly before raiding the refrigerator for the orange juice.

"What was that for?" she queried.

"Merely a thank you for tolerating my bad behavior."

"I didn't think you behaved badly."

"You must be more tolerant than I thought. Most women would walk out on a man who gets that drunk."

"How do you know how drunk you were?"

"By the level of pounding inside my skull."

She laughed, and he managed a weak smile. He looked like a child, with the lock of black hair flopped over his forehead, his bathrobe tied crooked.

"You'll feel better after a strong cup of coffee."

That afternoon, however, their platonic relationship took a serious detour. Elise had broken through the walls a particularly obstinate patient had erected around his emotions, and it took a severe toll on her, while leaving the man to fully heal. Mason, behind the mirrored wall, had monitored her progress, and been touched by her compassion and strength. Meeting in his office after the session, he'd embraced her trembling form, and kissed away her tears. She responded when his lips found hers.

The interlude was disrupted by the ward secretary's voice on the intercom. "Dr. Mason, there's a Mr. Donovan on the line for you."

"It figures," Elise chuckled, straightening her lab coat.

Mason picked up the phone, his baritone stern. Donovan pressed the psychiatrist for some news of Elise; none was forthcoming.

"He asked when you might be well enough to sign some important papers," related Mason once he'd replaced the handset in its cradle.

"I told you so."

"Maybe we should stop at your bank on the way home so you can make that withdrawal."

“Tim has an... acquaintance at the main office. If you want to drive me to the branch in Walkerton...”

“I can do that. Didn’t you say your passport was in a safe deposit box?”

“At an entirely different bank.”

“Smart.”

The plan seemed to work without a hitch, until the black Avanti chanced to pull up beside Tim Donovan’s 90s era silver Corvette at a traffic signal near Mason’s apartment building. Donovan turned to admire the vintage auto; Elise cringed in the passenger seat. The light changed with no indication Donovan had recognized the occupants. She exhaled loudly.

“You okay?” asked Mason.

“I hope so. If what I know holds true, he didn’t recognize me. He notices classy cars, but unless he’s looking for someone in particular, he doesn’t really see their faces, if you catch my drift.”

“It’s a common trait.”

Still, Mason understood the impact of what Donovan had seen might register later.

“I’ll be leaving first thing tomorrow,” Elise announced, entering the apartment.

“Why? We’re working so well together.”

“It’s too dangerous for me to stay. As soon as the bank opens and I can get my passport, I’ll be catching a bus north.”

They ate in silence, and Elise retired to her room early. Mason’s forlorn steel-gray eyes never left her face, and he sensed he’d made her uneasy. Had the situation been different, they might’ve begun a spectacular romance. Until her connection to Tim Donovan was permanently severed, though, Mason could not afford serious involvement with her.

He could not interfere with the woman’s efforts to accomplish that end, either. If the snippets of information she’d let slip were any indication, her safe deposit box *did* contain evidence which would see Donovan convicted of racketeering and illegal gambling, but taking it to the police might be fatal to her. She could send the authorities the key, with instructions; Mason suspected they might ignore the lead since no live person was available to testify regarding the documents’ origins.

The psychiatrist was pleasantly astounded when Elise opted to accompany him the next day. “I checked the bus schedules, and the one I need doesn’t leave until six PM,” she bluffed. “I’m too nervous to sit around, doing nothing.”

A good decision, coincidental perhaps, because Tim Donovan showed up within the hour, questioning the apartment manager about Elise. That man could provide no information, having not seen Mason's guest. Suspicious, Donovan headed for the hospital.

Elise saw his Corvette pull into the parking lot from the window in the ward's common room. She rushed Mason from the chamber, and they located an empty room where she could change into the gown and robe issued to all patients, and crawl into bed.

Donovan was allowed only a few moments to view her "sleeping" form through the observation window. "She hasn't been very cooperative," Mason lied. "We've had to use some strong sedatives to calm her."

"Then, she can't sign the papers I mentioned?"

"Not any time soon. Give her another week or two, and we should be able to adjust the dosages to where she's mostly coherent."

"Thanks."

The word was not sincerely expressed, and Mason detected Donovan's frustration as he departed the ward. Elise clothed herself once again in more comfortable garb, slipping through the emergency exit before Mason returned from watching the Corvette merge with rush hour traffic.

When the nurse informed him the pharmaceutical cabinet lock had been jimmied, Mason feared the worst. Shedding his lab coat, he tracked Elise to Turner's Saloon, at the edge of town. Donovan was impossible to miss in his Armani suit among the more casually dressed men sitting at the bar. Mason arrived in time to witness Elise enter by the rear door.

"Hello, Tim," she greeted somberly.

He spun on the stool, and his jaw dropped. "Elise? I just saw you..."

"I know. The hospital staff is getting frustrated with you pestering them all the time. Whatever papers you need me to sign, I'm here."

"You serious? You'd never agree to it before."

"The medication they've been giving me... I guess I just don't care anymore." She ran her fingers gently through his thick brown mop; Mason envied Donovan at that moment, despite his suspicion Elise was feigning the tenderness.

Donovan's cell phone chirped. He moved along the bar to take the call. Elise slid onto a stool and ordered two scotches. She dug a pouch from her jacket pocket, raising the pills toward Donovan's glass.

Mason stayed her hand, coming up behind her. "Don't do it, Elise. There are other ways."

She glared at the psychiatrist, and heard Donovan laughing as he reclaimed his perch.

“The keepers found their escaped loon, eh, Elise?”

“If you let them take me back, Tim, those papers will never get signed.”

Donovan considered. “Five minutes, Doctor. Then, I’ll bring her out to you.”

“If you do this, there’s no future for us, Elise,” whispered Mason.

“I’ve no future if I don’t.”

He released his grip and stalked from the building. Rapidly discovering the cunningness of these two minds, he shuffled around the corner and down a side street, where he could see the bar’s service entrance.

To his advantage. Less than ten minutes later, Donovan practically dragged Elise through the door, forcing her into the Corvette’s passenger seat. Mason’s exceptional memory for addresses and phone numbers made it possible to recall the location of Donovan’s condo without having to call his office. He retraced the path to his Avanti and headed across the river.

Mason eavesdropped on a heated exchange through the thick oak door of the seventh floor apartment.

“What do I get out of this deal?” demanded Elise.

Donovan’s rich baritone chuckled, “Proper treatment for your... illness.”

“I want more.”

“More?” he echoed. “You want me to say, ‘I love you’ or ‘I need you’? Or is it the game you want?”

The door opened a crack when Mason laid his hand on the knob. From the shadowed foyer, he saw Donovan yank Elise into a rough embrace, kissing her with a strange, detached passion. Then, his hands moved to her shoulders, two vices capable of breaking bone. He hissed in her ear, “Don’t push me, woman. You’re lucky to still be alive.”

“So, the truth will out. Once you have my signature, keeping me around could be... risky,” she ventured.

“You’ll be locked away in the nut house, and I won’t have to deal with you.”

“What if I don’t sign?”

He squeezed; she screamed. Whatever their individual motivations, Mason could not sanction physical abuse. He bolted forward and tackled Donovan. The two wrestled for dominance; Mason being older, his only hope was to outmaneuver this opponent, who weighed less. One well-aimed right cross knocked Donovan cold.

The psychiatrist scrambled off the carpet, sweat trickling down his temples. Elise raced to him, and hugged him. "I owe you my life!" she gushed.

"Don't ever leave without telling me where you're going!"

Elise eyed him angrily. "You don't own me, Doctor."

"No, but when you deliberately place yourself in danger..."

"I can take care of myself."

Mason drew her close and planted hot lips on hers; she melted in his embrace. He released her, finally, and her head bowed.

"I'm sorry," she smiled. "Now my work is done, things will be different."

How was he to know she was lying?

Donovan had managed to grab hold of the desk and pull himself to his knees. His breath coming in gasps, he seized the tumbler of scotch and drained it in one gulp. Elise began laughing; Mason's brow furrowed when the younger man toppled backward.

"The pills?" he gasped. "Call an ambulance."

"Are you kidding?" retorted Elise. "I'm finally free, and you want to let him shackle me again?"

"It's murder, otherwise!"

"I'm not the only one who'll be glad he's dead. Everyone who owes him money will rest easier in the days to come."

"You're just as heartless as he is!"

"Think what you will; do what you must. I'm outta here."

Mason checked Donovan's eyes; his pupil's were dilated from whatever drugs Elise had dissolved in his drink. Attempting CPR, he stopped only long enough to summon paramedics.

They arrived too late.

The police ruled Tim Donovan's death a suicide, precipitated by his extensive debt to other loan sharks, and Elise's departure. With the newspapers branding him a "two-bit hood", the official investigation did not delve too deeply into the severe bruise on his cheek, or the second tumbler of scotch sitting on the desk.

In the weeks which followed, Rupert Mason wondered about Elise Capshaw between his daily rounds. He admired her initiative, in some respects, given she had cast off a heavy burden, and Mason himself remained enslaved to the seemingly endless contract.

Riptides of Grief

The iPhone shattered on impact.

So did the glass protecting an 11x14 wedding photo hung on the darkly paneled wall.

“You’re ready to crack, Gemma,” came from the office threshold. “If you don’t get away for awhile, some board members are threatening to *put* you away, indefinitely.”

Gemma Tierney-Kline spun toward the door. “We’ve known each other since I was a kid, Manny. Wouldn’t you crack if you’d been through what I have?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” shrugged Emmanuel Finch.

“Maybe?” the woman almost shrieked. “On our wedding day, I had my entire life before me.” She crossed to the broken frame and plucked the picture off the floor. “Nick and I talked about having kids, then Dad died. Taking over the club really drove a wedge into our marriage, and things were just getting back to normal when... when...”

Finch rushed forward and embraced his boss. Bad enough, vibrant, oft-irreverent business entrepreneur and Indianapolis Capitols owner Mike Tierney died at 60 of undiagnosed prostate cancer. He’d been the type to not trust doctors, especially those on the take in sports. Then, for Nick Kline to be beamed in the leg by a wild pitch, and for a blood clot to form beneath the wound and travel to his heart...

This 33-year-old widow sobbed uncontrollably in Finch’s arms. About time, too. She hadn’t wept at either funeral, wanting to show the team - and the media - her inner strength.

Nothing worse than a weak owner.

It didn’t hurt to be human, though. To admit she couldn’t handle the pressure of running the World Series underdog baseball franchise carried with it no shame. Her Purdue University liberal arts degree didn’t amount to much in the cut-throat realm of egotistical players, greedy agents and demanding fans.

“Look,” soothed Finch, gently raising her chin, “remember that place on Lake Michigan your dad bought in the 90s? Why don’t you head up there for a month or two, and pull yourself together. You won’t be needed for any contract negotiations until January, and there’s always the phone if things change.”

Gemma’s quivering fingers tousled her brunette mop as she sniffed. “There won’t be anything to do.”

“That’s exactly the point. You need to relax and focus on yourself.” He dabbed her reddened eyes with his handkerchief. “Believe me, it’s for the best.”

“All right,” she conceded.

He reached for the desk phone. “I’ll tell the pilot to gas up the plane...”

“No, I’d rather drive.”

“It’s four hours to South Haven.”

“I like the scenery.”

“Corn fields?” quipped Finch.

“At least, it’s not skyscrapers and bumper-to-bumper traffic.”

“Fine. The Ferrari or the Porsche?”

“The Corvette.”

Finch rang the Tierney home on North Meridian, to notify the servants their employer would need her luggage packed and the ‘65 red and white Corvette thoroughly cleaned and lubed by that afternoon.

Gemma listened to his matter-of-fact baritone, and couldn’t help smiling. Before departing, she caressed the portly general manager’s wrinkled cheek.

“Thanks, Manny. Dad was right to keep you around all these years.”

He grimaced playfully. “What else would he do with an old has-been catcher?”

“You’re still catching - just not baseballs. You’ve caught so many who’ve fallen, time after time.”

He stared at the door long after she departed.

The further north her Corvette traveled, the more colorful the trees became. The glory of autumn, Gemma mused, normally unnoticed in the flurry of activity surrounding baseball playoffs and season-ending board meetings. U.S. 31 took her into Michigan and, after a slight jog onto I-94, continued to the lakeside community of South Haven.

This tourist enclave bubbled with life each summer, but after Labor Day, settled into a calmer routine. St. Basil’s Catholic Church, a landmark on Monroe Street, high on a bluff overlooking the beach, found many pews empty on Sunday mornings during these slow months. Gemma cruised past the Gothic facade to a yellow brick Victorian-style dwelling on the next corner.

Gull Cottage, it was called, because seagulls liked to nest under the numerous trees, both front and back yards.

More like “Tierney’s Folly”, smirked Gemma, pulling her Armani suitcases from behind the passenger seat.

Her dad had purchased the house from an old friend, half to help him through a financial crisis, and half to fulfill the dream of owning a place to hide from the trials and tribulations of professional sports.

Mike had never spent one night in the place.

Gemma wasted no second thought on the sparkling windows and manicured lawns, where a dozen gulls had already gathered to view the sunset. Wealth allowed her to ignore domestic duties, performed behind the scenes by an efficient household staff. She assumed the elder Tierney, upon taking possession of this property, had engaged a caretaker.

A light in the upstairs bay window welcomed her. Waiting for the electricity to be restored would have been inconvenient for one who had never roughed it camping in the forest. Chimneys denoting fireplaces offered hope for chilly October weather, in case the furnace proved non-functional.

Many romantic evenings spent with her husband - tears flowed anew - had been spent before a roaring fire she herself had built on the grate of their suburban Indianapolis home.

She retrieved a tagged key from the car's ashtray, where she'd always thrown loose change, odds and ends, never being a smoker. Manny had pulled it from a rack inside her dad's office safe.

The sturdy oak door opened on well-oiled hinges once the deadbolt tumblers had spun free. Whoever the caretaker was, she would instruct him to install additional security measures at the first opportunity. Vagrants or tourists could easily break into the structure and steal a myriad of antiques and fixtures. Had she known earlier the rooms were fully furnished, she would have made such arrangements sooner.

Moving from the tiled foyer, the living room, with its west-facing bay window bathed in dusky hues, might have been drawn from the late 19th century. The upholstered sofa and chairs were in pristine condition, end tables polished. Terra cotta statues lacked a speck of dust, as if feathers had brushed their arms and faces that very day.

Gemma deduced Manny had warned the caretaker of her arrival.

Before inspecting the kitchen and other rooms on the lower level, she carried her luggage up a split staircase featuring carved teak banisters. It proved a chore for one unaccustomed to hauling cumbersome bags. She paused eight steps up on the landing, then ascended another seven to the right.

Along the balcony, two huge bedrooms and a bath with modern tub, shower and sink. The previous owner must've updated the plumbing, Gemma

surmised. Doors positioned on the opposite side of the stairs confirmed a similar layout, as well.

Not a mansion, to be sure, but she wasn't planning to hold any parties.

The lamp burning in the front bedroom invited her to settle there, rather than grope aimlessly for a light switch in the darker chambers. Pale blue walls and the four-poster's floral print bed curtains indicated it had previously hosted female residents.

The woman's version of unpacking: tossing clothes into a chest of drawers by the pile, paying no attention to dividing undergarments, socks, designer t-shirts or jeans, or hanging her dresses in the wardrobe. In the morning, she would contact a local agency and hire a cook and maid, at minimum. They could handle the details of ironing and properly storing the crushed apparel.

She'd have to find sheets and blankets to make her bed, though.

And food, having not considered if the older style refrigerator in the kitchen was stocked with supplies for a light supper or the next day's breakfast.

Dejected, Gemma leaned against the stove. Across the passage leading to what had once been the servants' stairs, a glow caught her eye. She cursed the careless caretaker for closing the basement door without extinguishing the bulb.

No descent into the cellar, this, she discovered. Jerking the grimy bronze knob, she entered a sizable pantry, converted into some manner of laboratory. She'd paid little attention during required college science courses, so didn't recognize the purpose of the labyrinthine glass tubing, copper coils and complicated control console.

Nor did she recognize the scruffy, gray-haired figure hunched over a computer monitor, slender fingers furiously typing, resembling more a pianist performing a concerto.

"You the caretaker?" she demanded.

A flippant baritone resonated around the plaster walls. "Caretaker of what?"

"This house."

"If you mean, do I own it? Yes."

"Impossible. My dad bought this place in 1993."

"Impossible. I bought it in 1987." He strode to a lopsided metal desk and extracted a folded document from the top right drawer. "I've got the deed to prove it."

"I've got the deed to prove it, too," countered Gemma. "I just don't carry it with me."

A niggling doubt made her question the authenticity of the document stashed in her father's fire-proof cabinet. Mike Tierney tended to let subordinates - including lawyers on retainer - handle details of his business transactions. If he didn't trust doctors, why trust them? Some clever shyster could've created a sob story about the old friend in dire financial straits, and absconded with the check.

A simple call could straighten out the matter. She reached toward her hip, where the iPhone case dangled from her belt... empty. She'd forgotten smashing the device. "Where's your phone?" she inquired.

"Don't have one."

"What?"

"Hellish nuisance, telemarketers. If I need to make a call, I use a pay phone down by the pier."

Gemma snorted in disdain.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'm in the middle of something very important," stated the supposed scientist.

"This needs to be resolved..."

"Resolve it however you please. There's plenty of space, if you want to stay. Just don't let me catch you in my *sancto sanctorum*."

Her green eyes widened. "You can be positive, I won't go near it."

"Fine."

She whirled toward the door, then halted. "Why is the 'fridge empty?"

He replied, "I don't eat."

Shuffling toward the stairs, she guessed he meant he didn't prepare his own meals, or preferred to eat out. By the periodic stream of expletives and clinking of glass through the night, she also realized he didn't sleep.

Nor could she, in the strange bed.

She left early, shooing a swarm of gulls off the yard before driving to a convenience store she'd seen the previous day, to buy orange juice, eggs, bacon and bread. The butler, Stafford, accepted her collect call to Indy, and she instructed him to have Manny overnight her the entire South Haven property file.

"You look awful," remarked the man, opening the rear door for her, plastic shopping bags twined around both wrists.

"Thanks."

He followed her into the kitchen. "Just who are you, anyway?"

"Gemma Tierney-Kline." She set the bags on the counter.

"You say that like I should recognize the name."

"If you were a baseball fan, you might."

"Professional sports are a scam," he grumbled.

“You’ve a right to your own opinion.” Best not to antagonize him. “You are?”

“Rex Delaney.”

“Retired chemistry teacher?”

“Retired, but not a teacher, and not by choice.”

“How so?”

“I was a research physicist at JPL - the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California,” he added at her blank stare. “They... retired me when the focus of my experiments didn’t conform with their scientific objectives.”

Crushing thin plastic into a ball, Gemma took a moment to study her tall companion’s features.

Depending on the angle of the morning sun, his countenance appeared either affably roundish or stern and narrow. Crowned by a shoulder-length salt-and-pepper mane, swept straight back off his forehead - less gray than Gemma had initially noticed - orbs flecked with blue, green and brown burned with a peculiar light. The straight nose broadened slightly at the tip. Unshaven whiskers mottling his lower jaw detracted from a thicker, ragged mustache and goatee hiding a mouth slanted in perpetual frown. He stood erect, unlike scientists often portrayed in movies, stooped from years of hovering over test tubes hours on end. What she best described as an active build, perhaps, not athletic, his untucked dress shirt, faded jeans and torn sneakers looked like he slept in them.

“If you lived in California, how’d you end up here?” she prodded.

“I grew up in Grand Rapids, and we vacationed here in the summer. When my father died, I inherited enough to buy this place.”

The mention of a parent’s death brought an unwitting grimace to Gemma’s face. Delaney stepped toward her; she waved him off.

She suppressed the tears, asking, “Would you like a couple eggs?”

“Thank you, no. My appetite... isn’t what it used to be.”

“You don’t eat, you don’t sleep,” she commented. “How do you stay alive?”

“My work.”

He spun on his heel and vanished behind the laboratory door.

While the kitchen had been void of food, Gemma did find a complete set of Wedgewood china, Waterford crystal glasses and an assortment of pots, pans and utensils. A hearty meal refreshed her - the yolks broke but tasted just as good, and the toast burned - and after the sink had been drained of soapy water, she decided to take advantage of the autumn warmth.

The gesture was meant as a courtesy, not an obligation. She knocked on the door frame, and poked her head through a slim gap.

“I’m going for a walk on the beach. Would you like to join me?”

His concentration didn’t waver from the computer console. “Don’t go near the water. The riptides will suck you into the depths before you can blink an eye.”

“Um... thanks.” Gemma attempted to dispel the effect of his words by scanning the naturally-illuminated chamber. Above the desk, she pondered a tattered sheet from a flip chart, tacked to the plaster, on which had been drawn three circles, similar to a bull’s eye target, with a dot in the exact center. “You play darts?”

Her question disconcerted him enough to glance at her. “Eh?”

She pointed. “The poster.”

The raucous laugh clearly expressed his derision. “Even though we both speak English, it might as well be Chinese and Russian.” He thumped a powerful finger against the wall. “For those uninitiated into basic scientific principles: this is a representation of the four states of matter.”

“I’m not uninitiated,” protested Gemma. “I’m... just not...”

“Educated?”

“Look, just explain it.”

He began with the largest ring - molecules in gaseous form, moving rapidly. Liquids, formed when molecules were cooled and their motion slowed, were indicated by the next smaller circle. The last sphere were the solids.

“You said four states of matter,” Gemma noted. “That’s only three.”

“The three most common. For decades, though, researchers have been trying to reach the fourth state, at Absolute Zero, where molecules aren’t inert, but actually seem to lose their identity. It’s a quantum physics theory called a Bose-Einstein condensate.”

“Einstein, as in Albert?”

Delaney nodded.

“I still don’t get it. Zero is the freezing point of water on the Celsius scale, isn’t it?”

“Absolute Zero on the Kelvin scale is much, much colder. It’s impossible to create that temperature by natural means, so the quest begins with building equipment capable of cooling molecules that far.”

“Which is what you’re doing?”

“Unsuccessfully, for 20 years,” admitted the physicist.

“Then, why don’t you quit?”

“Because there’s more to it than just seeing what occurs when molecules abandon their normal behaviors. The theory has implications on a philosophical and spiritual level.”

“You mean, alchemy?”

Delaney squinted in disbelief. “Your grasp of science is minimal, but you understand alchemy?”

“My dad loved science fiction and fantasy novels. After Mom died, he sat around most evenings in the off-season reading Asimov and Tolkien,” Gemma reminisced. “One summer, I was bored, so I worked my way through a couple shelves in his library.”

A fresh wave of emotion welled in her throat and, embarrassed, she fled.

Her feet didn’t stop until she’d walked more than a block. Gritting her teeth against the sobs, she dropped onto St. Basil’s front steps. Not in a million years would she have ventured inside the church, even had the doors been unlocked. She did not blame God for what happened to her father and husband; their individual choices had led to the circumstances of their deaths.

Yet, she missed them both terribly.

Her breathing regulated once more, she rose and studied the route down the bluff to the beach. Indirect, to say the least. Monroe Blvd. connected to Erie Street. This ran beside St. Basil’s to Water Street, which curved down the hill. Then, she doubled back toward the lake.

Good exercise, anyway.

A deserted sandy park offered respite from the hectic schedule she’d left behind in Indianapolis. Warm breezes created whitecaps, and she rested on a bench while contemplating the vast blueness of water meeting sky.

The climb up the bluff to Gull Cottage confirmed how Gemma had slacked off on exercise during the recently ended baseball season. Being stuck in an office twelve or more hours each day didn’t mesh well with healthy living.

Puzzling over the seagulls’ attraction to this yard over those of her neighbors, she realized Rex Delaney owned no car. She involuntarily shuddered. How could a man confine himself to one room, not eating, not sleeping, and never enjoying the benefits of the outdoors?

He was either a workaholic or crazy.

Either way, she couldn’t count on him to restock the kitchen cupboards and refrigerator. After massaging a cramp from her left thigh, she drew out her car keys and steered the Corvette into town to find a supermarket.

She hadn’t realized the price of food. Servants shopped for her in Indy, and submitted receipts to the business manager for payment. Four bags of

absolute essentials cost over \$60. Not that she needed to worry about finances. Her father's investments would've kept her living in the lap of luxury, even if she didn't draw a salary from the Capitols.

The temperature cool enough her pistachio ice cream wouldn't immediately melt, she detoured through the countryside a bit, taking in the area's general layout. The coastline to the north was dotted with summer tourist enclaves - Douglas/Saugatuck, Holland, and more.

She surmised Delaney was throwing a party when she lugged the groceries inside late that afternoon. Music penetrated windows and walls, but not of a rock and roll vein. Depositing her burden on the kitchen counter, she charged up the servants' stairs and along the railing. She burst into Delaney's bedroom - on the balcony opposite her own - stunned motionless by the strangest image she'd ever encountered.

The crescendo to cannon fire in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* blared from column speakers many professional sound technicians would envy. The conductor of an invisible orchestra, Delaney faced the bay window, expressive hands waving broadly, as if serenading Lake Michigan to the west. Tinted glass panes reflected the room's stark decor in triplicate while allowing for a glareless view of the horizon.

And while Gemma's own brunette, slender frame blended with the tableau's furnishings, Delaney's worn visage did not.

Shafts of diffused sunlight, in fact, created an illusion of transparency, passing directly through his body and shining on a statue of Osiris in the corner.

She retreated on tip-toe, and didn't exhale until reaching the ground floor foyer. She didn't believe in vampires, but it would explain why he didn't eat or leave the house. The other option involved his experiments in the make-shift laboratory...

Flipping the switch ignited an overhead fluorescent bulb, and Gemma blinked against the brightness. Nothing on the three folding tables hinted at research capable of rendering a human being intangible. She skirted the host of pipettes, vials and asymmetrical copper configurations for a closer perusal of battered notebooks and the poster above the desk.

To decipher minuscule chicken scratch script scribbled on each circle, she mounted a shaky metal stool, then stepped on the blotter which displayed a yellowed calendar page from December, 1992. The outer ring was inscribed, "Childhood." Then came "Adolescence," with the smallest circle marked, "Adulthood." Almost a part of the central dot's design, she read, "Transmutation."

“I told you to stay out,” growled Delaney.

Gemma’s knees buckled, and she tumbled sideways, catching herself on a sturdy, ceiling-high storage cabinet. Regrouping instantly, she whirled on the man. “Damn you! Don’t do that!”

“Are you a spy from MIT?”

Her hazel eyes rolled in frustration. “You never told me to stay out of here!”

“No, I told you to stay out of my bedroom. Did you think I was so distracted, I didn’t see...”

“You had the music blasting so loud, I had to investigate the source.”

“If you owned this house, you’d have that right, but you don’t.”

“I won’t argue that point again. When my copy of the deed arrives tomorrow...”

“I’ll challenge it in court as a forgery.”

“Damn you!”

“As rich as you are, you can buy the Cape Cod that’s for sale on the next block without batting an eyelash. And you wouldn’t have to worry about cleaning gull crap off your shoes every time you take a walk.”

“It’s not about the money. It’s...” Another rush of painful memories made Gemma cringe.

“What’s with you?” queried Delaney. “You ill?”

“I...” Her tongue nonfunctional, she scurried from the room.

A desperately lonely night lying awake on the lumpy mattress did not improve Gemma’s mood. She’d half-packed her suitcases by sunrise, determined to drive back to Indianapolis and have done with this “vacation”. Had she truly been alone, she might have been able to gradually come to grips with her grief over the two deaths; Delaney’s presence disrupted everything.

Still, to leave now would be to cower in defeat. If she ever wanted to stand up as a woman of influence in the business world, she couldn’t surrender even this inconsequential battle.

The knock sounded more like a mouse scratching the baseboards. She pulled open the hefty oak door, to find a relatively cleaned and pressed Delaney, holding a long-stemmed red rose.

“I’m sorry,” he stammered. “I didn’t intend... You don’t know what it’s like to suddenly have someone underfoot night and day. My whole schedule has been unsettled, and it’s made me... testy.”

“You weren’t testy while you were conducting the Tchaikovsky,” she countered.

The permanent frown twitched into the semblance of a smile - from what Gemma could distinguish within the abundant facial hair. "Music revitalizes me, gives me focus. In a flurry of brass or percussion, I feel closer to my goal than at any other moment of the day."

"What is your goal, anyway?"

"The Bose-Einstein condensate."

"I don't think so." She waved him to the window seat. "It may have been, at first, but your research has introduced other... variables."

"You're thinking alchemy?"

"Not in the truest sense."

"Then, you'd be correct. The parallels between states of matter and the progression of human beings through life are phenomenal. Like molecules cooled to solid form, most adults believe they have no further to go in their advancement. To approach the center point, absolute zero, or whatever you wish to call it, brings with it revelations which cannot be expressed in ordinary language."

Speaking of two decades immersed in his quest lit Delaney from within, like a furnace. Gemma sank onto the flowery cushion beside him as rain clouds obscured the rising sun. She'd shared that sensation once, and only once, on her wedding day - an all-consuming peace and joy.

She'd never feel it again.

Shoulders sagging beneath the weight of the sobs, she didn't object when Delaney leaned closer and wrapped her in a tender embrace. It might've been five minutes, or five hours, before she regained her self-control, albeit temporarily. Lifting her tear-stained face off his chest, her lips passed within inches of his, the edge of his mustache tickling her nose.

"I haven't... touched a woman in so long," the physicist whispered, not releasing her. "And then, none as beautiful as you."

Emotionally and physically vulnerable, Gemma gave in to impulse, letting Delaney kiss her with a passion Nick had seldom conveyed.

She managed to finally wedge her hands against his chest and delicately force the separation. When she raised her eyes, his singular orbs glimmered with their own moistness.

"Your invasion of my solitude, I fear, has compelled me to violate your private mourning." He offered her a handkerchief. "Please, forgive me."

"No forgiveness necessary," she stated, dabbing her skin. "How did you know I'm in mourning, and not just some typical, weepy female?"

A wry grin twitched at his mouth. "Where did you lay the rose?"

Automatically, Gemma gazed across the room, where the stem lay atop her crumpled wedding photo, beside a small framed image of Mike Tierney.

“You’re going through a divorce?” Delaney speculated.

She snorted. “You don’t read the papers, do you?”

“I let my subscription lapse.” He shifted his attention out the window. “I almost died once. Out there. Riptides can be so treacherous...” He abruptly leapt to his feet. “You know what amuses me? Commercials for vitamins and supplements broadcast on religious television networks. Believers are supposed to welcome death as the eternal reward for a righteous life, yet they’ll send their money to televangelists and invest in any treatment to prolong their existence.”

Gemma had never considered the irony, and laughed with him. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“No, thank you. I must get back to my work.”

With that, he was gone.

Mid-morning brought a delivery van to Gull Cottage with Manny’s care package. Gemma had expected a thick envelope, gratified to find within the cardboard box a new iPhone, account activated and fully charged.

She sat on the front stoop, pondering why the air currents did not mingle with the scent of congregating seagulls. The weighty deed listed the dwelling’s numerous owners since its construction in 1902, the last being... Rex Delaney.

Her thoughts returned to the scientist’s bizarre behavior, in a somewhat softer vein. Could he have forgotten selling the property?

She punched a number on the tiny display.

The Capitols’ general manager wasn’t in his office, so she left a voice mail. “Manny? Thanks for the stuff. I need you to run a background check for me, on Rex Delaney. I don’t have his social security number, but he’s 45 or 50-ish, born in Grand Rapids, and worked at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. I’m especially interested in any medical conditions, like dementia or Alzheimer’s.”

Heart heavy, she trudged indoors when a few drops of rain began falling from the thickening clouds. Exhaustion and muscle pain diverted her from the stairs to the living room, where she flopped on the antique sofa, a throw pillow under her head, and slept.

Disjointed dreams and pervasive achiness woke her with a start. Beyond the bay window, darkness reigned. A single table lamp lit the chamber, and Rex Delaney stretched on the armchair near her feet.

“What are you doing?” she yawned.

“Meditating on a slumbering angel, yet consumed by envy, yearning and the basest lust.”

Gemma jolted upright, relaxing only when her brain registered his humorous tone. She challenged, "Envy me?"

"Having nearly died, the thought of closing an eye and being unable to open it again terrifies me. Unless one is properly prepared, the realms beyond are..." He rose and sidled toward the door, adding, "By the way, I read that."

The woman had forgotten flinging the deed and her phone on the coffee table.

"You have a legitimate claim to the house. If you'll permit me a few days to review my finances and dismantle my equipment..."

"No need." She stretched and rotated her stiff neck. "I don't plan to be here more than a month or so. You've taken good care of the place all these years... stay on, as caretaker. I'll even pay you."

His relief proclaimed itself in a broad smile. He rushed forward and swept her into his arms, swinging her around the floor. "Thank you."

The kiss he planted on her mouth was intended to further convey his gratitude, but rapidly escalated to a more romantic level.

Gemma responded in kind. She vaguely recalled quotes of a new love being the only cure for an old love. She might not genuinely feel anything more than curiosity toward her companion, but if his presence could comfort her, why not revel in the moment?

The moment extended through the night. They shared her bed, eventually lying side by side watching moonlight cast shadows on the walls.

A sudden, shrill chiming shook Delaney from his contentment. "What's that?"

"My phone."

She'd slipped the device in her jeans while chatting with him earlier, and now it lay somewhere in the tangle of their clothes.

"Leave it," he advised.

"The only time I get calls, they're important." Wrapped in a bed sheet, she rolled off the mattress and rifled the fabrics until she detected the vibration.

"Hello?"

Manny Finch apologized for calling so late, and related his news.

Gemma drew the sheet tighter around her torso. "Say that again."

"You heard me. Rex Delaney drowned in Lake Michigan 15 years ago."

"Send me the file."

"In the morning. My secretary's got it on her computer."

"I'll be waiting... anxiously."

The iPhone switched off, Gemma slipped it onto the night stand before crawling under the Amish-patterned quilt.

“Everything all right?” muttered Delaney.

“Sometimes, contract negotiations run into the wee hours, and end in an impasse,” she lied. “We have to decide if we want to up our offer for the league’s best pitcher.”

She stared at the four-poster bed canopy. Weird images of necrophilia danced in her mind’s eye. She hadn’t just betrayed her husband’s memory with a corpse. Bodies pressed together, she’d felt his heart pounding, his lungs filling with air. Solid flesh and blood sprawled beside her even now...

Except for being transparent when exposed to sunlight.

She flinched.

“You cold?”

“No. Just tired.” Rolling onto her right side, she pretended to sleep.

Soon half-dozing, when the mattress bounced, Gemma instinctively murmured, “Restless, Babe?” She’d used baseball slugger George Herman Ruth’s famous nickname to taunt Nick Kline about his batting average when they’d first met. As they grew closer, it became an affectionate term.

Unaware of this back story, Delaney presumed she was addressing him. Her manicured fingers groping for his as she faced the window seemed to reinforce this supposition. He leaned to kiss her naked shoulder, and she responded with a satisfied moan.

Whether she dreamed what happened next, Gemma could not be certain with the coming of dawn. Alone on the bed, she remembered feeling a man’s body, being caressed by searching hands. Afterward, pulse still racing, she’d watched the tall, lithe figure rise and sort through the clutter on the rug, slipping on a pair of boxers before carrying the rest of his clothes from the room.

Nick had granted her wish - the chance to be with him once more.

Or had he?

The chiming roused her from this stupor. On the iPhone’s screen, she opened image files sent by Manny’s secretary. First was a photocopy of the Grand Rapids newspaper obituary, listing Delaney’s few surviving relatives in that county. A brief synopsis of the 57-year-old’s life, the article indicated burial had taken place at South Haven’s Lake View Cemetery. A note handwritten on the sheet’s margin stated, “Grave unmarked.”

Had Delaney been destitute when he died, to be treated like a pauper?

A authenticated death certificate came next, with the cause listed as “accidental drowning”, even though his remains had been fully clothed when pulled from the water. Gemma thought the unthinkable: Suicide?

The third thumbnail displayed Rex Delaney’s ID photo from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

Gemma couldn’t control the trembling which made it impossible for her to maintain a grip on the device.

The physicist most likely downstairs in his self-styled laboratory hadn’t changed a bit in over a decade. The same amount of gray colored his disheveled hair, the exact mustache and goatee - along with a five o’clock shadow of stubble on his cheeks.

She tried to assemble mangled pieces of this eerie puzzle into a coherent picture acceptable to a rational human being’s understanding of natural law.

Given the circumstances, she had to acknowledge natural law might not apply.

Delaney claimed to have “almost died” in Lake Michigan, victim of a riptide. Had his experiments on both the temporal and spiritual levels - the states of matter and states of existence - given him the ability to transcend death?

Or, might his obsession with those same experiments have blinded him to the fact of his death, so his spirit continued to pursue its daily routine?

No. Not possible, Gemma brooded.

She’d had physical contact with the man no mere ghost could duplicate. The muscles in his arms had flexed at her touch. He breathed, perspired...

But neither ate, nor slept.

And the transparency thing...

In spite of the crisis’ morbidity, she chuckled. At Mike Tierney’s funeral, the toughest question mourners found themselves asking was, “How come he didn’t know he was dying?”

She’d had no answer.

The same at Nick’s, when they peppered her with repeated, “How did it happen so fast?”

Her dilemma would be asking a dead man why he didn’t succumb to the effects of the greatest equalizer of them all.

No phrasing could soften the context of such an inquiry.

Stomach aflutter with butterflies’ wings, the bowl of bran flakes Gemma poured herself remained uneaten. Sensing Delaney’s eyes upon her from the dining room threshold augmented her tension.

“Remorse?” he greeted.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

He detected the sour note. “I won’t apologize for last night; I feel more energized than I have for ages. Pressures of my research didn’t really include time for such... pleasantries, and I never realized what I missed. I understand if your grief is generating a very tangible guilt, and you’d prefer it doesn’t happen again.”

Speaking of tangible...

“Would you like some breakfast?” she suggested.

“Not right now, thanks.”

She swiveled on the Edwardian-style chair, an idea congealing in her brain. “I have some errands to run around town today, but what do you say to a quiet dinner up in your room tonight?”

“Why my room?”

“You’ve got that fantastic stereo, and we could watch the sunset with music in the background...”

One corner of Delaney’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Sounds good.”

The Corvette drove to Lake View Cemetery. A clerk in the small office near the gates easily located Rex Delaney’s plot, purchased by the county, on a map of the grounds. Fortunately, finding the exact spot didn’t prove too difficult, either - the name painted long ago in shaky letters could still be distinguished on remnants of a warped wooden cross marking the site.

To kill a few hours, she strolled through South Haven’s tourist district, only a few shops open weekdays during the off-season. A crowd of locals had gathered in the old fashioned ice cream shop for an afternoon cup of coffee and lively conversation; they paid no attention to her when she ordered a double-dip chocolate mint cone and sat against the wall.

Anything to stay away from the house until...

Broiled t-bone steaks, baked potatoes and corn-on-the-cob followed a tossed salad for dinner. Gemma carried a tray up the stairs and along the balcony; Delaney had set up a folding table and two chairs near the tinted bay window. Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* wafted through the speakers.

Neither picked up a fork, however - the physicist from habit, his companion from nerves at again not seeing his reflection in the glass.

Finally, she threw the cloth napkin onto her plate and rose, hoping the sunset would soothe her irritation. Delaney moved behind her - she felt his warm breath on her neck - yet she saw merely her own face in the multiple panes.

“What’s wrong, Gemma?”

“Look at yourself, Rex, and tell me.”

“I’d rather look at that gorgeous sky, or at you, equally enchanting.”

“Is it because you can’t *see* yourself?”

He hesitated. “I... never really thought about it.”

“You’ve *got* to think about it,” insisted Gemma. “Think about why you don’t eat, don’t sleep, and why gulls flock to this yard, while every other homeowner in this neighborhood has to worry more about raking their fallen leaves.”

Gripping her shoulders, he spun her toward him, those blue-green-brown eyes boring into her soul. “What are you saying?” he hissed.

“You told me you almost died in the lake. You weren’t swimming, though. You were wearing street clothes.”

“How would you know?”

“I have... sources.”

“I’d taken a break from the lab to walk along the shore. Some youngsters were tossing a beach ball, and the wind blew it into the water. One little girl began to cry, and her brother was going to chase it. I couldn’t let them risk the surf, so I waded about twenty feet, not knowing there was a sudden drop off and the riptides...”

Gemma dropped her chin, stifling a sob.

He chuckled, chiding her, “I lived through it, darling. I...”

“No, you didn’t,” she confessed. “The lifeguards didn’t rescue you in time.”

The sun’s last rays penetrated tinted glass in that instant, shining through Delaney’s form to the wall beyond. He gazed down at his own translucence, and gasped.

“Then, I’ve been...”

“Dead for 15 years.”

“Impossible! I’m here, I’m alive. Last night...”

“I don’t fathom it. I just know it’s the truth.”

“What happens next?”

“I... don’t know.” She wriggled from his grasp and sank on the chair, head buried in her hands. “I don’t expect angels to whisk you heavenward, or some movie-ish special effects to dissolve you into nothingness. You can be sure, though, I’ll grieve for you just as much as for Nick and my dad.”

He squatted beside her. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me. What if *this* is my eternity and I stay?”

She straightened, shivering. “I don’t think it is. If your theory about the parallels between achieving the Bose-Einstein condensate and humanity’s

progression are correct, once a person attains awareness of his ultimate state, his identity merges with the universal mysteries.”

“More alchemy than science, eh?”

“Or religion, really. You figured out, yourself, what transpires when someone who’s broken through the barriers of shallowness and inanity reaches their own absolute zero - whether during life or at death. For those who don’t know... I pity them.”

He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. “I’ll be waiting for you there.”

“I wish you could take me with you.”

“Each journey moves at its own pace. You understand what needs to be done - doing it may take some time.”

She glowered at the table. “I’d better clear this mess.”

Dishes stacked on the tray, she left the room. She shuffled to the living room, having deposited her load in the kitchen, arriving to witness hordes of gulls simultaneously burst into flight, as if frightened by a gunshot.

Night fell in earnest, and the birds didn’t return.

Gemma Tierney-Kline didn’t need to mount the stairs to grasp the symbology.

She drove to Indianapolis in the dark and, the following Monday, instructed her lawyers to put Gull Cottage on the market, and the Capitols, as well.

“What happened up there?” Manny probed, tramping into her office after hearing the news.

“Nothing I can explain. I only know I can’t do this anymore.”

Emmanuel Finch stood, dumbstruck, as Gemma whisked out, leaving the iPhone smashed on her desk.

Without Orders

Two dozen e-mails, 62 phone calls and 49 letters via U.S. Mail occupied much of the editor's morning. Every one contained the same message, "We wanted to inform you the wrong photo was used in the article about Fr. David Williams in your August 24 issue." Some attached snapshots of St. Stephen's parish priest, slated as a candidate for auxiliary bishop in the Little Rock, Arkansas archdiocese.

John Bowman's secretary had already pulled Williams' file from the Chancery records. That image - of an older, balding cleric - had been used in the *Arkansas Catholic*, and bore no resemblance to the lean, dark haired figure in the amateur prints submitted by his parishioners.

David Williams was a rather common name, Bowman admitted. There might be two in the diocese, and this group might believe their priest was the subject of the contested piece...

The secretary reported no other men with that name in Holy Orders.

"Get him down here," declared Archbishop Raymond Chase, when Bowman brought the matter to his attention.

A summons was sent Certified Mail the following day to the Ozark Mountain church - taking a week to arrive, due to road construction and mud slides caused by heavy spring rains.

Responding to the letter in person, as required, took Williams a week, as well. He covered the twisting route through peaks and valleys by riding his bike and hitchhiking. He arrived in Little Rock unshowered and unshaven, denied time to find a hotel room and clean up before being ushered into a sun-drenched conference room.

The only vacant seat at the massive, oblong mahogany table faced the brightness glaring through tall windows. Williams discerned only shadowed blobs rifling files opposite him. On benches against the wall, six familiar individuals waited - his parishioners, invited to testify as to their pastor's character.

They'd been given the impression their words would improve his chances of winning the bishop's mitre.

They'd been deliberately misled.

The gathering convened with a prayer for wisdom and guidance. Williams repressed his laughter.

Charity Dunwoody rose, called as the first witness.

This stooped elder had played the organ at St. Stephen's for thirty years. She knew everything about everybody in the isolated Ozark community, but never had a harsh word for any of them.

The panel had the manners to introduce themselves at that point: Deacon Terrence Young of the cathedral staff; Fr. Ian Horst, dean of the diocesan seminary; Fr. Curtis Masters, Office of Personnel; Auxiliary Bishop Brian McCready and diocesan attorney Fred Gammage.

"Miss Dunwoody, how long have you known David Williams?" began Masters.

"Seven years, since he came to St. Stephen's."

"What is your opinion of his behavior during that time?"

"He's a good and honest man, an admirable example of the cardinal virtues."

McCready interspersed, "Never a hint of scandal?"

"Oh, Fr. Williams is by no means... conventional in his activities. He doesn't quote the bible much, but his sermons are short and to the point." The woman wistfully twirled a lock of short silver hair around one finger. "I still remember that first Sunday. Some thought he was afraid to approach the pulpit, but not me. You know what he said? He told us, 'I saw an interesting quote on a t-shirt recently: Live simply that others may simply live. How often do we forget to think before we act, or take responsibility for those very actions? Nothing we do is isolated, it effects the entire planet and everyone on it. Apply that to your daily life, and you'll be a better person.'

"I spent weeks thinking about those words. It didn't matter so much, then, if he danced at weddings, drank a bit too much whiskey, or rode motorcycles every chance he got. He's friendly and affectionate, but nothing he's ever done could be called scandalous. In fact, some of you could learn a lot from him about how to treat people."

Dismissed on that note, the subsequent witnesses supported her positive view. Williams suspected the officials were probing for dirt, coming up with clean fingernails. Subtle remarks about his identity were discredited; Noel Lamont had seen Williams' drivers licence and birth certificate the day they registered to vote at the county seat.

They appeared ready to concede the matter, until Rachel Pomerance approached the table.

The light had shifted enough in the room so Williams could clearly see his accusers. Their eyes collectively radiated antagonism toward the pretty young blonde; without the least proof, they deemed her a threat to the vow of celibacy.

Horst growled, "You've been David Williams' housekeeper how long?"

"I moved into the rectory two days after his first Mass."

"How old were you?" wondered Young.

"Sixteen."

Williams bowed his head to avoid the panel's contemptuous stares.

Gammage attempted to add a solicitous note to his gruff bass voice when he spoke. "What prompted Williams to hire you as housekeeper?"

She turned toward the pastor; reluctantly, he nodded.

"My parents had kicked me out of the house because I was pregnant and unmarried. Fr. Williams took me in, and told me I could earn my bread and board until the baby was born by keeping the rectory clean and answering the phone."

"You stayed after the birth?" prodded McCready.

"I... had a miscarriage. Fr. Williams took me all the way to the hospital and sat at my bedside night and day until I recovered. Then, he brought me back up the mountain, and told me I could stay as long as I liked."

"Even though you were under age."

"We grow up quickly in the hills, Mister. Most girls are married by the time they're fourteen. I... wanted to go to school, not end up like my mother, with ten children, no husband, and no way to feed them except welfare. Fr. Williams arranged for the bus to pick me up and drop me off every day. I graduated at the top of my class because of his kindness."

"But continue to live in the rectory?"

"My husband and I rented a small house not far from the church last winter. He's accepted a job in Fort Smith, and we'll be moving there in a few weeks."

A break was abruptly announced, with the first five witnesses thanked for their time and released from further testimony. Fred Gammage requested Rachel return that afternoon to continue her narrative.

Williams knew full well what the tenor of that closed-door session would be.

And he resented the implication. Why did the religious hierarchy always maintain the lowest opinion of human beings? Did their own personal sexual repression dictate a belief where, placing a man and woman in close quarters, they would invariably wind up sharing a bed?

Gammage pulled no punches when the tribunal reconvened at 1:00 PM. "How many times since moving into the rectory with David Williams have the two of you had sex?"

Offending Rachel was no different than setting off a nuclear bomb - Williams had experienced the fallout more than once. Her blue eyes glowered at the men, and she launched into a tirade of expletives and curses unbecoming to a woman not born of mountain stock.

“You dirty minded hypocrites!” she raged, and things went downhill from there.

Williams finally left his place and wrapped his arm around her trembling shoulders. “I think you’ve made yourself abundantly clear, Rachel. Take a deep breath and go find your husband. He’s waiting to drive you home.”

The young woman calmed herself by sheer will. “What about you?”

“I’m not sure how long this will take. I’ll see you when I see you.”

With an affectionate squeeze of his hand, Rachel departed.

Williams resumed his seat, ready for the third degree.

“What is your name?” Gammage, for legal reasons, would speak for the panel henceforth.

“David Williams.”

“Can you prove that?”

“I have a certified copy of my birth certificate, if you want to see it, my drivers licence and social security card, my passport, and my yearly tax forms.”

“Where were you born?”

“Cincinnati, Ohio.”

“How did you come to St. Stephen’s parish?”

“By accident.”

“Would you care to be more specific?” snapped Gammage.

“No, but you want me to be.” Resigned, Williams leaned back on the posh leather chair. “It was a hot August day, and I was driving from Springfield to Little Rock, after being laid off from my job. I took a wrong turn somewhere in the mountains, and ended up on a stretch of two-lane road with no shoulder to pull over.

“Barely a mile from St. Stephen’s, I noticed a dead animal splattered over the center line, and skid marks. I stopped, and went to investigate. The animal was a goat, probably off someone’s farm. The burnt rubber came from the Grand Marquis which had gone over the cliff and was stuck on a ledge about fifty feet down.

“Not being good with heights, it took every ounce of courage to climb down there and check on the driver. He was an older man, bald; his glasses were cracked still on his face. I didn’t have to hunt for a pulse to realize he was dead.

So I could notify authorities, I took his wallet from his black slacks. When I opened it, I couldn't believe my eyes. The guy's name was David Williams.

"Up there, in the middle of nowhere, I didn't have any signal on my cell, so I climbed back to my car and headed down the road. The first building I passed while looking for help was the church. I figured they'd let me use the phone, but I never got the chance to explain. A crowd was waiting in the pews. They mistook me for the priest when I squatted beside a woman in the first row and whispered, 'My name is Dave Williams...' I went along with their assumption, because the idea of having a house to live in, free of charge, appealed to my... empty pockets."

Gammage grew impatient when Williams didn't continue. "What was your relationship with Rachel Pomerance?"

"She was my housekeeper, and my friend."

"Did you ever share a bed with her?"

Williams exhaled loudly. "Look. She came to me, thinking me a priest, speaking in confidence about her troubles. Working in Springfield, I'd met quite a few families from the Ozarks, and was aware of their mentality. I couldn't just tell the girl to go back home, or find help at a shelter 200 miles away. I did what I thought was right.

"For her age, she was very mature, and respected my... office. The only time she came into my room, except to clean, was the night of the big blizzard. The power went out, and the house got really cold. Even six blankets didn't seem to help. So, we slept together to preserve the body heat. I still think that's why she lost the baby, though. She's so small, and..."

"The power was out for weeks in the mountains after that storm!" protested McCreary. "You slept together every night?"

"No. The next morning, neighbors brought a small generator and some space heaters. It was tough going, but we made it through."

Whether the panel was satisfied with this explanation, Williams couldn't determine.

"What was your normal occupation?" Gammage queried.

"Sales. I could sell anything, even if I didn't believe in the product. Religion is no different. Those 104 families never knew I'm an atheist."

The five member panel might've ceased breathing, the silence engulfing the conference room was so complete.

Bishop McCreary finally spoke. "You said Mass on a regular basis?"

"Sundays and Wednesdays. The rest of the week, I made home visits."

"How many weddings did you perform?" inquired Horst.

“Only one. Given the rules in the mountains are different than in the city - about marriage, at any rate - I refused anyone under 18, so they went to the county seat and had a justice of the peace do the honors.”

“What about funerals and baptisms?”

“They’re hearty people up there, so not too many died in the past few years. A lot of babies were born, though.”

“So,” stormed McCreary, “without the benefit of Holy Orders, you performed sacraments reserved for the ordained, to the detriment of every soul in the parish!”

Williams leapt to his feet. “Bullshit! You, more than anyone, should understand the sole benefit of these sacraments you promulgate is to make the participants more at ease with the unknown beyond their scope of knowledge. By fooling them into believing they are loved and cared for by some unseen entity - and giving them something outside themselves to blame for their occasional misfortune - they live more productive lives, donate more in the weekly collection, and conform to society’s mandates. It’s a well-orchestrated snow-job, and all I’ve done is play the same game without the official recognition.”

The word “blasphemy” was not uttered, attorney Gammage the only one to whom it occurred, due to his lack of clerical status.

The other panel members exchanged glances. “Well, what do we do now?”

“There’s nothing you *can* do, unless you want the media to get hold of this,” stated Williams. “You can’t prosecute me under civil law, because I committed no public crime.”

Gammage confirmed this assessment of the matter.

“What about embezzlement?” ventured Horst.

“I took no personal salary,” replied Williams. “The funds used paid for utilities and food, with a modest stipend for Rachel. I never even replaced my car when it died three years back. The parish bank account has quite an impressive balance.”

A hushed discussion ended with the diocesan tribunal ordering all records of the investigation and hearing be destroyed, and no future action taken. David Williams was advised not to return to St. Stephen’s; his belongings would be shipped to him when he provided a forwarding address.

Lips set in a satisfied grin, Williams exited the conference room. Fred Gammage gathered the stack of manila files - his day wasted, except for learning one of life’s key lessons.

“There needs to be more men like him in the seminaries,” he told McCreary, pointing after the priest-impersonator.

Stunned, the bishop recoiled. “What are you saying?”

“I’d pit his integrity of spirit against the pious clap-trap your kind spouts from the pulpit any day. When it comes to inspiring souls toward the greater good, he’d win, hands down.”

Crossing the Chancery lobby a few minutes later, Gammage found Williams leaning against a column. “What’s next on tap for you?” asked the lawyer.

“I’ve been thinking about it the entire trip down here, but I have no solid plans. Get a job, find a place to live...”

“As for a job, you’ve got one in my office, if you wish. I can use an honest man to investigate certain cases...”

“My background is in sales, with no college to speak of...”

“Doesn’t matter. You bring far more to the table than any college course could teach.” Gammage moved toward the doors. “C’mon, I’ll buy you dinner, and take you to the apartment complex where my sister lives. The owner is a client of mine, and should be able to set you up with a furnished unit...”

“I... don’t have much money.”

“We’ll deduct it from your pay.”

The two men emerged in the afternoon sun, their souls far warmer than the air around them.