

Twisted Stories

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by

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Fruit of His Labors

“Maloney! Home!”

The shout reverberated between the marshy ravine’s moisture-laden trees. From its perch in a sturdy oak at the county cemetery’s edge, the king vulture launched itself toward the sky. It circled lazily above men refilling a newly occupied grave, before soaring west.

Oscar Jacobsen waited on the cement bunker’s threshold for his pet, rescued from a defunct midwestern zoo. They’d kept each other company for years, along with Clem, the white-nosed monkey, in a hovel where the retired professor cultivated remarkable plants.

These animals, however, didn’t ascend the steep hill or traverse the brick thoroughfare to Jacobsen’s modest dwelling. The neighbors would be... disconcerted to see a vulture patrolling the streets.

They preferred to watch the bespectacled, gentle soul - lank brown hair often drooping over his eyes - expertly cross-pollinating vegetables or fusing strands of fruit trees in an attempt to create something totally new.

Sun lamps provided artificial illumination, encouraging the seedlings’s growth. In summer, Jacobsen set pots on the structure’s roof, so daily rains and natural lighting could influence their progress.

Both Maloney and Clem retreated to the far corner of what might have been an abandoned bomb shelter from the Cold War when their master slid his elegant hands in sterile gloves to inspect the produce of his prized dwarf orchard. Not quite two feet tall, the tiny trees had flowered in the spring, and now had golf ball sized orangish globes dangling from the branches. Jacobsen didn’t want to taint the results of his analysis with his own perspiration or germs, thus the protective gear.

Quartering the orbs, he smeared pulp from one section onto a slide and placed it under his microscope. The rest was dissolved in various chemical solutions to gauge reactions, or warmed on the bunsen burner to appraise its scent.

One whiff of the latter drove the scientist back three feet. Rather than devising a viable alternative for climates where frost often damaged an entire year’s crop, he’d concocted something unpalatable.

Skunk citrus.

“Might be suitable for keeping rabbits out of people’s gardens,” Jacobsen quipped to himself.

Other properties of the hybrid intrigued him, nonetheless. Using litmus paper to check the acidity of the chemical mixtures, he discovered what should’ve

been a base had transformed into an acid, and vice versa. He jotted some notes, tucked the sheet in his pocket, and prepared to depart his “lab”.

“See you tomorrow, boys,” he promised his pets, before padlocking the rusted metal door.

Jacobsen sat in his living room that evening, staring for hours at block lettering on lined paper. He didn’t want to destroy the trees before he understood how his technique had failed, or went awry.

He’d thrown many previous experiments into the wood burning stove, installed in the bunker a decade ago. Very conscious of keeping his work secret from idle hikers and nosy youngsters, he’d chosen this swampy domain. Being denounced to the authorities for what might be deemed illegal activities wasn’t his idea of a good day.

This made no sense, though. He’d bought the litmus paper from a reputable supplier, and stored it properly. The chemicals were handled with equal care.

The fish oil could’ve been contaminated, but none of the other vegetation fed with the fertilizer had shown ill effects.

Chlorophyll produced beneath manufactured sunlight might’ve contained unstable properties - an unlikely prospect.

No theory or equation he could recall - beyond the singular blend of nutrients from many DNA sources - took this situation into account.

Pausing to clean his glasses, Jacobsen was tempted to consult one of his university colleagues.

He dismissed that temptation. Focused on publishing summations of their own research to keep their grants, they might steal his idea for their own.

Not that he was paranoid, but science had become a cut-throat profession at the college level, with academics vying for funding on the basis of their unique approaches to a host of problems.

The competition could be as puerile as one pursuing whether a diet featuring Jonathan apples decreased the likelihood of developing certain cancers, while another might try the same with the Red Delicious variety.

Both would receive staggering checks to finance semesters of inquiry. The primary reason Jacobsen had retired.

He’d wanted to teach, not wade through mounds of compliance paperwork.

Discouraged, he set aside his notes and opted for bed.

A fresh start the next morning, bolstered by three cups of coffee, instilled a sense of optimism in Jacobsen. He would crack the mystery of the strange fruit before moving on to anything else.

Maloney and Clem greeted him with hugs - an interesting sight to see the bald vulture wrap his wings around the man and peck his cheek with the powerful beak. Then, as they scampered outdoors, he shifted his concentration to the task at hand.

So deep was he in repeating the tests and viewing the slides, he didn't hear sloshing footsteps approach the bunker. Poised beneath the lintel, a flannel shirt and jean-clad woman stared at the form hunched over the work bench, intrigued.

She didn't speak until he glanced up, feeling himself being watched. "What the hell..." he grumbled.

She countered, "I didn't want to startle you. I'm taking soil samples for the county survey..."

"You want a sample of my floor?" Jacobsen stomped the packed earth with his boot.

"No, but it would be nice to know what you're doing here."

"None of your business."

"The health department might think otherwise."

The door nearly slammed in her face; surprisingly strong arms prevented its closure.

"I don't wish to make trouble, sir. I can see you've been established here quite some time. There's a question, however, of water contamination and environmental damage..."

"As a botanist, I'm extremely careful about how I dispose of everything."

"Glad to hear it. I won't bother you further." She turned, then leapt backward into the bunker.

Maloney had landed directly in her path.

Jacobsen caught the sandy-haired intruder before she tripped over a stack of empty pots. He shoved her outside. "He's harmless. Be on your way."

She resisted. "He... his species isn't indigenous..."

"His species is almost extinct," noted the professor. "He's free to live where he chooses."

Clem swung down from a nearby willow at that moment, causing her to shriek.

"Are you afraid of snakes, too?" mocked Jacobsen.

"I expect snakes around here. Not... these." She plucked a pen from her shirt pocket. "I'll have to report this..."

Roughly, she was yanked beneath the sagging roof and the door secured. "You'll do nothing of the kind."

"It's my job, Mister..."

“I thought your job was gathering soil samples.”

“And listing any anomalies in the flora and fauna.”

“There are no anomalies here.”

“What do you call those two...”

“My pets.”

“There’s an ordinance against exotic pets...”

“Fine. They’re my family.”

Violet eyes squinted at Jacobsen. “I’d like to see you claim them on your income taxes!”

“What do you need to forget you saw them?” If it took cash, or a check, the scientist was not averse to bribery.

“They pose a danger to public health...”

“How? They have no interaction with humans, other than myself. They are free of disease...”

“Are you a veterinarian?”

“No, but I don’t need to be. Once an animal adapts to its environment, the sole threat for contamination is contact with outside elements... such as yourself.”

“You mean, like when British colonists infected Native Americans with measles and chicken pox?”

“Exactly.” Jacobsen rested on a stool beside his work bench. “So, you do have a background in the sciences.”

“History, actually. This is my summer job.”

Disappointed, he swiveled toward the microscope. “I’m sure you have a lot more samples to log.”

Her gaze fell on the plants beneath the sun lamps. “Talk about samples...”

“They aren’t indigenous, either, and I’d appreciate if you didn’t touch them.”

Resigned, she moved toward the exit. “I’m sorry I disturbed you.” Then, noticing a row of the small fruit beside the beaker rack, she grabbed one and ripped it in half. “A bite or two of this should tide me over until lunch.”

Jacobsen didn’t reach her in time to prevent her sucking down the juice.

“You fool!” he chastised her, knocking the crushed rind from her grip.

“Man, that’s a nasty tasting tangelo,” she grimaced.

The botanist watched as her buxom frame spasmed violently. She gagged, and dropped to one knee.

Again, she shuddered, and a low gurgling in her throat preceded a terrifying yowl which propelled a cowering Clem behind his master.

Jacobsen could’ve sworn he heard bones cracking as she writhed on the dirt.

His initial assumption: "I've killed her."

When her muscles ceased twitching, he squatted to search for a pulse. The texture of her neck and arm diverted his attention from her heart rate.

Scrambling to the work bench, he used the point of an alcohol-doused scalpel to prick her finger, squeezing a drop of blood onto a fresh slide. He also took a skin scraping, carrying both to the microscope.

The red corpuscles and the skin cells had been dramatically - and inexplicably - altered.

The woman groaned; Jacobsen deserted his evaluation to lift her upright. Her entire body had reduced in size, leaving little more than flesh and bone. Formerly snug garments hung as if bought three sizes too large.

Surmising her fat cells had completely dissolved, the botanist also noticed her eyes had darkened from their original violet to a deep brown.

"Did I just drop 40 pounds?" she gasped, struggling to maintain her balance.

"Give or take five."

She shook free of Jacobsen's grasp, flexing her shrunken limbs. "My God, how rejuvenated, how energized..."

"You should be dead."

"I've never felt more alive. I want to run out and take advantage of all life has to offer..."

Jacobsen blocked her egress. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I... It's a matter of public safety. You were worried about environmental contamination; you're contaminated, and must be contained."

"Bullshit. I ate a spoiled piece of fruit, no different than sucking down a few bad oysters. My stomach might rebel later, but I'll survive."

"I'm not so sure."

She pushed past him; he called, "Maloney! Guard!"

The king vulture, poised on a decaying log beyond the door, spread its black and white wings threateningly.

She chortled defiantly. "What, he's going to tear off my ears if I don't stay put?"

"He can do worse than that."

"You'd let him?"

"If it protects the greater population..."

“What are you talking about? There’s nothing wrong with me a few hamburgers and fries won’t fix.” She added, “I wouldn’t try marketing that concoction as a diet aid. You’d be sued in a heartbeat.”

The botanist wished himself back at the university, where an MRI could record images of her brain, to ensure that organ hadn’t been damaged. This aggressive display could escalate if she were provoked...

Case in point: she ducked beneath Jacobsen’s outstretched arm and bolted toward the road. Maloney hissed and lunged; she grabbed his scrawny neck and squeezed.

Jacobsen paused in his pursuit to mourn the dead bird lying in the mud.

Clem joined him, gibbering his grief.

“Don’t let anything touch him,” instructed Jacobsen. “I’ll be back before sundown.”

Perhaps. The woman had a considerable head start, and a car transporting her to destinations unknown. Without a make and model, or license plate number, he couldn’t trace her.

The retired professor continued home, debating whether to involve the police. He opted to contact the county surveyor’s office, hoping they would identify the temporary college-age employee taking samples in the swamp.

As an excuse, he told the receptionist, “Her car keys must’ve fallen out of her pocket.”

He jotted her name and address on a scrap of paper.

Of course, Veronica Margulies wasn’t at the south side apartment complex, nor had any of her neighbors seen her since early that morning.

“She’s a quiet sort,” said one. “Spends a lot of time at the campus library, studying.”

The scientist doubted his victim would be wandering the stacks. “She drives a...”

“Silver Chevy Impala.”

Teeth clenched, Jacobsen rolled his eyes. Thousands of that particular vehicle cruised the streets. He could make the rounds of dives and nightclubs, but he hadn’t the slightest idea if she viewed that as what life had to offer.

En route to his Ford Taurus, he turned, recalling a chance phrase. “What’s her favorite burger joint?”

“A greasy spoon down Maple Street.”

“Thanks.”

He tried to appear nonchalant entering the cozy, clean diner - not a speck of grease to be seen, except on the six plates cluttering the booth where one

hungry history major devoured her seventh quarter-pound patty between sips of a huge chocolate milk shake.

Jacobsen slid on the vinyl seat opposite. “Not full yet?”

She didn’t seem surprised to see him. “Usually, two of these does the trick. Not today. For all I know, they might be running straight through me.”

A distinct possibility, admitted the scientist to himself. No way to predict the effects of the mutated cells...

“You really should see a doctor,” he suggested.

“What, and let a bunch of nurses and interns poke and prod me like some oddity? What’s wrong with feeling good after years of fatigue and drudgery?”

“If your body won’t process any nourishment, you won’t feel good much longer.”

“You mean, I’ll eat myself alive?”

He would’ve been less blunt, but nodded confirmation.

“How much is much?”

“I don’t know.”

“Great.” She threw the remnants of a sesame seed bun on the plastic platter. “I’ll let you cover this, and get on with savoring my last hours.”

Best to let her go, Jacobsen sighed as he paid the check at the cash register. Any harm she caused couldn’t be prosecuted after her death.

He didn’t expect local media to extensively report her antics on the late news.

To say the least, his evening hadn’t been so exciting. He’d wrapped Maloney in a moth-eaten army blanket and carried him to his favorite spot, burying him in a small grave on the county cemetery’s perimeter, beneath the oak from which the vulture had observed many indigent corpses meet a similar fate. Then, the researcher destroyed all his specimens in the bunker’s wood stove, vacating the structure.

A still unnerved Clem rode to his new home on his master’s shoulder.

The monkey was exploring this domicile while Jacobsen folded a long overdue load of laundry. The perky anchorwoman’s narrative distracted him from his chore.

As did footage of the mayor’s historic brick mansion draped with toilet paper. Socks clutched in his fist, the ex-professor sank in the leather recliner to view charred remnants of a brown paper sack, and the university president’s shoes caked with dog excrement.

Security footage, with sound, nearly deafened Jacobsen when replayed, showing every car alarm in the high school parking lot blaring simultaneously. Fans

from a preseason football scrimmage swarmed the asphalt, struggling to silence the cacophony.

“Somehow, these pranksters managed to coax a 12-point buck into City Hospital,” continued the nasal broadcast, “freeing it on the maternity ward. While no deliveries were disrupted, two nurses did suffer panic attacks.”

Flipping channels, Jacobsen learned more. The Civil War memorial - a granite soldier overlooking the river - now held a sex toy instead of a rifle. Comments expressing amazement at how that feat was achieved peppered an interview with the monument’s sculptor.

Cathedral bells, far enough away the botanist couldn’t hear them, had rung for two straight hours after the computer program was hacked, annoying the neighbors. The mall had been evacuated when the fire alarm was pulled.

“The final insult,” declared a plain-clothed detective, six microphones hovering near his collar, “was placing Road Closed signs on two major thoroughfares - east and west, and north and south - snarling traffic for three hours. Apprehending the perpetrators of these outrages will be our top priority.”

“Damned fools, they can’t conceive one person being capable of such mischief,” chuckled Veronica, holding open the screened kitchen door.

Jacobsen whipped toward the guttural voice, shocked by the deterioration of her condition since mid-afternoon. Others might’ve mistaken her for a well-aged, reanimated corpse. Clem did, scurrying to the bathroom and locking the door.

“You enjoyed yourself?” queried her host.

“Oh, yeah.” She collapsed against the refrigerator. “I’d always been so serious about my life, my future. Whatever you put in that damned fruit... set me free. Never before had I experienced such fun...”

Supporting her to the blue sectional, he knelt beside her. “You’re feverish. You should get to the hospital...”

“They won’t be able to cure me. You can’t either, can you?”

“No. I’d just begun my tests, and it would take weeks - or months - to complete the analysis.”

“Then, I guess I’m the real fool. My first grade teacher told me, after I swallowed a lump of clay, not to eat anything if I didn’t know the source...”

“Good advice.”

Veronica fought for air. “A handsome guy... like you... ought to marry some... rabid environmentalist, and... travel the world... saving endangered flowers...”

“Nonsense.” Stunned by his own trembling, fingers delicately pressed against her carotid artery, the pulse slow and weak. “Is there anyone I should notify?”

“I grew up... in foster homes. Part of my problem... most likely.” She heaved herself to her feet. “I’m... sorry about your bird.”

Jacobsen steadied her, acknowledging, “He would’ve ended up in some zoo again eventually, though he hated being caged.”

“He and millions of others.”

What remained of her muscle tissue must’ve atrophied; she slumped in his arms. Her head lay on his chest; tears dampened his shirt.

“I’m the one who should be apologizing to you,” said Jacobsen. “Some overzealous prosecutor might consider this murder...”

“Bullshit. You didn’t... shove the fruit... down my throat.” She cackled hideously. “If you’d have asked, I probably would’ve volunteered as a human guinea pig.”

He raised her chin level with his, dead weight straining his grip. “Why?”

“You have that... aura... of a mad scientist... Would’ve... been... a change... of... pace.”

Her breath shallower, he detected hints of violet in her eyes before they closed permanently.

By rights, he should’ve phoned an ambulance. Instead, he bundled her into his car and drove to the university’s medical school. An eager fourth year student asked few questions when the body was presented at the facility’s morgue.

“One request: you let me know the cause of death, if it can be determined,” Jacobsen stipulated.

The call came late Saturday. “I’ve been at this ‘round the clock,” related the student. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Have you... told anyone?”

“Not a soul.”

“Splendid. What intrigued you so?”

“None of her cells - brain included - were what the medical community would term normal. Personally, I was reminded of a book I read as a kid - Jekyll and Hyde. Whatever afflicted her split the cells into separate attributes, the immune system decimating unprotected components, like something evil supplanting good.”

Not evil, Jacobsen corrected internally, realization dawning. Veronica - a typically repressed young woman lacking self-esteem, pushed by society toward some skewed version of personal success - had been loosed of her inhibitions by the skunk citrus. Having never known love, she could not hate. Amoral escapades,

harming only the establishment, confirmed an abrupt self-awareness crying for recognition.

“No way could she have survived such a metamorphosis,” concluded the student. “This disease needs to be identified...”

“It wasn’t a disease.”

Horror filled the younger man’s voice. “You mean, a substance introduced into her system... A new street drug?”

“Nothing so... mundane. Be assured, the source of her ailment has been... eradicated. Thanks for your help.”

“Cremation and county?”

Ironic, she and Maloney resting in the same ground. “Yes.”

Switching off the Blackberry, Jacobsen contemplated the multitudinous unknowns of what might’ve transpired had Veronica lived, or a more polarized personality consumed the fruit. Clem climbed into his lap, rubbing his white nose against his master’s cheek.

Impossible to predict the variables, the botanist mused, stroking the monkey’s fur.

The consequences too painful, he wouldn’t be the one to unravel the mystery, leaving his future a grim landscape of futility.

Search for Perfection

She hadn't lived fifty years, read thousands of books - many published by her own company - met hundreds of authors, agents, employees and fans, to concede the futility of her search.

Staring through the wall of windows behind her glass-topped executive desk, Bea Schorr contemplated the city's skyline, a perfect example of the imperfection she found on all sides. Many had described the skyscrapers and streets on paper, conveying a sense of romance, or danger. The same with their characters.

Bea couldn't believe perfection existed only in fiction. And, sometimes, not even there.

She marveled at hacks who placed romantic interludes in bars, giving the impression lasting love could be found amidst alcohol and loud music. Those who occupied the stools or danced on dimly lit floors sought only a certain type of relationship, of a temporary nature.

The notion two people could meet on the internet, fall in love and live happily ever after - utterly preposterous.

Her maroon, buttoned-leather chair swiveled away from the noontday glare. In the process of editing stacks of mindless drivel, flowery prose and reasonably good adventures, the woman had also learned to read people. Within five minutes of being introduced - as with the first few paragraphs of a manuscript - she could tell if an individual possessed genuine creativity/intelligence, or was simply catering to an audience. Politicians and, sadly, many ambitious writers, fell into the latter category.

The man who'd generated the tale awaiting final approval on her blotter didn't.

His second submission, the first was already being prepped for distribution in hard cover format, missing only cover art and publicity photos. Bea believed Hollywood would option that plot for production within weeks of its release.

This work, she'd been told, outstripped his previous effort.

It might've been penned by Robert Louis Stevenson, or Charles Dickens, she discovered, wading into the double-spaced account.

The protagonist a deck hand on a Civil War era cargo ship, he blended the tensions of smuggling contraband into southern ports and encounters with women in cities along their route below the Equator. Vivid descriptions of storms and sunsets, redheads and brunettes, Bea could almost smell odors wafting from the ship's hold, and the stench of unwashed sailors.

A knock on the etched door shattered her concentration. “Come!” she invited.

The marketing department’s administrative assistant poked her head through a narrow gap. “He’s here, Ms. Schorr.”

Bea tapped the unfinished pile.

The young blonde nodded.

“I’ll be there shortly.”

She leaned back in the armchair. Few authors breached the citadel these days without a fast-talking agent to handle the gory details of contracts and royalties. This near-genius had sent a plain manila envelope in his own handwriting to “Editor” and, fortunately, one of Bea’s underlings had actually opened it.

This would be his first meeting with the staff.

He hadn’t been told the CEO would be joining them.

Bea didn’t want to intimidate him.

She soon realized, not much intimidated Christopher Anders.

He rose when she entered the conference room, impressing her with traditional manners. They exchanged a firm handshake, and resumed the business at hand.

She watched and listened as he critiqued a selection of full-color dust jacket layouts. The staff photographer would have no difficulty capturing what she termed “classic” features, with high cheekbones, firm jawline and deep brown hair. There remained, however, his biography for the press releases.

“You did an awful lot of research for the seafaring subplot,” Bea stated.

Crystal blue eyes flashed. “Not at all. My dad’s college roommate ended up a movie producer. He used to loan us his sailboat for a month each summer, and we’d hit the major ports between Boston and Panama.”

“What about the pianist’s background? I don’t supposed you trained at Juilliard?”

“No. But I did take lessons for ten years, before I realized I could make a better living refurbishing electronics.”

The publisher squinted. “Electronics?”

“I own a television and computer repair shop in a Chicago suburb.”

“Then, how...”

“There are lulls in the demand for my services. I started writing reminiscences of those summer vacations, which evolved into the two novels I’ve submitted.”

“Hopefully, there will be a third, and a fourth,” remarked Bea.

“I have some ideas.”

Excusing herself to take a phone call, she invited Anders to stop by her office before leaving. A number of the company's key contributors claimed they were obsessed by their creativity, others sought fortune and fame. Bea had never before met such an exceptional talent who wrote from boredom.

Yet, hadn't her own boredom spurred the formation of this very company, unable to find much in the way of intelligent reading on bookstore shelves? She'd taken half her inheritance and invested it in people who loved the English language and could craft an engaging story.

She hadn't been bored since.

Viewing digital proofs of Anders' publicity stills on her laptop, she detected an odd blend of indifference and self-confidence in his expression. Much like the sailor in his second effort, which she'd just finished reading. No one woman in the many cities he visited could entice him to give up the sea, despite their charms and skill as cooks.

Bea suspected no one could steer Anders from the course of his choosing.

"Coffee?" she offered when her assistant ushered him into the office.

"No, thanks."

They sat in brown velveteen armchairs by the marble-trimmed fireplace, less formal than on either side of the desk. "If you had a choice, would you prefer being a writer full-time, or stick to repairing computers?" queried Bea.

His frank answer was no less than she expected. "Living around Chicago isn't cheap. I don't think I'd be able to support myself as an author."

"You'd be surprised. If the first book grabs the public's attention, we'll be able to advance you a hefty sum on the second, and even more if there's a third and fourth."

Thin lips twitched into an intrigued smile. "How quickly would you want them finished?"

"Oh, we wouldn't need more than one a year."

"It took me two weeks to write the first one."

This admission stunned Bea. "With all that detail?"

"Some of it was added during subsequent drafts. Overall, the process took two months."

"Phenomenal."

"Not really, when you consider after the holidays, people have new computers and televisions to play with, and don't need repairs."

"Ah!"

Anders stood and contemplated the view from ceiling-high windows.

"What about you? You like this... glamorous life?"

“It’s not that glamorous. I’ve a hands-on management style, editing just as many books as the crew down in production.”

“Along with handling countless details, no doubt.”

“For that, I trust my staff. If they can’t handle an irate agent, or persistent journalist hoping for some dirt, I take the calls myself.”

“I’ve found dealing with your staff quite enjoyable. They seem to like their jobs...”

“If they don’t, I don’t want them. I pay them well, and they’re intensely loyal.”

“What about loyalty to your authors?” puzzled Anders.

“I’ve not had many problems with either side honoring the contracts. I don’t even keep a lawyer on retainer.”

“Good to hear.” Upon turning, he noticed the photos on her monitor. “Have you decided which one to use?”

Bea joined him at the desk. “They’re both suitable.”

“They’re too... posed. I’d prefer a shot of me with my screwdriver up somebody’s mother board.”

Bea might’ve been offended by the innuendo of his statement, but she’d grown up with four older brothers. “Might work, at that,” she chuckled.

Their eyes met, and they laughed together.

She sent him to the IT department, where he expertly tore apart a CPU, every move captured on the press assistant’s camera memory card. The candidness of the subject did enhance the novel’s back cover, attracting both males and females to the displays after the volume’s release.

The sudden crush of fame didn’t faze Anders, either. He continued wrenching on electronics well into the summer, even with the prospect of a sizeable advance toward his next book. Bea decided not to spring the offer from a prestigious Hollywood director on him via telephone, flying instead to Chicago on the red eye that Friday morning.

She wanted to see his reaction in person.

He met her expectations, considering the six figure proposal with unrivaled equanimity.

“Thing is: I like what I do,” he remarked, twirling a wrench between his fingers.

“With this kind of money, you can do what you like, when you like,” countered Bea. “You won’t have to be a slave to the business...”

Blue orbs twinkled mischievously as he scanned the paperwork. “I could afford a sailboat of my own...”

“I hear the Great Lakes are beautiful for sailing.”

“If I go that route, I’ll invite you on the maiden voyage.”

“No, thanks,” Bea smirked. “I get sea sick.”

They left it at that, each content with their own life choices, and the path of their respective futures. On the plane back to New York, Bea knew she’d finally met the perfect man, glad at least one existed beyond the printed page.

To Sea and Back

There are definite advantages to sailing the high seas on a three-masted schooner: no women.

There are definite disadvantages to sailing the high seas on a three-masted schooner: no women.

Few will argue the point that having a woman aboard ship is bad luck. The primary reason is the disruption caused to the efficient operation of said vessel, the hands too busy hunting for a glimpse of skirt to tend their duties. Still, the heartache among those seafaring men who've left their dearest loves ashore for months on end eventually demoralizes the entire crew.

So it was on our voyage west from San Francisco to the Orient that summer of 1867. A distinct hesitance at the coming of high tide infected the temporarily washed and sober lot; rumors of a monster along the route exacerbated the possibility many would never see this city again.

It didn't take a monster to scuttle a ship, regardless of its size. A violent storm could flood the bilges and sink her before the long boats could be loosed. I knew as much when I signed on for the chance to see Hong Kong and Singapore, two ports I'd missed on previous crossings.

The sea gets in a man's blood, to be sure. Staying on land for extended periods causes an unrivaled discomfort, almost a reverse of the mal de mer some suffer when riding the waves. My feet were never happy unless they felt the gentle roll of the waves beneath the deck, my heart watching the wind billow in the sails.

Having worked my way to the trusted post of navigator, I no longer had to climb to the heights, stitch tears in the canvas, or burn my hands on ropes securing the anchor. I ate at the captain's table, fare better than the ordinary seamen.

After twenty years traversing the world's oceans, I felt I deserved the respect.

Captain Byron Ainsley had, himself, started on a whaler, slicing blubber, boiling it and filtering it into casks. He wasn't a "gentleman" by common standards - avoided serving in either the Confederate or Yankee navies during the recent fracas between North and South. He'd run a few blockades, and ne'er lost a ship under his command.

We swapped stories in the off-watches over a glass of port. Neither of us married or encumbered by females, we had no regrets about our occasionally unsavory adventures. Our laughter reverberated through the aft quarters...

Until the typhoon nearly consigned us to Davy Jones' locker.

Three days and nights we were pounded by fierce gales and driving rain. Two men were washed overboard; we had no chance to rescue them, the blackness so thick on all sides. When, that fourth morning, the sun broke through thinning clouds, more than a dozen youngsters dropped to their knees and swore to fulfill vows made in the turmoil's midst.

They wouldn't have the opportunity. From the crow's nest, the watch shouted news of a unknown object floating on the surface to starboard off the stern. "It may be wreckage of a freighter!" he added.

Sails unfurled, the rudder aimed us in that direction. As the distance closed, updates came from above - the last quite disconcerting: "It's moving under its own power!"

We could see it by then, and the wild explanations for the behemoth's presence in these waters forced me to bite back a nasty reprimand. When the beast turned and accelerated toward us, we had no recourse. Veering to port served no purpose; we couldn't outrun it.

No whale, this, nor any leviathan of nature's creation. The skin gleamed in the sunlight, though the two giant eyes might've deceived less educated souls into believing it a breathing beast.

'Twas a ship of unique construction, half-submerged, ready to rip the schooner to shreds, though we posed it no threat.

Shred us, it did, before the call to abandon ship could be issued. The mainmast cracked upon impact, crushing two score beneath it. I, being at the helm, was propelled over the railing as if shot by a catapult. I landed in the water, left leg tangled in the anchor rope.

And the anchor had been jarred from the keel, splashing salty mist over me on its way to the depths.

Half-frozen fingers fought to free my limb, simultaneously working to stay afloat. I barely noticed the submersible making a second run to complete its grisly task, finding myself swept under the surface in its wake.

What I saw before I lost consciousness might have been a nightmare. A craft so long and swift, it defied imagination. Dark metal and glass... my last thought was why it didn't sink.

I awoke on a cold slab, doubly chilled by the sensation I was dead. Groping weakly, I realized my hands were shackled, and the surface on which I lay was some type of metal.

So were the walls, and the ceiling. I was a prisoner.

I recalled committing no crime. I tried to sit up; my clothes were still damp. Vague memories of my ordeal filled my mind; I moaned over the ship's loss. At the noise, a face appeared at the rivet-framed door.

"So, you've recovered," the crisp voice observed.

"I... suppose."

"Good. You're needed on the bridge."

"The bridge?"

"Cap'n's waitin'."

"Captain who?"

"Never you mind." The balding old salt unlocked the door, then did likewise with the iron wrist-bands. He helped me stand, steadied me when a splitting headache caused momentary dizziness, finally shoving me toward the exit.

I stammered, "We're on a ship?"

"Aye."

"A steamer?"

"Never you mind."

Down a narrow passage and up circular stairs, I emerged in a chamber surrounded on all sides by gauges and glass...

"No," I muttered. "No, not the beast..."

"Not a beast," came the cultured baritone of the gold-braided senior officer. "A submarine. The Nautilus."

"I don't care what she's called. You let me off..."

"Certainly. When next we touch land."

The crew chuckled, before the bearded, dark presence silenced them with a glance.

Peering through the oversized, curved portholes, I saw no sky, no clouds. I saw... water, and fish. We were, indeed, submerged!

"Where are the other prisoners?" I demanded.

"There are no other prisoners. Normally, I wouldn't have bothered with you, except for your position."

"My position?"

"As navigator."

"What's that..."

The mate, still guarding me, whispered, "Ours died a fortnight ago, impaled by a stingray."

The word "impale" clarified everything.

"You've traveled these waters often?" the captain pressed.

"On the surface, yes. But, below... never!"

“You may prove useful yet. We shall surface, you can take bearings, and soon will learn how to apply your skills to the deep.”

“I don’t want to learn...”

“Your only other choice is to be thrown overboard.”

My mouth opened to object; I shut it without speaking. Better alive and unhappy, than dead and done.

“Provide him a uniform, and a meal,” the first mate was directed. To me, he added, “Report back here at four bells.”

I saluted, “Aye, sir.”

Following the mate below, I felt a distinct sense of claustrophobia. We were under fathoms of water, and if something untoward occurred, we would not survive.

My companion discounted these concerns. “Since the Nautilus was constructed, we’ve had no major incidents which disabled us. You will be responsible for ensuring we have none in the future.”

“How so?”

“As navigator, you’ll chart subsurface obstacles and routes to various destinations.”

“What kind of destinations?”

I received no reply. Ushered into a cabin, the previous navigator’s clothing still hung in a simple wardrobe. A pair of blue trousers extended below my ankles. The conclusion: “One of the crew is a passable tailor. He can alter these to fit.”

Not so with the shirt and jacket sleeves. My predecessor must’ve had long legs and short arms. I resembled a child who’d outgrown his Sunday best.

“The cook will prepare your meal in the galley,” the mate announced.

“Then, get some rest. I’ll rouse you before four bells.”

“Thanks.”

The metal door clanged shut, and my claustrophobia increased. I felt a draft of fresh air, however, though the vent was not visible.

The men serving on the Nautilus kept to themselves, it seemed. The cook would not provide his name, nor did any of the others. Me being an outsider, I knew I would have to earn their trust.

The captain set the tone when it came to trusting me. At precisely four bells, he escorted me to his cabin, where one bulkhead boasted a sizeable map of the Pacific Ocean. He indicated a small speck south of the Equator. “This is our current position, our heading north-northwest. Familiarize yourself with these charts, because you will be adding to them in the days to come.”

“Adding to them?”

“Depths at various longitudes, rock formations, reefs...”

“Ah, I see.”

“I need not caution you one omission could cost you your life - and those of your crewmates.”

“I understand, Captain...”

“Nemo.”

As he withdrew, I puzzled at the odd moniker. In Latin, nemo meant “no man”, clearly an alias for this trim, stern leader. I wasn’t about to risk my neck, however, searching the drawers in his art-laden chamber to discover the truth. What difference would knowing make to my fate, anyway?

I shifted my attention to the map, surprisingly detailed. Another, behind it, depicted the Indian Ocean; the Nautilus had obviously covered thousands of leagues in its travels.

And would during my service. My duties at the helm were initially supervised by Nemo himself, and I would take notes on bearings and terrain visible through thick, oversized portholes. These were recorded before I fell into my bunk for a few hours’ sleep.

Its unique design allowed the Nautilus to steer as well as any schooner I’d helmed. Timid initially, I envisioned scraping jutting rocks or wrecks cluttering the sea floor ripping holes in the hull. With each succeeding day - or night, I’d lost track of the hours, sunlight unable to penetrate to such a depth - I mastered my task, and Nemo appeared content with my progress.

We lay off Madagascar’s eastern coast in late December. The surface calm, I ventured to ask Nemo about shore leave.

“We do not indulge in such mundane activities,” came his gruff response.

“We have left our terrestrial lives behind in service to a noble cause.”

I dared not press the issue, given the cavernous furrows wrinkling his brow.

We submerged before sunrise, northbound toward India. Our course would’ve seemed random to the casual observer, but the number of flagless freighters attacked and sunk - their holds filled with makings for gunpowder proved Nemo’s logic.

It also proved he placed little value on human life.

I inquired about his philosophy at dinner one evening. He claimed to be saving innocent victims by denying war-crazed political powers these tools of destruction. “Any seaman who signs on to crew such a vessel knows how the cargo will be used, thus his soul is forfeit.”

A gospel passage about judging others died on my lips.

Gradually, as I proved my worth, the engine room crew accepted me into their card games. Away from Nemo, they were jovial, though an underlying pathos tinged their reminiscences of past revels. Unjustly imprisoned, all, a common bond stemmed from their joint flight to the island where the Nautilus had been built.

I was given full access to the galley when my watches interfered with the cook's normal schedule. Only once did I participate in an underwater excursion; the suits, air tanks, boots and headgear weighed too heavily on my frame. The plants and sea life were intriguing in their natural surroundings, but I could not provide any assistance to those harvesting supplies for our table.

My increasing discomfort - rather than an adjustment to these imposed circumstances - sparked a desire to escape. Opportunities were almost nonexistent, however, since the submarine never cruised close enough to land for someone to swim safely ashore, or steal the skiff undetected. I felt more and more a prisoner, tempted to deliberately run the craft aground, and take my chances among the sharks.

I never intended to miscalculate the angle at which the Nautilus would strike a loaded frigate, rupturing the port ballast tanks. Nemo himself fought to prevent the sub from descending to unmeasured depths, and when it burst into scorching daylight, two score men scrambled from the hatches to assess the damage.

The frigate had been shattered, but not sunk. Listing dangerously to starboard, its hands were piling into longboats, the Indonesian islands barely visible on the horizon. Nemo consulting his men about repairs, I slid off the hull, barely reaching a chunk of debris, which kept me afloat until I could hail the warship's survivors.

Pulled into the crowded boat, I huddled on the rear seat while strong arms rowed for land. Vows to kill the gigantic monster spouted from each man; I hadn't the strength to explain their monster was a ship of ingenious devising.

In fact, no one believed me, even when I reported my adventures to the local authorities. I signed on a whaler bound for the States a month later, arriving in San Francisco during the rainy season. The weather matched my mood.

Relieving that inner blackness involved copious amounts of rum and whiskey as the year progressed. I ne'er set foot on the docks, and ran out of money toward Christmas.

Stowing away on a train, I made my way East to New York. I had relatives in that city, or so I believed, arriving in the spring to discover they'd gone West! Thinking my lot could grow no worse, I happened upon a newsstand, where the

headline proclaimed French Professor Aronnax had given his account of time spent on Captain Nemo's Nautilus exclusively to that paper!

He was touted as a hero, while I'd been reviled as a liar. Breaking the butcher's shop windows in my rage merited me an arrest and jail time...

A prisoner, once again without hope.

At least, I can see the sun.

An Unfortunate Incident

R. Bin poured himself a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice from the pitcher on the credenza. He sipped slowly, savoring the taste. "It's been too long," he whispered, before returning to his desk. As he settled onto the molded metal chair, a familiar face entered the chamber. He directed, "Report." Prior to occupying an identical chair opposite his superior, J. Das extracted a long, cylindrical item from his jacket pocket. He placed it between his teeth and used an odd contraption to create a flame, setting the end ablaze.

"What is that?" queried Bin.

Das replied, "It's called a cigar. The best are made on a little island in the Western Hemisphere."

"It smells awful."

"Actually, inhaling the fumes is quite soothing. I've grown very fond of the habit."

"Well, I don't approve. Extinguish the... cigar and make your report."

Das glanced around for a place to stub out the stogie, finally using the chair back. Ash floated to the floor; Bin frowned.

"Sorry," Das muttered, then leaned forward. "You remember the last time we stopped here for fuel?"

"Of course. We were on the way to Zus' daughter's wedding." Bin squinted toward the door. "Where is he, by the way?"

"He's... trying to convince the locals it was all a mistake."

"What was a mistake?"

"You remember having to rescue him when they tried to kill him?"

"Yes."

"From all accounts, they've been misinterpreting that incident ever since. There's a manuscript, widely circulated, filled with exaggerations and fabrications about those days. Some... group of opportunists - or fools - took his words and created a mythic hero. They worship him in special structures and fight wars because of him."

Bin sighed. "Zus always had a knack for getting into trouble. He doesn't think before he speaks, and acts on impulse..."

"I can attest, as I did then, he really didn't do anything wrong. The people, though, were simpletons, and they didn't understand."

"Obviously, given their reaction."

"Things haven't changed much, either. They're technologically more advanced, but their attitudes about life and each other are still antiquated."

“You mean, the prejudice, the greed...”

“All of it.”

“A shame.”

“Indeed,” lamented Das. “Anyway, the last section of this manuscript predicted Zus would someday return. He’s trying to use that prediction to clear up the matter...”

Bin’s eyes rolled, sensing the effort’s futility.

“Don’t worry, Boss. No one’s listening. They think he’s some crackpot from a place called Arkansas.”

“That’s a relief, anyway.”

“He’s awfully determined, though.”

“He’ll get himself killed again.”

“Certain robed... individuals are actively speaking against him. There’s what’s called a ‘media campaign’ to denounce him as a fraud.”

“Media?”

“Electronic broadcasts on audio and visual frequencies.”

Bin cracked a grin. “You think we can pick up the transmissions?”

“Sure.”

The pair hurried to the control room on the next level. Those on duty monitoring multiple screens were chuckling among themselves.

“What’s so funny?” demanded Bin as they crossed the threshold.

Sixteen uniformed menials straightened and sobered.

They didn’t have to answer for Bin and Das to detect the source of humor. Images of Zus, from various angles, featured snide, voiceover commentary. He was a laughingstock in the truest sense of the word.

Bin hid his own amusement. “Summon a retrieval squad,” he instructed Das. “We’ve got to get him out of there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Within ten minutes, teams had dispersed throughout Chicago. Bin gazed up at the Willis Tower, awed. “You didn’t lie about their technological advances.”

“Why would I lie?” countered Das. “Down the street, here, there’s a shop which carries the manuscript I mentioned, if you care to...”

“Later, perhaps. Right now, we’ve got to locate Zus and prevent another... unfortunate incident.”

Seeming to look in all directions at once as they walked north, Bin wouldn’t openly admit a sense of feeling lost. If Zus had been widely shown via this “media”, it might be possible the inhabitants knew his whereabouts.

He hailed a passing elder. “Good afternoon, sir. I’m...”

Das laid a warning hand on Bin's arm. "Never mind. They can't pronounce our 15-syllable family designations."

"As I recall," gulped Bin self-consciously, "some of theirs mystified me, as well." Wandering between State Street and Lake Shore Drive for two hours brought no results. Bin paused in front of a crumbling edifice, gazing upward.

"What are these structures bearing a 'T' atop the roof?"

"They are where the locals come to worship Zus."

"Why don't they realize how insane that is?"

"I don't know, Bin." Das steered his companion into a tiny bookstore. He chose a volume off the shelves under a "Religion" banner. "This is the manuscript I mentioned."

Skilled at speed-reading technical manuals, Bin devoured the pages from beginning to end in a matter of minutes. He snapped the cover closed and passed it back to Das. "You're in here, too. And M. Aria. Why?"

"We were with him."

"They butchered your family designations."

"The research I've seen indicates these stories weren't properly recorded until well after we'd rescued Zus and resumed our journey."

"Embellished, then?" prodded Bin.

"Outright fabrications, some of them."

"Like Zus' healing the blind and raising the dead?"

"He... did extraordinary things. We all did. In the frenzy of the moment, the tales... took on a life of their own."

"The last few chapters are written like a hallucinogen-inspired dream, but do claim Zus will return. People honestly expect this?"

Das nodded.

"Then, why aren't they accepting him, now he's here?"

"Rumors I heard in the past few days are he's supposed to come in a blaze of glory, on a throne, to judge the people."

Bin looked dumbstruck.

"I know, it's ludicrous," stated Das. "It gets worse. Those who claimed to know Zus set up a chain of authority, which none of those in the lower eschelons can challenge."

"The whole situation is ludicrous. We're a simple race, bothering no one, traveling freely without upsetting the natural balance. One idiot opens his mouth, and turns an entire planet of people into babbling automatons?"

"It seems so."

Bin glared up Michigan Avenue at shoppers and businessmen on their lunch hour. "Right, then. If that's what they expect, we'll give it to them."

"No, Bin!" Das protested. "We can't..."

"Maybe it'll wake up the locals to their mistake."

Communications between the teams confirmed Zus remained at large. Bin ordered them back to quarters, while he arranged for a display which would silence any doubters.

"I'll stay, if you don't mind," offered Das. "Maybe I'll get lucky."

Bin grunted, "So be it."

Das watched his comrades retreat, trying to logic out where Zus might be making his stand to convince the locals of his identity. He detoured into an electronics boutique, watching news bulletins on a large-screen television. By chance, Das recognized the bridge near which Zus had been standing during a recent interview. It was less than a block away, spanning the Chicago River.

Not finding Zus there, Das continued to the Tribune building, asking the receptionist if she knew of the broadcast blaring from the monitor in the gift shop. "Oh, he's upstairs," she supplied. "Doing an in-depth feature for tomorrow's paper. Thinks he's Jesus."

"Yes, his name is G. Zus."

"Believes this is the second coming."

Das growled, en route to the elevator, "It is, and you have no grasp how bad it'll be."

The young woman chased after him. "How can you be so sure?"

"I was here, with him, the first time."

"Who are you?"

He tossed the book at her, a specific page marked. She opened it, reading aloud, "One of the twelve, Judas Iscariot by name..." She stared as the lift door slid shut.

On the eighteenth floor, Das disembarked to view a cadre of reporters seated at their computers, typing frantically. Through a glass wall, Zus could be seen, pacing frantically while conversing with three skeptical journalists. Das overheard the exchange as he approached the door.

"Why don't you have long brown hair, and wear a crown and royal robes?" asked one of the interviewers. "No one's going to be impressed by a t-shirt and jeans."

"You still don't understand. I'm here by accident, just like the previous visit. You locals... blew everything out of proportion, and I just want to straighten it out..."

Zus noticed Das, and grinned broadly. He rushed forward, dragging Das into the office. "Here! He was with me! He can attest to the facts!"

"And, who is this?" spat a doubting female.

"In that manuscript... you call him Judas," gushed Zus. "His name is really J. Das."

"What's the 'J' stand for?"

Das answered evenly, "You... couldn't spell it."

"Give it a shot," taunted the third.

Ignoring him, Das studied gathering clouds beyond the tall windows. He grabbed Zus' arm. "C'mon. We've got to get out of here."

"But, why? I haven't convinced these..."

"Oh, they'll be convinced, all too soon," Das assured him, ushering him from the room. "Look!"

All eyes shifted toward the horizon. Zus shuddered.

The gray-haired elder discounted the darkening skies. "So what? A storm's coming."

"A storm unlike any witnessed before," predicted Zus. "You wanted proof of my words. Here it is."

With that, Das jerked Zus toward the elevator. They cleared the high-rise and rejoined the others seconds before Bin loosed the fury of nature upon the populace.

As the ship left orbit to continue its journey homeward, the third planet was left a hulk of lifeless rock.

The Francis Apparitions

I

A shaft of sunlight penetrated the grove of apple trees and shot through the window, hitting Sister Mary Giles directly in the eyes. She'd already ignored the rising bell, but she couldn't ignore nature's summons.

Still, she tried, giving the dawn her back.

Guilt got the better of the young woman, and she eventually dragged herself off the lumpy mattress. She hadn't slept well after Matins, the midnight Office of Readings, and longed for those August days before college started, when she could sleep until noon, if she chose.

Poor Clares of the Colettine reform, however, followed the same schedule every day of the year. Indulging the self wasn't permitted.

Even when one's limbs ached outrageously from weeding the vegetable garden on Wednesday.

Adjusting the wimple and veil on her shorn blonde head, fumbling with her wire-rimmed glasses, and tightening her cincture at the waist, Mary Giles shuffled to the chapel, her stomach growling. Ten years in the monastery, and she still felt pangs of hunger at inconvenient times.

Like during the previous afternoon's investiture ceremony of the newest novice. Just as the Abbess presented the buxom Chicago native with her habit, the noise had reverberated around the vaulted oak ceiling, to Mary Giles' dismay.

She'd been tempted to sneak a slice of bread, or a piece of fruit before these long sessions of prayer, but guilt - again - prevented her from breaking the rules.

Guilt. Not supposed to be part of this life. This dedication to prayer on behalf of all humanity was supposed to be a joy-filled existence. Every day new petitions arrived in the mail: sick relatives, those concerned about the wars being waged, and so forth. Today of all days - the feast of St. Clare of Assisi, and the beginning of a year-long celebration of the eighth centenary of the founding of the Poor Clares - her heart should have been bursting with love for the world.

Instead, as she settled on the polished chapel bench behind the enclosure wall, she yawned.

The Abbess, Mother Mary Agnes, lips pursed, glanced in her direction. Mary Giles shrugged.

Six candelabra had been added to the altar decorations, and vases of assorted flowers filled the space with delicate fragrance. Morning Prayer began

with voices raised in a hymn to their foundress; Mary Giles found herself too hoarse to sing.

The least of the nuns is how she'd always regarded herself. The others always seemed to smile, no matter the weather or their health. They always had a kind word, or a pleasant remark during recreation. Their spiritual and physical struggles were non-existent, or very well concealed. Mary Giles hadn't acquired that skill, instead actually hiding from her nine Sisters as much as possible.

Most days, whether washing the dishes or sweeping the brick path past the outdoor Stations of the Cross, she remained pleasantly anonymous.

Work was suspended on this special feast, allowing the community to enjoy the twelve acres of trees and greenery surrounded by a high privacy fence. A group sewed or knitted near the trickling creek. Some read books or meditated. Mary Giles parked herself beneath a walnut tree, snoring quietly as she napped.

An unfamiliar rustling jolted her awake. At first, she saw nothing unusual, then she glimpsed a friar's robe passing through the modest apple orchard.

Odd, she thought. The Franciscan priests who came each day to say Mass weren't allowed in the cloister.

Rising, Mary Giles brushed leaves and grass from her full-length brown habit, padding on bare feet after the retreating form. He moved quickly, as if escaping from a crime scene, and the young nun wondered if he had disguised himself to gain entry and rob the monastery of their few valuables.

She increased her pace, emerging into a clearing to see no one between her and the distant fence. Pausing, she contemplated possibilities, finally muttering, "Crap," before turning to retrace her steps.

And finding herself face-to-face with an emaciated, beggar-like individual barely covered by a tattered, stained robe.

It slipped out. "Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?"

"Pax et bonum, Sister," came the Franciscan greeting in a soothing tenor.

Mary Giles sized up this wreck of a man: lank, black hair greasy, hands gnarled and partially hidden with fingerless gloves, shoulders stooped. A strange glaze on his dark eyes gave the impression he was blind, as well.

"Who are you?" she repeated.

"I am Francis, your Father."

"Bullshit." She bit her lip hard, tasting blood.

"It is because of your... cynicism I am here. I have a task for you."

A bad joke, being played by the Sisters? Mary Giles pondered. Meant to rouse her from her doldrums?

She challenged, "If you're Francis, why aren't you speaking Italian?"

“The language of heaven is universal. Each hears in his - or her - own tongue.”

Mary Giles attempted to shove past him. “Nice try.”

A surprisingly strong grip halted her. “You have read the biographies written of me?”

“Sure.” She did not ease her resistance.

“They are... not accurate.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. Given the era, and that the biographers were Franciscans themselves, they... concentrated on creating a legend, rather than recounting the truth.”

“Your perception is the reason I chose you.”

She scoffed, “Really?”

“You must write the truth about my life, and my failures.”

This last intrigued Mary Giles. “Failures?”

“My failure to inspire the brothers to live the Rule fully, without compromise, my failure to transform the world with Christ’s love...”

As the man stared off into the distance, Mary Giles studied his weathered features. Of course, the frescoes embellishing the Assisi basilica built in St. Francis’ honor bore no resemblance to his face, nor had his portrait been painted during his lifetime. This was no phantom - she would have a bruise where his fingers dug into her forearm...

“If I agree, what will be involved?” she queried. “I don’t have access to any outside libraries...”

“I will come to you each evening, and dictate the story. You will record the tale.”

She hedged. “No publisher will believe...”

“Well do I know how little faith abides in the hearts of men! I will provide... verifications of the narrative’s authenticity, and they will agree to disseminate the volumes.”

“I... don’t know. I’m no author...”

“You were a secretary before you took your vows. You are accustomed to transcribing the words of others...”

He couldn’t know that, unless...

“When do we begin?” she acquiesced.

“This evening, after Compline. I will come to your cell...”

This thought horrified Mary Giles. “What if you’re heard?”

“Only you can hear my voice, as with other visionaries through the centuries.” He released his grasp and moved through the gently waving grasses. “I advise you to say nothing to your Sisters. They will think you quite mad.”

She managed a chuckle. “Aren’t I?”

He spun and flashed a beatific smile which shone like the sun. She shielded her eyes and, when she lifted her palm, he was gone.

Mother Agnes, however, stood behind Mary Giles, startling the younger woman.

“Are you all right, Sister?” asked the quiet contralto.

“Fine, Mother,” Mary Giles gushed, swallowing her stomach. “Just... fine.”

“We have visitors in the parlor, bearing a special treat for our feast day.”

“Great.” Shaking off her doubt and confusion, Mary Giles followed the Abbess toward the spacious yellow brick structure which had housed the Poor Clares over fifty years on Chicago’s south side.

Wayne and Sandra Nelson sat on the opposite side of the grille. The retired, wealthy couple regularly donated to the monastery’s upkeep. Mrs. Nelson’s aunt had been the first Abbess, and Mary Giles suspected Sandra’s own guilt spurred their generosity; Mother Mary David had wanted her niece to join the community, terribly disappointed at the news of an elopement with this charming bank executive.

The blue-haired senior revealed a gaily wrapped parcel from beneath her armchair. She removed the paper and opened the box, exposing a miniature gold monstrance in which was suspended a sliver of frayed cloth.

“A relic of St. Clare!” exclaimed Mother Agnes.

Wayne Nelson confirmed, “Direct from Assisi.”

“How’d you...”

“It wasn’t easy.”

“Or cheap,” his wife added.

Sister Mary John leaned so far forward, her nose was framed by the wrought iron grille-work. “What an exquisite gift on this holy feast!”

“It will have a place of honor in the chapel,” stated Sister Mary Anita, the sacristan. “I know just the spot!”

The chatter continued, until Sister Mary Matthew served tea and cookies. Then, the bell for Evening Prayer - Vespers - chimed, and the visit concluded.

Mary Giles remained in the parlor to rearrange the chairs. She’d paid little attention to the gift, or the donors. She paused to clean flecks of dust from her glasses, debating if she’d imagined seeing St. Francis in the orchard.

“Sister, you’ll be late to chapel,” Mary Anita warned, scurrying along the corridor.

“Coming.”

Psalms, prayers and a feast day Benediction preceded a light supper collation - and a bit more recreation of gin rummy and Scrabble. After Compline - Night Prayer - the Sisters grabbed a couple hours’ shut-eye before rising for Matins at 11:45.

Except Mary Giles.

Cross-legged on her bed, her nightshirt tucked under her feet against an unseasonably cool breeze through the open window, she idly rifled the pages of a spiral notebook. Francis’ materialization on the straight-backed chair in the corner made her jump, nonetheless.

“I told you to expect me,” chided the saint.

“To walk through the door, sure. Not...” she motioned vaguely, “this.”

“My apologies, Sister. The old conventions do not apply to the ethereal plane.”

Mary Giles sighed. “I’ll get used to it, I suppose.”

“Let us begin, then.”

Begin, Francis did, at the beginning of his life. Not the same story seen in movies or written by his devoted followers. Mary Giles gasped occasionally, and hesitated to scribble some revelations.

“Do you find the truth so repulsive?” the narrator, aggravated, queried during one such halt in their progress.

“No, just surprising.”

Francis vanished at 11:00, not giving Mary Giles enough time to rest before Matins. So, she reread the shorthand notations, doubting whether anyone would believe the facts after eight centuries of flowery prose.

“My father was a man of his time,” Francis had related. “He cared for his family in practical ways as a merchant, buying and selling cloth. In the greater scheme of things, and compared to occupations in this era, he would have been considered lower middle class, by no means wealthy - though his travels gave him a certain aura of worldliness among his fellows in Assisi. He brought gossip from far lands, places common folk would never experience.”

He’d shifted his attention to the landscape beyond the open pane of glass. “Have you ever been to Assisi?”

“No,” Mary Giles had answered.

“The reason basilicas honoring myself and Clare were built on the edges of the city is because it was such a cramped settlement. All stone. As children, we

played in the piazzas, or roamed the narrow streets. The only horses pulled farmers' carts to market. The richest families walked to and from the churches, or their social gatherings. If someone needed a horse for travel, as my father did, he would essentially rent one from a stable in the valley near San Damiano or the Porziuncola. The few horses kept in Assisi just stunk up the neighborhood. And they had nowhere to graze."

"Sounds... enchanting."

"It was a very basic life. And, having an active nature, I got into trouble for wandering the countryside. Up to the Rocca Maggiore, or caves on the mountain... The only time my father scolded me was when I stayed out after dark and frightened my mother. With the battles being waged between cities, and vagabonds on the prowl, it wasn't safe to be out after sunset.

"Most of my friends never learned to read or write," Francis continued. "My mother made a point to teach me, and my father approved, because being literate and understanding math meant I could join him in the shop when I reached a suitable age. If I lived that long. Disease killed many, and others were pressed into military service against Perugia or other imagined enemies."

"Is the story about you being a prisoner of war true?" interrupted Mary Giles.

"Yes. I wasn't soldier material. I hadn't the strength to handle those heavy swords, and didn't possess sufficient agility to wield a pike. I only used a bow once; my arrow nearly took off the commander's ear. It was only logical I'd be among the first captured.

"Our prison was a cow barn, because the Perugians had no better facilities than we of Assisi. The stench cannot be described by mere words, animals and men housed together for weeks on end..."

Mary Giles gagged involuntarily.

"Precisely my reaction. What little food we were given was indigestible. At the cessation of hostilities, the dozens who trudged home were more corpses than men.

"My mother didn't recognize me and, though she loved me unconditionally, was loathe to touch me in that condition. She toted bucket upon bucket of water from the well so I could have a bath and shave, then she put me to bed and fed me broth and bread until I regained my strength.

"My father's disgust tinged his every word. He branded me a failure, then and there, and gave me two alternatives: the Crusades or the shop. By then, I wanted neither."

“You mean, the vision on the road to Jerusalem, when you turned back to Assisi, was...”

“A lie.”

“Started by whom?” puzzled Mary Giles.

“Those who wanted to make me a saint.”

“What really happened?”

“Barely recovered enough to walk, my father offered me as squire to a knight whose wife often purchased cloth in the shop. I proved so inept in my duties, I was dismissed before the troop left Umbria.”

He chuckled wryly. “I wasn’t good at much of anything.”

“Your poetry...”

“A romantic notion concocted by overzealous biographers.”

“And, Clare?”

“Not yet, Sister. Let’s keep this in chronological order.”

“Okay.”

“Home once more, disgraced in the eyes of my father, I spent even more time roaming far afield. I had a handful of close friends, but none of us had any money to waste on women or drink, so we got into the habit of throwing stones off the parapet walls, or pretending to be beggars and lepers.”

“Sounds like kids today.”

“Undirected, uninspired... yes, probably.”

“So, how did you discover your... direction?”

“It remains a mystery to me, though my brothers created that fantastical legend of the San Damiano cross. I’d been idling away the summer, my mother nagging me to begin courting some seamstress’ daughter, my father all but disowning me, when I chanced upon an altercation in the olive groves near the crumbling church. The owner wanted to use the stones for a wall to keep out stray livestock, and the priest refused, vehemently professing he’d dreamt of a Good Samaritan coming to rebuild the structure, which was in ruins.”

Mary Giles breathed, “So, it was the priest who had the vision?”

“And the origin of the oft-quoted mandate for the Order.”

“But, still, you were the one who restored San Damiano...”

“My friends and I, yes. In fits and starts, only because we were bored, and because the priest promised us all the wine we could drink.”

“So, the accounts of the twelve first brothers...”

“Are a bunch of hogwash. There were no brothers until much, much later. Years.”

Hesitantly, Mary Giles gnawed the tip of her pencil. “The scene with the bishop and you stripping off your clothes...”

“Bad enough, my father craved acclaim and wealth which he would never attain as a cloth merchant. He saw my antics as hampering his climb up the social ladder. He banished me from his home after some local official falsely accused me of compromising his niece. I slept outdoors, eating wild berries and nuts. That’s how I encountered the lepers, scrounging for food, themselves.”

Francis slumped on the chair. “Seeing the way those poor souls lived raised my ire, and I began protesting against hypocrites who paraded about the streets, and attended Mass daily or on Sundays in their finery, claiming to hold the message of Christ dear to their hearts. Yet, they shunned these people - ill through no fault of their own - out of hand. My words were roundly ignored. I was labeled a pariah, and banned from the city precincts.”

On that note, he faded from sight, leaving Mary Giles stunned.

She set aside the notebook, her wrist stiff from writing more than she had in ten years. “I’ll never get used to this.”

Yawning through Matins, she frankly passed out as soon as her head hit the pillow. When she awoke at 5:00, she didn’t remember dreaming at all.

The day might’ve been equated to a nightmare. She dropped a crystal vase while changing water in the flowers adorning the chapel altar. Clearing the shards of glass, she drove one through her palm, bleeding profusely on the embroidered altar cloth. Mother Agnes recommended she be taken to the hospital for stitches; Mary Giles refused.

Applying pressure with a tea towel, she felt a strange affinity with her intangible visitor, who bore the Stigmata on his hands and feet.

If that, also, was true.

Why else, though, would he wear those odd gloves?

“Later, later,” he hedged upon arrival that evening. “Skipping around makes for a very poor biography.”

“I hope my transcription does the story justice.”

“I have faith in you.”

“Thank you, Blessed Father.”

His dark eyes flashed at her across the small room. “Don’t call me that.”

“Thousands have called you that.”

“Without my permission. When the... deed was finally done, I was Brother Francis, and nothing else!”

“What do you mean, the deed was done?”

“Despairing of my faith in God and man, I knelt one evening in the Porziuncola - barely larger than this cell - and cried to the Lord to smite the wicked who rejected their fellows, created in His image. I vowed to preach against their haughtiness and heap guilt upon their heads. A powerful wind blew through the door, knocking my bible to the floor. The page lay open to the quote, ‘Love thy neighbor.’ My heart softened, and my message became one of peace and forgiveness.”

Mary Giles smiled. “That is far more poignant than what has been historically accepted.”

“But less glamorous. When I recounted my transformation to the initial, curious few who joined me, they laughed. Like a juicy tidbit of gossip, details changed as they made the rounds of wagging tongues. They learned with amazing rapidity how, by setting me up as some holy example, contrite individuals - seeking salvation for their souls - would gladly donate food, property, goods and money to the brothers’ comfort.

“I’d long since stopped worrying about my own comfort,” admitted Francis. “Sleeping on bare earth proved no different than a bed with silken coverlets. My hatred took root anew, this time for my own manipulative brothers. I abandoned them for one of the caves up Mount Subasio, hoping to die in my grief at being such a failure.”

A knock on the door ended the session; the saint’s chair sat vacant when Mother Agnes pushed the varnished panel inward.

“Who were you talking to, Sister?” the Abbess inquired.

Embarrassed, Mary Giles sensed herself blushing. She might be the only one able to hear Francis, but her own vibrant contralto remained audible to the human ear. “I’m sorry, Mother. I... must’ve been talking in my sleep.”

“A lively conversation.”

“I apologize for waking you, or the other Sisters.”

“I just happened to be passing. I... haven’t been sleeping well, of late.”

A thought popped into Mary Giles’ head, and her mouth verbalized it. “The cancer?”

Mother Agnes flinched. “How... do you know?”

Cheeks reddened afresh forced the younger woman to lower her eyes.

“You... haven’t looked well,” she lied.

“You are very perceptive, Sister. I ask that you not mention this to the others.”

“I promise.”

The Abbess retreated into the gloomy corridor.

Mary Giles slid off the mattress and pursued her. “Mother?”

“Yes, Sister.”

“I...” Confiding her visions of St. Francis to this much more experienced nun wouldn’t be easy. “I...” Besides, she’d been instructed not to say anything, by an authority superior to the monastery’s own.

“Well, Sister?”

“I... hope you feel better soon.”

“I may have to be hospitalized for a month or two, depending on how the doctors schedule my treatment.”

“What... will happen to us?”

“Sister Mary John will act in my stead. She is a capable administrator.”

Mother Agnes plodded toward the chapel, Mary Giles contemplating the very uncertain future.

II

The Sacrament of Reconciliation followed Saturday Mass. This week, Father Everett Bailey remained after the recessional hymn to hear the Sisters confess their transgressions.

Mary Giles planned to unburden herself of more than just minor infractions.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” she began, kneeling behind the translucent screen in the cramped Reconciliation Room. “It has been one month since my last confession.”

“Why so long, Sister?” queried Fr. Bailey.

“I’ve been experiencing a... ‘dark night’, I think.”

“All the more reason to frequent the Sacraments.”

“It’s over, now.”

“Good.”

“Now, I’m having visions of St. Francis.”

The friar swallowed loudly, and Mary Giles suppressed her own giggle. Put forth so bluntly, it sounded ridiculous, indeed.

“When did these... visions start?”

“On the Feast of St. Clare.”

She detected his doubt.

“Father, I know I’m not worthy...”

“Has our Holy Founder given you a message?”

“He wants me to set his autobiography to paper.”

“Why, at this late stage?”

“He’s tired of the lies being told about him.”

Astonishment added a hint of gravel to the otherwise cultured baritone.

“Lies?”

“Like the story of San Damiano.”

“That... is a lie?”

“So he says.”

Fr. Bailey cleared his throat sternly. “Do you realize, Sister, this could be a ruse of Satan to mislead and confuse you, after your period of spiritual dryness?”

“Sure.”

“I... would like to read what has been dictated so far.”

“It’s still in shorthand. I don’t have a means to type it out, and no time to re-write it long-hand.”

“I will speak to Mother Abbess about finding you the time.”

Mary Giles’ jaw dropped. “I... don’t want Mother to know...”

“Hiding these visions may be proof of their dubious nature.” Bailey rose, peering around the screen. Damnably good looking, for a priest. Wavy brown hair, well-trimmed full beard, athletic physique. “You must tell Mother Agnes everything.”

Reluctantly, the young woman nodded.

“I will be saying Mass on Wednesday. I’ll expect you to have a copy of the writings ready by then.”

“Yes, Father.”

Given the tenor of their discussion, no absolution was forthcoming. She’d need one next week, though, leaving the chapel muttering, “Damn, damn, damn!”

For the most part, Mary Giles didn’t want to trouble the Abbess during her illness. Nor did she want to become the butt of unpleasant jokes, which periodically slipped out from the all-too-human females sharing the monastery confines.

Nuns weren’t automatically saints, to be sure.

She delayed the inevitable, avoiding the corridor near Mother Agnes’ office. A sunny, hot day, the others had their sleeves rolled up, working in the garden, to take advantage of what little wind blew from the south.

Mary Giles hid in the tiny library, reshelving books and dusting the furniture.

To no avail. The Abbess, nose sunburnt, confronted her between the stacks.

“Fr. Bailey requested I loan you the typewriter for a project,” she declared. “He hinted you would be calling upon me to provide the reason, but I haven’t seen you since dinner.”

The door closed. The pair settled at the oblong pine table, staring at each other in silence.

Then, Mary Giles rehashed the past 48 hours in disjointed sentences.

The sound for the next three minutes: Mother Agnes rustling the beads of her rosary in her habit pocket.

Mary Giles, and all the Sisters, knew why this particular woman had been elected Abbess during their most recent Chapter. Mary Agnes not only had seniority among the nuns - without the physical and mental decline of advanced age - she had the wisdom to go with it. She didn’t make snap decisions, in matters spiritual or secular.

Nonetheless, Mary Giles was astounded by her response.

“Holy cow,” the Abbess murmured eventually.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I didn’t ask for this...”

“I know, Sister. It’s... new to me, that’s all. The best thing I can do is abide by Fr. Bailey’s wishes and let you use your work periods to type what has been dictated.”

Which created quite a stack of double-spaced pages off the old Smith Corona manual machine. Each night’s additions sent Mary Giles’ fingers flying across the keys and, by Wednesday, a hundred pages awaited the Franciscan friar’s perusal.

Seated in the parlor, Bailey inquired of the Abbess, “Have you read this, yourself?”

“No, Father. My other duties...”

“Just as well. If it is a... suspicious document, only those on the committee should be privy to its contents.”

“Committee?” echoed Mary Giles.

“Yes. I’ve informed the archdiocesan offices of your situation. They are already in the process of forming an investigative committee to determine the authenticity of the apparitions.”

Mother Agnes sniffed. “Isn’t that a bit premature, Father?”

“I don’t think so. In this era when people claim to see the Blessed Mother in rusty water stains, or Christ in cornfields, almost on a daily basis - and the media reports such nonsense - quick action is necessary to protect the faithful from being misled.”

Dismissing the women, he attacked the manuscript with vigor. Mary Giles didn't move far from the enclosure side of the parlor door, peering through the crack and listening to Bailey's intermittent comments.

She didn't like what she heard.

But, then, what Francis had been relating between Compline and Matins had been disturbing, to say the least. Publication of the finished product would upend the Franciscan family and, perhaps, the entire Catholic Church.

"The sex abuse scandals in your news are nothing compared to the corruption of my day," Francis had affirmed the previous night. "I respected the priests, because their ordination gave them the power to change bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. Their behavior outside Mass, however, caused great harm. Misguided souls, craving reform, were branded heretics and apostates. Remaining true to the Gospels and Church teachings became a tenuous endeavor, when monks and priests flaunted their affairs so openly."

"You weren't involved in any of that, though," Mary Giles commented.

"No, once my preaching began in earnest, I steered clear of priestly indiscretions. I concentrated on a message of loving thy neighbor, helping the poor, understanding that material objects were worthless in the sight of God. That last bit got me into considerable trouble."

"Why?"

"The same as today: it was a consumer-oriented society. The more things you possessed, the more power you - supposedly - controlled. The fancier your clothes, the more attention you garnered. Difficult for people to grasp that true freedom comes from owning nothing.

"I had mud slung at me, stones, rotten vegetables. Most towns and villages were not receptive to the message; they were too bound up in their own problems." Francis chortled. "Funny how faith is a convenience, not a way of life. If times are tough, the prayers soar heavenward. When health and prosperity take the fore, prayers are nonexistent."

"You're saying your preaching failed, too?"

"Generally. It touched a few hearts, and those became my first followers. A rag-tag group of misfits, mostly uneducated. They were good at manual labor; Leo had an incredible green thumb, so he tilled a small plot of land near the Porziuncola and planted a few seeds. Would that we'd been able to plant the seeds of kindness in others.

"We shared our lot with the lepers, who mocked us, as well. They thought donations we received should have been theirs."

Francis stretched out on Mary Giles' bed, while she scribbled in her notebook at the desk. He spoke to the plaster ceiling. "I wrote the Rule because, even in the early days, some of the brothers took to hoarding coins in order to buy nicer material for the robes, warm coats, or chickens for fresh eggs. The flesh is truly weak, Sister. And it's so sad."

"Hadn't Clare joined you by then?"

"Ah, Clare. We met after her father's servants pummeled me in an alley near the Piazza San Rufino. She chastised them using language no high-born lady should utter, and tended my wounds. Her beauty was more than physical. She was the saint, not I. She would walk from Assisi down to the Porziuncola three times a week - against her parents' wishes - so we could chat. She yearned for a more fulfilling life than overseeing a household and bearing children.

"I never suggested she become a nun; when she appeared on the doorstep that Palm Sunday, I was at a complete loss as to what could be done. She'd sheared off her own hair, and sewn a plain brown robe. The veil came later, when we left her with the Benedictines until we could find a place for her to live."

"So, even that story has been..."

"Romanticized," snorted Francis.

Fr. Everett Bailey's grunts and hisses as he flipped pages confirmed for Mary Giles his skepticism. Finally, he rang the bell, summoning Mother Agnes.

"Outrageous!" the bearded friar ranted. "I've never read such a pack of falsehoods! To claim our beloved St. Francis never intended to form the Order, or the Poor Clares..."

Mother Agnes attempted to calm the priest. "Father, if you read the lives of many saints, they had no intention to perform the great deeds with which they were later credited. There may be a chance the milestones of St. Francis' life fell victim to... eager souls."

"Are you saying you believe this insanity?"

"I have not read it, as I told you. But, I believe Sister Mary Giles would not deliberately perpetrate a lie."

Bailey slammed the stack on the floor. "This is nothing but trash, and should be burned immediately! If any more 'visions' occur, they should be countered with ample prayer!"

"I thought you said you would pass the document on to the archdiocesan committee," said Mother Agnes.

"I won't waste their time."

"Maybe their assessment will be... less harsh than yours, Father," Mary Giles interspersed. "They are diocesan priests, and from other religious

congregations. They aren't as... protective about the legends of St. Francis as his own friars."

"Are you accusing me of bias, Sister?"

"Frankly, yes."

Mother Agnes chided, "Sister!"

"I'm sorry, Mother. I have no reason not to put my faith in St. Francis' narrative. If you look at the history of that period, the social conditions, it makes far more sense than the pie-in-the-sky writings of Thomas of Celano or St. Bonaventure."

Bailey stood, smoothing his habit. "Very well. The committee will receive the final work upon completion, and when you are censured and silenced as an agent of Satan, you will regret your defiance."

Mary Giles opened her mouth to respond; Mother Agnes laid a restraining hand on her arm. "Father," the older nun oozed, "we appreciate your opinion, and your efforts. We look forward to the committee's decision, and will abide by it."

Aghast, Mary Giles preceded the Abbess from the parlor. The latter was laughing quietly.

"Mother? Are you all right?"

"Don't worry, Sister. If you're an agent of Satan, I'm Bugs Bunny."

Her stomach unknotted, Mary Giles resumed her somewhat altered schedule. She struggled with typing Francis' account of his journey to Rome, where he never met the Pope, as legend had it. Approval of his first Rule actually took years, and multiple copies, because messengers were bribed by Vatican officials to lose or destroy the signed papers.

The Stigmata, another invention of overactive imaginations, according to Francis. His ills began with gradual blindness, unsuccessfully treated by cauterizing the eyes. While the Founder endured agonizing pain from this brutality, the then-Prior of the Order decided to bolster their reputation with a "miracle".

Hot irons thrust through the debilitated man's palms and feet.

Suddenly, they were able to sell rags soaked in the profusely flowing blood for princely sums, adorning their living quarters with gold, silver and priceless books.

"What about the Canticle?" prodded Mary Giles during a session weeks later.

"Leo wrote that, during his vigil at my death bed. I had no strength to move, much less talk or write. He had to interpret my wishes through the motion of my lips - and he misinterpreted much, poor boy."

“So, your life could be summed up as one used by manipulative bastards for their own good.”

“Aptly phrased, Sister. If they hadn’t literally dragged me from my mountain retreat under the pretense of mediating friction among the brothers, I would’ve died, blind and alone, but in a relative state of peace. As it is, I was party to a horrendous fraud, which persists to this day.”

Mary Giles closed her notebook. “At least, the part about the animals is true.”

“Animals are simple creatures. They want food, shelter and warmth. They understood me as one of their own, and did not harm me. But you should’ve seen how the Wolf of Gubbio ripped apart Brother Marius’ left leg.”

“Why?”

“He was hungry.”

“What had Marius done?”

“Nothing, except pervert Christ’s message to his own advantage.”

Coincidental that the notification of a “hearing” regarding the “Visions of Sister Mary Giles, P.C.C.” would take place at the monastery on November 21 at 8:00 AM. It implied a potential perversion of the Gospels and historically authorized biographies of St. Francis of Assisi.

The committee had received the finished manuscript in late September. Mary Giles resumed her former duties, hiding from public view and her Sisters as much as possible.

Mother Agnes had repeatedly postponed leaving the monastery for cancer treatment during this upheaval. She slowly withered, and considered petitioning the Archbishop to allow a special election to replace her.

The Sisters balked at the notion, including the new arrivals, attracted by leaked rumors of divine apparitions. Francis still visited Mary Giles at infrequent intervals; the young nun resolved to beg a miracle when next he came.

She had to deal with the committee alone, however, before that happened. Mother Agnes had taken to her bed, and the other Poor Clares were banned from the meeting, to maintain the confidential nature of the interrogation.

Six priests, an auxiliary bishop, one Sister of Providence and a Dominican psychologist descended upon the Chicago suburb. They were served breakfast after a Mass invoking the Holy Spirit, then retired to the parlor, outfitted with a conference table and comfortable chairs.

The bishop, George Welles, ensconced at the head of the table, frightened Mary Giles. His head seemed too square beneath its curly black hair, his forehead

too high, his jaw set sternly in stone. His shoulders mirrored that squareness within his cassock, the episcopal cross dangling on its golden chain.

It didn't help that his basso profundo shook the walls.

Copies of the documents had been distributed to each participant.

Handwritten notes on legal pads were consulted throughout the questioning.

Dealing with a barrage of accusations, Mary Giles mused if the Spanish Inquisition had been so brutal.

Fifteen minutes in, she cast off the fear and steeled her nerves against their judgmental attitudes.

Not a meek, compliant Poor Clare, this, but a bastion of determination.

"Have you a history of mental instability, Sister?" droned the stooped Dominican, wearing a tweed business suit.

Mary Giles couldn't remember any of their names, besides the bishop.

"No."

"Have you ever been under a psychiatrist's care, or been prescribed anti-depressants?"

"No."

A balding diocesan priest chimed in, "Have you made prior assertions of visions or seen blessed images in ordinary objects?"

"No."

"Did your... alleged visitor give you a reason for placing such confidence in you?" This from the middle-aged Providence Sister.

"Because I'm naturally cynical."

Wary eyes exchanged glances across the maple boards.

Bishop Welles boomed, "Does this natural cynicism include opposing Church doctrine?"

"There's not one word in those three hundred pages which runs contrary to Church doctrine," Mary Giles steamed.

"Are you a degreed theologian?" barked a red-headed priest.

The nun rolled her hazel eyes. "Oh, here we go! You're setting yourselves up as superior because you have diplomas hanging on your office walls, or were ordained before I was born. Francis faced the same kind of discrimination, not just from the clergy of his day, but from the lay people who didn't think him qualified to preach about God's love. Well, if you read the Gospels, there are passages which clearly note we are all God's children and, therefore, able to share His love as equals - with one another. 'Judge not, lest ye be judged!'"

"Sister, you forget your place," Welles cautioned.

“I wish I could, Your Excellency. Don’t think for a moment I’ve spent the past ten years within this monastery praying for the saints to favor me. I did my best, in fact, to hide from any praise or notoriety.”

“Then, what is that scar on your hand?”

Mary Giles had forgotten about the jagged mark. “A chunk of glass from a broken vase cut me.”

“Before or after you began having these... visions?”

“After.”

A triumphant fist slammed the table, as the psychologist beamed, “See? Her subconscious compelled her to inflict a wound similar to St. Francis’, to gain attention for her psychoses.”

“Oh, shut up!” snarled Mary Giles. “You’re the one who’s crazy.”

Welles intervened. “Sister, I’ll not warn you again. We are here by mandate of the Archbishop, and you must respect us as his representatives.”

“You make it tough, Your Excellency. All I’ve done is record the words of what I hold as the Church’s greatest saint. Why he imparted them to me, instead of one of you, I cannot fathom. I’ve faithfully typed them out, and intend to submit them for publication, as Francis directed.”

“The consequences may be severe, Sister, if you disobey this committee’s decision,” proclaimed the bishop. “You may be excommunicated, and excommunicated.”

If she spoke her thoughts, Mary Giles knew she’d be booted from the monastery on the spot. She inhaled deeply and rephrased her outburst. “I see Francis as an authority far exceeding yours, Your Excellency. And, to authenticate the visions, you will each receive a phone call by end of day, from a trusted relative, informing you of a disaster within your respective families.”

This last burst forth in much the same way she’d been inspired to mention Mother Agnes’ cancer weeks earlier. The news caused the assembly to collectively shudder.

Shortly thereafter, they departed, except for Bishop Welles. He stood, head and shoulders above Mary Giles at the grille, contemplating the feisty nun.

“I have chaired numerous investigations of... spiritual phenomena over the past two decades,” he rumbled, rattling the furniture. “The subjects - religious and lay - cowered like scared rabbits during the hearing. Their lies or delusions soon became evident. You... are cut from a different cloth. I am sorely tempted to report your case favorably to Cardinal Kelly, despite opposition from my associates.”

“Why?”

“You called our tactics out for what they are: judgmental intimidation. Mother Agnes, when I phoned last week, assured me you are a devout and loving member of the community, though a bit... earthy. You have nothing to gain from lying about seeing St. Francis, since media coverage would be restricted and any royalties from the book would go to the monastery, not your own pocket. There might be a temporary influx of curiosity seekers, hoping for a glimpse of you, or some memento to bolster their own lack of faith, but that problem can be solved by closing the gates.”

“What if I encourage visitors to donate toward some needed monastery renovation?” Mary Giles offered.

“That was one of the first things I asked Mother Agnes. She even left the monastery’s ledgers for me to audit, if I so choose.”

“I appreciate you telling me, Your Excellency. It alleviates the frustration I endured the past four hours.”

Welles stretched his hand through the grille; Mary Giles bent to kiss his ring. He withdrew his fingers before her lips reached it.

“You kiss mine, only if I’m allowed to kiss yours,” he smirked.

She countered, “That won’t happen.”

They clasped hands as friends, and Mary Giles watched the bishop pack the manuscript in his briefcase before taking his leave. She’d missed prayer and dinner, and the growling had begun.

Fortunately, the excitement was over.

She’d later learn her assumption was erroneous.

The Sisters encircled Mother Agnes’ infirmary bed that evening, reciting the rosary and litanies to the saints. Mary Giles blamed herself for the Abbess’ decline; had the older woman agreed to hospitalization - rather than remaining at the monastery to handle calls and paperwork required by the committee - she might’ve been cancer free once more.

“I’ve done for you, Francis,” she whispered between Hail Marys. “Do this for me.”

The ragged, weathered manifestation solidified beside the headboard, laying a tender hand on Mother Agnes’ brow. Calmly, blue orbs opened, no longer clouded by anguish. The Abbess smiled, seemingly at the ceiling, and sighed, “Thank you.”

Mary Giles wondered if Francis had allowed the woman to see him, too.

Mother Agnes’ miraculous cure shifted the limelight off the visionary, though the Abbess refused permission to the series of doctors who wished to examine her. She knew what had transpired; she needed no temporal proof.

The letter arrived on Good Friday. Michael Cardinal Kelly, Archbishop of Chicago, gave his approbation to the visions of Sister Mary Giles, P.C.C., as recommended by the unanimous vote of the special committee. The Autobiography of St. Francis of Assisi would be published with his Imprimatur, as well, and released on Pentecost Sunday.

Mary Giles puzzled over the change of heart among the committee members. Whatever tragedies had befallen their families - she never learned what, precisely - might have been sufficient to quash their opposition...

The editors contacted a fully-recovered Mother Agnes, requesting Mary Giles write an Introduction for the volume. Poised on the edge of the chair in the Abbess' office, the younger nun shook her head vehemently.

"Some explanation of the 800 year delay is imperative," cracked through the phone's speaker.

"Let Bishop Welles do it," Mary Giles replied. "His... innate piety and vast experience will set the proper tone for the contents."

"Credit where credit is due, Sister."

"The only credit I get is that of a secretary to a saint. The credit is all his and the controversy it stirs up, if Fr. Bailey's reaction spreads throughout the Order, may end in violence. Book burnings, and who knows what else?"

The conversation concluded, Mother Agnes sipped from a tumbler of fruit juice. She still hadn't regained the weight from her illness, and had been instructed - by both her physician and Cardinal Kelly - to forego the perpetual fast observed by the Poor Clares.

"I was finally able to read the manuscript during my daily rest period," remarked the Abbess solemnly. "The basis of our entire life has become... groundless."

"Not so, Mother. Francis made it clear: he and Clare were uncompromisingly devoted to absolute poverty, prayer, and spreading God's love to all people. Had they been left to themselves, they might never have been noticed, but what we would today call 'groupies' or hangers-on ruined it for everybody. They wanted something neither Francis nor Clare could give, and took it upon themselves to create the illusion to make themselves famous. Kind of like Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, or Erle Stanley Gardner and his character Tarzan. Fiction outshone reality, and the authors were lauded as geniuses."

"An astute observation, Sister. My hope is that those who read our Founder's words will discern the same message."

“My hope is that we can all spend our days in quiet solitude, whatever chaos erupts.”

“Amen, Sister. Amen.”

“I ask your forgiveness, too, for putting you through all this.”

“None of it was your fault. God works in mysterious ways, remember.”

“Of the thousands - millions - Francis could’ve chosen, I’ll never understand why me.”

“Because you have a pure, honest heart. A bit too... vocal, on occasion, but well intentioned.” Mother Agnes finished the juice. “By the way, why do you not refer to him as ‘Saint’ Francis?”

Mary Giles retrieved the empty glass and moved toward the door. “He doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like any of the overly-reverential titles. Being just a flawed human being, like every other, he never thought he deserved them.”

“Genuine humility. An exquisite example for us all.”

En route to the kitchen, the younger woman prayed her transcription of Francis’ words adequately conveyed his humble message. As weeks passed, she assumed it had, because negative reaction to the book was pleasantly limited. The Feast of St. Clare, 2012, closing the months spent celebrating 800 years since the founding of the Poor Clares, came and went in joyous celebration.

Francis never appeared to Mary Giles again.

She didn’t mind. She kept busy sweeping floors and weeding the garden.

The Sacrifice

Those who ventured through the vast, dense forest on a life-or-death quest honored her as the Healer. She welcomed them to join her beside the primitive shack's rustic stone fireplace on chill evenings, or bask in the brilliant sunlight on warm afternoons. They told of her definitive beauty - though no two described her the same, except for her tall, lithe figure draped in a sky blue gown and flowing waves. Some recalled her coloring as dark, others light. She shared her gentle touch, patient smile and pithy wisdom, while offering them candy.

Even these treats remained a mystery: depending on individual preferences and requests, they tasted pineapple, cherry, banana, caramel, chocolate or peppermint.

The sole consensus: each plaintiff returned with their petition granted - a loved one cured of illness, fields blighted by pestilence yielding an abundant crop, the ravages of poverty alleviated for their children.

She never left the lush clearing surrounding the quaint dwelling.

In stark contrast, the Hellraiser traveled at will half a world distant, eating to excess, yet never losing his youthful physique crowned by a shock of white hair. He drank copiously, his uninhibited sobriety a constant as he reveled in wild brawls with any who dared insult or contradict him. He pleased himself with every woman he encountered, regardless of age, culture, shape, social or marital status, to their lingering delight, thus siring generations of sons responsible for conflicts raging around the globe.

Ancient legend warned: should these two dominant personalities ever meet, the planet would suffer a horrific end.

Not that more than a scant few had worried themselves grey over such a possibility through the centuries.

The problem, according to the current iteration of dedicated priests and acolytes practicing a nearly defunct religion: the Hellraiser easily grew bored with his routine, and sought fresh excitement on the horizon. That progression west would bring him into the realm of the Healer all too soon.

She would, as recorded in their scriptures, greet him with open arms.

For decades, a succession of anointed underlings had been monitoring the Hellraiser's activities, seated in the corners of taverns or peeking through gaps in bedroom curtains. Their detection meant death, and the names of many martyrs to this cause lined the pages of the Book of the Fallen.

Brina had been consigned to the minions of the last Temple of Divine Balance by her parents on her sixth birthday. The youngest of eight, she risked

starvation otherwise, her father an unskilled laborer for the local governmental entity and poorly compensated for long hours wielding a shovel.

From a spindly waif with blonde curls, she grew into a lovely teen, and an even more desirable woman. Men of the town, seeing her about her errands on the street, vowed substantial contributions to the temple if she were permitted to be taken to wife.

The priests bristled when she refused such overtures. The decline in believers meant a decline in revenue for their lavish lifestyle...

When she came of age, the elders voted her as the replacement for the Hellraiser's latest shadow, who'd plunged from his perch high in a tree the previous week. They purchased her a ticket on the next transport, and she had no opportunity to protest the assignment.

A small pack of necessities slung over her shoulder, she boarded the carriage to be whisked to the furthest regions of the territory.

They'd supplied her with no description of the Hellraiser, but the dark, tall, broad, raucous character could not be mistaken as he paraded along the packed dirt thoroughfare near the station where she disembarked. He clutched a tankard in his right hand, his left arm encompassing a rotund matron. A procession of men followed him, babbling about his escapades.

Brina didn't need to guess where they were bound.

Her reluctance to observe these private interactions reflected in her expression. If she failed in her duties, though, she would face a reprimand that would see her - essentially - sold to the highest bidder.

She paralleled the throng's pace, taking up a post in a recessed doorway as the party filed into an opulent brick dwelling.

The Hellraiser didn't emerge for three hours and, when he did, he sauntered into the sunset, alone.

Brina scurried to the house, pushing open the unlocked door, to find a score of men sprawled on the living room's expensive carpets, snoring drunkenly. She located the woman upstairs in her boudoir, slumbering with a contented smile.

"Damn!" the young woman breathed.

So her days ran together in an endless regimen of taverns - where she sipped water or fruit juice - brothels and mansions as the Hellraiser's migration continued. Each week, she sent messages to her superiors, their replies becoming more and more dire: "You must stop him!"

She didn't understand their panic but, as an acolyte - and a female - she hadn't been privy to frantic consultations within the sanctuary.

Nor did she view herself as possessing sufficient cleverness to concoct a scheme that would waylay a being of the Hellraiser's significance.

Still...

Relaxing on a wooden park bench near the site of his latest conquest, she deliberated how men obviously found her alluring, attractive. Such a fact logically meant if she presented herself properly to the object of her mission, she might be able to delay his travels - perhaps indefinitely.

In a stable on the settlement's outskirts, where she'd shifted a measure of straw into a make-shift mattress in a vacant stall, she filled a bucket from the pump and set about washing two weeks of dust from her skin, combing and arranging her hair in a style similar to the trend of more affluent women, and donning her clean pale green robe. Rather than smell like horses or soap, she diverted into a shop en route to her destination, sampling the perfumes on display.

Twilight bathed her in an entrancing aura as she glided along the lane. Whistles of admiration from passing men accompanied her, and women's envious comments drew all eyes to her.

Including the Hellraiser's.

He'd just left his latest bed, bound for a saloon opposite, enticing in a blue silk shirt that highlighted aquamarine eyes shining beneath hooded lids, black leggings and leather boots.

Brina forced herself to remain composed. If she melted beneath that gaze, she hadn't a hope in hell to complete her mission - and hell would be the result for the entire population.

If she expected any manner of politeness, or preliminaries, she'd be disappointed. The Hellraiser strode toward her, shoving bystanders off the pavement, slid his powerful arms around her waist and smothered her mouth with a fiery kiss.

He didn't utter a single word until they were enshrined in his accommodations - a posh apartment he'd commandeered from its intoxicated owner. The basso profundo cut through her no differently than if she'd been standing in a raging thunderstorm.

"You are a princess, a queen," came the proclamation. "I've never seen your equal."

His standard compliment, she grasped - or not.

"I shall make you my consort, until..."

She echoed quietly, "Until?"

Deft, thick fingers unlaced her robe. "My destiny lies at the end of this journey, but we shall be together until that momentous day."

Their bodies merged as he lowered her on the sheets, stoking passions for both.

The Hellraiser's drinking companions missed him at their carouses that night.

And, true to his word, he and Brina formed an inseparable bond. She managed to slow his wanderings from town to town - rather than a week in any particular place, their stays lasted a month or more before moving on. He never tired of exploring her body; her every nerve tingled at his slightest caress.

This news pleased the priests of the Temple of Divine Balance, who discovered the special nature of the couple's relationship: Brina did not age in the Hellraiser's company. As generation after generation of elders passed, she preserved the world from destruction.

The Hellraiser never noticed they'd skirted the borders of the Healer's realm and that wise female, for her part, kept her candy dish full, awaiting petitioners brave enough to risk the forest.

The Strange Case of the Neighborly Doctor

Far diminished the hours diligent servants once spent polishing and cleaning the facades skirting this particular London square. Gone most of the respectable families residing in its faded houses, now let as flats to a shadier set of lawyers, architects and supposed professionals.

This deterioration of the neighborhood didn't seem to concern Lady Barbara Hennessy, dowager aunt of Lord Mendenhall. Try as her grand-niece might, the shriveled, blue-coiffed 73-year-old had no intention of moving decades of possessions from the crumbling premises. She trusted her staff - an elderly housekeeper/cook and stooped butler/maintenance man - to keep dust from collecting on the antiques and the water pipes from bursting.

As long as the pain in her aging joints didn't prevent her from ascending and descending the wide marble staircase to her suite overlooking the cobblestone byway, Lady Barbara would not budge.

Especially with a doctor so close at hand. Henry Jekyll, M.D., D.C.L., L.L.D., F.R.S., etc., had occupied the dwelling directly opposite these many years. A bachelor who entertained a set circle of friends, he nonetheless cordially acknowledged Lady Barbara if they chanced to meet on the sidewalk, and welcomed her in his consulting room when her aches proved intolerable.

On one such occasion in late autumn, Lady R'Deen Carmichael, the great-niece, accompanied the patient. Introduced to Dr. Jekyll, she smiled up at him broadly, if not prettily.

"I've heard many good things about you," she replied to his greeting. "Before my marriage, I was a nurse at St. Bart's."

"Dr. Lanyon has spoken to me of you," said Jekyll. "The staff was sad at your departure."

"To be honest, I don't miss it. The injured soldiers were most difficult to treat. They suffered not only physical wounds, but had nightmares which woke the whole ward. Whether affected by the killing, the blood or the noise of battle, nothing we did could restore them to their former selves."

While the doctor examined Lady Barbara, he glanced repeatedly at her middle-aged, ebon-haired companion. She studied him, as well. Solicitous and kind, though in his 50s, he could still be considered handsome, with a smooth countenance and animated brown eyes.

A pouch of finely ground powder, to be mixed with tea as sleep aid and analgesic, lay in Lady Barbara's gnarled hand before Jekyll spoke again.

“Your insights regarding the soldiers intrigue me,” he addressed Lady R’Deen. “I’m... researching case studies and would appreciate your input, if you care to contribute.”

“I’m in the city for a fortnight. If I can be of any assistance...”

“I wouldn’t want to deprive your husband of your company...”

“Come now, Doctor,” snapped Lady Barbara. “Don’t pretend I didn’t tell you last week my niece is a widow.”

Jekyll managed a guilty smile.

Poole, the doctor’s staid butler, appeared on the threshold to escort the women to the exit.

“We could have tea tomorrow,” R’Deen suggested, trying to ignore her aunt.

Jekyll affirmed, “I would be most delighted.”

Lady Barbara, however, did not share his enthusiasm. The prospect of a potential association between her neighbor and her relative dismayed her. Crossing the square, she chided, “You’re still in mourning, my girl. Don’t get any ideas...”

“What I saw at St. Bart’s might help him - and, helping him, those poor souls whose faces still haunt my dreams might find ease for their anguish. A discussion over tea doesn’t imply a proposal of marriage.”

That gloomy afternoon, Poole poured tea into plain china cups, as R’Deen and Jekyll occupied wing-backed armchairs before the roaring blaze in a low ceilinged, flagstone-paved hall. Oak cabinets positioned around the perimeter seemed to add more darkness to the room, rather than cheering it.

“There are religious authorities,” Jekyll expounded, sipping the steaming brew, “who claim human beings are born evil, and must strive to be good. Personally, I have discovered man is not one, but two beings housed in a single body. Good and evil vie for supremacy. Whether either theory is true, from what you’ve told me about the soldiers under your care, their participation in battle brought this evil to the fore, which subsequently quashed any good in what some call their soul.”

R’Deen prodded, “Has your research revealed any method to restore such tragic beings to their original state?”

“Perhaps.”

The woman raised her eyes from the cup at the abrupt change in Jekyll’s voice. “Are you unwell, Doctor?”

“No.” The morbid expression which had momentarily clouded his features vanished, and he straightened. “It is... unique research, and the results have been promising, to a point.”

“What types of animals have you used in your tests?”

Jekyll stood, towering over his guest. “Please do not think me rude, but you should go, Lady R’Deen.”

She hesitated. “If my questions have offended...”

“Not at all. You have a keen mind and a caring heart, and I admire that in you. In many aspects, you could be the perfect assistant for research of this kind, except...”

When his voice faded, she urged, “Except?”

He spoke no more, striding from the room and slamming the door. The butler entered in short order with R’Deen’s cloak and gloves, escorting her from the chamber.

“Poole, you have been with Dr. Jekyll for many years.”

“Indeed, twenty years, your ladyship.”

“Has he always been so... changeable?”

“Only in recent months, ma’am. He spends days on end in his cabinet, working himself to exhaustion. There have been weeks when neither the servants nor myself have seen him. Then, he’ll return, pale and lethargic, but resume his ordinary routine as if nothing untoward had occurred.”

“Does he explain his absences?” R’Deen pressed.

“No, your ladyship.”

“What of his patients?”

“Your aunt, Lady Barbara, is his only regular patient these days. And that, a mere neighborly courtesy.”

R’Deen planted her feet; Poole stopped, facing her.

“Your ladyship...”

“Has Dr. Jekyll gone to his cabinet now?”

“I believe so, ma’am.”

“Show me the way, please.”

The lean servant blanched. “It would mean my job, ma’am!”

“I will find it on my own, then.”

Poole chased her as far as the kitchen, where Bradshaw, the footman, had already ushered her into the courtyard. He swore under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” queried the younger man.

“What could possibly be wrong?” Poole mocked him. “A stubborn woman interrupting the work of an equally stubborn man... I might as well start packing my bags.”

R’Deen heard none of this banter. She crossed the expanse, which showed signs of having formerly been a garden, entering an imposing, blockish structure.

Within, an abandoned theatre-style room, lined with seats used by erstwhile medical students. Crates, packing straw and chemical apparatus were scattered about the dirt-coated floor. A cupola above, providing limited illumination, boasted glass uncleaned for years.

She mounted stairs to a door draped in red baize. She didn't knock, but burst into Dr. Jekyll's cabinet, a clutter of tables and equipment. The last embers of a fire were dying on the grate, and the lamp on the chimney shelf indicated the flame had just been extinguished, warmth emanating from the glass.

In the shadows, a movement, too large to be rodent or cat. Intent upon escaping through a far door, it skulked away from R'Deen, who circled a row of boxes to intercept it.

"Dr. Jekyll?" she called. "You may not want me as your assistant, but if you share your progress with me, I might be able to continue on my own... My husband left me a considerable fortune, and I would like to use it to see those poor soldiers cured of their ailment..."

"Hypocrite!"

More a growl than a word, R'Deen spun toward the sound. A shaft of light from one of three windows overlooking the courtyard shone on a dwarfish figure, whose smile made her shudder for no perceptible reason.

"Who... are you?"

"You are trespassing here, your ladyship."

"You know my name?"

"I know the type." His caustic laugh assailed R'Deen's nerves.

"Sanctimonious, straitlaced, more worried about the opinion of your peers..."

"Not true!"

He lunged, his hands corded, hairy and calloused. She dodged his grasp; he narrowly avoided crashing into a collection of pipettes and test tubes on the sideboard. Surprising agility allowed him to sidestep rapidly and catch her arm before she could move out of range.

"You want to see Dr. Jekyll?" he snarled.

Her voice quavered in spite of herself. "Yes."

She was shoved onto a leather chair. "Don't move," came the order.

With an expertness belying education and scientific training, the stranger practically attacked drawers filled with powders and liquids. He mixed specified amounts in a beaker, the concoction bubbling violently. He imbibed it before R'Deen could protest the danger.

Hideous contortions commenced, driving the woman deep into the cushions as she tried to hide from grotesque seizures. When the yowls of agony ceased, Henry Jekyll lay on the floor, semi-conscious, breathing hard.

“Damn my eyes!” cried R’Deen with characteristic frankness. “You’ve experimented on yourself?”

“I dared not use it on someone else, should the risk mean death,” the physician, bathed in perspiration, panted.

“And that... that creature... was your evil nature?”

He nodded, brushing aside disheveled, greying hair.

She offered her hand to assist him upright. Her jaw opened and closed, but she could not formulate a coherent sentence from the turmoil in her brain. She backed toward the cabinet door.

“I’m sorry!” he nearly shouted, blocking her route. “You cannot leave.”

“Why...”

“This is a secret which cannot be shared with anyone.”

“I’ll not...”

“I cannot presume on our short acquaintance to believe you. Given... recent developments, I’d planned to suspend my research...” He shuffled toward the other exit, extracting a key from his trouser pocket. Securing the well-oiled lock, he proceeded to drop the key on the floor and smash it under his boot heel. “No more shall Edward Hyde be seen by the world, nor can his existence be inadvertently disclosed by such as you.”

The mention of a name which had so recently headlined London newspapers as the much-sought murderer of Sir Danvers Carew compounded R’Deen’s unease. “What do you intend?”

“I shall acquiesce to your request, and we shall strive to adapt my formula for use as a cure for wounded soldiers.”

The widow swallowed her heart. “You mean, I am to live here...”

“The house has plenty of rooms for you to choose. All I ask is that you do not venture out unescorted, nor contact any of your old friends...”

“What will they be left to think?”

“I care not. You may write Lady Barbara a note, stating simply you have decided to leave for an extended tour of the Continent. Knowing her, she will not bat an eyelash.”

“And the next time she comes to you for treatment, you will be able to blatantly lie to her...”

“Not lie, just avoid the topic.”

“And, clothes?”

“Give the maid your particulars and she will shop for you.”

R’Deen raged, “You cannot hold me prisoner!”

“I, too, am a prisoner...” lamented Jekyll.

“Of your own foolishness! No self-respecting scientist experiments on himself!”

“There were... extenuating circumstances.” He paused on the top stair.

“We shall leave it at that. Dinner will be served at 8:00. We won’t be dressing.”

Thus began weeks of enforced captivity for Lady R’Deen Carmichael. Initially, she refused to comply with Jekyll’s directives, shunning the dining room and all food, locking herself in the sumptuous bedroom. He ignored her, until curiosity - and hunger - got the better of her.

She took precautions, though. Before leaving the albeit lush suite, she approached Mary, the housemaid, with two thick envelopes bearing neatly-penned addresses. “I want your promise, girl,” she began. “If anything should happen to me, post these letters immediately!”

Mary examined the parcels. One to Lady Barbara Hennessy, the other to Mr. Utterson, the lawyer. “Dr. Jekyll’s lawyer? If I may be so bold...”

“You may not!” snapped R’Deen. “Do you promise?”

The mousy girl agreed.

“Keep them safe, then, and tell no one!”

Scurrying over the threshold, the guest heard footsteps on the servants’ stairs.

She’d chosen a simple black frock in which to present herself at the cabinet, so as not to ruin an expensive gown. Jekyll offered her a white apron, similar to the one he wore over his shirt sleeves and brown trousers.

A purplish solution dripped into a test tube of clear liquid. “My thinking is that, small dosages, administered over a set period, might gradually bring the traumatized soldiers back to themselves.”

A strand of grey hair hung over his forehead as he hovered above the mixture. To R’Deen, he might’ve been a child playing with a cherished toy.

“Are you going to put out a call for volunteers?” she challenged facetiously.

“While I’ve been waiting for you to change your mind, I’ve been expending every effort to redeem myself in God’s eyes. My visits to various hospitals, including St. Bart’s, have located a number of suitable candidates...”

“You cannot be serious! Even smaller doses...”

Jekyll waved off the objection. “The... physical transformation was an unfortunate side-effect of administering the elixir full-strength.”

“I will not permit you...”

“The only alternative is for you to drink it.”

R’Deen recoiled.

The bubbling solution was thrust at her.

“Are you afraid of the secrets of your own duplicitous soul?” he stormed. Just when she feared he would force her mouth open, his arm retracted, the glass and its contents thrown on the fire. “I cannot allow it.”

Breathing easier, the woman didn’t question his motives. She’d seen Jekyll change, and read of Hyde’s heinous crimes. The soldiers whom she wished to aid would have to find another savior.

“May I go?” she whispered.

“No.”

“You have my word, I shan’t compromise your secret...”

A forlorn puppy could have worn no sadder mien when Jekyll turned to her. “I am aware of that. Rather than attempt escape - which would have been quite easy, as you were never truly guarded nor your movements restricted - you tolerated the folly of my addled brain. For my impertinence, I humbly apologize and beg your forgiveness.”

Reaching to accept his gesture of good will, R’Deen felt the tremor up her arm and through her entire frame. “Doctor, how may I help you?”

He shrank from her grip. “Get out!”

She remained in place. “Did you drink any of the...”

“No! No! This... shouldn’t...”

He might have been strangled, the way his sentence broke off with a gagging gasp. She heard bones cracking as he collapsed on his knees and saw him rise as Edward Hyde.

Transfixed by the sense, if not appearance, of deformity and evil, R’Deen had no control of her limbs. Hyde pounced on the opportunity, ripping her ebony tresses from their silver combs and yanking her face into contact with his. She regained some composure, and fought his advances, only to be slapped and beaten into semi-consciousness.

What might have been hours passed, the woman in a stupor and unable to defend herself against this monster. When she came to herself, the cabinet was bathed in darkness, and she could barely distinguish a form slouched in the chair near the fire.

“Dr. Jekyll?” she moaned.

“It took three doses to bring me back this time,” his pitiable squeak reached her ears. “You must leave, at once. I can no longer trust myself. Hyde has grown too strong...”

“I... my legs...”

Gentle hands lifted her from the floor. Over his shoulder, she saw her faint reflection in the mirror where the room’s occupant had viewed his good and evil personae. Bruises covered most of her face, and her shoulder jutted at an angle, leading her to diagnose a dislocation. She could place no weight on her left leg without the joints buckling.

“I examined you while you...” Jekyll muttered. “There are no broken bones. Poole will see you to Lady Barbara’s.”

“I... can’t. She will demand an explanation, and your secret...”

“Then, where...”

“As you said when this all began - the Continent. I shall take the boat train first thing in the morning...”

“That may be too late. I don’t know when... this... will happen again.”

“I shall sleep in the house, and Poole can hail a cab at daylight.”

The doctor had no strength left to resist her, or himself. “Very well.”

He assisted her to the door, and she tried her best to support herself down the steps to the theatre. She did not succeed, however, and tumbled to ground level - or had Hyde shoved her?

The structure’s lithe occupant hurried to where Lady R’Deen Carmichael lay at the base of the staircase, her neck snapped. He fled back to his cabinet before the ripple of satisfaction at having killed another human being twisted the visage of Edward Hyde.

When Poole brought his master’s breakfast that morning, he refused to open the door, calling down to notify R’Deen’s relatives, so they could have the body taken to a mortuary and buried at his expense.

Few people saw Henry Jekyll after that; Lady Barbara Hennessy read in horror a letter delivered by special courier. In addition to seeking a new physician to treat her recurring pains, she promptly moved from the London square where she’d lived those many years.

Traveler Lost

He jolted awake from a nightmare of bitter cold and torture.

And stared at the unfamiliar, rough wooden ceiling beams.

Swiveling his head, neck stiff, he glimpsed - through swollen eyelids - two elderly Chinese women on a bench beside the narrow bed, mumbling unintelligible gibberish.

A younger version of the Asian bloodline entered from the room beyond. "Honorable Grandmother say you alive," she greeted. "She say you have broken bone in left arm and another in right leg, so you not move."

That accounted for the agony coursing through his limbs. "Where..." he stammered.

"You in house of Miser Gulch's laundry man, my honorable father. He find you naked and half-buried beneath pile of stones in valley beyond snow-capped mountain."

He couldn't recall anything prior to the last few moments.

"Honorable mother think you escaped prisoner."

He couldn't confirm or deny the accusation.

"Honorable Grandmother say you be six weeks in bed, at least, and another six months to recover strength in leg and arm."

"I... can't stay here..." he protested.

"You read and write?"

That much, he did remember. "Yes."

"Then, you earn your keep writing letters for Chinese people."

"I don't write Chinese."

"No. English. They want to become citizens, but must write letters to government."

He attempted to sit up; the girl had no difficulty restraining him on the straw mattress. "You stay put. I bring you food, if you wish to eat."

"Yes, please."

She plumped the feather pillow, which smelled like chickens. At that angle, he was able to see the worn army blanket, and an ill-fitting linen shirt they'd used to clothe him. Peeking beneath the covers, he saw his bottom half remained unclothed.

"We could not... because of broken leg," said the girl.

Whatever beating he had sustained, the fractured bones were only part of the damage. His gut ached, his back felt twisted, and his face... "Do you have a mirror?"

A shiny skillet served the purpose. Even had his flesh not been bloated and bruised, he wouldn't have recognized himself beneath the shaggy tow-colored mane.

He didn't know his own name.

As the days passed, and he continued to recover a bit of strength, he learned he had a quick ear and reasonable intelligence. Soon able to communicate with his unwilling hosts in their native Mandarin, he listened to the story of how the father, Fong Shen, had been traveling home from a trip to San Francisco, when - from the mountain trail - he saw four men beating two others. He hurried to descend, but the thieves had time to bury one of their victims under assorted rubble, and mostly cover the second, who wasn't yet dead.

Neither the deceased nor his companion possessed a stitch of clothes or any identification. Shen loaded the beaten man on his wagon and transported him to the mining town of Miser's Gulch, giving up his own bed, but not being permitted by his wife to summon a doctor.

The old grandmother had set the bones and tended his other wounds, as she had done for countless family members through the decades. Despite severely arthritic hands, her gentle touch soothed his pains and, even as she started flexing his leg and arm - to keep his muscles supple, she explained in her whiny soprano - it didn't bother him as much as if others had done so.

She referred to him as "lost one", apt since, even now that his features had resumed a smooth, relatively youthful structure, he could not place himself.

Not even shaving the scruffy beard made a difference.

"You will find your way on life's journey," the white-haired elder assured him.

The road she expected him to travel, however, involved some unpleasant obstacles. Offering him a crude crutch one morning, she didn't intervene when he pitched forward, his right leg unable to support the weight. She waited for him to recover his balance, then introduced him to her nephew, a Shao-lin priest exiled from China.

Series of simple motions worked his stiff joints and, within days, he could walk without assistance. Towering above the tallest Asian in the settlement, he looked ridiculous in the trousers and shirt provided by Fong Shen, and no shoes fit his large feet.

They sent him, with a fistful of cash, to the general store, owned by feisty Irishman Liam McAfee.

Vague memories assailed his brain when he entered the aromatic establishment. Barrels of apples and pickles, racks of gingham dresses, pipes and tobacco...

“Welcome, friend!” hailed the proprietor, red-haired and ruddy. “What can I get you today?”

“Clothes that fit.”

“Certainly, certainly!”

Among the selection of men’s attire hung two brown wool, hooded robes. He brushed the fabric with tentative fingers. “What are these?”

“Don’t know, really,” admitted McAfee, two linen shirts brought from the stockroom. “Two cowpokes passing through traded them for supplies. My wife thought to cut them into dresses, but hasn’t had time.”

Far more comfortable in properly sized garments, the customer declined to purchase a hat; bowlers gave him a foolish cast, and the wide-brimmed style preferred by ranchers obscured too much of his face.

“Here’s one which might suit you.” McAfee extracted a flat black felt item he described as a “beret”. It fit his client’s skull perfectly.

Inside, a small tag seemed to read, “Roy Josephson”.

McAfee remarked, “Part of the trade with those lads. Throw it in for free.”

Thus, the “lost one” became “Roy Josephson” until he could discover his true name. He limped slightly en route to his temporary lodgings, due to the confining nature of brown leather boots now keeping mud off his feet.

A group of curious children followed him, tittering at his gait and cordial interaction with the Chinese. Silently, he bemoaned people’s tendency to nurture prejudice against the unknown.

Including scantily clad women perched on a balcony above the brothel dividing Miser Gulch’s “respectable” neighborhood from its poorest inhabitants. A pretty young thing waved and smiled at him over the balustrade, fondling her ample bosoms for him to admire.

The idea didn’t appeal to him, but he couldn’t hold the profession against her - some were driven to it of necessity. He nodded acknowledgment and resumed dodging piles of horse manure.

A copy of the local newspaper blew along beside him. He hadn’t concerned himself with the date up to that point, too busy recuperating from his injuries. “May 14, 1902” in small type beneath the banner didn’t really surprise him.

His left arm twinged as he crushed the sheets, affirming his surprise at people beating and robbing their fellows. Had he been a wealthy banker, carrying

saddlebags stuffed with gold? Or the servant of such a one, the man who Fong Shen had seen buried beside him?

Whatever the circumstances, he didn't feel privileged now, beyond the fact kind Samaritans had welcomed him into their home and nursed him back to health.

He could not repay them, and would soon need to be on his way.

At the moment, Grandma Fong scolded him from the front porch: his dinner was getting cold.

Talk of him leaving disrupted a pleasant meal. "Where will you go?" queried Shen.

"Toward San Francisco, I think."

"In such a city, you will become more lost. Better to stay here, find a purpose..."

"What purpose?"

Grandma Fong cackled, "You are strong. You can help in laundry, write for Chinese, maybe teach children better English."

"I'd love to, but..."

"No buts!"

He resigned himself to obeying - for the time being. His daily workouts with the former Shao-lin increased in intensity, to where they were sparring with a fierceness usually reserved for battle.

Four horsemen reined their mounts, seeing the pair on a hillock outside the town. Changing course, they leapt from the saddles and broke up what appeared to be a skirmish. The priest was pistol-whipped by one as two others restricted his arms.

Roy instinctively attacked, using techniques taught him. So swift his strikes, the men couldn't defend themselves and landed, unconscious, in the dirt.

Lifting his bloodied friend onto sore shoulders, Roy toted him home. His turn to be tended by Grandma Fong.

Within the hour, a disheveled, half-intoxicated creature sporting a silver star pounded on the laundry's rear door. The sheriff burst in, threatening to arrest everyone present unless the assailant of "four upstanding citizens" surrendered.

Roy heard the ruckus from the bedroom, where the honorable grandmother stitched up a deep gash in her nephew's arm. He set aside the cool cloth and crossed to the doorway.

A Colt revolver pointed at his chest prevented him from voicing his protest.

The barrel drooped, though, when the squat, sad excuse for an official gazed up at Roy's hard brown eyes.

“They tol’ me you were Chinee,” the sheriff grumbled. “I wouldna come if I knew you were one of ours.”

“You misunderstood them, obviously,” said Roy. “They must’ve told you how they beat up a Chinese, four against one.”

“I... ah... don’t likely recollect.”

Roy escorted him to the exit. “When you sober up, maybe you will.”

And, maybe he would be pressured to return and follow through on making his arrest. The Fongs had related how justice couldn’t be found in Miser’s Gulch, with a few rich landowners dictating criminal charges and punishments - including hanging.

Thus, he bid the family who’d tolerated his intrusion these many weeks a hasty farewell. Better not to involve them in his troubles...

Grandma Fong managed a quick kiss on his cheek - she stood on a rickety chair to accomplish the task - before he shuffled down the dusty street.

He trekked west with the setting sun, reaching the tiny hamlet of El Diablo before dark. Lively off-key music poured from the saloon, along with yelling, singing and cursing. Roy figured he had enough coin in his pocket to get a room for the night, but he’d have to run the gauntlet of drunks and gamblers to find out the hotel’s location, the signs not visible in the gloom.

Had he the desire to order a glass of whiskey, Roy would’ve passed, given the filth of the place. No more than twenty men, and a few dance-hall girls, occupied the decrepit interior, one trying to play a lopsided spinet piano.

“Are there accommodations in town?” Roy shouted to the barkeep from the far end.

His situation was assessed in an instant; the reply a finger pointing further along the main thoroughfare.

Roy withdrew and continued onward, to encounter an angry, inebriated man dragging a teenaged girl behind him. She resisted vocally, and he swung around, slapping her hard. She collapsed against a water trough; he grabbed her by the hair and lifted her upright. She screamed in anguish.

“Next time you run away, chil’, I’ll kill you!” he growled.

He landed in the trough so quickly, he didn’t know the cause. Dripping wet, he stared up into Roy’s stony features, while his daughter fled.

Severely tempted to pound the man into pulp, Roy spat on him and stalked off. He would not remain in this hole one second longer.

Until two hands clutched at his shirt, pulling him into an alley, where he was abruptly embraced and kissed fiercely by inexperienced lips.

Easily, he pushed the damsel he'd just rescued from distress to arms' length. Her cheeks were caked with mud, her skirts torn.

"Why..." he stammered.

"To thank you for saving me."

"I... why did you run away?"

"He beats me like that every day, if I don't cook his eggs right, or his shirt isn't clean enough. He's been like that since Ma died..."

Weeping, she sank against him. He tenderly wrapped his arms around her bony frame, until she calmed once more.

"We can... go to the hotel, if you like," came her suggestion.

It took him a moment to grasp the innuendo. He couldn't recall ever being with a woman in that way, of the many things he couldn't recall. "No, thanks."

"But, I owe you a debt of gratitude..."

"Which you've already paid."

He moved into the street, but she pursued him, trying to catch his hand and steer him toward the hotel. When her father hollered at the pair, Roy turned to see the glint of a Winchester rifle aimed at him.

"Nobody throws me in the water trough and gets away with it!"

Once again, instinct drove Roy to snatch a twig off the road and toss it toward the man, who ducked while squeezing off a shot. The bullet ricocheted off cobbles into a wooden hitching post. The drunk's legs were swept out from under him with one deft kick; he thumped, unconscious, on the rain-soaked earth.

"Is he dead?" asked the girl.

"No." Roy continued his departure, while curious onlookers trickled from the saloon.

The daughter, so amazed by the display of self-defense, stood motionless over her father, waiting for him to revive.

A shadowy figure framed in the hotel entrance intrigued him. His legs throbbed, and he wanted a night's sleep...

The woman drawled as he passed, "You've got some moves."

He didn't reply.

"We need someone to handle troublemakers like Ol' Nick."

"Ask the sheriff."

"Don't mean that." She linked her arm through his. "Inside, when the men get ornery, or plastered."

Not a hotel, in the strictest sense, he realized scanning the lobby. Rooms, yes, but offered with companionship.

“Sure, why not?” Too tired to argue, and the pay would make it possible to catch a stagecoach west, rather than hike the distance.

“Ten dollars a week, plus your pick of the girls.”

Painted, possibly pretty underneath, he had no desire to handle such well-used goods.

Which made him all the more popular with both the clientele and the merchandise, since he posed no threat to either. Yet, when riders visiting just for the evening got too... enthusiastic, Roy sent them packing, usually with a bruise or two.

Roy often pondered why the sight of curvaceous females in their undergarments, or their playful kisses, didn't arouse him, like it did the paying customers. He lamented those emotions as part of the past locked in some unknown part of his mind.

The only person who generated genuine concern from him was the girl whose father abused her so terribly. Roy would see her at the Mercantile, or the restaurant where she waited tables in the evenings. She would grin at him when she brought his plate of beef, beans and potatoes - washed up, she could be considered attractive.

He made a habit of lounging on the hotel porch smoking a cigar, while the women went about their business. Marcie - he'd gleaned her name from local gossip - would stop on her way home, where her father had already passed out from drink, and enjoy the moonlight with him. They didn't talk much, at first, but she eventually began confiding her deepest secrets and dreams.

Because the family owned no property and had little money, her prospects of making a good marriage were nil. Roy didn't grasp the underlying implications of such talk. He hadn't much of a future himself, having no verifiable history, but he did have a steady income and the begrudging respect of the community.

They taught each other the basics of togetherness, so different from hasty episodes the brothel women tolerated. Roy decided there could be worse fates than having Marcie as his wife, and planned to propose beneath the next full moon.

Given the proximity of El Diablo to Miser's Gulch, the inevitability of the latter's "four upstanding citizens" calling upon the painted ladies of the former should have been occurred to Roy. When they did, he saw his world ripped asunder. Hanging in the shadows, he rushed upstairs to his room as soon as the lobby cleared.

He'd stashed \$100 under his mattress - some of the women were quite generous on occasions he rescued their "fair honor" - and determined, to protect Marcie and himself, he'd best resume his journey. To avoid objections from Sal,

the brothel's madame, he slipped out the upstairs window before dawn, while everyone dozed.

The first light of morning found Roy traversing a stretch of ground marked by a grave-shaped pile of rocks, without a marker of any type, and a second, disturbed mound. He would've ignored them, except the landscape seemed eerily familiar. Remnants of a camp fire had disintegrated, leaving a lone article visible, if not well burnt: the corpus of a crucifix, its carved, outstretched arms blackened with soot.

Roy sank on a rock, puzzling over the image. In his reverie, he didn't hear horses approaching over the hillock behind him, reacting too late to prevent still another confrontation with pistols.

That's when the memories flooded his brain. This is how it'd happened the first time, months earlier. Thugs had crept upon him and Brother Roy Joseph - the beret he now wore had belonged to his fellow Franciscan friar - as they slept. The pair had been bound for the Lake Tahoe region of Nevada, missionaries to the native peoples.

The four surrounded him, the same "upstanding citizens" of Miser's Gulch who'd thrashed the Shao-lin priest. Had they recognized him as a previous victim, and feared being exposed as thieves and murderers? he wondered.

Pushed to his knees, pressure on his neck forced his head onto the rock upon which he'd been sitting. He heard a blade unsheath, and guessed they'd slit his throat and finish the grave they'd started.

No Fong Shen to save him this time. Nonetheless, he didn't plan to die that day. He slid out from between his captor's hand and the stone; with lightning swiftness, he disarmed two smirking cowhands. One bullet caught him in the left forearm, but not before he'd sent the third man flying into the fire ash.

The horses having bolted at the gunshot, the fourth sprinted after them.

Roy - no, that wasn't his name, it was Brother John Robert - sank against a tree trunk, exhausted and bleeding. He ripped a piece of his shirttail as make-shift bandage, visualizing the brown hooded robes in the Miser's Gulch General Store: his Franciscan habit! Now the threat to his future had been eliminated, he still couldn't return to Marcie, being vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience. Reluctantly, he set off west, bound for the San Francisco friary he'd called home the past ten years.

This was one story they'd never believe.

Rivalry Resurrected

Bess Early hadn't seen Tony Downs since Hollywood High's 1986 commencement ceremony. He'd stood right in front of her during the procession through the gymnasium, as he'd often sat next to her in homeroom, their surnames so close alphabetically. They'd faced off in debate club, and the dark, gangly scholar - with a penchant for science - had always emerged victorious, because he had the brains and conviction to make his point, while she had the money.

Pausing in her response to the receptionist announcing his arrival at the Early, Inc. headquarters, Bess recalled the trip home from a senior debate competition in Palm Springs. She'd driven her vintage gold Camaro; Tony rode shotgun. They'd argued the entire distance, so vehemently she'd had to pull onto the shoulder to calm herself.

They'd ended in a clinch, and probably would've had sex in the car, had her blouse not caught on the stickshift and wrenched her neck.

Licking chapped lips, she remember those kisses...

And the midnight race down country roads outside Riverside, after the state finals. His dented VW Beetle had beaten her by three car lengths, thanks to his modifications to the air-cooled engine.

"Miss Early?" pressed the front desk employee through the speaker.

The reverie disrupted, the ginger-haired executive puzzled why Tony would venture into Los Angeles, when his suburban environmental/humanitarian exploits were so widely publicized.

"Send him in."

The lavish penthouse office's double doors parted silently, leaving a matured, goateed Tony Downs framed on the threshold. While usually photographed in rolled-up sleeves, jeans and sandals on some street corner, he wore a brown pin-stripe suit, burgundy tie and loafers, as befit someone who'd graduated summa cum laude with double majors in physics and engineering from M.I.T. and Harvard Law School - all on full scholarship, no less. Bess had kicked back on her reclining leather armchair, battered sneakers propped on the plexiglass desktop. "You look like you're going to court," she greeted in her best sarcastic contralto.

His baritone countered, "So will you, if things don't change."

"Oh, really?"

Nimble fingers extracted a folded subpoena from his inside pocket.

"Don't you have flunkies to serve papers for you?" She waved him to a bent steel chair, opposite.

“Still resentful about the debates?”

“I’ve got a corporation to run, I don’t have time...”

“And, I won’t take up more of that valuable commodity than necessary. This is about the highway extension and valley overpass you’re contracted to construct north of Santa Barbara.”

She waited for him to continue.

“The materials delivered to the site are substandard, and run-off from the equipment is not being properly collected, contaminating the natural habitat of at least three endangered species.”

“You’ve been out there?”

He nodded. His ebony mane didn’t move an inch.

“You want me to shut down, or...”

“I’ll get an injunction from the court.”

“If I don’t complete the project, another contractor will.”

“I’ll get an injunction against them.”

“Who are your clients? The birds? The voles?”

“That doesn’t matter. What does is whether you want to save the court costs for defending against my petition.”

“So, we’re playing poker, and you’re trying to bluff me into folding,” scoffed Bess.

“An apt analogy.”

“Well, I’m all in. Put up or shut up.”

Tony rose, defiant.

“How’s that old Bug of yours?”

“Floor boards rusted out back in college. The salt they use in New England after it snows.”

“Too bad. I would’ve challenged you to a rematch of the race.” Bess jibed. “Our brake caliper subsidiary has a two-mile test track. With that natural fuel you invented to eliminate off-shore drilling and coal mining...”

“One of the oil companies bought the patent out from under me, and pulled funding for the research.”

“Sorry to hear it. You could’ve gotten rich.”

With a snarl, Tony made his exit. The businesswoman crumpled the subpoena and pitched it in a metal mesh trash basket for two points. “That went well.”

She stared out ceiling-high windows at skyscrapers, wondering what had prompted her old adversary to pursue his agenda now. Early, Inc. had worked on

numerous Southern California road projects, and his forte seemed to be small-time violations of a very personal code.

Maybe, by opposing a company of this size, he hoped to move from being the subject of jokes to a serious contender in the environmental community.

No joke when both her cell and the desk phone began ringing, reporting supposed vandalism to vehicles in the underground parking garage and on the street. Every car was dead, their engines entirely non-functional.

Except her 1968 Camaro.

Not difficult to deduce something - someone - had simultaneously fried every computer circuit board in a half-mile radius.

“Who was the last person to get his car started?” Bess queried from the building’s lobby.

A robust security guard related, “Ralph Stevens was on his way to a jobsite when his pick-up stalled on the ramp.”

“When?”

“Twenty minutes ago.”

Bess crossed to the polished oak desk where visitors were required to check in. “What time did Tony Downs leave?”

“Ten-fifteen, Miss Early,” noted the perky assistant, scanning the logs.

Twenty minutes ago.

“What’s his address?”

A copy of Tony’s drivers license flashed on the monitor. Obviously out of date, listing a residence in San Francisco.

He’d shown her how serious his intent, and vanished like a puff of smoke.

“Did he take a cab, or walk?” she pressed.

“I... didn’t notice, ma’am.”

Like high school, he’d won this round, but she would come out on top. Striding to her private elevator, she shouted, “Get my attorneys on the line.”

Nothing ever came easy for Bess, though. She’d had to claw her way to the CEO’s chair at her father’s company, because the men who dominated the Board of Directors didn’t believe a woman capable of understanding the intricacies of construction projects and diversified interests such as an auto parts manufacturer, musical instrument distributor and cable television station. She’d stood hundreds of feet in the air on narrow girders, welded beams, driven huge backhoes, dug ditches, for starters. Her hands still retained the callouses from years of blisters.

During a conference that afternoon, a cadre of legal geniuses reviewed the wrinkled subpoena she’d recovered from the trash. Somehow, Tony Downs had managed to keep his address off that paperwork, as well.

“There’s got to be a record of him with the State Bar Association,” Bess stormed. “Do whatever it takes to find him! It’s going to cost thousands to repair the employees’ cars and the company trucks.”

“You can’t prove...” objected one clerk.

“Oh, yes, I can! He has the scientific wherewithal to concoct some little toy... You bring him to me, and I’ll pin this on him - with real pins!”

Rather than tow hundreds of cars from the parking garage, Bess authorized the expense of having mechanics work on-site. Many of the parts had to be special ordered and, when they were installed, didn’t fix the problem.

“It’s a computer virus, Miss Early,” the gruff auto shop manager explained two weeks later. “We attach the board, and it’s instantly infected.”

“Bastard!” muttered Bess. Then, seeing the man’s startled expression, clarified, “Not you.”

Tony Downs hadn’t been located. In fact, he didn’t appear for the court hearing on the injunction - a subordinate had argued weakly, the motion denied by the judge.

News coverage from suburban neighborhoods - where rows of cars wouldn’t start and couldn’t be repaired - crept their way to the lead stories on evening broadcasts. Police spokespeople proclaimed it wide-spread gang activity, or the work of domestic terrorists.

Little by little, clusters of Los Angeles inhabitants found themselves without personal transportation. Most opted for busses and trains, walking or riding bicycles.

Bess Early could still drive, since her Camaro had been built prior to the computer age. She happened to be headed toward the Santa Barbara highway project on I-405 when a t-shirt and jean-clad figure walked into north-bound congestion three vehicles ahead of her. She recognized him instantly: Tony Downs.

He sat on the concrete divider for a few minutes, as traffic jerked forward. She rolled down her window to yell at him, but other cries of confusion and discontent drowned out her words.

Every car but hers had died, leaving the interstate a literal parking lot in both directions.

She yanked on the parking brake and leapt from the Camaro, collaring Tony as he serenely departed the scene.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

He shook loose easily. “Stopping environmental contamination of the worst kind.”

“You’ve set yourself up as a superhero, a one-man defender of nature?”

“Why not? I’m tired of all the talk, and no action. Even the courts don’t provide satisfaction...”

“You knew that long before you came to see me last month! Was it a ruse to gain access to the building, and transmit that computer virus?”

He smirked, just like when he would win a debate. Her right fist reared back to slug him; he caught her hand and held it in mid-air. “No violence, now. Can’t you see, this is the peaceful way to achieve positive ends...”

“The damage is costing working stiff thousands of dollars...”

“You want to debate the issue?”

“Yes!”

“Here?”

Bess paused to consider. “No. We’ll hold the debate next week, before the ribbon cutting for the new highway and bridge. If you win, the road won’t open. If I win, you stop this nonsense and surrender whatever device you invented...”

He extended his hand. “Agreed.”

She clasped his fingers, not expecting to be pulled into an embrace and kissed passionately. Pounding his chest, she eventually escaped his grasp, wiping her mouth on her flannel shirt sleeve.

“What the hell was that for?” she raged.

“Because, I’ve always seen potential in you, Bess. You’ll come over to my side before we’re done.”

“I’d rather die first.”

He shrugged and walked off, while she returned to the Camaro, maneuvering it onto the highway shoulder, reaching the next off-ramp in short order.

How simple it would’ve been to back over Tony as he sauntered along like king of the world...

Never in a million years would Bess have expected to be prepping for a head-to-head debate, so long after high school. She’d made numerous presentations to prospective customers as part of her job, and maybe answered a few questions, but had forgotten the rules of a formal exchange.

If the press provided coverage, the finer details wouldn’t matter, only who got their point across quicker. It would be all about the sound-bites.

Once she accused him of decimating thousands of cars, no one would listen to a thing he said.

And, that’s exactly how it transpired. Gathered for the grand opening of the newest six-lane freeway, cameras flashed and microphones recorded political

platitudes from California's governor and U.S. Senator. Then, Tony Downs and Bess Early approached the podium simultaneously.

Rather than commence a polite dialogue, Bess stated, "While I'm very proud to have been part of this project, recent events have overshadowed its completion. As we dedicate this overpass to fallen members of our military in Afghanistan, I'd also like to present you with the culprit who disabled public and private vehicles with a fatal computer virus."

A squad of police clamped metal cuffs around Tony's wrists and led him away, his jaw agape. Bess shrugged and managed a grin not unlike his victorious expression.

The niceties concluded, a line of semis were signaled to parade their rigs across the stretch of concrete. Watching the convoy roll, she heard metal straining, and columns buckling. She leaned over the safety rail and swore. Whether the slow speed, the weight or an earthquake, Bess didn't know.

"Get them off!" she shrieked, but no one paid any attention.

Until the second vehicle pitched sideways as the roadway split. Crowds panicked, running hither and yon. Uniformed officers abandoned their prisoner beside a black and white cruiser; Tony viewed the chaos with apparent satisfaction.

"If you say 'I told you so...'" threatened Bess.

He didn't have a chance to respond. A crack developed in the substrate, and jolted him - and the nearest sedan - off the bridge. He managed to grab a length of exposed rebar, as the car smashed on the rocks below.

Instinctively, Bess dropped onto her stomach and strained to clutch Tony's hand, beyond her reach. "Hold on, I'll get a rope!" she promised.

"Don't bother. I've proven you wrong again, Bess Early."

"Yes, you were right, Tony. Maybe, if you change your tactics, you can have an impact..."

"I already have."

Amidst screams and destruction, he let go and fell to his death.

Bess wasn't the same after that. She lost interest in running the family business, spent long hours sitting across from Hollywood High School, trying to figure out where her life had derailed.

She stopped answering her cell, except for one call identified as the L.A. County Coroner's Office. She thought it a wrong number, but the medical examiner asked for her by name.

"While performing the autopsy on Anthony Downs, we discovered your contact information in his wallet," the doctor said.

How bizarre, thought Bess.

“Since the news reports indicated you tried to rescue him, we felt you should know he had stage four pancreatic cancer, and would’ve died within a few days of his... accident.”

She disconnected, tempted to laugh and weep at the same time. He’d had a plan all along, to win one last skirmish before losing the ultimate battle.

Sliding off the Camaro’s hood, she spat, “Bastard.”

His “impact” increased the number of junk cars crushed for recycling, and commissions to salespeople who staffed local auto dealerships. A 6.2 earthquake was blamed for the destruction of the bridge, and Early, Inc. got the contract to rebuild it.

As before, life went on for the billions inhabiting the planet.

Dr. Jackson and Mr. Hart

Each time Milo Jackson saw an advertisement for anti-depressants, he puzzled at the irony of pharmaceutical manufacturers continuing to produce drugs for which a key side effect involved suicidal thoughts.

He'd suffered from depression in his 20s, and had tired of doctors experimenting on him with prescription after prescription. None of the existing treatments eased his condition.

So, he studied chemistry and medicine in college, and set out to find a viable means to assist the millions who shared his ailment.

Twenty years later, he'd come closer than any other researcher. Laboring long hours in his lab, while administrative types applied for more and more grant money, he'd reveled in successful tests on mice and rabbits.

Indeed, he despised the need to test new medications on animals, and wished human trials weren't so difficult to get approved. He capitulated to the system, however, and did his best to abide by the foremost rule of scientific endeavor: never experiment on yourself.

Some of Milo's colleagues thought he had violated that tenet, commenting how his originally shaggy mane had gone from dark to light to bald, then grey in the course of a year. Fact was, he'd bleached his hair on a dare from an old friend, struggling through a subsequent allergic reaction to the chemicals. Clumps fell out when he bathed, so he shaved his head, the regrowth a snowy stubble.

No one believed the transformation had nothing to do with his work.

He wearied of defending himself, and opted for the graveyard shift, when the building was deserted and quiet, leaving little chance to socialize with his few close friends.

He imbibed mug after mug of coffee, usually perched beside his computer, to stay awake. Over the course of weeks, he sensed increased vitality in his approach to the project, and a more positive attitude.

Employees and business associates described building developer Edward Hart as ruthless, greedy, depraved, narcissistic, and analytical. Truly a self-made man, he came from nowhere with sufficient wealth to buy a sizeable, albeit foundering, company without bank financing.

Those who opposed him vanished into nowhere, without a trace.

He expected perfection in every aspect of business operations. Budgets or deadlines not met resulted in extremely unpleasant consequences for the offenders.

If Hart paid an individual for a certain service, and the obligation was not fulfilled, well...

Case in point: a project manager colluded with a subcontractor to buy used lumber, and pocket the surplus cash. Hart fired the man, allowed him to be prosecuted for embezzlement and fraud - publicly humiliated while the corporation was lauded for its diligence in discovering the malfeasance - but before the convicted felon could report to serve his prison sentence, he and the subcontractor disappeared.

Hart treated women far worse. Paparazzi periodically photographed him at one of a dozen high-end restaurants or night spots, an array of blonde beauties offsetting his dark, handsomely chiseled frame. These gullible females who clung to him like leeches might hope for a reward of diamonds or an expensive sports car; they received nothing but his disdain, whether or not they gratified his wide array of demands.

Most disturbing, perhaps - at least, in the mind of senior Board member, philanthropist Carl Lancaster - and beyond the concession Hart's behavior bordered the fringes of professionalism, the man's frequent and unexplained absences resulted in last-minute meeting cancellations, unreturned phone calls and uncertainty regarding his impulsive decisions.

At an unofficial gathering of the Board over a friendly dinner, a unanimous vote approved hiring a private investigator to shadow Hart for two months, reporting on his activities and whereabouts. The fees would not be charged to the company, so the ploy would remain secret.

Presenting his findings at a second confidential session, the leather jacketed P.I. wound up barraged by questions from his disbelieving clients. "A man cannot enter a building with one door, and never come out!" raged Lancaster.

Attorney Aaron Fiennes barked, "Disappear into thin air?"

"I can only relate what I saw with my own eyes. Mr. Hart parked his Corvette at the curb, went into the tailor shop, and never returned to his vehicle. I waited until after the store had closed and all employees left for the evening."

"Did you question any of them?"

"Yes, but none of them..."

"There had to be a rear exit!" interspersed Bill Studebaker, a California vintner.

"None. A newer structure on the next lot closed it off."

Lancaster pressed, "And you claim this isn't the only time you lost him?"

"Over the course of six weeks, he escaped my surveillance eight times."

“Did you notice any commonalities between events? A suspicious car in the area, any individual acting strangely...”

“Just one. An older man, short white hair, slightly stooped and rather dazed. After the last incident, I tailed him. He traveled by public transportation to the Wedgewood Pharmaceuticals complex.”

“And...” prodded Fiennes.

“Nothing. He seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, is all. I wasn’t going to involve outsiders when you warned me against undue publicity.”

Studebaker recommended, “You should swing by Wedgewood and interview the man on some pretext or other. Determine if he’s acquainted with Hart, or ran into him...”

“No,” countered Lancaster. “Keep him out of it. But, if you have an opportunity, take photographs...”

“I already did,” said the P.I. He passed enlargements of five angles around the room.

Computer software magnate James Wright studied the facial features intently. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear this guy is Hart’s father.”

He laid the pictures on the floor and pointed out similarities in the eyes, ears and chin.

“Isn’t Hart’s father dead?” puzzled Lancaster. “Could it be his older brother, maybe?”

“If we’re honest with ourselves, gentlemen,” began Studebaker, “none of us is privy to one iota of Hart’s background before he purchased our company. If this man is a relative, we have to respect his personal life, except insofar as Hart’s disappearances affect the day-to-day operation of the construction crews.”

A murmur of assent preceded the P.I. being directed to conduct a casual interview with the elusive grey-haired man. Their next meeting was set for a month hence.

“If you’re a college student searching for a paid internship, you’re out of luck,” greeted Jackson when the scruffy P.I. sidled into the laboratory without knocking.

“No, sir... I’m... er, hoping to snag a story for the college paper,” bluffed the visitor.

“Security clear you?”

He nodded.

“You wasted your time. My research is classified.”

“Why?”

“Do you know anything about science, boy?” Jackson scoffed. “If I detailed my work, and you publish it, some hack would beat me to the finish and file the patent, and my grants would be pulled...”

“You don’t even talk about it with your family?” hinted the P.I.

“I have no family.”

So much for that idea. Feigning disappointment, the trespasser withdrew.

Colliding with a nervous lab technician carrying a tray of beakers.

“Sorry, man,” the P.I. apologized.

“It’s okay. I’m rushing, because I should’ve delivered these to Dr. Jackson last week, except he just got back today...”

“Got back from where?”

“Dunno. But the boss says, if he keeps ditching work so often, he could lose his job.”

Basking in the afternoon sun after departing Wedgewood Pharmaceuticals, the P.I. could not resolve a gnawing unease at both Edward Hart and Milo Jackson absenting themselves from their daily routine on a recurring - and mysterious basis.

Knots in his stomach drove him to falsify a request to the respective human resource departments, obtaining records of hours clocked.

And marveled at the comparison.

When Hart could be found in his office, Jackson could not, and vice versa.

The P.I. had solved cases where guys led double lives, wives in different states - or the same city - and so forth. They seldom bothered with disguises.

For Hart to disguise himself as Milo Jackson, despite a basic resemblance, he’d have needed to carry some type of briefcase or backpack holding a wig and other items, and he never did. Nor did the switch from one identity to another seem an organized ruse, instead occurring at totally random times and locations.

Meaning, the same factors applied to Jackson impersonating Hart.

Curiosity aroused by these oddities, the P.I. ruminated over how to track answers for the Board of Directors.

He’d start with the talkative lab tech at Wedgewood.

Who happened to be outside the employee entrance that particular Friday, puffing a cigarette. The P.I. glimpsed his nametag: Drew O’Malley.

“Hi, Drew, how ya doin’?” he greeted.

For a moment, the tech didn’t recognize this newcomer. He blew a column of smoke skyward. “Oh, yeah. Hi. You here to see Dr. Jackson?”

“I had an appointment to pick up a report he was reviewing.” All bluff, but that’s how he operated.

“Sorry, he’s not here. Didn’t call in - again.”

“Do you think he might’ve left the report in his lab? I really need to turn it in at school.”

“We can go look.”

Drew swiped his I.D. across the reader beside the door, and they climbed the staircase to the third level. Jackson’s lab door stood ajar, a crew of uniformed movers crating equipment.

“What’s up?”

“I told you they’d fire him, and when he didn’t show this morning, they texted him his termination.”

“Too bad.” Not really paying attention to the conversation, the P.I. scanned the chamber for anything connecting Jackson to Hart. The only table as yet undisturbed held racks of test tubes and beakers, linked by coiled glass tubing, with a bunsen burner at one end, and a coffee mug at the other, beside a desktop computer..

“What’d he do, brew his own?” queried the P.I., inspecting the assembly.

“Dunno. That was his private project, never mentioned it to me.” Drew poked around the desk. “Do you see your report?”

“Report?” Too intrigued by a goldish liquid pooled just above the half-empty ceramic cup, the P.I. had spaced his lie. “Oh, yeah. No, it’s not here.”

“We better get outta here, then. I’m not getting accused of stealing Jackson’s papers and letting them can my ass.”

As he spun toward the exit, the P.I. brushed his finger across the tip of the tube, quickly tasting it. Sweet with a bitter residue.

It had been dripping into the coffee, and if Jackson had been drinking it...

“Where will all this stuff be stored?”

“Building 79 is the warehouse. Probably there.”

“Thanks.”

The tech sauntered toward the stairs, another cigarette pulled from its pack. He didn’t realize the P.I. had ducked back into Jackson’s lab, confiscating the mug to have the contents analyzed.

“Never seen a configuration like this,” his buddy, a college chemistry professor, admitted after studying the atomic absorption results over three days.

“Some new drug, you say?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I gave a miniscule dose to one of my rats. Turned his white hair completely black, regressed the aging process, and started him attacking others in the cage.”

“So, it changed the physical appearance, and mental attitude?”

“Right.”

“What would a larger dose do to a man?” pondered the P.I.

“Any man who drank this... I don’t want to think about it.”

“What if it happened by accident?”

“You mean, mixed in his coffee, like you gave it to me?”

The P.I. nodded.

“He’d become a different man entirely, and probably not remember anything that happened while the drug was in his blood.”

“Not suited as an anti-depressant, then?”

“Hell no. It would energize the synapses to the point where it could drive him completely over the edge.”

“Thanks, Prof.”

The Board of Directors skeptically listened to his report in silence. The company’s stock could not withstand such a scandal, after so recently having survived near bankruptcy. The P.I. received his check - including a fat bonus - and went on his way, tucking the file in a locked drawer at the office.

That same night, Edward Hart got into a fight over one of his voluptuous escorts at a posh club. In the process of flattening his opponent, someone shoved a steak knife in his back. He died before the ambulance could navigate through traffic.

Once the crowd ringing the scene had been cleared, paramedics found Milo Jackson on the floor.

The P.I. wouldn’t have to worry about paying his bills for awhile.

Under the Influence

Beautician, stylist, hairdresser, cosmetologist...

Tillie didn't care how people referred to her - as long as they referred their friends to her.

She'd been operating the salon at the corner of Main Street and Fir Avenue for over a decade, since her father - the town's lone barber - had retired and moved to Key West. She'd apprenticed with him for eight years prior to that, following exceptional achievements at the beauty college down state. In addition to expanding the establishment's dynamic to include services for women, she took over the male clientele without so much as an adverse comment.

Maybe that's because Tillie's rather ordinary looks posed no threat to the wives of the guys who hung around the shop, talking football, basketball, hockey or baseball - depending on the season - and drinking beer from a well-stocked refrigerator in the back room. Perhaps her generous sponsorship of local Little League and high school teams, even during the recent economic recession, offset her avant garde clothes and eccentric behavior.

Dedication to doing the best job possible topped her priority list; she didn't care what anyone thought about her personally if they were satisfied with how they looked when they walked out the door.

Fingertips adept at tactile identification of hair consistency by simply tousling a customer's mop enabled her to provide superior solutions to split ends, dandruff and such. She never mentioned experiencing her own unique high while stimulating the scalp of an individual seated in the adjustable chair.

No more so than when Angus MacGowan came in for his monthly trim.

If she could've gotten away with it, she would've spent hours just running her digits through his long, wavy mane.

Long wasn't just an arbitrary description. Dense white strands extended to the middle of his back, usually kept braided or in a ponytail. She remembered his younger days, when that head was framed by a bush as red as his tartan kilt, worn on major holidays. He'd greyed in his 30s, and

strangers to the area either mistook him for a tenured professor at the nearby university or a tramp seeking a free meal.

He rode a British Triumph motorcycle, adding to his mystique as a rebel. A platinum skull ring adorned his right hand, and a two-inch silver banjo woven together with sea glass beads dangled from his left ear.

That he'd been aware of her presence in the barber shop since she'd become a fixture after school - her mother having died giving birth to her little

brother shortly after she'd started kindergarten - didn't faze her. She flat-out loved his hair.

As proof, a curl of his original, incredible auburn nestled in the etched gold locket suspended on a heavy chain around her neck.

She'd never confess that fact to him - or anyone - having plucked the scrap off the floor as her father chatted with MacGowan at the cash register one sultry summer afternoon.

Tillie forced herself to concentrate on Stella Finch's permanent. She'd tried to convince the mother of three how repeatedly subjecting her hair to these strong chemicals damaged the follicles, but the woman insisted, just as others over-dyed their hair and, consequently, dealt with unhealthy thinning and coarseness.

Ed and Charley popped in on their lunch hour, hoping for a quick buzz. "Go, grab a sandwich," advised the proprietor. "I'll fit you in while Stella is baking."

Dual accolades of the "most sensitive hands in town" and the "fastest scissors" brought a chuckle to her lips.

MacGowan arrived for his appointment - always the fourth Thursday - five minutes early. Tillie set aside her smart phone, having booked an entire wedding party for the following Saturday morning. She craved a cup of coffee, but sated herself with a quick bite of a chocolate bar...

Something struck her as odd when he took his place in the chair. He'd removed the earring; the sole evidence he'd worn the skull ring: a pale indentation around the base of his index finger. She spun toward the window; the Triumph's usual parking spot stood empty.

"What's up, Angus?"

"Time to shear it off."

Tillie swallowed hard. "Might I ask why?"

"I've met someone I care about deeply who... thinks I should grow up."

The words escaped before she could stifle the impulse. "If anyone dared expect me to change as a condition of our relationship, I'd tell him to fuck off."

MacGowan's head jerked around so rapidly, she feared his neck would snap.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"You... don't need to apologize, Tillie. I've been... procrastinating about this for quite awhile, and since I plan to ask her to marry me..."

Brush in hand, Tillie felt a tear trickle down her cheek. This would be the last time - ever - that she'd luxuriate in this exquisite mass of fullness... "How short?"

“The same as you do for Bart Marbury.”

“Oh, God, no.”

“Please.”

She knew, if he regretted the decision, the hair would eventually grow out.

Still...

Setting aside the tools of her trade, she snatched a straight-backed wooden chair from against the wall and plopped in front of him.

“What’s this?” MacGowan queried.

“Angus...” Her throat abnormally dry, she croaked piteously.

“Tillie?”

Clutching at straws, she bumbled, “You remember that weekend Dad was in St. Louis for the Masons convention and you dropped by to check on me?”

“What’s that got to do with...”

“Hear me out. Do you remember, or not?”

The hesitation may have been a ploy, or he might have honestly forgotten the incident. “Sure.”

“I never told Dad what happened...”

“You mean, about the acid?”

“Yeah.” Too funny, really, though she suppressed her chuckle. The black Cocker Spaniel puppy had been a birthday present, and she’d named him “Acid” because his spasms of energy reminded her of how classmates acted when stoned. MacGowan found that tag rather weird, and had asked if Tillie - recently graduated from Washington High - had ever tried the drug. When she answered in the negative, he’d offered her the “trip of a lifetime.”

Her altered consciousness forged a link with the sensation of touching MacGowan’s hair. Colorful strands, charged with static electricity, stood on end, floating on air. Until then, she’d ignored her father’s periodic hints to succeed him as the third generation to run the family business.

“I’m here now because of that night.” She toyed with a stray wisp clinging to his silk patchwork shirt. “I’ve never come down off that high, and if you do this, it’ll destroy me.”

Thick digits encircled her forearms; penetrating hazel orbs studied her pasty features. “Tillie, I can’t be held responsible...”

“Of course not.” She averted her gaze. “But, I *do* know that no person has the right to demand someone else alter their lifestyle or behavior...”

“Even if they’re in love?”

Tillie rose, shoved aside the chair and grabbed the scissors. “Hell, Angus, you’re too old to believe in such nonsense. You sound like a teenager.”

“I’ve always been a teenager,” he grunted, spinning away from her.
“Everyone reaches a point when it’s necessary to... to...”
“Surrender to the conventions of society?”
“Is that so wrong?”
“It is, when you’ve professed all these years the exact opposite, so I believed with every fiber of my being you were legit.”
He swatted aside the checkered chair cloth Tillie draped over his lap.
“We’ve been friends for ages, and I’ve exaggerated a lot of my personal views...”
“Including when we were trippin’ together?”
“For instance?”
“To start: the opinions of others don’t matter, and we should listen to our hearts.”
MacGowan sniffed. “You want the truth?”
“Always.”
“I was just trying to impress you, so I could get your knickers off.”
“Is that your motivation for this?” She tugged his earlobe.
“She’s... a respectable woman. An attorney.”
Tillie’s blue eyes widened. “What? You met in court?”
“I received a summons for jury duty. Six months ago. She was the prosecutor on the case.”
“Isn’t that a bit... unethical?”
“I never made it as far as being interviewed, so, no.” He shifted on the cushion. “Since when do you care about ethics if, as you’ve said, you don’t care what others think?”
“All I’m saying, Angus: don’t lose your real self just for... for...”
“Will you cut my hair, or not?” he barked.
She stiffened. “Not.”
“Then, I’ll drive to Bayswater.”
“That’s your choice.”
He exited the building; she shuddered and sank to her knees.
A “Closed” sign tacked to the window bemused passersby as days elapsed. Customers arriving for prearranged trims, highlights and styling weren’t able to contact Tillie on her cell, her voicemail full. No calls were returned.
Saturday fortnight, Angus MacGowan braked his Triumph at the curb, having heard from the clerk at the grocer’s that Tillie had disappeared without a trace.
Or, at least, without being actively traced.

No one had filed a missing person report with the Sheriff's office, since she had no relatives in the vicinity. The guys who'd usually enjoy a pre-dinner beer and a few off-color jokes wouldn't risk their spouses' ire by driving across the railroad tracks to the Victorian-style house to check if her Chevy Nova sat beneath the carport.

MacGowan rode three miles along roads never paved by the county and discovered the residence unlocked. Inside, Tillie sprawled on an old floral-print sofa in the parlor, zonked out of her gourd.

Switching on a dusty crystal chandelier, he squatted beside her and delicately pried her right lid open.

"Christ, woman," he groaned. "You haven't had a pupil in your eye for weeks!"

A cursory search of the premises revealed a stash of acid hidden behind canned goods in the kitchen cupboard - and this visitor could but wonder if the bad habit to which he'd introduced her 20 years previous had been a constant in her life ever since. He wrapped the tabs in yellowed newspaper from the recycling bin beside the trash, tossing the wadded sheets in a moldy cast iron skillet. He lit a match and ignited the lot, waiting until flames reduced the contents to ash before returning to the front room.

"Tillie," he drawled, "are you in there?"

She muttered incomprehensibly, the gold locket firmly clutched in her fist.

He tapped her cheek. "Tillie, c'mon..."

As if in response to his voice, skewed by the drugs, her fingers flexed like they were running through someone's hair. She moaned with pleasure and, when he trapped her hands between his, she yanked him downward, so his face pressed against her breasts.

Once she felt his singular mane against her flesh, though, she shot upright.

"Angus!"

"Aye."

"You... didn't..."

He eased her onto a stack of neon throw pillows, the weakness of her limbs evident. "No, I didn't. On the drive to Bayswater, I had time to think."

"You... broke it off with the attorney?"

"She... dumped *me*." He grinned wryly. "I told her she'd have to take me as I am, or not at all."

Tillie stroked the waist-length ripples. "Thank God."

MacGowan helped her drink plenty of water, and he prepared her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, not letting her leave the table until she ate the last bite.

He directed her to shower and change, then presented her a spare helmet so the Triumph could transport them into town.

“I need a wee haircut,” he stated, using her keys to unlock the shop. “If you’re... sufficiently recovered.”

She inhaled deeply as she preceded him indoors. “Just an inch off the end, eh?”

The Concert Master

A cheery reception room: walls painted pastel blue, three comfortable armchairs placed around a polished walnut coffee table. Soft lighting from brass floor lamps with pleated shades. No glass divider between visitors and the administrative assistant who answered e-mails on her computer.

If Geri Anstott would've thought about it, she'd have guessed the congenial decor could inspire many generous souls to make fat contributions to the Southwest Occasional Symphony Orchestra.

Except, the organization did no fundraising.

Not via the internet, at least.

When the overnight envelope arrived at her Springfield, Massachusetts apartment, she'd puzzled over the \$10,000 check and one-way airline ticket. The cover letter didn't explain much beyond the fact that, without her applying for the position, she'd been hired as concert master for this California ensemble at a salary of \$100,000 per year.

She'd used a variety of search engines to learn more about SOSO - as the letterhead proclaimed the acronym - and found no website, no schedule of concerts. A few newspaper reviews praised the genius of R.J. O'Malley, founder, musical director and, not surprisingly, unconventional conductor.

One grainy photo showed the virtuosi in jeans and t-shirts, rather than the tuxedos and formal gowns other orchestras required their musicians to wear during performances.

Geri knew. She'd been playing violin since age four.

What she didn't know is why she'd been summoned 3,000 miles.

The door leading to an inner office opened to disrupt her reverie. A darkly goateed, friendly miened, athletic young man emerged, his hair a shock of bleached blond wildness, slender hand extended.

"Miss Anstott, I'm Mike Wiley. Very glad to meet you."

Clasping his fingers, Geri detected the lotion he'd just rubbed into his skin. "Likewise."

"Won't you come in?"

She followed him across the threshold into a chamber equally simple yet pleasant, but with a larger desk and full-length windows overlooking the I-5 freeway.

"Please, have a seat," Wiley invited.

Settling on plush cushions, Geri declined an offer of coffee or bottled water. "If you don't mind, Mr. Wiley, could you tell me why I'm here?"

“R.J. was right about you,” he grinned broadly with straight white teeth.
“But then, he always is.”
“Mr. O’Malley?”
“Oh, no one calls him that. He doesn’t allow it. Just like he doesn’t abide flattery or tolerate suck-ups. He appreciates frankness more than any virtue.”
Geri blushed to the roots of her brunette tresses. “He... knows about me?”
“He wouldn’t have offered you the job, if he didn’t.”
“What, exactly, does the job entail?”
“He’ll explain that himself.”
“Oh, is he here?”
“No, he’s at home. There’s a rental car waiting outside, so you can drive over.”
“But, I don’t know how...”
“The GPS has been programmed, though it does go a bit screwy once you reach Satan’s Alley.”
“Satan’s Alley?” she echoed.
“The private road to R.J.’s house. We call it that because it’s hell to get up the hill.”
“Steep?”
“A bit. Narrow is the problem. Until last year, it was also dirt. Every time it rained, someone got stuck in the mud... Since he’s had it paved, it’s barely wide enough for his Ferrari. You’ll want to take it slow.”
Wiley rose and ushered the petite woman to the parking lot, where a new black Mustang GT idled. She’d sold her blue 2005 model before leaving New England.
R.J. O’Malley had done his research, to be sure.
The journey through Los Angeles suburbs proved frustrating; too much traffic and noise for her contemplative nature. She missed the off-ramp the first time, and had to double back to veer off the interstate, then turned the wrong way. The GPS kept drawling, “Recalculating,” with every error in direction.
She wanted to rip the cord from the dashboard and throw the contraption out the window.
Two hours later, she braked at the foot of an imposing rise, a lone dwelling set on its peak. She steered onto an asphalt track, keeping the transmission in low gear due to the grade and hair-pin curves.
Satan’s Alley, indeed. Any divergence from the road, and the next stop would be hell!

The straining V-8 fell silent near a two-car garage attached to the cozy yellow brick bungalow. A dusting of snow obscured the lawn. Exiting the vehicle, Geri marveled at the panoramic view of the valley. She estimated a height of 4,000 feet.

And suddenly felt quite dizzy.

“It’s a common reaction,” said the refined baritone watching her from the front porch. Ebon mane unkempt, he wore a red flannel shirt flecked with splinters, faded jeans and scuffed tan hiking boots. “You’ll feel better once you adjust to the lower oxygen level.”

He waved her through the portal, where a fire blazed on the living room grate. She hadn’t fathomed how cold southern California could be in late January, and hadn’t worn a coat over her cream silk blouse and tan dress slacks.

“Hot cocoa?” O’Malley suggested.

“Sure. Thanks.”

Pouring from a ceramic pitcher adorned with musical notes, her host - and employer - studied her with intense brown eyes, to the point she fidgeted on the unpretentious green love seat.

“Sorry,” he stated. “Recent photos don’t do you justice.”

“Like the one of me breaking my violin over Adolfo Carelli’s head?”

He nodded.

“If you know about my temper, why did you hire me?”

“Because an abuse of musical integrity inspired your anger. I’ve listened to Carelli’s recording of that piece. You were absolutely correct in pointing out his controversial interpretation for controversy’s sake.”

“The symphony on the verge of bankruptcy, he had to do something to gain attention.”

“Negative attention serves no practical purpose.” O’Malley gazed at the flames briefly. “Excuse me a moment. I was chopping wood when you arrived, and left the logs out back.”

Geri sipped the delightful, genuine chocolate in the hand-turned porcelain mug, amazed at the earthy surroundings. Pine floors were covered with braided area rugs, frames on the walls contained enlarged photos of scenic vistas.

Except for one directly above the teak spinet piano. Her initial assumption of a college diploma was quickly dispelled. She recognized scripted Latin, but couldn’t translate the words beyond, “Excommunication.”

Returning with an armload of firewood, O’Malley discovered her squinting at the signatures; his bootstep caused her to jump.

“I’m... sorry,” she gulped, flustered. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

He stacked his burden on the tiles near the carved walnut fireplace and threw an asymmetrical chunk of oak atop the bed of red coals, before closing the mesh metal screen. "If I didn't want people to see it, I wouldn't put it on display."

"You're proud of it?"

"Twenty years ago, I was an idealistic college graduate who decided to join the Franciscans so I could serve the poor. Well before my ordination to the priesthood, I rebelled at how my brother friars failed to served those in greatest need, and I spoke out publicly. I wrote articles, some of which were compiled into a book, displeasing both my Franciscan superiors and the majority of bishops. I was ordered to be silent, to let the status quo continue. In good conscience, I couldn't. So, they silenced me." He raised his glass of orange juice to the parchment in mock salute. "In a strange sort of way, that document confirmed there is no God to mete out justice or answer prayers."

"What did you do next?"

He led her to the love seat. "I'd always enjoyed music, and managed to join a punk rock band. Being good at math, too, and rather analytical, I took the few bucks I made each weekend playing gigs and invested in specific stocks. Within five years, I had more money than I could ever spend. I established SOSO."

"A strange name."

"An accurate name. You see, you will be concert master for an organization which performs at my pleasure. Once or twice a year, sometimes more, sometimes less. I compose most of the selections, but they also play the great masters."

"I can't take your money to sit around until you..."

"You won't be sitting around. The musicians rehearse every other Tuesday, for which they are well paid. They are in a constant state of readiness..."

"That's crazy!" Geri blurted out.

O'Malley laughed, a soothing sound. "Many people think so, but since we're not non-profit, and no donors dictate terms, I can do as I wish."

"What about ticket sales? You have to advertise..."

"Admission to the concerts is free."

Mind boggling.

He must've read her expression, still smiling. "One thing about having money, Geri. I can buy what I want, when I want..."

"Or buy who you want?"

"No, I don't believe in using people like some do disposable cups before tossing them to the side..."

"But, you believed I would come if you offered me a fat paycheck."

“To do a job, which I expect you to do well.” He crossed to the piano, rifled a stack of wire-bound score books. Opening one cover, he arranged it above the keyboard. “How would you execute this passage?”

He’d pointed to a series of roughly scratched notes half-way down the page. Geri studied the staves, caressing the white ivory hesitantly.

“Oh, that’s right,” supplied O’Malley, pulling a dusty violin case off the vacant bookshelf behind him.

“A Stradivarius!” Stunned by the treatment of such a valuable instrument, the new concert master reluctantly tuned the strings and tightened the bow. She ran a chromatic scale to warm up her fingers, then attacked the piece O’Malley had written.

He listened in triumph, beaming as the notes filled the room. “Yes, I made the right decision!”

Geri stopped at his shout.

“I can trust you to grasp the underlying emotions of my work, and stimulate the orchestra accordingly.”

“Might I ask where we’ll be rehearsing, or performing? It must be difficult to arrange for space based on periodic whims.”

“Not when I own the 1,200 seat auditorium.”

Laying aside the violin, she reclaimed her cup, too astounded to reply. Maintenance and taxes on such a building must be phenomenal, she pondered, and for it to sit empty most of the year...

“Oh, don’t fret at the waste, Geri.” He must be psychic, she decided. “I let high schools use it for student productions, and a community theatre troupe.”

“Good to know.”

“I’ve reserved you a room at the Hilton, and set an appointment with a rental agent, who’ll show you apartments I think you’ll like.” Their meeting had reached its conclusion, evidently. “The Mustang is yours, unless you’d like a Shelby version.”

“I thought...”

“Mike has trouble accepting when I buy things for people, without strings. All I ask is that you be careful driving down Satan’s Alley.”

“You know...”

“Of course. I carved the road into the side of the hill with the bulldozer myself, for the very reason that I don’t want paparazzi hounding me, or uninvited visitors pestering me. I dissuaded errant bikers one summer with my 12-gauge shotgun; they dragged the scrap metal behind them as they fled in panic.”

“You like being a hermit?”

“I’m no hermit, in any sense of the word, as you’ll learn when we have dinner tonight in town.”

Geri swallowed hard. The fringe benefit package for this job might include wheels, but not companionship. “I have unpacking to do...”

“You’ll be here the rest of your life. Unpacking can wait a day.”

Determined not to be swayed by O’Malley’s forthrightness, she declined once more.

“Fine,” he conceded. “Some other evening.”

At the door, a chill breeze caught her, and she shivered. He pulled a beat up parka off the coat rack. “Here. Until you can buy yourself something suitable to the climate.”

“I thought California was warm...”

“Not by a long shot. Not in the middle of winter.”

“Thanks.”

He waited on the stoop until she unlocked the Mustang. Its finely tuned engine revved, and she electronically rolled down the window.

“Mr. O’Malley,” she called.

“R.J.”

“Is there anything you want that you’ve never been able to buy?”

“You’re implying I try to buy people’s respect?”

She shrugged, her innermost thoughts exposed again.

“I don’t give a hang about people’s respect. I respect myself, and respect others. If they don’t respect me, that’s their problem.”

Tires kicked up stray bits of gravel as she spun the muscle car 180 degrees and headed toward sea level, utterly flabbergasted.

To put it mildly, she’d never met a man like R.J. O’Malley. She’d met tyrants, like Adolfo Carelli, or her former boss at the corrugated box factory. Male chauvinists, who didn’t think women knew anything, and should stay home having children. Or those who thought she wouldn’t mind being groped for a pay raise or promotion.

She navigated the last frightening turn before retracing her route to Los Angeles. O’Malley’s straight-forward honesty might still be a ploy to win her confidence, or convince her to let him have his way in all things. She would reserve judgment regarding his sincerity for awhile, at any rate. Proving her musical prowess would be easy, compared to how he’d have to prove himself to her.

The lavish hotel suite irritated her, better suited to a head of state or rock star. Within two days, she’d leased a modest studio off the beaten track - furnished

sparsely from thrift stores - near enough to the SOSO auditorium she wouldn't have to fight rush hour gridlock.

Thursday afternoon, she toured the facility with Mike Wiley, awed by near perfect acoustics and posh seating. Flats from a recent amateur production of what looked to be *H.M.S. Pinafore* were propped against the rear stage wall, but that wouldn't interfere with rehearsal, for which a cadre of maintenance workers were preparing.

"Does R.J. attend rehearsals?" she queried from the conductor's podium.

"Only the night before a performance."

"So, I'm free to handle things the way I choose?"

"I didn't say that."

Geri eyed Wiley, curious.

"You didn't ask whether R.J. monitors rehearsals, which he does. He doesn't like social media, texting, smart phones and all that. But he does have a remote link to the sound system here, through which he can hear every note..."

"Giving feedback as we go?"

"No. Usually within ten minutes of dismissing the musicians, he'll ring your cell."

Did O'Malley realize she'd worked assembling computers for the better part of ten years, and could easily disconnect the link? The idea of big brother always listening...

"Doesn't he trust me?"

"Of course, he does. He simply has his own ideas of how music should be presented."

Made sense, actually, but still disturbing.

A ragged assortment of strings, brass and woodwinds trickled in during the next hour. Each greeted her warmly; they'd obviously been warned about her. Once in tune, she led them through a bit of Mozart and some Bach, finishing with Gershwin's *Concerto in F*, a personal favorite.

She forgot about O'Malley until a silent vibration in her purple cardigan sweater pocket provided a reminder.

"Just one comment, Geri," he stated pleasantly. "Your language is a bit... vulgar."

"I grew up with four older brothers."

"As did I. Because I encourage my musicians to dress comfortably doesn't mean they're not professionals. And, by how you put them through their paces, you must agree with me. Each one is paid \$20,000 per year to fulfill certain duties, and is due the respect of those talents."

“True. I’ll be more careful in future.”

“Dinner tonight?”

“No, thanks.”

“They serve excellent chili dogs down the block at Rocco’s.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

That he’d dug into her background so deeply to track her favorite foods jarred Geri’s train of thought. He’d disconnected before she could react.

This congenial routine continued for six months, until her cell rattled the nightstand beside her bed at 3:00 one rainy Tuesday morning.

After dropping the device twice, she managed to bring it to her ear, grumbling, “Hello?”

“The concert will be Sunday week. Wiley will handle P.R. and notify the crew. Pick up the score before noon.”

Twelve days to prep the orchestra on a brand new, never before heard concerto? She’d come to love how easily the group shifted from classical to contemporary, baroque to mediaeval. It shouldn’t be too difficult to break them in... she hoped, staring at the ceiling.

She alighted from the Mustang atop Satan’s Alley closer to 1:00 that afternoon. An accident on I-405 had turned the freeway into a parking lot for two hours. Her knock unanswered, she wondered where O’Malley might be hiding.

No one chopping wood; the muddy, mulched path leading to an even higher ridge appeared untraveled. She decided not to wait, storm clouds gathering to the west, when a black leather-clad form buzzed up the asphalt track on a sporty BMW motorcycle.

He dropped the kickstand so close to her bumper, she feared he might’ve scratched the waxed black paint.

“She’s fine,” he hailed, shedding his helmet and jerking a backpack off squarish shoulders. “You been here long? I ran out of paper to print the oboe parts.”

Inside, the fire had died enough the chill encompassed them still. “Throw on another log,” O’Malley directed, nimbly pulling three reams from the zippered canvas bag.

She helped him sort pages, punch holes and slip the sheets into ring binders - too many to fit in her trunk. “Why didn’t you have Mike or the office staff do this?” she wondered.

“I did, a couple years ago. They got the movements in the wrong order. Our first rehearsal sounded like discontented cats.”

“These aren’t handwritten...”

“I do the draft in pencil, so I can erase quickly. Once I’m happy with it, I run it through the computer.”

“Does the computer generate audio output?”

“Nope. I have it all in here.” He tapped his temple and winked.

“How will I...”

“I’ll play it for you... after lunch. I’m starving.”

Geri hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and her stomach concurred with O’Malley. “What’s in the ‘fridge?”

“Nothing you’d like. We’ll head into town...”

“I...”

“Better roll up the windows on your car. It’s starting to rain.”

The concert master rushed outside, fumbling for the keychain in her coat pocket. Unlocking the Mustang’s doors, she jammed buttons to raise the glass, the driver’s seat already well soaked.

O’Malley, meanwhile, had stripped off his chaps and wheeled the BMW into the garage, where a low, sleek red Ferrari Testarossa made Geri’s mouth water.

“Climb in,” her host instructed.

He took hair-pin curves twice as fast as she had - from practice, no doubt, she mused. Experience gave him the advantage over slow-moving major thoroughfares, too. They shot along side streets, hitting the Coast Highway in short order.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

“You respect frankness in other others, R.J, so I’ll speak plainly: I don’t like being kept in the dark,” objected Geri.

“Fine. It’s a little grill between Malibu and Santa Barbara. Best steaks this side of heaven, cooked to perfection, no frills.”

She didn’t like her meat smothered with onions, or mushrooms, or sauces. And, two hours later, she contentedly laid the plaid cloth napkin across her empty plate.

“I was right, eh?” he smirked.

“Yes, thanks.”

“Dessert?”

“God, no. I’ll be good until tomorrow.”

He escorted her outdoors, after tipping the waiter \$100. Breathing fresh salt air, he flexed his flannel covered arms.

Geri admitted to herself she liked his physique and his smile. As the sun descended over the ocean, the Ferrari practically raced back to O'Malley's house.

From that elevation, dusk fell on a peaceful world. A red-tailed hawk circled lazily above the pines. The pair briefly enjoyed a painted sky, before a sudden shower drove them under cover.

O'Malley offered her a bath towel to dry her face and hair, wrapping one around his own shoulders. "Come on," he urged, leading her from the living room toward the rear of the dwelling.

What should have been the second bedroom door opened onto an elaborate recording studio, sound system capable of shaking the building apart. Geri couldn't help but be impressed.

Running his fingers over the main console, music filled the chamber - the new concerto, with full orchestra.

"You... had them play it already?"

"No." He indicated a high-end keyboard. "I can program that to become any instrument I choose. I input all the parts, then mix the tracks."

"Phenomenal!"

"More fun than anything."

"You know what the movements remind me of?"

He didn't respond, waiting.

"Sunrise."

"Very perceptive. I wrote most mornings, while I watched dawn break through the picture window."

"I noticed the conductor's score marked Opus 32. How long..."

"This one? Since last spring. Or, if you mean overall, since I was a kid."

"You could be famous..."

O'Malley switched off the power. "It's not about fame, or money, for that matter. If I wanted fame, I'd live in Beverly Hills and grant interviews. Money, I have plenty. An hour a day manipulating my stocks, and I can support not only 100 musicians, but staff and stage crew, and assorted charitable organizations."

He built a fresh fire on the living room grate. "Hot cocoa?"

Stars visible beyond the glass confirmed the late hour. "I'd better be going."

"You have a death wish?"

"Huh?"

"You can't drive Satan's Alley in the dark. I don't even try."

"You mean, I'm stuck here for the night?"

“No, you can leave if you really feel the need. Otherwise, you’re welcome to stay.”

“I... don’t have any clothes.”

Dropping onto the cushions of a wing-back armchair, he chuckled. “Don’t think you’re in any danger from me. This place wasn’t designed for habitation by two people. Peek into the bedroom, and you’ll find a twin bed, seldom made. Besides, the games men and women play to attract each other bore me. You accused me of buying who I wanted, but I’ve never done that. I would respect a woman enough to tell her I believe her my equal, and show her I meant it.”

“Have you had that opportunity?” asked Geri, warming her hands at the hearth.

“Not until now.”

The brunette head whipped toward him, startled.

“Not that such an interaction entails marriage. Two equals, comfortable in their own skins, shouldn’t require such... mundane conventions.”

“I agree.”

“Good.” O’Malley yawned. “I’ve a spare set of sweats, if you want to use them as pajamas. Personally, I sleep in boxers.”

“That’ll... be fine.”

While her host retired to his modest quarters, Geri huddled on the love seat, mulling over his behavior. His reasons for constructing a domicile far from humanity, doing as he pleased, buying what he pleased, and expressing himself so bluntly her heart still pounded...

She’d never had that luxury, as a working stiff struggling to survive on a modest income.

The salary O’Malley was paying her, and the perks of his generosity, would free her from the conventions he, too, abhorred. She could expose the politics behind many community orchestras, the deals made to secure donations, while musical integrity was compromised.

Then again, what good would it do? The public really didn’t care. What they saw on stage, they enjoyed, then returned to their mundane existence.

Changing the established order was a job for the Don Quixotes of the world.

Better just to live, interfering with no one, permitting no one to interfere with that inner peace so difficult to attain.

She maneuvered a rather large hunk of wood onto dying embers; fire irons clattered to the floor.

O’Malley shuffled groggily into the living room. “You still awake?”

“Thinking.”

“You’ve got a busy day tomorrow, with the first rehearsal.”

“I know. I...” She got a glimpse of his mostly naked body in the firelight, and her jaw dropped.

“What?”

“I...”

“Come to bed.”

He clasped her calloused hand and drew her down the hall.

Geri’s life from that moment changed dramatically. She drove to her apartment late morning, showering and changing into red turtleneck and jeans. Delivering scores to the auditorium, she handed them to each musician personally upon arrival. An atmosphere of excitement consumed the ensemble, and bringing the concerto to performance level proved a true joy for the concert master.

O’Malley’s attitude and approach altered not one whit. Each evening, they discussed the flaws and strengths of the session, and Geri felt no compulsion to drive up Satan’s Alley, or anxiety when he didn’t call exactly on time.

Sunday afternoon, a capacity crowd filled the seats, treated to not only the new composition, but Gershwin, Brahms and Saint-Saens. From her place as first violinist, Geri observed O’Malley consumed by the music, thrashing around on the podium in a Lakers jersey and jogging pants. The standing ovation applauding his concerto validated the music’s excellence, rather than the performers’ casual attire.

To celebrate, O’Malley invited Geri to dinner at a fancy Hollywood bistro. Leaving the Ferrari in a valet’s charge, they passed a cordon of paparazzi, cameras flashing like strobe lights. Photographers recognized the virtual recluse; he despised them.

Escorted to a reserved table - despite the requirement of suit and tie, neither of which R.J. owned, Geri had learned - she whispered, “I thought you might punch the guy who shoved his lens in your face.”

“No need.” Perusing the wine list, he revealed a small plastic box from his windbreaker pocket. “My defense against the masses.”

“What is it?”

“I invented it in high school, as a joke. It emits an electronic damping field, which drains the batteries on any device within 50 feet. Right now, three score idiots are pacing the sidewalk wondering why their equipment went dead.”

Together they laughed.

“You could market that to actors and directors...” Geri hinted.

“If they go out every night, partying and deliberately putting themselves in the public eye, they deserve what they get. This, for us, is a special occasion. We deserve our privacy.”

A red-clad waiter greeted them, taking their order and departing quietly.

O’Malley entwined his fingers through Geri’s. “I want to tell you how proud I am of you, and grateful.”

“Why?” she countered.

“Your dedication and determination are incredible. You never went off on the musicians who came late, or weren’t prepared. Where I can’t tolerate people’s imperfections, you have gifts of patience and kindness.”

“Not really. Like my swearing, it’s become a habit. I long since comprehended humanity is greatly flawed, and no amount of effort will change that, if each individual won’t change himself.”

“Amen.”

Geri prodded, “Are you going to drive up Satan’s Alley tonight?”

“No, I have a reservation at the Hilton.”

“You could... always come home with me.”

“Or, you could share the suite with me.”

Their salads were placed on the cream linen tablecloth.

“And, the orchestra?” puzzled Geri. “You have a new project?”

R.J. O’Malley showed her his napkin, on which he’d doodled two staves and a series of musical notes. “As always, on to the next.”