

One Day, I Will Die

By Sonny Kohet

“Sometimes we make life more complicated than we need to. We focus on the wrong things.”

Frankie Farrington.

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For Art's Sake

When he was seven years old, Art knew he was going to die.

His death was inevitable.

Art took in his surroundings. *Shades of gray*. Lighter on the walls, darker on the venetian blinds against the window, the light seeping through highlighted the dust on them. Dark gray commercial carpet tiles on the floor.

A voice demanded his attention.

“Aryeh, do you understand what I am telling you?”

The name sounded foreign to him. He'd written it countless times, but it had been a lifetime since he'd heard it spoken.

“Yes.”

The last time he'd heard his name spoken was when he'd married Ruth ‘until death do us part.’

He remembered something his Papa used to say. *Knowing is not doing*.

Art had never thought about what he'd do with his life. From birth, it was laid out before him. He'd take over the family business from Papa. A destiny he'd never questioned. Unlike his son, Myron, he'd not been educated to do anything else.

He studied the man sitting across from him, noticing how the gray Formica desk almost matched his lab coat. *Why is everything gray?*

He could see concern in the doctor's steel-gray eyes, despite the light reflected on his thick, black-rimmed glasses. A frown created a deep furrow in his brow, causing the dense gray and black eyebrows to knit together.

Art felt sorry for the doctor. Delivering bad news was not a task to be taken lightly.

“It changes nothing,” Art lied. “I'll call you.”

They stood, and the doctor offered his hand. Art shook it firmly in an effort to underline his well-being.

“Give me two days...”

“Don't leave it longer,” the doctor said with the authority of someone accustomed to being listened to.

Art shrugged. “It's not like there's anything you can do.”

Art stepped out of the building, the busy world bustling around him. The sun warmed his face. *Didn't realize I was so cold*.

He closed his eyes and listened. Traffic: light and heavy vehicles contributing to the symphony of idling and engaged engines, punctuated by an occasional squeal of tires or a blaring horn. *Always love the sound of the city, my city*. It was the only life he'd known.

He opened his eyes and glanced at the bus stop. *I'll walk*.

Art strolled towards home, allowing himself to take in every detail as if it was the first or last time he'd walk these streets. He stopped beside every eatery, pretzel or hotdog stand he passed, taking a moment to inhale the sweet, salty, spicy scent of the city.

Art considered the elevated cross-town expressway. The click clack of the cars speeding over expansion joints was reminiscent of a train hurtling down the track. *I always thought they should've built an elevated rail system instead.*

The whine of a bus's engine faded as it moved away, sounding like it was disappearing into a tunnel.

Art stopped at the front of one of his buildings and caressed the granite blocks of its façade, appreciating the texture of stone cut long before he was born. *Here before I was and will be here long after I've gone.*

His Zeyde had acquired the nineteenth century building when his Papa was a boy. One day it would belong to his Aynikl, Melanie. He gazed at the building. It made him feel immortal.

He wasn't.

Art resumed his stroll. *No hurry. I suppose I'd better plan what to do with my life. A new experience for Art. Never too old to have a new experience.*

He shook his head; he didn't know where to start. *I'll tell them on Sabbath.*

Ruth had first prepared Sabbath dinner with her Bubbe when she was five years old. She hadn't missed preparing it since. Not once in all the ensuing decades would she be found anywhere else on the Sabbath, but in the kitchen.

Some people would've become bored long ago, but not Ruth. It was the highlight of her week.

Her life had been far from boring, but Sabbath was special. It was her time to catch up with family. Even when it had only been her and Art, she'd loved spending the day with her husband.

It was the day they discussed, collaborated, and shared their life. No subject was off limits, and no judgement. It meant they were always engaged with each other's lives.

Before Myron and Judy married, she'd become part of the family and their tradition. They saw her as a daughter rather than a daughter-in-law.

Since Melanie joined their family, she always came for Sabbath with her Papa on Friday before sunset, which gave her the opportunity to bond with her Bubbe Ruth.

Normally, Melanie would help prepare dinner, but that day, Art was telling her stories about his childhood.

"Sorry Bubbe," she said, "I don't know why, but it feels important I spend time with Zeyde today."

Ruth smiled when the front door opened as Judy arrived. She still arrived on Saturday, having spent Friday night on her date with Ali.

She smiled again as she heard Myron greet his wife as he'd done every Saturday since Judy joined the family.

"How was your date?" Myron asked.

"Pleasant. Ali turned her phone off so Rae couldn't ruin it like last week."

“It’s natural for Rae to be insecure.”

“I told her she has nothing to worry about,” Judy said. “Ali and I never sleep together.”

“She’d feel less threatened if you did,” he said. “It’s Ali’s heart she wants.”

“That’s what she said.”

“We can control our actions, far easier than we can control our emotions.”

“Monica understood. We’re waiting until we can be together.”

“Rae’s not Monica.”

“That’s for sure.”

Judy entered the kitchen, leaving Myron to take her overnight bag to their room. She hugged Ruth and kissed her cheek.

“Hello Mama. Where’s your assistant?”

“Hi Judy. She’s listening to Zeyde tell her stories of his childhood. More interesting than peeling potatoes, apparently.”

Judy smiled, picked up a potato, and began peeling.

After dinner, Art studied his family. More than his buildings, they were the culmination of his life. He was proud of them, and he supposed by extension, proud of himself.

“I have something to tell you, and I can’t think of an easy way to say it.” He glanced at the faces of his family, looking at him expectantly. He swallowed the lump in his throat and continued. “I have pancreatic cancer. It’s malignant and there is nothing to be done. I have around six months left.”

With a simultaneous sharp intake of breath, Judy and Ruth exchanged a glance. Ruth was about to say something, but Art shook his head.

He glanced at Judy. Her eyes were full of questions, but she wouldn’t ask them until he finished talking, and only if a question remained unanswered.

He turned his attention to Myron, who was assessing him. Myron was analyzing the situation. He’d be identifying all the pieces and putting them together to join the dots before offering his opinion.

Art moved his chair back from the table and adjusted his position, ready to receive Melanie, who was climbing onto his lap with her arms around his neck.

“Oh Zeyde...” was all she could manage before her tears consumed her.

He kissed her gently on the forehead.

“Didn’t you tell me you were too big to be climbing on peoples’ laps?”

She hugged him tighter and sobbed loudly.

“It’s alright Princess,” he said. “I knew this day was coming when I was half your age, and now it’s come. All of us have a time, and this is mine.”

Ruth wiped away a tear. He smiled. If there was one thing he knew better than his buildings, it was his family.

“It’s not time for grieving. That will come, but not yet. I don’t want to spend my last weeks surrounded by grief.”

Ruth nodded her agreement and simpered.

“Before you ask,” he said, looking at his son and daughter-in-law, more like a daughter in his heart, “I’ve had every test imaginable. It’s inoperable. A done deal. The way I figure it, I could’ve been hit by a bus, and it would be over. Given the choice, I’d prefer to be given notice. I still have some living to do.”

Judy was focused intently on his eyes. He frowned. *Frank Farrington. She’s reading my eyes.*

He smiled. “You can see I’m at peace, Judy.”

“Yes Papa,” she whispered.

Melanie had stopped crying and was staring at him just a few inches from his face.

“Princess, could you do something for me?”

“Yes, Zeyde,” she said, her voice quieter than her mother’s.

“Will you ask your angel to guide me when the time comes? Then you’ll know I’ll reach my new home safely.”

“I’m sure he will, Zeyde.”

Myron spoke. “What’s your plan, Papa?”

He focused on his son. *Still analyzing and looking for all the pieces.*

“You were always going to take over the family business. Nothing has changed. A little sooner than expected, is all. I know you don’t want to handle it yourself and I’ve always respected your choice. It’ll be in excellent hands with Burt and your property company. I’ve no concern about our legacy. But I don’t want to hand it over to strangers. I want to hand it over to you personally. Father to son like my Papa did to me and Zeyde did to him.”

“Yes Papa. Burt needs a holiday. He hasn’t taken one since his wife passed. I’ll send him to Europe for an extended holiday. He’s going to be busy when he gets back.”

Art nodded.

Judy squeezed Myron’s hand.

Art looked at Ruth. “I’ve always dreamed of seeing Jerusalem with my girl.”

“I’d like that.” She smiled.

“I don’t want to be surrounded by sadness in my last few weeks and don’t want you pussyfooting around me and changing the subject when I enter the room. Life goes on as normal, and my death is now part of our normal. If anything needs to be spoken about, we talk about it as a family, as we always have.”

“Of course, Art,” Ruth said.

“And no fussing and asking me how I am every five minutes. If I’m feeling poorly, I’ll tell you.”

The next day, after they’d arrived home, and Melanie was in bed, Myron held his wife, buried his head in her shoulder and cried.

Judy had never seen Myron cry.

Rae of Sunshine

Rae felt her lover shudder and heard her moan as the orgasm washed over her body in waves.

After the trembling subsided and the body stilled, the moans became a whimper, ending with a sigh. Rae extracted herself from between her lover's thighs and settled on her side of the bed.

She lay on her back, placed her hands under her head, and stared at the ceiling. *Why?*

A solitary tear escaped the corner of her eye, tickling slightly as it made its way into her ear.

Ali eased onto her side, a contented smile on her face, her body still buzzing from her orgasm, and looked at Rae.

She rolled her eyes. *Again.*

Gravity caused Rae's breasts to fall on either side of her and her stomach to flatten. Ali liked Rae's soft mid-section. It was a comfortable pillow.

Other than light red pubic hair which seemed to glow in the morning light, Rae reminded Ali of Sara, the second woman she'd had a relationship with, two decades ago.

She reached out and touched Rae's arm, who jerked away from her.

"What is it?" Ali asked, despite knowing the answer.

"I know you were wishing it was *her*."

That's true. "That's not true," she said.

"Then what were you thinking?"

About Judy. "I wasn't thinking anything. I was enjoying your sensational tongue."

"You always seem to have deeper orgasms after you've been out with *her*."

Yes. "You're imagining it. You're obsessed with Judy. If I do, it's because you put in extra effort. You think you need to compete with her."

"No. You're the one who's obsessed with her. I *really* don't know what you see in the bitch. I'm twice the woman she is," Rae said, rolling on her side and raising herself on one elbow to focus on Ali. "Why would I need to compete with her?"

"You knew when we got together that Judy and I date every Friday night, but that's all it is, and it's not going to change. I made no secret of it. I've always been open with you."

"And what? I'm supposed to sit at home meekly like Myron does while you're dating *Miss Perfect*?"

"I never said that." Ali stiffened. "You can do whatever you want on Friday nights."

"Perhaps I should go to bars and pick up girls."

Ali shrugged. "If that's what you want."

"It wouldn't bother *you* if I did, would it?"

"No, why would it?"

“Are you saying you’d be okay if I went chasing stray girls?”

Ali shrugged again. “If that’s what you want.”

“So, you’re saying *you* want to go out chasing girls?”

Ali rolled her eyes. “No.”

“That’s right, you’ve already fucked *every dyke* in the city!”

“Not *every* dyke.”

“And now there’s only one pussy you’re interested in.”

“Yes. Yours.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’m going to have a shower.” Ali got up and put her gown on. “I’m not going to have this argument every Saturday. I want to be with you, Rae. I date Judy Friday nights, but I always come home to you. If you want to be with me, you’re gonna have to deal with it.”

I can’t give Judy up. Still waiting on the word from Myron.

Ali stepped into the shower, allowing the water to wash over her.

I miss Monica. She understood.

Monica had gotten Charlie off to school. Frankie was away at university. She heard Ali turn the shower off and sighed. *Not looking forward to this.*

She placed the breakfast she’d prepared, double cheese and mustard on toast, the way Ali liked it, on the table. Poured their coffees and stood by the door, waiting.

Monica’s heart and her breathing were racing and erratic. Conflicted emotions were building behind her eyes. *She’ll understand, and make it easy, but I don’t want to do this. I must, no choice. Can’t have everything, that’s not for the likes of me. That’s for Ali and Judy. Why can’t I hate Judy?*

Ali was tying her dressing gown as she entered the kitchen. Monica stepped to her, slid her hands inside the gown before Ali tied it, and pulled her lover close. Tears spilled from Monica’s eyes as her lips found Ali’s.

“Hey, hey. Moni, what is it?” Ali asked. “What’s happened?”

Monica clung to Ali, sobbed loudly, and buried her face into Ali’s shoulder. “Nothing’s happened,” she whispered. “Hold me a minute.”

She wiped her face against Ali’s gown, lightly kissed her cheek, and said, “I made breakfast, your favorite.”

Ali glanced at the table. “That’s hardly my favorite breakfast.” She focused her gaze on Monica’s legs.

Monica’s lips curled into a smile, despite herself. “All day breakfast, although it’s been a long time since you’ve eaten it all day.”

“Busy,” Ali said. “Lack of time, not lack of desire.”

“Eat, before it gets cold,” Monica said as they sat at the table.

Ali cut a little cheese on toast and placed it in her mouth. She closed her eyes while she ate. "Delicious," she said. "Now talk to me. What's this about, Moni?"

"I love you, Ali."

"I can feel that, but?"

"I met someone who can give me what you can't."

"A commitment?"

"More than that. She wants to settle down, have kids. I never wanted that until I met you. Being with you has been the happiest time of my life, but it's shown me what it means to have a wife and kids. If we could have that..."

"We have that, Moni."

"No, we're pretending. It's temporary. I need something more than being on borrowed time with a borrowed woman, even if you are the finest lady I've ever known."

"Are you going to move in with her?"

"More than that," Monica said. Her breathing and pulse calmed. "We're moving to Sapphire City."

"She wants you to leave the city?"

"No. That's my condition. I couldn't honor a commitment to her if I lived in the same city as you. I couldn't keep away from you."

"Then why are you leaving?"

"I told you. To settle down with a wife and kids. I have the opportunity now. If I wait until you, Myron and Judy decide it's time, I may not have the opportunity and I'll be left alone. I don't want that."

"I want you to be happy, Monica. I'm not going to make it difficult for you, but I don't want to lose you entirely. I couldn't bear that."

"You won't," Monica said. "We'll keep in touch and talk a lot. I'll come back and visit. I have the boys on social media. I wish they were my boys, our sons. I wish you could be my wife."

"Moni, I..."

"I have no regrets. You were honest. I knew time would take care of the future, and it has, albeit not in the way I hoped."

"When will you leave?"

"The weekend. We have a few more days together, and I need to talk to Charlie."

"What now?"

"Now, I have a second breakfast with your name on it if you..."

"I could eat."

A few weeks after Monica left, Ali met Rae.

After Charlie went to college, she found she was staying at Rae's apartment most nights. It was convenient to walk to work at Dancer's Bistro, and eventually she moved in.

She'd hoped Rae would replace Monica, but Rae couldn't accept Judy. She hated her, and Ali hated Rae's drama. *I need to talk to Myron. Melanie's old enough now.*

Washed and dried, Ali returned to the bedroom and began dressing. Rae's eyes were red. Ali sighed loudly and shook her head.

"I wish you'd sleep with her and get it over with," Rae said. "Maybe, then you'd realise she ain't so fucking special, which she's not."

"That's not going to happen. Agreements have been reached."

"I'm sure Myron wouldn't mind. I reckon he fantasizes about watching you two together."

You have no idea. She'd never explained the relationship with herself, Judy and Myron to Rae, who wouldn't have understood. *I've been selfish where Rae's concerned, and I'm getting what I deserve.*

"Don't be ridiculous," Ali said.

Ali finished dressing. She smiled when she noticed Rae watching her. "Come on Rae, get up and I'll make you breakfast."

She left the bedroom and headed to the kitchen. *Need a coffee.*

Ali placed coffee into the Italian percolator. She loved the aroma of the John Farrington Blend brewing. A popular blend developed by her ex-husband, and she owned a small piece of the rights with Coffee Roasters who sold the blend.

She sat at the table, savoring each sip of her coffee. *Need to sit down with Judy and Myron. Can't tolerate this bitchiness much longer.*

Rae, naked, wandered into the kitchen. Ali smiled as she watched Rae's unsupported breasts bouncing independently. She studied Rae's soft stomach, which provided an awning for her golden-red pubic hair. She directed her gaze upward to her lover's tangled shoulder length hair. It still surprised Ali that Rae's hair and pubic hair were exactly the same color. In Ali's experience, there was usually at least a difference in shade.

Rae wasn't smiling. Her dark brown eyes, which had taken Ali by surprise because she'd believed that redheads always had blue eyes, were red from crying. The eyes may have been unexpected, but the freckles weren't.

"I'll make breakfast when I've finished my coffee."

"No hurry, I'm gonna shower and wash your stink out of my hair."

"That's hardly my fault."

Rae glared at her.

"Go shower and I'll make something special for breakfast."

"I already had something special for breakfast."

Ali smiled. She could sense a softening in Rae, as her body lost a little of its tension.

Rae turned the shower on and grabbed a handful of her hair, which she directed under her nose. She inhaled deeply. *Love her scent.*

She sighed. Rae relaxed as she stepped into the shower and the water wet her hair. She applied shampoo. *Everything would be perfect if it wasn't for fucking Judy.*

Had we met in different circumstances, I might have liked her. I would've wanted to bed her; she's an attractive woman.

However, Ali's infatuation meant that Rae sought flaws to criticise. Despite Ali's and Judy's assurances, she felt threatened by Judy. It wasn't all her insecurities. If the opportunity presented itself, Ali would dump her in a heartbeat to be with Judy. It was a reality she had to live with.

As she washed herself, she twitched as her hand rubbed between her legs. *My fault if I hadn't been such a bitch, she would've attended to that.*

In the bedroom dressing, Rae inhaled the sweet aroma of breakfast being prepared. *Damn, that smells good. Sweet taste and a superb cook. If she wasn't hung up on fucking Judy...*

Rae walked into the kitchen. Their breakfast was on the table, her favorite, blueberry pancakes and maple syrup, and a cup of that wonderful coffee.

She smiled. *This is the problem. She'd be a perfect wife... except for...*

"My favorite breakfast, thank you."

"I thought I was your favorite breakfast."

"Oh, you are... you gave me both my favorite breakfasts in one morning."

If only...

They ate in a relaxed silence. The tension had vanished somewhere between Rae's shower and Ali's breakfast.

After breakfast, Ali said, "Better get off to work, need to get next week's staff roster done."

"Okay darling."

Ali was manager and part owner of Dancer's Bistro, a restaurant in Docklands, a trendy area of the city. Therein was part of the problem, as far as Rae was concerned. Judy and Myron were the major investors in the restaurant, Ali and Judy's lives were intertwined at all levels.

They were both part of the Farrington family. Ali had been married to John, but Rae never quite understood how Judy was part of the family, something to do with Judy's friendship with the elder brother Frank, who'd died a few years back.

Rae stood, took a step to Ali, wrapped her arms around her and kissed her.

"I'm sorry. I was such a bitch."

"We're fine. Why don't you come have dinner with me at Dancer's? I'll have Darnell make us something special."

"I'd like that."

"Seven?"

Rae nodded and held Ali tighter.

"Sometimes," she whispered. "I hate myself for loving you."

"That's a line from Joan Jett," Ali said. "Think of something original."

Ali squeezed her hand.

Rae cleaned away the breakfast dishes, went to her office and sat at the computer with a fresh cup of coffee.

She'd sold her antique business shortly after meeting Ali. After a break, she was looking for a new opportunity, partly so she had something to do other than dwell on Ali and Judy.

She browsed the notice board on the Antique Traders Association website. An advertisement for an antique business for sale in San Francisco caught her eye.

That's the answer. If we're going to make it, I gotta get her away from here. Doubt she'll leave the city and Judy, but I'll go with or without her. It'll hurt if Ali won't come with me, but I'm going. I won't be anybody's second choice.

If Ali came with her, it would mean she chose Rae over Judy.

Rae completed and submitted the expression of interest.

Nothing to do now but wait.

Mouse

Mouse tentatively opened the door and looked both ways into the dirty service lane between buildings. *No one.*

He stepped into the shadows and screwed his face up in disgust. Nothing but dirt and piles of rubbish. A stinking old sofa, left out in the weather for years, a broken table lamp, an abandoned bike with a broken chain and deflated tires, and bags of household trash, covered with what seemed to be an inch of dirt.

A rank stench rose from the garbage, intermingled with a decaying carcass of a cat, and the unmistakable scent of stale piss. *People are disgusting creatures.*

Mouse stepped quietly along the service lane, pulse racing, senses heightened. Vision and hearing attuned for anything different.

He stopped beside an alcove that led to the locked door of an empty shop. The door hadn't been opened in a dozen years, judging by the buildup of dirt. He looked around again, making sure no one had wandered into the lane. He glanced up at the dirty windows. No one ever opened them or looked out from what he'd observed. Nobody had entered the lane, and nothing had changed in the weeks he'd been observing it. *All quiet.*

Mouse stepped into the alcove, down two steps to the door. He reached up to the ledge above the door and retrieved a medium-sized zip-lock bag containing four items. His glasses, a small burlap bag, a can of lighter fluid, and a box of matches.

He removed his disposable hazmat overalls and dropped them on the ground. They were a little damp, but stiffening as Six's body fluid dried.

He wasn't far from the hospital, so nobody would pay attention to a lab worker who hadn't removed his protective clothing. He'd seen them step out for a smoke or to buy lunch sometimes. *Don't want to be noticed.*

Six had been disappointing. *Too loose and wet. Even her fear didn't tighten her up.* He shook his head; he needed to focus on what he was doing. *Shouldn't hang around too long.*

He unzipped his fly, removed his condom, took a tissue from his pocket, and wiped himself clean. The condom and tissue he threw on the overalls. He rolled down his left surgical glove and extracted the blade he'd slipped between the two gloves. He dropped the blade as he called it, even though it was a cut-throat razor into the burlap bag, wrapped it and tied it, before slipping it into his pocket.

After Mouse finished removing the outer left glove, he removed the right, which he threw on the pile of discarded items. He squirted lighter fluid on the pile and screwed his nose up at the smell. His paper cap and surgical mask were next, both landed on the pile. Then it was the outer shoe covers. The inner ones he left in place. *Don't want to leave footprints.*

He stepped back, then struck a match and threw it onto the pile, which caught fire with a whoosh of flame. Mouse smiled. *Love that sound.*

He was momentarily lost in the experience, enjoying the colourful display of the flames and the heat from the fire. The acrid smell he didn't like so much, but at least it disguised the stench of the alley. He stared at the blaze until it burned itself out, leaving nothing but a small puddle of molten something.

If forensics worked out what it was, which he doubted, he didn't believe they'd find anything useful. Just another piece of unidentifiable refuse.

Satisfied with his work and feeling elated, he shoved his hands in his pockets along with the lighter fluid, matches, and blade. Reaching the entrance to the alley, he made sure no one was watching and quickly darted out. Like a mouse, no one would know he'd been there.

Mouse walked head down, hands in pockets. Another nondescript person no one would pay attention to. He hastened, without appearing to do so. This was the most dangerous time. He had evidence in his possession.

He headed home via the river, as he always did after an encounter. Mouse ducked down a small service road, removed his hands from his pockets, pulled off the inner gloves and discarded them in an industrial trash bin, which his observations confirmed was emptied daily.

Mouse continued down the service road to its end. It was a shortcut saving him a walk around the corner. Another block covered and one more to go. He stopped beside a public trash can. Made a pantomime of looking at his feet. Cursed with an exaggerated movement of his head. "Fuck it!"

He bent down and removed the inner shoe covers and threw them in the trash. He was, for the benefit of anybody watching, a lab worker who'd forgotten to remove his shoe covers.

Heart pounding, Mouse reached the bridge a few minutes later. He wasn't out of danger yet.

Halfway across the bridge, on the pedestrian walkway, he stopped and gazed over the river. Nothing unusual in somebody stopping to appreciate the view. He discretely slid the burlap bag containing the blade from his pocket and dropped it between the railings. He smiled when his package hit the water and imagined the weight of the razor dragging it down to the riverbed, to lie on the bottom with the other five blades he'd disposed of this way.

Mouse relaxed. The danger had passed. He carried no evidence on his person. Mouse watched a tourist sightseeing boat as it rounded the bend until it disappeared under the bridge. He wanted to make sure he did nothing suspicious.

Hands in his pockets, head down, he made his way home.

Mouse entered his mother's apartment.

She'd been gone over fifteen years, and he still called his home his mother's apartment. He'd changed nothing. The furniture was dark, and wooden—he didn't know the type of wood—framed with a lemon and pink floral material. He didn't know what the material was, perhaps wool. The furniture in the house matched, including the bed in his mother's room, with the bed head having the same floral pattern inlay as the living and dining room furniture.

Mouse supposed his parents purchased a household package at some point, three seat sofa, two armchairs, coffee table, dining table and six chairs, double bed with two bedside tables, a wardrobe and a dressing table.

It was nearly forty years old, but in excellent condition because his mother had taken care of it. The furniture he'd grown up with.

He went into his own room. A blond wood grain laminated world. Single bed, wardrobe, desk and bedside table. His world, and the only world he'd known. The matches and lighter fuel he placed in his desk drawer. He undressed, took his clothes to the laundry,

placed them in the machine with washing powder and bleach, and turned on a full cycle, the first of three. He didn't want to risk any stray specks of forensic evidence.

Next, he showered, the steaming hot water stung his skin.

Now feeling clean, he went to his mother's room, opened the draws in the dressing table, selected her silky underwear, panties, bra and full slip. He turned to the wardrobe and chose a pale blue dress.

Mouse glimpsed his reflection in the mirror, but saw his mother. He crawled into her bed. The only time he used her bed was on days when he'd had an encounter. He slid his hand up his dress, and inside his panties, closed his eyes and relived his encounter with Six.

Mouse took the final step, which would bring him in contact with Six. He'd waited a step inside the alley. He knew what time she'd pass. Before she realised what was happening or that anything was happening, his blade settled at her throat, pressing hard enough that she'd feel it.

"Make a sound and I'll cut your throat right here. If you don't want to die, walk into the alley and before you know it, everything will be over, just a memory."

Six complied, they always did, hopeful that whatever was going to happen would be over quickly. Her breathing quickened, and her body tensed as panic consumed her. His nostrils filled with a blend of cheap perfume and nervous farts.

Reaching the doorway to the stairwell, he told her to open it. Fear ensured compliance, as it did when he instructed her to remove her panties. Her hand disappeared up her powder blue skirt and she dragged her pale-yellow panties down.

Her eyes told him her story. Six was afraid, but there was a glimmer of hope. If she was compliant, he'd have no reason to kill her. She could see nothing of him except his eyes. She couldn't identify him.

He knew how she'd react; he chose his encounters carefully. She lay face down as instructed, and the blade was away from her throat for a few moments.

"Don't do anything foolish and you'll live through this," he lied.

Fucking them was only the foreplay. Feeling the life drain from them was what he wanted.

As he thrust into her, he pressed the blade a little harder with each surge of his hips. Doing it slowly like this, and distracted by him fucking her, she wouldn't notice what was happening. She'd feel him inside of her, but she wouldn't feel the life flowing out of her.

By the time he orgasmed, the blade had cut deep into her artery. Mouse continued thrusting to keep her distracted. He felt her relax as her life-force depleted. He stood before she went limp. At the moment of her death, she may evacuate her bowel and he didn't want that mess again.

Mouse watched until she was limp. He smiled.

He shook his head. *Time to focus.*

There'd be time to dwell on his encounter later. He wiped the blade using her discarded panties, folded it, and slid it between his inner and outer glove. He pivoted, walked down the steps, opened the door, and stepped into the alley...

As he relived the encounter, Mouse slowly masturbated. After he'd ejaculated inside the panties, he got up, went to the laundry wearing his mother's clothes, and started the second full cycle on the washing machine. He returned to his mother's bed for an encore performance.

After the second cumming, he repeated the process a third time.

Then he put his clothes in the dryer—the only purchase he'd made since his mother's passing—removed his mother's clothes, put them on a gentle cycle, and went for another shower.

Showered and dressed, he was finished with Six now. It was done.

He made a cheese and pickle sandwich and an instant coffee, sat on the sofa, turned on the TV and watched *Jeopardy!* He smiled. Mouse always watched *Jeopardy* with his mother.

The show over, he washed his plate and cup, then set up the ironing board in the laundry. He ironed his clothes, including his underwear and socks, and put them away. His mother's clothes he placed in the dryer.

Later, all clothes ironed and put away, he undressed, climbed into the single bed he'd used all his life and slept.

Burt

Burt Rogers stepped out of the shower, dried himself and dressed. He had an efficient system for his morning ablutions. *Do people still use that word?*

Ablutions was an old word his first boss had used every day, but it was a long time ago.

Burt prepared breakfast, John Farrington Blend Coffee from Coffee Roasters, and sourdough bread from Alice's Bakery, both of which he'd been introduced to by Judy Vernon.

Coffee prepared in his Italian percolator, a gift from Judy, bread toasted and spread with butter. He sat at an outdated chrome framed table with a brown marble Formica top, which had been fashionable along with the chrome and burnt orange vinyl chairs when he'd purchased it.

Burt ate his breakfast and contemplated life as a widower. He supposed he missed Carol, who'd died of cancer two years earlier, but they'd never been close despite having been married over twenty-five years.

He'd always worked long hours, and Carol had never been interested in his work, except when he'd been made redundant, and then her interest hadn't extended beyond when he'd find another job.

Her interest, as far as he could tell, was that he had work and could support the family. What that work was, or whether he enjoyed it, was outside her field of reference.

When they talked, it was about household affairs or matters involving their three children. He was trying to recall when they'd last had a personal discussion and couldn't. Sex had lasted for around ten years after they married and then dried up. It hadn't bothered him, and he hadn't sought to have his needs satisfied elsewhere, other than an occasional visit to a Thai massage center, which, for an extra fifty dollars, provided a happy ending.

His children attended college, but none returned to live at home when they'd finished, although they all live in the city. Carol's passing only made one slight difference in his life; he needed to prepare his own breakfast.

After breakfast, he placed his dishes in the sink for Maria—the housekeeper he'd hired when Carol became ill—to wash later.

He didn't need her to come every day, but she did, not that there was much for her to do. Maria was a single mother of two. She'd come after getting the kids off to school and leave in time to pick them up. She needed work, and knowing how important work is to people, Burt was happy to provide it.

He collected his briefcase and keys from the hall stand beside the door, left the house at precisely seven ten as he did every day, climbed into his Patagonia Red Mercedes-Benz A220 and headed to the office.

Burt was waiting for Myron to arrive. He asked his secretary to brew them a fresh pot of coffee. Drip filter coffee in the office, but the same blend.

Wonder what Myron wants? Burt guessed it was serious because they only met in his office when they had building plans to discuss, which could be laid out and inspected on a large table with spotlights.

Normally they'd meet in Judy's Booth at Frank's Diner, a nineteen fifties style eatery and one of two restaurants Myron and Judy owned.

While waiting, he recalled the meeting which changed his life.

Burt wiped his hands on his trousers for the fourteenth time in the five minutes he'd been waiting outside the guy's office. *Fuck, what was his name again? Myerson.*

Burt had been made redundant following a merger seven months earlier. He'd reached a point where he despaired at ever finding another job.

The door opened and a young, well-dressed man stepped out, took two steps to Burt and offered his hand. "You must be Burt. I'm Myron Myerson."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Myerson."

"Myron. Please come in."

Burt followed him into his office.

"Modern thinking is to manage properties by exception report," Myron suggested. "Are you capable of using technology?"

Burt's mouth was dry. His answer to this question had made him redundant. *I should lie.* He picked up the glass of water Myron had placed in front of him and moistened his mouth; he rubbed his hands on his pants and sighed.

"I'm more than capable of using technology. The problem isn't with the technology. The problem is people think technology provides answers, it doesn't. It asks questions. To effectively manage buildings, one has to take the questions into the field and look at the properties or projects for themselves to find the answers."

Myron raised an eyebrow and nodded. "I understand a lot of money can be saved by tightly controlling maintenance."

Burt shook his head. *Guess I'm not gonna get this one either.* "People who don't understand buildings think that. They see maintenance as an expense, but it's not, it's an investment in the building. For every dollar you spend now, you save five in the future." Myron was trying to suppress a laugh or smile or something, but Burt continued, "It depends which p is more important, profit or property."

Myron smiled. "You sound like my father."

Burt shrugged. "Generational, I suppose."

"What are your ideas about building superintendents? Some people say having a live-in maintenance person is a waste of money and unnecessary."

"A super is, or should be, a lot more than a maintenance guy. He also provides security and helps maintain a quality of life standard for the tenants. You know, like excessive noise, that sort of thing. Owners often lose sight of their tenants, forget tenants are assets too. I err..." Burt hesitated.

"Please, what were you going to say?"

"I have a theory. I think the quality of a super depends on how much they want or need it. A parolee who learned maintenance skills in the prison workshop can be very capable, and they need and appreciate the opportunity to get their life on track, so they're committed..."

Myron offered Burt a position as manager of his newly established property management company, giving him five percent of the company as an incentive.

It never occurred to Burt he'd own a business, but now he owned thirty percent of one. Myron was the best boss he'd ever had, because he trusted Burt, and left him alone to do his job.

Myron was his business partner; but he still saw Myron as the boss. Burt had two business partners, the other being Myron's wife, Judy. Although not actively involved, Judy took an interest and sat in on meetings.

Burt worked with Judy on some projects, and was, he supposed, a little in love with her. He'd met no one like her, confident and comfortable within herself and who she was. Openly bisexual with a husband and a girlfriend, Ali.

He wasn't sure what her relationship with Ali was. That sort of thing was beyond his experience. Myron seemed okay with whatever was going on and was close to Ali himself.

Myron arrived exactly on time, as expected. He was precise with everything he did. Burt hated being late and always arrived early.

Myron sat at the meeting table opposite Burt and placed his briefcase beside him.

Papers to attend to.

Burt's secretary delivered their coffees moments later.

Myron picked up his cup and inhaled the aroma. He smiled, took a sip, and replaced the cup on the table. He got right to the point.

"Papa has cancer. He's dying."

"Myron, I'm so sorry, I..."

"Thank you, Burt, it is what it is." Myron stared past him, out the window. "Nothing to do but deal with it."

"If there's anything I can do."

"We're going to take over the management of my family's properties."

"Of course."

"Burt, you haven't taken a day off since Carol's funeral."

"No, I haven't had a reason to. I'm fine Myron I..."

"In fact, you haven't taken a proper holiday since we started the company."

"I've taken leave when I needed to..."

"But not a real holiday."

"I'm not a holiday sort of person."

"I'm going to send you on a research tour of Europe for three months."

"Research tour of Europe? What's there to research? This is when you're going to need me..." Burt stared at the dust dancing in a sunbeam coming through the window from a small gap between two buildings across the road. *Is anywhere truly dust free?*

Myron continued. "I've taken leave from the accounting business, and I'll take care of things here. The tradition in our family is for father to pass the business to son, and Papa wants to pass everything to me, not to my company. It's not a reflection on you. Papa respects you."

"I'm happy to take a back seat."

"I need you fresh and ready to manage everything when it's finalized. With all the rental properties, it's going to more than double the portfolio under management."

"All the more reason for me to stick around."

"No, Burt, you need a holiday, so we'll make it a working holiday. Study old buildings and see how they're maintained."

Myron would've analyzed the situation from every angle and reached a conclusion before suggesting the trip. He would've anticipated Burt's every question.

"It could be interesting, but three months?"

"That's how long I need, and then I'm taking Papa and Mama to the holy land. It was the only two things he wanted. I'll need you back in three months, fresh and ready to take over everything."

"Okay, I'll make arrangements."

"I already have."

Myron opened his briefcase and extracted a folder, which he passed to Burt.

Of course he has. Burt opened the folder. It was all there. Tickets, itinerary, hotel bookings, travel, and transfer arrangements.

He glanced through the itinerary: London, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Madrid, Barcelona, Lisbon, Rome, Venice, Zurich, Viena, Zagreb, Budapest, Prague, Athens, and Istanbul. It was difficult for Burt to conceive.

"You leave Monday. Don't forget to enjoy yourself. Everything is paid for, put your meals and expenses on the corporate credit card. It's a business trip and a thank you for all you've done and all you will do."

"Thank you, Myron, I don't..."

"Nothing to say. Enjoy yourself. I have some loose ends to tidy up, then I'll start here Monday, so let your people know what's happening. Tell Max he's going to be busy."

Myron closed his briefcase, shook Burt's hand, and left.

Burt spent some time studying his itinerary. The idea grew on him.

He had calls to make. Burt called Maria and told her he'd be away for three months, but he expected her to call in every day. He didn't want dust accumulation while he was gone, and it was an excellent opportunity to do some spring cleaning. They both knew it was an excuse for him to keep paying her while he was away.

He called Henry, his oldest son, married but in the middle of a divorce, who thought it was a good idea for him to get away.

He then called Donny, his youngest. The reaction was as expected. Donny was critical, as he was of everything and everyone. Burt assumed it was why he wasn't able to keep a

girlfriend for long. Donny didn't understand what looking at old buildings in Europe had to do with the properties he managed in the city.

Last, he rang his daughter, Audrey. She'd never married and never introduced Burt to any of her boyfriends. She shared an apartment in the city with Denise, who'd been her college roommate. Audrey was enthusiastic, telling him it'd be good for him to broaden his horizons.

Burt smiled. They'd each reacted as he expected. He was happy he knew his children, even though his wife had done most of the child rearing while he was busy working. He wasn't close to any of them; they weren't that sort of family, but he got on well with them, even Donny.

His last call was to his assistant Max, who was out in the field on a property inspection. Burt suggested they meet for lunch at Dancer's Bistro, Myron and Judy's second restaurant, part owned and managed by Ali.

Burt entered through The Shipyard; a gay bar attached to Dancer's Bistro.

He glanced around. Egyptian blue carpet with gold patterns, angel chairs in every color of the rainbow sat in matching pairs at each redwood table. A small, polished dance floor in the back corner, and a jukebox. The carpet and colorful chairs balanced each other rather than clashing, as one might expect. The ambience in the room seemed right, neither too dark nor too bright.

He greeted the owner Dancer, behind the redwood bar. He was part owner of the adjoining Bistro.

Dancer looked out of place in his own bar, a tall former boxer and hard man of the docks who wasn't even close to being gay, not that Burt knew what being gay was other than the obvious. He didn't know how to tell if someone was gay, except those who advertised themselves.

"Hello Burt," Dancer greeted him.

"How's business, Dancer?"

"We're doing okay. You want a beer?"

"Sure, just in for lunch."

"Ali'll get you seated, and I'll send Shirley Temple in with it in a minute."

Burt nodded and headed into the bistro.

Ali saw him and came over to greet him with a hug.

"Just you today, Burt?"

"No, Max'll join me."

"You want a window seat?"

"Please, sweetheart."

No sooner had Ali seated him than Shirley Temple, real name Jason, in his late twenties, with stunning blue eyes, blond curly hair, and obviously gay, arrived with his beer.

"Here you are gorgeous. I have a thing for bald men."

"You say that every time."

“Jason, behave yourself,” Ali said. “Ignore him Burt, he’s only doing it for my benefit.”

Burt looked at Ali quizzically, but she didn’t elaborate.

The door opened and Max entered.

“Maxy,” Jason greeted him with a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Hello J,” Max said, returning both hug and kiss.

“You haven’t come for a visit for ages.”

“I thought you might be busy.”

“You know my policy... first in.”

Max smiled. “Soon, J.”

Max sat down and said to Burt, “He means that literally, not figuratively.”

Jason smiled. “Anytime gorgeous,” he said to Burt, and to Max, “Your usual?”

“Please, J.”

Jason went to the bar to organize it.

Burt said to Ali, “Have you seen Judy or Myron today?”

“I’m meeting Judy later, between lunch and dinner.”

Burt watched Ali as she headed off to seat some new customers who’d just entered.

Nice ass.

He looked at Max, who was smiling at him.

“No harm in looking,” Burt said. “Are you and Jason a thing?”

“Na, just the occasional casual hook up.”

“You talk to Joanne yet?”

“Tonight.”

Jason arrived with Max’s drink, a gin and tonic. He placed it on the table, winked at Max, and went off to make a coffee for another customer. Burt drank a little beer.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers boss.”

Burt picked up a menu. “Let’s order.”

Ali was busy, so Burt signaled a waitress who came to take their order.

“I think I’ll just have the lunch special today,” he said.

“Two,” Max added.

The waitress sent their order to the kitchen and went to attend to another customer.

“What do you think Joanne will do when you tell her?”

Max shrugged. “Probably kick me out.”

“You got somewhere to go?”

“Not yet. I’m hoping it won’t come to that.”

“I’m going to Europe for three months, so if you need to, you can stay at my place.”

“Good for you. When?”

“Leave Monday.”

“Monday? That’s sudden.”

“Fact finding mission, maintaining old buildings, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds interesting, but it’s still sudden.”

“It’s time to merge management of the family properties. Myron wants to handle it himself, so he’ll be looking after things while I’m away.”

Max nodded thoughtfully. “Why?”

“Between us, Art has terminal cancer. Myron will probably tell you, so look surprised.”

“Oh, that’s sad. He’s not so old.”

“No, but if there was anything to be done, Myron would’ve done it.”

Max nodded again and stared out the window.

“I need you to look after the existing portfolio and keep Myron updated as you would me. If you run into any problems, ask Myron or Art for guidance. Also, familiarize yourself with the rules related to heritage buildings.”

“Sure Boss.”

“If you have any family matters to attend to after your talk with Joanne, let Myron know.” Burt studied Ali, who was bringing their meals to the table herself. “He’s very understanding about these things.”

Ali delivered their meals, and Max asked Burt about his itinerary. They talked about Burt’s trip while they ate.

Beside The Ancient Rose

Ali surveyed Dancer's Bistro. The lunch crowd had thinned out, leaving a few stragglers. The scent of the dishes seemed to permanently whet her appetite, but she seldom ate lunch these days. Rae's overhang encouraged her to pay attention to her figure. She might have liked Rae's, but she didn't want one.

The afternoon barista arrived with her boyfriend, the late shift kitchen hand. They would grab their staff meal at the chef's table, where Irving Jones, manager of the family's adjoining hotel, The Old Seaman's Lodge, was enjoying his before starting work.

Ali announced to her staff, "I've got to go out for a while."

She glanced at her watch. *A little early, I'll walk.* Her pulse increased, as it always did when she was meeting Judy. *All these years, and I'm still like a kid at Christmas when I'm meeting her.*

When she arrived at People's Park, Judy was waiting on the bench where they usually met inside the East Gate. Judy stood to greet her. As they eased into their embrace, Ali noted Judy's red, hollow eyes. *Something's wrong.* Judy held her like she didn't want to let go.

"What is it?" Ali whispered.

Judy didn't answer. A tear escaped from the corner of her eye and made its way down her cheek. Ali reached up and gently took the tear on her finger. She inspected it before placing her finger in her mouth and drinking the tear, mirroring Judy's actions of many years earlier in the same park.

In this park, they'd agreed to the terms of their relationship and made promises not to consummate it, despite mutual desire. Without those promises, their relationship would've been over before it began.

This is serious. Ali took Judy's hand and led her to their place. Walking through the park holding hands, they appeared to be a couple. Ali frowned. *I Never walk in the park with Rae.* Nobody who saw them would have guessed the truth of their relationship.

They reached the tree circle at the center of the park, which hid a rose garden. Despite its beauty, few people visited. Most, she supposed, didn't know or had forgotten it existed. Ali and Judy walked through a gap in the trees and onto the circular path, and were greeted by roses in a plethora of colors, shades of pink, white, red, yellow, and peach. Ali frowned when she turned her gaze from the roses and focused on Judy, who was biting or sucking her thumb.

They followed the cobblestone path to a break in the circle of roses and entered the next circle. Roses now surrounded them. The intoxicating scent—made sickly sweet by the high concentration—filled the air, which hummed with the buzz of a multitude of bees. Another break and they found themselves between the second and third circles.

The multicolored flutter of butterfly wings competed with the roses for attention as the insects danced between the blooms. The chirping of crickets punctuated the bee's hum. Birds in the trees towering over the garden competed to have their song heard. *What was that quote? If you can hear the birds, you're in touch with your soul.*

One last connection and they stepped into the inner sanctum, as they called it. The ancient, gnarled rose stood by itself in the center, but today it looked forlorn, and didn't offer the single bloom it blessed them with on the first day they'd seen it together, the day they'd become a couple, albeit an unusual one.

They sat on their usual curved bench, one of four surrounding the ancient rose, its limbs gnarly and twisted like an arthritic nonagenarian. They called it paying homage to the ancient.

Ali held Judy's hand and repeated, "What is it?"

Judy buried her head in Ali's shoulder and sobbed. She didn't hold back; the tears flowed, and her body heaved with her sobs. Ali held her; stroking her back and lightly kissing the top of her head.

Judy cried herself out and slowly sat up, ready to talk.

She brushed Ali's shoulder as if she could brush the water from her tears away.

"I've made you wet."

Ali tensed a little as if she was about to say something, and then relaxed, evidently deciding it wasn't the time. Judy knew what Ali was going to say and needed her mood lightened. She was feeling her mortality and seeking reassurance.

"Tell me," Judy whispered.

Ali winked. "You know, it's not the first time."

Judy rested her hand on Ali's thigh, lightly caressing her.

"It's not the time."

"It never is." Judy's brow furrowed. She turned away and stared at nothing.

Ali said, "Tell me what's upsetting you."

"Papa's dying."

Judy felt Ali's sharp intake of breath. "What is it?"

"Cancer."

"How long?"

"Six months."

Judy wiped Ali's tears away.

"How's Myron?" Ali asked.

"At first, he was Myron."

"Analyzing."

"But when we got home last night, he held me and cried."

"Oh, I..."

"Yeah." She nodded. "I held myself strong. I wanted to cry too, but I didn't. I didn't want him to feel he needed to hold back and protect me."

"You be there for him, and I'll be here for you."

"I know you will, but what about Rae?"

"She's okay. Had an argument Saturday morning."

"What about?"

“You...sual.”

“She’s jealous,” Judy said.

“She thinks you’ve always got your hand up my skirt.”

“She knows I don’t.”

Ali raised an eyebrow, and Judy smiled despite herself.

“She thinks you want my hand up your skirt,” Judy suggested.

“I obviously don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

“How’s Mel?” Ali asked.

“She was devastated at first, but Papa handled her well. Told her it was his time and asked her to ask her angel to guide him when the time comes. Last night, I heard her praying to her angel to look after Zeyde.”

Judy began crying again, and Ali held her. After she’d finished, she wiped her eyes on Ali’s dry shoulder.

“Speaking of Mel, I’d better go,” Judy said. “She’ll be home from school soon.”

“Yeah, I should get back to Dancer’s. Burt was in today, by the way.”

“Myron’s sending him to Europe on holiday, wants to handle the transition with Papa himself.”

“Of course he would.”

“Mama’s in shock, I think. I’ll spend time with her while Myron and Papa are taking care of business.”

“Good. If you need me, call me anytime, day or night.”

“What about Rae?”

“Fuck Rae, if she can’t understand, you need me now...”

“I do love you, Ali.”

“I know. Give my love to Myron. Tell him I’m here if he needs me.”

“He knows.”

When Ali arrived home that night, Rae paused the movie she was watching. Ali was still thinking about Judy. She looked at Rae. *Fond of her. Good company when she’s not being dramatic. Great lover.*

“What?” Rae asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking.”

“About *her*. I can always tell.”

Ali rolled her eyes. “Art is dying. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Rae looked genuinely concerned.

“She wants to stay strong for Myron, doesn’t want him holding back for her sake.”

“That’s kind of her, so she’s leaning on you.”

“Yes, and I’ll be here whenever she needs me.”

“Of course you should be. You’re her friend.”

“You understand?”

“For fuck’s sake, Ali, I’m not a total bitch.” Rae went to the kitchen, and poured a glass of red wine for Ali, then topped up her own.

Not total. “I’m sorry, but I know how…”

“It doesn’t matter how I feel about her,” Rae said. “What matters is I love you and I’m here for you.” Rae handed Ali a glass of wine as if to underline her point.

“Thank you, Rae, I’m gonna need you.”

“Yes, and I’ll try to keep my insecurities in check.”

Ali studied her. *So you acknowledge it’s your problem.*

“But this infatuation you have for each other is not healthy. If you were going to act on it, you would’ve by now, so I honestly think you both need to let it go. Step back from each other so you have a chance at a real life. It’s okay for Judy. She’s got the best of both worlds, but you can’t have that, at least not with me.”

“I told you, I’m not infatuated with her, and she’s certainly not infatuated with me.”

“Don’t be so fucking stupid. She’s as infatuated with you as you are with her. If you weren’t so blinded by your own obsession, you’d see it was mutual.”

“I don’t think…”

Rae returned to the armchair where she’d been sitting when Ali arrived home. “There’s nothing as annoying as someone who’s obsessively infatuated with you if the feelings aren’t reciprocated,” Rae suggested. “If she didn’t feel the same, she’d have walked away from you years ago.”

Of course, she feels the same. “I never…”

“Think about it is all I’m asking. I understand you *think* you have something special, but you don’t, not really. It’s a fantasy and you can’t build your life on fantasy.”

Is she right? Will Myron ever make it happen? “I don’t…”

“No, not now. Just think about it is all. Now you should come here and let me hold you.”

Ali walked to the armchair where Rae was sitting, climbed onto her lap, put her arms around her neck and held her as a child might.

Flash Jack

Detective Sergeant Jack Hawkins sat in the Coffee Roasters outlet near his office, drinking his favorite coffee, The John Farrington Blend, and eating white chocolate, mandarin, and macadamia cookies. It was his afternoon ritual when he wasn't at a crime scene or chasing down a lead.

He thought about his new assignment as head of the throat slasher task force. Five murders, and no pattern other than the modus operandi. Five victims with nothing in common. Ages, body types, cultures, hair color and styles, and demographics all different. Nothing linking them except their fate.

All raped, their throats cut by a straight razor, but not the same one. Five victims, five different blade patterns. The method told him it was the same perpetrator. Nevertheless, there was nothing to go on and nothing to investigate. Zero forensics. No breadcrumbs. This man was careful. Beyond cautious, he was meticulous.

Jack had spent a week reviewing the files with a fine-tooth comb, a detangling comb, and a Denman brush. His predecessor, Steve Lord, hadn't made any mistakes. He'd investigated every victim, and found nothing remarkable about any of them, and nothing linking them. The attacks and the victim selection appeared to have been random. If a pattern existed, no one could see it.

Lord had worked on the case for three years and gotten nowhere, so he was replaced. *Poor bastard. It wasn't his fault. Nothing to go on.*

When Jack took over, he'd kept the team intact, and added a promising young detective Daphne Loader, who had a productive confidential informant. All criminal stuff. He doubted it would produce anything, but he was desperate, clutching at straws, grasping at smoke, and pissing in the wind.

He sipped some coffee and ate another cookie. *Where the fuck am I going to start?*

Charlie Gibson walked into the alley and scrunched his face in disgust. It smelled of garbage and stale urine. *I detest these inspections.* He needed to make sure it was safe to demolish the building. *The sooner the better, by the look of it.* The gas had been turned off years earlier, but he needed to check every outlet, just in case.

He had a four-page list of potential hazards to inspect and sign off on. He shook his head and grimaced. *Not looking forward to it.* Some guys would tick the boxes without actually checking, but if anything went wrong, it was his ass on the line.

He turned on his Maglite 5-Cell and shifted it from hand to hand, feeling its weight. They weren't permitted to carry weapons, but he could use the heavy torch as a baton if necessary. He sometimes encountered junkies in old buildings, and you never knew what they were going to do. Charlie tried the door even though he had keys.

Unlocked.

“Fuck it.”

Homeless probably squatted there, seeking shelter from the unforgiving streets. Perhaps it was being used as a drug den, another shit hole full of addicts. Either way, he'd have to call the cops. He checked his phone to make sure the speed dial was open. *These homeless lunatics can be dangerous, so could a druggie looking for their next fix.*

He stepped into the stairwell. His method was to start at the top and work down. He didn't get far. As soon as he breathed in, the stench of rotting flesh made him gag. *Something's dead in here.*

He removed a 3M Organic Vapor/P95 respiratory protection mask from his tool belt and placed it over his mouth and nose. He should have put it on before entering the building, but he hated wearing the damn thing. The hard hat, hot and uncomfortable, was bad enough. The mask muffled the smell, but didn't eliminate it.

He climbed the first flight of stairs, reached the landing, and froze, but not for long. His stomach flipped. He swallowed back the bile rising in his throat. Moisture formed on his forehead as he turned and ran down the stairs and back into the alley, tearing his mask off on the way.

He turned his head away from the entrance and vomited. He was shaking, his pulse was racing.

I'm never gonna stop seeing that. He breathed in through his nose, which was a mistake. *Or smelling it.*

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth, glanced at the phone attached to his clipboard, and tapped speed dial on the screen.

The police operator answered immediately.

"Yes, h-h-hello," he stammered. "This is Building Inspector Charlie Gibson. I, umm... found a body."

Officers Tony Satler and Stu Jordan were on patrol when they received the dispatch call to attend a ten sixty-seven.

"You know what this means," Satler said.

"Yep, we're gonna be babysitting a stiff the entire tour. Exactly how I wanted to spend my day."

They pulled the car over behind what they assumed was the inspector's vehicle based on the government license plate, reported their arrival on scene, and alighted. They walked down the alley to where the inspector was waiting for them.

"Guess that's him," Jordan said.

"Yeah, the safety vest is a giveaway," Satler replied.

"That, and the ashen shade of his face."

Sattler checked his notebook to make sure he got the guy's name right. "Charlie Gibson?"

"That's me." His hand shook as he pointed towards the door. "Through that door, first landing." Gibson sighed to relax and swallowed hard. "Umm... If you guys have nose plugs, better put them in."

"We use a mentholated gel." Satler took a small flat tin from a pouch on his utility belt, opened the lid, scooped a liberal amount on his finger, and deposited it under his nose. "We'll need to take a statement, so hang around."

"Sure."

Jordan had been inspecting the alley. He pointed to the vomit. “That yours?” he asked.

Gibson glanced at it, then looked away. “Yeah.”

Jordan applied his gel, and they entered the building. When they reached the landing, Jordan and Sattler looked at the body and then at each other. “Fuck.” They reacted.

“You know what this is, don’t you?” Jordan asked.

“Number Six. We better get out of here before we’re accused of contaminating the scene.”

“Yeah.”

They retreated downstairs and into the alley.

“Thanks for the heads up,” Satler said to Gibson. “Not that the gel helped much.”

“Who’s in charge of the task force now?” Jordan asked.

“Flash Jack.”

Jordan depressed the call button on the police radio attached to his uniform. “Dispatch, can you advise Detective Sergeant Hawkins we appear to have number six on our hands?”

A minute later, dispatch’s voice came over the radio. “Charlie Papa Sixteen be advised task force detectives are on their way. Secure the scene until they arrive.”

“Roger that.”

Gibson asked, “You wanna take my statement, so I can get outta here?”

“Sorry, you’ll have to hang around. Detectives will want to talk to you.”

Detective Daphne Loader was requested to attend, with instructions not to disturb anything until Detective Sergeant Hawkins arrived. He wanted to examine the scene untouched.

She’d stopped for coffee on her way, having been informed which officers were on the scene, and a witness—the building inspector who’d discovered the body.

Daphne parked behind the patrol car, checked her dark brown, cinnamon, the colorist had said, hair and her makeup—not much, light blue eye shadow and pale pink lipstick—in the mirror. She retrieved some disposable nose plugs from the glove compartment, alighted, and grabbed a tray containing four coffees from the passenger seat.

Daphne made her way down the alley, the tight, dark blue slacks moving with her body, a light blue blouse, which may have been a size too small, struggling to contain her breasts.

Jordan said, “They’ve sent Front-End Loader.”

“Yeah, she’s been transferred to the task force. Flash Jack asked for her.”

“You think he’s slipping her one?”

“Why not? Everyone else has.”

Daphne reached them. “Hi boys.”

“Hey Daph,” they said almost in unison.

“Thought you could use a coffee. It’s going to be a long day.”

She handed the tray to Sattler. “Hold this, Tony.”

Sattler smiled, realizing it was a veiled reference to when he’d said something similar to her when drunk in a bar.

“You must be inspector Gibson?”

“Yeah.”

“Got you a coffee, too.”

Charlie nodded in appreciation. “Thank you, Detective.”

“I’ll just take a quick look and come back and take your statement, but you’ll need to hang around until Sargeant Hawkins gets here. He’ll want a word too.” She headed to the door.

Jordan said, “You’ll need gel. She’s ripe.”

“I got disposable plugs.” Daphne extracted a small plastic bag from her pocket.

She pulled the door open and got a whiff. “You’re not kidding.” She stuffed the plugs in her nose.

When she saw the body she gagged, she wanted to run out and vomit, but she swallowed the urge and her rising bile. *Don’t want to be seen as a weak female.*

She exited the building and looked at Gibson. “I’d hate to smell it without plugs.”

“I had my mask on, but still lost my breakfast.” He indicated his vomit.

Daphne glanced at it. “Hopefully, you haven’t contaminated the crime scene. Flash Jack won’t be pleased.”

She contacted Crime Scene and told them to bring portable spotlights.

She removed her nose plugs and slid them back into the disposable bag. Retrieving her coffee from Sattler, she removed the lid and inhaled before taking a sip.

“We’ll need to search the building. Is there another way in?”

“Boarded up. This door was supposed to be locked. Doesn’t look like anyone else has been in there, but...”

“Except for whoever killed her.”

She handed her coffee back to Sattler and took Gibson’s statement.

Jordan said, “Here’s Flash Jack now. Guess he’ll get that fancy suit dirty.”

“Nothing wrong with a man wearing good clothes,” retorted Loader, as she went to greet her boss and update him with the statement from Gibson.

“He’s definitely sticking it to her,” Jordan observed to Sattler.

“You jealous?”

“Nah, been there.”

“Haven’t we all.

“Definitely number six Sarge, same M.O.,” Daphne said to Hawkins.

“Better have a look for myself.”

“It’s dark. Crime scene is bringing light. You’ll need the plugs, she’s ripe. The guy who found the body hasn’t got much. Got his details, but I don’t think we need to keep him hanging around, unless you...”

“That’s fine, prefer to talk with him in a couple of days, see if he remembers anything more when the shock’s worn off.”

Daphne went to tell Gibson he could go.

Hawkins headed to the doorway, acknowledging the officers on his way.

Jack inserted his plugs, put on his latex gloves, turned on his flashlight, and entered. He walked up the stairs, each step disturbing dust, which irritated his eyes. He reached the body and crouched down to inspect the deceased. *Definitely the same guy*. He examined the scene the best he could. A handbag, presumably the victims, was against the wall.

He extracted an evidence bag from his inside pocket, then changed his mind. *Better wait for lights so the scene can be photographed*.

He went downstairs and into the alley to wait for the crime scene unit.

Daphne was flirting with the officers, which didn’t surprise him, or anybody. But he was pleased when she headed over to him as soon as she saw him. She had her priorities right.

“Her handbag is against the wall near the body.”

“Yes, Sarge. Didn’t want to move it before the scene was photographed.”

“Quite right, too. Your Confidential Informant got anything?”

“Not a clue.”

“No, this sick bastard’s not a criminal.”

He took out his phone and called the rest of his team, issuing instructions. He’d wanted to see the crime scene first, so he’d know if they needed to bring anything.

“Call the coroner, Daphne. Here’s the crime scene officers now.”

He met them and instructed the lights to be set up first.

After the scene was lit and photographed, he had the handbag bagged and passed it to Daphne.

“Not much to do here for now. Get this back to the house and inventory it. When you know who she is, see if you can track down her next of kin and come back here. We’ll do the notification together. It’s your case.”

“Thanks Sarge.” She beamed.

He knew it was the most important case she’d been assigned. He wanted her motivated.

Jack watched her head back to her car, tight slacks hugging the shape of her ass. *Would it be totally stupid to sleep with her? She’d be up for it.*

The other three detectives on his team arrived. He had them view the crime scene, so they’d know what they were dealing with. He instructed them to canvas the residents of the surrounding buildings, but he doubted they’d come up with anything.

Two more uniformed officers were assigned. He left one on the door and sent the others to search the building, not that he expected they'd find anything either.

Next, he went back up the stairs to see if the Crime Scene Unit had found anything.

"No, Sarge. It appears to be clean." The officer glanced around the filthy stair well. "Forensically speaking."

Hawkins shook his head. *Another murder and nothing to work with.*

"Okay, when you're done here, process the alley. You never know."

The coroner examined the body. "I can confirm she's deceased."

Smart ass. "Cause of death?"

"Apparently, throat cut, left side only. Straight razor, same as the others. Killed here, and bled out."

Nothing I didn't know.

"How long has she been dead?"

The coroner made a show of inhaling deeply.

Jack noticed he didn't use nose plugs.

"Maybe four days, no more than a week. It's been hot, and she's been closed in here, so she smells like she's been dead longer. I'll know for sure when I do the autopsy."

"Okay, you can take her home with you. See you at the postmortem."

Daphne donned latex gloves and carefully opened the victim's bag to inventory the contents. *Nothing of note. Purse, a little makeup, keys and some feminine products.* She checked the purse itself, being careful to touch only corners and edges so she didn't smudge any fingerprints.

Daphne took photos of the driver's license, credit cards, and a card containing her emergency contacts. Daphne studied the driver's license. The victim, Joan Summertime, thirty-four, had collar length blonde hair, and pale blue eyes. She was from another city but lived downtown now. *Ordinary, a little fat.*

She returned the items to the bag and arranged for everything to be sent to forensics, not that she expected they'd find anything useful.

Crime scene investigator Martin Mellon examined the alley.

Little of note, garbage mostly, human excrement and a dead cat.

In an alcove of a doorway leading to a disused shop, he found a molten something. He didn't know what it was and doubted it would be useful, but it was reasonably fresh, so he bagged it up for analysis at the lab.

Daphne returned to the crime scene.

Jack Hawkins was trying to get a feel for what had occurred. "Nothing here at all."

"Joan Summertime, from out of state. The locals will notify her next of kin."

“Good, wasn’t looking forward to that. You get her address here?”

“Yeah, Sarge. She rents an apartment.”

“Better look at her place.”

“Yes, Sarge. I haven’t told the building super yet.”

“Best not. Better see his reaction.”

“Don’t expect we’ll find anything.”

“No, like the others. I’ll have a word with the guys on canvass and meet you there.”

Daphne arrived at the older brick apartment block, which was in shades of brown. *Probably called burnt umber or something.* She casually looked around while waiting for her sergeant to join her. *Pleasant enough building.*

Hawkins knocked on the super’s door, four raps in quick succession.

A middle-aged man, with salt and pepper hair and pale blue, almost gray eyes, opened the door and squinted at them. “Can I help you?”

Hawkins held up his shield. “I’m Detective Sergeant Jack Hawkins, and this is Detective Daphne Loader. Do you know a Joan Summertime?”

“Yes. Three B, lives alone.”

Explains why no missing person’s report was made.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe a week ago? I often see her going to work in the morning, but I haven’t seen her for a few days.”

“I’m sorry to have to inform you that Ms. Summertime has died.”

Daphne studied the super’s face. *Surprise, not shocked. Sad.*

“I’m sorry to hear that. She was a nice girl. Quiet, but always offered a smile and said hello. You’ll want to see her records for next of kin, so you better come in and then I’ll let you into her apartment.”

“Yes,” Jack said. “What did you say your name was?”

He turned and walked into his apartment. “Tony... Antony James Richardson. Used to go by AJ, but I use Tony now. As this is a murder investigation, you’re gonna want to eliminate me. I’m on parole for assault, which you’ll find out as soon as you run me.”

“How’d you know she was murdered?” Daphne asked.

“If it was an accident, you’d be uniformed cops. Two detectives means murder.” Tony opened a file containing the rental application and passed it to Daphne. “All her information is in there.”

He took a book from his desk and passed it to her as well. “My log. I keep a record of what I do each day, how long it takes, and any costs associated with repairing something.”

“Why are you giving us your log?” Jack asked.

“I got shafted by my P.O. last time I was on parole because I couldn’t account for my whereabouts. He reckoned I pulled a job with another parolee. I didn’t, I was banging his

wife, so I couldn't admit it. Guess he knew and fitted me up. Learned my lesson. Account for my time and don't bang anyone I shouldn't. She wasn't worth two more years inside."

Daphne glanced at Jack, who nodded. She returned the log to Tony. "You hold on to this. If we need it, I'll come back."

Tony opened the door, and Daphne entered Joan's apartment.

"We'll take it from here." Jack dismissed Tony and followed Daphne in.

Joan's apartment was square. They entered a living/dining room, which they crossed and stepped into a hallway of sorts. It was a path through the kitchen. Sink and bench on one side, appliances: microwave, stove, and refrigerator on the other. The bedroom was at the end of the passage with a small bathroom—toilet, washbasin, and shower—behind the kitchen.

"Small," Daphne observed.

"I believe realtors call it cozy."

"Not much personality here, furnished by IKEA."

"You're right," Jack said. "I can't get a sense of her, beyond that framed photo with what appears to be her parents and a sister."

On their way out, they stopped by the super's apartment to tell him they'd finished with it, and he could arrange with Joan's parents to clear out her stuff when he needed to.

Returning to the task force office, Jack said, "Got a job for you, Daphne. Get the tech guys to go back two months from the date of their murder, using facial recognition of the victims from CCTV around the city and splice together their movements the best they can."

"Sure, Sarge."

"Then I want you to sit down and watch them all."

"But Sarge, that'll be hours."

"Several hundred, I should think."

"That's grunt work."

"If I give it to a grunt, they won't see what we're looking for."

"What're we looking for?"

"I don't know, but you'll know it when you see it."

Max

Max Skelton sat at his dining room table waiting for his wife, Joanne, to finish washing the dishes. His mouth dry, his palms wet, and his heart raced.

Max was gay, always had been. He recalled when he and his wife first got together.

After he'd been told he was, "Nothing special, just another wannabe fag," by his lover as a young man, he'd gotten drunk with his best friend, Joanne, an African American girl he'd met in his social psychology class.

That night they'd slept together, and had continued having sex for a few months, 'friends with benefits.' Max had been broken-hearted and confused by being rejected as a wannabe fag, whatever that meant.

Despite her being his best friend, he'd never told her he was gay. He hadn't come out; his parents wouldn't have accepted a gay son.

They'd married two weeks after she'd announced she was pregnant. *It was the right thing to do.* This didn't stop him from having sex with a cute Mexican guy a few weeks later.

His parents weren't pleased with the arrangement. He'd overheard his father say to his mother. "I don't understand why he had to dip his wick into a fucking nigger bitch, but I s'pose it could be worse. I was worried he was one of those disgusting, degenerate fags." Not that his father's remark had surprised him.

Max never made decisions about his life. Joanne made the decisions, and he went along with them. He knew where he stood. He'd been married for fifteen years and had two kids. Joanne never exhibited an active sex drive, and Max wasn't interested either.

Max considered himself a gay tourist. Whenever he felt the urge, he went to a bar and picked up a guy for a one-night stand. Lately, his touring had become more frequent, so it was time to come out to his wife. He didn't anticipate she'd react well.

It's time I start making my own decisions about my life. Coming out to his wife was the first.

They got on well and other than the lack of sex; they had a good relationship. *We're more like siblings than a couple.* Their friendship hadn't become as close as it might have because he wasn't open with her. He held an important part of himself back.

Max sighed. *Expect she'll kick me out when I tell her.*

Joanne was in no hurry to talk with Max. She knew he wanted to talk about something personal, and she didn't want to have the conversation. She'd expected this conversation for fifteen years. Joanne was sure Max was going to tell her he'd met the one and was going to leave her. He didn't love her, not in that way.

Having finished the dishes and put the children to bed, Joanne arrived in the dining room with two glasses of red wine and sat opposite her husband. She passed Max a glass; he took a sip and absentmindedly placed it on the reclaimed-wood dining table.

Joanne frowned, sighed demonstratively, retrieved a coaster from the stack on the table, and slid it to Max, who picked up his glass, took another sip, and then set it on the coaster with exaggerated care.

“What is it, Max?”

He glanced away, swallowed hard, turned back, and said, “I’m gay.”

Joanne stared at him. *Does he think I didn’t know? All this time, I thought we both knew the score. Surely, even he couldn’t be that naïve.*

“Why are you telling me you’re gay?”

“I’ve been gay all my life, but I’m tired of feeling guilty all the time. I can’t keep doing this.”

He’s serious. He doesn’t know.

Joanne drained her glass. “I need another drink if we’re going to have *this* conversation.”

She stood and walked out of the room, returning a few minutes later with the bottle, and poured herself another glass of wine. Noticing Max had emptied his glass, she topped it up too. She studied her husband. His concerned expression was now one of confusion.

“Jesus, Max, you thought I didn’t know? Aren’t *you lot* supposed to be perceptive? Why do you think I married you?”

“Because I knocked you up.”

“I wanted to get pregnant and married. My parents were asking questions I didn’t want to answer. I chose you because you seemed like—sorry, *are*—a decent guy and because you’re obviously gay. One look at you and people know you’re gay. How could I not know? Even your asshole father knows you’re gay.”

“You married me because I’m gay?”

“I believed we had an unspoken understanding.”

“An understanding?”

“Max, I’m a lesbian.”

“Oh... I...”

“I couldn’t come out any more than you could. You know my family, they’re not as bad as yours, but still intolerant. Coming out wasn’t worth the cost of being cut off from them. I thought that’s what it was about for both of us.”

“You’re a lesbian? It never occurred to me. I...”

“Was too wrapped up in your own guilt to notice, I guess. I think it’s worked out fine, a lot worse marriages than ours out there. And I have two kids which I wanted.”

“Jesus.” Max looked at the ceiling as if he was appealing to a deity. “I’ve been feeling guilty all these years. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I assumed you knew. It’s obvious, and I never kept it a secret from you.” She sighed. “So, what’re you telling me, Max? Have you met a cute guy you can’t live without? Do you want a divorce?” She sipped her wine and locked her eyes on his. “I’ll want you to maintain a relationship with the kids. You’re a good father.”

“No, I thought you’d kick me out. I’ve never looked for a relationship. Only picked up guys in bars...”

“So, you don’t want a divorce?”

“Not unless you do?”

“Of course not. I like everything the way it is.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Nothing serious. I have a few girls I see from time to time. From the club.”

“There’s a club?”

Joanne, feeling relieved, finished her wine, poured herself another, and topped up her husband’s glass.

“Bored Housewives Club, run by a woman named Shy. We meet at her home once a month. Married lesbians who aren’t out. If we want, we exchange details and arrange hookups, mostly during the day, at each other’s place. I usually have them here. Figured it wouldn’t matter if you came home unexpectedly and caught us.”

“Sometimes you’re out until the early hours. I supposed you were having a night out with your girlfriends or something.”

Joanne smiled. “That’s exactly what I’m doing. The same as you when you don’t come home, I guess. I go to the bars and pick someone up if I’m in the mood.”

“There’s a couple of guys I see regularly, too. I think I’m going to enjoy it more without the guilt. I’ve been a tourist. That’s...”

“I know what a tourist is Max, we have them too. I don’t mind doing one occasionally, but there’s an older lady at the club, Nancy, who has a thing for them. She usually pounces before anyone else gets the chance.”

“I do love you, Joanne,” Max said. “I’m not attracted to you. Sexually, I mean. I love you like a sister, I guess.”

Joanne shrugged. “I feel the same. Not uncommon in marriage. I read a feature about it. *Spouses Becoming Siblings*. I like the writer, read all her stuff. Picked her up in a bar once a few years ago... sweet taste.”

“Now we’re being open with each other,” Max said. “I don’t want us to keep up the pretence. I don’t mean the juicy details, but at least say we’ve got a date or something.”

Joanne frowned, then nodded. “I’ll tell you when I’m going clubbing, and you tell me when you’re touring. The boys are getting older, and we don’t want them overhearing anything that’ll confuse them.”

Max collected Burt to drive him to the airport.

Burt asked, “Did you have the talk with Joanne?”

“Yes, I came out to her last night?”

“And?”

“Turns out she’s a lesbian, knew I was gay when she married me.”

“So, you’ve been guilty all these years for nothing?”

“Yes, apparently I grew a beard fifteen years ago, and thought I was clean shaven.”

“You didn’t know she was a lesbian?”

“Didn’t have a clue.”

Burt laughed so much tears came from his eyes.

“Jesus Maxy, you’ve made my day. I thought you were all sensitive types.”

“That’s what she said. Anyway, no reason to get divorced.”

“Can’t believe you didn’t know.”

“Too wrapped up in my guilt to notice. Thought she wasn’t interested in sex, turns out she gets plenty.”

Myron's Regret

Myron glanced around Burt's office. The room was bright, full of light from a strip of windows on the exterior walls of the corner office and lit by recessed spotlights. Burt's computer, phone and stationery were on the return of the L-shaped cherrywood desk. Like Myron, he kept his desk clear of everything, except what he was working on.

He sat in Burt's Herman Miller Embody chair, and Art sat in one of two antique red leather York Chesterfield tub chairs, which faced Burt's desk. The desk and visitor's chairs had been acquired when a tenant had skipped owing rent.

Eighteen old white storage boxes, with dark brown lids, were stacked along the back wall. On the side of each box, written with a black marker, was the name—if it had one—and address of a building, one box for each of their buildings.

The nineteenth box, minus the lid, sat on the desk. Inside the box were manilla folders, each with a year written with black ballpoint pen. On the inside flap was a list of the folder's contents, recorded as each receipt for costs associated with owning the building was added. Every maintenance item was meticulously recorded.

They were reviewing Art's files. Myron knew the financial details of the invoices, because he managed the books for the family business. Art was relaying the story behind each of the invoices.

Myron said, "We'll keep your records, but I'll have someone enter them into our management system. Easier for us to analyze and plan maintenance that way." In fact, he'd have the information transferred from his accounting company's system.

Art tapped his temple. "This is my computer. Analyze and plan everything in here, always have."

"Yes, Papa. It always amazes me how you retain every detail about your buildings."

"It's all I've had to worry about my whole life. Mama's always taken care of home and I've never needed to worry about you. Running our business is all I've ever done. I know those buildings like they're my children. Not that I've had to worry about them either, only care for them."

Myron nodded and smiled. "Do you ever wish you'd done something else?"

"No son, never. I was a boy when my Papa acquired The Secret Garden. The building was run down. The courtyard, little more than a garbage dump. Mama insisted we create the garden. Along with maintenance, we transformed what was little more than a slum Papa acquired cheap into a heritage-listed building.

"Watching them turn a dump into a garden made me proud. When finished, it was unrecognizable from what it had been. Even so, it wasn't a patch on what it is now. I remember looking at it and thinking... *We did this*. I didn't do much, but I helped. That's when I fell in love with our buildings."

Today, The Secret Garden was a courtyard filled with rose gardens and surrounded by hanging roses from six floors of balconies, like a waterfall of green, white, pink, and red cascading from above. A gazebo, located towards the back, was covered with climbing roses.

Entered through a nondescript, light gray entrance, in the front of the building, and not visible from the road, makes it secret.

Myron smiled. Papa loved them all.

“They’re not inanimate structures to me. They’re alive. I know them. Each is different, has its own unique personality. Always seems to me that our tenants, the long-term ones, take on the personality of the buildings, or perhaps it’s the other way round. Perhaps the buildings take on the personality of the tenants.”

“Maybe a little of both,” Myron suggested.

“I’m at peace because I know you respect our properties.”

Myron opened his mouth to say something, but Art cut him off. “I know you don’t love them the way I do. I don’t expect you to. You live in a different world than me. I know your thinking and I know you’ll look after them. Burt is a good man. He’ll do the right thing.”

“Yes, Papa, he will.”

“Judy gets it. She understands. I could sense it in her, even before she designed her City Oasis.”

Judy had designed the space to include an international food court, an exercise area with public gym equipment, a running track, and a convenience area with twenty-four-hour vending machines. There’s a relaxation area in the center, including a pond, fed by a waterfall cascading from a three-story structure with seating where visitors can take in an ever-changing cityscape from the third floor, and enjoy food and beverages from the food court and coffee and tea franchises. The Oasis borders three family-owned buildings, with another two close by.

“She does,” Myron agreed. “There’s something special about Judy. Not because I love her, perhaps it’s why I love her. I don’t know what it is... You’d think I would. I don’t think it’s any one thing. It’s the sum of all she is.”

“From the day you introduced her, I noticed it, too. She seamlessly fit into our family, like she’d always been a part of us.”

“Alison sees what I see. I think that’s why I like Alison so much. She gets it.”

Art smiled. “Never quite understood their relationship. It’s beyond me. Mama says they’re twin souls or something like that. Not sure what that is, but I think she might be right.”

“Sometimes I don’t know where one stops, and the other begins. It’s almost like they are one person.”

“Perhaps that’s why you love them both.”

“You know?”

“It’s obvious, well it was after Mama pointed it out.”

“Mama’s right.”

“She usually is.”

“Come on,” Myron said. “Let’s go for a coffee and stretch our legs.”

They walked the block to the Coffee Roasters Franchise outlet slowly. Myron had noticed his father did everything slowly these days, as if drinking in every precious moment of what was left of his life.

Art looked at everything as if seeing it for the first time. He cocked his head to listen and frequently stopped to sniff the air.

“Savoring life,” he said in response to Myron’s quizzical look.

Myron ordered John Farrington Blend coffees, Kansas Cheesecake for himself and Darnell's Triple Chocolate Cheesecake for Papa. Since the success and expansion of the Coffee Roasters and TeaMe franchises, Alice's Bakery had taken over the production of both signature cheesecakes.

Papa was eating his morning tea, like he did everything these days. Slowly. After placing each fork full in his mouth, he'd close his eyes and savor the taste. It occurred to Myron, Papa was making sure he remembered everything about his life, perhaps hoping to carry those memories with him after his death.

As they enjoyed their coffee and snack, Myron was thoughtful. "My hope is our family business will still exist in a hundred years. Play the long game. I'll be dead by then, so looking that far into the future isn't logical... but it's what I want, perhaps for Melanie's children."

Art nodded. "The key is to keep it in the family. Teach Melanie to value what's important and it won't be an issue. Many young people these days are raised to value the wrong things and all they care about is money, so they sell the family legacy off as soon as they can."

"That's true Papa, I see it all the time, but it's not only the money. I think they lack the will to run an old business."

"If you'd married Malka, I know you would have remained strong enough to resist her need to chase quick profits, but I wonder what values she'd have instilled in your children."

Myron frowned. "I'm sure I'd have been able to educate them in Myerson lore like I do with Melanie."

"What concerns me," Art said. "Are those who'd influence Melanie?"

"You're right, Papa," Myron said. "I'll think about how I can protect her from that."

"I have no concerns with Judy. I'm going to transfer my third of the family company to her and Melanie."

Myron smiled; he was going to suggest that.

Art frowned, and he sipped his coffee. "Do you have any regrets, son?"

Myron didn't answer immediately. As the furrow in his brow smoothed, he sighed, then nodded. "Just one."

Art nodded. "I'm at peace with dying because I have no regrets. I'd prefer another twenty years, and I'd have liked to see Melanie grow up." He was silent for a while, then continued. "At this point, I regret not having another year, but I don't regret anything in my control. Don't live with regret, son."

"No, Papa."

"If it's something you can fix, do it."

"Difficult now, but not impossible."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I um... not sure. Don't know how to talk about it with you."

Art nodded. "It's personal, I understand."

"Yes, Papa."

Art closed his eyes and was silent while he savored the remains of his coffee. He frowned. "I'm dying Myron."

Myron studied his father, swallowed back the tears that were forming as he was reminded of his Papa's prognosis, then nodded. "A few years ago, I was trying to work out how to bring Alison into our family, but I couldn't see how everything would fit together."

Art's frown deepened. "Why not?"

"You and Mama, and the community, for a start."

"I've never cared what the community thought. They criticize me for refusing to sell my buildings, despite some huge offers over the years. I won't speak for Mama, but we both know what her reaction would be."

"Yes, Papa. Another problem was Alison's children. I thought they'd been through enough upheaval. Their parents' divorce, their mother coming out as a lesbian, a new stepmother, the change in their routine when Alison started running Dancer's Bistro. I thought it would be a step too far for them, and I couldn't put Alison in that position."

"Then Melanie arrived in our lives and our attention was refocused. We were being assessed to determine if we'd be suitable as adoptive parents, and being in an unconventional relationship may have influenced the process negatively." Myron shrugged, shook his head, and concluded, "We couldn't take that risk."

"Alison's boys are grown now, moved away, I believe."

"Both in college. Perhaps I should've acted when Monica left, but Charlie was still at high school. Now she's with Rae. Don't know how long it'll last. Rae's not happy about Ali's closeness with Judy. Calls it an obsession."

Art nodded. "I've spent my life happily married to your Mama, so I don't much about this, err... stuff. Times are different now, but I believe as hard as it is to live with regret, it's harder to die with regret."

Myron continued. "Interesting thing is, Alison thinks it's an obsession too, but it's not. It's more than that. Maybe Mama's right."

"How do you see it working?"

"Judy has always been open about her bisexuality, which I've never had an issue with... I mean, if she wasn't, we never would have got together. Alison identifies as a lesbian, but she was married to John for about twenty years. More importantly, Alison and I are attracted to each other, very much so."

"Guess she must be bisexual, too."

"Her preference is women. Judy has no gender preference. That's the difference, but it's not about that. If it was only sex, it could've happened years ago." Myron stared at the floor. He moistened his lips and shook his head. "I didn't want that. Didn't want Alison... or perhaps me, being a third wheel. Felt it would cheapen everything somehow."

Art nodded again. "I've never thought about being with two women."

"My idea is to bring Alison into the family, equal. That's the only way I can picture it working long term."

"Perfectly normal in some cultures."

"Yes, I've considered that," Myron said.

“Of course you did,” Art silently reflected and then continued. “I’ve learned three important lessons about not being concerned with what other people think, and not attempting to explain things to them.” He studied his son over the rim of his cup as he took a sip of coffee. “The first was when we nearly married you off to that awful girl because the community thought it was a good match. The second was when you took in Rebekah and Darnell after not only her family, but the entire community rejected her, and no one could understand why you’d taken in a drug dealer from the projects. I told people it was the right thing to do. The third was when you adopted Melanie after her parents died and neither family was prepared to raise a mixed-race child they wished never existed.”

Myron nodded, then confirmed. “Alison is my only regret.”

“And Melanie?”

“Alison is like her second mother.”

“If that’s what you want, son, do it. If the three of you love each other, everything would work itself out easy enough.”

Myron stared ahead for a few moments, then nodded. “When the timing is right, I will.”

Art smiled. “We don’t have as much time as we think we do.”

Myron’s voice caught a little, as he again fought back tears threatening to escape. “No, Papa, we don’t.”

Red Seven

Mouse folded the electric bill, retrieved his passbook from his desk and put them in his bag.

His mother had been gone for over fifteen years. The deed had transferred to Mouse, but the utilities remained in her name. She'd left him the apartment in her will along with the remains of his father's insurance policy.

Following his father's death in a car accident, she'd learned the benefit of life insurance, and had taken out a policy on herself with Mouse as the beneficiary.

The proceeds had left Mouse, a wealthy man with over two million dollars, sitting doing nothing in his savings account. He didn't live like a millionaire; he lived in his mother's apartment, and he traded second-hand books for clothes at the Thrift store.

Mouse completed his withdrawal slip, a thousand dollars, the amount his mother believed would be enough for his expenses. He handed the slip and his passbook to the teller, who looked at him like he was from another planet. They always did.

"You don't need to come to a teller now. You can use your card in the ATM," the woman explained.

Mouse shook his head. "Don't have a card."

She studied the computer screen in front of . Surprise registered on her face—as it always did—when they glimpsed his balance and compared it to his appearance and demeanor. "Says here they sent you several cards over the years, but you never activated them. If you bring it in, I'll activate it for you."

"Burned it."

"Why?"

"Don't trust cards." He shrugged. "If I have real money, I know how much I got."

She frowned, stared at him like he was crazy—as they always did—and processed his withdrawal.

She handed him the passbook and his cash with the automatic. "Have a nice day."

Mouse nodded, put the passbook in his bag, the cash in his wallet, then turned and walked away.

His next stop was City Gas & Electric Company. He passed the cashier the bill and some money.

She said, "You don't need to come in. You can pay online or use your phone to pay."

Mouse explained, "Don't have no phone."

The woman stared at him. "Everybody has a phone."

"I don't."

"How can you live without a phone?"

He shrugged. "Don't have nobody to call."

"But how can you do anything without a phone?"

“Why would I need a phone to do anything?”

The woman also looked at him like he was from another planet, but didn't say more.

His last stop was to buy a pre-made salad and tuna sandwich, which he took home for lunch.

Mouse usually walked everywhere, but occasionally took a bus where he'd need exact fare, so he carried a purse full of change. He didn't own a car. He'd never learned to drive.

Mouse had a social security number, his name on a deed, and a bank account his mother had opened for him, but nothing else. Officially, he barely existed. Mouse didn't intentionally live off the grid, he didn't know there was a grid.

After lunch, he packed the books he'd read into his backpack and headed to the Thrift store.

When he arrived, he unpacked his bag, stacking the books on the counter.

“What are you looking for today?” the older woman asked.

Mouse had been coming to the store for years. He exchanged books for clothes, but they'd never exchanged names.

“A shirt and a pair of trousers.”

The woman inspected the stack of books and nodded.

He chose a simple light blue shirt and a pair of grey slacks. He handed them to the woman who made notes in her book, bagged them, and returned them to Mouse, who placed the bag in his backpack and walked home.

The next morning, Mouse finished his breakfast of black coffee, orange juice and a slice of toasted, processed supermarket bread. He didn't work, he never had.

He wore his usual nondescript drab clothes, older style, acquired from the thrift store. Mouse didn't like to be noticed.

He put his backpack on and left his apartment, intending to go to the flea market and buy some cheap books. Mouse enjoyed reading and spent most of his time with a book. He read anything he could find. Genre wasn't important to him, but he supposed he liked crime novels best.

From reading crime novels, he'd learned how not to leave a trace of forensic evidence after his encounters.

He didn't wonder about his next encounter, he never did. Nor did he know the catalyst for selecting an encounter. When he saw her, she'd 'tell' him she wanted to be encountered.

Rae kissed Ali goodbye. “Heading to the flea market. Got to keep my eye in.”

“Better get my ass organized and into work, too. Have fun hunting.”

“I'd like to get your ass organized.”

“You already did. That's why I'm running late.”

Rae smiled. Negotiations were progressing well from her expression of interest to purchase the antique business in San Francisco, which she hadn't mentioned to Ali. She was

worried she'd back out if she couldn't convince Ali to go with her. She wanted to be committed to the acquisition first.

Gotta get out of this city. No future for us with fucking Judy in the picture. Rae shook her head. *Not strong enough to give Ali up. Gonna have to force the issue.*

She glanced at her lover, sighed, turned, and left their apartment.

As she walked the four blocks to the flea market, Rae reflected on how she came to be in her current situation. She'd completed a Master of Fine Art specializing in Ceramic Art at Alfred University in New York State, which, along with experience working at an antique market, she'd transformed into a love of fine china and porcelain. She established herself as a leading dealer, with a lucrative business which she sold when she'd received an offer she couldn't refuse.

Therein lay much of her problem. A few months off work had become nearly two years as she attempted to build a life with Ali, whom she'd fallen in love with soon after meeting.

She now realized she'd never be able to build a life with Ali in this city, so she'd registered an expression of interest in an antiques business in San Francisco, where collecting Fine China and Porcelain was a popular pastime of many residents.

Rae arrived at the flea market and dodged a kid riding a skateboard on the sidewalk. She inhaled the familiar smell from the hotdog stand, which to Rae was the scent of the city. An old guy playing a familiar tune which she couldn't quite recognize on an old tattered piano accordion distracted her thoughts. She reached into her purse, grabbed a couple of quarters, dropped them into the musician's cup, then headed for the stalls selling bric-à-brac.

She'd heard tales of dealers finding priceless treasures at these places, although she didn't know if they were true. Nevertheless, she'd made several purchases for practically nothing since she sold her business. Each had netted several hundred dollars profit in the online store she'd established.

Rae went to work inspecting items. Mostly, it was junk not worth much more than the asking price, sometimes less. She found a full set Shrewsbury Oval Sauce Tureen; it was *Losol Ware*, by Keeling and Co. The asking price was ten dollars, which she bartered down to eight. *That'll turn a nice profit.*

Mouse filled his bag with books from the one-dollar book stall as usual. He raised his heavy backpack and grunted as he slung it over his shoulder. He was about to head home when he glimpsed her. As soon as he saw Seven, his pulse quickened, his breathing became shallow, an adrenalin rush focused his vision.

I've never encountered a redhead before.

He hung around, keeping his distance, pretending to look at items on stalls. He kept Seven in sight, moving from one stall to the next as she did, always three stalls between them.

His first step would be to follow Seven home. From there, he'd follow her as long as it took to know her routine, then he'd plan their encounter. It didn't matter how long it took, the longer it took, the better.

An hour later Seven left the flea market and Mouse followed her, at a discreet distance but close enough to follow if she took a bus. If she took a taxi, he'd lose her. That happened

with Four, but he'd returned to the area where he'd first glimpsed her, and picked up her trail again a couple of days later.

Rae crossed the road and headed to a café for coffee and a sandwich. She had her regular places. Occasionally she'd call into Dancer's to see Ali, but not often, in case *she* was there. *The way everyone fawns over Judy makes me want to puke. Fucking bitch.*

She ate lunch thinking about San Francisco and trying hard not to think about *fucking Judy*. Sometimes she wondered if she was as obsessed with Judy as Ali was for opposite reasons. *Does my hatred mirror Ali's love of her? I wish Ali could love me like she loves her.*

May as well go home and do some research on this morning's find. If they are what I think they are, I'll put them up on the website today, might get a quick sale.

Rae took her bag from the seat, and left the café, planning to walk home. *Pleasant afternoon for a stroll.*

Mouse saw Seven leave the café. He stepped out of the doorway and followed, knowing she wouldn't notice him. They never did. No one noticed him, no one looked at him. He was invisible.

She's not going anywhere, probably going home. Stopping to browse in windows.

It didn't matter to Mouse. The longer he watched them, the more he knew them.

Finally, Seven entered an apartment building. Mouse waited two minutes and followed.

The lobby didn't have security, other than two security cameras over his head. He'd learned about surveillance cameras from his reading. These were older and held a fixed position with a narrow focus. They were easily avoided by hugging the walls as he passed them. He entered the lobby and focused on the elevator indicator. *Hope she's the only one in it.*

The elevator stopped at sixteen. He left the building and crossed the road to a convenient bus stop. He sat on the bench and pulled a book from his bag, innocently reading, watching the building to see if she came out. She didn't.

At eight o'clock, he returned his book to his bag and sauntered home.

The route took him past Six's alley.

Mouse, wearing nondescript gray overalls, under a green sweater—both acquired from the thrift store—stepped out of his apartment at four the next morning, and strode to Seven's building, again passing Six's alley. *If Seven walks past here, I could use the same place.*

He took the elevator to the sixteenth floor, found a dark alcove which hid a fire hose in a cupboard, and waited. He could stand there all day. Experience told him residents would walk past and never glance into the alcove. Nevertheless, he removed his sweater, placed it in his backpack, and removed a clipboard with a pen attached. If challenged, he was 'doing an inspection', he didn't need to be specific.

It was a long wait, but Mouse was patient. Eventually, Seven left an apartment close to the alcove. *One six zero four*. He knew where she lived. She walked past him without glancing in his direction.

He waited until the elevator doors closed behind her and darted to the foyer, where the scent of Seven's perfume lingered. He called the next elevator, which didn't take long. Thankfully, there were two elevators in the building.

In the elevator, he dragged his sweater on, which disguised that he was wearing overalls, and returned the clipboard to his backpack, and slung it over his shoulder.

When he exited the building, Seven had crossed the road and turned right. He followed but didn't cross immediately. The morning sun made her red hair shine like a beacon for him to follow.

Front-End Loader

Daphne Loader had recently completed her probation when she acquired the nickname Front-End. She knew it was what they called her, and she knew why, but to her face it was Daphne, Daph, Officer, or Detective.

She'd been a cop for a little over a year when she was dispatched to a home-invasion homicide. Daphne and her partner, Henry 'Ted' Danson, who'd been on the job for nearly ten years, were first on the scene. Their task was to secure the scene and wait for detectives and crime scene investigators to arrive.

It was her first murder. Ted was the first to enter the house. She noticed him stiffen after he stepped inside.

"It's gruesome," he warned her over his shoulder.

Despite the warning, she wasn't prepared for what was laid out before her when she followed a few yards behind.

Blood splatter and spray adorned the walls. Wet blood had run down them, like rain on a window, and was still glistening as it hadn't quite dried. *It's as if the house is bleeding.*

A man lying on his back but still seated in the chair which he'd been tied to, had half of his head missing. An apparent shotgun blast had scattered his brains throughout the dining room. One eye was hanging out of the side of his head by sinew or something. Daphne was staring wide-eyed. She seemed frozen in position, but her instinct screamed at her to look away.

A woman was sitting in another chair, staring—with eyes open wider than Daphne's—at nothing. Her throat had been cut deep, and what blood hadn't redecorated the walls was in a pool at her feet.

The stench of evacuated bowels assaulted Daphne's nostrils and made her gag. It was—up to that point—the worst thing she'd seen.

Daphne took the lead upstairs. Ted was checking the other downstairs rooms. She stepped into the first bedroom, on her right, gun drawn. She gasped and almost dropped her weapon. The room had been decorated in a similar manner as downstairs.

Lying on the floor were two teenage boys, neither had a head, raw flesh jutting from their open necks. She glanced around the room, trying to stay calm and keep her own head as she'd been trained to do, but the involuntary shaking of her body made this difficult.

She heard a noise and spun around, her finger shaking against the trigger. A black and white kitten, with what appeared to be drops of blood on its fur, had knocked against something as it darted from behind the door and took refuge under the bed.

The boys' heads were together on the floor, appearing to stare at each other. She didn't take another step. There was evidence everywhere, and she didn't want to contaminate the scene.

Daphne retreated and made her way to the next bedroom. The room was cleaner, but there was a girl on the bed, maybe ten or eleven. Her legs were tied apart, and her genitalia distended, covered in blood, and Daphne didn't want to imagine what else. Her throat had also been cut. Daphne's legs became jelly, her body was still shaking.

Finally, her humanity shattered the shock which had engulfed her. She prayed the throat had been cut before the brutal rape had occurred.

One more room. It was the one she wished she'd never entered. A baby lay on the floor. The head had been caved in, almost flattened. Daphne screamed. "Oh, God! No. No. NO!"

Her stomach heaved. Holstering her gun, she turned, tears streaming down her face, and left the room, shoving her partner, who'd come running in response to her scream, into the wall.

She stumbled downstairs, willing her shaking legs to hold her upright. She staggered outside, almost knocking over the next two officers who arrived on the scene.

Once outside, she vomited, her body heaving not only from the convulsions of her stomach, but from the blend of rage, fury and disgust consuming her strength. Tears flowed freely down her face, and internally, mixing with mucus and draining from her nose into her dry retching throat.

A third radio car, and two more officers arrived. One went inside; the other, Snowy Thompson, came to rally Daphne, convincing her to pull herself together before the brass turned up.

"You don't want to get a reputation for being a weak female, unable to handle nasty situations," he cautioned.

Easy for him to say. He hasn't been inside.

Ted came out, walked a few paces, then threw up. Daphne frowned. She'd never seen Ted affected by anything.

She straightened and wiped her mouth. "I'll check things out around the back of the house." She needed time to stabilize her emotions.

In the backyard, she found another victim, a man with a bullet hole in his head, apparently from a small caliber weapon. Beside him, a plastic baggie half full of smaller baggies, with an outlined portrait in red of a naked woman from the waist up. The bags contained white powder.

"So that's what this mess is about." Snowy had followed her.

He scanned the area, then bent down, picked up the bag, winked at Daphne and slid it into his pocket.

The six officers changed from their uniforms and headed to the Blue-Lights Bar as soon as their shift was over. They drank for a couple of hours, but their mood was wrong. They were morose. Nobody wanted to talk about what they'd witnessed that day, but all seemed incapable of talking about anything else.

Ted, for example, sat staring into his glass, ignoring anyone who spoke to him, and then would say something like, "How could a human being do that to a child?"

No one would answer, could answer, and the table would go quiet, until someone else expressed a similar sentiment.

Snowy suggested, "Let's buy some real booze, go back to my place, and get drunk properly. We've all been put on leave tomorrow."

Another hour of drinking straight bourbon from the bottle and they were all hammered, each desperately trying to blur the edges of what they'd witnessed in that house.

Snowy pulled the bag from his pocket and dumped the contents on the table.

“Let’s get high,” he said.

Ted cut it into lines, and they all partook.

Daphne was drunk and high. Her short skirt had ridden up as she half sat, half lay on the sofa. Her panties were removed and then Snowy was on top of her, fucking her and yelling, “Ride ‘em, cowboy.”

She smiled; this was exactly what she needed. By the end of the night, all five of her fellow officers had fucked her. She hadn’t only allowed it to happen, she’d needed it.

When Daphne woke the next day, she squinted at the daylight. She raised her head, which was a mistake, because of the vice gripping her skull and the drums beating in her ears. Her mouth and vagina felt like used cat litter. She didn’t know where her panties were. Her pubic hair was hard and matted together with assorted dry semen.

Her partner, Ted, was beside her, pants around his ankles, his penis hanging limply.

She staggered to the bathroom, relieved herself, stripped naked, and climbed into the shower. As she stood under the hot water, she pieced together what had happened. *They’d all taken a turn.* From his position, when she woke, she supposed her partner had been last. *Hope he liked sloppy seconds.*

They’d been as high as she was, and she wanted it at the time.

After her shower, Daphne dressed in her skirt and blouse. *What happened to my underwear?* She went to the kitchen where the guys were all sitting at the table, drinking coffee. They had made her a cup.

They’d been talking when she entered the room, but were now silent. And none would look at her. *Fucking men always want to think they’re the ones in control. This could become awkward. We need to work together.*

She sat and inhaled the aroma loudly, to draw the focus onto her. “Relax boys,” she smirked. “We were all high, and you didn’t hear me objecting. You don’t need to act like guilty schoolboys caught jerking off behind the woodshed.”

Her colleagues shared guilty looks, and there were some murmurs, but no one said anything.

Daphne sighed heavily. “My head’s killing me, Snowy. You got any Advil or something?”

“Sure, Daph,” he said as he went off to find the Advil.

Daphne looked at her remaining colleagues, who still seemed self-conscious. *Fuck this.*

“I’d rate you,” she said. “But none of you were any fucking good. At least you didn’t shoot your load in my ass, but I’d hoped one of you losers could’ve made *me* cum. Now which one of you sick bastards souvenired my panties?”

They relaxed, although none admitted to the panty theft. The incident was never mentioned again, other than the nickname Front-End Loader, ensuring she never forgot that night. Well, what she could remember of it, which wasn’t much.

Everything changed after that day. Daphne found that when she was home alone at night, she couldn't get the images of what she'd seen in that house out of her head. A man lying on his back, half his head missing. A woman, her throat slashed, staring at nothing. Two teenage boys, decapitated, staring at each other. A young girl, genitalia distended, throat cut. A baby with its head flattened.

She couldn't sleep because of flashbacks, and when she did, she had nightmares.

The remedy, as far as she was concerned, was booze and cock. She drank with her colleagues until she was drunk and then took one of them home for sex. After which she could sleep without the nightmares. It had occurred to her, the events of the night of the murders, might have conditioned her in how she could banish the images, but rather than dwell on it, she shrugged. *Whatever works.*

A procedural review panel determined the officers were suffering from PTSD, and they were required to attend compulsory trauma counseling. The sessions focused on getting them to talk about what they'd seen, and none of the officers involved wanted that. Daphne attended the sessions, told the councilor what she thought he wanted to hear, then adjourned to a bar for self-prescribed therapy.

What they'd witnessed in the murder house changed the lives of all six officers. Within twelve months, Daphne was the only one who remained a patrol officer.

Snowy Thompson, the most senior of the officers, had retained the remains of the bag of coke he'd lifted from the crime scene. He became an addict, and was put in rehab, but he didn't want rehab. Being sober meant remembering. He was dismissed. Ted Danson left too. He went to seminary and became a priest. Another officer, George Stone, transferred to traffic, and the remaining two left to establish a landscaping business.

Two years later, Daphne decided she needed a couple of decent busts to be promoted to detective. She had experience on the job, and had passed the exams, but needed some notable performance in the field. She was working foot patrol when she targeted Duke, a known minor dealer.

Duke was returning to his apartment when he was stopped by a female cop, wide eyed and weapon drawn.

"Hands up, and assume the position against the wall," she ordered.

Duke assessed the situation. *Nervous white bitch cop with a gun pointed at me.* He complied.

"Are you armed?" she asked.

"No."

"Hands behind your back."

Could hit her and bolt. Only takes one bullet, not worth the risk. He complied.

After cuffing him, she holstered her gun.

"Anything in your pockets that's going to stick me?"

"No."

She frisked him, extracting his keys from his pocket.

“We’re gonna go upstairs and I’m gonna toss your room. Lead the way,” she instructed.

“You gotta warrant?” he asked.

“Am I gonna find anything?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“Then why would I need a warrant?”

Duke knew she’d find nothing, so he humored her for his own amusement.

He smiled. With hands cuffed behind him, he led her upstairs. “Four C,” he said.

Daphne opened the door and shoved him inside.

“Sit on the bed,” she ordered.

He complied, still amused. He watched her search the studio apartment. *Does she think I’d be stupid enough to keep anything here?*

Finished searching, she uncuffed one hand and cuffed it to the radiator.

“I need to piss. Don’t move.”

He raised his cuffed hand. “Where would I go?”

He heard her piss and flush. When she came out of the bathroom, she was naked from the waist down.

“What the fuck?”

“Lay on your back or I’ll shoot you in self-defense.”

He complied; the amused smirk left his face.

She opened his belt, then his fly, and pulled his trousers and pants down. He hardened as she grabbed his cock and massaged it.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I’m gonna have me some of this.”

“You’re fucking crazy.”

“Let’s see if we can harden you up.”

She took him in her mouth until he was fully hard and then climbed on top and rode him until he ejaculated.

“That’s a taste, a free sample.”

“Of what?”

“I need some busts to make detective and you’re going to be my snitch.”

“I ain’t no snitch, you crazy bitch.”

He was still inside of her, and she was gently riding him.

“This is how it’s gonna work. You give me intel, and if it leads to an arrest, I’ll come round and fuck you. Snitch for snatch.”

“I told you, I ain’t no snitch.”

“What’s the matter, big boy? You don’t like my pussy?”

He stared at her. *She's fucking crazy.*

"It'll give you a chance to even up some scores, take over the neighborhood. I'm going to dress now. You can think about it while I'm gone."

Could be useful. I'll give her that fucking Jonus and see what happens.

When she returned, he said, "Jonus is gonna stick up that pawn shop on Ninth Avenue this afternoon. During rush hour when the streets are crowded. He thinks he can blend in with the crowd and make his getaway."

"You see, Duke, that wasn't so hard. I'll attend to this Jonus and come back tonight. Be here and I'll tell you how it's gonna work."

She leaned in and kissed him, then uncuffed him.

He rubbed his wrists. "You're fucking crazy," he said.

Daphne sat in a café diagonally opposite Ninth Street Pawn. She'd called in another break, drank a mediocre coffee, and waited.

When Jonus entered the shop, she left the café, crossed the road and was waiting when he exited.

"How'd you know, bitch?" he asked as she arrested him.

"Not your lucky day. I was on a break having a coffee," she nodded toward the café. "When I saw you go in, looking suspicious. I thought I'd check you out."

She cuffed him and radioed for backup to give them a ride back to the precinct.

That night, Daphne sent Duke a message to be home, picked up a bottle of bourbon and, wearing civilian clothes, arrived at his apartment as arranged.

Duke opened the door as soon as she knocked.

"You see how this works," Daphne said. "You give me information and I'll get them off the street."

"Yeah, I'm not fucking stupid. You get a bust and I get even or remove competition."

"Time to party," she said. "You earned it this time."

When they'd finished and she was ready to leave, she said, "Come into the station tomorrow and I'll register you as a confidential informant. That way, nobody will be suspicious if I'm seen with you. I can protect you for minor possession, but any violence and you're on your own."

The next morning, they completed the paperwork. Duke was now legit.

"Says here I get paid."

"Depends on the quality of the information and significance of the case. Your file will have a pseudonym. Less than two hundred I get cash, over two hundred it's a check made out to me which I cash and give you the proceeds. You'll sign for the payments to verify I paid you, but you know how I pay you," Daphne said. "The money will cover my expenses."

Duke shrugged. “Five o’clock, O’Rourke’s Park. Two guys, one black, one white, looking like a pair of fags with identical fag bags, which they’ll exchange. You’ll want to get a look in those bags.”

Daphne smiled. “So, you like this kind of work?”

“I like the pay and getting rid of my competitors.”

She organized a stakeout easily, as her confidential informant was registered.

Another bust, this time a drug deal.

Another two arrests courtesy of Duke.

One night, after drinking more than her share of bourbon, she opened up to Duke, telling him what she’d experienced in that drug house.

Duke stared at her. He knew something had made her into the person she was, and now he understood. Admittedly, he’d benefited from their connection, but he wished she’d never witnessed the scene.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Daph. It was about control of the drugs in the city. The thinking was they wanted to wipe out the whole family so no kids would grow up looking for revenge. But no one understands why they needed to be so brutal.”

Daphne’s eyes opened wide and fixed on him. “Were you involved?”

“No.”

“But you know what happened?”

“Yep.”

“And who did it?”

“Yeah.”

“I want them.”

He looked at her. She was sitting bolt upright. Seemingly sober now. He nodded, placed his hand on her knee. “I need to make a phone call.”

Duke left his apartment and stood in the hall. He selected a number and hit call.

“Duke, speak,” the voice said.

“You said you weren’t happy with things. I’m hearing there might be changes. With your support, I can take over the city for you.”

He heard muffled voices on the other end of the line, then. “Agreed. Make it happen.” The line went dead.

Duke re-entered his apartment. Picked up a small notepad and wrote some information on it. Names and addresses. He passed it to Daphne.

“Here,” he said. “They did it.”

She stared at the paper, and then at Duke. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Were you involved in any way?”

Duke shook his head. “Nup.”

“I need to call the lieutenant,” Daphne said, reaching for her phone.

Duke stopped her. “No Daph, not now. In the morning when you’re sober. No one’s going anywhere. Tell your people to expect them to be heavily armed.”

She nodded.

“Let’s go to bed, and I’ll clear your head.”

The next morning Daphne arrived early, changed into her uniform, took Duke’s note to the lieutenant of detectives, and explained the situation.

“Get downstairs and change out of your uniform, then come back. I’ll second you for this and if you perform well, I’ll make it permanent.”

Two days later, the teams the lieutenant had put together, simultaneously hit every address Daphne had provided. They didn’t come easily, all but two of the perpetrators were killed, and the survivors admitted the home invasion homicides as part of a plea agreement.

Daphne looked up when Flash Jack entered the small, drab, windowless room she was working in.

“Hello Sarge,” she greeted him.

“Hey Daph, I brought you a coffee.”

She flashed him a smile. “Thanks.”

“Anything?”

“Not yet, early days.”

“Keep at it. I’m sure you’ll find something.”

He left the room. *Maybe I should invite him for a drink. He looks at me like he wants to or wants something.* She smiled, then sipped her coffee. *No advantage in it.*

Daphne had spent most of the day tracking Joan Summertime through CCTV footage. An average woman who lived a boring life. She never met friends. Work and home, with nothing in between. *No wonder no one missed her. Who knew she existed?*

She glimpsed a man behind Summertime when she turned a corner. It was just a glimpse, but something about him seemed familiar. Daphne noted the time stamp and rewound the tape. It took some time, but she finally found the guy again. He was in a car. She paused the tape and studied it. Unless he had a twin in the back of the car, he wasn’t in the car; he was reflected in the window, front, then rear as the car moved past. *That’s what drew my attention to him. He looks like he’s in the car twice.*

Daphne noted the timestamp, and then returned to the time she noted him previously. She glimpsed him one more time, following maybe ten feet behind Summertime.

She was getting tired, which was the worst time for her. As her tired brain lost concentration, the flashbacks she’d carry with her until the day she died began to sneak into her mind. *Bourbon O’clock.*

She glanced at her pitiful notes. Three tape times noted so she could find them again if she needed to. She’d caught a glimpse of a man behind the victim on three occasions. Summertime followed the same routine most days.

Probably nothing more than a guy who had a similar routine. Just two working people who crossed paths daily without being aware.

She requested CCTV footage so she could track Karen Marie Ginn the next day, when she'd be looking for any glimpses of the same man.

Daphne headed to the bar, a few drinks and some company, to chase the images away. She glanced at Flash Jack on the way out. *Better not.*

The next day was another tedious day, staring at CCTV footage. However, she was now looking for someone in particular. She glimpsed the man twice, once directly, and once reflected in a store window. As with the footage of Summertime, it was only a glimpse. *That can't be a coincidence.*

None of the glimpses were clear. He never looked directly at the camera. He always wore a cap, and kept his eyes down, but she was sure he was the same man.

Daphne ran his image through facial recognition but came up blank. There was no matching record of him anywhere. She sent what she had to the FBI. *Maybe he's from out of state.*

She requested the footage for victim Four, Elizabeth Anne Wren, and decided it was time to tell Flash Jack. *That can wait until tomorrow. I need a drink.*

Lunch with Ali

Judy finished reviewing her latest feature and glanced at her watch. *Time to meet Ali.*

She selected a short, pale pink Mini Qipao dress, with a darker pink and white floral pattern and maroon trim. Matching aphrodisiac lingerie in powder pink—Judy still categorized her lingerie, aphrodisiac, fine lines and, who cares. Her outfit finished with pink heels.

She inspected her reflection. *Maybe a tad overdressed. Doesn't matter.*

Judy was heading to the second restaurant she owned, Dancer's Bistro, for lunch with Ali. Since Art's revelation, Judy often lunched with Ali. With Myron busy with Papa, and change coming, she was feeling vulnerable.

She appraised herself again and smiled with satisfaction. *That'll moisten her up.*

She couldn't decide if she wanted Rae to call in or not. As Judy's lunchtime visits had increased, Rae's had diminished. Judy was happy about this. The atmosphere was always tense when they were both there, but today, she wanted Rae to see how amazing she looked.

I'm a bitch.

She grabbed her old, worn shoulder bag, which met her three criteria for purchases; practical, comfortable, and quality. It was out of place with her outfit, but it had been her constant companion for ten years, and she was reluctant to say goodbye to what she considered an old friend. She left the penthouse.

When she exited the building, George was standing outside Frank's Diner, having a cigarette. *How is he always outside when I come out?* It didn't occur to her that following rigid routines meant she left for lunch at the same time every day.

She stepped over to greet George, resting her hand on his arm as she always did.

"Hello George."

"Hello Miss Judy."

That'll give him something to think about tonight. She smiled.

"You look pretty today," George said, then flushed, and glanced away.

"Thank you, George."

He smiled.

"Pretty in pink," she said, and winked.

George seemed at a loss for words.

On impulse, she kissed him on the cheek. "Better go, meeting Ali for lunch."

She turned, walked to the curb, and flagged a taxi. Settled into the taxi, she noticed George was staring at her. She smiled. *Still got it.*

Judy swept into The Shipyard; the bar attached to Dancer's Bistro. It was busy with the lunchtime crowd. Mostly men, sitting alone or in pairs. Many were fashionably dressed.

Egyptian blue carpet with gold patterns, angel chairs in every color of the rainbow sat in matching pairs at each redwood table. A small dance floor in the back corner, with a jukebox.

Still can't believe how different the place is from the first time I visited, when the bar was full of drunks.

She'd barely walked three steps when Dancer was beside her. The former boxer, muscle for hire, and longtime bar owner hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek, as he did every day. His large hands could crush her if he wanted to.

"Hello Dancer," she said. *When I met him, I never imagined we'd end up as business partners.* "Business is good."

"Always is, since we became fagified."

Judy smiled. The Shipyard may have changed, but Dancer hasn't.

"You're in a good mood today."

"Had a visit from Art and Myron this morning," Dancer explained. "Art's looking much better than I expected he would."

"Yes, it's hard to believe..."

Jason, the barista and jack-of-all-trades, interrupted her.

"Judy, look at you! All pink cotton candy. Makes me want to lick you. You know pink is my color."

"Hello Jason."

Dancer said, "Behave yourself, Shirley Temple, or you won't be licking anything for a fucking week. Now get Judy a drink."

"Must be a Pink Gin today," Jason said.

"He's a pain in the ass," Dancer said to Judy.

"You wish, old man," Jason suggested.

Dancer grinned. "You see. Enjoy your lunch."

Judy smiled and headed into Dancer's Bistro and the chef's table outside the kitchen.

Ali was busy seating customers, but stopped and stared at Judy.

Guess I got her attention. Judy glanced around. *No sign of Rae.*

Jason delivered her drink, and a second one for Ali. "Sure your girl will wanna get her mouth into something pink today." He winked. "Much more suitable for her than red, if you ask me."

He doesn't like Rae either. Judy smiled, but didn't respond.

"Dancer's being the tough guy," he said. "He's really cut up about Art."

"It's hard to process the reality of it. I don't think it's sunk in yet."

Dancer called out, "Shirley Temple, need some coffees."

"My master's voice," Jason said and went to attend to his duties.

Judy was watching Jason as he walked away when a familiar voice demanded, "Stand up and let me look at you."

Judy stood as Ali instructed.

“If Rae saw you like this... I don’t know what she would do, but I’d be hearing about everything that’s wrong with your outfit for a week.”

Judy frowned. “What’s wrong with my outfit?”

“As far as I’m concerned, nothing. If you wore it for a reason, it worked.” Ali kissed her and whispered, “Want to feel?”

“Maybe later.”

Ali smiled. “I wish. From Rae’s perspective, that you’re wearing it makes everything about it wrong.”

“Thinking of a salad for lunch,” Judy said. “What are you thinking?”

“I know what I want to eat, but you’re not on the menu.

“It’s comments like that which make Rae jealous.”

“And you wet, but we’re not going there.”

Judy grinned.

“We could get a room upstairs,” Ali suggested.

“Behave.”

“You wore that outfit because you’re feeling vulnerable. Change is coming and you don’t like it. You’re looking for reassurance that my feelings haven’t changed, so you don’t want me to behave.”

I think she is more in my head than Frank ever was. “So, you’re a psychiatrist now?”

“I know you, darling. I’ll organize our salads, tell them to give us twenty minutes.”

Ali went to the kitchen.

When she returned, she said to Jason, “Keep an eye on things for a few minutes.” Then ordered Judy, “Restroom.”

Judy dutifully followed her into a stall, locking the door behind them.

They kissed passionately, tongues dancing in each other’s mouth. Judy felt Ali’s hand slide up her dress and reciprocated. They fondled each other through their panties, each bringing the other to the edge before pulling back.

They stared at each other, both breathing heavily as they struggled to control their desires. As her breathing calmed, Ali announced, “Need to pee.”

She lowered her panties, sat on the toilet and relieved herself. Neither gave it a thought.

As they left the stall, they almost collided with Rae, who glared at them. “Fucking bitches,” she said, turned and stormed out.

Ali grimaced. “I’m in for a rough night.”

“Sorry darling.”

“I’m not. Figure it was worth it.”

Mouse settled down on the bench at the front of O’Rourke’s Park with his book to wait for Seven. She visited Dancer’s Bistro often and usually stayed a few hours. Not today. She had left in minutes, stormed across the road, and walked past him without a glance.

Something's pissed her off.

He turned his head and saw her walk towards the sea wall. She stood staring out over the bay. Mouse gathered his backpack and his book and moved to a bench closer to Seven, who didn't notice him. They never did.

Judy smiled when she sat at the chef's table. *Looking forward to this salad.*

The base was romaine lettuce hearts. The halved cherry tomatoes added red to the blend of purple, mauve and white of diced red onions, and seemed to highlight the orange of matchstick cut carrots, with more shades of green with sugar snap peas, and minced fresh chives. Croutons made from sourdough bread from Alice's Bakery added crunch and accents of crumbled blue vein cheese added texture and bite. The salad was finished with Judy's favorite honey mustard and macadamia dressing from Exquisite Jams.

Ali scanned the restaurant, then joined Judy. "Looks scrumptious," she said.

Judy winked. "Me or the salad."

"You know what I'd rather eat, and you get off teasing me."

I do. Selfish, I know. Should feel guilty but I don't. "Sorry I caused you problems. Shouldn't you go after her?"

Ali shrugged. "That's what Rae wants. If I was younger, I probably would. Now, I'm not interested in playing these emotional games. If she wants to talk about anything, we can, but I'm not chasing after her like a guilty teenager. She says you're as obsessed with me as I am with you. Says it's not healthy."

"She's probably right, on both counts," Judy said.

Don't know how I'd survive without Ali. Maybe it's time. She'd drop Rae in an instant. I need to talk to Myron. Can't now with Art... Should stop being so selfish and let Ali have a proper life.

Ali asked, "What is it, darling?"

"I'm too selfish, and it's not fair to you."

"That's for me to decide, and I'm not going to give you up. I like you being selfish, but the occasional orgasm would be, err... nice."

Judy smiled.

Rae stared at the ocean, but she didn't enjoy the vista. That's not what she was looking at. All she could see was Ali and that bitch coming out of a stall, looking flustered and disheveled. *Sick bitches touching each other up again. Don't understand why they don't just fuck and get it over with. Like a couple of pathetic fucking schoolgirls.*

She forced herself to calm her breathing. At that moment, she wanted to go back in and scratch the bitch's eyes out. *Fucking bitch, what was she thinking dressing like that? She must have known Ali wouldn't be able to resist her.*

Calming herself was not proving easy. *She gets herself off teasing Ali. That's it. She teases Ali to get herself off. If she really cared about Ali, she'd either go through with it or walk away.*

Rae continued to stare sightlessly across the bay. *Wish I could make Ali see what's really going on. Fucking bitch! I'd like to slam her against the wall and fuck her hard, teach her a fucking lesson about teasing.*

Rae felt her body react to the image. The more she thought about it, the more her body reacted. *What's wrong with me?* The side effect of her violent fantasy was to calm her down in reality. *I bet the selfish bitch is a fucking pillow princess. She'd want all the pleasure and none of the work.*

Ali will expect me to react when she gets home. She'll spend the afternoon preparing her defense. I won't give her the satisfaction. Not going to say another word about anything until the deal's done. I have to get out of this city. She can either come with me or stay here being teased by the fucking pillow princess, if that's what she wants.

Rae took a deep breath, turned, and walked home, taking her violent fantasy with her. It wouldn't go away. She didn't notice the man return his book to his backpack and follow her.

Judy and Ali had finished lunch. Judy said, "I'd better get back for Mel."

"She'll be fine. Do her homework in the booth. Becky will keep an eye on her."

"You're right, but she'll con them into giving her a second peanut butter milkshake. She's only allowed one a day."

"Come and say goodbye properly before you go."

Judy smiled and led the way to the restroom and into the stall, which Ali locked behind her.

"How many times have we made out in a restroom stall?" Judy asked.

"Hundreds."

"It's not normal for women our age."

"It's normal for us."

They kissed. Judy's hand was up Ali's skirt in less than a minute. She slid her hand into Ali's panties and touched her clitoris directly. She'd done so before, but not often.

"What are..." Judy kissed her harder, cutting off her words.

"Didn't you ask me to give you an orgasm?"

"Please..." Ali returned the favor.

Being aroused from their earlier encounter, they brought each other to orgasm quickly.

"I'm sorry," Judy said. "I needed that."

"Do you hear me complaining?"

Judy examined her fingers, inhaled Ali's scent, and made a show of licking them clean.

"I taste even better directly," Ali suggested.

"I remember. The timing is always wrong. We need to talk to Myron, but with Art... I have to go."

Ali hugged her. "You're feeling vulnerable is all. Don't obsess over anything. One day at a time and you know where I am."

Judy smiled, she put her hand on her heart. "You're here, always will be."

Ali kissed her.

"I really have to go."

Judy left the stall, retrieved her bag, left Dancer's, and flagged a taxi.

Ali washed her face and adjusted her attire. *Whenever she's feeling vulnerable, she gets like this.*

She left the bathroom and signaled Jason. "I need a drink."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I don't know, something for someone who needs a drink."

He nodded.

Ali surveyed the restaurant. *Everything's under control.* She found a vacant table in the bar and sat down quietly to think.

Jason handed her a tall glass. "Long Island Iced Tea."

Ali sipped. "Strong."

Jason shrugged. "The drink you need when you need a drink. For what it's worth, I don't think red's your color. If you need to talk..."

"Thanks, sweetheart, but I need to think."

Judy sat opposite Melanie, who was busy with her homework, in their booth at Frank's Diner. She was sipping her usual coffee, a flat white made with the John Farrington Blend and staring out the window.

I can't talk to Myron now with Art dying, and I can't keep Ali hoping when I don't know if the timing is ever going to be right. I don't want to give her up, but I can't keep being selfish. Why don't I sleep with her and tell Myron later? He'll understand. I can't do it, not until we can be together. Should have acted before Art got sick. Why didn't we?

"What is it, Mama?" Melanie asked.

"Nothing, sweetheart, got things on my mind."

"I'm worried about Zeyde too, but I don't know what I can do."

"We can be here for him, sweetheart. Him and Papa."

"Yes Mama, I wish..."

"So do I."

Rae arrived home. She heard the second elevator arrive as she was about to open her door. *Seems to happen a lot lately.* She didn't give it another thought. Her mind was occupied with images she couldn't dispel.

She supposed she should eat, having missed lunch, but she wasn't hungry. She showered and lay on her bed naked, as she often did in the afternoon, for a nap before Ali came home.

Rae closed her eyes, hoping sleep would banish the images from her mind...

Rae took in her surroundings. *Where am I?*

She was in a room she didn't recognize. She was vaguely aware of a bed, a deep green bedspread and a high-backed red velvet chair. Judy was standing in front of her, dressed in the pink outfit she'd worn that day. *She's gorgeous... What's she saying?*

"How can you compete with me? Can't you see how beautiful I am? Of course I'm gonna make Ali wet. What do you expect? Admit it, I make you wet too. But you're never gonna get a taste."

Rae heard herself saying, "I don't need your permission. If I want a taste, I'll take it."

"You wouldn't dare."

Rae took a step forward and slapped Judy across her face hard. Judy staggered back. Her mouth was bleeding. She stared at Rae defiantly.

"You wouldn't dare," she repeated.

Rae stepped forward and hit her again. "So that's the game you want to play. You want it rough."

Judy staggered and glared at Rae with narrowed eyes in defiance. "You wouldn't dare," Judy said, a third time.

Rae grabbed the collar of her dress and pulled her close. This time, she forced her lips against Judy's bloody mouth and kissed her violently, her teeth biting into Judy's split lip and hungrily tasting Judy's blood. Judy, breathing hard, pulled away, but Rae had hold of her collar.

She threw Judy face down on the bed and straddled her, pinning her down before Judy could move. She grabbed Judy's hair and pulled her head up. "I'm gonna give you exactly what you deserve, bitch."

With her left hand, she pushed Judy's head hard into the pillow to muffle any screams. "Bite that pillow, princess," she said. With her right, she roughly pulled Judy's dress up and her panties down. "You're gonna feel this bitch."

She could hear Judy trying to scream and pushed her face harder into the bed. "It's a pity I can't see the fear in your eyes."

Judy was breathing hard, and so was Rae. Judy with fear, Rae with lust. Rae put her right hand in her own mouth to moisten her fingers. She repeated, "You're gonna feel this bitch, and when I'm done, you'll be begging for more."

Rae forced her fingers into Judy. She filled both holes and fucked her hard. She could hear Judy simpering into the bed.

Rae woke from her dream as waves of ecstasy washed over her. Her body relaxed.

That may have been the deepest orgasm I've ever inflicted on myself. What has she done to me?

Rae lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. *I thought I'd gotten those tendencies out of my system years ago.*

But this was something more than rough fantasy/role play. *I really wanted to do her.*
She shuddered.

What has that bitch done to me?

A Surprising Venetian Affair

Burt stepped off the Alilaguna water bus from Marco Polo Airport, at Madonna dell'Orto in Venice. He enjoyed the cool ocean breeze on his face, and the scent of salt in his nostrils as he made his way to the historic Metropole Hotel.

Myron hadn't scrimped on the trip. At first glance, it was a drab, square building, made interesting by its waterfront location, overlooking the grand canal and embedded in history reaching back to medieval times.

Stepping into the lobby was like stepping back in time, luxury and opulence from days long past, creating an atmosphere that was a fusion between a museum, a gallery and an antique store. *It's like stepping into another century.* Burt's steps echoed on the tiled floor. The reflected light from the glass fronted display cases danced at his feet as he unknowingly entered another world.

After checking in, he entered his Lagoon View Deluxe Room. The elegant mauve and slate blue upholstered furniture looked like it had been in place for a century. Natural light filled the room. Burt gazed out the windows and was rewarded with a view of the shimmering Venetian Lagoon and San Giorgio Island. Burt smiled. *If Myron designed this trip to give me a love of historical buildings, it's working.*

Traveling through Europe, staying at historical, famous, or legendary luxury hotels, Burt had developed a taste for fine dining. He returned to the foyer, where he attempted to book a table at The Met, a one-star Michelin Restaurant.

"I'm sorry, Signore, but we're fully booked tonight, and tomorrow. However, the day after, we can offer you a table."

"That's disappointing, but I'll make a reservation for a table in two days, and again the day after, if I may." He'd be there for a week.

"Si, Signore. Of course. Can I have your room number, please?"

Burt passed him the key tag.

Another guest who'd entered the restaurant said, "Sorry. I couldn't help but overhear. I'm dining alone, and you're welcome to join me."

Burt glanced at the maître d' who nodded.

"That's kind of you."

"I'd appreciate the company. I'm tired of eating alone."

"I know what you mean," Burt offered his hand. "Burt Rogers."

"Ernest Harrison," he said as he took Burt's hand. He appeared a little older than Burt. Black hair, with a smattering of gray around the edges, which enhanced his steel-gray eyes. A tidy salt and pepper mustache added to his distinguished air. He wore a loose white shirt with mandarin collar and Millennial loose fit pleated black trousers. Burt later learned the shirt color was chiffon and the pants obsidian.

The maître d' escorted them to the table, pulled out chairs and snapped napkins, before laying them across their laps. The drinks waiter appeared beside them with the water menu.

"I've booked the tasting menu and opted for wine matching," Ernest explained.

Burt glanced at the maître d'. "Sounds perfect."

Burt enjoyed the meal. What was not to enjoy about a Michelin Starred Tasting Menu, with wine matching? It was the best meal he'd experienced. Even the complimentary water and bread had individual menus from which to select his preference. Pallet-cleansing sorbets were served after each offering, and the table was brushed for crumbs between each of the seven courses.

The restaurant itself was elegant. Each table had its own individual soft light, with the lighting in the remainder of the restaurant softer. Carefully selected ambient music caressed their ears, and even the candles in tall marble holders and flower petals in alabaster bowls on the table, between two middle-aged men, who were strangers, didn't seem out of place.

As much as Burt enjoyed the meal, he enjoyed Ernest's company more. Normally he'd have paid attention to every detail of such an outstanding meal, but this day, his attention was focused on his companion's interest in him.

Burt explained, "My wife passed a few years ago. I threw myself into my work more than usual. I'm finally taking a holiday. My boss insisted."

"I'm clearing my head after finishing a toxic relationship with a guy fifteen years my junior," Ernest said. "I don't know what I was thinking, but it's obvious what I was thinking with."

He asked Burt about his work, his life, and his family. He was genuinely interested in Burt as a person. Conversation flowed throughout the meal, and for a long time after.

Ernest, Burt learned, was a retired investment broker from the Midwest, who'd become fed up with the constant pressure and demands of clients looking for quick returns. Now he only invested for himself, and he could afford to play the long game.

Burt had done most of the talking, punctuated by an occasional question from Ernest when Burt thought he'd exhausted the conversation.

After dinner, Ernest asked, "Fancy a walk? It's a beautiful night in Venice."

The full moon reflected on the water. A faint breeze fluttered against Burt's collar, making the night pleasant. If Ernest had been a woman, or Burt had been gay, it would have been a romantic walk. The city, the moon, the water, the distant lights, and the stars. A perfect end to the evening.

As they walked, they chatted, carrying on from dinner. When they stopped and gazed across the lagoon, they stood in comfortable silence.

Arriving back at the hotel, they parted ways.

Burt showered and donned the hotel robe. His mind was filled with Ernest. *What is it about him? He was interested in me. That's it. No one has ever been interested in me before.*

Carol was interested in a man who would be a good husband and father, and I fit the bill. My kids are interested in their father and that's me. Myron is interested in someone to run his property company, which I can do.

Judy is interested in me, but she's a journalist. That's her job. Max and the others are interested in their boss. No one is interested in me, without a reason.

Ernest has no reason to be interested in me. He's gay, but he wasn't interested in a conquest. He knows I'm not gay, and he didn't flirt. I guess gay men flirt. I've seen Max and Jason flirting. He could have been interested in making a new friend, but he never asked for my details or suggested we meet up again, so it's not that.

He wasn't interested in becoming friends, but he was genuinely interested in me.

I gave him plenty of opportunities to end our discussion, and he kept it going. I could understand someone pretending to be interested if they want something, but I don't know what he could have wanted.

Nobody's ever been interested in me before. I know I'm not interesting, but he was interested.

Burt, who'd been sitting on the bed, stood and dressed without thinking about what he was doing. He recalled Ernest had mentioned being a whiskey connoisseur. *I should thank him for dinner.* He called room service and after some discussion ordered a bottle of Dalmore fifteen-year-old single malt whisky.

He'd seen Ernest's key tag on the table during dinner and remembered the room number, four-zero-one.

It is difficult to say which of them was more surprised when he knocked on Ernest's door twenty minutes later.

Not sure why I'm here. I enjoyed being with someone who was interested in me. Burt blurted, "I noticed this bottle in my luggage and thought you might like to share it with me."

Ernest smiled. He was wearing the hotel robe. "I sure would. Come on in. It's still a pleasant night. Make yourself comfortable on the terrace and I'll get us some glasses."

Burt sat on a chair on the terrace overlooking the Venice Lagoon, and the moon and lights reflected on its glistening surface. He placed the bottle on the table.

Ernest joined him, placed the glasses beside the bottle, opened it, and poured generous portions into their glasses. Ernest handed Burt a glass and raised the other to his nose to inhale the bouquet. "Notes of sweet orange, cinnamon, and nutmeg," he observed.

Burt emulated Ernest but wasn't sure if he picked up the aroma or imagined it based on his companion's description.

Ernest sipped the whisky and closed his eyes. The way his mouth moved; it seemed the whisky was dancing on his palette. "Mandarin, vanilla, ginger, and a little apple in the background."

Again Burt emulated him but was unsure what he was tasting beyond smooth whisky.

Ernest offered his glass, and Burt clinked his against it. "Venezia." They toasted.

They relaxed, talking about nothing and everything.

The men finished their third shot. They'd been drinking slowly, sipping and talking.

"Feel like one more?" Burt asked, as he glanced at his friend. He saw a different expression in Ernest's blue-gray eyes. *Why's he looking at me like that?*

"What I feel like, Burt, is kissing you."

Never kissed a man. "I, umm..." *Don't know what to think, don't know what I want. Suppose it can't hurt.* "Guess you can if you want to."

Ernest leaned in and they kissed. *Oh, that was ...* they kissed again.

Burt gazed into Ernest's eyes. He wanted to kiss him again. This time Burt initiated the kiss. Longer and more passionate. Burt became a little aroused. *Oh!*

Ernest gently stroked Burt's face, and Burt reciprocated during their fourth kiss. Burt poured them another drink; he needed time to breathe.

Ernest was looking at him with desire and something like tenderness, Burt supposed. What he saw in Ernest's eyes mirrored what he was feeling.

They kissed again; this time tongues entered mouths. Ernest extended his hand, inviting Burt to stand.

Burt said, "I don't know if I can do this, I haven't..."

"It's all right Burt, we'll just take things slow and see what happens. If you become uncomfortable and want to stop, we can stop."

Burt nodded. Ernest kissed him again. Burt relaxed and allowed himself to be seduced under Ernest's gentle and experienced touch.

Ernest lowered his hand, caressing Burt's hardening penis through his trousers. His hand reached for the buckle on Burt's belt, and he looked questioningly into Burt's eyes. Burt swallowed hard, then nodded once more.

Ernest removed Burt's trousers and folded them on the end of the sofa. Ernest sat on the sofa beside the standing Burt and took his erection into his mouth.

"Oh, God!" Burt moaned. He recalled Carol had done this once or twice when they'd first married, but that was a long time ago, and he didn't remember it feeling so good.

Ernest stood, finished undressing Burt, undressed himself and led Burt to bed. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Burt couldn't find the words. He nodded again and whispered, "Yes."

Ernest squeezed gel or something into his hand and massaged it into Burt's erection, and his own opening. He guided Burt's hardness inside of him. The fit was snugger than he remembered with Carol, but beyond this fucking a man wasn't so different to fucking a woman.

As he ejaculated into his friend, Burt couldn't recall experiencing such a deep orgasm. He withdrew himself and looked into Ernest's eyes. *I don't feel gay. I'm not sure what I feel, but I've never felt this way about anybody.*

He kissed Ernest gently, curled into him, resting his head on his lover's shoulder, as his back was lightly caressed and fell into a deep contented sleep.

The next morning, Burt went to the bathroom and showered, not because he felt dirty, but because he wanted to feel clean. He recalled what had transpired.

He came out of the bathroom wearing a hotel robe and sat beside Ernest on the bed. Ernest, who likewise wore a robe, looked at him and smiled. "How're you feeling Burt?"

"Not sorry."

"Will you stay for breakfast?"

"Yes, I think I'd like to."

"Any preference?"

"I'll leave it to you."

Ernest rang their order down to room service.

Burt leaned in and initiated their kiss. His hand slipped inside Ernest's robe, and he began caressing his penis.

Burt said, "I owe you from last night. I want... well, I think I want to give you... but I'm not sure if I'll be able to. I've never done this before. Never thought about doing this. I'll try, but I can't promise I'll finish."

Ernest kissed him gently on his bald head. "You just do what you're comfortable with, and if you feel uncomfortable, just stop."

Burt lowered his open mouth and performed felatio for the first time in his life. He was tentative at first. *This isn't too bad.* As his enjoyment increased, so did his enthusiasm, and with it, his lover's penis.

Suddenly, Ernest extracted himself. *Am I doing it wrong?* Burt frowned. "Did I..."

Ernest said, "I'm about to cum."

"Isn't that the point?" Burt took him back into his mouth and finished. He simultaneously knew what to expect and didn't know what to expect. The force behind the load Ernest shot into his mouth surprised him. He gagged, which didn't diminish his enjoyment of the experience.

There was a knock on the door. "I'll get it," Burt said.

Ernest pulled his robe closed as Burt opened the door for room service. The bellboy placed the tray containing their breakfast, coffee, in an Italian percolator and omelets for both, on the table. He stared at Burt.

The guy left and Burt turned to face Ernest, who smiled. He took a tissue and wiped the excess liquid from Burt's chin. Burt felt embarrassed as he realized what the bellboy had been staring at.

"Guess I'll have to watch that in the future," Burt said sheepishly.

"I hope so, because that was sensational."

"Really? I enjoyed it, didn't expect to..."

"That's why it was amazing. I could feel you were enjoying it. Time for breakfast."

"Second breakfast," Burt joked.

After breakfast, Ernest said, "Did you notice that Hammam bath?"

Bronze ceramic tiles, authentic taps, almost the size of a single bed. "How could I miss it?"

"Would you like to join me?"

"Yes, Ernie I would."

Later, Burt returned to his room to change for a stroll around Venice. He didn't know what to make of the developments with Ernest, Ernie. He didn't register the significance of Ernie's name coupled with his own.

I don't feel gay. What does feeling gay feel like? I miss him already. I don't know if I'm gay, but I know I want to be with him. Never felt this way before.

Burt opened the door as soon as Ernie knocked. Ernie kissed him. "I missed you, Burt."

Burt smiled. "I missed you too, but it's only been minutes."

“How do you feel?”

Burt shrugged. “I don’t feel gay, but I do feel happy.” He offered Ernie a sheepish grin.

Ernie took his hand, and they headed out for their walk. Burt was self-conscious holding Ernie’s hand, but it was Europe in the twenty-first century, and nobody paid any attention to the two middle-aged men holding hands. *I need to loosen up.*

They walked along the Grand Canal thoroughfare, lined with Renaissance and Gothic palaces. In Piazza San Marco, they visited St. Mark’s Basilica, where Burt marveled at the Byzantine mosaics. *Glad I don’t maintain any buildings like these. It’d be a nightmare.* Halfway across Rialto Bridge, they kissed. *Can’t believe I kissed a man in public.*

They came across Al Duca D’Aosta, a historical and fashionable outlet. Ernie, excited to visit the store, convinced Burt to buy a new outfit.

When he tried it on, Ernie said, “Fashionable. Suits you. Makes you look more handsome.”

They walked some more, intending to find their way back to The Metropole, but couldn’t. As they walked, Burt noticed girls in short skirts, but Ernie’s eyes followed guys with cute asses. *I’m not gay, I don’t know what this is.*

“I think we’re lost,” Burt suggested.

Ernie smiled. “Of course we are. Everybody gets lost in Venice. Let’s take a ride in a gondola.”

They sat together in what seemed to be a double armchair, holding hands for a romantic cruise around the canals, experiencing a mode of transport that has operated for a millennium.

Ernie said, “Kiss me as we pass under the Bridge of Sighs.”

Burt glanced self-consciously at the gondolier, but turned to accept a long slow kiss from the man who was sweeping him off his feet.

“They say lovers who kiss under the Bridge of Sighs will be blessed with eternal love,” Ernie explained.

Burt grinned, but was unable to think beyond the moment.

After their cruise, they asked for directions back to their hotel. They made their way through the narrow streets. Holding hands, Burt remained self-conscious, but Ernest seemed relaxed.

They made love again prior to going for dinner. Burt was hungry. They’d skipped lunch, but Burt didn’t care.

Later, having sent Myron an email, enquiring about Art’s health, and now dressed in his new outfit, Burt examined his reflection in the mirror. It was a mint-colored Al Duca D’Aosta shirt with caramel Tagliatore trousers, which to Burt was pale green and tan.

Not sure whether it’s the outfit or the gleam in my eye, but I look different. Don’t know what this is, but I like it. Haven’t been this horny since I was a teenager jerking off every chance I got.

They spent the remaining time together, day and night. When it was time to move on, Ernie changed his itinerary to match Burt’s and they traveled together.

Old Friends

It was late morning when Frank Dunn pushed open the door of Tenth Street Tavern. He surveyed the room. The furniture and the bar were fake wood, worn, and jaded after too many years of use and cleaning. It looked tired.

He headed to the bar counter where a woman was moving bottles to clean under them, instead of wiping around them. *Shows pride in the place.*

Her cloth slipped off the counter and she bent to retrieve it, revealing her red lace covered ass and everything else as her short, black skirt rode up. *Very nice. She mustn't have noticed me.*

She stood. "Good morning," she said. "What would you like?"

A piece of what's under that red lace. Brown hair, hazel eyes with more than a hint of mischief, and an inviting smile. *Starting to age, but still attractive.*

Frank was divorced, the result of one extramarital affair too many. He was a good person, but he wasn't a saint, and he did like to sample new pussy. Never a parolee though, that was crossing the line. It never occurred to him he was more loyal to his job than he'd been to his wife.

He nodded towards the coffee. "I'd like a coffee and some lunch," he said. "How's the food here?"

"Black?" she asked as she handed him a menu.

"Er, please." He glimpsed himself in the mirror, the usual white short-sleeved shirt, and thinning blond hair.

"Surprisingly good for bar food," the woman said, as she reached up to retrieve a cup strategically placed on a high shelf.

Nice ass.

He chose a roast beef and tasty cheese panini with home fries. He didn't expect much, but he was hungry.

"I'm Myriam," she said, as she placed his coffee on the counter in front of him.

"Frank Dunn," he said.

"My first husband was Frank. Always liked that name."

"It's common."

"Suppose."

"I'd like a word with Wilma Ferguson if she's available."

"Bill? She's preparing your lunch."

"Okay."

It didn't take long for a young girl to bring his order.

"Squirrel, let Bill know this gentleman would like a word?" Myriam asked.

He watched Squirrel walk back to the kitchen. Her shorts were particularly short that day.

“I agree,” Myriam said. “Squirrel’s got a very sexy ass, but if you touch, Bill will cut your balls off.”

“Only looking.”

Frank was a parole officer who’d learned from years of experience to identify those who genuinely wanted to rehabilitate themselves, who were looking for an opportunity to have a normal life. He didn’t have much time for the ones playing the game, and he wasn’t going to recommend them to companies like Myerson-Vernon, who gave people a chance.

There were no guarantees, but at least it gave them an opportunity. He rarely got it wrong. When he did, he’d rectify his error quickly. It was easy to violate the parole of a game player who’d slipped through. They usually gave him the opportunity to do so, and he never hesitated. One bad one could destroy all he’d worked to achieve.

Frank began eating lunch. The home fries were almost perfect. He cut a corner off the panini and tried it. *Wonderful.*

“You’re right Myriam, the food is excellent.”

“Bill sure can cook.”

Bill came out from the kitchen as if on cue. He’d never met her, but he knew who she was, and recognized her. He stood to greet her and extended his hand. *My God, she’s strong.*

“Frank Dunn,” he said.

“I’m Bill,” she responded and sat beside him at the bar. Myriam poured her a beer without being asked.

“This is excellent food.”

“Glad you like it.”

He handed her his card. She glanced at it. ‘Frank Dunn, Parole Officer.’

She stiffened, and her eyes hardened as she fixed him with a stare.

Frank Dunn? Know that name.

Long-term prisoners picked up feedback on parole officers. She tried to recollect what she’d heard about him. *Fair, one of the few genuine ones. Helped parolees who were trying to get their life back on track but violated others in a heartbeat.*

Bill’s attitude towards her fellow inmates had been the same as Frank’s, but she’d never make the comparison.

She looked into his blue eyes. *Kind eyes. Not those lifeless, jaded, and disinterested eyes often associated with P.O.s. He’s all right.* She relaxed.

“I know who you are. What can I do for you?” she asked. “I’ve done my time, and so has Squirrel.”

“Yes, you declined parole, I understand.”

“Didn’t want you guys looking over my shoulder,” Bill said. “Easier to keep out of trouble inside.”

Frank nodded. “I have a new parolee who’ll be out tomorrow. I wouldn’t normally ask a former inmate, but she gave me your name as a reference, and it’s job specific, so I thought... Glad I did,” he said, indicating the food.

“Fair enough.”

“April Anderson,” he said. “Used to work in the kitchen with you. She wants to get into our culinary program. We send them to culinary school and get them a work placement. We have a few restaurants we work with. Thinking of placing her in a restaurant which strongly supports the program, but I’ve some doubts about her, to be honest.”

“Always be honest with me, Frank, and we’ll get along fine. Why didn’t I know about this? I would’ve taken parole if I did.”

“The program is focused on juveniles and young offenders. We’ve had some success with older parolees working as kitchen hands, so we thought we would see if the program can be extended to older people.”

Bill didn’t like the inmate concerned, but she wasn’t about to become a grass. “Guess April is all right. Deserves a chance to sort herself out, I suppose.”

“Hardly a glowing recommendation,” he said.

“You said you’d be honest. Why do ya have doubts?”

“I’ve a feeling she’s playing the system to get out.”

“Can’t blame anyone for that.”

“No, and I don’t. Even if she is, she’ll get her chance, but I’ll violate her as soon as she steps out of line. Not that I’d invent something.”

“Heard that about you,” Bill said. “Why I’m talking to you.”

“We’ve had a lot of success helping people who genuinely want to get back on their feet. It’s difficult for parolees. They must declare their status, which stacks the deck against them.”

“True enough. That’s why I declined a parole hearing, figured it would land me back inside for longer.”

“It happens,” he said. “My concern is that the wrong one could fuck up the program. The restaurant I’m thinking of placing her with, and the company that owns it, has done a lot of good in giving people a second chance.”

“Which restaurant?”

“Frank’s Diner.”

“Heard of it. Great food, I’m told, never been there, though.”

Myriam, who’d been hovering and listening, interrupted. “Did you say Frank’s Diner?”

“Yes, you know it?”

“Sure do,” said Myriam. “Not that I’ve gotten around to going there, keep meaning to.” To Bill she said, “That’s our Judy’s place.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Frank.

“Judy’s place? Well, that’s different. Don’t you let that bitch April anywhere near it. She’s always got some scam or scheme going on. Don’t trust her. She’s trouble.”

Frank smiled. He didn’t know how they knew Judy, but he wasn’t surprised they’d be protective of her.

“Thank you for your honesty, Bill. I’ll place her elsewhere, but I doubt she’ll last long.”

“You want another coffee, hon?” Myriam asked.

“Sure, thank you.”

“You want a fresh cup?”

“Of course he does, Myriam.”

He nodded a thank you to Bill for the suggestion, as they both watched Myriam reach up to the top shelf for a fresh cup.

“Got to admit, she’s still got a firm ass, even if she’s getting on. Wouldn’t go there though, and neither should you.”

“I heard that!” said Myriam.

“You were meant to,” replied Bill.

“Only looking,” confirmed Frank.

He and Bill chatted while he finished his lunch. He liked her.

“I’ll be back,” he said. “This is great food.”

“Anytime, you’re not a bad guy for a P.O.” To Myriam Bill said, “Lunch is on the house.”

“Sorry Bill, but I’ll pay my way. I appreciate the gesture, but I won’t accept any gifts from ex-inmates. It’s nothing personal.”

“I can respect that, Frank.”

A few days later, Frank called into Dancer’s Bistro for lunch and to check on his charges. The culinary program has its perks. He joined Judy at the chef’s table.

“Oh Judy, I had lunch with some friends of yours the other day… Bill and Myriam.”

“Excellent food,” Judy said.

“It certainly was.”

“Lunch and a show, I’d bet.”

Frank grinned. “Myriam is something.”

“Believe me, Frank, you don’t want to go there.”

“That’s what Bill said.”

“Go where?” Ali asked as she entered from the bar. “Oh, hello Frank.”

“Myriam,” Judy said.

“Oh God, no!” agreed Ali.

After talking with Frank Dunn, Judy decided it was time to pay Myriam a visit.

When she entered Tenth Street Tavern the next day, Miriam’s white lace-covered ass greeted her as Myriam reached for the whiskey bottle on the top shelf. Judy noticed a familiar man seated at a table by the window and headed over to join him.

“Hello, Trevor McCormack,” she said as she sat down.

Trevor wore jeans with a blue, white, and red checked shirt and boots. He appeared exactly like one would expect a farm boy to. She imagined his brother Kevin, who’d be working the family farm this week, and would swap roles with Trevor as they did every weekend, would be dressed the same. The McCormack brothers managed Pheonix Imports, the first business she and Myron had purchased together, two years before they’d married.

Trevor glanced up from his phone.

“Hello, Judy Vernon,” he said, “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Catching up with Myriam,” she said.

“Been out visiting customers,” he explained. “We’re a little concerned about Discount Bazaar. I’ve been delivering their statement personally for about three months now. They’re struggling. We want to keep on top of the situation. Learned that from the air conditioning company.”

The brothers’ company had failed, causing their bankruptcy when their major customer hadn’t paid for their purchases, Judy recalled.

“Their smaller store is doing well, a suitable location and plenty of business. It’s their mega store that worries me. The location is no longer appropriate. The area is being upgraded to middle class. Many of the original properties, which are quite large blocks with basic low-end houses on them, are being bought, knocked down and replaced by duplexes.”

Judy nodded. “Progress is changing the city.”

“The middle class are happy to shop in two-dollar stores, but don’t want to be *seen*, so they’ll find one in another area. When they renewed their lease, the rent increased dramatically in line with the property values. They should’ve moved to a more suitable area, instead they renewed.”

“Reduced income and increased expenses. A recipe for disaster, so we’re keeping an eye on the situation. If they go under, we’re exposed, so we want to make sure we know to what extent, and minimize the impact on us.”

Myriam brought a coffee for Trevor and a glass of house red (a passable Cabernet Sauvignon) for Judy.

“I didn’t see you sneak in, Judy Vernon,” she said. “Figured you’d want a wine.”

“Hello Myriam. Yes, I certainly do, thank you.”

Myriam was about to say something, but the arrival of customers required her attention.

Squirrel brought Trevor’s lunch, a BLT Panini with home fries, filling Judy’s nose with the aroma of freshly cooked food and causing her to salivate.

She noticed Trevor watching Squirrel as she bent over to bus a nearby table. Squirrel’s short shorts were tight, and bending over the table as she was, what little couldn’t be seen was easily imagined. Judy was admiring Squirrel’s performance as much as he was.

“I can see why you come here,” she said.

Trevor shrugged; he didn’t flush or appear embarrassed at being caught ogling Squirrel.

“No,” he explained. “There are plenty of suburban bars serving eye candy with lunch. I come here because the food is excellent, and the portions are generous.”

“Speaking of which, I’ll duck into the kitchen, say hello to Bill, and organize some lunch.”

He nodded and began eating his lunch.

Bill glanced up when she heard the door open and beamed when she saw her visitor. Her heart stopped and then pounded as it always did when she saw Judy.

She walked a few steps to Judy, forcing herself not to run and take her in her arms. The women embraced. Judy lightly pressed her lips against Bill’s. *Oh God!* The strength drained from Bill’s legs.

“Hello Bill,” The intimate warmth of the words whispered into her ear, melted Bill.

Bill gripped her tighter, swallowed hard, and responded, “Hi Judy.”

Judy rested her hand on Bill’s arm. “Perhaps you could prepare me some lunch.”

Prepare you some lunch? I want you for lunch! “Of course, any preference?”

“I trust you,” Judy said, and kissed Bill’s cheek.

Bill stared at the woman she desired as Judy retreated from the kitchen. Then glanced at Squirrel, who’d watched the exchange.

“It’s fine,” Squirrel said. “You’ll never get the chance. Besides, I want to as well.”

Bill grinned.

After Judy left the table, Myriam came to top up her wine.

“How do you know Judy?” she asked.

“She’s... my boss,” Trevor said.

Taken aback by Trevor’s response. “Oh,” was all Myriam could say.

Trevor was still smiling at Myriam’s reaction when Judy returned.

“What?” Judy asked.

“Myriam topped up your wine.”

“So, I see.”

“She wanted to know how I know you. You should’ve seen her face when I told her you’re my boss.”

“I can imagine,” Judy said. “Myriam’s first husband was Frank Farrington, who started Pheonix Imports, but that was long after they’d divorced. She hasn’t put it together.”

“Oh, I understand she was the reason the settlement of his estate was delayed.”

“Yes, mainly to spite Frank’s sister, Susan.”

“That new guy, Sean, is working out fine, by the way.”

“Good to hear.” Sean was another of Frank Dunn’s parolees.

Phoenix Imports was going well, distribution had been expanded to other cities, and other states. They employed three store men to handle the movement of stock, which still followed the process Frank Farrington had established of one week in and one week out.

Trevor handled the distribution and Kevin the acquisition of stock. Myron's assessment of what Frank Farrington had created had proven accurate. It was a proverbial gold mine.

Squirrel delivered Judy's lunch.

"Here Judy," she said. "Cod in crispy tempura beer batter with home fries and a salad, made with love just for you." She winked and smiled as she leaned over to place the plate on the table, then stood.

Judy turned to thank her. Squirrel was standing close, her tightly packed body inches away from Judy's face. *Oh!* Judy swallowed hard. She forced herself to look up at Squirrel's face, despite the attraction of what Squirrel had positioned at Judy's eye level.

"Thank you, Squirrel, and thank Bill for me."

Squirrel hovered for a few moments longer, then turned to make her way back to the kitchen.

Judy studied her as she walked away. It was the first time Squirrel had flirted with her.

Trevor said, "She wants you, and she wasn't exactly subtle."

"Subtle is not a word I'd associate with the Tenth Street Tavern." Judy smiled, glancing at Myriam.

Trevor's phone dinged. He read the text and grimaced before passing his phone to Judy.

#We're finished. Liquidator appointed this week.#

"It's from Jethro at Discount Bazaar. Not surprised."

Judy nodded and picked up her phone. "Try some fish, Trevor. It's delicious. I'll call Myron."

Trevor tried some fish. "You're right," he said. "I'll order it next time I come."

When Myron answered, Judy explained the situation with Discount Bazaar.

"That's the reaction I expected," she said, "but wanted to check."

She ended the call and said to Trevor. "Myron thinks it could be an opportunity to move Phoenix into the discount retail business, and he'll check if we have any shopfronts available. Can you ask Jethro to give you the name of the liquidator as soon as he gets it? Myron probably knows him. Also, prepare an assessment of the market based on your knowledge of it."

"Sounds like a plan," Trevor said.

Lunch finished, Trevor offered to drive Judy—who still didn't have a driver's license—home, which she accepted.

"Lunch's on me," she said, as she headed to the bar to settle up.

Handing Myriam her credit card, she said, "Mine and Trevor's and add a hundred tip to be split between you, Bill, and Squirrel. Bill is expecting it, so don't try pocketing it all."

“As if I would,” Myriam said, as she dropped Judy’s card and bent from the waist to pick it up.

Judy didn’t avert her eyes. “Myriam, you really are incorrigible.”

Myriam returned the card.

“I’ll pop back to the kitchen and thank Bill for lunch,” Judy said.

“Better knock first, no telling what she does with Squirrel back there.”

“Nothing you wouldn’t do given half a chance.”

Myriam grinned and shrugged. Judy grinned, too. Despite everything, she liked Myriam.

Judy knocked and waited a moment before entering. Bill and Squirrel were cleaning the kitchen.

“I’m off now,” Judy said. “I just wanted to thank you again for lunch. Trevor and I both loved your fish. I left a tip for you two with Myriam.”

Bill and Squirrel both kissed her goodbye, and Judy headed back to Trevor for her ride home.

Judy smiled when she heard the bell as she pushed open the door of Frank’s Diner. A *relic from another life*.

She ordered coffee and went to her booth to wait for Melanie to arrive home from school.

She glanced at Frank Farrington’s memorial plaque on the wall behind her corner booth, located where the sofa had been in Kansas Café. Not for the first time, she wondered how many hours she’d spent on that sofa talking to Frank’s ghost.

Although his ghost had departed many years ago, she still talked to him occasionally. “I was thinking, Frank, I spend far more time on business these days than I do writing. I haven’t written a feature for a few weeks, and I doubt I’ll have time to write another book.”

Her ringing phone interrupted her. She glanced at caller ID and smiled.

“I went to Myriam’s for lunch,” she said.

“Of course you did,” Ali responded. “Myriam never changes and you want to reassure yourself, because you don’t like change.”

“I was just talking to Frank about how much my life had changed....”

Ali laughed, and Judy could almost see her rolling her eyes, even on the phone.

An Unexpected Encounter

As head of a task force, Flash Jack was given an office. Daphne Loader knocked on his door.

“Enter.”

“I might’ve found something, Sarge. Probably nothing, but thought I’d mention it.”

“Anything is better than what we’ve got now.” Jack shrugged.

She passed him the stills from the video. “Just a glimpse, and no match in facial recognition. The first three are from Joan Summertime, the other two from Karen Marie Ginn. Possibly a coincidence, but I’ll start going through Elizabeth Ann Wren’s video this morning and see if he turns up again.”

Jack studied the photos. “Told you if there was anything, you’d find it.”

“I’ve sent the stills to the Feds,” Daphne said. “Maybe they’ll find something.”

“Let’s hope. Good work, Daphne. I’ll show these to the brass and tell them we have a suspect, well, a person of interest, anyway. It’ll keep them off my back for a couple of days.”

“If I glimpse him again, I’ll let you know.”

Daphne grabbed a coffee and went back to work. It didn’t feel so tedious now she knew who she was looking for. She studied her computer screen intently, watching Wren go about her day, searching behind her, beside her, and in reflections in windows as she passed by.

Three hours later, her heart skipped a beat. *That’s him.* She paused the video and studied the image. He was behind Wren, his reflection caught in a shoe store window. It was a fleeting glimpse, but it was him and he was following Wren.

Daphne beamed and pumped her chest out.

She rang Flash Jack. “Sarge, we can officially upgrade him to a suspect. Glimpsed him behind Wren.”

“Great work, keep looking. The more we can connect him to the victims, the easier it’ll be when we catch him.”

Mouse sat on the bench in O’Rourke’s Park, reading a book. He had one eye on Dancer’s Bistro. *Why is Seven staying late tonight?*

He didn’t know where he’d encounter her. Seven didn’t have a routine. She went out in the morning, walked around shops, parks, and visited offices. Usually went home after lunch and stayed in, but occasionally came out to this Dancer’s Bistro for dinner. She hadn’t visited for lunch since the day she’d stormed out, but sometimes she sat in the park at lunchtime and watched the bistro. He didn’t know why.

I’ll have to encounter Seven in her home in the afternoon. I’m gonna need to get into her apartment and look around.

Finally, Seven left the bistro holding hands with a dark-haired woman. *Must be that woman she lives with.* Mouse had observed her a few times, but never saw her face. His position in the alcove meant he only glimpsed their face as they were leaving, and he was always following Seven when the woman left the apartment.

He followed them home. Occasionally, they stopped to kiss. *Lesbians. Never encountered a lesbian before. Wonder if encountering a lesbian will be different? Maybe she'll be tighter?*

When he noticed the lights in the apartment go out, Mouse assumed they'd settled down for the night, and headed home.

He made himself a late dinner of canned vegetables and sausages.

The next morning, he assumed his position in the alcove near the door of Seven's apartment.

The dark-haired woman left home first, which was unusual. She didn't see him, but he finally saw her face. His heart pounded, his pulse raced, and his mouth went dry.

He swallowed hard. He recognized her.

Eight!

What? Never happened before. Always finish with one encounter long before I meet the next. What do I do? Need to think. How can I encounter Seven and Eight?

Mouse made his way home. *I know where Eight lives and works. I know her routine. How am I going to do this? Is it possible to encounter them both? Lesbians. Never encountered a lesbian before. Now two.*

He was making his way through the city streets, oblivious to the environment he was passing. He never paid attention unless he was searching for a site for an encounter. Mouse needed to go home to talk to himself, work out what was going on, and what he was going to do about it.

His sixth sense kicked in. A woman who'd stepped out of a shop, looked at him intently, then frowned as he walked past. He thought or imagined he saw a spark of recognition in her eyes.

How? No one ever notices me.

Daphne Loader climbed off Duke, who groaned and closed his eyes. He'd sleep now. He worked nights. The nature of his occupation. If anyone on her job knew she was sexually involved with a drug dealer, even if he was her confidential informant, she'd be professionally fucked, but she loved riding him before work. At least, that's what she told herself. Truth was she loved him.

She knew she was out of control. Had been since that day, but drinking and fucking were the only ways she could chase the images out of her head. Every night she went to *Blue Light Bar* and got drunk on bourbon.

Then back to Duke's place, sleep until he got home. Ride him, shower, and go home to change for work. She glanced in the mirror and offered herself a half smile. She supposed she should seek therapy again, but sex and booze was the only therapy that worked. *Another day in the fucked-up life of Detective Daphne Loader.*

Her walk home took her past the alley where Joan Summertime had been found. She shuddered as goose bumps crawled over her body, as if someone had walked on her grave. The alley's proximity to her home was why she'd been the first detective on the scene.

That morning, she saw a familiar face. Daphne recognized him immediately. She'd spent the last week looking for him on CCTV recordings. She let him pass, and at a discreet distance, turned to follow.

Should call for backup. Sure he didn't see me. I'll follow him and learn where he lives.

She wanted to be the one who found the sick bastard. No one else had come close.

Daphne saw him turn into Summertime's alley and quickened her pace. She didn't want to lose him.

She entered the alley, but there was no sign of him. She scanned the buildings, looking for an entrance to one of the buildings besides the one where Summertime was found, but she didn't see one.

Fuck! Should've called for backup. If I can't find him, I won't tell anyone I saw him, just stake out the alley and pick him up again. Where'd he go? Back to the scene?

Daphne walked further into the alley.

Should pull my gun.

She didn't.

Mouse turned into the alley and quickly slipped into the alcove where he'd burned the evidence after encountering Six. He knew the alley well, having meticulously planned his encounter with Six.

His heart was pounding, his breathing shallow. *Stay calm.* He extracted latex gloves and the lucky razor he always carried in his backpack and waited.

If she comes into the alley, she's following me. How'd she recognize me?

The woman walked past the alcove without glancing in his direction.

Good, less messy this way.

He stepped out behind her.

Before she realized he was there, he slid the blade across her throat and quickly removed his hand, hoping to avoid getting sprayed with her blood.

Daphne didn't feel the blade cut her throat. Warm liquid sprayed her face from under her chin.

What?

Blood!

My blood!

She wrapped her hands around her throat and tried in vain to stem the flow. She sank to her knees, in part from shock and in part from the sudden loss of blood.

Daphne fell face down, still trying to piece together what happened.

All she could see was the filthy ground in a disgusting alley. She closed her eyes, and her mind filled with images, a slide show she'd seen many times; a man lying on his back, half his head missing. A woman, her throat slashed, staring at nothing. Two teenage boys,

decapitated, staring at each other. A young girl, genitalia distended, throat cut. A baby with its head flattened.

A trickle of blood left her body, followed by some last drops, accompanied by a final thought, *and so ends the short fucked up life of Daphne Loader.*

Mouse was breathing hard. *It doesn't feel right.* There'd been no encounter. For a fleeting moment, he thought about encountering her. *That would be stupid.*

He watched the woman die; it didn't take long less than five minutes. It gave him no satisfaction. Mouse bent down to wipe the blade on her clothes. He removed his gloves, placed the razor inside one, and pocketed them.

He kept his head down, but was sure no one was watching. He turned, left the alley, and followed the familiar route home.

Stopping halfway across the bridge, he extracted the blade from the glove in his pocket and discreetly let it slip into the water below. He stood there for five minutes, another passer-by who stopped to look across the river. He was disappointed at the loss of his lucky blade, but it couldn't be helped.

The latex gloves he threw into a dumpster, which would be emptied the next morning. He discarded his shoes in an alley near his home, where homeless people slept.

When he arrived home, he removed his clothes, everything including socks and underwear, and placed them in a garbage bag.

Wearing clean clothes, he walked up the stairs to his private rooftop garden above his apartment. He seldom went up. His mother had died there.

Placing the bag of clothes in a small incinerator he hadn't used for years, he doused them with lighter fuel and set them afire. He stood, stoking the flames until there was nothing left but ashes.

Downstairs, he removed his clothes and placed them in the washing machine, using detergent and bleach just in case any stray DNA evidence had been transferred to them, and began the first cycle.

He showered with steaming hot water.

Returning naked to the laundry, he began the second wash cycle. He glanced at the floor, remembering where he'd found his mother's panties that day.

Mouse went to his underwear drawer, and from the back of it he extracted his mother's last panties. He hadn't handled them in years, and he'd never washed them. He could still smell her scent on them, despite knowing it was impossible.

He pulled them on and lay on his mother's bed. Masturbating, he imagined he'd encountered the woman in the alley.

He ejaculated, but it wasn't the same, not like after a real encounter.

Mouse began the third cycle of the washing machine, returned his mother's last panties to his drawer, without washing them, and showered again, dressed and made himself a sandwich.

After lunch, he went to the storage cupboard, took a straight razor from the carton, opened the packet, extracted the razor and disposed of the packet in the trash can.

He held the razor in his hand to feel the weight of it. He opened the blade and went through the motions of slitting a throat from behind, smiled, closed the blade and slipped it into the side pocket of his backpack.

He sat on the sofa with an instant coffee.

So, what do I do about Eight?

“You need to encounter them close together, or you will lose Eight,” he said. “You can’t do them at the same time. You can’t control two at once.”

Talking to myself, not a good sign.

Mother's Day

Mouse half woke and began his first masturbation of the day. He masturbated many times a day. It made him happy.

As he became fully conscious, he realized his surroundings. *Why am I in mother's bed?* His confusion didn't motivate his hand to stop its slow, rhythmic movements.

Mouse remembered the previous evening. His mother's bedroom door was open. He saw she was naked on her bed. Her legs were open, and she was touching herself. He knew where everything was and what it looked like from some old *Penthouse* magazines he'd found in the trash downstairs. *So, that's how women masturbate.* He hadn't realized she did it too. He remained in the doorway and watched, becoming aroused.

After undressing and dropping his clothes on the hall floor, Mouse had stepped into the room for a closer look. He stood beside the bed, naked and erect, and began rubbing his penis.

His mother had beckoned him to join her, pulled him on top of her and guided him inside. His mother made seventeen-year-old mouse a man, as she took his virginity.

He thought about what he was doing. *Where's mother? It was much better than doing it myself, even if the result was the same.*

He headed to the bathroom to relieve himself.

Mouse found his mother in the laundry having put a load of washing on, including the clothes he'd left in the hall the previous night.

He stepped up behind her. He wanted to kiss her, but kissing his mother didn't seem right. Mouse put his hand inside her nightdress, and feeling underwear, he pulled them down, letting them drop to her ankles.

Still behind her, he began touching her vagina. He half expected her to shout at him, and slap him as she'd done when he was younger and had attempted to touch it. She didn't, instead she turned and stared at him.

Mouse took her hand and led her to her room, where he pushed her onto the bed. He raised her nightdress and guided himself inside her again, riding her until he orgasmed. Any consideration of attending to her needs didn't enter his mind. Mouse didn't know she had needs.

When he was done, she looked at him with something akin to confusion and pity and left the room. It was the last time he'd see her.

Penelope looked at her son, naked and spent on her bed.

What've I done? I'm a sick woman.

She recalled the previous night. She'd left the door open when she masturbated. She'd never done that before. He was there, standing in the doorway. Penelope hadn't heard him approach. She never did. He was quiet as a mouse.

Penelope had taken him into her bed and into her body. She hadn't been with a man since his father had died, over ten years ago. Penelope wanted, needed, to feel a man inside her again, and she'd realized her Mouse was a man now.

Last night, when he slept beside her, after they'd finished. She'd vowed never to do it again.

This morning, when he came into the laundry to find her, she knew what he wanted. She'd allowed him to remove her underwear and lead her back to her bed. She'd opened her legs and accommodated him. If this was going to continue, she'd have to teach him how to satisfy her too, but it wasn't going to continue. It couldn't happen again.

As she looked at him contentedly sleeping, a tear escaped and ran down her cheek unchecked. "I'm sorry, Mouse," she whispered.

She went to the laundry, which had stairs to their private garden, on the roof of the building, where she hung their clothes to dry. Her husband's life insurance policy had provided more than enough money for such an apartment.

What've I done?

She carried the laundry upstairs and hung the washing on the line. It tickled a little as his semen ran out of her.

I'm going to hell. I'm a sick woman. Who'd fuck their own son? It's sick. I'm sick, not normal.

As she finished hanging laundry, her mind filled with images of her naked son, images of her going back downstairs and riding him.

What's wrong with me?

If she went downstairs, she'd let it happen again.

I'm going to hell.

She turned and walked to the edge of the building. When she reached it, she took one more step.

Francine Allbright was walking her black poodle. "Rastus," she asked. "Why do you have to cock your leg on everything?"

A loud dull thud behind her caused her head to spin around. A woman lay on the ground, blood oozing from her head, cracked like an egg, a leg twisted at an impossible angle, with the bone protruding, her nightdress ridden up to her chest revealing her nakedness.

Francine was momentarily frozen with shock, and then screamed, and screamed. Rastus excitedly ran in circles around her, barking.

Old Fred was trying to remember his name. Thompson, Thomas, Tomlinson? Something like that. Everyone had called him Old Fred for so long, it was the only name he knew.

He'd slept in the stairwell of a building; it was the only one where the door to the fire stairs could be opened from the outside. He always made his way to the second floor. It wasn't comfortable, but it was dry, safe, and warmer than the alley.

His teeth, riddled with decay, hurt constantly. He was getting thinner, his knees and hips ached, walking hurt his feet. These days, he struggled to get enough money for coffee. People walked past him without a glance and sometimes accidentally kicked his begging cup

away. He had to chase the few pennies thrown in there. *Life is getting harder. Hope I can die soon.* Fred didn't really want to die. If he did, he could have stepped in front of a bus.

A loud, piercing scream scared him into action. He dragged himself up and ran/hobbled down the stairs the best he could. Throwing the door open with his momentum, he nearly collided with a resident carrying groceries.

The man looked at him and began a tirade about bums keeping out of the building.

Fred didn't listen. He'd heard it all before. He hobbled down the road to the park; he needed the restroom.

Detective Alphonse Jones frowned at the trill sounds of his ringing phone. He sighed and picked up the receiver; Jones knew what it meant. He'd caught a case.

The lieutenant said, "Jones, we have a dead body. Woman looks like she's been thrown from the roof. Get the address from dispatch on your way out."

Fuck, that'll be messy. His only acknowledgement was a grunt as he replaced the receiver. He eased his bulk from his chair, sucking in his stomach so it wouldn't get trapped under the armrests. farting loudly as he did so. He took his crumpled jacket from the back of it and ambled out of the detective's office to find his partner.

His partner was in the break room as usual.

"C'mon Robin, we got a body. Took a dive so it's gonna be messy."

"And you had to pick up the phone..."

"One of us had to."

Robin Beevors downed his coffee and stood to follow his partner to their car.

In the station, they were referred to as *The Dynamic Duo*, partly because of Robin's name, but mostly because they weren't. They had a reputation as the laziest two cops in the station, which is why the lieutenant had partnered them up.

"Don't want to saddle a decent detective with either of you."

When they arrived at the scene, one of the cops turned to his partner. "They've sent the dynamic duo, Beevors and Butthead. Let's hope it's a slam dunk, or it'll never be solved."

The detectives glanced at the body, but didn't examine it closely. That nonsense was for TV cops and rookies. She was a mess.

The coroner was already there.

"What're we looking at?" Alphonse asked.

"A dead body," the coroner replied.

Alphonse couldn't be bothered responding. He knew what everyone thought of him and his partner. Nobody made it a secret.

"Anything I should know?"

"No panties and traces of fresh semen."

"Whatcha thinkin'?"

"First impression, probably raped and thrown from the roof, but don't quote me on that."

Alphonse grunted, then headed over to the officers who'd secured the scene.

"Got anything for me." He glanced at his partner, who'd contributed nothing. *Might as well have left him in the break room.*

One of the cops opened his notebook. "Penelope Christine Davis lived in 8B for a couple of decades. Next of kin hasn't been notified. Witness reported seeing that old bum Fred something running from the building immediately after she landed. Probably nothing. Likely heard the screams and got scared. He's harmless unless you're downwind."

"We'll check it out."

"Had him picked up. He'll be waiting for you when you get back. Might've seen something."

"All right, better go talk to him."

"Aren't you going to examine the crime scene, do a canvas or something?"

"We'll see what he's got to say. Can come back if we need to."

As he ambled away, the cop said to his partner, "For fuck sake, and he's the good one."

Fred sat in the interview room, waiting for he didn't know what. One hand was cuffed to the table. "Procedure," the officer had informed him.

His teeth hurt. He had a headache. His knees ached. *Hope they keep me in overnight, they'll feed me then, and I'll have a bed.* Fred's stomach sounded like a herd of wild horses careering down a ravine.

The hinges squeaked a little when the door opened. Two detectives entered the room. One sat opposite, the other leaned against the wall.

"Hello Fred, I'm Detective Alphonse Jones and this is Detective Robin Beevors."

Officially, Fred was being interviewed as a witness. They didn't read him his rights or record the interview.

"Hello."

"How are you, Fred?" Detective Jones asked. "Do you need anything?"

"Coffee and a sandwich."

"Do you think this is a fucking cafeteria?" The detective leaning against the wall asked.

Fred shrugged.

"If we get you a coffee and a sandwich, will you talk to me?"

Fred shrugged again. His mouth tasted vile. He supposed his breath smelled like dogshit, but he didn't care.

"Robin, would you get Fred a coffee and a sandwich?"

Beevors left the room.

"Do you know what this is about, Fred?"

"No."

"It's about what you did this morning."

“Didn’t do nothing.”

“We both know that’s not true, Fred.”

Fred shrugged.

“What did you do with her panties, Fred?”

“What panties?”

Robin returned with Fred’s coffee and a sandwich from a vending machine. He placed the items on the table and leaned against the wall.

“If I let you have these, will you tell me what happened, Fred?”

“Yes.”

Fred devoured the sandwich. Ham and cheese, but he barely noticed the filling.

“You’ve done time Fred.”

Fred shrugged. He drank some coffee and scratched his head. *When did I last have a shower?*

“You must have liked being inside to do what you did.”

“It was all right.” *At least I could shower.*

“Tell me about this morning.”

“Slept in a building, woke up and went to the park.”

“Did you dream Fred?” The fat detective cocked his leg and farted loudly, but it didn’t bother Fred. He’d heard and smelled worse.

The skinny detective leaning against the wall said, “Jesus Alphonse, have you got a dead rat up your ass or something?”

The corner of Alphonse’s mouth curled up. “What did you do in your dream?”

“Don’t remember.”

“Fred, do you want to spend the rest of your life in prison?”

Fred shrugged. His teeth hurt. He still had a headache despite the sandwich and coffee. His knees ached; his back was sore from sleeping on the concrete landing. *Wish I could die.*

Beevors said, “Maybe he had a blackout?”

“Do you have blackouts, Fred? Are there times you can’t remember?”

“Sometimes.”

“Did you have a blackout this morning, Fred? Is that why you can’t remember?”

No. Fred shrugged and scratched under his armpit.

“Do you want me to tell you what you did?”

Fred shrugged again.

“You went to the roof of a building, where you encountered a woman. You raped her and threw her off the building. Isn’t that right Fred?”

No. I couldn’t. Haven’t got it up for twenty years.

Fred stared at the detective.

“If you show contrition, it wasn’t your fault... you’re very sorry. I can help you, Fred. Talk to the DA get you life in prison. If you force us to go to trial, it’s the death penalty. Do you want to die, Fred?” Not that it would ever go to court. Nothing they had done would be admissible.

Yes. He didn’t verbalize the answer.

“We’ve got a witness, Fred. You were seen leaving the scene of the crime.”

“Let me think about it. I can’t remember exactly.”

“Okay, Fred. We’ll give you ten minutes to think about it, then come back and take your statement.”

“Can I have another sandwich?”

“Sure, and a coffee?”

Fred nodded.

The detectives left the room.

Fred had been on the street for thirty years since he got out of prison for his part in an armed robbery. There were programs for homeless people, and do-gooders had tried to help him over the years, but nothing had stuck.

Prison dentist. Prison doctor. A proper bed, three meals a day. A shower. No one’s gonna bother and old nobody like me. Share a cell with another useless old man, I suppose. Better than being outside, living on the street. It’ll get cold soon, and never having enough to eat. Too old to live on the street now. Live longer inside than out, not that it matters.

The detectives returned with another sandwich, a coffee, and a blank statement form.

“Are you prepared to make a statement, Fred?”

“Sure, I don’t remember it right and I don’t write so good. You can write it for me and I’ll sign it.”

Alphonse Jones wrote a statement. He knew how to word it with the right amount of detail, the occasional contradiction and using language Fred might use, so it sounded authentic. It wasn’t the first time Alphonse had assisted a suspect to write a statement.

When he finished, he read the statement to Fred, then said, “That’s what you did, Fred. Do you remember now?”

Fred nodded. “I’ll remember.”

He passed the statement across the table. “Read it through and sign it here,” he said, pointing to the bottom of the page.

Fred signed it but didn’t read it.

He handed Fred another document. “This acknowledges I read you your rights.” He pointed to a space halfway down the page. “Can you sign here?”

Again, Fred signed without a cursory glance.

“An officer will escort you to the cells, and then you’ll be transferred to detention, pending sentencing, and then transfer to prison.”

Fred shrugged.

The dynamic duo were buoyant as they headed upstairs to inform the lieutenant they'd closed the case.

"Case closed and home for dinner," Robin said.

The lieutenant read the statement and nodded. If they were any other detectives, he might have acknowledged their good work at closing the case.

"Well, you got lucky with this one. Nobody's told the next of kin yet, so you two can take care of it."

If he'd cared enough to give the paperwork more than a cursory glance, he'd have seen it was gaping with holes. Too soon for a coroner's report, no DNA test ordered of the semen, no forensics from the crime scene considered. He was under pressure to improve his closure rate, and a case closed was a closed case.

In time, all the documentation would find its way to the file, but no one would ever look at it.

Mouse sat on the sofa reading a book. He didn't know where his mother had gone, but he wished she'd come back soon. He couldn't stop thinking about her. *Hope she'll do it again.*

It didn't feel wrong to Mouse.

Three loud raps on the door told him someone was there. Not his mother. If she'd forgotten her key, she'd have knocked softly.

Mouse sighed and put his book aside. Normally, he wouldn't answer the door. That was for mother to do. He opened it to see two men standing there. The fat one was disheveled, the thin one neat.

"I'm Detective Jones and this is Detective Beevors," the fat one said. "May we come in?"

"Okay."

"Let's sit down at the table."

"Okay."

"Son, I have some bad news for you. I'm afraid your mother has been killed." It didn't occur to either detective they hadn't verified Mouse's identity.

Mouse stared at him blankly.

What? She can't be dead. I want to do it again.

Mouse said nothing.

"She, umm...encountered a man on the roof. He raped her and threw her off."

"Encountered?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, son."

If another detective had delivered the death notice, they would have been kinder. At least they would have remembered Mouse's name. They would have contacted social services as Mouse was seventeen or verified that there was a relative for Mouse to stay with.

They did none of these things. Nevertheless, Alphonse Jones catching the case had been a boon for Mouse. Another officer might have pieced together that Penelope's death was suicide, and the insurance company would have enforced the suicide clause and denied the claim. He never would have received the payout.

"Are you all right, son? Do you need me to call someone?"

"There's no one. I'll be okay."

The detectives left.

Mouse went to the laundry, retrieved his mother's discarded underwear. He undressed, pulled her panties on, climbed into her bed and, in his mind, encountered her—a term he'd learned from the detective—while he masturbated.

When he was done, he lay staring at the ceiling.

He knew what had happened. She hadn't encountered a man. Mouse was the only one she'd encountered that morning.

She had to die because she encountered me.

He removed her panties and placed them in the back of his underwear drawer where they'd remained until the day; he met Daphne Loader.

The next morning, Mouse took the envelope his mother had given him five years earlier. "If anything happens to me, open this. My lawyer will help you," she'd said.

Mouse carefully opened the envelope, which contained some documents and a business card. He walked to the office of Henry Freebody, Attorney-At-Law.

When he was shown into Mr. Freebody's office, Mouse handed him the envelope, and sat on the chair in front of Freebody's aging wooden desk.

"My Mother died," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that, son."

Freebody scanned the documents and then retrieved a file from a dusty cabinet in the corner of his office. Mouse watched the disturbed dust particles dancing in the sunlight coming through the dirty window.

Freebody opened the file and glanced at his notes. He nodded.

"Can I ask how she died?"

"The police said she was thrown off our building."

"Oh, Sorry to hear that."

"Your mother has left everything to you in her will. I am the executor of her estate, which means I'll take care of everything for you."

"Okay."

"She has pre-purchased a funeral plan, so I'll contact the funeral directors. They'll be in touch with you. I'll ask the bank to transfer the assets in her account to yours, but it will take a little time, because I need to obtain some documents."

"Okay."

“Once I have the documents, I’ll transfer the deed for the apartment to you, and I’ll lodge the claim with the insurance company.”

“Okay.”

“This will take a little while, so your mother has left some money for you in trust.”

“Okay.”

Freebody pressed a button on his phone. “Shirley, can you take a thousand from petty cash and prepare a receipt?”

It seemed to Mouse that Shirley took less than a minute, but he knew it would have been longer. She handed the money and a piece of paper to Freebody.

He checked the money, wrote something on the paper, passed it to Mouse saying, “Sign here, please.”

He handed Mouse the money. “If you need anything, or have questions, you can call me.”

“Okay.”

He stood and offered his hand, which Mouse shook.

“I’m sorry for your loss. Your mother was a good person,” Freebody said.

“Okay.”

Mouse left the office and returned home.

He sat on the sofa and read his book.

One of Our Own

Flash Jack was in his office, which was not much more than a small enclosure with large windows. His furniture comprised a small, cheap office desk, a four-draw filing cabinet, two shabby looking old visitor's chairs and an outdated phone on the desk.

How're we gonna find this suspect of Daphne's? The only answer he received was a trill sound from his phone. He cursed as he knocked his coffee over when reaching for it.

"Hawkins," he said, distracted by the coffee already dripping from his desk to the floor.

"Sarge, they've found another body in the alley where Summertime was killed."

"Okay, I'll head over there."

"Sarge, the body... it's Fron...it's Daphne Loader."

Jack froze. His brain was jammed like a typewriter when two keys try to type at the same time. "What?"

"It's Daphne Loader, Sarge. Throat's been cut. Like the others."

He hung up and stared sightlessly out the window.

"Fuck!" he shouted as he smashed his fist against his desk.

Detectives Lopez and Reynolds rushed into his office. "You all right, Sarge?" Lopez asked, staring at the spilled coffee.

"No, I'm not fucking all right. Daphne's gotten herself killed."

"What?" they asked in unison, echoing his own response.

"Throat slit in the alley where we found Summertime. Guess she clocked the suspect. Stupid bitch should've fuckin' called for backup."

"Fuck! Daphne's dead?" Reynolds said.

"Get your coats. She's one of our own. Let's find this sick fuck."

When they arrived at the crime scene, Flash Jack sent Lopez and Reynolds to canvas.

He reluctantly made his way to the victim. He didn't want to see her like this. The officers on scene were buzzing with talk of Daphne. *At least they're telling the kinder stories.*

Jack crouched beside Daphne's body, in the filthy alley which hadn't been cleaned since he was last there. He smelled—or imagined he could—a rotting cat and stale piss. He was careful not to touch anything. Jack could feel emotion building behind his eyes. He felt as though a ping-pong ball, wrapped in cotton wool, was jammed in his throat.

Gun holstered, not expecting trouble.

The coroner crouched beside him. "Single cut across the throat, from behind is my guess. No hesitation marks."

"He never hesitates."

"No. She probably didn't know he was there until after it happened. I won't know for sure until I examine her back at the lab, but my early opinion is it's the same guy and the same type of blade. Generic straight razor, with nothing to distinguish it."

Jack nodded. "Put a rush on this one."

"Of course, Jack. Sorry for your loss, I liked her a lot. She saw a lot during her time on the job, maybe more than she should."

Jack walked away, trying to collect himself. He'd liked Daphne. He'd wanted to ask her out, maybe because of her reputation, maybe despite it, or maybe because he was sure his wife was cheating on him.

He moved to the side of the alley, where he stared at the wall. He didn't want others to see his tears. *Come on, man, pull yourself together.*

Jack wiped his eyes with the palms of his hands.

Grief gave way to anger. He balled his fists and stormed to the officers, securing the scene.

"Pass the word around. If this guy ends up with a bullseye between the eyes, I won't be asking questions."

The officers looked at each other but said nothing.

"Were you two first on scene?"

"Yes, Sarge."

"Who found her?"

"Passerby. A woman. Anonymous call from the pay phone down the road. Crime scene dusted for prints, and there's CCTV nearby, so we might get lucky."

"If it's fixed," Jack shook his head. "It was out of order when the sick bastard dumped Summertime here. Anything on the scene when you arrived?"

"No, sir. Saw a body in the alley as per the report, investigated and saw it was Daphne. Called in and secured the scene. No one went near the body until crime scene arrived."

Jack glared at him, turned, and walked back to his car. He removed the flask from his glove compartment and took a long swig.

He slammed the door shut and returned to where the crime scene unit was working. "I want every speck of dust in this shithole examined!"

Crime scene investigator Martin Mellon said, "Not much useful here, Jack. There are some footwear marks leading into the alley and into the alcove where I found that melted sludge. Looks like he waited there, and from there to the bod... Daphne, then turned and left the alley."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing. This wasn't planned is my guess. Even so, other than the footwear imprints, there's nothing. He's goo... careful."

"So, the perp's noticed her following, ducked into the alley and lay in wait. When she followed him in, he stepped out behind her, and she didn't know he was there."

"That's what the evidence suggests," agreed Mellon.

Jack shook his head. "Stupid girl, didn't call for backup."

"Young detective," Mellon opined. "Looking for glory."

"I wish she'd called me, didn't pull her weapon." Jack almost spat the words out.

“Didn’t realize she was in danger,” Mellon suggested.

“No, he doesn’t look dangerous.”

“I’ve got photos of the footwear marks. If you find the shoes, I’ll be able to match them, but he’s careful. My guess is he’d get rid of them.”

“Let’s get them analyzed. Maybe they’ll tell us something about the guy, whether he favors a leg, or has an unusual gait or something. I’ll take anything.”

“Sure, Jack. I’ll video them following the path I think he took. May show us something.”

Jack went to Daphne’s sister’s home, but the building super told him she was at work. *Better at work, she’ll have support.*

He pulled into the parking lot of St Auburn’s Presbyterian Hospital and picked up Daphne’s personnel file from the passenger seat. *Sister. Jennifer Loader. Jenny, her super said.*

He opened the glove compartment, extracted his bottle, took two swigs of courage. *Leaves you breathless*, he grinned and headed for the hospital entrance. The receptionist told him where he’d find Daphne’s sister.

A nurse showed him into a small office, where he could wait. Jack took in his surroundings. Small windowless room painted pale green. An empty fake wood desk with a black metal frame and three straight-backed black vinyl chairs. Two in front of the desk, one behind it. He supposed the room had heard more than its share of bad news.

After a soft knock, the door opened, and a woman wearing a nurse’s uniform stepped in. She was obviously related to Daphne, but noticeably carried more weight. *A plump version of Daphne.*

“Jennifer Alice Loader?” Jack asked.

The woman nodded. “What’s...”

“Please sit, Jenny.”

She frowned, but complied.

“I’m Jack Hawkins. I work with Daphne.”

Jenny’s frown deepened as her confusion increased. “Okay.”

“There’s no easy way to say this, but I’m sorry to have to inform you Daphne has been killed in the line of duty.”

The color drained from Jenny’s face. “Daphne’s dead? How?”

He placed his hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. “She was killed by a perpetrator while trying to apprehend him.” Jack didn’t want to tell her the circumstances of Daphne’s death.

“What about her partner? Did she have a partner?”

“She was off duty, and didn’t call for back-up.”

Jenny shook her head. “She wouldn’t.”

Jack frowned.

Jenny sighed and shook her head again. “Daph doesn’t like asking for help.”

“I’m sorry again, Jenny. We’ll get the bastard who killed her.”

Jenny shook her head a third time. “That won’t bring her back.”

“No. Is there anything I can do? Do you need me to get someone to sit with you?”

Jack hated this part even more than delivering the death notification. He never knew when it was the right time to leave, despite being desperate to get out.

“No,” she said. “I have lots of friends here. I’ll be fine.”

He passed her his card. “If you need anything…”

Jenny glanced at it. “Thank you… Jack.”

He nodded, turned, and left, hoping his relief didn’t register on his face, as she buried her face in her hands and sobbed quietly.

The next morning, Jack addressed the officers at roll call.

“The pictures you have aren’t clear. They’re from surveillance footage. Daphne found him on the footage, and it appears she found him on the street too. We don’t know who he is. No match on facial recognition here or with the Feds.”

“Not much to go on,” one officer suggested.

“Daphne was one of our own, killed doing her job. I want this guy, so keep your eyes open.”

“Still no questions asked, Sarge?”

“If you think you see him, call for backup. He might look harmless but don’t be fooled, he’s a dangerous man. He’s killed seven that we know of, so don’t take any chances.”

Despite their best efforts and collective determination, Mouse wasn’t sighted by any officer.

Other than two visits to the small supermarket near his home, Mouse didn’t leave his apartment for three days.

He wasn’t being careful. He was thinking. Planning. Working out a plan where he could encounter Seven and Eight. He needed to encounter them on the same day.

The only way I can be sure of that is to encounter them at home.

He’d encounter Seven first; they needed to be in order. That would work because Seven came home early, and Eight came home late after she’d finished working at the restaurant.

I need to get inside their apartment and plan. I can see the keypad from the alcove. If I watch long enough, I should be able to get their code. Let myself in and plan it properly.

“What about disposing of the evidence?” he asked.

I need to get up on the roof, work out where to burn it. Slip out when I’m done and cross the river home.

After this, Mouse spent most of his time in the alcove near Seven and Eight's apartment. He needed to be in place when they arrived home so he could watch them key the door code.

Knowing their movements would assist him to time his entry. There would be little chance they'd come home unexpectedly and find him in their apartment.

The police may have been actively looking for him, but he wasn't anywhere to be found.

When Duke arrived home to an empty apartment for the fifth morning in a row, he knew something was wrong. This hadn't happened since he became Daphne's lover, under the guise of being her confidential informant.

Something's wrong.

Duke walked to Daphne's station. He focused on the light-colored fake wood of the service counter, with two officers seated behind it. He didn't know why he felt nervous as he walked past the black vinyl, metal framed chairs in two rows in the waiting area. He glanced at the charge counter to his right. Taller than the service desk, with a sergeant standing behind it.

Duke stepped up to the service desk, attempted to swallow, licked his dry lips in an effort to moisten them, and asked, "Daphne Loader, please."

The officer exchanged glances with his colleague, frowned and raised the receiver to his mouth. "Sarge, this is the service desk. A guy here is asking for Daphne."

"Sure." The officer replaced the receiver and glanced at Duke. "Detective Sergeant Hawkins will be with you in a moment. Please take a seat." He indicated the waiting area.

What the fuck? Duke wanted to ask what was going on, where Daphne was, but he knew the officer wouldn't be permitted to tell him. He nodded and sat in the waiting area.

A tall man wearing a tailored suit approached Duke. He offered his hand. "You must be Daphne's CI, Duke. I'm Detective Sergeant Hawkins."

Duke stood and accepted the offered hand. *Friendly enough.* "That's right."

The detective looked around. "We need to talk somewhere more private. Come to my office."

Duke nodded and followed him into the station proper. *Where's Daphne? What the fuck's goin' on?* He followed Hawkins into an office.

"Sit down, Duke." Hawkins closed the door and sat on the other side of the desk.

"What's goin' on?"

He noticed Hawkins studying his face. "I'm afraid Daphne's been killed."

"What?" Duke's chin quivered, his chest deflated, his shoulders sank, and water began to dam behind his eyes. "How?"

Hawkins' tone softened. "From what we can tell, she saw a suspect we've been searching for and intended to apprehend him. She didn't call for backup."

Duke shook his head. "She wouldn't."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Hawkins must have read it in his face.

Duke nodded. “Shot?”

“Throat cut.”

“That serial killer you’ve been looking for?”

“We believe so.”

“Not surprised she was the one who found him. Daphne was a determined woman.”

“If you want to continue as a confidential informant, we can assign you another officer.”

“I don’t think so,” Duke said. *Could be good for business.* “But I’ll think about it.”

He stood, offered his hand, which Hawkins shook, and left.

Duke turned left at the side of the building, sank, or perhaps collapsed onto his haunches, buried his face in his hands and sobbed like a five-year-old. If anyone saw him, they had the decency to ignore him.

When his sobs ceased, he straightened, wiped his eyes on his sleeve and took a deep breath to steel himself. *He’ll pay, Daph.*

Duke returned to the station and asked for Hawkins again.

Seated in Hawkins’ office, he said, “As a registered confidential informant, I’d like to help you catch Daphne’s killer. Is there anything you can give me to suggest where I should look or who I’m looking for?”

He held the detective’s gaze while waiting for a response.

Hawkins nodded, removed a photograph from his desk draw and passed it to Duke. “We believe this is the guy. If you find him, let me know. He’s dangerous.”

“So am I. If I find him, you can have what’s left.”

“Understand, if there’s any evidence that you’ve done anything illegal, I’ll have to charge you.”

“There won’t be.”

Jack grinned. “Good, I’d hate to charge you for performing a public service.”

Business As Usual

Myron sat comfortably in Burt's chair. He smiled, having discovered a tin of Otter wax leather salve in a drawer. The source of the cedar wood scent in the leather had eluded him.

"Agreed." He ended the call with the liquidator of Discount Bazaar.

He frowned, and Art gave him a quizzical look.

"Deal's done. We're taking over Discount Bazaar. The McCormack Brothers will run it, along with Pheonix Imports as they're related businesses. It's an excellent opportunity for us, but I feel guilty taking advantage of people's misfortune."

"You're not," Art replied. "You're taking advantage of an opportunity created by other's misfortune, but unless you were the cause, you're not taking advantage of it. Besides, the staff would've lost their livelihood. Now many will keep their jobs."

"We'll retain the original store, but close the mega store. There are a couple of small storefronts in suitable areas. One is available now and the other will be in a few months. When Burt gets back, I'll have him keep an eye out for additional locations, like we did with the Conveniencemats."

Myron picked up his phone and selected Trevor McCormack from his contact list. After he'd updated him on the developments, he ended the call, in time for Art to pass his phone to Myron in response to an incoming call.

He placed the phone on the desk between them and turned on the speakerphone.

"This is Myron Myerson."

"Oh... Hi. This is Tony Richardson."

Art retrieved a file from one of his boxes and placed it on the desk. Tony was employed by Myron's property management company, as were all the superintendents in the family buildings. However, he reported directly to Art, who'd managed his own buildings all his life.

"Hello, Tony, how can I help?" Myron asked.

"One of our tenants got herself murdered."

"That's awful. I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything we can do?"

"So am I. She was a nice girl, always said hello. Anyway, I've been in touch with her family who asked me to send her personal papers and possessions to them. I've packed everything into two boxes, ready to go, but I, umm... don't know how to ask them for the money to send..."

"Pay it from your petty cash."

"Thanks. The other thing is her furniture and clothing. Her parents asked if I could dispose of it."

"The clothing can go to Goodwill if you don't mind taking it."

"Of course not."

"What condition is the furniture in?"

"It's in good condition, Ikea."

“Hold off on shipping those boxes. Max will drop in to value and inventory the furniture, and he’ll write a check. You can add it to a box.”

“That’s generous of you,” Tony said.

“We’ll earn more by renting the apartment out furnished. Max’ll call you.”

“Thanks, again.”

Myron retrieved a device from his briefcase and passed it to Art.

“What is it?” Art asked, as he examined what looked like a barcode scanner he’d observed staff using in supermarkets.

“It’s a barcode creator. Called a *Handbot*. The company that made them went broke. We bought the patent and the stock cheap from the liquidator.”

Myron went to find Max, who was in his office at the other side of the building. They returned a few minutes later.

“Look at this device.” He handed it to Max.

Max held it, turned it on, and pointed it toward Burt’s desk. He pressed the ‘okay’ button and an image of Burt’s desk appeared on the screen. He entered the make, model, year information, and selected a description. He pressed enter. The device printed a label with a brief description and a bar code.

Myron said, “You can place the sticker under the desk, somewhere convenient.”

Max did as instructed and then flicked the device to scan. The image reappeared on the screen and a value had been assigned.

“That seems easy enough.”

“You won’t think that when you’ve scanned all our assets.” Myron winked. “Don’t worry, you won’t have to do it all yourself. We have a few thousand scanners. Finish scanning the furniture in this room. Then head over to see Tony Richardson. A tenant of his has died, and her family has left us her furniture. You can inventory and value it.”

“Sure, boss.”

“Give Tony a check for the value, which he’ll include with the tenant’s belongings.”

“Okay, so give them whatever value the system allocates?”

“Yes. Then drop the device back to our software company for analysis. Also, give them your perception of using it. We’re planning on giving them to the supers and maintenance staff.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“If the furniture is in good condition, maybe flag the apartment as Airbnb and explain how it works to Tony.”

“Will do.”

“Papa and I are going to wander out for a coffee, so you can take your time in here.”

“Okay, I shouldn’t be long.”

On their way to the Coffee Roasters franchise, Art said, “So much technology these days. Makes me feel useless.”

Myron smiled. “No, Papa, you keep everything in your head. I can ask you anything about any apartment, and you can answer me without even looking at your files. We need the technology, because we can’t do that.”

Adrian was sitting at the bus stop. He’d gotten off here for a reason, but he couldn’t remember why.

He seemed to spend half his life trying to remember what he’d forgotten. His mind was present, but it often disappeared. He only needed a clue.

He looked down the road, and there it was. The clue he’d needed. The blonde woman walking toward him never seemed to age. *I came to see Judy*. Her lemon dress appeared tailored to fit her perfect body. He would’ve preferred at least two more buttons to be undone, one at the top and one at the bottom.

He felt the familiar tingle in his groin. *Hope I remember long enough to jerk off.*

He swallowed hard, stood, and waited for her.

Judy smiled. “Adrian Sebastain Bach! It’s been such a long time.”

“Judy Vernon.” He beamed. “I don’t get out as much as I used to. I came to see where you hang out.”

“You’re always welcome. Have you got time to have lunch? My place is close by.”

“Of course, dear lady.”

They entered Frank’s Diner. Adrian stopped as soon as he stepped inside.

The booths had pale-blue, white-trimmed high-backed vinyl benches, and the tabletops were ash wood Formica. Pastels with white walls and lots of light from the windows created an open, inviting atmosphere.

Polished chrome trimmed the tables, bench seating, counter, fixtures, fittings in the service areas, and even the counter stools. The gleaming chrome made the diner appear very clean.

“Wow,” Adrian said.

“Do you like old diners?” Judy asked. “Come sit in my booth.”

They sat, and Judy passed Adrian a menu.

“Oh... A lamb shank,” Adrian said, perusing the menu. “I haven’t had one of those in years.”

“Good choice. I’ll get one too.” Judy ordered lamb shanks and coffees.

“My mind goes away. I don’t know where. They put me in a home with old people. I don’t know why. My mind is working today, so I stole my phone...” He extracted it from his pocket and placed it on the table. “...and came to find you.” He placed his thumb on his phone. The screen opened, but there were no messages.

“What is the name of the place where you are living?”

“St. Margarete’s home for old fucked-up guys or something.”

“St. Margarete’s. I’ll remember that and come find you.”

“I’d like that.”

“I haven’t seen you for a long time. Is there a new Mrs. Sebastian Bach?”

“I’ve been married a few times and have had several other relationships. Serial monogamy, not that I’ve always been monogamous. They all followed the same pattern. Started off fine, and then became an environment based on criticism and complaint. Mind you, it was one-sided. As much as they may have annoyed me, I never criticized them or complained about them.

“It seems I have an entire array of faults. I need to sit straight. I talk too slowly. I don’t talk enough. I eat too quickly. I walk too slowly. I’m lazy. I don’t get enough sleep. I get up too early. I need to keep my head up when I’m walking. I spend too much time reading. I should be more sociable. I shouldn’t fall asleep on the bus... and the list goes on.

“It’s hard to live in an environment when you are the subject of constant criticism and complaint. You sometimes become defensive, sometimes you do the things that annoy them on purpose, to piss them off. Maybe smoke, because they tell you not to smoke, or drink because they told you not to drink too much.”

The waitress arrived with their coffees. Adrian picked up his cup and inhaled. “I’ve missed good coffee. All they give us in the home is cheap shit.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Adrian. If you ever want good coffee, or food, just come. Even if I’m not here, you can sit in this booth and order whatever you want.”

“That’s kind of you, but they don’t let me have money these days.”

Judy shrugged. “You won’t need any. I’ll tell them you’re my guest. Please, continue, I’ve missed your stories.”

“Oh yeah, where was I? I spend too much time in the shower, I don’t spend enough time cleaning my teeth, I stand too close to the television, I spend too much time looking at my smart phone, I eat too much, I don’t eat enough, I drink too much coffee, I don’t drink enough water, I looked at that girl, I paid this girl too much attention. The lists of my faults and flaws seem endless.

“One used to finish every lecture with ‘you can do what you like.’ Pissed me off more than the lecture. Why would I need her permission to do what I like? Of course, doing what I like was only half the story. She should have said, ‘you can do what you like, but if it’s not what I want, I’ll bitch and moan at you some more.’”

Adrian stared out the window. Judy recognized the expression. He was remembering. He looked at her again, gave her a half smile and resumed.

“Another one said, ‘I don’t know why you can’t just do what I say and save us both the trouble. If you don’t do what I say, I’ll nag and complain and make your life miserable until you give in, and you’ll give in just to get some peace. So why not just do it at first and save us the trouble?’ How could I argue with that logic?”

“When you are constantly criticized, corrected, and complained about, it erodes your confidence because you feel you cannot do anything right. Pretty soon, it becomes self-fulfilling. You believe you can’t do anything right, and you can’t. It’s soul destroying. I know people who remained where they are, convinced they’re useless, and no one would want them. Broken people living broken lives.”

Their food arrived. Judy leaned forward and inhaled, savoring the aroma. Adrian mimicked her.

“Smells great,” he said.

“It’s superb. Everything here is.”

“Especially the owner, I bet.”

Judy smiled. “Behave yourself. Now let’s enjoy our food quietly.”

After they’d eaten, Judy ordered more coffee.

Adrian continued, “I’d reach a point where I’d walk out of the relationship by any means possible, and sometimes I wasn’t kind. Sometimes I could do it in one attempt, others I was like a yo-yo, before I finally escaped for good. More than once I thought, ‘If there’s so much wrong with me, why don’t you want me to go?’ I never understood that.

“I analyzed the situation and realized my mistake, or so I believed. They were mostly single children, and they were hard women, who I’d mistaken for strong women. There’s a difference between hard and strong.”

“What is the difference?” Judy asked.

“I don’t know exactly. Hard resists all change, strong can change based on factors. For much of my life, I didn’t know the difference. I finally found one who was different, who didn’t fit the pattern. Not an only child, and not hard. It was a better relationship, but she still presented me with a list of my faults.

“I was the common denominator. I had a long list of faults that made me unsuitable to have a relationship. This was my real mistake, believing that I’m suitable for a relationship, when clearly, I’m not. So, I’ve accepted that I’m unsuitable. Now I have a peaceful life.”

“Do you ever feel lonely?” Judy asked.

“I have a woman I pay when I can get out of the home with a little money in my pocket. I used to think I’d never pay for it, but then I realized I’ve been paying for it all my life. Cost me two houses and alimony. This way is cheaper, and I only have to pay if I actually get some. Plus, she doesn’t complain about the way I... whatever.”

“That makes sense.”

“Sometimes...”

“Adrian?”

Adrian Sebastian Bach stared at her. He seemed frozen, his eyes full of life a moment ago were now dead. He looked like he didn’t know where he was or who he was.

“Adrian? Adrian?” Judy said.

Judy didn’t know exactly what had happened, but she got the gist. Adrian had shut down. She didn’t know why, but it seemed natural and would certainly explain his residence in a care home.

He was a little lighter than when she’d last seen him. His hair was both thinner and grayer, his pale blue eyes now sunken, the lines on his face deeper. *He’s looking old.*

She moved around the booth to sit beside him. She picked up his phone and pressed his left thumb against it as she’d seen him do. The phone opened, and she perused his recent call list. Most of his calls were to or from Twinkle Dingle.

Judy selected the number and hit call.

It answered after four rings. “Hello, Poppy?”

“Umm... Hi. I’m Judy Vernon.”

“Oh, you have my grandfather’s phone.”

“Yes, he’s with me. We were having lunch...”

“Oh, did he freeze?”

“Yes, I don’t know...”

“Nothing you can do. He’ll come back, but maybe not for a few days. He calls it lost time. I don’t know what it is.”

“What should I do?”

“I’ll come get him, take him back to the home, but...”

“I can take him back if you’d prefer. It’s no trouble.”

“If you’re sure, that would really help me today.”

“No problem, and it’ll give me a chance to see where he lives. I like Adrian, and I’ve missed him.”

“He misses you too, talks about you a lot. In time, when he comes back, he’ll remember everything, including your visit.”

“Good. It was a nice visit, and we had a pleasant lunch before...”

“I’m glad.”

After getting his details and ringing off, Judy looked at her friend and teared up. She wiped her eyes. “Everything changes.”

She stood, took Adrian’s arm to guide him, and headed out to a taxi.

Obsessions

Judy occupied her booth at Frank's Diner, waiting for her breakfast. Melanie sat opposite. She was staring at Suzy Q, who wore a Frank's Diner uniform like all staff did. Rebekah introduced them after Suzy Q stopped wearing anime outfits.

"Graduated from university and will marry Leon soon. Time to be adult," Suzy Q explained to Judy.

However, she'd shortened her uniform and added three staggered petticoats protruding from the bottom.

"I think she's very pretty, Mama."

"Yes, she is," Judy agreed. "Aunt Ali used to think so."

The bell jangled as the door opened, but Judy didn't look up until she heard Mel say, "Mama says you think Suzy Q is pretty."

"Yes sweetheart, she is...very."

Judy said, "Ali, what's up?"

Ali kissed Mel hello.

"Nothing. Wanted to have breakfast with my girls."

She sat beside Judy, and they kissed slowly on the lips. That Mel was with them didn't concern either.

Mel smiled. "I like having two Mamas."

"Almost, sweetheart," Ali said.

Judy squeezed her arm.

Suzy Q came to take Ali's order. "Hi Ali, what you like?"

Ali smiled, "You...sual."

Judy squeezed her arm harder. "You're a terrible flirt."

Judy observed Mel and Ali watching Suzy Q walking away. *Interesting.*

"What's a flirt, Mama?"

"Somebody who teases other people."

"A girl at school always teases me."

"Sorry, darling, it's not good when people tease others."

"No, it's not," Ali said, looking Judy in the eye.

"It's okay. I kinda like her."

Judy glanced at Ali. "So why are you here? Has something happened?"

"Yes, my best girl's been avoiding me."

Judy hadn't been to Dancer's for over a week.

"Not avoiding you, busy."

"Bullshit."

"Language," Mel said.

“Sorry sweetheart.”

“It’s all right. Sometimes I want to say that to Mama too, but Papa says I shouldn’t use words like that.”

“Papa’s right,” Judy agreed.

“He usually is,” Ali said.

Suzy Q arrived with their breakfast and a coffee for Ali. After unloading the tray, she said, “Enjoy,” and returned to the counter.

Again, Ali and Mel watched her.

Would she know at her age?

After breakfast, Mel stood and pulled her backpack on her shoulders. “Time for school.”

She kissed Judy and Ali goodbye, stopped to say goodbye to Suzy Q, and left the diner.

Judy stared at her daughter. “I think our Mel might be a lesbian, but I would think she’s too young to know about those things.”

“Smart girl. How old were you when you knew?”

“I don’t know,” Judy said. “I was thirteen the first time I was with a girl, but knew long before that, I guess.”

“She’ll find herself when she’s ready, and it doesn’t matter whatever she becomes.”

“You’re right, of course,” Judy said.

“I’m right about you avoiding me too, and I want to know why.”

“I don’t want to be selfish and cause you problems with Rae.”

“You want to be selfish, but you’re feeling guilty, because it causes me problems with Rae,” Ali interpreted.

“That’s not what I said.”

“No, but it’s what you meant.”

Judy rolled her eyes and looked out the window. *Hate when she gets in my head.*

She could sense Ali smiling. She looked at her. “What?”

“You don’t like me in your head, but I know you too well.”

Actually, I do. Judy smiled, “You do.”

Ali leaned in and kissed her, her hand sliding up Judy’s skirt.

Judy pulled back and removed Ali’s hand, but not before savoring her touch.

“You’re incorrigible,” she said.

“And you love it.”

“Seriously, did Rae give you an earful?”

“No, she didn’t. Expected her to. She only said you look pretty in pink. I didn’t know what to say.”

Judy winked. “You could have agreed.”

“Nearly did, but thought she might be baiting me into an argument.”

Judy smiled. *Must have looked pretty if Rae thought so. She hates me.*

“Point is,” Ali said. “I don’t like not seeing you.”

“Me either, especially now, but it causes too much trouble. I gave myself a talking to about being selfish.”

“But you want to see me?”

“Of course I do, you stupid woman.” *I want to do more than see you. Can’t believe I’ve been such a stupid bitch. I only had to talk to Myron, but the timing’s wrong again.*

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“Can you take a break between lunch and dinner?”

“Sure, we can get a room upstairs...”

God, I want to. “Not now. The timing is wrong.”

“The timing is always wrong.”

“I need Myron’s blessing. You know that. I was going to ask.”

“What about our hidden rose garden in People’s Park?”

“I was going to invite him to join us a couple of years ago.”

“No, you weren’t. You thought he was going to suggest it.”

Judy smiled. “I was sure he was going to, but then Mel...”

Ali squeezed her hand. “I was sure he was too... I liked that night I spent with him.”

“Now Mel’s settled. I was thinking about talking to him. Should have done it before, but you took up with Rae, and...”

“I was lonely and didn’t want to go back to trolling bars.”

“You couldn’t with Dancers.”

“No, nor could I wait and hope you’d come to your senses.”

“Not blaming you, darling, I understand. Anyway, now with Art being sick... I can’t.”

“No, you can’t. So, we’ll meet in the garden...”

Judy glanced at the plaque on the wall and smiled. “Where Frank blessed us.”

Ali kissed her on the lips. “It’s a date. Better get to work. I’ll call you when I can get away.”

Judy looked into Ali’s green eyes. “I do love you, Alison Farrington.”

Ali smiled and stood to leave. She took a step, then looked back over her shoulder; “I know you do, Judy Vernon.”

Judy watched her walk past the window, stopping to face Judy as she did and raising the front of the skirt enough to reveal her transparent pink panties.

Judy inhaled sharply and stared at the image long after Ali had gone.

She glanced up, almost startled, when Suzy Q and Leon approached.

Suzy Q said, “Judy, could we talk to you about...”

“Of course you can.”

Suzy Q placed a binder on the table and sat in the booth, sliding across to be opposite Judy. Leon, looking nervous, sat beside his wife.

“What’s up?” Judy asked.

“We want to open our own place,” Suzy Q blurted out. “Rebekah said you guys might be interested in backing us. She helped me prepare a business plan.”

“And Darnell helped design the menu,” Leon added.

“We’ll certainly look at it,” Judy said, unsure whether she was surprised by the development or not.

Suzy Q slid the binder to Judy. “It’s all here.”

It was unusual for Suzy Q to be nervous. Judy smiled, opened the folder, and began reading the business plan.

“It’s across town. There was a restaurant there before, but it failed,” Suzy Q explained. “We think if we have good food, we can make it work.”

“Good basic food, not like here or Dancer’s,” Leon said. “It’s what the people there want.”

Judy nodded. “Makes sense. You plan to call it *Suzy Q’s*?”

Leon said, “It’s catchy and easy to remember.”

“I agree,” said Judy.

When she finished, Judy smiled. “It seems sound. Myron will need to look. If you’ve missed anything, he’ll pick it up, and have a solution. We’ll want our property guys to inspect the premises, too. What’re you looking for?”

“If you can provide the funding, we’ll do the work,” Suzy Q said. “Similar to Rebekah and Darnell. I know we’re not family...”

“If we do fund it, we’ll be looking at an eighty/twenty share of ownership and profits,” Judy explained. “You’ll get a wage too, of course.”

“That’s what we’re hoping for,” said Leon.

“We’ll need a few days. I’ll let you know. No promises, but it looks sound.”

“Thank you, Judy,” Suzy Q said.

Judy saw the hope in their eyes as they left the booth. Suzy Q returned to work and Leon made his way to Dancer’s Bistro.

She picked up her phone and rang Myron.

“Hello sweetheart.”

“Hi darling. Suzy Q and Leon want to open their own place across town. They’re looking for backing. Becky helped them with the business plan.”

“I’ll look at it tonight.”

“Do you and Papa have time to look at the property?”

“We’re in the middle of building inspections. Perhaps give Max a call and see if he can do it.”

“Okay sweetheart, love you.”

“Love you too, darling.”

Max answered immediately. “Judy, what do you need?”

“Hello Max, you sound busy.”

“Not too bad. Can I help with something?”

“We’re looking at investing in a new restaurant across town. Suzy Q and Leon found a suitable property available for lease, wondering if you have time to meet today and maybe look at it tomorrow.”

“Err... I could. What time?”

“You seem hesitant. Am I interrupting your plans?”

“Not important. Was going to have lunch with my wife at Dancer’s but we could do it another day.”

“Nonsense, I’ll meet you there. Haven’t met your wife. What time?”

“One.”

“See you then.”

Judy extracted the property information from the binder and slid it into her shoulder bag. She’d drop the binder home first.

Judy arrived at Dancer’s Bistro earlier than expected. She was tempted to wait for Max and his wife inside. She could spend some time with Ali. *Better not, we’ll end up in the restroom again.*

She crossed the road, entered O’Rourke’s Park, and headed for the seawall. She enjoyed looking out over the bay and feeling the sea breeze on her face while she inhaled the salty scent.

Judy didn’t notice Rae sitting on a bench.

Rae, however, noticed Judy. She watched her walk to the seawall and lean against it, face tilted into the breeze. *Ali’s right, she does have a great ass.*

Rae stared at her and felt herself become aroused. She wanted to take Judy hard against the wall. *Want to make the bitch beg me to stop, then beg me for more.*

Rae shook her head. Her breathing was fast and erratic. *What the fuck has the bitch done to me?*

She stood and, against her better judgment, walked up behind Judy. *What am I doing?*

She wanted to grab Judy’s shoulder, spin her around and slap her face, hard. She wanted to force her fingers inside of Judy and fuck her hard, right there in the open for all to see. *What am I thinking? Am I a rapist now? Fucking cunt did this to me.*

Rae forced herself to calm down. She whispered in Judy’s ear, “Ali’s right, you’ve got a sexy ass.”

Judy spun round, a look of fear on her face. Rae smiled with satisfaction. She stood very close, so when Judy turned, their faces were barely an inch apart.

“Oh hello, Rae, didn’t see you there. You startled me.”

I’ll do more than startle you, bitch. She smiled. “Hi Judy,” she said. “Wanted a quick word.”

She remained close, knowing Judy, who’d been leaning against the wall, couldn’t look away.

“Sure,” Judy said. “What’s up?”

Rae was itching to slap Judy, and her breathing had quickened again. She took Judy’s hand and held it to calm herself and stop her hand from acting on her desire. She noticed Judy glance down at her hand, but she didn’t pull away. *Always Miss Cool.*

“This obsession you two have for each other is not healthy,” Rae said. “It’s consuming both of your lives.”

Judy seemed about to say something, but didn’t.

“You should have acted on your desires years ago. Now they’re taking on a life of their own. You can’t walk away from them because their spell is too strong. Now you’re scared to act on your desires, which have become stronger because of the obsession, and you know it would break the spell.”

“I umm...”

“You use Myron as a security blanket to justify not breaking the spell of desire. For all your bullshit, you’re just a dyke addicted to your obsession, touching each other up whenever you need a fix.”

“I’m not sure... I don’t think you’re right.”

“Bullshit! You know I’m right. You’ve got hotels. Get a room and fuck each other’s brains out until the spell is broken and then we can all move on.”

“You’re telling me to fuck your girlfriend?”

“Tell her if she doesn’t fuck you, I will.”

“You? I’m not sure I’d agree...”

“I wouldn’t be asking.”

“Oh... I.”

Rae lifted her free hand. Judy cringed as if she feared Rae would hit her.

“Don’t worry, precious, I won’t hit you... at least not here and not now.”

She gently placed her hand on Judy’s cheek, caressed her lightly, steered their lips together, and kissed her. At first Judy resisted, then relaxed and returned the kiss. They stood staring at each other, both breathing heavily.

Rae said, “Think about it, but don’t take too long. I meant every word.”

She released Judy’s hand and walked away.

Judy stared at Rae, only vaguely noticing the man following her. She was breathing hard, a blend of fear and arousal.

What the fuck was that about?

She turned and quickly made her way to Dancer's Bistro. She entered without saying hello to Jason, dropped her bag on the chef's table, glared at Ali and said, "Restroom."

Ali followed Judy into the stall and locked the door behind them.

"What's happened?"

"I-I-I don't know."

Judy buried her head into Ali's shoulder and cried. Ali held her and gently stroked her hair, which calmed Judy.

She looked at Ali. "Rae."

"Rae?"

"She scared me."

"Scared you? What happened?"

"I was in the park, waiting to meet Max for lunch."

"So, you're the third. He changed his reservation."

"Rae came up and talked to me."

"Fucking bitch! What did she say?"

"I need to think about it. Clear my head."

"I'll call her. Ask her what the fuck she's doing."

"No, not yet. We'll go to the hidden garden after lunch, like we planned, and talk about it. Got a meeting with Max first."

"Okay darling, but later I'll tell her..."

Judy smiled. "I'm okay now, just needed... you."

Rae arrived home. She didn't shower or undress. Her mind was in turmoil. She had to clear the image before it consumed her more than it had. She removed her panties, lay on the bed, and opened her legs.

Rae slapped Judy's face hard. Judy stared at her, shocked. Tears forming in her eyes. Rae grabbed Judy's hair and pulled her head back.

She stepped into Judy, forcing her hard against the sea wall. Her other hand found its way inside Judy's panties and then inside Judy, forcing as many fingers as she could deep inside. She kissed Judy, biting her lip until it bled, and hungrily sucked Judy's blood.

Her fingers fucked Judy hard, her lips still locked on Judy's bleeding lips, her eyes revelling in the fear screaming from Judy's. Her hand moving faster until she saw ecstasy replace fear in Judy's eyes.

Again, Rae came as Judy did in her brutal fantasy. Each time a variation of her fantasy played in her mind; her orgasm increased in intensity.

Rae stared at the ceiling, breathing hard. She cried. *What's wrong with me?*

Max was seated beside his wife when Judy returned from the bathroom. She collected her bag and joined them.

Max stood to make introductions. “Judy, this is my wife, Joanne. Jo, this is Judy.”

Judy reached out her hand, which Joanne shook warmly. “Nice to meet you, Joanne.”

“Nice to meet you too, Judy.”

Neither acknowledged the recognition which filled each woman’s eyes. It’d been years ago.

Ali, who’d followed Judy to the table, gave her a quizzical look.

They ordered lunch.

“Sorry to intrude on your lunch,” Judy said to Joanne. “Need to give some papers to Max.”

“It’s fine.” Joanne’s eyes locked on Judy’s as if saying, ‘I’m glad you did.’

Judy extracted the papers from her bag, wishing to break the connection. “Max, Myron and I are thinking of investing in a new restaurant across town. Can you talk with the agent and have a look at the premises? Make sure it’s suitable and see what deal you can negotiate.”

“I’ll get onto it this afternoon. Try to have a look in the morning.”

They ate lunch.

Judy excused herself to go to the restroom. *Should have gone while I was there.*

Ali followed her again, locking the stall behind them. Judy lowered her panties, sat, and peed.

“When?”

“When what?”

“When did you sleep with her? I saw the way you looked at each other.”

“A long time ago, at least a year before I met you.”

“She’s pretty.”

“I thought so. Didn’t know she was Max’s wife. Didn’t know she was anyone’s wife. Didn’t ask.”

“Wonder what would have happened if you didn’t know I was John’s wife when we met.”

“You know exactly what would have happened.”

“What’s that?”

“I would have had you in bed within five minutes.”

“You still can.”

“Rae thinks I should.”

“What?”

“Tell you later, I’d better get back.”

“Kiss me first.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After they'd finished lunch, Joanne said, "Better head to the restroom before I go."

Hope she offers to accompany me, want another taste of her. She's hot. Maybe I should invite her. Better not if she's one of Max's bosses.

Joanne made her way to the back of the restaurant where Ali was standing, surveying the room.

She's hot too. "Excuse me, where's the restroom?"

Ali smiled, leaned over and picked up something from the table, but Joanne didn't see what. "I'll show you."

Ali escorted her. Joanne thanked her and disappeared into a stall.

She was surprised Ali was waiting for her when she exited.

"Oh... Hi."

She felt Ali watching her as she washed and dried her hands.

Ali smiled and offered her a business card. Joanne took it, and for a moment their hands connected.

"Why don't you come back for a late lunch one day when you're not busy..."

Joanne studied her. "I might do that."

"I'm free between lunch and dinner," Ali explained.

"I always enjoy dessert after lunch." Joanne winked as she pocketed Ali's card.

"Me too."

They left the restroom and returned to the restaurant.

Ali went to the chef's table and sat watching Joanne.

I want her because she had my Judy. Is that sick? Maybe Rae's right, I'm obsessed.

Ali smiled as she saw Judy making her way to her.

"Can you get away now?" Judy asked.

Ali called out, "Jace, can you keep an eye on things? I need to pop out."

"Sure, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"We'll do everything you wouldn't do."

Ali and Judy left Dancer's holding hands. They flagged a taxi to People's Park, holding hands and occasionally stopping to join at the lips, as they had done many times since that first day when they'd agreed on the boundaries of their relationship.

They entered the circle of trees which hid a rose garden. They followed a cobblestone path around the outer circle of roses, stepped down a small linking path, then followed an identical path between the two outer rose beds. Color, in shades of pink, white, red, yellow, and peach surrounded them. The air, full of the fragrant, unmistakable scent of roses.

Ali inhaled deeply.

"Yes, you are."

Ali gave Judy a quizzical look.

“So beautiful,” Judy echoed her observation from the first time they visited.

They strolled around the circular paths surrounding two more rows of roses. Reaching the center, the world was silent. An ancient rose, its limbs gnarly and twisted like an arthritic nonagenarian, its leaves sparse. They still referred to the experience as paying homage to the ancient.

They made their way to their usual bench in front of the ancient rose, which was, to their disappointment, not in bloom.

They settled on the bench, quietly emerged in the peace and spirituality of their environment. They seldom encountered anybody else in the garden, so to them, it was their private domain.

Ali said, “So what did Rae do?”

“She spoke to me, calmly. She even held my hand. We kissed when we parted.”

“Rae kissed you?”

“Yes, I was shocked at first, but I kissed her back.”

“But you hate each other.”

“She hates me, and I understand why.”

“What did she say?”

“Rae wants us to sleep together.”

“She said that?”

“She said we need to rent a hotel room and fuck each other’s brains out until we break the obsession that’s consuming us,” Judy explained.

“Rae said something similar to me. Says by not acting on our desire when we first met, we created a mutual obsession.

“Says we’re scared to sleep together, because we don’t want to break our obsession.”

Ali shrugged. “She may be right.”

“Been thinking that, but the timing is wrong. I can’t do anything without Myron’s blessing, and I can’t ask him now because of Art.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine with it.”

“I am too, but...”

“I know. The problem is, after Art passes... I wish this wasn’t happening. Not because... I mean, for Art’s sake.”

“Me too,” Judy whispered.

“Not being cold, but it won’t be the right time when Myron’s grieving either.”

“No.”

“You said Rae scared you.”

“She said if you didn’t fuck me, she would.”

“She really said that?”

“I told her I wouldn’t agree.”

“Good, I don’t want that.”

“She said she wouldn’t be asking. That’s what scared me. There was something about the way she said it. I believed her.”

“Fucking bitch.”

After this, they sat quietly, each lost in thought until it was time to leave. They kissed slowly, not passionately... a long kiss dripping with the depth of their love.

They strolled to the exit, each flagged a taxi, and they went their separate ways.

That night Ali arrived home ready for a confrontation. She was furious with Rae.

Rae was watching TV, legs curled up on the sofa. A normal day.

“Hi Petal,” she greeted.

“What are you fucking playing at?”

“Gave her some advice the same as I gave you, and you both know I’m right.”

That’s not the point. “You threatened to rape her, for fuck’s sake.”

“I didn’t mean it, wanted to scare her into action.”

“Well, you scared her. What the fuck were you thinking? You’re a fucking woman, no woman would wish that on another. Would you like to be raped?”

Rae looked at her but said nothing.

“You need to apologize.”

“Sorry, Ali.”

“Not to me!”

Rae shrugged. “We have to do something. This fucking obsession of yours is contagious.”

If Ali registered what Rae had said, she didn’t realize it.

“I’m going to have a shower.”

The Circle of Life

Ruth smiled when Melanie came into the kitchen to help her prepare Sabbath lunch.

“What do you need me to do, Bubbe?” she asked, and hugged her grandmother.

Ruth’s heart swelled. She may not be her blood, but Melanie and Ruth had developed a strong bond, which Myron believed was because she didn’t have a strong connection with her biological grandparents.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. We’ll have lots of Sabbath meals to prepare. Perhaps today you can go listen to Zeyde’s stories.”

Melanie smiled. “I like his stories.”

Ruth smiled again as she watched her granddaughter skip off. Despite her resolve, a tear escaped her eye. *He’s gonna miss her growing up.*

She wiped her eyes and pulled herself together. *There’ll be time for crying when he’s gone.*

She heard the door.

Judy.

Moments later, Judy stepped into the kitchen.

“Hello Mama.” Judy hugged her and kissed her cheek.

“Hi Judy, I sent Melanie off to spend time with Art.”

“How is he?”

“He seems in good spirits. Myron’s quiet. In your room.”

“I’ll make sure he’s all right.”

Ruth nodded.

Myron stood, staring out the window at nothing, when Judy entered. She stepped up behind him and put her arms around him.

“What happened, darling?”

“Thinking about Papa.”

Judy kissed him. “Do you need to talk about it?”

“No. I’ve come to terms with it... it’s just not going to be the same.”

“No, it’s not,” She agreed. “I wish I could find some words...”

“There are no words, sweetheart. It is what it is. Papa’s right, we have time together we may not’ve had.”

They stood quietly and held each other for a long time. She was tempted to raise the subject of Ali, but didn’t.

After Sabbath lunch, the family sat in the living room, which didn’t look like it was in an old house owned by the same wealthy Jewish family for more than a century.

A simple beige leather set of a high-backed armchair, and high-backed three-seater, and two-seater sofas. An oak coffee table in front of the larger sofa sat on a traditional Antalya rug. Its primary burgundy color somehow made the room feel cozy, and the beige and whites blended it with the furniture. A small matching side table sat beside Art's chair.

Ruth always sat on the smaller sofa, with Myron and Judy on the larger and Melanie on Art's lap. A large, mounted television sat on the wall, above a fireplace converted to gas, in front of the sofas. The other walls contained photographs and paintings of four generations of family.

"I've been planning our trip," Ruth said. "We need to book the tickets soon. When shall we go?"

Art said, "We'll be finished the inspections next week."

Ruth smiled. He called them inspections, but it was his way of saying goodbye to his buildings.

"Burt'll be back in a week," Myron said. "So, about ten days."

"Are you sure you won't join us, Judy?" Ruth asked.

"It is your time..." Judy said. "You know what I'm trying to say."

Ruth nodded, excused herself, and went to the bathroom. She sat on the toilet and sobbed. It was fine for Art to tell her to act like it wasn't happening, but the only man she'd ever loved was dying, and sometimes she was overwhelmed.

After she washed her face, she returned to the living room. Even without the redness of her eyes, everyone knew she'd been crying, but nobody acknowledged it.

Melanie extracted herself from Zeyde's knee and sat beside Ruth. She held her grandmother's hand, reached her head up and kissed her cheek, then rested her head on Bubbe's shoulder.

Judy waited for Max in her booth at Frank's Diner. She opened her phone and called the number at the top of her favorites list.

"Hello Sexy. I must look at the premises for Suzy Q and Leon's new place this afternoon. So, I..."

"Just about to call. Have something I need to do myself."

"I guess it works out then."

"Perfectly."

Judy frowned. *Ali sounds a little stiff.*

She placed her phone on the table without another thought and stared at the papers in front of her. The business agreement was already signed by Myron, but she read through it again.

Next, Max's report on the building. Everything seemed in order. The previous occupant had abandoned the space when their business failed, leaving the kitchen, dining room and amenities intact, with several months' rent owing. It needs a deep clean but was otherwise in good condition.

Max arrived and joined her.

“Better sit beside me,” she said. “Suzy Q and Leon will join us shortly.”

He nodded and sat.

“So, you’ve read my report,” he noted.

“Yes. Normally, Myron or Burt do this, and I’d be on the sidelines watching. I’m nervous because it’s the first project I’ve handled, and I’m making sure everything is in order.”

Max smiled. “I’ve negotiated an option for a three-year lease. We have thirty days to formalize the arrangement.”

“Myron examined the business plan, and it’s sound. Not surprising, as Rebekah helped them put it together. There’s a market for a restaurant in the area, but the previous establishment offered poor quality food. Mostly pre-made caterers’ meals that only needed to be heated.”

“So, I understood from the agent.”

Leon, influenced by Darnell, would use fresh produce. There’s no reason it wouldn’t be successful, and the start-up costs were minimal. She and Myron agreed it was a safe investment, and Judy liked the idea of creating the opportunity for Suzy Q and Leon.

Judy glanced at her watch. The meeting would begin in ten minutes. Her hand shook as she added her signature to Myron’s on both copies of the agreement.

Max rested his hand on her arm. “It’s fine. The worst that can happen is they fail, and you get Rebekah and Darnell to take over.”

Suzy Q brought her and Max a fresh coffee when she and Leon joined them in the booth.

“Thank you,” Judy said. “Good news. We’re going to back you.”

Suzy Q and Leon looked at each other, as if trying to confirm what they were hearing. They smiled and squeezed each other’s hand, but looked like they wanted to jump up and down.

“Thank you, Judy,” she beamed.

“We won’t let you down,” Leon added.

“We know you won’t,” Judy said.

Max added, “I’ve negotiated a three-year lease, including all fixtures and fittings, so the kitchen and restaurant are fully equipped. We’ll need to get some professionals in for a deep clean, but I’ll help you with that.”

“Here’s Max’s report,” Judy said, passing the document across the table.

“Thank you,” Suzy Q said.

“There’s also Myron’s comments on your business plan and a market evaluation he commissioned. You’ll need to complete the application for a liquor licence, but Myron made some phone calls so it won’t be a problem and Dancer will put you in touch with his suppliers.”

“Oh... So much to do,” said Leon.

“Myron’s people will handle the registration of the business and the name. Max’ll coordinate the health inspections and certifications after the cleaning is done. Oh, and here’s our agreement formalizing our arrangement. Myron and I have signed it. You need to read it

through and sign it. One copy is for you, and you can return the other to me after you've signed it."

Suzy Q said, "We know you'll do the right thing."

She signed the agreement without reading it and passed it to Leon, who did likewise.

Judy reached out her hand and shook both. "Partners," she said.

"Guess we better give Rebekah notice," Suzy Q said. "Then we can focus on getting it set up."

Judy smiled as she watched them excitedly head to the kitchen.

Max drove them to the location of the new restaurant.

He stopped at the agent's office to deliver the signed tenancy agreement. The property would be leased by Myron's property company, rather than Leon and Suzy Q directly. Max had ensured they could sublet to allow for unforeseen circumstances.

He returned fifteen minutes later and handed the keys to Leon. "All yours," he said.

They arrived and entered the restaurant. Judy walked around, but allowed Suzy Q and Leon to discuss what needed to be done with Max.

The premises were dirty. The power would be reconnected that week. Entering the premises, the atmosphere overcame Judy. The air was stagnant, musty, and cold. She ignored its condition and imagined what it could be, but it was difficult to shake off the depressing ambiance caused by the darkness and dust.

The furniture was dark, maybe walnut, or perhaps mahogany. The bar along the wall opposite the entrance and separating the dining room from the kitchen was even darker, probably ebony.

The fabric on the benches which lined the walls on either side was ginger or rust, a dark shade of orange. In front of the wall seating, on both sides, were tables and chairs. Each table sat two people and they could be pushed together for larger groups. Along the centre of the room were larger tables, which sat four.

The walls were bare blond brick, which even without the lighting brightened the place despite the dark furniture. The floors were dark brown tiles, easy to clean, but they wouldn't help the acoustics.

She joined Leon and Max in the kitchen. "Oh!"

Max said, "I didn't expect this either."

Leon explained, "A full, top of the range kitchen. I heard they just reheated food from a catering supply company, so I wasn't expecting this. It's wonderful."

Judy stood back and watched the three doing their jobs, as she'd learned to do from Myron.

Vicarious Sex

Ali smiled when she ended the call and cast an eye around the restaurant. She'd spent the last twelve hours racking her brain for an excuse to cancel their date, but fortunately, Judy had an appointment.

She didn't need a reason. Ali could've said she had something to do, which would've been enough for Judy, but Ali was feeling guilty and wanted an excuse ever since she received the call.

"Hi Ali, this is Joanne."

"Oh. Hi, Joanne."

"I have some free time tomorrow and thought I might call in for a late lunch."

"That's great news. Looking forward to spending time with you."

Guilt washed over Ali. Her something to do was *someone* to do.

Ali felt she was planning to cheat on Judy. Since she'd divorced John, she'd been with many women, and other than the beginning of her freedom, she'd never felt she was cheating on Judy.

She loved Judy but sought her sexual gratification elsewhere. It was the way of things. The one thing Judy couldn't provide her.

In reality, it was Rae she was cheating on, but this never occurred to her. Ali didn't give Rae a thought which should have told her everything she needed to know.

Ali was excited, nervous, and distracted all morning.

Jason noticed and asked, "What's up, Ali?"

"I, umm...Have something planned for this afternoon and I want to be discreet."

"You being a naughty girl?"

"I hope so. Maybe you could book a room for tonight in your name. I'll only need it for the afternoon."

"I'll find a use for it tonight." He grinned. "Even though it'll stink of pussy."

Ali chuckled. "Thank you, Jace, just between us."

"I can be discreet when I have to. Anyone I know?"

Ali shrugged. "I guess you'll find out when she comes for lunch. Max's wife, Joanne."

"Can you believe he's been married to her for years and never knew she yodelled in the valley?"

"I'm guessing she knew about..."

"Seems that's why she married him. He didn't know."

"More common than people realize."

"Yes."

Jason went upstairs to organize the room.

When Joanne arrived, Ali's mouth went dry. She looked around the restaurant, feeling all eyes were upon her. She didn't know why she'd been with hundreds of women.

Ali wiped the sweat from her palms on her skirt and went to greet Joanne. They kissed lightly, and Ali took her hand and led her to the chef's table. She pulled out the chair for her guest. "Please," she said. "What would you like?"

"Not sure, something light."

"Seared tuna salad?"

"Perfect."

"Won't be long," Ali said, as she entered the kitchen to place the order.

She returned and sat beside Joanne. "I'm glad you came."

Joanne smiled. "I thought it would be later today when you said that." She winked.

The image Joanne placed in her mind moistened Ali, who returned her wink. "Oh, I plan on saying it a few more times before the afternoon is over."

Ali felt herself relax as she entered familiar territory. She studied Joanne. She wasn't young, but she was attractive. Dark skin, long hair braided straight, eyes dark and alive, which made Ali think of hot black coffee. Her dominant feature was full lips, adorned with pink bubble gum glitter lipstick, which Ali wanted to kiss properly.

Jason arrived with drinks. "Pink Gins, I know you girls have a preference for pink things."

Joanne's smile dazzled Ali, who returned it suggestively. The salad arrived almost as soon as they sipped their drinks.

Ali cut a piece of tuna with her fork and offered it to Joanne, who opened her mouth to receive what Ali was offering. Joanne's dark eyes locked on Ali's and the desire and intention they communicated almost melted her in her seat.

Ali smiled. The intimacy of sharing a single fork was something she'd learned when first became free. She forced herself to focus on the tuna, cut another piece and ate it herself.

And so, lunch was consumed with Ali alternatively feeding Joanne and herself, punctuated with long looks filled with unambiguous desire.

They had nearly finished their meal when Jason said. "Let me borrow the keys, Ali."

Ali reached into her bag and passed Jason the keys without asking why.

Ten minutes later, he returned. "Ready for you."

Ali drained her drink, picked up the keys, and looked at Joanne. "Ready?"

"I've been ready since we met."

Ali led the way upstairs. She could sense Joanne admiring her ass, or she believed she could.

They entered the room, a queen size bed, bright walls, lemon and orange pastel shades with the bedcover, curtains, and matching lamp shade. An inviting pale green sofa and a desk with a leather upholstered chair. The walls were eggshell. It wasn't the first time Ali had slipped into a room for a few hours.

Two pink Gins were on a coffee table, a bottle of pink champagne in an ice bucket on the desk. A single pink rose on the bed. Ali grinned.

Joanne followed Ali in and closed the door. She smiled at the scene.

“Jason,” Ali explained.

Ali passed Joanne a pink gin, and they toasted each other silently. Joanne took Ali’s drink from her and placed it back on the tray. She stepped in, turned Ali’s lips to hers as if she knew how much Ali wanted to wrap her lips around that sparking bubble gum. As they kissed, they gently caressed each other’s bodies. Initially through their clothes, and then under their clothes as hands slipped up skirts.

They needed no words, their bodies communicated desires, but they didn’t rush. They weren’t kids, instead they savoured every moment, every touch, every tease. Ali slowly and purposefully undressed Joanne. Skirt and blouse first, then underwear, which landed on top of the outer layers of clothing. Joanne matched Ali move for move. These were not shy kids; they were mature women who knew why they were there.

Naked they embraced, silky bodies revelling in the other’s touch. Another sip of gin, then Ali guided Joanne to the bed. She picked up the rose and lightly caressed her lover’s body with the bloom.

Joanne’s low moans were almost connected, as if she was purring. Ali poured a little champagne into a glass and drizzled it on Joanne’s nipples, hardened under the soft caress of the rose.

And so, Ali spent the afternoon gently and tenderly making love to Joanne. In Ali’s mind, Joanne was Judy. A link created by the tenuous old connection between Joanne and Judy, which was nothing more than Judy having picked Joanne up in a bar for a one-night stand years earlier.

Joanne needed to head home for her children, and Ali watched her dress. Still naked on the bed, sweaty and covered in Joanne’s scent, Ali wanted to shower before going back to work.

Joanne kissed her goodbye. “Thank you for this afternoon. Never had a partner who was so tender and considerate.”

Ali smiled. “You’re gorgeous.” She winked. “Thank you for cumming.”

“Thrice,” Joanne said, “and it’s me who should thank you.”

Ali smiled.

Joanne’s eyes seemed a little sad. “This was a one-time thing, wasn’t it?”

“Sorry, but yes. I’m with someone.”

“It’s a pity,” Joanne said, disappointment registering on her face as she left the room.

Ali lay on the bed naked, staring at the ceiling.

Fucking Rae’s right, I’m obsessed. How can making love to Judy by proxy be that good? Ali’s desire for Judy had grown, not diminished, as she hoped. She stood, walked to the bathroom, and showered.

After she’d dried herself, she bent down and picked up her clothes from the floor where Joanne had dropped them.

She dressed and sat on the bed staring at nothing, knowing she needed to make love to Judy, but knowing it couldn't happen... not for a long time.

Rae's right about Judy too. She feels the same, but I know she won't act without Myron's blessing. She can't ask for it now, and I can't expect her to. Poor Myron.

She sighed, stood and walked to the desk, where she poured the remains of the champagne into her glass. The taste was a reminder of Joanne, or was it, Judy?

Fuck.

She downed the rest of the champagne and turned to make the bed. *Better not, better let it dry first. God, that girl knew how to cum.*

She picked up the keys and left to attend to her business.

Arriving home that night, Ali poured a glass of wine for herself and Rae. She sat beside her on the sofa and leaned into her as Rae put her arm around her.

"Are you all right, petal?" Rae asked. "Did something happen.?"

"No, nothing happened," Ali answered, still not registering it was Rae she'd cheated on. "Just feeling a little sad tonight."

"Why?"

"I think you may be right, but there is nothing I can do about it."

Burt and Ernie

The interior of Cafe de Flore had a timeless décor that had barely changed in a century. It was dominated by red leather benches with dark brown two-seater tables which could be moved together to accommodate the size of the party, each with a matching low backed wooden chair. High ceilings, columns and unusual lights that looked like bent ceiling fans captured his interest, but Burt preferred to sit outside. He could speculate on which famous historical figures may have sat where he now did.

It was a mild fall day in Paris. Long sleeves but no sweater. Burt glanced at his cold cherry beer, a deep red hue, almost glowing in the sunlight. He looked at Ernie and smiled. “Looking forward to this.”

Ernie said, “Me too. Never thought I’d acquire a taste for fruit beer.”

Burt winked. “I’ve acquired a few tastes on this trip that I couldn’t have imagined I would.”

They clinked glasses, and Burt made a silent toast to the future, but he didn’t know what that would be. Meeting Ernie had changed everything.

Ernie said, “Our last day in Europe.”

“Yes. Not sure I want the trip to end.”

“I booked a table at Brasserie Fouquet’s for tonight.”

Burt smiled. *I really don’t know where I go from here.*

Burt examined his reflection in the mirror. He almost didn’t recognize himself. His wardrobe was completely different since Venice, but it was more than that. He was different, more relaxed, and less serious than he’d been. He felt younger, vibrant and alive. More alive than he’d felt in his entire life. *Guess falling in love will do that to you.*

“Are you ready, Burt? Or do you want to admire yourself in the mirror a little longer? You look very handsome, by the way. I’ve been debating whether to take you to dinner or bed you.”

Burt smiled. “You can do both, but dinner first, as we have a reservation.”

They held hands as they strolled to the restaurant. Burt liked their intimacy. It was something he’d never shared with Carol.

When they were seated, Ernie said, “I booked a tasting menu in honor of the night we met.”

Burt nodded. “Good choice.” He was quiet. He sipped his wine without really tasting it and stared out the window at nothing. They were returning to America in the morning. Their destinations separate cities.

Don’t know when or if I’ll see him again. Why don’t I tell him I love him? Don’t know how I’ll live without him or what life I could have.

They began their deserts, a La Baule: a cube of Baulois chocolate cake, with coffee Panna cotta, Polignac almonds, salted caramel, and chocolate ice cream.

Ernie said, “You’re quiet tonight.”

Burt's stomach tightened as his butterflies took flight. *Still not sure if I'm gay now, or if it is that wonderful man.*

"Sorry, contemplating the future." Burt stared at his glass, then picked it up and sipped his wine. He closed his eyes for a moment, replaced the glass, and continued, "We never talked about what happens next. I mean, is this a holiday romance, or is there something more, a future?"

"Do you want something more?"

"I do." *Very much so.* "But we live in different cities. I've made a commitment to Myron, and there's my kids. I can't... but the truth is I love you, Ernest and I..."

"You love me?"

Burt looked him in the eye. "Yes."

Despite studying him intently, Burt couldn't read the expression on Ernie's face. Shock, surprise, relief, delight. Ernie's expression transformed with each second, but to Burt it was in slow motion.

Ernie stood, stepped beside Burt, and shakily lowered himself to one knee. "Burt Rogers, the truth is I've never felt about anybody the way I feel about you. I love you. Will you marry me?"

Ernest's hand shook as he extracted a small box from his pocket and fumbled to open it, revealing a platinum and diamond ring.

Burt didn't realize he was crying until he felt the tears on his cheeks. "Yes, Ernest, I'd be honored to marry you."

They stood, and Ernie placed the ring on Burt's finger. They kissed. In Venice, Burt had been self-conscious, now he understood. This was Paris in the twenty-first century. They were in a crowded restaurant, but to Burt's knowledge, no one noticed two middle-aged men kissing. Realistically, someone could've been filming them, but if so, Burt was oblivious.

On the way back to their hotel, they walked along the Seine arm in arm, stopping every few minutes to kiss.

Arriving back in their room, Burt winked. "Recall you promised to bed me."

Ernest smiled. "I did and I will." He stepped forward and caressed his fiancé's back as they kissed.

Burt sat in Judy's booth at Frank's Diner, waiting for Myron and Judy to join him for breakfast. He was nervous. Breakfast was a rehearsal for tonight's dinner with his children, where he was going to announce his news.

Suzy Q delivered his coffee.

"Thank you," he said.

"Today's my last day," she replied.

"Max emailed me about your new place. Sorry, it slipped my mind. How's everything looking?"

"Amazing. We open in two weeks. So much to do."

Burt smiled. "I'll call in to see you later in the week, if there's anything you need..."

“Max has been fantastic. Helped us so much.”

“Good to know.”

She stared at him for a moment, seemingly taking in his outfit. A short-sleeved shirt with forest green shoulders, gradually transitioning to gray at the bottom, with fine white pinstripes and charcoal slacks.

“You seem different... Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You know what they say,” Burt said. “Travel changes people.”

“Yes,” agreed Suzy Q, and headed off to attend to another customer who signaled her.

Burt’s butterflies took flight every time the bell told him the door had opened, but he never turned to see if Myron, Judy, and Melanie had arrived. Suddenly they were there, sliding into the booth. Burt offered to move over so Melanie could sit beside him.

“It’s alright Uncle Burt. Papa’s been busy with Zeyde, so I haven’t seen him so much lately,” said Melanie, sitting between her parents.

Judy wore a pale blue dress, which she could’ve been modeling for an upmarket fashion outlet. Myron, as usual, was impeccable in his tailored suit, and Melanie wore her school uniform. Burt smiled. *Some things never change.*

Myron leaned down and kissed the top of his daughter’s head. “Looks like travel agrees with you, Burt,” he observed.

“Opened up a whole new world.”

“You look different, Uncle Burt,” Melanie said.

“I bought some new clothes.”

Melanie nodded. “I like them.”

“Thank you, Mel.”

Suzy Q arrived with coffee for Myron and Judy and orange juice for Mel.

“Mama, maybe I can have a peanut butter milkshake to celebrate Uncle Burt coming home.”

“Better wait until after school,” Judy replied.

Melanie shrugged. “Worth a try.”

“Everyone want their usual?” Suzy Q asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Judy said.

“I’ll have the Welsh Rarebit,” Burt said.

“Okey-dokey,” Suzy Q said as she headed to the kitchen with their orders.

“Place won’t be the same without her,” Judy observed.

“She’s pretty, but I miss her cartoon outfits,” Melanie said.

Burt talked about his trip until they’d finished breakfast, and it was time for Melanie to go to school.

“Papa, could you walk me today?”

“Sure. Won’t be long, Burt.”

“Another coffee while we’re waiting?” Judy asked.

“I’ll let Suzy Q know,” Melanie said.

Myron and Melanie left, and shortly after Suzy Q delivered their coffee.

Judy asked, “Burt, what’s going on?”

“Like I said, new clothes.”

“And that twinkle in your eye? Anything to do with the ring on your finger?”

Burt smiled. *Of course, she noticed.*

“I, umm... met someone. I’m getting married.”

“That’s wonderful. When do we get to meet her?”

“*He* needed to go home, to organize some things, but he’ll be here in about three weeks.”

Burt saw a shocked look on Judy’s face. “You did say *he*?”

“Ernest met him in Venice.”

“But, Burt, you’re not gay.”

“Apparently, I am, at least as far as Ernest is concerned. At first, I was still looking at women’s legs, but I seem to be checking out guys’ butts now.”

Judy grinned. “Happy for you Burt, he obviously agrees with you. You’re radiating. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Didn’t know how people would react.”

“You know Myron won’t care. He’s happy to see you looking so well.”

“He didn’t say anything...”

“He won’t, but I saw the way he looked at you.”

“Yes, I knew you two would be okay. Gonna announce it to my kids tonight. That’s what worries me.”

“They love you. They’ll be glad you’re happy.”

“I hope so.”

Myron returned. “Come on, Burt. We better get to the office so I can complete the handover. We’ll be off in a couple of days.”

Burt drove to the office. Nervously checking the mirrors and continually glancing at Myron from the corner of his eye. He licked his lips in an effort to moisten his dry mouth.

“Myron, there’s umm.... Something I need to tell you.”

“You don’t need to tell me anything, Burt.”

“I umm...”

Myron smiled. “Do you want to keep trying, or do you want me to tell you what I know?”

“Umm... What do you know?”

“You met a man in Europe and you’re planning to marry him. Not my business, but I’m fine with it if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“How?”

“Your expression and demeanor tell me you’re in love. The ring on your finger tells me you’re getting married, and your attire tells me a gay man dressed you. I joined the dots.”

“Judy suggested you’d know.”

“Relax, Burt.”

Burt sat at the table he’d booked at Franco’s for his family announcement. He drained his glass again and signaled the waiter for more water.

He looked around the restaurant and smiled. Before his trip, he’d have been thinking it was looking old and should be updated. Now the dark wooden high-backed chairs, the beige table clothes, nearly the same color as the painted walls, seemed perfectly authentic.

His daughter Audrey was the first to arrive with her roommate, Denise. They’d been roommates in college and still shared an apartment in the city, where they both worked.

“Dad, you look amazing,” Audrey said as she kissed him, and rubbed his long-sleeved dark green, raw cotton shirt between her fingertips.

Denise was looking at his gray trousers and matching gray shoes. “You *do* look great, Mr. Rogers,” she agreed, with the amused smile she always had when she said Mr. Rogers.

Shortly after the eldest and soon to be divorced, Henry arrived. “You look good, Dad. Europe agrees with you.”

Burt glanced at his watch. It would probably be twenty minutes before his youngest, Donny, got there. He was always running late and usually angry about something.

“Donny’s still Donny,” Henry said.

Donny arrived. “New clothes,” was his only greeting to his father. Not that anyone was surprised. He seldom had a good word to say about anyone.

“Let’s order,” said Burt. “I’m starving.”

They ordered and consumed their meals with Burt talking about the cities he’d visited as he had at breakfast. Conversations flowed easily, interrupted by Donny complaining about the price of the food and his steak being chewy. Despite this, Burt noticed his plate was empty.

During dessert, Burt found the courage to reveal the purpose of the dinner. “I have an announcement to make,” he said. He looked at his children and sighed, forcing his butterflies to remain still. “I’ve met someone and I’m getting married again.”

“That’s wonderful Dad,” Audrey said.

“There’s more,” said Burt. “I don’t know how else to say this.” He paused, took a deep breath to give himself courage and continued. “Turns out I’m gay.”

Henry asked, “You’re gay?”

“Yes.”

Audrey said, “You? How?”

Burt shrugged. “The usual way, I suppose. Met a man in Venice...”

Donny, who'd been staring at his father opened mouthed, said, "First I got a dyke sister and now my father's a fucking fag."

Audrey said, "Donny!"

Burt's head spun from Donny to his daughter. "Aud?"

"Yes, Dad. I'm a lesbian."

Burt stared at her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd understand. Mom said it was best I didn't."

"Your mother knew? Why wouldn't I understand?"

"I don't know... You never talk about stuff like that."

He shook his head. "What's there to talk about?"

"I don't know, gay people."

"Half the people I work with are gay. Maxy, Ali who runs Dancer's, Judy's bisexual or was until she married Myron."

"Told you," Denise said to Audrey.

Burt looked at Denise. "I take it you two... Why are you calling me Mr. fucking Rogers, which you can barely do with a straight face? It's Dad to you."

Denise smiled, and again said to Audrey, "Told you."

"I can't believe you never told me," Burt said. "What must you think of me?"

"I love you, Dad. I was trying to protect you."

"Trying to protect me from what? I can't believe this. Maxy had been married to a lesbian for half his life, feeling guilty for being gay. Turned out that's why she married him. He's gonna have a field day with this. Roommates. I thought that nonsense stopped in the seventies or something."

"Sorry, Dad."

Henry said, "Well I'm fine with it, Dad. Never seen you so alive. What's his name?"

"Ernest."

"When do we get to meet this amazing man of yours?" Audrey asked.

"In about three weeks. He has some things to sort out and then he'll move in."

"Your new roommate." Denise winked.

"Husband, or will be. He proposed, and I accepted."

"That's wonderful, Dad," Audrey said.

"We could make it a double wedding," he joked. "What do you say, Denise? You gonna make an honest woman of my girl?"

"I've asked...."

Audrey looked at her father, looked at her girlfriend and then back at Burt. "And I'm saying yes to both of you."

Denise grabbed her and kissed her.

Burt grinned. "I'll talk to Judy. We'll do it in the secret garden, but we'll have to wait until... or not, I'll ask Myron. Maybe Art would like to attend one more, well, two more weddings in the garden before..."

Donny stood. A pissed off expression on his face. "This family is so fucked up! I want no part of it. And you!" he said to his father, "Burt and fucking Ernie, are you kidding me?" He turned and stormed out.

Burt shook his head at the retreating figure of his son.

Henry reached out and placed his hand on his father's arm. "Don't worry Dad, he'll come round."

"Yes," Burt agreed. "I wish we didn't always have to go through the theatrics first."

Denise said, "Well, Mr... Dad, are you going to show us your ring?"

Black Eight

Mouse stood hidden in the shadows of the alcove where the fire hose was housed, as he'd done every day for more than two weeks. A light coating of oil brushed on the numbers made it easy to identify the correct numbers. He'd watched the women enter the code many times as he tried to discern the order. So far, none had worked. He tried daily, but only once, in case there was some security protocol after repeated incorrect attempts.

He supposed it would be safe to try a second attempt, but didn't want to have to start again if they changed the code. So, he hid and patiently watched them every day, trying to note the code they pushed to open the door. There was no hurry, so he didn't become frustrated or impatient.

Wearing disposable surgical gloves, he entered his latest selection and heard the lock open. Mouse smiled. He was elated. He pumped his fist and mouthed, "Yes." Mouse was still smiling when he stepped into their home.

There was a lot of stuff in the apartment, none of which concerned Mouse, who only cared about three things. Where he'd encounter Seven, where he'd encounter Eight, and was it possible to burn the evidence here, or should he find somewhere else?

He formulated a plan. The front door opened inwards, but being in the center of the wall, it didn't open against a side wall. A door stop at ninety degrees meant he could wait behind the door and come at Seven from behind when she closed it.

The blade at her throat would ensure she cooperated. He'd direct her into the bedroom, bend her over the bed, and take her there. When he'd finished with her, he'd pull her head back, by her hair, look into her eyes and watch the life fade from them as her blood drained from her body to be soaked up by the bed.

He'd leave her there. *Maybe I could do her again.* He'd been curious about how it would feel to do a woman without blood, since he'd been tempted to do that woman who'd followed him into the alley after he'd drained her life.

His plan was to wait behind the entry door again when Eight arrived home. After she closed the door, he'd put the blade on her throat and take her to the white sofa and do her there. *What will the sofa look like? Red with her life, or pink?*

Will I be tempted to do her lifeless body if I do Seven, and it's good?

Few people moved around the floor, and Eight was always the last one in the building to come home at night. If he was quiet, no one would guess he was there. This was different. He wouldn't have to quickly steal away. Mouse could take his time, but doing things differently created risk and encountering Seven and Eight within hours of each other in the same location was risk enough.

He'd waited too long for Seven and was rushing Eight. This would be the first time he'd done two and the first time he'd done them in their home. He didn't want to rush Eight, but if he didn't, he'd lose her after Seven was finished with. It had to be this way.

He'd had lots of time to explore the building and he'd found access to the roof. The door opened easily, and he'd put duct tape over the catch to stop it from self-locking. He watched and waited. No one came there.

When he finished, he'd sneak upstairs and burn the outer layers of clothing. There was a place hidden from adjoining buildings, between two ventilations ducts which would be safe. No one would notice the short, intense fire on the roof, even at night. He could then go

home and dispose of his second gloves, mask and shoe covers on the way, sliding the blade into the river as usual.

As it was, he'd been in the apartment longer than he should've. Nevertheless, he slipped into the bathroom and inhaled the scent from their previous day's panties in the laundry basket. He wanted to know if he could recognize their individual scent. He was enjoying the experience. Other than his mother's scent a very long time ago, he hadn't had time to appreciate the scent of his encounters.

Either of them, probably Seven, could come home unexpectedly. In his excitement, he was becoming careless, and he didn't like it. *It's stupid. I should get out of their apartment.*

He needed more time to get a proper sense of Eight. Seven could wait a little longer. He'd follow Eight until he had the right sense of her. Hanging around the building placed him at risk.

The next morning, he waited outside the building and followed Eight during her morning routine to work at the restaurant. She wouldn't know he was following her; they never did. No one ever saw Mouse, except that woman who'd followed him into the alley.

He sat in O'Rourke's Park, reading his book and watching the restaurant entrance for any sign of Eight.

After lunch, he followed her to People's Park; she was walking quickly and purposefully, not like Seven, who never seemed to have a purpose or a routine. At the entrance to the park, Eight met a blonde woman. He'd seen her before coming and going from the restaurant.

Oh, that's why Seven waits in the other park. She's spying on Eight. Is this Eight's girlfriend? Is she cheating? Maybe the last thing I tell Seven is her girlfriend won't be cheating anymore.

Mouse followed the two women. They held hands as they walked through the park, sometimes stopping to kiss. *I don't like her cheating.* He believed he didn't like Eight cheating on Seven, but what he was feeling was that Eight was cheating on him.

He watched them disappear into a circle of trees. He didn't follow them in, instead he made his way to a nearby clump of bushes, slipped into the middle where he could see the entrance to the circle of trees without being seen himself, and waited.

The woman Eight met seemed familiar. He recalled Seven had met her one day while waiting in the park opposite the restaurant. She hadn't looked pleased to see Seven. *Rivals, that explains why.*

An hour and a half later, the women exited the circle of trees. Mouse followed them back to the park entrance, where they kissed again. Eight flagged a taxi, and the blonde woman walked away.

Mouse, curious, returned to the circle of trees and entered.

Never knew this was here. He stared at the roses and followed the circular path that led to another, and another. *So much color. Never seen anything like it.* At the center was a garden surrounded by benches with a single old rose in the middle. *A grandmother rose.*

Mouse sat on a bench. He thought of staying there for a while. He shivered. *Doesn't feel right. Something about this place.*

He left and made his way back to Eight's restaurant.

Mouse stayed on the bench in O'Rourke's Park, reading his book until it was too dark. He ate the sandwich he'd brought with him for dinner. Nobody seemed to find it strange that a man sat alone in the park at night. Sometimes, a man or boy would stare at him for a moment, but none approached.

Finally, Eight finished work and walked home. It wasn't far from the restaurant to the apartment. *Wonder which scent is hers.*

After escorting her home unseen, he returned to his own place.

Mouse was getting a feel for Eight. In doing so, he neglected Seven. Eight's days were the same. Working, meeting the blonde woman she had on the side, in the park, working again, then home to Seven.

Wonder if the blonde woman will choose to be encountered.

On the third day, he tentatively ventured into the circle of trees, ten minutes after Eight and her girlfriend had entered. He was curious.

Confident he wouldn't be noticed and if he was, it wouldn't matter. A guy enjoying the roses. He stopped several times, pretending to admire the roses, occasionally inhaling a bloom's scent. *In case someone is watching.*

He reached the inner circle. He could see them on the bench. Kissing. Hands inside each other's skirts. His breathing quickened and his penis hardened. He watched for about thirty minutes before discreetly leaving the circle of trees and returning to hide in the nearby clump of bushes.

His mind was in turmoil. *Could I encounter Seven and Eight together? Force them to have sex with me watching. No, I couldn't control them that way. Not safe.*

The fourth day, he didn't follow. Instead, after both women had departed their apartment, he slipped in and stole a pair of panties from the laundry hamper in the bathroom. He didn't know whose they were.

Mouse went home, where he removed the panties from his pocket. He stripped and climbed into mother's bed. He held the panties to his nose so he could enjoy the scent while he masturbated.

When he was done, he made his mother's bed and laid the panties on his own pillow. He'd wear them the next day.

On the fifth day, he followed them into the circle of trees again. This time, while he watched them, kissing and touching each other with hands up skirts, he quietly masturbated. Ejaculating into the panties he'd stolen from the apartment and worn for the occasion. He didn't know if he was wearing Seven or Eight's panties, but he'd liked the scent when he slept with them on his pillow the previous night.

That day, instead of returning to O'Rourke's Park immediately, he followed Eight's blonde girlfriend. He had time. She entered Frank's Diner. He didn't know why, but he wanted to know where she went.

He knew he should have encountered Seven and Eight by now, but he was becoming fixated on watching Eight and her secret girlfriend. His life now focused on following Eight

to the park, watching them make out while he jerked off into the same pair of stolen panties he wore every day. He followed the girlfriend to the other diner.

Then he'd go back to the park opposite Dancer's Bistro and wait for Eight to finish work so he could follow her home.

Flash Jack stared at the picture, a grainy screenshot of the man he'd give his left testicle to catch. *Where are you, you evil little bastard?*

He stood and headed to the rec room for a coffee. Flash Jack stopped and stared at Daphne's desk, which remained unoccupied, a reminder of one of theirs who'd been taken. He hadn't replaced her.

"I'll get him for you, Daph, even if it's the last thing I do," he whispered.

Just Judy

Myron, Art, and Ruth were visiting Jerusalem. Judy and Melanie stayed home. Myron called them every night, but she missed him. They hadn't been apart since they became a couple.

Judy sat in her booth at Frank's Diner, enjoying her usual breakfast of scrambled eggs, with Melanie, who was talking about something, but Judy wasn't listening. She was staring out the window, thinking about Ali. *Am I being selfish?*

Melanie said, "Mama, you're *not* listening."

Judy shook her head and focused on her daughter. "Sorry Mel, I was thinking about something."

Melanie rolled her eyes. "Your latest feature?"

Judy bit her tongue. *Sometimes she's too direct.* "No."

"Then it's either Papa or Aunt Ali."

Judy studied her, then grinned. "You know, young lady, there's an expression about being too clever for your own good."

Melanie gave her *that* look and smiled sweetly. "Are you saying I'm clever, Mama?"

By now, Judy knew better than to allow herself to be drawn in to one of Melanie's circular conversations. "I was thinking about Ali."

"That's what I was talking about. Maybe you were um... sub... umm, what's that word?"

"Subconsciously?"

Melanie smiled. "Subconsciously listening."

"Where do you get this stuff?"

"Online, of course."

Judy rolled her eyes. "Maybe I should ask Papa to get me an app or something so I can see what you're doing online."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

What's she looking at online? "Why not?"

"Papa won't agree. He says raise me right and trust me to make my own decisions."

"Really?" Judy asked. "When did he say that?"

"I don't know. A while ago. Don't *you* remember?" Melanie asked. "He was talking to you. I was listening."

Judy smiled. "I always remember what Papa tells me."

"Me too."

"Anyway, what are you saying?"

"I was saying I miss Aunt Ali. Wouldn't it be a good idea if Aunt Ali stayed with us while Papa's away?"

It certainly would. If only I'd talked to Myron before Art got sick. Don't know why I didn't do it years ago? Mel, that's why, but she's been settled for a while. Why do I keep making excuses? Sometimes, I wonder what's wrong with me.

Melanie rolled her eyes. "Mama?"

Judy shook her head. "Sorry Mel. That's a good idea, but Ali needs to stay with Rae."

"I don't like Rae much."

Neither do I! "That's not a kind thing to say, Mel."

"I know, if I can't say something nice about somebody, I shouldn't say anything."

Judy smiled. "That's right."

"That's what Ms. Parkson told us in class. I think Ms. Parkson is pretty, don't you Mama?"

Hadn't thought about it, but she is. "Yes, darling I do."

"I'll tell her you think she's pretty."

Judy shook her head and smiled. She knew she'd been set up.

"I like Rae's red hair. That's something good to say about her."

"Yes, darling it is." *Wonder if her hair is red everywhere. Ali never said.*

Melanie glanced at her watch and sighed loudly. "Time for school."

"Poor girl, you have such a hard life."

"No, Mama, I have an easy life." She smiled.

Judy looked up when the bell sounded to see Burt enter. He looked around, smiled, and made his way to Judy, reaching the booth as Melanie was leaving for school.

"Hello, Uncle Burt," she said.

"Hello, princess." He bent and kissed the top of her head.

"Time for school," Melanie said. "I have a hard life!"

Burt shook his head and watched her leave.

He hugged Judy, who stood to greet him. "A hard life?"

"She's having a dig at me," Judy explained. "Too clever by half, sometimes."

Burt grinned. "Daughters have their challenges."

"Time for coffee?"

"Sure."

Judy signaled Bea, the new breakfast waitress. Bea was young, slim with dark brown, but not quite black hair, and eyes which almost matched. Her lightly tanned skin suggested she was of Latin descent, but she'd been educated in America, and her only accent was a slight southern drawl.

Her slim, youthful body looked good in the Frank's uniform. *What's wrong with me? Is it Ali, or have I been married to a man too long?*

"What can I get you guys?" Bea asked.

“Coffee for me, house special,” Burt said.

“Same,” confirmed Judy, admiring the far too young teenage Bea.

She studied Burt, a two-tone gray shirt, dark gray trousers, and gray shoes. The style wasn't so different from what he used to wear, but the ensemble made him look very different. She smiled. “What were you saying about daughters?”

“Turns out my Audrey is gay.”

“I assumed she was.”

“Denise is her partner, not her flatmate.”

Judy nodded.

“You're not surprised.”

Judy shrugged. “Gaydar.”

“Ernie has Gaydar. Says he can always tell.”

“Why didn't she tell you?” Judy asked.

“Her mother told her it was better not to.”

“Really?”

“I'm fine with it, and would've been before I met Ernie. I don't have any issues.”

Judy smiled. “I know. Burt. How long have you worked with Max?”

“Long time now.”

“I met his wife, by the way.”

“Oh, so did...”

“Between us, I met her many years ago, in a bar.”

Burt winked. “I take it no one said anything to Max. He would've told me.”

“No. But Ali picked up on it in a heartbeat.”

“Anyway, my dinner with the kids turned out to be a mutual coming out party.”

“How did they take it?”

“Henry and Audrey were fine. Donny was angry, of course, but he's always angry. He'll come round,” Burt said. “After everything settles down, thinking about a double wedding.”

“That'll be wonderful, Burt.”

Bea delivered their coffees. Quietly, and without fuss, beyond a smile. She didn't have Suzy Q's personality, but Judy admired the view as she walked away.

Burt noticed, and grinned, which she ignored and asked, “How'd Max take the news?”

Burt smiled. “He offered to join me and Ernie for a threesome.”

Judy laughed. “You planning on taking up his offer?”

“No. Thing is, I don't identify as gay. I mean, I must be, but it never occurred to me to sleep with a man other than Ernie. Not that it occurred to me to sleep with Ernie. I mean, before I did it. Although to be honest, I admit I'm, err... noticing guys more now.”

“You don’t need to label yourself, Burt. Be happy and don’t worry about what you are.”

“Yeah. I guess I’m technically bisexual.”

“Being bisexual has its advantages.” Her head filled with images of Ali. “And its challenges.”

Burt looked like he wanted to say something.

“It’s all right Burt, we’re friends, say what’s on your mind.”

“Have you always been bisexual?”

“No. I was a lesbian. I was in my twenties the first time I was with a man. Trying to make myself heterosexual, having sworn off women. Discovered I was bisexual. No regrets. I’m comfortable with who I am. Although that’s not how I see myself. More gender irrelevant.”

“That’s how I feel about Ernie. His gender is irrelevant.”

Judy smiled. “It really is.”

Burt glanced at his watch. “We’d better get going.”

Burt pulled up outside Suzy Q’s. A large blue, yellow and red Neon sign hung in the window. The restaurant name with a cameo of an Asian girl. *That’ll certainly attract attention when it’s turned on at night.*

He held the door open, and Judy entered. It was clean, ready to open in a few days. She took in the décor, the furniture, bar and facilities were the same, but looked very different.

Burt made his way to the kitchen, leaving Judy in the restaurant.

They had adorned the walls with fans, paper lanterns, knots, umbrellas, masks from three continents, painted skulls, sombreros, paintings, and baskets. A blend of Chinese, Hispanic and African American cultures, which in theory shouldn’t work together, but did. They represented a blend of Suzy Q’s and Leon’s cultures but created an environment as unique and full of character as Suzy Q.

Appearing, seemingly from nowhere, Suzy Q was beside Judy, asking, “Do you like it?”

“Yes, I do, very much. You’ve given the place a unique character.”

“Of course, like me.”

Judy grinned. “Are you ready to open?”

“Yes, two waitresses, a barman, two cooks to help Leon and a kitchen hand. Everyone working a double shift to start. Lunch and Dinner with a break between.”

“Sounds like you’re well organized.”

“Yes, Leon and Darnell designed the menu. Nothing fancy. Good quality produce and everything fresh.”

“May I see the menu?”

“Sure, you can sit over there.” Suzy Q indicated a table with a reserved sign on it. “That’s your table for our opening. I’ve invited all the local business owners as our guests. We open to the public the following day, already booked out. Lots of company people too,

thanks to your announcement in the newsletter. It's a pity Myron can't come, but Rebekah and Darnell will be here."

"I might see if Ali can take the night off. She can come with me and Mel instead of Myron."

Suzy Q passed Judy a menu. "I'll make you a coffee and Rebekah has agreed to supply Kansas style cheesecake, and Darnell's triple chocolate cheesecake, too."

Judy smiled. "Thank you."

The menu was longer than she'd expected. It was in the usual starter, mains, sides and desserts format, and four colors were used. Studying the menu, she slowly worked it out.

Yellow was Chinese, with dishes such as sang choy bow, cumin lamb, honey chicken, deep fried ice cream.

Green was Mexican, a variety of tacos, chicken, beef and vegetable, burritos, quesadillas, and churros with dark chocolate sauce.

Blue was African American, crumbed catfish, covered chicken with cornbread, collard greens and okra, seafood gumbo, and a hummingbird coffee cake.

Red was American, steaks, roasts and burgers, broccoli and blue cheese soup and Smores.

Suzy Q delivered a coffee—her usual flat white made with the John Farrington Blend, which was the house blend—to Judy, who commented. "Interesting menu."

"It is. It'll need to be refined. We have a diverse population out here, and we're trying to cater for everyone. Probably why the previous owners went broke. It'll be a challenge at first, but we'll see what's popular." She was obviously nervous.

Judy nodded. "Makes sense."

"There are few other restaurants out here. Only chains. We'll make it all good and pay attention to what's popular and on what night. Over time, we'll refine and reduce our main menu. If a particular night is popular with certain types of people, we could make, say Thursday, African American night, or something."

"Good idea."

"After six months or so, it should be easy."

"You've given it a lot of thought," Judy observed.

"Not really. I listened to Rebekah," Suzy Q said as she went to answer the ringing phone.

When they'd finished, Judy had Burt drop her at Dancer's Bistro.

Judy entered through The Shipyard. It was already busy, a humming from the background noise of half a dozen conversations between the mostly male patrons. Joe Jackson's *Real Men*, plying on the duke box. Muted aromas from lunchtime specials being served in the bistro tantalized her taste buds.

"Hello Judy," Dancer greeted as she sat at the bar.

"Hi Dancer, you keeping well?"

“Yeah, different than it used to be, but busy.” Two guys came out of the restroom together and took their seats at a table. “They’ve been in there over thirty minutes. Can’t imagine what they’ve been doing.”

Judy winked. “I’m sure you can.”

“I don’t want to.” He placed two Pink Gins in front of Judy. “Don’t imagine you’ll be by yourself long. She’ll be here as soon as she notices you.”

Judy sipped her drink as Dancer went to attend to a new customer who came in. He still wore jeans and a dark blue polo shirt, as he had before they refurbished the bar. *Don’t think he’ll ever change.* She smiled.

As Judy took her second sip, Ali slid onto the stool beside her. “Hello Darling, just thinking about you.”

Judy grinned. “You’re always thinking about me.”

“What can I say? Rae’s right, I’m obsessed.”

“You knew that long before you met Rae.”

“She’s right about you, too. You’re equally obsessed.”

Judy sipped her drink again, and Ali mimicked her.

“Realized today, you never told me if Rae has a red bush, too.”

“You thinking about taking her up on her offer?”

“No. Curious.”

“Why?”

“Talking about her with Mel this morning.”

“You were discussing my girlfriend’s vagina with your daughter?”

“Of course not. Mel said she likes Rae’s red hair, and that got me curious.”

“You want the short answer or the real answer?”

Judy shrugged and raised an eyebrow.

“When the sun streams in the window, it glows like fire.”

“Really? Sounds beautiful.”

“It is. Change your mind now?”

“Fire burns. If I make love to you, it will be directly, not by proxy, with someone you’ve been with.”

Judy noticed Ali’s face almost turn crimson, as Ali looked away.

What’s that about? Judy decided not to pursue it.

“Been at Suzy Q’s all morning with Burt.”

“How’s it looking?”

“Different, unique, interesting.”

“Like Suzy Q.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Say it.”

“She has a cute little ass, you know.”

Judy winked. “Still make you want to eat Chinese?”

“Yes... but it wouldn't be the first time.”

“So you told me.”

Ali shrugged. “You wanna eat...” *me*.

“Something light and tasty.”

That's what I had in mind. “I'll get the boys to make you a salmon salad.” Ali said. She stood and drained her glass. “Come through when you've finished your drink.”

“Before I forget. Can you take the night off and come to Suzy Q's opening with me and Mel tomorrow?”

“Stand in for Myron? Love to.” She winked. “Besides, I've wanted to see Suzy Q's opening for years.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “You're getting worse. Last time you were like this, you spiraled into slutting around the city...”

“No, darling. Toying with you. It's only Rae,” she lied.

After lunch, they left Dancer's and walked to People's Park, holding hands. Neither noticed the mousy little man keeping pace behind them.

Judy said, “Mel misses you. Suggested you come stay with us while Myron is away?”

“Okay, I will.”

“What about Rae?”

“Fuck Rae.”

“You could give her up that easily.”

Ali shrugged. “I like Rae, but I'm only with her because I can't be with you.”

“Problem is Rae knows it.”

“I never lied to her. That's why she hates you.”

“I'd hate me too.”

Ali nodded, but remained silent until they sat on their bench beside the ancient rose.

“I think I should come and stay with you. Myron will understand and accept it. I'm sure of it.”

Judy stared at the rose, or nothing. “I'm sure you're right. But I wouldn't feel right taking advantage of him being away with his dying father to be with you. Can you understand that?”

“Yes. If I thought about it, I wouldn't feel right either.”

“Been thinking a lot since Rae gave me that, err... pep talk. Everything she said is true. I'm equally obsessed with you. What I feel goes far beyond love, if there's such a thing.”

Sometimes I don't know where I end, and you start, emotionally. Don't even know how to describe it... It's almost like we're the same person."

"You don't need to describe it, because I feel the same."

"I've been trying to understand why we've never, umm... consummated our relationship. At first it was easy because of John. I made that commitment to Myron to ease my conscience and because I wanted to spend time with you openly without sneaking around."

Ali hugged her. "We both knew it was the right thing to do."

"After your divorce, I should've talked to Myron sooner, given you what we both wanted. I didn't like you slutting around."

"I gave you every reason to act on your desire."

"I wanted to, but we both sensed Myron was going to suggest it," Judy said. "I was sure of it and wanted it to be his idea. Thought that would make things easier somehow."

"But then Mel came into your lives, and everything changed."

"Yes, it did, and I don't regret that."

"I didn't mean that."

"After Mel settled down, I should've talked to Myron, but I didn't. I can't tell you why, because I don't know."

"You don't like change, and I was trying to be understanding of the Mel situation, so I backed off. Guess it seemed less urgent."

"I suppose. Then you and Rae moved in together."

"That was always temporary. I was lonely at night, and tired of picking up girls in bars after the diner closed."

"I don't know why I kept making excuses."

"And now we've missed another window."

"Yes, my fault entirely. I love you darling and I want us to be together. I'm sure Myron will be okay with the arrangement, and I think Mel will be, too," Judy said. "She really likes you."

"It wouldn't be right to raise it now with Art dying."

"I know I'm selfish by nature, but I'm not insensitive."

"We have to wait a little longer. I understand that. Problem is when Art passes, God rest his soul, Myron will be grieving."

"Yes. It should have happened already. My fault."

"I think you're right, but until then, I remain in limbo."

"I understand how frustrating it is for you. I can't without Myron's blessing. I gave him my promise, and I won't break it without him releasing me from it."

"We both know the truth..." Ali said.

"You're right. I want you so much I have occasionally gotten carried away. He knows I've broken my promise, but never intentionally. It's one thing to let my obsession get the better of me, but intentionally making love to you is something different."

“I need to do something about Rae. Either commit or walk away.”

Judy said, “I understand. We’re not being fair to Rae. I understand why she feels threatened by me.”

“Because I’d leave her in an instant to be with you, but you wouldn’t leave Myron to be with me.”

“There’s a difference.”

“You love Myron, and I don’t love Rae. I know.”

“We love Myron.”

“Yes.”

“Do what you need to do. The future will take care of itself.”

“You’re right, it will. Thinking I might talk to John.”

“Why?”

“He’s impartial. Can give me perspective.”

Judy nodded. They stood and made their way to the park entrance. Neither noticed Mouse, who scampered out of the circle of bushes behind them.

Reaching the road, they kissed and went their separate ways.

The Promised Land

Myron looked out from his balcony to the promised land. He thought of his wife and wondered if the promised land for Judy was between Alison's legs. He smiled. It was a small piece of the world he'd like to explore with his wife.

He turned his attention from the small piece of land in his mind to the old land spreading beneath his balcony of the King David Hotel. It overlooked Jerusalem's ancient city walls, minarets, and domes.

His mother had chosen the hotel, but he hadn't asked why. It'd been the site of a major terrorist attack by the Israeli terrorist group, Irgun Zvai Le'umi against the British rule of Palestine in nineteen forty-six, but he knew little else about it.

Myron missed his wife and daughter. In his heart, he'd all but forgotten she was adopted. His father was in the last weeks of his life, and he already missed him. The thought of a Sabbath without him was not something Myron could process. The number of sabbaths in his life he'd spent without his father could be counted on one hand, with fingers to spare.

He heard the Muslim call to Dhuhur prayer and glanced at his watch. It would soon be time to meet his parents for lunch, but his mind was filled with images of Alison, and he didn't know why. He supposed Alison should be his second wife by now, but Judy hadn't pushed it. Now, life was stable, and Judy didn't think she'd lose Alison. Everything had settled into a rhythm. He knew his wife didn't like change, and he should've taken charge, but he didn't. *Why not?*

He surveyed the room, sofa and coffee table, double bed. Old but not classical. Dark wooden furniture with tan cushions on the sofa, a beige bedspread, and pale blue curtains. Parquetry floor, with what Myron assumed was a dark Persian rug under the coffee table. *Pleasant enough, but not special.*

He glanced at his watch. *Time to go.*

In the elevator, his thoughts drifted to George, who'd been outside Frank's Diner having a cigarette, a week earlier when Myron talked with him.

"Good morning, George."

"Hello, sir."

He smiled. George had always called him sir. "I'll be going away for a few weeks. I was hoping you could keep an eye on my family and make sure they're safe."

George grinned. "Of course, sir," he agreed, more than happy for an excuse to watch over the woman he loved. Not that he needed one.

"Thank you. I know I can trust you to keep them safe."

Myron smiled as the elevator reached the ground floor. He supposed that most wouldn't trust a man who'd spent the majority of his life in jail, but he knew George loved Judy and would protect her with his life, not that he believed Judy needed protection.

He made his way to The Grill Room. A classic New York style steakhouse restaurant, in the heart of the King David Hotel, which was the original concept when the hotel opened in the late nineteen-twenties.

The meat in the restaurant was of the highest quality from the local Holstein breed and aged for at least thirty days. Dark wood furniture, with beige inlay on seats and backs of the chairs. White crockery with gold trim adorned the table.

Myron felt the room was a little dark, perhaps trying too hard to present a touch of elegance, and as such it didn't quite get there. He'd not be suggesting any of the decor ideas to Darnell and Rebekah.

Myron and his parents each ordered English cut slow roasted entrecôte beef. He knew they wouldn't eat here again. He could read his mother's face.

Ruth said, "Bloomfield Garden is nearby. I'm thinking you could have a morning run there, Myron, and then join us in our suite for breakfast." She'd booked a deluxe suite for herself and Art.

He nodded. "Sounds good, Mama."

"I have it all planned," Ruth continued. "After breakfast, we'll visit one place of interest. A slow visit so we can take it all in. Then we'll find somewhere to have a late lunch. Back to our hotel for a rest. If we get hungry later, we'll order something light from room service."

Art frowned. "Only one place per day, that doesn't seem like very much..."

Ruth glanced at her son, then focused on her husband. "You listen to me, Aryeh Myerson," she began with another glance at Myron, who nodded agreement. "I've given you more than enough time to say goodbye to your buildings. They're Myron's now and not your concern. Do you think I can't see you're becoming more easily tired, and you're eating less?"

Art opened his mouth, presumably to argue, but a look and a hand signal from Ruth told him to remain silent.

"I've let you do things your way your whole life, and now it's time for you to do things my way. I have your list of what you want to see, and we'll visit one place each day, slowly and appreciate it, and after a relaxing lunch, we'll rest. If I think you're looking tired, we'll rest. Do you understand me? Both of you?"

"Yes Mama," Myron said.

"But..." Art began.

"But nothing," Ruth said. "I need you to say you understand."

"I understand..."

"That's all I want to hear from you at this minute. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need the bathroom."

They both knew Ruth had gone to cry, but neither mentioned it.

Myron said, "She's right Papa, you're looking more tired."

"I know, son. Thought I was hiding it, but I guess not."

Myron grinned. "She's lived with you most of your life. Knows you better than you know yourself."

Art nodded. "Yes, she sees everything, but usually keeps her own council, unless I raise something."

"Or don't raise something," Myron grinned.

"I didn't know how lucky I was when my parents arranged our marriage," Art conceded. "It's unlikely I could've found a woman half as good as your Mama, by myself."

“Have you told her?”

“No, I...”

“Well, you have a little time left, so make sure you do,” Myron said. “We’ve both been lucky in finding the right wife. So let her do things her way and be agreeable. Okay?”

Art stared at his son and nodded slowly. “So, I’m supposed to spend my last weeks doing what my wife and son tell me?”

“Yes, Papa, you are.”

Art nodded. “I can do that.”

Sitting on the toilet, Ruth wiped her eyes. She thought about her daughter-in-law. *Judy understands*. She smiled despite her tears.

Ruth wanted to spend time with her husband before he passed, and in his waning days, she wanted his full attention, with no buildings or business to distract him. Art was deteriorating fast now, despite his attempts to hide it from her.

She needed her son with her, too. She’d need his support if Art became stubborn, and his strength if Art’s physical condition deteriorated.

She’d said nothing to Judy, but Judy understood. She could see it in her eyes. Her daughter-in-law was very perceptive and a better match for her son than Ruth had found him.

Ruth dabbed her eyes, and studied herself in the mirror to make sure they weren’t too red, then returned to their table. Neither said anything to her. She smiled. “So, we’re in agreement.”

Her men nodded.

“We’ll spend Sabbath in our suite. The hotel has a Sabbath menu, and we’ll order room service. If you men want to talk about our business, that’s when you can do it.” She looked at her husband. “If I think you’re looking too tired, I’ll send you for a rest, and you won’t argue.”

“I’ll listen to you.”

“Today, we’ll head to Jaffa Gate and the Tower of David, which is a museum. We’ll look around the museum and walk around the streets nearby until you look tired. Then we’ll come back for a rest and order dinner in, if we’re hungry.”

“Okay, Mama.”

“It’s about two thousand years old, so it warrants at least an afternoon of our time. I have the entire trip planned, and I was going to go through it with you both now, but I won’t. No reason to get ahead of ourselves. We’ll discuss what we’re going to do each day over breakfast.”

If either of the men had something to say, the arrival of the meals pushed it out of their minds.

“This looks great,” Ruth said, looking at the food now in front of them on the table. She inhaled deeply. “Smells wonderful, but we’re not going to eat like this every day. I want to find small restaurants in neighbourhoods and try authentic food.”

Myron said, “I agree Mama. Not much of interest here.”

Ruth smiled. Her son was opening his third restaurant in a couple of days, and she knew he'd be looking for ideas.

Rae's Ultimatum

Rae arrived home from her lawyer's office. She unwrapped the Reuben sandwich she'd bought for lunch, made herself a coffee, and took them to the dining table.

She extracted a large, buff envelope from her bag, untied the pink bow that held it closed, and removed two agreements to read through over lunch.

Glancing at the documents, both of which had a yellow post-it note on the front, Rae chose the one identified as 'single'. She examined the agreement to purchase an antique business, including the shop front and attached residence. *No surprises.*

She finished her sandwich, drank some coffee, and picked up the other document, which the note indicated was 'joint'.

She read the second document through. It was almost identical, except this one included she and Ali as joint purchasers. Rae sighed, placed it beside the first and took her dirty plate and cup to the kitchen.

Not sure if I want her to agree anymore. Whatever. I've got to get out of here before I do something stupid to Judy. Fucking bitch has me screwed up.

She sighed again. *Shower, I think.*

Washed, Rae lay on her bed, naked, opened her legs, closed her eyes and watched the fantasy that consumed her play out in her mind.

Today, she was particularly rough with Judy. She smiled as her orgasm exploded through her fingers, but her satisfaction didn't last long.

She stared at the ceiling. *What's wrong with me?*

Rae never went to Dancer's Bistro or O'Rourke's Park now. She was scared of running into Judy. She couldn't trust herself not to act on her fantasy.

Ali headed home. She was drained. The emotion of her talk with Judy had taken its toll. From the corner of her eye, she'd thought she glimpsed a man leaving O'Rourke's Park, but when she turned her head, no one was there. *I'm so tired.*

After arriving home, she almost collapsed onto the sofa beside Rae.

"Hello to *you* too," Rae said.

Ali recognized the tone. *Fuck! Should've said hello.*

"Sorry, feeling a little shattered today. Hello Rae."

"Why? Did you two finally fuck? You've realised she's *not* the goddess you imagined her to be?"

Fuck! Not this shit, again. "Don't do this tonight, Rae. I'm not up to it. Can't you give me a break?"

"Do you think we should have a break? Is that what you're suggesting?"

For fuck's sake. "If you keep this nonsense up every other day, I'll have to. It's tedious. But, no, that's not what I'm saying." *Or am I?*

"Neither of you are going to do anything about this obsession of yours."

“We’ve talked about it. We think you’re right. We’re both obsessed and need to do something to break it, but now isn’t the time.”

“Why not?”

I don’t want to have this conversation again. “Reasons.”

“There are always *fucking* reasons, always have been, and then you’ll find more reasons. You always do. I’m convinced you both like being obsessed with each other. It’s an addiction, and it’s *pathetic*.” Rae spat out the last word.

“Perhaps it is, but it’s my obsession and I don’t want to talk about it any... today.”

“So, you’ve been talking to her about it today? I can always tell when you’ve been with her.”

“I’m not sure you’re right about what’ll happen when the obsession is broken.”

“What do you mean?”

Ali glared at her, then stood and walked across the room. She folded her arms and stared at Rae. *If she wants to talk about it.* “You think when we sleep together, we’ll lose interest, but you don’t get it. We’re closer than simply being infatuated. Our souls are connected. I think when we sleep together, we’ll be even closer.” *And that’s what scares Judy. Why could I not see this?*

“Maybe you’re right. At least you’ll be out of this purgatory, and so will I.”

“Seriously Rae, if it bothers you so much...”

“Jesus Ali, you have to ask? I have the misfortune of loving you,” Rae said, then muttered, “Stupid bitch!”

“Who’s a stupid bitch?”

“I was talking about myself, but both of us, I guess.”

“Don’t know why you’d love a stupid bitch like me.”

“Neither do I, but I do. If I didn’t, I’d walk away without a second thought.”

“Well, no one’s stopping you.”

“I can’t stay here. You two are making me crazy, and I don’t like what I’m becoming.”

“I never lied to you, Rae. I told you about Judy on our second date.”

“You did, and I thought I could deal with it, but I can’t. It’s turning me into something that scares me.”

“What scares you?”

“Me.”

What the fuck does that mean? “You?”

“Doesn’t matter. Point is, I have to get out of this city.”

“So, you’re dumping me.”

“That’s up to you.”

“Jesus, Rae. I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. I told you I’m not up to this tonight. If you’ve got something to say, fucking say it.”

“I’m buying an antique business in San Francisco. I’m leaving.”

Guess that solves one problem. “When are you going?”

“You’re not even going to ask me to stay?”

“You said you’re buying a business, so you’ve obviously made up your mind. Would you stay if I asked you?”

“No.”

Ali shook her head and sighed. *Not in the mood for these games.* “Then what’s the point of this?”

“You could’ve asked.”

“So you could take pleasure in refusing. Jesus, Rae, how fucking old are you?”

“Old enough to want you to ask.”

Fuck this. “Well, I guess there’s nothing more to say. I’m going to bed.”

“Ali, there are two agreements on the table. One is for me to buy the business alone, the other is for us to buy it together. I’m asking you to come with me and we’ll build a good life together.”

“Why would you want to run a business with a stupid bitch like me? I know nothing about antiques.”

“I told you. I love you. I can teach you the business.”

“All this to get me away from Judy?”

“No. All this to give *us* a chance to build a life together.”

“You know, if I go with you, I won’t cut off contact with Judy. I’ll still be talking with her on the phone, and I’ll visit her when I come back to see my kids.”

“I’m not fucking stupid. I don’t expect you to go cold turkey, but it would do you good to ween yourself off her.”

She has a point. Can’t see us getting together soon, and without Rae. “I need to think about it. I can’t answer you now.”

“I don’t expect you to, but don’t take too long. I must get the agreement signed soon.”

“I want to talk to someone first. Don’t push me or the answer will be no.”

“Judy, no doubt.”

“Of course I’ll talk to her, but I mean John.”

“John? Why?”

“Because I trust him, and he has no agenda.”

“Makes sense. Guess he knows what it’s like to be me.”

Enough of this. “I appreciate you offering to do this with me. It’s a big change for me, and not only because of Judy. I need a little time to think about it, and I can’t do that if you’re constantly digging away at me.”

“I know. I’m sorry. This is what I mean by not liking what I’m becoming. I haven’t been doing a good job of convincing you to come with me.”

“It’s all right.”

“You ready for bed, petal?”

Ali smiled. She’d softened, and her mind was full of possibilities. “Sure. You can show me the benefits of coming with you.”

Ali stepped out of the taxi and walked to John’s door, deep in thought. She’d called John as soon as she woke.

“John, I need to talk. Have you got time?”

“Always, darling, what’s up?”

“Can we meet somewhere?”

“Working from home today. Got a report to write,” John said. “Why not call in for coffee?”

“Could I come over now?”

“Sure, I can write it later.”

Life was much simpler when I was with John. No hard decisions to make.

She pressed the doorbell, which chimed inside, and waited.

Lori answered the door. “Hi Ali.”

“Hello Lori, I’m sorry to intrude. I…”

“You’re not intruding, you’re family. John’s in the kitchen. I can make myself scarce if you want to talk in private.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I need some impartial advice.”

Ali stepped inside, and the women embraced. Lori’s long, black, wavy hair had a few orange highlights, enough to be distinctive. *What prompts her to change the color of her highlights?* Lori’s clear hazel eyes were alive and engaged and still contained a hint of mischief. She had slightly olive skin from her Mediterranean heritage. Ali found her attractive, but neither would cheat on John.

“Besides,” Lori said, “John always seems nervous when we’re together. I enjoy seeing him like that.”

“Yeah, every man’s nightmare.”

The women entered the kitchen. John sat at the end of the table. They sat either side of him. Ali and Lori exchanged a smile, because John seemed unsure whether he should be looking at his current wife or his former wife.

The coffee was on the table, waiting. Ali picked hers up and sipped. She smiled at John. Despite his large frame, he maintained his fitness. His dark brown collar length hair now contained noticeable streaks of gray. His eyes were almost the same color, without the tinges of gray. He was clean shaven and had an easy smile.

He wore a dark green polo shirt and gray slacks. *Lori still influences his attire.* His wedding ring differed from the one he’d worn most of his life, and he still wore the LIGE watch he’d purchased with the proceeds from his brother Frank’s estate.

Ali didn't bother with small talk. "I need to make a decision. Rae's asked me to go to San Francisco with her and open an antique business. A part of me likes the idea, but..."

"Our Judy." John smiled.

"Yes. I don't want to leave her."

"So, what's the status between you?" John asked.

"Still complicated and will be because Art's dying."

"Of course it is. Nobody in the family can understand it, to be honest."

"Sometimes, I don't understand it myself."

"Are you sleeping together?" John asked.

"John!" Lori said.

"Ali wants me to give her perspective. I can't do that if she's less than honest."

Ali nodded. "John's right. I need to be honest with myself as well." She looked John in the eye. "We've never had sex intentionally. There've been occasions when we got carried away in the moment."

John asked, "Why not intentionally?"

"You know why, John. Judy won't cheat on Myron."

"Not intentionally, anyway."

Ali rolled her eyes. "Judy promised Myron we won't have sex. She won't break that promise. The same as I never broke my promise to you after I accepted, I'm a lesbian. For Judy, it's a matter of trust. For me, it was guilt. Myron will release her if she asks, but the timing has never been right."

"Why are you sure Myron will release her from her promise?"

"He didn't ask for it. She didn't tell me that. He did."

"Sounds like you're right. He's letting you know he's okay with you two."

"Rae says we're obsessed with each other, and it's become an addiction. She thinks if we sleep together, it'll break our obsession, which is why we don't. We don't want to break the addiction. She may have a point."

"What does Rae think you should do?"

"She says I should sleep with Judy and then I'll realize she's not Miss Perfect and move on."

Lori said, "I think that's wishful thinking on Rae's part."

"What do you think would happen if you slept together?" John asked.

"We're so connected sometimes we seem to be inside each other's head. I think sleeping together would complete our union."

John nodded thoughtfully. "I'll make another pot of coffee while I think."

Lori reached across the table and took Ali's hand. "Doesn't sound like anything will change soon with Judy. You're right, she can't ask him now because of Art. So, let's talk about Rae."

Ali shrugged. "I'm fond of her. She's great in bed, but I don't love her. When she's not obsessing about Judy, she's easy to live with. I could see us having a future together in another city because there'd be no Judy."

Lori nodded. She looked thoughtful.

John brought the coffee to the table and refilled their cups. He said, "Blunt question time."

Ali noted the warning look Lori gave him.

"How do you feel about Myron?"

"I don't resent him, if that's what you're asking. Never have."

"That's not what I'm asking. I can see that, and you've told me before."

"I love him. He's an amazing guy. If I preferred guys, I'd be very interested. Except I wouldn't do that to Judy, of course."

"Do you love him like you love me?"

"I don't love him with the depth I love Judy."

"Not what I asked."

"I love him differently than I love you, John."

"So, you don't love *him* like a brother?"

Ali bowed her head and looked at the cup as she picked it up. "No, John," she whispered.

John nodded. "It's okay, I know that. He feels the same."

"How?"

"I see the way you look at each other. There's genuine affection between you."

Ali frowned.

John said, "I pay more attention to these things than I used to."

Lori said, "He does, and that's from you, not me."

"One thing confuses me," John said. "If Myron made it clear he'd be okay with you two before Melanie entered their life, why didn't Judy talk to him then, or after Melanie had settled in?"

"I don't know John. Never found the right moment, I guess."

"But you two were sure he'd agree. What aren't you telling me?"

Ali had been thinking about the situation, so she wasn't unprepared for the question, though she was surprised John had thought to ask it. She looked at Lori for moral support.

"When we separated, I went a little crazy. I was free and Judy wouldn't... So, I found other women to have sex with."

John nodded.

"A *lot* of other women. A combination of being free to do what I wanted and trying to pressure Judy into talking to Myron. From what we could work out, my pheromones were out of control, and they certainly had an effect on Judy, which is when we got carried away. They affected Myron, too."

“Not only those two,” Lori said.

Ali looked at her and nodded, then continued. “Anyway, when we opened Dancer’s, it gave me something to focus my attention on instead of focusing all my energy on umm... exploring my sexuality, and everything calmed down.

“Then Myron made it clear he was attracted to me, without being flooded with my pheromones. We both thought he was going to suggest something, and we were content to let the idea come from him.”

“He’s still attracted to you,” John said.

“Everything changed the day Myron saved Melanie.”

John asked, “When did Judy make her promise to Myron?”

“When we started seeing more of each other. We talked about things and made promises to each other about what we wouldn’t do because of you and Myron.”

“So not long after Frank passed. A lot of things have happened since. Judy became part of our family and brought us together. Frank knew about you, and everything changed for you when you met her. Everything changed for me too, but I didn’t see it then.”

Ali gave him a quizzical look.

“Without Judy, I was a guy who stumbled across a blend for coffee. It was Judy who made it famous and changed my life.” He looked at Lori, then returned his gaze to Ali. “I don’t really understand it, but I believe Frank was influencing Judy’s life.”

Ali nodded.

John continued, “I love Lori deeply and completely, and yet I don’t understand the depth of your relationship with our Judy. I don’t think any of this is about sex. If it was, it would’ve happened years ago. It’s about holding something back from each other. I think if you held nothing back, you’d become consumed in your relationship at the exclusion of all others.”

Ali looked at her ex-husband, but remained silent. *Didn’t Myron say something like this on that night we shared?*

“Judy knows this. I think she’s afraid that if you complete your union, Myron will be excluded. If he’s the one who completes it, he’ll become a part of it.”

Ali stared at John, open-mouthed.

He continued. “Judy’ll never approach Myron, because she doesn’t like change. It must come from him, and that won’t happen now because his father is dying.”

That’s what Myron said. Holding back sex for sex’s sake never made sense.

“Thank you, John. When did you become so smart?”

John smiled. “You’re too close and never could step back from the situation. When we separated, I learned I was blind to the world around me, and I started paying more attention.”

Ali glanced at her watch. “God! Is that the time? I’d better call a taxi and get to work. I appreciate...”

“Nonsense, and you don’t need to call a taxi. I’ll drive you to work.”

Lori said, “No John. You’d better make a start on your report, or you’ll be up all night finishing it. I can drive Ali to Dancer’s.”

“Okay. If you need to talk again, Ali, I’m here.”

Ali kissed him goodbye, and she and Lori headed out.

Ali's Decision

In the car on their way to Dancer's, Lori said, "John can still surprise me."

"Yes, me too." Ali agreed. "As if he was channeling his brother."

"Or your son."

Ali smiled. "Frankie is very much like his Uncle Frank."

"Can I offer my opinion?"

"Always."

"Being honest, Rae isn't right for you, but I think John's right. Judy won't take the step. It needs to come from Myron. Not that I know what that step will be. If it happens, it won't be soon, because of Art."

"No argument from me."

"Perhaps you should accept Rae's offer. I don't think it'll last, but you need to get out of the city for a while and give yourself and Judy some breathing space. If you're meant to happen, you will. When Myron's ready."

Ali nodded. "Makes sense, but wouldn't I be using Rae?"

Lori shrugged. "Isn't that what you're doing now?"

Ali nodded again, thoughtfully. Having told Rae the truth at the beginning, and maintaining that truth, Ali had convinced herself she wasn't using Rae.

Lori stopped outside Dancer's. They kissed lightly on the cheek and said their goodbyes.

After checking everything was in order at Dancer's, Ali called Judy.

"Hello darling, I have something to do this afternoon, but I'll see you at Suzy Q's opening."

Judy laughed. "Not the first time you've made that suggestion."

"Silly woman. I was thinking maybe I could stay with you and Mel tonight. Don't worry, no pressure."

"I'd like that, and so would Mel, but what about Rae?"

"She'll be fine."

They rang off.

Ali watched Cherry, the senior waitress, going about her job, seating and serving patrons. *She'll make a wonderful hostess, and Rebekah can oversee the management of the bistro. Dancer will make sure there's no nonsense.*

At the conclusion of the lunch shift, Ali left for the day, and walked home to see Rae. *Don't know how this is gonna go.*

She didn't notice the mousey little man who followed her.

Rae was almost at the point of her afternoon orgasm when she heard the door. She removed her hand, quickly covered herself with a sheet, rolled onto her side, and closed her eyes.

She heard Ali come into the bedroom, pause for a moment, and leave.

Thinks I'm asleep. Aroused to the point of orgasm, she wanted to call out to Ali, and have her come to bed and finish her off. Her concern was that her mind was still full of violent sex with Judy, and she was worried her intentions would overtake her with Ali.

Rae lay on her side, eyes closed until both her arousal and her imagination subsided.

What's wrong with me? Gotta get out of this city.

She slid out of bed, threw on her robe and went to ask Ali why she was home early.

Ali was sitting at the table, reading the agreement Rae had left for her.

"Hello petal," Rae said. "I'll put some coffee on, and I better go pee."

"Rae. You're awake!"

Bitch is letting me know she knows I wasn't sleeping.

"Yeah, felt like a nap after lunch. Was busy this morning."

"Naked?"

"Obviously. Sweaty after walking around all morning, showered and then took a nap."

"Okay."

"I can get dressed?"

"No, I'm waiting for you to sit down," Ali said. "Your gown always falls open when you sit."

If you were that interested, you'd have slid into bed beside me. Rae smiled. "I'll pee, make the coffee, and give you a show."

After Rae placed their coffees on the table and sat opposite Ali, she asked, "Have you decided?"

"I'm pretty sure we're moving to San Francisco," Ali said. "I'll give you a firm answer in the morning."

Rae nodded. *Quicker than I expected. If she signs.*

Ali continued, "I'm standing in for Myron at the opening of Suzy Q's tonight."

Rae shrugged. "You mean you're Judy's date?"

"It's not like that. Melanie's coming too."

Rae shrugged again. *So, you're playing happy families.*

Ali explained. "If we're going to move to San Francisco, I need to have a long talk with Judy."

"Do you need her permission?"

"No, her blessing, I guess."

"So, you'll come with me if she says you can?"

“That’s not what I’m saying, and I’m not in the mood for your word games. She’s my best friend and I want to talk it through with her. If you’re gonna be a bitch about it, you can go on your own.”

If you don’t get yourself under control, you’re gonna fuck this up. “I’m sorry Ali. I’m worried she’ll talk you out of it.”

“She won’t. Thing is, it’s gonna be a long night, and rather than have you driving yourself crazy wondering when I’m gonna be home, I thought I’ll stay with Judy and Mel.”

Don’t know if I should be pissed or happy. Will this break that fucking obsession? “Will you sleep with her?”

“Yes, but we won’t have sex.”

Rae rolled her eyes. “I’m not asking for your promise.”

“I’m not making one. I’m stating a fact.”

“Whatever. Do what you want.”

“If I leave, you know we’ll still be talking on the phone, right?”

“I’m not fucking stupid. I know you’ll talk with her and see her whenever you come back to visit your kids. But at least you won’t be focused on her twenty-four seven and we’ll have a chance to build a life. That’s all I’m asking. Give us a chance. If you, spending the night with her is what it takes to make it happen. I’m fine with it.”

“Thank you, Rae.”

“If you want to thank me, come home tomorrow morning and sign the paper.”

Ali nodded. “I’m going to shower and get ready.”

Rae shrugged. *Whatever’s going on tonight, hopefully, will free us from her.*

Showered and dressed, Ali entered the living room wearing a sea foam green form fitting dress, one side of the dress finished above the knee, the other below. Décolleté neckline, an emerald pendant, and matching earrings.

Rae stared at Ali, open-mouthed. “Wow! You look stunning, petal. If that doesn’t get the bitch’s legs open, nothing will.”

“I told you, that’s not gonna happen. I don’t want that.”

“You’re dressed like you do.”

“I don’t and I won’t. You’ve nothing to worry about. Me and my dress will most likely be going with you to San Francisco. Judy won’t.”

“Wish I could believe that. She’s a part of you.”

“She is, and she’s not a bitch.”

Rae opened her mouth, but Ali cut her off.

“Leave it Rae. I’ll be back in the morning. When I sign the agreement, I’ll be focused on planning our move. You’re getting what you want.”

Rae smiled. *Maybe I should go myself and leave the bitches to each other.*

“See you tomorrow. Don’t worry, everything’s gonna be fine.”

Rae watched Ali turn and leave the apartment. A tear escaped Rae's eye. *She's fucking Beautiful.*

From his vantage point on a bench at the bus stop across the road, about a hundred yards from Seven and Eight's building, Mouse watched Eight leave. He stared at her, openmouthed. He was nearly ready to have his double encounter.

Mouse knew he should've already encountered them, but he'd grown to enjoy jerking off into whichever one's panties he was wearing as he watched Eight and her friend making out in the garden. It was a mistake, and he knew it.

Why did Eight come home early? What if she comes home early when I'm encountering seven? I won't be able to control the situation then.

He watched Eight flag a taxi and decided to wait to see if Seven went out, too.

Maybe it's only today she came home early. She didn't go to the park either. He was disappointed. He'd come to look forward to masturbating in the park.

Do I need to watch them a little longer to see if she comes home early again? Can't afford to have her come home while I'm encountering Seven.

He was doing everything wrong, and he knew it. He needed to focus on the task at hand.

Can't keep delaying. I'll bring my bag tomorrow and hide it near the fire hose. I'll do them tomorrow.

He returned to the book he was reading.

Confusion and Fantasy

Rae poured a Balvenie twelve-year-old single malt scotch whisky into a Mercer 41 Hearn lead crystal whiskey glass. Neat. She downed it. Poured another and returned to the sofa.

She frowned and shook her head.

Damn, that woman was fine tonight. Don't understand why I'm not jealous. I'm actually okay with her staying at Judy's. Hopefully, this'll be the end of it.

Judy. Need to get that urge out of my system.

Rae went to her bedroom and stared inside her wardrobe. She chose a pink blouse and a black skirt from the items she intended to discard.

Do I need underwear? She smiled. "No point," she muttered to herself.

She grabbed a small purse with a shoulder strap, also destined for Goodwill. All she needed was a little money for a taxi and a credit card.

Rae didn't notice the man sitting on the bench watching her as she flagged a taxi.

She gave the driver the address of Petticoat Dungeon, a basement bar with private rooms, which catered to lesbians with a taste for anonymous rough sex.

Mouse watched the taxi taking Seven away. He dropped his book into his backpack and slung it over his shoulder.

Better go home. Need to think. Don't like them acting strangely.

He followed his usual route. Hood up, head down, invisible to the world, until he arrived at his apartment.

Sitting on his sofa, reading after dinner. He put his book down, stared at nothing, and opened his mind to his inner voice.

Don't know what to do. Everything about this feels wrong.

"Should walk away. Find another target. A quiet, predictable girl," he said to himself, which should've told him something was wrong. He only talked to himself when something wasn't right.

Can't now. They've asked me to encounter them.

"You've never encountered two before."

Never encountered lesbians before. I want them both.

"It's too dangerous."

I've planned it right. Six was too loose. I think lesbians will be tighter.

"But what if they change their routine like today?"

I'll have to watch them for a while longer, make sure it doesn't happen again.

"Another delay. If you didn't indulge yourself in the park, you'd have encountered them already."

Mouse smiled. *That's true, but I enjoy watching Eight and her girlfriend.*

“You need to name the day. Set a date and, if there are no more surprises, encounter them. No more excuses.”

He walked to the calendar, an old-fashioned paper calendar the local drug store gave away every year. He circled a date. Two weeks and three days from today.

“That was stupid. You’re becoming careless.”

Mouse nodded, ripped the page from the calendar and took it to the bathroom. He set it on fire and dropped the ashes and the corner he’d been holding, still alight into the toilet. The burning paper sizzled as flame met the water. Mouse relieved himself onto the ashes, flushed the toilet and went to the bedroom where he undressed.

He climbed into bed, wearing Seven or Eight’s panties—he still didn’t know which woman they belonged to—aroused at the thought of his upcoming dual encounter. He masturbated.

Rae paid the driver and exited the taxi. *Years since I’ve been here.*

She made her way down the dimly lit staircase and entered the neon glow of the bar. The old wooden bar had changed little. Even the furniture in the bar was the same. A few women, a couple, and a threesome were dancing in front of the aging jukebox.

The bucking rodeo machine was still in use, being ridden by an ample figured girl wearing only purple panties, whose sagging unruly breasts were being thrown in various directions, followed by waves from her flabby stomach.

Rae made her way to the bar and smiled. “Jo-Jo, you’re still here.” She traced her initials, which she’d carved into the bar counter more than a decade earlier.

“Hello Red, been a long time. Of course, I’m still here. Full of girls looking for what I have to give. What can I get you?”

“Looking for a petite blonde who likes it rough.”

“How rough?”

“Rough.”

Jo-Jo nodded at a young girl, drinking with others at the end of the bar. “Fiona.”

Rae assessed the girl. Her body type was similar to Judy’s. Although she was slighter, younger, and her hair was a shade whiter than blonde. Fiona wore a loose forest green tank top and very tight denim shorts. She looked delicate. Rae returned her gaze to Jo-Jo and gave her a quizzical look.

“Don’t let her appearance fool you. She can take whatever you dish out, but be warned she’s a wildcat. She’ll scratch and bite.”

Rae frowned. She walked to Fiona, grabbed her by the hair, and pulled her head back. She kissed the girl, biting Fiona’s lip until she tasted blood.

When Rae released her, Fiona gave Rae an appraising look while she licked the blood from her own lip. “Hello yourself.” Fiona smiled.

“Can I get you some salt for that?”

“Sure.” Fiona followed Rae back to the other end of the bar.

“This is Red,” Jo-Jo said. “She doubts you can take what she’s offering.”

Fiona studied Rae. “Don’t worry, old woman, I’ll take it... and like it.”

“How much?”

“Five hundred, but free if I cum.”

Rae said, “That’ll save me some money.”

“I usually get paid.”

Rae glanced at Jo-Jo. “Tequila float.”

Jo-Jo nodded and went to prepare their drinks.

A short time later, she handed Rae a key. “Six is available.”

She placed a float containing seven shots on the bar.

Rae looked at Fiona. “Whoever reaches the extra shot first gets it.”

The women each took a shot and downed it, slammed the glass on the bar and reached for the next. Fiona got the extra shot.

“You’re too slow, old woman.”

Rae grabbed her hair again, pulled Fiona’s head back and kissed her, biting harder this time. “Right, bitch, let’s get this done.”

She grabbed the key with her free hand, and dragged Fiona by the hair to room six, opened the door and flung her inside. Before Fiona could regain her balance, Rae hit her with the back of her hand, sending her staggering across the room.

Flash Jack Hawkins sat at his desk, staring at the fuzzy image of his suspect. Not even a hint of new information about his suspect had trickled in. *Who the fuck are you, and where are you?* He slammed his fist into the desk.

Detectives Lopez and Reynolds rushed into his office.

“All right, Sarge?”

“No. Based on this fucker’s pattern, he should’ve struck again by now.”

“Do you want him to?” Reynolds asked.

“I want to stop him before he does.”

“Maybe poor Daphne put him off his game,” Lopez suggested.

“Possibly, but he might have struck again, and we haven’t found her yet. If not for that building inspector, Summertime would still be rotting in the stairwell.” *And Daphne would still be alive.*

“Any ideas?”

“Not really. You two start combing the surveillance of all the victims again tomorrow, especially the earlier ones. Perhaps there’s a clearer image of him we missed. I’ll remind the cops at roll call in the morning to keep looking for this guy.”

“Can’t say I’m looking forward to it,” said Reynolds, “but as you say, there’s fuck all else we can do.”

“Never seen a case like this. Not one clue other than this fuzzy image. Tell you what, I’ll call in a profiler to watch the footage with you. Maybe they’ll be a genius who can identify a pattern we’ve all overlooked.”

“Can’t hurt Sarge, but I doubt it’ll help.”

Hawkins shook his head. “About time we got lucky.”

Rae made her way to the bar to settle up for the drinks and room rental. She’d been scratched, but was hoping she could cover them up so Ali wouldn’t notice. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror behind the shelves at the back of the bar. Seeing the deep scratches on her face, she knew that wouldn’t be possible. *I’ll think of something to tell her.*

Jo-Jo took Rae’s offered credit card.

“I warned you. She’s a wildcat.”

Rae smiled, “You were right about her being able to take it, too. I wasn’t gentle.”

“She likes it rough.”

“Oh, she liked it.”

“You pay her?”

“Didn’t have too.”

Fiona joined them, lips swollen and bleeding a little. She was walking gingerly.

“Okay, Fi?” Jo-Jo asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. Red here knew what I needed... I don’t know who that Judy is, but I bet she couldn’t take it like I can.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Anytime you want me to stand in for her again, you come back. I rarely reach orgasm, but when I do, it makes everything worthwhile.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I better clean up.”

Rae shook her head. “Think it’s out of my system now.”

Fiona nodded and headed to the restroom.

“This Judy of yours doesn’t like it rough then?” Jo-Jo asked.

Rae shrugged. “I think she does, but doesn’t know it yet.”

“Oh... One of those.”

Rae smiled as she took her credit card back.

“I’d better go home and try to clean myself up too, before my girlfriend gets home in the morning.”

“Judy?”

“She wishes.”

Rae arrived home and went straight to the bathroom. She studied the long, deep scratches along the side of her forehead, down to the side of her chin.

Not going to cover that up. Fuck her. If she doesn't like it, she can stay here. Maybe I'll tell her I was saving Judy.

Rae stripped her clothes off and tossed them back in the bag she was giving to Goodwill. *They'll wash them.*

She wheeled the full-length mirror into the bathroom and used the bathroom mirror to study the scratches on her back.

They're deep. She dug her nails in when she came. Thought she was going to rip me in two. I'll have to keep myself covered until they heal.

Rae smiled. *Seen no one cum like that... Thought she was having a fit, and the water... Never seen anyone squirt that hard.*

If not for Ali and moving away, Rae knew she'd go back. She smiled and stepped into the shower. *This is gonna sting.*

After she showered and dressed in her long nightdress, Rae poured herself another whisky, downed it, and went to bed.

She lay down, closed her eyes, and thought of Judy.

Nothing.

She smiled and wondered what Ali was doing.

Suzy Q's Opening

Ali walked into Suzy Q's and scanned the room. Judy was sitting with Melanie, staring slack jawed at her. Ali smiled.

Suzy Q, who'd been hovering by the door to greet guests as they arrived, was immediately beside her. "Ali, thank you for coming."

"Wouldn't miss a chance to see your opening for the world," Ali said with a mischievous glint in her eye, knowing Suzy Q wouldn't pick up on her innuendo.

She surprised Ali because she wore a white-pink pearl low-cut dress, which hugged her figure to her waist, and then became a layered pink dress, with what seemed to be three layers, and a dark pink lacey petticoat protruding nearly to her knees. She wore white ankle-high boots, with heels making her appear taller. On her head she wore a pink shoulder-length wig and a white headband.

Suzy Q smiled. "Judy's already here."

"Yes, I better say hello. Good luck tonight Suzy Q. Seems you have a full house."

"Darnell sent over a couple of chefs to help, so I think we'll be fine."

Ali made her way to Judy, who stood to greet her. When they embraced, Judy whispered in her ear. "You look... Wow! Just wow."

Ali beamed. "Wore it for you. Staying at yours tonight."

"You are?"

"Yes, Mel invited me, remember?"

"Oh... Yes. Umm... What about Rae?"

"No, only me... I can invite her. I'm sure she'd be up for it."

"Ridiculous woman. You know what I mean."

"She's okay with it," Ali said. "Thinks we're going to copulate, but we're not."

"The way you look tonight, I don't know if I can resist..."

"You won't have to because it's not gonna happen."

Judy kissed her lightly on the lips. "You've made my night."

"Why? Because I'm *not* going to have sex with you?"

"Silly woman. Because you're going to stay with me."

Ali smiled. "Let's sit."

They took their seats with Melanie between them.

"Are you really going to stay, Aunt Ali?"

"Yes, darling, I am."

"Good, you can read me a story."

"I thought you were too old to be read stories," Judy said.

"I'm too old for *you* to read me stories, but Aunt Ali can."

Judy and Ali exchanged glances and then looked at the menu.

Ali finished reading to Melanie, kissed her forehead, and tucked her blanket in for the night.

Judy was sitting on the sofa, glancing through *Elegance* while she waited. She looked up as Ali entered the room. “She settled?”

“Yes, she’s almost asleep.”

“Think I better have a quick shower,” Judy said.

She could’ve done that while I was reading to Mel. Guess she wants company.

“You want me to wash you?”

“Yes.”

Ali smiled. It wasn’t the first time they’d showered together.

“It’s been a while, but I’m sure I remember how,” Ali said.

They undressed in Judy’s walk-in robe and went to shower together. Intimate but not sexual.

“I always like you washing me,” Judy almost purred.

“You enjoy teasing me,” Ali corrected. “But tonight, I’m not gonna be teased.”

Judy smiled. They dried each other. Judy took two identical, short, silky night dresses from her drawer, kept the salmon one, and passed the magenta one to Ali. Neither wore underwear.

They returned to the living room. Where Judy had decanted a bottle of Barolo La Serra—a bright, floral, and energetic, aromatic red with notes of strawberries, flowers, and lemons—into a Sagrada decanter and placed two matching Cornet Sagrada glasses on the black walnut and maple coffee table.

She poured the wine and handed a glass to Ali, who raised it to her nose, inhaled the aroma, smiled at a memory she couldn’t quite place, and offered Judy her glass. “Soulmates.”

Judy clinked her glass and echoed her toast.

They sat on the sofa, legs curled under them, facing each other.

Ali studied her. Another day, Ali would’ve needed all her willpower to control her desire, but not that night. They kissed. Judy began caressing her, and Ali reveled in her touch, but didn’t reciprocate.

“We’ll talk first,” Ali said. “After we’ve finished talking, you can do what you want with me.”

Judy looked confused, but nodded, and took a sip of wine. Judy’s phone rang. She glanced at caller ID and said, “Myron.” She answered her phone on speaker. “Hello darling.”

“Hi, sweetheart. Sorry I’m a bit late tonight, a busy day. I suppose Melanie is in bed.”

“Yes, and Ali’s here.”

“Hello, Myron. I’ve missed your smile,” Ali said.

“Hi, Alison. I miss you too.”

“Ali’s staying tonight,” Judy said.

“Good, enjoy yourselves.”

“We will,” replied Ali, “but not too much.”

Myron hesitated for a moment. “It’s fine with me. Wish I was with you.”

The women looked at each other, neither sure how to respond.

“I only called to check in. How was Suzy Q’s opening?”

Ali, who was taking a sip of wine, almost gagged as wine spilled from her mouth and nose.

Judy, eyes full of humor, winked at Ali as she responded to Myron, “Suzy Q’s opening was amazing.”

“Really? That’s good news. I’m sure they’ll do a great job.”

Ali was still laughing, wiping herself with a tissue and trying to compose herself.

“What’s so funny?” Myron asked.

“Ali spilled wine all over herself.”

“I can imagine Alison covered in wine.”

Ali and Judy exchanged glances.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were flirting with me,” Ali said.

“Isn’t that Judy’s job?”

“You know what they say,” Ali said. “A job shared…”

“That’s an idea. We could lick it off together,” Myron responded.

Judy spread her hands and shrugged her shoulders. She asked, “So, how’s everything there?”

“Papa was tired last night, but he seems fine today. He wants to go to the wailing wall.”

“Tell him to take it easy.”

“He won’t listen.”

“I guess he wants to see as much as he can while he’s there.”

“The trip’s been good for him, and Mama, too.”

“I’m glad, darling.”

“Anyway, better go. They’re almost ready by the looks. Give my love to Melanie and tell her I’m sorry I missed her tonight.”

“She sends her love.”

“Love you, too,” Myron said and ended the call.

Ali said, “Did he say too or two?”

“I had the same thought.”

“I need more wine,” Ali said as she poured herself another glass. “Did I hear Myron right?”

“If you think he gave us his blessing, yes, you heard right.”

“That changes things.”

Judy smiled. "You mean we're going to have sex tonight?"

"No, not tonight."

"Why not? Because you told Rae we wouldn't?"

"She didn't believe me, anyway."

"Why not then? Myron's okay with it."

"He was always okay with it, which we both knew."

"Yes, don't know why we didn't."

"Your promise to Myron gave us a reason not to, but it's never been about sex. If it was, you would've bedded me years ago."

"I would've bedded *you*?"

"Of course you would."

"You're sure of yourself."

Ali winked. "Without a moment's doubt."

Judy grinned. "So, what is it about? And why are you only telling me now?"

"I didn't know, well I'd forgotten, until John explained it."

"John?"

"Surprised me, too."

"Are you going to tease me all night? Or are you going to tell me John's theory?"

"You've been teasing me for years."

"You love being teased."

Ali grinned, but didn't admit it. "We're too close..."

"Too close?"

"Let me finish."

"Okay." Judy drained her glass and poured herself another, then leaned over and topped up Ali's.

"We're so close we're almost in each other's minds. Sometimes I don't know where you end and I begin. If we didn't hold something back, we'd consume each other and that would leave Myron excluded."

Judy frowned, and then slowly nodded as she processed what Ali was saying.

Ali continued, "If we give ourselves one hundred percent, there'll be nothing left. If this is going to work, Myron must be the one who binds us together."

Judy nodded. "I think at some level I always knew that, even if I didn't understand it."

They held hands, contentedly leaning against each other while they finished their wine.

"Ready for bed?" Judy asked.

"For years."

Judy beamed.

The women went to the bathroom and took turns cleaning their teeth and relieving themselves.

They slid into bed, caressed, and kissed without either being tempted to make love. They wrapped themselves around each other, and slept in one another's arms for the first time.

Ali stirred the next morning. They were still wrapped around each other. *Perfect*. She gently extracted herself from Judy's embrace, trying not to disturb her, slid out of bed, and crept to the bathroom.

Judy entered the bathroom as Ali flushed. They kissed. "I slept well, content in your arms. Need to pee," Judy said as she sat on the toilet.

Ali cleaned her teeth.

Judy finished, sprayed water on herself from the inbuilt jets, and wiped herself dry, and rinsed her hands, before taking the toothpaste Ali offered.

They kissed again. "Quick shower?" Ali asked.

Judy nodded, and Ali lifted Judy's nightdress over her head. Judy returned the favor, and they embraced; naked bodies pressed against each other.

"I like you naked," Judy said.

"Us naked, and you enjoy teasing me."

Judy turned on the shower and they stepped in.

After they'd washed and dried each other, Judy asked, "Did you bring a change of clothes?"

"Didn't think of it."

"Help yourself to my wardrobe."

Judy bent to retrieve the lingerie for them both, asking, "What do you want for breakfast?"

Ali's eyes were locked on what Judy was showing her. "I'm looking at it."

Judy, who hadn't considered what she was displaying as she bent over, blushed.

"In a few weeks, you can have it."

Ali grinned. "I've waited years. A few more weeks won't matter."

Judy straightened, turned, and handed Ali underwear.

They dressed and made their way to the kitchen.

Melanie was sitting at the table writing in a book.

"Mel, I didn't realize you were awake," Judy said.

Melanie said, "I looked in earlier, but you two were asleep and I didn't want to wake you."

"Get yourself ready for school and we'll go down for breakfast."

"Okay. Mama, can Aunt Ali walk me to school?"

"I thought you were too old to have someone walk you to school."

“No, I’m too old to have *you* walk me to school.”

Judy rolled her eyes, and Ali laughed.

“Aunt Ali, do you want to come and help me get dressed?”

“Sure, sweetheart.”

Judy shook her head, but smiled as she watched them head to Melanie’s room.

After breakfast, Melanie said, “I like Aunt Ali living with us, Mama.”

“So do I, Mel.”

“Can she live with us all the time?”

“When Papa gets back, we can ask him, okay?”

“Okey-dokey,” Melanie said, imitating Suzy Q.

“I’ll walk Mel to school and head home. I’ll call you later.” Ali kissed Judy goodbye.
“I feel so wanted.”

“You are, darling.”

If I Can't Have You

Mouse was excited. Today was the day. He couldn't delay any longer. He wondered what it would be like to encounter two in one day.

What's this? He saw Eight arrive home.

Why's she coming home now? Where's she been? I don't like this. Maybe I should wait a few days and let things settle down, see if they get back to normal?

"No. No more delays," he told himself. "It must be today."

He tucked himself back into the alcove and waited.

Ali inhaled deeply, sighed loudly, opened the door, and stepped into her apartment. *She's not going to take the news well. I can't be bothered with her drama.*

Rae was sitting at their dining table drinking coffee. She glanced up when Ali entered.

Ali caught her breath and stared at scratches on Rae's face. *What the fuck?*

As if nothing was out of the ordinary, Rae casually asked, "New clothes?"

"They're Judy's. Forgot to bring a change."

"So, you're wearing each other's clothes now?"

"It's not the first time." Ali grimaced as the words slipped out of her mouth.

"Guess that's one way to get into her panties. Did you fuck her?"

"Don't worry about what I did," Ali said. "What happened to you?"

"Didn't want to sit home alone, so I found a girl to play with."

"I can see that. What did you do to make her scratch your face like that?"

"Nothing. It was consensual," Rae explained.

"Doesn't look consensual."

"It was. There's a club I used to go to. Role play and rough sex. JoJo, who runs the place, films what happens in the rooms. For the patron's protection, she says, but I think she gets off on watching."

"What sort of role play leaves you scratched up like that?"

"Rape."

"What are you saying?" Ali asked. "Women get off role playing being raped?"

"We did. I can arrange for JoJo to show you the tape."

"Why would I want to watch that, and why would you want to rape someone?"

"I told you. Better I get it out of my system with a willing participant than act on my impulse."

"Are you saying you really did want to rape Judy? I thought that was nonsense you came up with to get a reaction."

"I wanted to teach her a lesson, but I got it out of my system. Surely that's a better way to deal with it."

I don't know her at all. Can't believe she's got that inside of her. What if she felt an urge to rape me?

"I can't accept someone who could rape. I'm tired of your bullshit. We're done. I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You said you were going to come with me."

"I was... but not after this. I'll find somewhere to stay until you're gone. Then I'll take over the lease here by myself."

"So, this is it?"

"You knew it would be. That's why you got yourself scratched up."

"No. That wasn't supposed to happen. We got carried away is all."

"Whatever. We're done." Ali threw her hands in the air. "I'm going to work. I'll organize somewhere to stay and come back later to grab a few things. You can get yourself packed up and I'll come back when you move out."

She took that better than I expected. At least she gave me the opportunity to put it on her. Raping women for fuck's sake, even if it's consensual. I can't believe it.

Ali went to the bathroom, relieved herself. She didn't change. *I like the idea of wearing Judy's clothes.*

Rae was standing by the door when she came out of the bedroom. Ali walked past her without a word.

"What?" Rae asked. "Not even a kiss goodbye."

Ali glared at her. "I'm not kissing a fucking rapist."

She opened the door and left, slamming it behind her.

Mouse peeked when he heard the door slam.

Looks like Eight is going to work early. Is she covering breakfast because she left early yesterday? Wait for Seven to go out and then I'll slip inside.

No sooner had the elevator doors closed than Seven came out.

She's going early. Wearing a skirt, good. Doesn't look happy. Something's not right.

When the second elevator's doors closed, Mouse slipped out of his alcove and pressed the button. It didn't take long. When he arrived on the first floor, Seven was leaving the building.

He followed.

She was rushing, hurrying to catch up with Eight, he guessed. He quickened his pace. Seven was too intent on catching Eight to notice him, even though the street was quiet, with rows of cars parked on either side. People who lived close to the city didn't need to leave early.

Seven caught up with Eight as she stepped from the footpath between two cars. They were arguing, but he wasn't close enough to hear what they were saying.

He looked around. The street was deserted, other than an orange and yellow van driving past the row of parked cars.

Seven pushed Eight into the van's path. The driver apparently hadn't seen the two women between the cars and the van hit Eight hard. She flew into the air and landed with a thud so loud Mouse heard it above the squeal of the heavily applied brakes.

Seven stared at Eight with a horrified expression, then turned and ran away from her apartment. He discreetly made his way closer. He didn't want to be noticed, didn't want to be identified as a witness.

Eight was lying on the road, a pool of blood under her head. She wasn't moving.

The driver was screaming into his phone. "She came from nowhere. I didn't see her. I've killed her."

Mouse, who'd ducked between two parked cars so he couldn't be seen, stared at Eight's body. He began to cry. *I've lost her. Seven took her from me.*

The ambulance arrived first. Police minutes later. They taped off the scene. People—apparently drawn out of their homes by the sound of brakes—had crowded around craning their heads to look at his Eight in the street. Mouse was watching what was happening, but his eyes were darting around, looking for any sign of Seven, *the murdering bitch*, returning. She didn't.

He may have lost Eight, but he wouldn't lose Seven.

More police arrived and began taking photographs of the scene and measuring skid marks. The driver was sitting on the curb, head in his hands.

The paramedics lifted Eight's lifeless body onto a gurney and placed her in the back of the ambulance. As the ambulance pulled away, sirens blaring, Mouse turned, and slipped away quietly like a mouse, and made his way back to the apartment.

He ducked into his alcove, pulled on his disposable overalls, shoe covers, two pairs of gloves, and a condom. His hearing tuned in to listen for the elevator. He placed a surgical hat on his head and a mask over his face. Mouse checked the blade in his pocket and slipped inside the apartment, his heart pounding.

Standing beside the door where he couldn't be seen but could grab Seven when she entered, he waited. He stood patiently, excitement building for two hours before he heard the code release the lock.

Seven stepped in, quickly closing the door behind her. She looked flustered. Her face was red, her eyes swollen. She'd been crying. There were scratches on her face. *Did Eight do that?*

He stepped behind her, his hand whipped round quickly and covered her mouth. With his other hand, he pushed the blade against her throat, enough to draw blood.

"If you want to live," he lied. "Do exactly as I say and don't make a sound."

Seven nodded.

"We're going to your bedroom."

Seven nodded again.

"Now."

They moved to the bedroom.

"Walk to the bed."

Keeping the blade against her throat, pushing it a little deeper, enough so she wouldn't get ideas, he used his free hand to pull her panties down to her knees.

"Bend over and put your hands flat on the bed. Try anything or make a sound and it'll be nothing for me to cut your throat."

She did as he instructed, her face reflected in the mirror. He could see fear in her eyes. She was sobbing. When she bent forward, a drop of blood fell on the bed. He smelled her farts. *Why do they always fart?*

He lifted his foot and placed it in the crotch of her panties, pushing them down to her ankles.

Mouse was ready. He placed his erect penis against her vaginal opening and thrust himself inside of her. Seven was frozen with fear, and compliant with a hint of hope. They always were.

He continued thrusting until he felt himself ejaculate and then withdrew himself. As he did, he pulled the blade across her throat, and she collapsed on the bed, which absorbed the blood as it gushed out of her. The room filled with a metallic odor. A final involuntary convulsion as he felt her life drain out of her.

He smiled. *At least I got to encounter Seven.*

He wiped the blade on the back of her shirt. Folded it and slipped it between the two gloves on his left hand. He zipped himself up. Took one last look at Seven's body, turned, and left the apartment. It had been much quicker than he'd intended, but he was concerned the police would turn up looking to question Seven.

He retrieved his backpack from the alcove, then slipped into the stairwell and onto the roof through the door he'd propped open days earlier.

Going to the area he'd selected, with cover on three sides, Mouse removed his outer layers and dropped them to the ground. He removed his condom and dropped it on top. He doused the pile with lighter fluid and dropped a match, both of which he'd hidden on the roof. Mouse always enjoyed hearing the whoosh as the fire took hold. It was part of his encounter.

After the fire had done its job, leaving a small unidentifiable piece of slag on the ground, he pulled his hood over his head so no one would notice his skullcap, and slung his backpack on.

On his way home, he stopped beside various trash cans separately, disposing of his inner gloves, shoe covers and finally his cap.

Mouse stopped halfway across the bridge, pretending to enjoy the view as the small burlap bag containing the blade slipped from his grasp and into the river.

He arrived home, stripped his clothes off, and placed them in the washing machine, adding bleach, for their first cycle.

He showered; the steaming hot water stung his skin.

Feeling clean, he went to his mother's room, opened the draws in the dressing table, selected her silky underwear, cream panties, a red bra and a white full slip. He turned to the wardrobe and chose a pink dress.

Mouse glimpsed his reflection in the mirror, but as usual, saw his mother. He crawled into her bed. As he always did when he'd had an encounter. He slid his hand up his dress, and inside his panties, closed his eyes and relived his encounter with Seven.

She'd been tight and tense. He'd liked that. Maybe because she was a lesbian, or maybe because she'd just killed her lover.

Despite having encountered Seven, he didn't feel the same satisfaction he usually felt after an encounter. He supposed it was because he'd lost Eight.

I need to find a way to encounter Eight.

Sleeping Beauty

Judy sipped her flat white coffee, opened her eyes, then picked up her cellphone. She selected the first name on her contact list and hit call. It answered on the fourth ring.

“This is officer Jason Townsend.”

Judy’s stomach sank. *Something’s wrong.*

“H-h-hello,” she said. “I was calling Alison Farrington.”

“I’m afraid Ms. Farrington has been in an accident. We need to con...”

“What happened? Is she all right? Where is she?” Judy’s pulse was racing, tears filled her eyes, dread filled her stomach.

“I’m sorry, but Ms. Farrington was struck by a car,” The inexperienced officer revealed. “It doesn’t look good, so we need to contact her next of kin.”

No! No! No! Not Ali. “Her sons are away... At college. I-I-I’m her emergency contact. Where is she?”

“What’s your name, ma’am?”

“Judy Vernon.” She was trying to force herself to remain calm, but the tears were flowing freely, and she was fumbling to put her stuff into her bag. “Where is she?” She shouted into the phone.

“Auburn Presbyterian.”

Judy ended the call and ran to the kitchen. “Becky, Ali’s been in an accident. Can you take care of Mel when she gets home? I’ll call when I know what’s happening.”

She ran outside, into the late morning sunshine, without waiting for Rebekah’s answer, and flagged a taxi.

From the taxi, she called John Farrington, who sounded happy to hear from her. “Hi Judy...”

“Ali’s been in an accident. She’s at Auburn Presbyterian. It doesn’t sound good. I’m on my way. Let the boys know.”

Again, she didn’t wait for an answer. She ended the call and stared straight ahead. *Please God.*

“I’ll get you there as quick as I can,” the driver said, as he increased speed.

Judy had the door open nearly before he stopped at the hospital, threw the driver a twenty, slammed the door shut and ran inside.

“Alison Farrington,” she screamed at the receptionist. “She was in an accident.”

The receptionist checked her computer. “Fourth floor, you can use the elevator on the right.”

Judy ran to the elevator, pressed the call button, and waited. *Come on, come on.*

The doors opened, Judy pushed her way in, passed the people trying to exit. Ignoring their protests, she frantically pushed the button marked four.

The doors opened, and she ran to the fourth-floor reception desk. “Alison Farrington,” she said in panicked tones.

The receptionist checked her computer. *God, doesn't anybody know anything?*

The receptionist said calmly, "She's in surgery. Please wait over there." She pointed to an area with chairs towards the center of the floor. "Someone will see you shortly."

She opened her mouth to speak, but didn't know what to say. The receptionist handed her a box of tissues. "Here," she said.

Judy realized she was still crying.

She looked around. Other than the elevators, and the white reception desk adjacent to them, there was little in the room. A glass screen separating rows of uncomfortable looking seats, about twenty, she guessed. Mostly, the room was unoccupied.

She threw her bag on a yellow plastic chair in the waiting area and took two tissues, dropping the box beside her bag. She blew her nose and was wiping her face when a police officer appeared beside her.

"Are you Judy Vernon?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Officer Townsend. We spoke on the phone."

"What happened?"

"She stepped in front of a van from between two cars. The driver didn't see her. She was hit hard."

"How is she?"

"I'm not a doctor..."

"But?"

He shook his head. "She was hit hard," He repeated, looking around. Hoping for support, Judy guessed. A nurse was heading over, and Townsend was visibly relieved. He stepped away, but didn't go far.

"What is your relationship with Alison Farrington?" The nurse asked.

"I'm her girlfriend, her emergency contact."

The nurse nodded. "Please sit down and I'll explain what's happening."

The strength drained from Judy's legs, and she sat. *Why won't anybody tell me what's happening?*

The nurse took her hand. "Alison suffered severe head trauma. She's in a coma. The doctors are operating now, trying to relieve the pressure on her brain. We'll know more after the surgery. The doctor will come and update you then."

Judy had a thousand questions, but couldn't find one. "I um..."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but until she's out of surgery, there isn't anything more I can tell you. I'll bring you a coffee."

The nurse left, and Officer Townsend sat beside her. "I'm sorry about your girlfriend, ma'am, but I need to ask you a couple of questions."

Judy nodded.

"Have next of kin been notified?"

“I spoke with John, her ex-husband. He’ll call their children. He’s on his way. Shouldn’t be long.”

The nurse returned and handed Judy a coffee. She sipped it and screwed up her nose. *Instant three-in-one.*

John arrived. Again, Townsend seemed relieved. Judy passed him her coffee, giving him little choice but to take it, and jumped up to embrace John, who’d rushed to her as soon as he stepped out of the elevator. Her tears flowed once more.

He hugged her and allowed her to cry. Judy’s tears stopped, and she reached for some tissues.

“What happened?” John asked.

“A car hit her. She’s in surgery now, but they won’t know anything until she’s out.” Judy saw the look of despair on John’s face. She knew what he was thinking.

“It’s not like Peter, John. She’s in surgery. They’ll save her.”

John nodded slowly and whispered, “I hope so.”

Townsend stood, handed Judy her coffee, and extracted his notebook and pen from his top pocket. “I’m sorry, sir, but I need a little information.”

John nodded.

“May I have your full name?”

“John Charles Farrington.”

“And you’re Ms. Farrington’s former husband?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Ms. Vernon said you’d contacted her next of kin?”

“Yes, our boys. They’re both flying back today, but I don’t know...”

“That’s fine. I only need to confirm they’ve been notified.” He made some notes in his book, then directed his gaze back to Judy. “I hope your friend’ll be alright.” He nodded, then left.

John sat beside Judy. They held hands, but neither knew what to say.

Thirty minutes later, the nurse who’d spoken to Judy previously returned. “Ms. Farrington is still in surgery. I’m not sure how much longer. As soon as I can give you more information, I will.”

John said, “Thank you.”

Judy cried, and John held her. “I can’t lose her, John, not now. That’d be too cruel.”

John appeared about to say something, but didn’t. Instead, he held her tighter.

“Ali told me you worked it out,” Judy explained. “Myron said we should, but you’re right. We’re waiting for him to come back. He needs to be the one who completes our connection.”

John nodded and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “I’m sure she’s going to be okay.”

“We can’t be sure, but I’m praying to Frank. I don’t know if he can help wherever he is, but I know he will if he can. He brought us together.”

John nodded, but seemed unsure what to say. "Have you let Rae know?"

"I didn't think of Rae. We better call her."

Judy tried calling, but there was no answer. She left a message.

"I'm probably the last one she wants to talk to," Judy said. "Ali was going to tell Rae she wasn't going with her."

"I thought she'd decided to go."

"She did, but we spoke to Myron last night and he changed everything."

John smiled. "Between us, I never really liked Rae."

"No, I don't either."

Lori arrived. She hugged Judy first and then John. "Any news?" She asked.

Judy shook her head.

John said, "She's in surgery."

"I think that's a good sign," Lori suggested.

"I hope so," Judy said. "I feel useless. Wish there was something I could do."

"Have either of you told Susie or Jenny?" Lori asked.

"No, waiting until I have something to tell them," John said.

"We should tell them," Lori said. "I'll do it."

Lori walked away, out of earshot, and called them.

John held Judy's hand.

Lori returned. "They'll wait until they hear from us."

Judy glanced at her watch for the one hundred and twenty-third time. *Nearly three hours.*

A nurse approached them. Judy stood. *Please God!*

The nurse said. "She's out of surgery. Come with me. The doctor will talk to you soon."

They followed her to an office. "Wait here. He won't be long."

Lori took Judy's hand, which was shaking, but no one spoke.

The doctor entered. Judy asked. "How is she? Can I see her?"

"I'm Andrew Allen. I operated on Ms. Farrington. She's in a coma," he explained. "To be honest, if she wasn't, I'd have induced one until the swelling in her brain subsides."

"What's the prognosis?" John asked.

"I hate these situations," Dr. Allen confessed. "There is hope, but I don't want to give you false hope. There are three possibilities. She could wake up at any time, she could remain in a coma indefinitely, or she may..."

"No!" exclaimed Judy. "We're *not* going to think of *that*. She'll wake up, we just don't know when."

Allen said, "Okay, let's focus on the positive for now."

"It's okay Doctor, you've made the situation clear," John said.

"Wh-When can I see her?" Judy asked.

"It won't be too long now. A nurse will come and get you."

"Thank you, doctor," John said.

John's phone rang. "Hello Frankie."

"She's in a coma. I'll explain it when you get here."

"Judy and Lori."

"Okay, son."

"Frankie's in a taxi on his way from the airport," John explained. "Don't know when Charlie's flight will get in."

"I'd better call Becky," Judy said. "Let her know what's happening." She glanced at her watch. "Too early to call Myron."

Judy left the room. When she returned fifteen minutes later, it was obvious she'd been crying. "Becky'll look after Mel tonight. I'm staying with Ali."

John and Lori exchanged glances.

"Of course you are," Lori said.

"Somebody should be with her, so she knows she's not alone, and when she wakes..."

"Yes, you're right Judy. But you can't do it by yourself. We'll talk to the boys tonight and draw up a roster. I promise one of us will be with her all the time. You're gonna need some sleep and to get away from the hospital sometimes."

Judy looked like she was about to argue, but didn't.

"John, can you get us some coffees?" Lori asked. "I'll stay with Judy until you get back, then I'll update your sisters."

"Sounds like a plan," John said.

"Judy, give me Rae's number," Lori said. "I'll try her again, too."

"Thank you."

Ten minutes later, John returned with their coffees, followed by a nurse who said, "You can see her now. A maximum of two visitors."

Lori said, "You two go. I'll make those calls and wait for Frankie."

John received a message as they reached the door of Ali's room and glanced at his phone. "Charlie's plane has landed," he said. "He's on his way."

Judy stepped inside and gasped. Her tears flowed again. Ali looked like she was asleep other than the tubes, wires, and machines. Her head was bandaged. John held Judy.

When John felt Judy relax, he moved a chair beside Ali's bed. "Sit and talk to her."

Judy nodded. She sat and reached out to take Ali's hand, being careful not to disturb her I.V. "I don't know what to say."

“Just tell her how you feel. I’m sure she can hear you,” John said. “Tell her whatever you want her to know.”

“I love you, Ali, and I need you. Don’t you go anywhere. Sleep as long as you need to get well. I’ll be here waiting when you wake up.”

John said, “I better go talk to the boys.”

“Okay, I’ll stay here.”

John found Lori and his sons sitting together in the cafeteria.

Charlie stood. “What’s happening Dad?”

“She’s in a coma. We don’t know when or even if she’s going to come out of it. When you see her, she’s all tubes and wires, and her head is bandaged, so don’t be surprised. Keeping her alive until she gets better. Judy’s with her.”

“Of course she is,” said Frankie.

“Your mom can only have two visitors at a time. I think Judy will want to stay with her, but she’s going to need a break.”

Frankie said, “I think we need to make sure someone is with her all the time, so when she wakes up...”

“I think so too,” John said.

“Problem is,” Lori said, “We don’t know how long it’s going to be. If it’s going to be weeks or months, you two will need to go back to school, but Jenny and Susie can be with her when we can’t. Rae too, but I can’t contact her.”

“I don’t like Rae,” Charlie said.

“I’ll draw up a roster,” John said. “Four-hour shifts.”

“I think you need to be flexible, Dad,” Frankie said. “Maybe Aunt Susie can’t do four hours.”

“What about two-hour blocks?” Lori suggested.

“I’ll do four blocks overnight. I can study while I’m with her. Maybe read some stuff from my textbooks to her,” Frankie suggested. “I’ll start tonight.”

“I’ll fit in around everyone else,” Charlie said. “I can fill the holes.”

“I’ll work it out. Let Frankie know who’ll relieve him in the morning.”

Charlie said, “If Frankie’s doing tonight, I’ll go see her now.”

Judy glanced up when Charlie entered the room.

“Hello Aunt Judy,” he said. “How is she?”

“Hi. Charlie, I don’t know. She’s...” Judy indicated Ali. “I’ve been talking to her, but I don’t know if she can hear me.”

Judy had stood, and Charlie hugged her. “I can’t believe it. I don’t like seeing her like this,” Charlie said. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t know either. I want to do something, but I feel useless.”

“Dad’s making a roster. Someone will always be with her. We know you’ll be here most of the time, so there’ll always be someone to give you a break. Hope she wakes up soon.”

“So do I. While you’re here, I’d better call Myron. Just sit beside her and talk to her. Let her know she’s not alone.”

Charlie sat, “Hi Mom,” he said. “I love you.”

Judy left the room to call Myron.

“Hello sweetheart, I was going to ring you a little later.”

“Myron, Ali’s been in an accident. She’s in a coma. The doctor doesn’t know when she’ll wake up, or if she’ll wake up.”

“What happened?”

“She got hit by a car. Not the driver’s fault, the police said.”

“What do you need me to do? We’ll get the next flight home, I...”

“Doctor said there’s nothing anyone can do. I wish you were here, but there’s no point in rushing back. She’ll either wake up or...”

Judy was crying.

“You need me. I can be there for you if nothing else.”

“Papa needs you too. Finish his last trip. It’s only a few more weeks. I don’t want to spoil it for him.”

“He’ll understand.”

“I know, but really, there’s nothing you can do.”

“There might be something...”

“You look after Papa, and I’ll look after Ali. John’s drawn up a roster so there’ll be somebody with her all the time.”

“What about Melanie?”

“She’s with Becky and Darnell. Perhaps you could call her?”

“Yes, I’ll do that.”

They talked a while longer and rang off.

When Judy returned to Ali’s room, Frankie had replaced Charlie sitting beside his mother. He stood when Judy entered the room. “Aunt Judy,” he said. “How’re you holding up?”

They hugged. “I don’t know, Frankie, still trying to process it.”

“Well, I’ll be here all night, every night, if you need to talk.”

“Thank you. How’re you holding up yourself?”

“I don’t know yet. I don’t have enough information. I’ll try to talk with the doctor when I can.”

“I don’t think they know much more than us.”

“Rae’s still not answering.”

“She was moving to San Francisco. Maybe she left early.”

“Maybe. I think Mom was trying to have what she had with Monica, but Rae’s not Monica. I spoke to her. I think she’ll fly in tomorrow.”

“She’ll be glad Monica came. She hasn’t said anything, but she misses her.”

“Yes, but she couldn’t give Mon what she needed, so she understands.”

“Your mom is an amazing person. People don’t realize it, but she always puts the needs of others before her own.”

“Yes, she does, and she makes the best of things.”

Judy began crying again, and Frankie hugged her. “I love her so much, Frankie. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost her.”

Myron hung up from Melanie and stared at his phone. His brain had been working in overdrive since he’d spoken with Judy. *I wonder if?*

He called Joel Swartz. “Hello Joel, this is Myron Myerson.”

“Myron. This is unexpected. What do you need?”

“I know it’s been a while, but I was hoping you could help me.”

“If I can, I will.”

“A friend of mine is in a coma, and I was...”

“Give me the details.”

Myron told him what he knew, and where Alison was being treated.

“I’ll get the first flight out in the morning.”

“Thank you, Joel, send your account to my office...”

“It is nothing compared to what I owe you. I’ll call you when I’ve seen Alison.”

“My wife, Judy Vernon, will be there.”

“I’ll talk to her too.”

They rang off.

Doctor Swartz

Ending his call from Myron, Joel rang his travel agent. “First flight out and last one back.”

He called his assistant. “Jean, can you rearrange my schedule tomorrow? I need to consult on a case out of town. I think one day will be enough.”

He packed a bag with a change of clothes, just in case.

Joel settled into his first-class seat on the plane. He remembered when he’d met Myron.

He hung up from his financial advisor and sat staring at nothing, trying to process what he’d been told. *How can all my money be gone?*

He’d been distracted all day, and he’d woken at three in the morning. *Why would he put all my money into a dubious start up? It doesn’t make sense.*

Three days of enquires about forensic accountants had given him several names. One of whom had appeared on everybody’s list of suggestions. Myron Myerson.

“Send me your financial records,” Myron had said. “I have a program that sends bots tracking everything.”

“But all my records show is me transferring funds to my advisor.”

“That’ll be enough to open the door. The bots are like little tracker dogs, they’ll tell us what happened. Of course, your advisor could be telling the truth. If so, we’ll confirm it,” Myron explained.

“And if not?”

“We’ll know where your money is.”

A few days later, Joel received a call. “It was a sophisticated scam,” Myron had said. “He owned the startup through a shell company. An elaborate smoke and mirrors deception.”

“Bastard. Do you know where my money is?”

“Yes, every penny.”

“Can I get it back?”

“If he cooperates. We’ll need to give him an incentive. Do you have any connections at the District Attorney’s office?”

“Yes, I know the DA, in fact.”

“Set a meeting.”

A week later, they sat in the DA’s office with Omar Grimes, head of the NYPD Financial Crimes Unit.

Myron provided details of every financial transaction from a number of investors who’d used the same financial advisor, explaining how the scam had worked, and tracking the money through to its current location in an offshore account out of reach of the authorities.

Grimes said, “This level of detail is very impressive. Can you tell me how you could track it all in such detail?”

“No,” said Myron. “But I can assure you it’s accurate.”

“I have no doubt,” Grimes said. “Two problems. It’s unlikely we could use your information without disclosing your methods, and we can’t freeze the money where it is.”

“Both true. However, in my experience, this level of detail will do two things. It’ll tell you where to look to get the proof you need and give you leverage to encourage cooperation.”

Grimes nodded. “My thinking too.” To the DA he said, “I’ll need some warrants, then we’ll arrest him and troll through his records. We know exactly what we’re looking for.”

The DA made a call, and the warrants were organized.

“The other problem is, as soon as he knows we’re onto him, he could move the money.”

“He’ll probably panic and do that, they usually do. If he’s smart, he’ll leave it where it is because you can’t touch it or prove it’s there, but they seldom do. When he moves it, I’ll know, and track it.”

“Looking at this, I thought you might. Don’t s’pose you’ll let me have a copy of your program.”

“No, but I do consult for law enforcement in several jurisdictions. I can’t give you anything you can use, but I can tell you what you’re looking for.”

In exchange for a year in minimum security prison, all the investors’ money had been returned.

Joel owed Myron.

He arrived at Auburn Presbyterian and was directed to Andrew Allen’s office.

“Dr. Allen, I’m sorry to call in unannounced. I’m Dr. Joel Swartz. I’ve been asked by the family to consult on Ms. Alison Farrington’s condition.”

“The Dr. Joel Swartz from New York?”

“Yes.”

“It’s an honor to meet you. Take a seat.” Andy slid Ali’s file across the desk. “Here’s her records. We have CCTV in our operating theaters. I’ll cue the recording and we can watch it together. If I could have done anything different, I’d value your feedback. Would you like a coffee?”

Joel studied the young man. *Not defensive or questioning my presence. Not trying to justify himself. A sound doctor.* “I’d love a coffee, early start this morning.”

Joel read the file, making some notes as he did.

Over a second coffee, they watched the footage of the operation, with Dr. Allen providing commentary of the thinking behind his decisions made during the procedure.

Confident and competent. Textbook procedure.

“You did exactly what I’d have done, and your thinking was sound. She owes you her life.” Joel said.

“If she makes it,” Andy replied.

“Am I keeping you from anything?”

“Nothing urgent,” Andy said. “I rescheduled everything. An opportunity to consult with a neurosurgeon of your caliber is invaluable.”

Swartz nodded. *He's the real deal. He glanced at his watch.* "Now I'd like to consult you about lunch. How's the cafeteria?"

"Palatable."

"Let's have a bite and talk about where we go from here."

Over lunch, Joel asked, "What're you thinking?"

"I'm concerned about the swelling on the brain. I think it's best she remain in a coma to give the swelling a chance to go down."

"Agreed. What have you told the family?"

"The truth. I don't know what her prognosis is."

"That's my policy too. I don't like to give them false hope. They have enough already."

They sent Ali for a brain scan.

"This is what I'm concerned about. The swelling hasn't reduced like I hoped it would."

"She's taken an extremely hard hit. It may take some time. The swelling could increase, and you may need to go back in to release the pressure. I think daily scans."

"Yes, I planned that."

"Let's go talk to the family," Joel said. "Can you email me the daily scans?"

"Thank you. I'd appreciate your guidance," Andy responded.

Judy had gone to buy a coffee while the doctors had taken Ali for some tests.

When she returned to Ali's room, a familiar face greeted her. "Monica! She'll be happy you came."

"Hello Judy, I was hoping you'd be here."

The women embraced. Judy studied Monica. Her hair was longer now, and more feminine. She wore a cream blouse and an olive skirt, with black high heels. Her make up was more subtle than it used to be. *Maybe a good thing Ali's not awake to see her.*

"I still can't believe this has happened," Judy said.

"No. It was a shock when Frankie called. How is she?"

"They've taken her for more tests. She's still in a coma."

"What do the doctors say? Do they think she'll pull through?"

"They don't know," Judy said. "At least they're being honest."

"All we can do is pray, I suppose. I'm not religious, but I've been praying."

Judy nodded. "I've been talking to her, hoping she can hear me, but you're right, it's not enough. I need to pray."

"If she can hear anyone, it'll be you."

"I don't know what I'll do without her." Judy grimaced and began crying. Monica embraced her.

After she composed herself, Judy asked, "How about you, Mon? Life treating you well?"

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I’m happy. She loves me. Between us, she’s not Ali, but she can give me what Ali can’t.”

“That’s my fault.”

“I’ve never believed that.”

Judy glanced away. She didn’t quite believe her.

Monica expanded. “We have a daughter. She’s the biological mother, artificial insemination. We plan to marry soon. Should have done it prior to the birth of our Jasmine, but I wanted to be sure.”

“Will you only have one?”

“No, we’ll have another, but I’ll be the mother. One each. Hopefully, they’ll be sisters.”

“Oh, you want another girl?”

“I think that’s better for us, being lesbians, but probably just my prejudice. Although, I do love Ali’s boys.”

Judy smiled. “Be happy, Mon.”

Monica grinned. “I am. I was worried Ali’s bitch would be here.”

“Rae doesn’t know. Nobody’s been able to contact her.”

“Seems strange.”

“Rae’s moving away. She nearly talked Ali into going with her, but in the end, Ali decided to stay. Last I saw Ali, she was on her way to tell Rae her decision. I assume Rae wasn’t happy and moved early. My guess is she got herself a new number to mess with Ali, hoping that when Ali couldn’t contact her, she’d go looking for her.”

“I could see Rae doing that.”

“Nothing we can do until we can contact her,” Judy said. “I don’t think anyone is interested enough to track her down.”

“The boys don’t like her. They still talk to me sometimes.”

An orderly brought Ali back to her room. “The doctors will be along to talk to you shortly,” he said. He settled Ali in, making sure the electronic devices and lines were functioning correctly and then left.

“She looks so vulnerable like that,” Monica said, “but she’s kinda cute bald.”

“She is. Maybe I should ask her to keep it shaved,” Judy suggested.

“I remember when she had herself waxed. She told me she wanted to experience being bald.”

“I recall she liked the visual, but wasn’t too impressed with the itching as the hair regrew.”

“It certainly was visually stunning,”

Judy smiled, “I never saw it, but I’d like to.” *I’ll ask her to do it again for me. She’ll probably want me to do it, too. Wonder what Myron will make of that.* “Thank you, Mon, you’ve lightened my mood a little. I needed that.”

Dr. Allen and another man entered. The other man was older, with a full head of grey hair. In his fifties, Judy guessed. He wore gold rimmed rectangular glasses, and Judy noted a plum-colored shirt under his lab coat.

“Judy, this is Dr. Swartz, a leading specialist from New York.”

Judy extended her hand but frowned. *Why has he called in a specialist? Has she deteriorated?* “Hello, Dr. Swartz, I’m Judy Vernon.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Ms. Vernon, but I wish it was under better circumstances. Your husband called me last night and asked if I could consult on Ms. Farrington’s situation.”

“Oh, you know Myron?”

“Yes, he helped me out when I needed it. Ms. Farrington hasn’t deteriorated, but she hasn’t improved as much as we’d like. I believe Dr. Allen has explained the situation, which hasn’t changed. I’ve reviewed her files, watched a video of the operation, and examined her myself. She’s in excellent hands, and Dr. Allen will keep me updated. Unfortunately, there’s nothing more we can tell you. As Dr. Allen explained, now we have to wait.”

“Thank you, Dr. Swartz,” Judy said.

“I need to leave now. I have a plane to catch. I’ll call Myron later when I get back to New York as a courtesy, but there is nothing I can tell him I haven’t told you.”

The doctors left.

Judy and Monica stared at each other for a moment and then embraced.

“I have a feeling she’ll be fine,” Monica said.

“I hope so, Mon.”

“I’m here for a few days, and will sit with her. If you have matters needing your attention, now would be the time to do them before I fly home.”

Judy frowned, and seemed about to argue, but didn’t. Instead, she sat beside Monica, and rested her head on Monica’s shoulder as they held hands, silently staring at the woman they both loved.

Dr. Allen returned fifteen minutes later.

“Dr. Swartz is the leading neurosurgeon in the country, perhaps the world. That he’d drop everything and fly here to consult is extraordinary.”

“My husband,” Judy explained. “Has an amazing network of contacts and people who feel they owe him a favor.”

Allen nodded, turned, and left.

Franco's

Myron stared at his phone, then glanced at his father, who frowned. "Mario wants to retire. He's offering us the first opportunity to take over Franco's."

"They should. Without you bailing them out, there'd be no Franco's," Papa suggested.

Myron looked at Ruth, who nodded. He smiled. They were permitted to talk about business, and it wasn't the Sabbath.

"Yes, Papa. He intimated that. He asked me to make him an offer, which I can do because we do his accounting."

"What about this new restaurant?" Art asked. "Could you take on another?"

Myron frowned thoughtfully as he identified and connected the dots. He glanced at his mother.

Ruth said, "I'll order us up some coffees, and perhaps some snacks." She picked up the room phone and placed her order.

Two savoury and one sweet plate. Myron smiled. Combination Boreka-pastry pouches filled with spinach, potato, and cheese. Potato Latkes-small potato pancakes with a side of sour cream. The sweet snacks were Rugelach—similar to chocolate filled mini croissants—made with cream cheese and yogurt.

He glanced at his father, whose appetite was diminishing daily. *High calorie snacks for Papa's benefit.*

"Darnell and Rebekah are not involved in Suzy Q's, and Franco's would give them a flagship restaurant. It's fully staffed, so no immediate pressure there. Darnell could run it, but has limited experience with Italian cuisine," Myron began talking, perhaps more to himself than to his father.

"I think I might offer to buy eighty percent from Mario, with him retaining twenty and remaining as a consultant for Darnell. We'll give Darnell and Rebekah a share, as usual, and keep sixty. Later they could buy Mario out themselves if it suits everybody."

"Makes sense," Art agreed.

The doorbell chimed, and Ruth opened the door for the room service attendant to wheel in a trolley. He made a couple of adjustments under a tablecloth, and the trolley was converted into a small table. He opened a compartment and extracted their order, which he laid out on the table.

Ruth thanked him, and went to pour the coffee, as Myron pulled some notes from his pocket for a tip.

"Thank you, sir," the attendant said. "Call down when you're done, and we'll collect everything."

"Okay," replied Myron. "Thank you."

Ruth passed her son a coffee. "We're proud of the opportunities you and Judy have given Rebekah and Darnell."

"No, Mama." Myron smiled. "We gave Rebekah an opportunity, and she brought Darnell in. They've worked for and earned everything else. It's Rebekah and Darnell you should be proud of."

“Oh, I am son. I’m proud of them too.” She handed a plate of snacks to her husband. “You must eat these, Art. We need to keep your strength up.”

Art grimaced to his son, but took the plate and smiled at his wife. “Of course.”

Myron placed his cup on the table and redialled Mario.

“I’ve given it some thought.” Myron laid out his plan. “I’d like you to retain twenty percent and remain as a consultant and advisor to Darnell.”

Myron listened and smiled when he heard Mario’s response.

“Thank you. Then we have a deal. When you feel the time is right, you can sell some or all of your share to Rebekah and Darnell.”

Myron nodded as he listened again.

“Okay, I’ll have Judy contact you and arrange a meeting.”

Myron ended the call and glanced at his watch. *A little early, but I think she’ll be home for breakfast.* He selected the number at the top of his frequently called numbers list.

“Hello sweetheart.”

He sipped some coffee, then smiled at her response.

“Nothing bad. I’ve been negotiating with Mario. We’re going to buy eighty percent of Franco’s. He’ll stay on as a consultant, but Darnell can take it over as their flagship restaurant. We’ll give Rebekah and Darnell twenty percent and keep sixty ourselves.”

Myron sipped some more and grinned at Art, who was reluctantly eating his snacks, under Ruth’s watchful eye.

“They’re fully staffed, so he can walk in and take over. The only issue is a head chef for Dancer’s, especially with Leon gone to run Suzy Q’s.”

He picked up a Boreka and ate it while listening.

“Sure, can you set a meeting with Mario, Darnell, and Rebekah? They don’t know yet, so you can have the pleasure of informing them. I’ll have Simon prepare the paperwork.”

He rang off and called Simon Sharpe.

Judy stepped out of the shower. She’d nearly dried herself when her phone rang. Her heart skipped a beat. *What now? Ali?* She dropped her towel and darted into the bedroom to answer it. She glanced at caller ID. Her heart calmed for a moment, and then she was hit with another thought. *Papa?*

She pushed the answer key, but barely registered his hello.

“Myron?” Her voice was an octave or two higher than usual. “What’s happened?”

She relaxed and listened to Myron’s news about Franco’s.

“Do you think they can handle it? I mean Suzy Q’s has just opened. Leon has gone. Will they be able to find staff?”

She considered teasing him, but decided it wasn’t the time. She’d been almost celibate for years before she and Myron got together, but now between Myron and Ali... She shook her head to focus on what he was saying.

“Okay. You’re right, of course. My mind is too full of Ali to concentrate. What do you need me to do?”

She listened, forcing herself to focus.

“I umm... I’ll do it today. Monica is here for another couple of days. She’ll be with Ali all day.”

She rang off, got dressed, and called Monica.

“Hello Mon...”

“What is it?” Judy recognised the anxiety in Monica’s voice. “Has something happened to Ali?”

“No, no. I’m sorry. John is with her, but she’s fine.”

Monica sighed, loudly. “Sorry, I...”

Judy smiled. “I’m the same every time the phone rings. I need to attend to a little business today, so I won’t be in until late.”

“Okay, I’ll relieve John and stay with her all day, so don’t worry, she won’t be alone.”

Judy ended the call, collected her bag, and headed downstairs for a coffee and breakfast with Melanie.

Judy was finishing her flat white when Melanie and Rebekah entered the diner.

Rebekah smiled and went to the kitchen. Melanie skipped to the booth, sat beside Judy, and kissed her.

“Hello Mama.”

“Hi sweetheart, how was your night?”

“Funny. Uncle Darnell told me some stories when he came home after work.”

Judy raised an eyebrow. “Seems to be a bit late for you to be up.”

“Oh, Mama.” Mel frowned. “I was talking to Papa for a long time, so I was still awake when Uncle Darnell got home.”

“Still, a young girl like you needs enough sleep. It’s a school day.”

Melanie sighed. “I didn’t become stupid because you’re tied up with Aunt Ali. Do you think I don’t know it’s a school day? Am I on time and ready for school?”

“Yes, but...”

“So, no problem. Here’s Bea with our breakfast now.”

“Yes, but...”

“Mama, I’m fine. You have enough to worry about with Zeyde and Aunt Ali. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Yes, but...”

Melanie sighed again. “I miss Papa too. Now let’s eat breakfast quietly, like you always tell me.”

Judy looked at her daughter, shook her head, and turned her attention to breakfast.

After breakfast, Melanie stood and pulled her backpack on. “Time for school. Don’t worry about me, Mama, I’m fine. I promise.”

Judy smiled. “Well, come give me a goodbye kiss.”

Melanie knelt on the bench, leaned in, and kissed Judy. “Goodbye Mama, I love you.”

“I love you too, Mel. When you say goodbye to Becky, could you ask her to come see me?”

Melanie stared at her. “You’re not going to say anything about bedtimes, are you?”

Despite herself, Judy grinned. “No, it’s business.”

Judy finished her coffee. When she heard the door open, she glanced up and smiled as her daughter left for school.

Rebekah approached. “Darnell has finished at the markets. He’ll be here soon.”

“Fine, I can wait.”

“Another coffee while you’re waiting?”

Judy nodded. *I’m too predictable.*

She looked out the window and observed George enjoying his cigarette. He was pretending not to be watching her, but she could sense he was. She smiled. *Glad some things never change.*

Darnell arrived and, having fetched Bec from the kitchen, they headed to her booth together, stopping to have a word with Bea on the way.

Ordering more coffee, Judy assumed.

Darnell removed his arm from his wife’s shoulder and hugged Judy hello, and they sat opposite. “What do you need?” Becky asked.

Judy explained. “I had a call from Myron this morning. Seems we’ve acquired an eighty percent share of a restaurant, and we’re hoping you guys could take it over for us. We’ll give you twenty percent.”

Darnell and Rebekah exchanged a glance.

“Of course we will, Aunt Judy, and thank you for the opportunity,” Becky said. “We really appreciate it.”

Darnell added, “We appreciate everything you and Uncle Myron have done for us. Which restaurant is it?”

Judy smiled. She wanted to see their reaction. “Franco’s.”

“Franco’s?” Darnell beamed and stared at first Judy and then Bec.

“Thank you, Aunt Judy, but that’s a high-end restaurant, not what we’re used to.”

“Myron says it’ll be your new flagship. He’s asked Mario to stay on as a consultant. Darnell can take it over as head chef under Mario’s guidance. It’s fully staffed now, so that won’t be any extra work until staff leave. The only immediate need, he thinks, is a head chef at Dancer’s, because Leon left.”

Darnell switched to professional mode. “That makes sense. I need to adjust to a high-end Italian restaurant. When I get it down, I’ll be able to start putting my slant on things.

Uncle Myron's right, we'll need to hire a new head chef for Dancer's. We were grooming Leon and haven't replaced him yet."

Becky said, "I'll keep half an eye on things for a while. Sarge can handle dinners here. There may be a good young chef at Franco's who'll appreciate the opportunity. Darnell can suss that out. When it's sorted, I'll start spending some time at Franco's, too. We need to understand the business, and we can move staff around to meet our needs, and theirs."

Judy smiled, pride swelling her chest. They were professionals now. "I'll call Mario, and we'll head over and work out the details. Myron has Simon preparing the agreements."

"I'll go let the kitchen know I'll be out for a while," Becky said.

Darnell smiled. "I never thought I'd ever have a high-end restaurant, let alone so soon. You and Uncle Myron have been so good to me. I want you to know, I appreciate everything you've done for me, for us."

"All we did was give you an opportunity here at Frank's. The rest is on you and Becky. You've both worked hard and earned the opportunities."

Becky left the kitchen. Judy and Darnell met her as they left to flag a taxi.

Eight By Proxy

Mouse was restless. Seven hadn't provided him with the level of satisfaction he usually experienced following an encounter. *I enjoyed slitting her throat. I owed her that. She took Eight from me.*

Even his masturbation ritual, reliving the experience when he returned home, hadn't left him content. His mind was too consumed with the loss of Eight.

I can't find another Eight. She wouldn't be Eight. She'd be Nine. Can I find Nine after missing Eight? I don't know. I guess I'll know when she looks at me and tells me she's Nine. Can that happen if I have no Eight?

Having seen the panties Seven had worn, he was sure the ones he'd taken from their apartment belonged to Eight. That was something. *I could go back and find some more. No. That would be stupid. Too dangerous.*

Eight's panties were not in good condition. Stiff from countless ejaculations but he couldn't wash them, they still carried faint traces of her scent.

It's only been a few days. Maybe Seven is still soft? Perhaps I could go back and do her again? I shouldn't have ended her so quickly. I could have tied her up for a while, moved her to the sofa and encountered her there, pretending she was Eight.

No... The police could've come looking for her, for killing Eight. How would they know what she did? Nobody saw but me.

If I go back to the park where Eight used to meet her other girlfriend. I can jerk off into her panties among the roses, and maybe it'll go away and Nine will find me somewhere.

That's what I'll do.

Jack Hawkins sat in his study. He poured himself a whiskey and glanced at his watch.

"Still not home. Always out late with her friend these days." *Why does she call them 'my friend'? Haven't they got a name? "Why don't I ask her the friend's name?" I don't want to know. I'm sure she's having an affair.*

Marcy arrived home. "I'm just gonna have a quick shower," she said.

"Okay." *No, sorry I'm late. Why does she need a shower? Wash her lover's scent off before she comes near me? Worried I'll smell the sex on her?*

He swallowed the last of his whiskey and poured another. He was tempted to go to the hamper, inspect her panties for traces of semen. *And if there are, then what?*

He didn't want to confirm his suspicions. Jack didn't want to confront her. He didn't want his marriage to end.

Besides, I was considering sleeping with Daphne, not because I'm bored with Marcy, just because I could. Daphne!

His thoughts turned from his wife's infidelity to Daphne and the man that took her life.

Eight. He's broken his pattern, or we haven't found her yet. Need to catch him before he strikes again.

To Jack, Daphne had been Seven, he didn't know Mouse didn't include Daphne because he hadn't encountered her. He didn't know that Mouse's Seven had been encountered and was waiting to be discovered.

There must be a pattern to how this sick bastard selects his victims, but I can't see it. No one can. Maybe Daphne did.

Marcy, out of the shower and dressed, stood at his door. *How long since I've seen her naked?*

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

"No, not yet."

"Me neither. I'll organize something."

"Thank you. I love you, Marcy."

"I know you do, Jack."

Judy settled into a routine. Her nights she spent with Ali in the hospital. Home in the morning to shower and have breakfast with Melanie, who was staying with Rebekah and Darnell. When Melanie went to school, Judy walked back to Auburn Presbyterian to clear her head, stopping at the hidden garden in People's Park, where she and Ali had been blessed, to sit quietly and pray to the ancient rose, or Frank Farrington's spirit, or to something. Then she visited Ali.

She followed the same route home, stopping to pray, before having dinner with Melanie. When Melanie went to bed, she'd take a taxi back to the hospital and take up her vigil at Ali's side.

She entered the garden on her way home, went to the center, sat on the bench, and prayed for Ali's recovery. She didn't notice the man leave the clump of trees and follow her into the garden.

Mouse saw Judy entering the circle of trees. *That's Eight's girlfriend. The one she cheated on Seven with. Probably why Seven killed her. It's her fault Eight's dead.*

He followed her into the circle of trees and hid between rows of roses, watching her as she sat praying. He became aroused, remembering watching the women make out as he masturbated.

That's why I delayed. If it hadn't been for her and Eight making out, I wouldn't have. It's her fault Eight's dead.

As he observed her, an idea formed. *I could encounter Eight through her girlfriend.*

When Judy left the park and headed home, Mouse followed.

She stopped to talk to a man having a cigarette, then entered a building. He stopped at the bus stop nearly adjacent and waited.

George saw a man, walking some distance behind Judy, sit at the bus stop and take a book from his bag, which he pretended to read.

Prison had given George many skills. One was an ability to look at someone without them knowing he was looking at them. Looking at people could get one in trouble inside. Another skill George possessed was knowing when someone was wrong. He could always pick the inmates who were snitches.

That guy is wrong. George lit a second cigarette, which he seldom did, and watched the man before going inside the restaurant to collect his dinner and head home.

When George arrived the next morning, the man was there again. George shuddered. *Got a bad feeling.*

He was busy in the kitchen when Judy left that morning, so he didn't see the man follow her.

Mouse followed Judy to the park, where she again went to the rose garden hidden behind the trees.

He then followed her to the hospital and waited outside until she left again several hours later. He didn't know who she'd visited. It never occurred to him that Eight was alive. He'd seen her die at the hands of Seven.

This was Mouse's routine for three days. On the third day, he hid a backpack in the clump of bushes and dug a small hole where he'd burn the evidence before covering it with dirt and raking the pile of leaves, he'd prepared, over it.

The fire never burns long. By the time anyone notices the smoke, it'll be done.

Jack Hawkins sipped his coffee. *Fuck, that's hot.* He blew on it. Jack contemplated what he considered the irony of life.

He knew, or thought he knew, what he didn't want to know. Marcy was having an affair.

He didn't know what he wanted to know. Where that sick bastard who was killing women was, or when he'd strike again?

Nothing is the way I want it. Daphne. The link between the two. If that fuck hadn't killed Daphne, I could have had something with her. Balance the ledger with Marcy. He drank a little coffee and discreetly scratched his balls under the table. *You don't know Marcy's having an affair.* "Yeah, I do. I just don't want to know."

Jack finished his coffee and stood to leave. He didn't know what to do about either situation.

Mouse woke excited. Today was the day. No waiting this time. *I don't know how long she'll be visiting the hospital. Better act before she changes her routine. Learned my lesson. I delayed too long with Eight and lost her.*

"You haven't prepared. You don't know her. She didn't let you know she wanted to be encountered."

I know enough, and it's Eight I'll encounter through her. Eight wanted to be encountered and Seven took her from me. I'll take Eight back.

"It's not safe in the park. Someone could come."

No one ever comes there except Eight and pretend Eight. I'll be quick.

“I have a bad feeling about this.”

That's the point, if I encounter Eight, the bad feeling will go away, and Nine will find me.

Mouse left his apartment early. He'd wait at the bus stop opposite her building.

Final Encounter

From his vantage point at the bus stop, Mouse glanced up from his book when he noticed Pretend Eight leave her building. She stopped and talked to the black guy smoking outside.

Pretend Eight began walking in the direction of People's Park.

Mouse dropped his book into his backpack, slipped it onto his shoulders, and discreetly followed. He didn't need to cross the road. He could see her clearly.

He went over the plan as he walked. Trail her into the park and the circular rose gardens to make sure no one else was around. Slip into his clump of bushes, put on his disposable overalls, two pairs of shoe protectors, and gloves. Surgical mask, condom, and cap. He had an erection, thinking about the encounter.

It wouldn't take long to finish. It never did after weeks of mental foreplay. She was now Eight.

As he ejaculated, he'd slit her throat and feel the life pulse out of her. He was close now; he could taste it. He knew she wasn't Eight, but she was the closest Mouse could get to Eight.

Afterward, he'd slip back into the clump of bushes, douse and burn the outer layers. With the lighter fuel, the fire would be done before anyone noticed the smoke. Fill the hole, cover it with leaves and be leaving the park within five minutes of the encounter.

Dispose of the inner gloves and shoe protectors on the way, drop the blade into the river, then go home to complete the final part of the dance alone.

Pretend Eight crossed the road ahead of him, as he knew she would. He followed her into the park. Mouse was alert, scanning the area for any other people. There were none.

She entered the circle of trees as she always did, and he ducked into the clump of bushes, his base camp. A quick scan to ensure everything was in order. He shrugged off his backpack, dressed in his protective gear, and made his way to the rose garden.

It didn't take long to survey the garden and confirm Pretend Eight was sitting alone on the bench where she always sat.

He was ready for his delayed encounter with Eight.

She gasped and stiffened when the blade touched her throat.

"Do exactly as I say. Keep quiet if you want to live. Try anything and I'll slit your throat. Nod if you understand."

The slight nod of her head caused the blade to pierce her skin and a trickle of blood made its way down her neck.

"Stand slowly, and move to the end of the bench."

Pretend Eight did as instructed, they always did. Fear of death is a great motivation.

"Now turn to face the bench, and don't do anything stupid or scream." He placed a little more pressure on the blade, deepening the cut to underline his words.

As she turned, he glimpsed terror in her eyes. Beneath the terror, he noticed the glimmer of hope. This was the look he wanted. The glimmer of hope they'd survive ensured cooperation.

“Bend over and lean your hands on the bench. We’re going to have a brief encounter and you’ll live to talk about it if you let it happen. If not...” A fraction more pressure on the blade.

When she was bent over, he slid his free hand up her skirt, grabbed the top of her panties, and pulled them to her knees. He raised his foot to their crotch and forced them down to her ankles. As he did, he saw urine running down the inside of her legs. It didn’t matter; she wasn’t the first one who’d pissed themselves.

He positioned his penis, already out, sheathed in a condom and ready, before he’d put the blade to her throat. He was about to feel the ecstasy of penetration; it was nearly over now. Less than a minute and he’d be done, and she’d be dead, waiting to bleed out.

Instead of the anticipated ecstasy he felt a searing pain in his kidneys, he screamed as he sunk to his knees, arms stretched out to cushion his fall.

Mouse heard the loud crack as the bones in his arm shattered, quickly followed by intense pain as the blade slipped out of his useless fingers.

A hand grabbed his collar and threw him like a rag doll onto his back. Mouse felt a weight upon him, and the last thing he saw was a large black fist heading towards his face.

Judy didn’t want to die. *Please God, let me live. I’m letting him do it. He said he wouldn’t kill me if I let him do it. Please God. Never been so scared, didn’t know people really pissed themselves. Hope I didn’t make him angry. Why me? Why’d he choose me? Why here? This is our place. Frank, help me wherever you are? I don’t want to die, Frank. Come on, get it over with and leave me alive.*

Can’t feel that knife now. What’s happening? Scream? Why did he scream? Where’s he gone? Should I look? What was that crack? What’s happening? Turn around and see what happened. I can’t. What if he kills me? Look now Judy!

Judy tentatively turned her head. She glimpsed what was happening and spun her head round. *George! George is on him. George’s eyes! She shuddered. He’s going to kill him.*

“George! No! Stop George! I can’t lose you too. Stop George! I’m safe now. George!”

If George heard her, her words didn’t register. She straightened and turned, took a step as she began to run to George. *I must stop him.* Judy had forgotten her panties were around her ankles. She tripped and fell against George, knocking him off the now unconscious man, and landing on top of George.

She saw George’s face register what had happened. The devil which filled his eyes dissipated, replaced by tenderness as he looked at her.

“You saved me, George.”

He gently wrapped his arms around her as she lay atop of him, sobbing into his shoulder, shaking all over, panties still around her ankles, blood trickling from the wound on her neck, her legs covered in her own urine.

“You’re safe now,” he whispered. “I’d never let anyone hurt you.”

When her sobs abated, George said, “Come on now, we better get up.”

Judy didn’t respond, but she felt George carefully ease her off him. He slid out from under her and stood, reaching down to lift her to her feet. He bent down again and gently

eased her panties back into position, careful not to touch her inappropriately. "I'm sorry Judy..."

"No reason to apologise." She glanced at her attacker, still laying prone on the ground. "Is he dead, George?"

George leaned over for a closer inspection. "No, not dead. He would've been if you hadn't stopped me."

"I don't want you going inside again. My bag is on the bench. Hand me my phone."

George retrieved it and passed it to her. She called Simon Sharpe.

"Judy, what do you need?"

She began to cry as reality set in. "I was attacked. He was going to rape me, maybe kill me. George stopped him. He's unconscious, but not dead."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks to George. He saved me."

"Where are you?"

"People's Park. In the rose garden."

Simon asked. "Did George hit him?"

"He had to," Judy explained. "He had a knife at my throat."

"I'll call the police. Don't say anything. Either of you. It's important to make sure George understands, and don't let them separate you. Tell them you have legal representation and will both make a statement at the precinct. I'll meet you there."

"Thank you, Simon."

She hung up and said to George, "Simon will send the police. Don't tell them anything. Say you have legal representation and will make a statement at the station. Simon will protect you."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"And no more of the Ma'am. You've seen me half naked."

"Yes, Ma'am I'm sorry, I..."

She stepped forward and hugged him. "I'll never forget you saved me."

George put his arms around her. "You're safe now."

They stood holding each other until two police officers arrived.

An officer asked, "What happened here?"

Judy replied, "We have legal representation and will both make statements at the precinct."

He looked at George. "I'm going to have to take you into custody."

George nodded.

"Put your hands on your head so I can search you."

George complied.

The other officer checked the man lying unconscious for a pulse. "He's alive."

He rolled the man over to look at his face. "Fuck! You know who this is?"

The officer, who was patting George down, turned and looked down. "Fuck. Cuff him, not taking any chances."

The officer kneeling beside the unconscious man rolled him onto his back, and cuffed him, broken arm notwithstanding.

The officer who'd been patting George down spoke into his radio. "Control, this is two-six-zero-two. Can you patch me through to Detective Sergeant Hawkins? Also, we'll need a bus to this location."

After a delay of a barely a minute, there was a click.

"This is Hawkins. What's up?"

"We got him, Sarge."

Hawkins froze for a moment, and then his adrenalin kicked in. "Are you sure?" he shouted. "Where are you?"

The officer gave him the location.

"Is he secured?"

"Cuffed and unconscious."

"You didn't do anything?"

"No Sarge, unconscious when we got to him. Bus is on the way."

"Don't let anyone near the scene until I get there."

George and Judy exchanged glances. She said, "I don't know, George."

It didn't take long for EMS to arrive. The paramedic examined the unconscious man. She indicated the handcuffs. "Is this necessary? He isn't going anywhere. Broken arm and probable broken jaw."

"That's the bastard who did Daphne," the officer said. "We're not taking any chances."

"That explains his injuries," She suggested.

The police officer looked at George. "Found him like this."

"Okay, we'd better get him to the hospital."

"If it's not life threatening, you can't move him until Flash Jack gets here."

"Okay. I'll look at the lady's injuries first."

She cleaned Judy's neck injury. "Not too deep. Don't think you'll need stitches." She treated her and applied a dressing.

Jack Hawkins arrived with a team of detectives, followed shortly after by the crime scene investigators.

"What happened?" he asked the officer.

"Found him like this," The officer repeated, nodding towards George.

Jack looked at George and then at Judy. "Can someone tell me what happened here?"

Judy said. "We have legal representation and will both make a statement at the precinct after consultation with our lawyer."

Jack appeared to be about to say something, but only nodded. He turned to Reynolds and Gomez. "Take them to the precinct, and let them consult with their lawyer, then I'll talk to them."

He turned to the officers, who were first on the scene. "You two go with him to the hospital. One of you rides in the bus. Eyes on him." And to the EMS officers, "You can take him now, but the cuffs stay on."

The detectives assigned to Judy and George approached them. "We'll take you now," Gomez said. "Assuming your lawyer will meet you there."

"Yes," Judy confirmed.

They arrived at the precinct and were escorted inside. Simon was waiting for them. He hugged Judy and shook George's hand.

"Do you have somewhere private where I can consult with my clients?" he asked the desk sergeant.

"Interview room three is available," the sergeant said.

"Follow me," said Reynolds.

Settled into the room, Simon asked, "Are you sure you're all right, Judy?" Looking pointedly at the dressing on her throat.

"Still shaken, but George stopped him before he could cut too deep."

"Tell me what happened."

Judy explained.

"George, tell me in your own words."

George did.

"Okay. They'll separate you to take your statements. Tell them the facts, but no more than necessary," Simon said. "I'll be with you, so I'll interrupt if I think it's best, but it sounds justified and reasonable to me. So, nothing to worry about. George, just say you disarmed and immobilized him, then attended to Judy." Simon glanced at Judy, who nodded her understanding.

Three loud raps sounded on the door.

Simon responded, "Enter."

A man opened the door and stepped in. "I'm Detective Sargeant Jack Hawkins. I need to take statements separately."

"Understood," replied Simon.

"I think I'll start with the lady, and then we'll take the gentleman's statement."

Simon smiled; it was the order he'd anticipated. Take Judy's first and then try to catch George in a lie. "Fine, George can wait outside. He's not to be questioned unless I'm present."

"Of course he won't be questioned," Jack confirmed.

Another knock on the open door and two detectives entered without waiting to be invited.

Jack said, "Detective Reynolds will wait with George. Detective Lopez will set up the recording, assuming you have no objection to the statements being recorded."

"No objection," replied Simon.

Detective Reynolds said, "Come with me sir, and we'll find somewhere quiet to wait. Would you like a coffee or something?"

George stood and looked at Judy, who said, "It's okay, George, I'm fine."

George nodded, turned, and followed the detective out of the room. "Yes please, I would like a coffee. I don't s'pose you can get me a cigarette. I really need..."

Reynolds closed the door behind them. Simon stood and moved to the other side of the table beside Judy. He squeezed her hand.

Hawkins and Lopez sat opposite. Lopez started the recording device. He ran through the formality of making a record at the beginning of the tape, formally stating the names of those present, and the time and place where the recording was being made.

Hawkins fixed his gaze on Judy. "I understand you'd like to make a statement. Please describe in your own words what happened. I may have some questions when you're finished."

Judy inhaled deeply and shuddered. Her hand was shaking. Simon placed his hand on hers. "It's alright, take your time, just tell us what happened."

Judy nodded. "I... I don't know. I was sitting on a bench in the hidden rose garden in People's Park. My best friend's in a coma... I was praying..." She sobbed, her shoulders shook, and tears began to flow once more. Simon squeezed her hand. Detective Lopez passed her a box of tissues.

Hawkins said, "Take your time, no hurry."

Judy sobbed again, swallowing hard, and blew her nose into a tissue. She wiped her eyes and straightened herself to regain her composure. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm a little emotional these days. Family..."

Simon explained, "Her father-in-law has a terminal illness, and her closest friend is in a coma following a traffic incident."

"I felt a sharp object against my neck." Judy inhaled deeply. "A man said if I didn't do what he told me or screamed, he'd cut my throat." She fingered the dressing. "Every time he gave me an instruction, he pressed a little harder."

Hawkins nodded, but remained silent.

"He told me to stand and lean over the bench. I did because I was scared. I didn't want to die. I thought he was going to kill me." She sobbed again; tears flowed once more. She retrieved a tissue and whispered from behind the tissue as she wiped her face, "I wet myself."

Hawkins and Lopez exchanged a glance.

"I need a shower," Judy said. "He pulled my panties down and pushed them down to my ankles. He was going to fuck me, then kill me. I'm sure he was going to kill me. I was praying for help. Then he grunted loudly, and the blade wasn't against my throat. I heard a loud crack, and the man screamed. I turn around and saw George on top of him. I told George

I was safe, and he could stop hitting the man, then I sort of got tangled up because I forgot my panties were around my ankles. I fell and landed on George.” She shuddered and sobbed again. “George saved me.” She fell silent, contemplating what she’d said.

“What happened next?” Hawkins asked.

Judy shrugged. “George helped me up and adjusted my attire.” She looked at Simon. “I wasn’t sure what to do. I was in shock, I suppose. My husband is travelling with his parents. I called Simon, and he called you.”

It was George’s turn to make a statement. When the formalities of the recording were completed, Jack Hawkins said, “Okay, George, can you tell us what happened in your own words?”

George wiped his palms on his trousers. He glanced at Simon, who said, “It’s okay, George, just tell the truth.”

“I seen this guy hanging around outside the diner a few times. I knew he was wrong, so I kept an eye on him.”

George swallowed and licked his lips. He fixed his eyes on Hawkins. “You know what I mean,” he said. “I’ve spent my life with criminals. When someone’s wrong, you just know... develop some sort of sense about wrong uns.”

Hawkins nodded, “Yes George, we do.”

George nodded as if making a connection with Hawkins, a man who would’ve been his adversary in the past. “I was having my morning smoke. I said goodbye to Miss Judy like I do most mornings... When she walked past the man, he followed her. I didn’t think about it. He was wrong, and he was following Miss Judy, so I followed him.”

George sighed and looked at Simon. “I didn’t want Miss Judy to think I was following her, but I wanted to keep her safe, so I kept my distance. If nothing happened, I didn’t want her to think I followed her.”

He stopped talking and stared at the table.

“What happened next, George?” Hawkins prompted.

“Miss Judy entered the park, and the man followed. When I entered, I saw Miss Judy enter a circle of trees, and the man went into a clump of bushes. I started thinking he was only following her, so I thought I’ll wait until she leaves and if he follows her again, I’ll warn him off.”

George wiped his hands on his trousers again, glanced at Simon and then at Hawkins, who said, “It’s all right George, you’re not under arrest and you haven’t been cautioned.”

George nodded. “I saw the man come out of the trees. He was wearing different clothes, but I recognized his walk... I’d been following him, so I know his walk. He went into the trees where Miss Judy was, so I followed him in. I was running now. I knew he was wrong.”

“What did you see when you entered the trees, George?”

“Umm... flowers, I think there were flowers. I followed a path, and I saw him hurting Miss Judy. I couldn’t let him hurt her. I wouldn’t let anyone hurt Miss Judy. I stopped him.”

“How did you stop him, George?”

Again, George fixed his gaze on Hawkins. “I hit him and kept hitting him until I knew Miss Judy was safe.”

Hawkins nodded. “Go on, George.”

“Next thing I knew, Miss Judy fell on me. She was crying and scared. I held her until she stopped crying, and then I helped her up. I cleaned her the best I could. She called Mr. Sharpe.”

George opened his mouth to say something, but Hawkins waved him to stop. “Thank you, George. You used as much force as was necessary and stopped when you had disarmed and disabled the assailant.”

“I err...” George began.

“George, you saved Ms. Vernon’s life. That man has raped and killed several women. We’ve been looking for him for a long time.” To Simon he said, “Mr. Sharpe, your clients are free to go. If we have any follow-up questions, we’ll be in touch. We’ll probably need them to appear as witnesses if this gets to court.”

He stood and offered his hand to George. “Thank you. The city owes you a debt of gratitude.”

George shook hands with a police officer for the first time in his life. He didn’t know what to say.

Hawkins said, “There’s a substantial reward for the capture of this man. Your lawyer can help you with the paperwork, and it may take some time to secure a conviction unless he pleads guilty.”

Simon nodded. “I’ll get onto the paperwork. Come on, George, we should get Judy home safe now.”

George frowned. “I just needed... To protect Miss Judy.”

Several officers who were standing around gave George a round of applause as he left the station.

Aftermath

Simon dropped them home. George escorted Judy to the penthouse.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face against his shoulder. Judy held him close, and he put his arms around her. It seemed the natural thing to do.

“You’re my hero, George,” she whispered. “You saved my life.”

“No one will hurt you while I’m around, ma’am.”

She pushed him away and stared at him. George didn’t know what he’d done wrong. He frowned. “Ma’am?”

“Ma’am?” She echoed. She leaned up and kissed him full on the lips and held the kiss...

Initially, George froze, but when she didn’t break her kiss, he returned it. It was everything he’d imagined, and more. He flushed when he felt himself harden against her and pulled back.

“I’m sorry, ma...”

“Don’t you dare call me ma’am after that!”

“I’m sorry...”

“Not ma’am, not Miss Judy. I’m Judy, your friend Judy.”

George smiled, “Judy.”

“That’s better. Now I’m going to shower and change. I still need to go to the hospital.”

“Okay, ma... Judy.”

She kissed him again, lightly this time, stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

George turned and pressed the button for the elevator.

Better get back to work.

His lips and his groin were still tingling from the kiss.

Judy stood in her kitchen. In a daze, she discarded her clothes in the trash before making her way to the shower. As the scalding hot water washed over her, her body shook and tears flowed freely.

Thank George. I owe him my life.

Her thoughts turned to Ali. She dressed quickly, grabbed her bag, and headed out to flag a taxi.

Rebekah and Darnell were waiting for her in the lobby.

Darnell said, “George told us what happened. Are you alright?”

Judy smiled, but shuddered. “I’m fine, thanks to George. He saved my life. That man has already killed half a dozen women, according to the police.”

Rebekah gasped.

“I’m fine, really, just a scratch on my neck. I don’t think I’ll be back for dinner tonight if you could tell Mel I’ll see her in the morning. I’ll explain what happened to her then... Once I work out what to say.”

Rebekah said, “Okay Aunt Judy, are you sure you’re...”

“Yes, George kept me safe.”

Judy entered the hospital and waited for the elevator. Someone tapped her shoulder. She gasped and took two steps forward without realising what she’d done.

A man said, “I’m sorry, Ms Vernon. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Judy turned at the sound of the familiar voice. “I’m sorry Sargeant, guess I’m still a little jumpy.”

“That’s normal. You will be for a few days. Can I ask what you are doing here?”

“I think I told you. My friend is in a coma. I visit her every day.”

“Yes. Yes, you did. I, well, your assailant is in this hospital and for a moment...”

“No Sargeant. I never want to see him again. Not that I really saw him.”

“Just a coincidence then.”

Judy smiled, stepped into the elevator, then looked back over her shoulder. “Thank you for the way you treated George. He’s a good man.”

Hawkins smiled. “I believe he is.”

Flash Jack waited for the next elevator. *Best not let her see which floor he’s on. You never know what ideas people get in their heads.*

Jack stopped outside the suspect’s room. The suspect’s personal items had been found in the clump of bushes where he’d hidden them. They now had a positive identification and his apartment had been searched. Other than a box of straight razors, the search had turned up nothing useful.

Except for his modus operandi and the witness to the assault on Judy Vernon, he had no evidence the man had raped and murdered seven women... This guy was careful.

Wonder why he was careless today? Gonna need a confession.

The officer on duty said. “Hello Sarge.”

Hawkins nodded. “No one has spoken to him, I trust.”

“Other than medical staff, no Sarge. Like you instructed.”

“Good, no mistakes with this one. Can you ask the nurse to fetch his doctor?”

The officer returned with a young haired man wearing a white physician’s coat. They shook hands.

“What’s his status, doctor?”

“He’s conscious, no indication of concussion. He has a few contusions and some swelling in the head area, which, if I’m being honest, may suggest excessive force when he was arrested. His broken arm was clean and has been set and cast.”

“No officer has laid a finger on him. A good Samaritan who interrupted him in the process of committing a rape and murder did the damage. So, I don’t think it was excessive, do you?”

“No, Sargeant.”

“Good. Is there any reason he cannot be released into police custody?”

“No medical reason.”

“Good. Officer, ask a nurse to join us? You too, Doctor, if you would. I want independent witnesses, that I have read him his rights before speaking to him, and officer, give the police photographer a call and have him get his ass down here.”

The officer went to find a nurse as he was making the call.

On his return with a nurse in tow, he said, “Photographer is on his way.”

All four entered the room. Jack studied the nondescript guy lying in the bed. His face was bruised and swollen, his right arm was in a cast, and his left was handcuffed to the bed.

Hawkins asked, “So Doctor, his jaw wasn’t broken?”

“No, swollen and bruised, as you can see.”

Hawkins said, “Kirk Douglas Davis, you are charged with seven counts of murder, six counts of rape, one count of attempted rape and one count of aggravated assault.”

The nurse gasped.

Hawkins took a card from his top pocket. He didn’t need it, but he wasn’t about to make a mistake. He continued, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand your rights as I have read them to you?”

Mouse nodded.

“Please answer verbally so we can hear you. Do you understand your rights as I have read them to you?”

Mouse said quietly, “Yes.”

“Good. Nurse, would you stay here with my officer until the photographer arrives?”

She looked pleadingly at the doctor. “Please stay, Ms. Jennings. It’s important.”

She nodded and turned her back on Mouse.

The officer asked, “Why the photographer Sarge?”

“I want a record of Mr. Davis’s condition when he was released into police custody, so no smartass lawyer can accuse us of police brutality. That’s why I wanted impartial witnesses to me reading him his rights. No opportunity for loopholes, real or imagined, that this bastard can squirm through. I promised Daphne, I’d put him away.”

When Mouse came to, he was disorientated. *Where am I? What happened?*

“You made a mistake. You tried to encounter someone who didn’t want an encounter.”

Eight wanted it.

“She wasn’t Eight.”

Seven took Eight from me so I thought her friend.

“You made a mistake and now it’s over.”

Over?

“Finished. You’re handcuffed.”

Mouse pulled his wrist against his handcuff. He was caught. His other arm was strapped to his chest.

That demon broke my arm. His head was throbbing.

“You didn’t follow the rules. You weren’t careful, so the demon caught you.”

What should I do?

“Nothing. Do nothing. Say nothing. If you talk about your encounters, they’ll be lost. Given away.”

I don’t want to give them away.

“If you never speak of them, they are yours.”

What’ll happen?

“You’ll go to jail. They’ll feed you. You can read and you have your memories.”

A man came and told him he had the right to remain silent. Mouse would exercise that right, but then the man said he needed to answer.

The man left the room. A police officer and nurse remained. They were chatting quietly. He didn’t listen to them.

Sometime later, another man came, took several photographs of his face and left, so did the nurse. Mouse didn’t know why.

Two more police officers arrived. The first officer uncuffed him, and they assisted him to stand up. The officer then attached the cuff to his own wrist.

“Come on, Mr Davis. It’s time to go.”

The officer escorted him to the elevator and led to a police car waiting outside. The officer told him to get into the back seat and followed him in. The other officers sat in the front, and they drove away.

Judy sat beside Ali and cradled her hand. She raised it to her face and pressed her cheek against it. “Please wake up darling, I need you. If not for George, I’d be dead now. Makes me think. What if I died? What if you do? Life is too short. We’ve wasted too much time waiting for everything to be right. What if it’s never right? What if it’s always been right and we couldn’t see it? I wish Frank was here. He always knew how to guide me. He guided me to you, and he guided me to Myron.”

She stood and leaned over the bed to embrace Ali and cried on her shoulder. “Please, please, wake up, darling.”

Frankie came in. “Aunt Judy, are you okay? I’m sure she’ll be alright. I don’t know why, but know she’s going to be alright. It’s as if... I don’t know. It’s like she needs to be in a coma now. I can’t explain it, but I feel it.”

Judy lifted herself from Ali and stood to hug Frankie, she clung to him.

“What is it? Something’s happened. In there news about Mom?”

“No Frankie, no news. I... Something happened this afternoon. It got me thinking. Life is short.” She looked at Ali. “We’ve wasted so much time and I don’t know why.”

Frankie smiled. “Sometimes we make life more complicated than we need to. We focus on the wrong things. What happened?”

Judy told him, concluding, “The police said if he’d raped me, he would’ve killed me.”

Frankie hugged her. “I can’t begin to imagine how traumatic it was. I’m glad George was there.”

“So am I, Frankie.”

He turned away from Judy and stared at his mother. “I think if the worst had happened, she would’ve let go. I don’t think she would’ve wanted to come back if you weren’t here,” he said. “It’s alright Mom. Judy is safe here, waiting for you.”

Myron had been standing when he’d called Judy. As she told him what happened, he could feel the color drawn from his face and the strength drain from his body. He sat on the bed. His heart sank into the pit of his stomach.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. A scratch on my neck, but George stopped him.”

“Thank God for George.”

“Yes, thank God. Do you think anyone has ever thanked God for George before?” Judy asked.

“First Ali, and now this. I’m coming home. My women need me.”

“I admit I want you home. We need you, but Papa?”

“He’ll want to come home, too. I’ll make the arrangements and call you back.”

Myron ended his call with Judy and forced his legs to walk across the hall to his parents’ room.

Ruth must have seen it in his face. “What’s happened? Ali?”

“No, not Ali. It’s Judy. Someone tried to rape her. The police say he would have killed her, but she’s alright. George saved her.”

“Oh no. Myron, we need to go home.”

He glanced at Art, who’d fallen asleep in an armchair.

“Yes Mama. I’ll make the arrangements.”

Memory of One

Mouse sat in his holding cell waiting to be interviewed. Other than to give him instructions, no one had spoken to him. The small metal flap in the door seemed to open and close every fifteen minutes.

Why do they keep looking at me?

His eyelids lowered, transporting him to another time...

A pleading look in the woman's eye caught his attention. He didn't know what it meant, but he'd come to recognise it. She wanted an encounter.

He followed her home that day and waited all night until she left her apartment the next morning. She wasn't young, maybe in her forties. Light brown hair, blue-green eyes, a loose smile, and a little overweight. She reminded him of his mother.

He watched, followed, studied her movements and habits. Mouse got to know her. He felt close to the woman and became aroused whenever he saw her. *I need to encounter her.*

Mouse paid attention to her route, and the empty shops she passed each day. He chose an old, abandoned bookstore which looked promising. He took down details of the lock. Make, model, and serial number.

He felt strange the day he took a bus across town instead of following her.

He walked up to the key cutting stand. "Excuse me," he said to the guy working there. "I've lost my keys. Someone told me if I had the details, you'd be able to duplicate it." He passed his note to the man, who studied him for a moment.

"It's illegal," the man explained. "Are you a cop trying to entrap me?"

"No. I lost my keys."

"You don't have a spare?"

"This was the spare, lost the first one two years ago. I meant to get a copy made, but didn't get around to it."

The man nodded, considered Mouse again, then said, "A hundred, take it or leave it."

"Okay." Mouse passed him the money.

The man looked up something on his computer, entered a code in his machine, took a blank key and inserted it. There were buzzing and scraping and scratching noises. The man extracted the key, rubbed it with a cloth and passed it to Mouse, who thanked him and slipped it into his pocket.

When he alighted from the bus, Mouse stood watching the abandoned bookshop for two hours. No movement or activity, so he stepped to the door. The lock was stiff, and he had to push hard to get the key into the hole. It was difficult to turn, but after some jiggling, he managed to open the door. He pulled shoe protectors over his feet, and surgical gloves on his hands.

It was dark and dirty inside. No one had been in the old bookshop for years. Mouse didn't try the lights; he wouldn't need them. He wandered around the empty shelves and located an area near the rear of the store blocked from view by the shelves.

In the back, there was a small kitchen, a bathroom, and a bolted door. Like the key, the bolt was stiff, but he finally worked it open. He grunted as he struggled to pull open the

door and stepped out into a loading dock. It was deserted, disused except to dump rubbish. He explored the immediate area, finding a convenient exit to a lane on the left-hand side. *Perfect.*

As he sat in his cell, Mouse relived the next few days, alternating between following his woman, and studying the bookstore and loading dock. He meticulously planned everything until he was ready to encounter her. She'd be the first woman he'd encountered since his mother.

In the loading dock, he slipped into his protective disposable overalls, light blue and indistinctive. He put on his disposable cap, a mask, and a second pair of shoe protectors. Mouse slid his hand into the slit he'd cut in his overalls to pull out his penis. He'd been hard with anticipation for days. He rolled a condom over his erection, clenching his teeth, near orgasm at the thought of what was to come. Mouse pulled on a second pair of surgical gloves, then picked up his blade and opened it. He was ready.

As the woman reached the bookstore late in the day, squinting into the lowering sun which cast long deep shadows, she didn't notice Mouse standing in the doorway. Nobody ever noticed him. As if he was invisible.

Mouse stepped behind her and pushed the blade against the woman's throat. "Make a sound and you'll die here. Do what I tell you and you will live." He pressed the blade a little harder against her windpipe and tried to still his shaking hand.

The woman gasped and froze.

"Nod if you understand."

The woman nodded, causing the blade to cut her a little. He guided the woman into the shop, turned slightly sideways and kicked the door closed, then locked it.

Mouse moved slowly down the aisle. He was moving backwards and so was she. He kept his eye focused on the door.

"Remember, do what I say, and after you can go. Fight me, disobey, or make a sound and you'll die here." He pressed the blade a harder to emphasise his point. "I'm in control now. Your life is mine."

He could feel the woman breathing heavily against him. Her breathing matched his own, his heart pumping in his chest and in his ears. His mouth was dry, his words quiet.

He had in her in the back, hidden from view by the bookcases. Her back was still to him. His pulse was racing, his desire building, forcing its way into his shaft. He was ready.

"Drop your bag."

It landed with a soft thud.

"Pull your panties down."

Her breathing was faster now. She fumbled with her panties but managed to pull them down a little.

"Pull them to your knees, and bend over."

Her body rubbed against his hard penis as she complied. He groaned in ecstasy and anticipation. He raised his foot and used it to drag her panties to her ankles.

Mouse inhaled her scent, a mixture of sweat, perfume, and flatulence. What he would come to know as the smell of fear. She whimpered.

“Quiet,” he instructed, placing a little more pressure on the blade at her throat.

She tensed and went silent.

He jabbed his penis against her labia. She grunted as he forced himself inside her. The blade pressed a little harder.

Mouse began to thrust in and out. His every nerve was singing with pleasure as he felt himself ejaculate. He groaned and pushed the blade deeper, sliding it deep across her throat. His hand was now steady. He pulled out and released her. She slumped to the floor.

A look of bewilderment and surprise in her eyes. She gurgled as she struggled to breathe; the life oozing out of her as the blood pulsed freely from her neck.

Mouse was fascinated as the light in her eyes dimmed, the life flowing out of her eyes as the blood flowed out of her body.

He smiled as the light flickered and died.

“Now you are mine forever,” he told her lifeless corpse.

Mouse ejaculated into the overalls the police gave him to wear.

He smiled.

Mine forever. I won't give them away.

It's Private

Assistant District Attorney Mike McLean knocked on the door of Jack Hawkins' office and walked in without waiting to be invited.

"Jack."

"Mike."

"How we gonna play this? You want the death penalty?"

"That'll mean a trial, and we don't know what a jury will do. He hasn't lawyered up and I wanna keep it that way. Other than the one he was caught doing, we don't have a shred of evidence. I wanna confession, it's the only way."

Mike nodded. "Makes sense. The only sure conviction is aggravated assault and attempted rape. Not enough to get an attempted murder verdict, but I'm sure he'd have killed her."

"He got sloppy and made mistakes. I don't know why, and I don't care."

"Offer him a lawyer again and confirm he understands his rights. We don't want some do-gooder—looking to make a name for themselves—lodge an appeal in the future."

"That we don't."

"Think he'll lawyer up?"

"I don't," Jack shrugged. "But now he's had time to think of things in the cell he might."

"Kid gloves, Jack. Don't push him, don't get his back up. A half decent lawyer will take a minute to know there's nothing linking him to his first seven victims."

"Other than his M.O."

"Good luck in there. I'll watch from the observation room and buzz you if I need to tell you anything."

"Sure. Don't let me fuck it up."

Jack Hawkins sat across the table from Kirk Douglas Davis. He studied the man opposite, trying to read him, to work out how to play him. He wanted a confession, needed it. They had no forensic evidence, no evidence at all. Until the last one, Davis had been careful. He'd know they didn't have forensics, so Jack figured bluffing would work against him. *I can't read him, haven't got a clue.*

Jack glanced at Detective Lopez beside him, looking for support. Lopez smiled weakly.

Jack turned his attention to the third man in the room.

"Kirk Douglas Davis," he began. "That's one hell of a name."

Davis shrugged. "Mother was a fan."

"Apparently. What shall I call you?"

"Mouse. People call me Mouse."

"Okay," Hawkins smiled. "Mouse, it is."

Mouse nodded, but beyond this he didn't react.

"Do you know why you're here, Mouse?"

"You said I'm charged with killing seven women."

"Do you remember I read you your rights, Mouse?"

"Yes."

"Did you understand your rights as I read them to you?"

"Yes," Mouse nodded. "I've read lots of detective novels."

Hawkins studied him again. *No loopholes.* "So, you know you do not have to say anything. You have the right to remain silent."

"Yes."

"You know, too, you can have a lawyer if you want one."

"Yes."

"Do you want a lawyer, Mouse?"

"No."

Hawkins nodded. *His kind always want to talk, to tell us how smart they are. To relive their work.* "Did you kill those seven women, Mouse?"

"Yes."

Hawkins glanced at Lopez, who shrugged.

"I'm going to ask you again, Mouse. Did you kill seven women?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They offered themselves to me, and I accepted."

"How did they offer themselves to you?"

"I looked at them and knew they wanted an encounter."

"An encounter?"

"Yes."

"What does an *encounter* mean, Mouse?"

"When I encounter someone, they become mine."

"How do you choose them?"

"I don't. They choose and I know they chose."

"How do you know when they choose you, Mouse?"

"I see it in their eyes."

"You see it in their eyes?"

"Yes."

"What do you see in their eyes?"

"I can't describe it, a look that says they have chosen to be encountered."

“Do they remind you of anyone?”

“No, they just have a look.”

Jack sighed, glanced over his shoulder at the observation window, and hoped he wasn't going to fuck anything up.

“Do they remind you of your mother?”

“No.”

“Your mother was raped and murdered.”

“No, she wasn't raped, and she wasn't murdered.”

“I have the police report here,” Jack frowned. “Says a homeless man raped and murdered her.”

“They told me that.”

“But you said she wasn't raped and murdered.”

“She wasn't.”

Jack studied Mouse. He was still emotionless, detached. “Did you tell the police?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“That's private.”

What does that mean? “Okay, let's talk about Melissa Ann Chapman.”

“Who's that?”

“She was your first victim.”

“No, she wasn't.”

Shit. There are more. Jack fidgeted in his chair. “Who was your first victim?”

“I don't know the names of the women I encounter.”

“How do you know Melissa Ann Chapman wasn't your first?”

“My mother was the first woman who encountered me.”

“Your mother.”

“Yes.”

“Did you kill your mother, Mouse?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me what happened with your mother?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I told you, it's private.”

“Okay, so I guess Melissa Anne Chapman must've been your second.”

“I don't know their names.”

“Okay, I understand. Can you tell me about your second, er... encounter, Mouse?”

“No.”

“Do you remember the details?”

Mouse smiled, his first hint of emotion. “Yes.”

“But you won’t tell me.”

“No, it’s private.”

The conversation was repeated almost verbatim for the next six victims.

Jack took a sheet of paper with seven names typed on it. He passed the document to Mouse.

Lopez said, “For the tape, Detective Sargeant Hawkins is now handing the suspect a list of names of the murder victims.”

“Read those names. Are these the seven women you raped and killed, Mouse?”

Mouse looked at the page. “They are the names of the women you asked me about, but I never knew their names. If you say those are their names, I have no reason to doubt you.”

Jack sighed and grimaced at the observation window.

“I think we might have a little break now,” Jack said. “Would you like a nice cup of tea, Mouse?”

“Yes, please and a sandwich, please.”

“Okay Mouse, Detective Lopez will organise that for you.”

He stood and left the room.

Lopez said, “Detective Sargent Hawkins has left the room, and the interview is suspended.”

He stopped the recording and exited.

Jack entered the observation room. “What do you think, Mike?”

Mike shrugged. “You’ve got a confession. Do think you’ll be able to get him to talk about the victims? Give us some details that’ll tie him to them?”

Jack shook his head. “Normally, guys like this want to talk about their crimes, brag about how smart they are, or just relive the crime for their own perverted reasons. This guy’s different.”

“Do you think it’s because he knows we’ve got nothing to tie him to victims, and he’s smart enough not to give us anything?”

“Could be, but I don’t think so.”

“Problem is, despite his confession, with no details, there’s nothing to link him to victims except his M.O. A half decent public defender could get him off.”

“That’s what concerns me, and why I don’t want to push him.”

“He could be playing you and will lawyer up before he gets to court.”

“I don’t think so, but some do-gooder could lawyer him up.”

“Offer him a plea agreement. He pleads guilty in exchange for life without parole and we won’t pursue the death penalty.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Worth a try, but I’ll have another go at getting details out of him first.”

He glimpsed Mouse through the observation window, then squinted to focus on his suspect. “What the...”

Mouse took a bite of his sandwich and washed it down with a mouthful of tea. He closed his eyes, smiling faintly as he relived the black girl who had been Two. In his mind or his memory, he wasn’t sure which. He inhaled her scent. She smelled different to One. He never learned why different races smelled different.

As he reached the end of his recollection, his smile broadened, his body jerked a little as he ejaculated. Satisfied, reached for his tea, and drank some to moisten his dry throat. Replacing his cup on the table, he picked up his sandwich and took a bite.

He could never give away what was his.

“Did you see?” Jack asked. “The sick little bastard came just thinking about it.”

“I saw.”

“That’s why he won’t give up the details. That’s why it’s private. He wants to keep it to himself so he can continue to get off on the memory. The sick fuck.”

“Maybe you can use that to get him talking about his victims.”

Jack shrugged. “I can try.”

The detectives returned to the interview room.

Lopez went through the formalities of restarting the recording.

Jack asked, “Well Mouse, did you enjoy our break?”

“Yes, very much.” Mouse smiled.

“What did you think about?”

“Two.”

“What can you tell me about your second victim?”

“She was black.”

That’s a start. Even a little about each victim will help, but he could’ve got that from the media. “Is there anything else you’d like to share about Shona Digges?”

Mouse glanced at the paper. “Two,” he said. “Black people smell different. I never knew that before.”

“That’s, umm... interesting. Can you tell me about your, err... encounter with her?”

“No. That’s private.”

“Okay Mouse, I can respect that,” Jack lied. “Can you tell me something about Melissa Anne Chapmen?”

Mouse glanced at the names in front of him “One. She’s my oldest, and a little fatter than the others, but I didn’t mind.”

Jack worked his way through the list of women, obtaining one small comment about each. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

Jack’s pulse quickened. A vein on the side of his forehead throbbed. He clenched and unclenched his fists under the table where Mouse couldn’t see. His stomach sank. “What can you tell me about Daphne Loader?”

Mouse consulted the list. “Seven. She’s a killer.”

Mouse could’ve said she was red, or a lesbian, but he didn’t. Jack assumed Seven being a killer was a reference to Daphne having a firearm.

Jack took a deep breath. He pressed his hands face down on the table. He glanced at the observation window, glanced at Lopez, then studied Mouse.

“Well, Mouse. I think we need another break. Detective Lopez will escort you to the bathroom and then make us more tea. Would you like that?”

“Yes, I need the restroom.”

“Would you like a chocolate bar or something, Mouse?”

“I like sandwiches.”

“Okay, we’ll get you another sandwich.”

Detective Lopez suspended the interview and escorted Mouse to the restroom.

Jack remained seated, breathing deeply, clenching, and unclenching his fists. A knock on the observation window focussed him on the task at hand and he made his way out of the room.

“Don’t know how much more we’re gonna get from him about the murders, but I think we can link him to all of them.”

“Tenuously, a defence attorney could rip it to shreds.”

“I know, but we’ve got his confession.”

“It’s weak.”

“Yep, we’re not gonna get the death penalty without it going to trial.”

“Not sure we have enough to take it trial. I can’t guarantee a guilty verdict.”

“What about a plea agreement? He pleads guilty sand we won’t pursue the death penalty?”

“Do you think he’ll agree to a life without parole?”

Jack shrugged. “If it means he doesn’t have to give up the details of his crimes, he might.”

“Perhaps offer him the segregation unit. That’d give the judge reason to accept the plea agreement. Offer him a lawyer again. Hopefully, he won’t take it.”

“Think I’ll try for a signed handwritten confession first.”

“Okay, I’ll prepare the plea agreement. Get it signed before he changes his mind.”

“I need a drink.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re handling him perfectly. Daphne was one of yours and I know you want to rip the sick bastard’s throat out.”

“I do, but I want him off the street. Without concrete evidence, it’s the best we’re going to get.”

Jack left the observation room and headed to his office. He opened the top drawer, extracted the whiskey bottle, and poured a shot. He studied the glass in his hand before swallowing the contents. He stared at the bottle. *One’s enough until I have this bastard wrapped up in a bow.*

He made his way to the restroom, relieved himself, then washed his face. Jack contemplated his reflection in the mirror and the vein pulsating in his neck. He pushed his anger back down into his belly. *Do it right for Daphne.*

Jack returned to the interview room. He sat, nodded to Detective Lopez who recommenced the recording, then passed a yellow pad and black pen to Mouse.

“Okay, Mouse, I need you to write about what you’ve done.”

Mouse stared at the pad but didn’t pick up the pen. “I told you that’s private.”

“I understand. Maybe admit to the rape and murder of each of these women. You’ve already admitted it, but we need it in writing. So, you begin with your name. I, Kirk Douglas Davis, confess to the murder of... state the victim’s name, Melissa Anne Chapmen, on... use the date of the offense next to the name. Then repeat it for each of the seven women. Can you do that Mouse?”

“I can, but nothing that’s private.”

“That’ll be fine.”

After he’d completed his confession for the seven women he’d killed, Jack handed him a sheet of paper with a solitary name and date.

“Now you need to admit to the aggravated assault and attempted rape of Judith Vernon and the date.”

Mouse complied. “She was a mistake.”

“I guess she was. She had a bodyguard. Now I need you to sign your confession and write today’s date.”

Mouse did as asked and handed the confession to Jack, who read it. He frowned, then took the pen, saying, “I need to make a minor adjustment.”

Jack again missed what he was being told and drew a line through ‘and rape’ regarding Daphne Loader. He passed the paper back to Mouse. “Just initial the slight change I made.”

Mouse did without reading or noting what the change was.

Jack read over the confession one more time and then passed the document to Lopez.

He studied Mouse again, then asked, “Do you know what’ll happen now?”

“I suppose I’ll go to prison.”

“First there’ll be a trial. The District Attorney will ask for the death penalty. He’ll probably get it, so I don’t expect you’ll be imprisoned very long. They’ll take you and tie a

rope around your neck. The floor will drop, and you'll hang there by your neck, jerking and twitching until you are dead. It won't be quick and peaceful like the women whose throats you cut."

Jack saw the color drain from Mouse's face. His eyes became furtive, darting from side to side. He didn't seem to know what to say.

Now you can smell your own fear, you sick fuck. Let's see if we can't make you squirm some more.

"At the trial, the judge will insist you tell everyone about each, um... encounter. He'll want to know the details."

Mouse's panic increased. It appeared he wanted to jump up and run out of the room. "I-I-I can't, that's private."

"Nothing's private in court Mouse. I understand they're private, but the court won't. You'll have to tell them."

"No, I can't, if I give them away.... I can't. They're mine."

"I don't think you're gonna have much use for them when you're jerking at the end of a rope that's choking the life out of you. Do you Mouse?"

"Don't keep saying that!" Mouse appeared close to tears. "I don't want to listen."

Jack smiled. He wanted to see the sick fuck hang. In fact, what he really wanted was to reach across the table and choke the life out of the bastard himself.

Detective Lopez leaned towards Jack and whispered, "No evidence, Sarge."

He's right... Maybe I can. "I'll tell you what Mouse, what if you tell me quietly? Only the two of us, then the court won't have to know?"

Mouse was squirming again. He wiped his hands on his shirt. It appeared he was going to speak several times, but didn't. He muttered to himself. Jack stepped up the pressure.

"Of course, they may decide to send you to the electric chair. They'll strap you in and fry you with electricity until you're dead. Your memories won't help you then. Why don't you give them up to me now? You'll still have them."

"No! No! No! I can't give them away, they're mine, I..."

"Have you watched *The Green Mile*, Mouse?"

"I read the book."

"Can you imagine what it must be like to die, with the smell of your own flesh cooking your last memory? That would be your memory, Mouse, the one you'd carry to the other side."

"I don't want that." Mouse sounded like a child.

"What do you want Mouse?"

"I want to go back and accept that I couldn't have Eight."

"That can't happen. We are where we are."

Even if I scare him into giving us the details, even if I get the evidence, they'll never give him the death penalty, likely he'll end up in some mental facility, and some shrink will declare him cured in a few years.

"I could accept going to prison, I guess."

“I guess...” *I’m gonna have to accept that, too.* “I tell you what, Mouse, I’ll have a talk with the District Attorney. Perhaps I can get him to agree. I should remind you, Mouse, that you’re entitled to an attorney. Would you like me to get you an attorney, Mouse? Or would you like me to talk to the District Attorney and see if I can get him to agree to you going to prison?”

“What would I have to tell my lawyer?”

Jack’s pulse began racing. *Please don’t let him lawyer up now.* “Of course you’d have to tell your lawyer everything. He’s gonna need all the details so he can defend you effectively.”

“Would he tell anybody?”

“I can’t say what he’ll do, but he’ll use what you tell him to build your defence, so maybe he’ll have to. He’ll probably support you in court while you tell the judge, the jury and the court the details.”

“No, I don’t want that.”

“I can’t say for sure...”

“Could you get the District Attorney to agree I can keep my private stuff private?”

“I don’t know Mouse. I could try if you want me to?”

“That’d be better.”

“Just to be clear, are you asking to request the District Attorney to offer you a plea agreement, Mouse?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, Mouse, I’ll do that for you. Would you like another cup of tea while I’m gone?”

“Yes, and a sandwich.”

Jack nodded at Lopez, who suspended the interview and paused the recording as Jack left the room.

Jack began speaking as soon as he entered the observation room. “Tell me I’m wrong Mike. We don’t have enough evidence to link him to the crimes without a reasonable doubt. The only way we’re going to get that evidence is to coerce a detailed confession, and if he provides it, there’ll be enough in it for even a public defender to get an insanity verdict.”

Mike said, “You’re right. He’d be institutionalised and some shrink will declare him sane and no longer a threat in a dozen years.”

“They’d be wrong.”

“The plea agreement is ready. Get him to sign it and I’ll get him put away for life. I’ll make sure it gets in front of a judge who’ll accept it.”

Jack nodded. He stepped over to the observation window and studied Mouse one more time. “He’s not arrogant, he’s not gloating. It’s not about that for him. I believe he’s insane, but I don’t care. I’ll get him put away for life.”

“Even if it’s in the protection unit.”

Jack shrugged. “There are enough ex-cops in the protection unit. They may be bent, but they won’t take kindly to a cop killer.”

Jack picked up the plea agreement from the table and read it through.

“This’ll do the job.”

Detective Sargent Jack Hawkins watched Kirk Douglas Davis being escorted from the interview room. He’d be returned to the holding cells while waiting to appear before the judge, who’d sign off the plea agreement.

Surprises

Burt stood in The Secret Garden and surveyed the scene. He'd been in this garden more than a hundred times. It was owned by Myron's family and managed by his company. Nevertheless, the waterfall of green, white, pink, and red roses cascading down the six floors of balconies, which enclosed the courtyard, never ceased to take his breath away.

Denise, the groom of the first wedding, was beside him, wearing a white suit with a pink shirt and tie. Burt wasn't surprised. On learning Audrey was gay, he'd guessed the roles she and her fiancé Denise fulfilled in the relationship.

Burt's phone dinged. He removed it from his pocket and glanced at the screen. He smiled and leaned into his daughter-in-law. "She'll be here in a few minutes. I'll go to meet her now."

"Okay, Dad. Can't believe how nervous I am," Denise replied, wiping her palms on her trousers for the sixteenth time since she'd been waiting at the gazebo.

Burt kissed her cheek. "I'm proud to have you as a daughter-in-law. Couldn't think of anyone more suitable."

His words were rewarded with a smile. Henry, Burt's eldest son, stood beside Denise, her best man. He was quiet. Burt suspected he was thinking about his own failed marriage. *Must have a word with him later.*

He looked behind the red rose covered gazebo as he turned to leave. Judy was standing beside the balcony of a nearby apartment, talking to a tenant who was an employee of Myron's first business, a forensic accountant, Tim Clean. Burt shook his head. Tim was a shut in, suffering from Germophobia and Agoraphobia, who never left his apartment. His friend, Barry Power, a male prostitute who lived across the road, was next to Judy.

As Burt stepped out, he glanced at Myron, who was to be his best man, sitting with Melanie, Art, and Ruth in the front row of the foldable white chairs which the building superintendent, John Clarke, had set out in front of the Gazebo. *Art's looking better than I thought he would.* Burt nodded at Myron.

His youngest, Donny, sat towards the back. Burt shook his head. *At least he's here.*

Standing behind the seating, making sure everything was as it was meant to be, stood John Clarke with his son, John Junior. Burt stepped to him. "Thank you, John. You've done a wonderful job as usual."

John grinned. "Thanks, boss. Congratulations, I hope the day is everything you want it to be."

"I'm sure it will be." Burt smiled. Then continued to the nondescript entrance in the front of what seemed to be a drab, square building.

While he was waiting for Audrey to arrive, he thought about the dinner he'd hosted for her and Denise.

Burt planned on going to Franco's, but Ernie insisted on cooking. He hadn't known his fiancé could cook. The main was crackling puff pastry and earthy mushroom duxelles enclosing roast beef in mini-Beef Wellingtons. Accompanied by roasted Brussels Sprouts and Broccoli with Cranberry sauce and potatoes au gratin. For dessert, they had individual molten

chocolate cakes. It was a pleasant surprise. Certainly not the first Ernie had given him, and he hoped it wouldn't be the last.

After dinner, he sat at the table with Audrey. He could still smell the warm earthy blend or aromas from the meal. Ernie and Denise had gone to the kitchen to wash the dishes. He was surprised how quickly the two had connected.

Burt sighed, then smiled at his daughter.

She frowned. "What?"

"I can't believe the difference in my life since I met that man," Burt said. "My life isn't so different, but every experience is deeper and more significant."

Audrey smiled. "You're in love, and I'm happy for you, Dad. I can see now you weren't in love with Mom."

Burt was thoughtful. "I loved her in a way, but you're right, I was never in love with her."

She nodded, then frowned.

"What?" he asked.

Audrey explained. "Denise's family disowned her when she came out. They can't accept her being in a same sex relationship. She says she expected their reaction, and she's fine with it. Not that I understand it. I mean, look at her, it's kinda obvious."

Burt smiled. "I thought so. With you two being roommates for so long, I should've put it together, but I never gave it a thought."

Audrey reached out and rested her hand on his arm. "It's fine Dad. My fault. I shouldn't have listened to Mom. I've been thinking, I don't think she really knew you at all."

"We never had that sort of relationship. I don't think either of us took the time to know each other." Burt shrugged. "Different times back then. We both had a role to play in the marriage, and we played our role the best we could, and trusted the other to do the same."

Audrey nodded thoughtfully. "I think I was influenced by Denise's family. I didn't want to risk losing you."

Burt stood and hugged his daughter. "That'll never happen."

A white Rolls Royce pulled up to the entrance to the building. The rear door opened and Audrey's bridesmaid, a girl she worked with, got out first, and then assisted Audrey.

Burt stared at his daughter. She wore a traditional white wedding gown decorated with a string of pink miniature roses. He smiled as he stepped beside her and offered his arm.

As they stepped through the nondescript square entrance, he didn't see Ernie slip out of the car.

Burt escorted Audrey to the Gazebo. She turned and smiled, stepping up to take her place beside Denise with her bridesmaid beside her.

He wiped a tear from his eye as he stepped to the front row, where he sat beside Judy, who'd joined her family for the ceremony.

At the conclusion of the formalities, both Audrey and Denise headed for Burt and hugged him. Denise kissed him on the cheek, "Thank you, Dad."

Burt beamed. He hadn't expected his daughter to marry a woman, but he liked Denise, and her gender was irrelevant. Perhaps more importantly, Audrey and Denise marrying had made him more comfortable marrying Ernest.

Judy stepped beside him. "Are you about ready, Burt?"

He glanced at Audrey, who nodded and squeezed his arm. Burt wiped his hands on his Onyx colored suit, straightened his Space Gray tie over his Lavender Gray shirt. At least that's what Ernie had told him. To Burt, he was wearing black and gray. He glanced at Judy and nodded.

He noticed she gently touched Myron's arm, then left to find Ernest outside the garden.

Myron kissed Audrey on the cheek and then Denise before turning to squeeze Burt's shoulder.

Burt smiled weakly and stepped up to the gazebo with his best man. Audrey, Denise, and Henry took the vacated seats.

Judy stepped through the featureless, square entry to where Ernie was waiting, nervously pacing. He was wearing a white suit with a pink shirt and tie.

She smiled; they'd obviously planned it. The 'groom' in the first wedding was identical to the 'bride' in the next.

"You appear nervous." Judy observed.

"Never been married before. Never thought I'd get married."

"I know the feeling, but you're marrying a good man, like I did."

Ernie grinned and nodded.

Judy offered her arm. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." He took her arm. "I know he's a good man."

"A very good man," Judy agreed.

Ernie led his Matron of Honor down the aisle to marry the man he loved. She noticed Donny smiling at Ernie, which surprised her. Max and Joanne were smiling as well. Judy discreetly winked at Joanne.

Denise beamed as they walked past and she saw Ernie's suit, which was identical to her own. Audrey said something to her wife.

They reached the Gazebo, and Judy stood beside Ernie, after delivering him to his fiancé. She caught Myron's eye and smiled.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Burt leaned in and kissed his husband, feeling self-conscious because it was their first public kiss in front of family and friends. He smiled self-consciously at Audrey and Denise, who'd stood to accompany them on the journey back along the aisle.

As his daughters stepped out in front of him, he noticed Melanie sitting on Art's knee and smiled. For some reason, being part of the last wedding Art would witness in his life, felt special to Burt.

Leaving The Secret Garden, the four entered a stretch limo, waiting to take them to the reception, being held at Frank's Diner, which was closed after brunch on Sunday afternoons.

Two taxis arrived at the diner shortly after the limo. Art, Ruth, and Melanie exited the first. Myron and Judy were in the second.

He held the door open for his family to enter. *Papa looks tired.* He caught Mama's eye. She nodded agreement.

When Myron followed them into Frank's, he noticed George was working, and approached him.

"I didn't think you worked on Sunday's, George?"

George smiled. "Hello, sir. No, not working, helping out at Mr. Rogers' wedding."

"Guess weddings like this must seem strange to you, George."

George frowned, then smiled. "It's true they couldn't have legal weddings like this before I went inside, not that I ever attended a wedding back then. But I saw all manner of strange weddings inside. Not legal, but weddings all the same."

Myron nodded. *Hadn't thought of that.* "Could you slip away for a few minutes? I have something for you in the penthouse."

George nodded. "Of course."

After they entered the penthouse, Myron opened his briefcase and extracted two identical documents. He turned them to the back page and indicated a line flagged with a green post it note. "I need you to sign there, both copies."

He nodded again and took the papers and pen from Myron, leaned down to the table, and signed them, without reading them or asking a question.

Myron asked, "Don't you at least want to read them?"

George shrugged. "I trust you."

"One copy is for you. It is a legal 'right of residency'. It means you have the right to reside in your apartment until the day you die. There are no conditions, and you will pay no rent."

George responded with a puzzled expression.

"I don't know how else to thank you. Not only for protecting Judy and saving her life, but for everything you do for us."

"I appreciate it sir, but it's not necces—"

"It is for me. I know you have somewhere safe and comfortable to live for the rest of your life."

"Yes, sir. It's part of my wages."

"Not anymore. You could quit tomorrow, and you can still live in your apartment."

"I don't want to quit."

"Good, because I don't want you to. I want you here keeping an eye on things and protecting us."

“Between my wages these years and the police gave me a lot of money for getting that guy who hurt Judy... I don’t need much, and I don’t have anything to use it for.”

Myron smiled. “Maybe have a holiday, George?”

“I don’t think I can until I finish my parole,” George grinned. “Besides, compared to my life before, my life now is a holiday.”

“I suppose it is. Anyway, I’ll have Simon have a look and see what we can do for you.”

George frowned.

“Not a day goes past. When we don’t thank God, you came into our lives.”

Myron noticed George’s frown deepen. He seemed to press his lips together, but said nothing as they left the apartment.

When they reached the foyer, Myron returned to the restaurant, and George headed outside.

George stepped out of the building and walked away from the entrance.

He fumbled in his trouser pocket to retrieve his cigarettes. Took one from the pack with shaking fingers and put it between his lips. He struggled to get his lighter ignited, then finally lit his smoke and inhaled deeply. He needed to steady his nerves.

Despite his efforts, tears rolled down his face. Never could he have imagined anybody thanking God for him being in their lives.

No Regrets

Melanie's eyes seemed big, her expression serious and determined.

"Yes, Zeyde, I will make you that promise," she said.

Art half expected her to salute.

"Put your hand on my heart, sweetheart," he instructed.

He smiled as the small, soft hand warmed the chill in his chest.

"Now repeat after me."

"Okay, Zeyde."

"I, Melanie Myerson."

"I, Melanie Myerson."

"Hereby, make my final promise to my Zeyde."

Art was struggling not to smile. His granddaughter was so serious.

"Hereby, make my final promise to my Zeyde."

"That I will take responsibility."

"That I will take responsibility."

Art had turned the moment from one of grief to one of commitment, as far as Melanie was concerned.

"For the care and wellbeing of my Bubbe."

"For the care and wellbeing of my Bubbe."

Art nodded, then glanced at Ruth, who smiled, despite the solemnness of the occasion.

"Thank you, Melanie, I will rest in peace knowing Bubbe is well cared for."

"Yes, Zeyde I will."

"I know you will. You are a remarkable young lady. I will always love you and watch over you. If you need to talk with me, look up at the stars, and talk to me. I'll hear you. Then sleep in peace, knowing my answer will be in your heart when you wake."

"I will Zeyde. Mama told me you will always live in my heart. I will always love you, too."

Art nodded at Ruth, who took Melanie's hand, and led her from the room, saying, "No sweetheart, we don't need to say goodbye. Zeyde will always be in our hearts. He's not going anywhere."

Art smiled as his wife and granddaughter left his room, despite knowing it was the last time he'd see his Aynikl. *Today, I will die.*

There had been no tears. They would come later. Instead, Melanie had promised to accept responsibility to care for Ruth. He'd asked for a promise because he wanted Ruth focused on the future, not the past.

He drew on the little strength he had left. His light was fading, the world was losing its color.

Judy entered his room. She sat on the side of the bed. She leaned over and embraced him. “Oh Papa, I don’t know what to say. I love you so much. I could never thank you enough for accepting me into the family. I wish there was something I could do, I…”

“Hush, sweetheart. I don’t have long now. It’s time to listen.”

Judy nodded and swallowed back a sob.

“We have spent every Sabbath together. You don’t need to tell me what I can feel for myself.”

Judy squeezed him tighter.

Art continued, “Myron is the rock that supports this family and makes us strong. You are the crowning jewel that bathes us in light. The light of the world is fading, but not your light. It never will.”

Judy sobbed again.

“There’ll be time for tears later.”

Judy nodded. “Too much time and too many tears. You’ll be gone, and it seems Ali will soon join you. If not for George, I would’ve been there waiting for you. It’s too much.”

“I’m not going anywhere. My body’s worn out, but I’ll live on within you all, like you told Melanie. I already have one foot on the other side. If your Ali was there, I’d see her. She’s not there. And you, it’s not your time. Won’t be for many, many years to come. Your light is still needed in this world.”

“Papa, I…”

He raised his hand. “I want you to do something for me, Judy. Regrets. Don’t let Myron have them. Give him the strength to do what he needs to do.”

“Always Papa, but what…”

“You know.”

Art studied Judy, drinking her in one last time. She opened her mouth to speak, but he placed his fingers against her lips.

“We agreed, no goodbyes. I need to talk to Myron now.”

Judy stood. He could see the depth of pain in her eyes, then she turned and silently left the room.

Myron entered and sat on his father’s bed.

“Papa.”

“Son. This body is almost done. Don’t mourn me. I lived the life I chose. It was a good life. I have no regrets. None.”

“No, Papa.”

“It is a good time to go, not having regrets. Gives one a sense of peace. Of knowing I lived the life I was meant to live and achieved what I was meant to achieve. When I was a boy, I knew this day would come, and finally I know which day it is.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“I have something I want you to promise me, son.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you won’t die with regrets. You don’t know when or how you’ll die. That’s out of your control, but not having regrets is in your control. If you have no regrets, it won’t matter when you die.”

“You’re right Papa, and you have my promise.”

“She’ll wake up soon, and when she does.”

“I won’t waste any time.”

Art closed his eyes. “It’s time. I think I’d like Mama to hold me, carry me to the other side.”

Myron stood, nodded goodbye to his father, and left.

Ruth looked at her husband as she sat beside him and put her arms around him.

“Hold me, Ruth. My life began that first time I held you. Hold me now so I feel safe.”

Ruth didn’t speak. They needed no more words. Everything that needed to be said, had been said.

The life faded from her beloved Art. She felt his body go limp. She released him and gently kissed his lips.

Ruth stood, smiled at the man she’d shared a life with, and called out to her family.

“He is at peace.”

Awake

Myron, Judy, and Melanie arrived home from Art's funeral, less than twenty-four hours after he'd passed.

"Mel seems withdrawn," Judy observed.

"To be expected," Myron suggested.

"I suppose. I'll sit down with her tomorrow. Maybe she needs to talk. I worry because she might be reliving the death of her parents."

"Will you go to Alison tonight?"

"No." Judy finished preparing their drinks and handed Myron his glass. "I'll stay with you tonight."

As Myron sipped his whiskey sour, he was startled when Judy's phone rang.

He answered, then passed it to Judy. "The hospital, for you."

Myron stood beside her and gripped her shoulder. He watched her creased forehead smooth out. He saw the veil of concern leave her eyes as they widened and brightened. She was beaming.

"Ali's woken up. She's asking for us."

A weight lifted from Myron's shoulders. His smile matched his wife's. His hand on her shoulder spun her towards him. He crushed her into him.

"Our girl's come back," he said, his eyes locked on Judy's.

Their lips pressed together as the joy of answered prayers enveloped them.

Melanie came running from her room and stopped, frozen, staring at her parents. "Papa, Mama? What is it?"

Myron smiled, extending his arm to invite her to join them. "Aunt Alison woke up."

Melanie ran to them, tears streaming down her face. "Days are like this sometimes," she said.

Myron nodded. He took her implication. The day she'd lost her birth parents had been the day she'd met her new parents, even if none of them realized this at the time.

"I'm sorry, Mel, but we need to go to see Aunt Ali."

"I know, Mama, and you want me to stay with Becky and Darnell?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I mean, today is..."

"It's alright, Mama."

Judy called Rebekah while Melanie went to prepare an overnight bag.

They stopped at Rebekah and Darnell's apartment and dropped Melanie off before exiting the building and flagging a taxi.

Ali was sitting up in bed. She'd eaten a light meal a nurse had dropped off. Her first non-parenteral meal in months. She wanted to get out of bed, but the doctor told her they needed to monitor her a little longer. He promised to remove the catheter the following day. She wanted to shower, and to remove the rainforests under her arms.

She didn't know what she was doing in the hospital bed. *Why am I here?* They told her she'd been in a car accident and had been a coma for months. She couldn't remember. She vaguely recalled Judy talking to her, but she couldn't recollect what she'd said.

A nurse told her Judy had sat with her every day and night since the accident. *Where is she now? I'm dirty and hairy like a feral living in the wilds. Of course, she doesn't want to see me.*

The doctor explained she may never recover her memory. She was trying to remember, but all she found was a void, and that recollection of Judy's voice. *Was Judy with me when it happened?*

Ali glanced up when the door opened. She gasped, her eyes widened, but filled with water. She opened her mouth to speak but found no words. She heard the most beautiful sound in the world as Judy shouted, "Ali!"

Judy landed on her with a heavy jolt, she seemed to have flown across the room she was on her so quickly. She was being squeezed, Judy's lips pressed against hers, but she was talking to her. Not that Ali had any idea what she was saying. Words and kisses mingled. Judy's tears blended with her own and ran down her cheeks.

Sobbing and kissing and trying to talk amongst it all.

A nurse entered. "What? She's not strong enough for all that!"

Judy squeezed Ali one more time and slowly raised herself.

The nurse moved the chair closer to the bed. "Please sit in your chair, Judy. Ali needs to get her strength back."

"Sorry, I..." Ali heard Judy begin.

She noticed the nurse was beaming despite the stern tone. Past the nurse she saw Myron, standing beside the bed, also smiling, but tears were rolling down his cheeks. She raised her arms, inviting him in. She was oblivious to what Judy was saying.

Myron leaned over and embraced her. His lips found hers, which tingled with the intensity of their reunion. *Wow, that was a kiss.* She looked at his eyes on hers. *I don't remember such a powerful connection. Have I forgotten something?*

"Myron, you're crying. I can't remember seeing you cry before."

"It's okay darling, just an emotional day."

Judy said, "It was Papa's funeral today."

"Oh Myron, I'm so sorry."

"He promised he'd send you back to us."

The nurse placed another chair on the other side of Ali's bed.

"Okay, Myron, you can sit here. If I think you're exhausting her, I'll kick you both out."

Myron's lips found Ali's once more, before he complied with the nurse's instructions.

Judy's hands cupped one of Ali's, Myron's the other. She locked her eyes on Judy's, gazing deep into her soul, and then switched her focus to Myron's. She closed her eyes and allowed the warmth in her chest to become a heat that permeated through her body.

Ali opened her eyes, looking at neither, staring ahead, focused on some distant point. "I am so loved."

The three sat in silence for around thirty minutes, each basking in the moment, until Ali said, "I don't remember what happened. Tell me everything that's happened while I've been sleeping."

Judy told her what she knew of the accident, which wasn't much, and filled her in on the visitors she'd had. Mostly Ali nodded. "Mon came? That's sweet of her."

"Your ears must have been burning," Judy suggested.

"I can imagine."

"Nobody's been able to contact Rae. I don't think she knows."

Ali frowned, trying to recall. "She bought that business in Frisco, so she probably moved without realizing I'd been in an accident."

"She isn't answering her phone."

"Probably changed her number, or her phone or something. Making me pay by cutting me off or some nonsense. Doesn't matter. I vaguely recall telling her we were finished."

Myron said, "You two keep talking. I'd better start making some phone calls."

Ali nodded, and he left the room.

She stared at Judy with unblinking eyes, as Judy told her about her experience with Mouse, and how George saved her.

"I'm sorry Judy. You needed me and I was MIA."

"You ridiculous woman. I was fine."

"Thanks to George."

Judy switched from George to Art.

"Poor Art," Ali said. "I didn't even get to say goodbye."

"None of us did. He wouldn't let us say goodbye, because he'll still be in our hearts."

Ali grinned. "I can imagine him saying that."

Judy smiled. "Maybe you can remember, if Myron's right and Art sent you back."

"Perhaps."

Nearly an hour later, Myron returned. "Now I know how those guys feel who ring to tell people they won the lottery."

Ali seemed to glow. "Nice to know everyone will be pleased to see me."

"They certainly will. John and Lori are already on their way. Frankie and Charlie are organizing flights. We don't want to leave you, darling, but you'll soon be inundated with people, so we better let you have some rest. We'll be back later today."

He leaned over, and his lips found hers again in another intense kiss. He straightened and walked around to Judy.

"Come on, sweetheart, kiss our girl goodbye. We have a lifetime to be together."

It was Judy's turn to smother Ali with passionate kisses until Myron gently pulled her away.

Ali studied them as they left the room. Between Myron's intensity and Judy's passion, the tingling of her lips extended to her toes.

William Moulton Marston

It had been several weeks since Ali woke. She was still in hospital but hoping to be cleared to leave soon. Daily physiotherapy sessions strengthened her, and Judy, almost constantly by her side, ensured her spirits remained buoyant.

Her extended family often visited, and she spent a lot of time with her sons before they returned to their universities. It seemed if Judy wasn't with her, Myron was. Melanie often visited with either of her parents, usually bringing Aunt Ali a peanut butter milkshake, which she let Mel drink when Judy was distracted.

Monica had visited, as did several of Ali's staff. Jason didn't surprise her, but a visit from Dancer did.

Ali lay in bed, her breakfast finished, the morning sun streaming onto her bed, warming her. She smiled. *I've never felt so loved.*

Judy, Myron, and Melanie enjoyed breakfast together. Judy was waiting for his return after walking Melanie to school. She very much enjoyed them having breakfast as a family. Myron was coming back because they had something to talk about, but she didn't know what which concerned her.

She ordered her usual flat white coffee from Del, the second morning waitress. Judy was listening to the fifties music playing in the diner: Johnny Otis Show's, *Mama (He's Making Eyes at Me)*. She couldn't decide if she liked it. She called Ali.

"You're early! What's up?" Ali answered.

"Nothing, I don't know... probably nothing."

"Explain."

"I had breakfast with Myron and Melanie. He's walking her to school, then he wants to talk about something."

"What?"

"I don't know. He said we need to talk about something."

"And now you're worried, because he would normally have explained what he wants to talk about."

"Exactly."

"Did he indicate it was something bad?"

"No, said he'd been trying to get it straight in his head."

"Don't worry. You'll know soon."

"Yes, I suppose.... Oh, he's back now. Talk later."

Myron kissed her. "Let's go upstairs. I don't want to talk here."

"Okay..." Judy said. *Sounds ominous.*

He frowned at her expression, then smiled, and said, "I told you, it's nothing to worry about."

“Okay.”

They sat at the dining table in their penthouse.

Myron smiled. “There’s nothing to worry about. It’s something I’ve been trying to talk to you about for years, well not all that time. I mean, I tried to talk about it years ago, but I couldn’t quite work out how.”

“Okay, I...”

Myron shook his head. “Let me talk. I wanted to bring Alison into our family, but I couldn’t decide how it would work. I don’t mean invite her into our bed as a third wheel. If that was all you wanted, you two could have slept together, and you didn’t.”

“I... we...”

He silenced her with a gesture. “I couldn’t get my head around the dynamics, not of sleeping together, that I *could* imagine. I didn’t know how we’d explain it to people. Then Melanie came into our lives, and everything changed.

“Papa asked if I had any regrets. I told him about wanting Alison to join our family, which isn’t an easy conversation for a Jewish boy to have with his father.” Myron smiled. “Unless, of course, his father is Eugene Levy in *American Pie*.”

“When I was away, and it became apparent it would happen, I did some research. Having multiple wives is acceptable in many cultures, of course. Have you heard of William Moulton Marston?”

“Vaguely.” Judy shrugged.

“He and his wife were involved with the invention of the lie detector, among other things. He created and was the original writer of *Wonder Woman*, based on Olive Byrne, who was the polyamorous life partner of Marston and his wife. After Marston died, the two women remained together for another twenty years. A precedent which shows that such an arrangement can work.”

Judy’s mind was spinning. “What are you saying?”

“We should ask our Alison to be our wife. Something we should have done years ago.”

“It’s what I want, and I know it’s what Ali wants, but are you sure it’s what you want?”

“Yes, darling, I wanted it years ago, but I couldn’t figure it out.”

“I had no idea...” Judy lied. The women had seen it coming, perhaps not exactly as Myron was now explaining it. They hadn’t imagined it would extend much beyond the bedroom. They’d discussed it and agreed to allow Myron to set the pace, but it never happened, because Myron pulled Melanie from a car wreck.

“I mentioned it to you, but you were crazy with Alison’s pheromones and didn’t really hear me. I hinted to Alison too, more than hinted. Then Melanie came into our lives...”

“... and everything changed.” Judy completed his sentence.

“Anyway, what do you think? Shall we finally marry Alison?”

“Oh. Please Myron, let’s do it.”

“You want to ask her now?”

Judy was excited. For her, it was a dream, a fantasy, come true. “Let’s do it together,” she said.

Judy and Myron entered Ali's room together. Subconsciously, she straightened herself up and patted down her hair. She looked at their faces. Both were beaming. "What?"

Judy winked at Myron. "What, what?" she asked.

"You two. You're beaming."

"Of course. How should we react to seeing our beautiful girl?" Myron asked.

What? Something's happening. "You're not acting.... Normal."

Judy was laughing. Ali frowned. "It's not funny Judy. You're making me feel... something."

"Alison," Myron said. "We have a question."

"This is serious." Judy said.

"What's serious?" Ali asked.

"Our question," Myron said. "We were wondering if you'd be interested in marrying us, not legally, of course. We can't, but...."

"What?" Ali asked, trying to comprehend what Myron was saying.

"We want you to move in with us and live with us as our wife," Judy clarified.

"It's called a polyamorous life partner," Myron explained.

"They have a term for it?" Ali asked.

"Apparently," said Judy. "Myron's been doing research, joining the dots. So, what do you say? You want to marry us?"

"Be your mistress?" Ali asked.

"No Alison, that's not what I mean. I... *We* respect you too much for you to be a bit on the side. We want you to be our wife, an equal tri-party relationship. Love, respect, responsibility to and for each other... The works."

Judy added, "Oh, and sex, of course, lots of sex."

"Not *just* sex," Myron clarified.

"Oh, I never imagined. I mean, I imagined the sex, but I it never occurred to me that the rest, the important stuff, would be possible." Ali said.

"It is, and we're asking." Judy said.

"Well yes, or course yes!" Ali was ecstatic, and in shock, trying to come to terms with what she'd agreed to. She didn't notice the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"When will they let you come home, darling?" Myron asked.

"Not long, a few days at most." Ali suggested.

"Well, that's when we start our life together," Judy said, as she leaned across and gently brushed Ali's tears away.

Myron kissed his women goodbye and left for his office.

Ali had a lot to think about. She was trying to let this unexpected development sink in, but Judy was so excited she was rambling, not that Ali was listening.

Seven's Scent

Judy and Ali sat together on the side of Ali's hospital bed. Judy wore a cornflower blue blouse, with the three top buttons undone, and a matching azure blue skirt. Her lacy, pale blue underwear, set from her aphrodisiac collection, was flashed at Ali as she moved.

"I want you in bed," Judy said.

"I'm fine," Ali responded. "I'm coming home tomorrow."

Judy smiled. "You're not fully recovered yet. I mean, I *want* you in bed."

"When I'm home, you'll have me in bed every day, and you won't need to tease me with short skirts and lacy panties."

Judy grinned. "Can't wait."

"We've waited years."

"Yes, but this year has taught us we don't know how long we have. We should embrace life, not wait for circumstances to be ideal."

Ali leaned into her woman. "Can you go to my apartment and collect some clothes for me?"

"Give me the door code. Don't s'pose Rae'll be there."

"I hope she hasn't done anything spiteful, like cut my clothes to ribbons."

"I'm sure she didn't. From what we can work out, she left the day you got hit by that car. Nobody's been able to contact her since."

"Probably changed her sim or something to spite me."

"I guess. Do you want anything in particular?"

Ali smiled. "You choose and when you get back, you can dress me."

"Deal." Judy leaned across and kissed her.

Judy stepped out of the taxi and looked up at Ali's building. Her heart was racing, butterflies were dancing in her stomach. She inhaled deeply, shook her head, and walked towards the building.

Judy closed her eyes, opened them when the bell dinged, and exited the elevator. She tentatively stepped to Ali's front door, raised her hand, keyed in the code, and heard the door lock release. She pushed the door open and vomited. Legs weak, she staggered back until her back slammed into the wall. Her eyes were watering. She vomited again.

Gathering her wits, she made her way back to the elevator lobby. The stench was less intense here, but she vomited a third time. *What's that smell? Is something dead in there?* She made the mistake of breathing through her nose. She dry retched. Her stomach was empty, the contents decorating the hall carpet. Tears had escaped her eyes; her nose was running.

She retrieved her phone from her bag. Her hand shook as she chose an entry in her contacts and selected call.

"This is Detective Sergeant Jack Hawkins."

"Hello Sergeant, this is Judy Vernon."

“What do you need, Ms. Vernon?”

“I came to collect some clothes for my friend. There’s a foul smell. I think something’s dead.”

“Give me the address, and I’ll send a couple of officers to check it out.”

Hawkins made a note of the address.

He contacted dispatch and had a radio car assigned, before saying to the first detective he encountered. “Come on, Steve. We’ve a foul smell to investigate, and I’ve got a bad feeling.”

On the way, Hawkins received a call from the officers who’d been dispatched to the scene.

“Sarge, I think we’ve a dead body on our hands.”

“Thought so. Secure the scene and wait for me. I’ve got a feeling.”

“Sure Sarge.”

“Ask Ms. Vernon to wait until I arrive. I’ll need a word.”

“Okay. She hasn’t entered the apartment, but she’s contaminated the hallway.”

“She mentioned that. Give her some mentholated gel.”

“Will do.”

When they arrived, Hawkins checked he had nose plugs in his pocket. He wanted, well needed, to smell the decomposing body before he blocked the scent.

He turned to the detective. “I’ll talk with Ms. Vernon so I can let her get out of here. Go into the apartment, see if you can find some coffee grounds to burn. Guess this one’s going to be particularly ripe.”

“Okay Sarge,” Steve said, inserting his nose plugs.

As soon as the elevator doors opened on Ali’s floor, Hawkin’s olfactory nerve was assaulted. He gagged, but experience prevented him from throwing up. *Fuck me! That’s ripe.*

He approached Judy, who was leaning against the wall, looking pale and seemingly weak kneed.

“Ms. Vernon, did you enter the apartment?”

“No Sergeant. I opened the door, and umm...” She screwed her face in disgust. “That smell hit me. I vomited. I-I’m sorry, but I couldn’t go in.”

“I understand. Why did you come here?”

“My friend, Ali, in the hospital, needs some clothes...”

“If her clothes are in that apartment, the smell would have permeated through them, and my guess is they’ll all need to be replaced.”

“Okay, if they smell like that...” She sniffed and grimaced. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes. I’m afraid it is. Does Ms. Farrington have a flat mate?”

“Yes, Rae. Nobody’s been able to contact her since Ali’s accident. She was planning to move to another city. We thought she’d moved and changed her number.”

“If she possibly changed her number, can I assume they didn’t part on the best of terms?”

Judy shrugged. “Ali was going to end their relationship and not go... but she doesn’t remember much from the time of her accident, I believe.”

“Will she be leaving the hospital soon?”

“She’ll be staying with me. You have my details.”

Jack nodded. “Okay, we’re probably going to need to talk with her.”

“I doubt she’ll be able to tell you much.”

“Well, I need to piece together what’s happened. Maybe I’ll be able to do so without bothering her. We’ll see. For now, you can go, but I’ll need to get a statement from you at some point.”

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

“Officer,” Jack said. “Could someone take Ms. Vernon home? I guess she’s gonna want to change.”

“Sure Sarge. C’mon Ma’am, let’s get out into the fresh air.”

Hawkins steeled himself and entered the apartment, being careful to avoid Judy’s vomit. He’d smelled enough to know what he was dealing with and inserted nose plugs.

As he entered, Steve said, “Just getting the coffee grounds going. She’s in the bedroom. Crime scene are on the way.”

Jack didn’t answer. He made his way to the bedroom. Stepped inside and stopped. *Jesus.*

He walked to the body. Decomposition had begun, but the open wound across the throat was unmistakable. He’d seen the wound before and studied photographs of many more. One look and he knew what had happened and who was responsible.

How many more are waiting to be discovered?

Jack returned to the kitchen. “I’ve seen enough,” he announced. “Crime scene’ll know what I want. You stay here until they’re done. Look around and bag anything you think might be relevant.”

Steve said, “That didn’t take long.”

“Need to head over to talk to our mousy little friend in prison. He did this, and I need to know if there are any more.”

“You’re sure it was him?”

“No doubt. Didn’t you look at the body?”

“I didn’t go in the room, wanted to get the grounds going.”

Jack nodded. He exhaled loudly. “She *is* ripe.”

He left the kitchen, nearly reached the door, turned on his heel and went back. “Go through everything and collect all the personal papers, photographs, jewellery, and stuff like

that you can find. Do your best to separate them into two bags, one for the victim and one for Ms. Farrington.”

“Sure Sarge.”

“I don’t want those women to need to come back here.”

Hawkins waited in the interview room in the prison. Detective Lopez, who he’d asked to meet him there, had already set up the recording device.

A corrections officer escorted Mouse into the room and glanced at Jack, who nodded.

The officer said, “I’ll be right outside.”

Mouse looked at Jack, blinked and said “Oh, hello there.” As if he was addressing an old friend.

“Sit down.” Jack said, and nodded at Lopez, who went through the formality of recording everyone’s presence for the tape.

“Why did you lie to me?” Jack asked.

“I didn’t.”

“You said there were seven girls, but we found number eight, Rae Leanne Staite, in an apartment.”

Mouse frowned. “Seven was the only one I encountered in her apartment. I couldn’t encounter Eight because Seven killed her.”

Jack frowned and glanced at Lopez, who seemed equally confused.

“We found Seven, Daphne Loader, in the alley near where you encountered Six, Joan Summertime.”

Mouse stared at the two-way mirror behind Jack. “Oh her. I’d forgotten about her. I didn’t encounter her.”

“Her throat was slit the same as the others, using a blade from the same batch you used.”

“She was looking at me. I had to stop her looking at me, but I didn’t encounter her.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, I wanted to, but it wasn’t planned. She didn’t ask me to.”

“But you killed her?”

“I stopped her looking at me.”

“So, Seven was Rae Leanne Staite, the woman in the apartment, and she was the last woman you encountered.”

“Yes, red hair. Lesbian. Never encountered one before. I planned to encounter both Seven and Eight that day, first lesbians and the first time I did two. It was the first time I found one before I’d encountered the last one. I found Eight before I encountered Seven. It confused me, and I had to delay Seven. I guessed as I’d found them both, I needed to do them together. I was going to encounter Seven in the day, and Eight when she got home in the evening, but I left it too long.”

“What did you mean when you said Seven killed Eight?”

Mouse shrugged, and then frowned. His face showed what Jack could only describe as disappointment.

“They had a fight. Eight walked out. Seven followed her when she was about to cross the road. Seven pushed her in front of a van. It hit her hard, and she flew in the air, then landed on the road and didn’t move. Dead like a dog.”

“Are you sure she was pushed?”

Mouse shrugged again. “I saw it.”

“Then what happened?”

“Seven ran off. I went back to the apartment and waited until she came home and then encountered her.”

“We’ll get your statement typed up. Will you be a good boy and sign it?”

Mouse shrugged a third time. “Sure.”

“Can you describe the woman you call Eight?”

“Dark hair, green eyes. Pretty, but not young. Worked in a restaurant. She had another girlfriend, the one when that devil beat me. My fault. She didn’t ask to be encountered.”

“She didn’t die, by the way. She was in a coma, but she’s recovered now.”

Mouse shook his head. In a rare display of emotion, he looked like he might cry. “I should have waited. I suppose that’s why her friend visited the hospital all the time.”

“Is there anything else you haven’t told us? Are we going to find anyone else you’ve encountered?”

“No, I only encountered Seven. I thought Eight was dead, and I was arrested when I tried to encounter her friend. That other one in the alley was following me. I wanted to encounter her, even after I watched the life leave her eyes, but I didn’t.”

Explanation and Anticipation

Hawkins had a signed statement in his briefcase. Case closed. But questions remained.

Should I tell Ms. Farrington about the attempt on her life? Should I tell her it almost certainly saved her life? Guess she has a right to know.

When he returned to the station, the detective he'd left at the crime scene was back.

"All good, Sarge?" Steve asked.

"I don't know if good is the right word," Hawkins said. "But I have a confession and witness statement."

"A witness statement?"

"Seems our victim pushed her girlfriend, Ms. Farrington, in front of the van. Attempted murder, which saved her life because that sick bastard would've killed her. We wouldn't have caught him, either. He only tried to rape and murder Ms. Vernon because he thought Ms. Farrington was dead."

Myron sat at the kitchen table with a coffee he'd had Rebekah send up. He was holding Judy's hand, listening to her explain her experience when she'd attempted to collect Ali's clothes. She wore an Aegean teal kimono style gown, decorated with white orchids, and tied loosely at the waist. She was obviously naked underneath, having showered after calling Myron when she arrived home.

"I should buy Ali some clothes, but I don't feel up to it. I can't get the stench of her apartment out of my nostrils. I didn't like Rae, but I'd not wish what happened to her on anybody."

Myron said, "Your taste in clothes isn't so different and you're the same size off the rack. Why not share a wardrobe? It'll be much simpler than keeping separate closets."

"Hadn't thought of that, but it makes sense. Normally, people would want their own wardrobe, but I think Ali will *want* to share. Maybe I only need to get her some underwear."

"Why? It wouldn't be the first time she's worn your underwear."

Judy flushed and looked away. "Myron I..."

"If I'm being honest, I didn't hate the idea of seducing you out of Alison's panties."

Judy laughed. "And tomorrow you'll get to seduce her out of mine."

"There are two errors with your statement. First, we'll be seducing her, and second, they are no longer your panties."

"I can't wait for the three of us to make love together."

"It should've happened years ago."

Judy frowned. "I thought so, but if it were true, it would have. It was always going to happen in its own time."

"But it *was* always going to happen." Myron grinned.

"What do you want her to wear?"

"I can't think of anything she's worn when she didn't look stunning."

Judy stood in her wardrobe, staring at her clothes. *Guess this answers the question. No, I don't have too many clothes.* She smiled. *We don't have too many clothes.*

“What do you want to wear?” She asked, as if Ali could hear her.

She caught a glimpse of a silk, pale pink dress, from her sensual collection and smiled. *Perfect.* It was the dress she'd worn when she first seduced Myron. She took a dress/travel bag from the shelf. She placed the dress in the bag. Selected her favourite lacy pink lingerie from her aphrodisiac collection, which she placed in a pocket in the bag. She finished the ensemble with pink high-heeled shoes placed in the zip up shoe compartment. She added a small make-up pouch with *NARS Intrigue* matte lipstick and a *NARS Orgasm Rising* eyeshadow palette.

She grabbed her phone and messaged Ali.

#Myron will drop off your clothes. Long story, he'll explain. Important. Don't let him see your outfit until he collects you tomorrow. Promise me#

Ali's response was quick. #Don't understand, but I'll promise my gorgeous wife anything. Love you. #

Judy replied #Same. #

“Myron!” She called out.

He entered Judy's dressing room.

“Here's Ali's outfit. Promise you won't look until you collect her tomorrow.”

“You won't come with me?”

“No, you bring our wife home to me.”

Myron nodded, grinned, and stepped over to Judy. He pulled her tight against him. Judy slipped her hand down and rubbed his hard penis gently. “There's certainly enough stamina in that to share.” She winked.

Her lips found his. “It's going to be an adjustment,” she said.

“Our instinct and desires will find our groove.”

He grabbed the dress bag. “If you're okay now, I'll drop this off to Alison and explain the situation, then head back to work.”

“I'm fine darling. Give her my love.”

“I'll give her something,” he winked as he extracted his phone from his pocket and called a taxi.

Hawkins knocked, took a deep breath, and entered Ali's room.

“You don't know me,” he said. “I'm Detective Sargent Jack Hawkins.”

“I know who you are. Judy filled me in.”

“Did Ms. Vernon tell you what happened today?”

“No, she told me something happened. She said Myron will explain.”

Damn! “I don’t know how to soften this, so I’m gonna tell you straight.” He handed her a large envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Your personal papers. Your laptop and a small box with your jewelry and some framed pictures are in my car. I can drop them off somewhere if you’d like.”

“Oh, I... Judy’s place, I guess. What’s going on?”

“I have Ms. Vernon’s address.”

“And? You said you’d tell me.”

“Your accident was not an accident. Ms. Staite pushed you in front of that van. There was a witness who was close and had a clear view. We believe she attempted to kill you.”

Ali had a puzzled expression. “I remember now.” She frowned, then nodded. “I must have blocked it out.”

“The irony is that in attempting to murder you, she probably saved your life.”

Ali’s frown deepened, but she seemed incapable of speech.

Hawkins continued. “The serial killer-rapist had targeted Ms. Staite, and yourself. He’d been stalking you both for some time, which is how he came to see her push you.”

Ali nodded.

“His plan was to rape and murder Ms. Staite in the afternoon and then wait until you got home...”

“Rae’s dead?” Ali sobbed. She was shaking now.

“I’m afraid so. She was killed on the day of your accident as planned. Her body was only discovered this morning by Ms. Vernon.”

“Judy found...” She was wide eyed, staring at Hawkins, tears spilling from her eyes.

Hawkins grimaced. He placed his hand on her arm, but felt inadequate. “Not exactly. A decomposing body has a particular odour, and Ms. Staite’s body had lay undiscovered for some time. When Ms. Vernon opened the door, the smell prevented her from entering and told her something wasn’t right. She contacted us.”

“Oh... at least she didn’t see...”

“No, but I think it may be some time before she stops smelling it. The smell will have permeated all your clothes, and the furniture is mostly covered in fabric from what I saw.”

Ali grasped a hand full of tissues from beside her bed. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes, and pulled herself together.

“At least I’m alive to start again. Clean clothes wouldn’t be of much use if I was dead. Most of the furniture and stuff is Rae’s, and the lease was in her name.”

“Just so you’re clear, if not for your accident, I’m convinced he’d have raped and killed you when you got home.”

“I picked up on that,” Ali grimaced. “I don’t know how to feel about Rae. I had ended things that morning, but I didn’t want her dead. Then she tried to kill me and saved my life...”

“It’s a lot to process.”

“Time, I guess.”

“There’s something else. When he thought you were dead, he turned his attention to Ms. Vernon.”

“So, it’s *my* fault she was attacked?”

Hawkins shook his head. “No, it’s his fault. What you’re trying to do is blame yourself for not being raped and murdered, because that’s the only thing that would’ve stopped Ms. Vernon from being attacked.”

“I guess, I…”

“She was shaken up. It was a traumatic experience, but she wasn’t harmed because George was protecting her, and he stopped the guy. Until that point, the killer was very careful. Only one detective was close to knowing who he was, and he cut her throat, too. All things considered, everything worked out for the best, as far as you’re concerned.”

Ali frowned. “I suppose so.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, but I don’t believe there was anything that could’ve been done to save Ms. Staite.” He removed a card from his pocket and passed it to Ali. “Here, if you have questions, or need to talk, call me.”

She took the card, glanced at it, and placed it on the table beside the bed. “Thank you.”

“I’ll get going, and I’ll contact Ms. Vernon about your things. Not much is salvageable, but better than nothing.”

Ali shrugged. “I’m alive, despite being destined to die on that day.”

“No, you’re alive because you were destined *not* to die on that day. You have a lot more living to do.”

Ali smiled, despite everything. “I certainly do.”

When Myron arrived, Ali jumped out of bed and ran to him. She threw her arms around his neck. He dropped what he was carrying on a chair and wrapped his arms around her. *I feel safe now.* “Oh Myron.”

“I saw Jack Hawkins had been here. I guess he filled you in better than I could.”

Ali grinned. She giggled. *Even now he can make me laugh.*

“What?”

“No one can fill me in better than you, darling.” *He’s actually flushing.* She smiled. “Hold me. I need to feel safe and loved.”

“Always, and in stereo.”

Ali felt his arms pull her tight against him, and she felt his desire pressed against her. *God, I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed that.* His hands caressed her, which reminded her she was wearing a hospital gown, loosely tied at the back, and no underwear. His hands effortlessly slipped inside. *He knows what I want massaged and how to massage it.* “Mmm, I’ve missed the feel of your strong hands on my skin.” His penis pressed harder. *I can’t believe how much I want that to fill me. I’m pulsating. I swear my body could draw him in deep with no assistance.*

As if he could read her mind or feel her body reacting, Myron took a step back. “Apparently, we’re both craving the same thing.”

“I can’t believe how you effortlessly transformed my mood. A minute with you had me feeling safe and loved, and two minutes and I’m literally dripping with desire.”

Myron smiled, raised his hand, and stared at it. “My fingers are wet with your desire.”

“I can lock the door...”

“We can, but we have a wife waiting for us at home.”

Ali grinned. “We do, and I want to taste her while you fill me... everything that’s happened... life’s too short. I don’t want to miss anything. I’ve dreamed and fantasised about this life for years. Well, no more trying to do what’s right for everyone. I want what’s right for me, and I’m not afraid to make it known.”

Myron smiled. “I promised Papa I’d have no regrets.” He collected the dress bag he’d dropped on the seat. “Where shall I hang this? She made me promise not to see it until you’re wearing it.”

“She sent me a message making me promise the same thing.” Ali said. “I have a small wardrobe. I won’t look myself, until I’m ready to get dressed tomorrow. Sargeant Hawkins said my clothes are no good. Did she buy me something to wear?”

“No, she said there was no point. You can share her wardrobe.”

Ali nodded, then smiled. “Our wardrobe, and our husband.”

Myron sat in the chair and mirrored her smile.

“It might need three of us to consummate, but there’s no reason I can’t sit on your lap and kiss you for a while,” Ali suggested.

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

She sat on his lap and draped her arms around his neck. She could feel his erect penis through his trousers, pressing into her naked flesh as her hospital gown opened at the back. She fidgeted, manoeuvring herself so he was pressing against her swollen clitoris. She gasped. *Can’t remember when I last had sex.*

Having everything positioned as she needed it, she directed her lips towards his, hungrily parting them with her tongue.

As his body’s rhythm moved in time with hers, she felt his breathing deepen and quicken to match her own. She could feel his lips pressing against hers with increasing intensity as their pace quickened.

Her movement reached a crescendo, spasming with each wave of orgasm that washed over her. His body echoed her movements.

She buried her head in his shoulder and bathed in the contented afterglow until a knock at the door shattered the magic of the moment.

Ali looked up. *John and Lori.*

John said, “I’m sorry, I-We can come back another time.”

Myron awkwardly twisted his head to glance at his watch. “I didn’t realize it was so late. I’d better get going. You two stay a while.”

Ali extracted herself from his lap, keeping her back towards the bed, and Myron stood subtly manoeuvring her back to bed until she sat.

He leaned in and kissed her. “See you tomorrow, darling,” he said.

Okay, so we're going to be open. She smiled and then noticed the wet patch on his lap. "Oh... you or me?"

"Both."

She kissed him again. "Tomorrow," she said, "And Myron, I love you." She reached over and took the package from her bedside table, passing it to Myron. "Can you take this package with you? Jack Hawkins was going to drop some other stuff in to our Judy."

Myron nodded. "Of course. I love you too. I'll be back tomorrow to bring you home."

Ali beamed.

Myron said goodbye to John and Lori, picked up Ali's paperwork and left.

John looked like he wanted to say something, but didn't seem to know what to say, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

Lori said, "John, I'd like a coffee, and I'm sure Ali would too."

"Yes, please," confirmed Ali.

John appeared glad of a reason to leave the room.

As soon as he left, Lori hugged Ali. "Finally?"

"Yes, they've asked me to marry them."

"That's great news, but not surprising. I always thought it was going to happen."

"I'll finally be released tomorrow, and Myron will collect me and take me home."

John returned with their coffees.

"John," Ali said. "Myron and Judy have proposed, and I've accepted."

"Both of them?"

"Yes, we can't make it legal, but other than that. We'll be married."

"Well, you've loved Judy for years..."

"I've loved both of them."

"Have you told Frankie and Charlie?"

"Not yet, but they'll be home on their next break. I didn't want them to rush back again, because they've missed enough school."

John nodded.

"I'll tell them then."

"If they raise the subject, well Frankie won't, but Charlie might," Lori said. "We'll be supportive." She blew on her coffee, then sipped a little.

"For you and Judy," John suggested. "It's probably the only option, and Myron seems quite taken with the idea."

"There's more," Ali said. "Rae's dead. The poor woman was murdered on the day I had my accident. Judy found her body in the apartment today."

"Oh, I'm sorry Ali," Lori said, as she reached out and hugged her. "How do you feel?"

“I don’t know. I was feeling morose, but Myron fixed that. I remember now, I’d broken up with her, she tried to kill me. Rae pushed me in front of that van. Her killer witnessed it, and when the police told me, I remembered feeling her push me.”

“That’s a lot to take in. Especially as you’re only just out of your coma.”

“There’s more,” Ali said. “He raped and killed Rae in the afternoon, and he planned to rape and kill me that night when I arrived home from work. By trying to kill me, Rae saved my life.”

John squeezed her shoulder. “Much to absorb and process.”

“Yes, but I’ve got an amazing husband and wife to support me.”

“You have us too,” John said. “We’ll be here for you if you need us.”

“We will,” Lori said. “Anytime, day or night.”

Ali smiled. “Thank you. I appreciate you both.”

“Okay, John, we’ll leave now. Ali needs a good rest.”

“Yes,” John said, as he and Lori left the room. “If you need anything, call.”

Judy heard the door unlock as Myron arrived home.

“You didn’t look at that outfit, did you?” She asked.

“Hello sweetheart, of course not.”

“I told Ali not to let you see it until tomorrow.”

“She told me.”

Judy frowned. “What did you spill on your pants?”

Myron grinned. “Alison.”

Judy’s frown deepened. “You spilled Ali on your pants?”

“We spilled each other?”

“You spilled each other?”

“Alison sat on my lap. I was aroused and we sort of rubbed against each other. Those hospital gowns open at the back and she, umm... leaked on me.”

Judy reached down, opened his belt, unzipped his trousers, and slid her hand into his underwear. “The leakage came from both sides,” she said.

Myron grinned.

“It seems you’re not spent yet,” Judy said as she felt him harden.

“Not even close.”

“Good. Take me to bed.”

Myron's Wives

Myron communicated well, but only after he'd joined the dots, saw how all the pieces fit, and had a clear understanding of what he wanted to say. He was not a person for rash talk, but made his feelings known, often without words.

He didn't see value in over-analyzing the situation, but Myron needed to understand how everything worked. This, many believed, was his real gift.

Not being able to work out how everything fit together had prevented him from acting on his feelings. Not regarding the three of them, but the outside factors such as Alison's children who'd been at high school, and his parents, who were members of an Orthodox Jewish community.

Before he'd connected the dots, Melanie had come into their lives. They needed to be approved as adoptive parents. All his and Judy's energy had been focused on ensuring Melanie could settle into her new life.

Myron had come to collect Alison from the hospital. He suspected the adjustment to a polyamorous relationship would be a small one for Judy and Alison. It would be a larger one for him.

Ali was dressed in Judy's silky pale pink dress from her sensual collection, the one she'd worn when she first seduced Myron. The underwear was soft pink with a touch of lace and the outfit was finished with light pink shoes, high enough to accentuate the shape of her legs. The NARS make-up shades were perfect for the ensemble.

Without realizing the echo of Judy's actions, Ali inspected her reflection in the mirror and nodded appreciatively. *Pretty in pink.*

Myron would be here soon, to simultaneously take her back to her old life, and into a new one. She was excited, but nervous, not knowing what to expect. She imagined her life, but reminded herself, what we imagine is seldom the same as we experience. This is true of both positive and negative experiences.

Nevertheless, she'd been fantasizing about being with Judy since the moment they met. Learning Judy reciprocated her feelings, took her breath away. Adding Myron to the equation had come later. She supposed she knew what to expect in her fantasy, but not in reality.

Melanie was at her grandmother's for the night. Ruth didn't know why. Neither did Melanie. However, whatever it was must be important, and they'd learn soon enough. Myron had invited them for breakfast the next morning.

They suspected whatever was going on would be revealed during breakfast, so there was no point in speculating. Instead, they'd enjoy some time together.

In contrast to Myron, Judy was a woman of words, albeit more as a listener than a talker.

Judy waited at home for Myron and Ali to return. She was pacing, feeling a mixture of excitement and nervousness. It was what she'd wanted for a long time, and more. She hadn't conceived that the three of them could've had a marriage.

She'd had a relationship with both for years. She'd become comfortable with the situation, but now, her relationships were merging.

She worried everything would change. Judy didn't like change. She supposed she'd adapt her routines or develop new ones soon enough, and yet she remained unaware that she based her life on routines.

He stopped and stared. His jaw dropped, his brows furrowed, and then he smiled. *She's making her presence felt.* "The dress our Judy wore to seduce me the first time."

He embraced Alison. *She's going to melt into my arms.* They held their kiss for a long time, like new lovers who hadn't seen each other for a whole day.

"Let's get you home, darling," he said. "Our wife is waiting for us."

Myron took her bags to the taxi, loaded them in the trunk, and slid into the back seat beside her. She snuggled into him exactly as they both did when riding with Judy. They were content with the quiet intimacy of the moment.

When they exited the elevator on arriving, Myron said, "You should do the honors, see if your fingerprint still works or if we need to reset it."

Alison placed her finger on the panel, and the door opened.

"Home," Myron said.

Judy was close to the door, as if she'd been pacing the room, anxious for their arrival. She embraced Alison, and they kissed as they had thousands of times before, but this time, it was different. They were moving to the next level.

As the newcomer to the marriage, Alison was the center of attention. Myron and Judy each took her by the hand and led her into the bedroom.

Together they undressed her, slowly and with intention.

Myron scooped her up and lay her naked on the bed. Alison was worried she'd orgasm before they touched her properly. Judy and Myron undressed each other while Alison watched. Her eyes widened when Judy removed Myron's shorts.

Judy and Myron joined her on the bed, one on either side of her and for several hours, the three consummated their marriage.

Ali opened her eyes. She was trying to get her bearings, to remember where she was. Myron was standing in the bedroom, dressed in his suit, watching them sleep. Ali untangled herself from the still sleeping Judy and went to Myron. That she was naked in front of Myron felt natural to her. In fact, she didn't notice her own nakedness at first. Myron stared.

They embraced, he dressed in his usual suit and tie, she naked. It didn't feel strange or awkward.

"You need to be somewhere?" she asked.

"Tying up some loose ends at the office. I may be late, so don't wait up. To be honest, I'm delaying, well, I was. I came in to watch my beauties sleeping... I froze... Been standing here thanking God for my blessings."

"Well, you can thank him for me, too."

Myron kissed her again and left.

Ali went to the bathroom before crawling back into bed with her wife. She wanted to let Judy sleep, but she couldn't contain herself. She'd waited a dozen years to be in bed alone with Judy. She couldn't wait a few more seconds, and kissed Judy awake.

"Mmm," Judy said sleepily. "More please, sexy wife." After kissing and caressing each other for a few minutes, Judy asked, "Where's our man?"

"Said he had some loose ends to tie up at the office, and would be home late, so we shouldn't wait up."

"I'm sure we'll find a way to amuse ourselves."

"At this very moment," Ali said. "I have everything I've ever wanted in life, and more, much more. Let's face it, my wonderful wife... Sorry, I like saying it... Wife, wife, wife. Our life is perfect."

"Yes, and I'll never be able to thank Myron for making it happen."

"You silly woman, we already have."

"How're you feeling? You know, about everything."

"I'm not thinking about the past," Ali said. "It's too confusing."

Judy nodded. "Do you feel comfortable with us?"

"Emotionally, I'm comfortable. I'm exactly where I belong. Physically, I'm more than a little sore. To be honest, that man of ours certainly has some stamina. Can't say you didn't warn me. I mean... I'm sore, but not sorry."

"I need the bathroom. Then, do you think that sweet little lady down there could use some gentle kisses better?"

Ali smiled. "Exactly what she needs."

Later, they showered together, both enjoying every moment of something they'd started many years earlier.

Ali went to the walk-in closet.

"It's alright darling, just wear anything you want."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, it's ours now. Sharing a wardrobe is sort of intimate, don't you think?"

Ali grinned. "We're sharing that monster between Myron's legs, so I guess..."

"Well, you'd better put something on, another minute, and I won't be letting you out of this penthouse tonight."

"Yes wife," Ali said.

"Choose an outfit first, then grab the matching underwear."

"I know your dress rules." Ali smiled. She chose buff slacks, a cream blouse, and lingerie from what Judy called her 'Fine Lines' selection'.

"Wow!" Judy exclaimed. "Stunning!"

"Nonsense. I'm too old to be stunning."

“Age has nothing to do with it. They aren’t related. As long as we keep ourselves in good shape and don’t let ourselves go, age does not come into it.”

“Is that why you stand naked in front of the mirror and inspect yourself?”

“You were watching me?”

“I had to drag myself away, but yeah, I was watching you, watching yourself. We were both inspecting your sexy body, and you still have a damn fine ass, by the way.”

“The ladies are starting to sag a little,” Judy said, cupping her own breasts. “Well, it started years ago, age and gravity, but they’re not too bad. I’m glad we don’t have those large breasts that get dragged down by their own weight.”

“You look perfect.” Ali grinned. “I wouldn’t change a thing about you.”

“The feeling is entirely mutual.”

Welcome To the Family

George delivered their breakfast as arranged.

The house specialty, which Judy ate every day. Scrambled eggs made with cream, butter, and grated parmesan cheese, accompanied by an herb salad, dressed with the honey, mustard and macadamia dressing from Exquisite Jams. A small crispy garlic and parmesan flat bread on the side.

Judy smiled and winked. "Good morning, George."

George beamed. "Mornin' Mi... Judy."

Myron fussed over the breakfast, five identical breakfasts, each covered by a cloche.

Judy and Ali drank coffee, smiling as they watched him nervously pacing the room.

Ali glanced at Judy, who shrugged. It was unusual for Myron to be nervous. Judy could count on one hand the times she'd seen him like this; before their marriage, Melanie's adoption hearing, and when his father was close to death. They were the only occasions she could think of.

She recalled Ruth telling her Myron was this way when he'd told them he was dating Judy, because she wasn't Jewish, and he'd believed his parents wouldn't approve.

The door opened, and Melanie entered, followed by Ruth. "Breakfast is on the table," Myron said.

"Papa." Melanie rolled her eyes and sighed demonstratively. "Give me a chance to take my stuff to my room."

They were seated at the table, and ate mostly in silence, other than Melanie, who told them about a movie she'd watched the previous evening.

After breakfast, Ruth glanced expectedly at Myron, but said nothing. An announcement or something was coming, she could tell by his behavior.

Myron looked at Mama, but his question was meant equally for his daughter. "Do you know what a polyamorous relationship is?"

Ruth looked at Myron, at Ali and then at Judy. She smiled. "Yes son, I do. When you were opening Dancer's Bistro, I saw the way you and Judy were with Ali, and I knew there wasn't a problem with your marriage."

She focused on Ali and continued. "It's important the family's together for Sabbath every week because we talk about the family business, our lives, and our thinking. This means we know each other well and understand how each thinks. What's important, and what's not. We talk about everything and anything. It keeps us strong as a family."

She turned her attention back to Myron. "I know you're not one for meaningless affairs. You're far too serious, and far too attached to order and everything being in its rightful place. Anyway, I did some research, and concluded you were contemplating a polyamorous relationship. I expected an announcement would be forthcoming, after you joined the dots and worked out how all the pieces would fit together. I know how your mind works, son."

"Life gets in the way of living sometimes," Myron said. "I couldn't connect the dots."

"It's okay," Ali said.

“I’m proud of you, son. Always have been. You don’t do anything in a half-hearted way, or without considering all conceivable angles.”

She turned her attention back to Ali. “As I said, we have Sabbath every week. Even though we’re not religious, it’s important to us as a family.”

Ali smiled. Ruth was accepting her into the family.

“Well, you’re together now,” Ruth said. “I think it’s wonderful. I can see how happy you three are.”

Myron nodded then looked at Melanie, who said, “Of course I know. We had an assignment for our writing class, where we had to choose a character from a comic and write a biography about them as if they were a real person. I chose Wonder Woman, and I went further. I wanted to know her creator, too. I wanted to understand what he was thinking when he created her. Charles Marston was the name he used for the comic. Wonder Woman was based on one of his polyamorous wives.”

“Am I the only one who didn’t know what a polyamorous relationship was?” Ali asked.

“It’s alright Aunt Ali, I’m sure you know now.”

Ali flushed.

Melanie, who apparently noticed Ali’s reaction, said, “I guess it’s not Aunt Ali now. Would it be okay if I call you Mama too?”

Ali misinterpreted a little. “Mama two. I kinda like that.”

“Yes,” said Melanie, “Second mother.”

Technically, Ali was Melanie’s third mother, but nobody corrected her.

Ruth asked, “How do you feel being out of the hospital?”

“Wonderful Mama.” Ali felt strange referring to Ruth as Mama, but this was what Myron said to do. She studied Ruth, who smiled, but didn’t comment. Ali continued. “It was the first time we could go home together and, er... complete our, umm...”

“To be honest, I’m surprised you two weren’t going home together every Friday night,” Ruth said.

“Myron,” Judy contributed.

That they were having this discussion with Myron’s mother, her mother-in-law, she supposed, was surreal to Ali. “I didn’t want to risk coming between Judy and Myron. If I did, it might’ve changed everything.”

“Isn’t being between them exactly what you wanted?” Melanie asked. “I’ll enjoy having a second mother. I like having a modern, open family.”

Ali noticed the smirk on Melanie’s face, as if she were laughing on the inside at an unvoiced joke. She winked. “Emotionally, I didn’t want to come between them.”

To Ali, Melanie’s transition from a smile to a frown suggested she wasn’t pleased at having two mothers who could read her mind.

Glancing at Ruth, Ali continued. “I was crazy in love with Judy the moment I laid eyes on her. It wasn’t only a physical attraction, our eyes met, and sort of locked together as we somehow recognized each other, soulmates, past life connection, future destiny,

something. I don't know exactly what it was, what it is. In all honesty, it was a good thing she was already with our Myron. If not, it would have thrown my life into turmoil.

"Not once have I resented Myron for keeping Judy away from me," Ali explained. "They belong together. I saw that the first time I met him. I instantly liked him, and became fond of him, and then fell in love with him too. It was destiny for the three of us to be together."

"Sweetheart," Ruth said. "In life there are a lot of maybes, but maybes in hindsight serve no purpose. It's easy to say if you knew then what you know now... but you didn't know then, you had to learn it. Everything's as it's meant to be. If not, the universe has a way of correcting the situation."

Myron said, "Mama's right. If I didn't have a compulsion for order and everything being in its place... but I do, and it's served me well over the years. Everything is in its rightful place now, and as it should be."

Ruth said, "Myron learned the business and about people and life, listening to Papa, his Zeyde and me talking about everything openly at the Sabbath table, and this is how Melanie is learning too. It's what we do."

"Myerson lore," mused Melanie.

"It's how I learned the business too," Judy said. "This and Myron giving me projects."

Ali smiled. This was an unusual family she'd become a part of.

After breakfast, they headed to The Secret Garden, a rose garden hidden in the courtyard of one of their buildings. Ali knew where they were going, but didn't know why.

The family entered the gazebo, and in a private family ceremony, Judy and Myron each placed a part, one white gold and one yellow of an intertwined ring on Ali's finger and pledged to love, cherish, care for, and support her for the rest of their lives, formalizing the promise made beside Ali's hospital bed.

Ali was stunned. Tears overflowed, and she shook. Nevertheless, despite not being prepared, she returned the pledge to each of them, and so they married in a quiet, simple family ceremony.

Ali spent the remainder of the day staring at her dual wedding ring. For her, everything was perfect, but she couldn't help but wish it had occurred years ago.

A part of her kept thinking she'd wake up and discover it was all a dream, but for her, for all three of them, a long-held, but sometimes dormant dream had come true.

After the ceremony, they headed to Franco's, where Myron had arranged with Darnell to prepare a private celebratory lunch. Darnell was cooking to order, and Rebekah was their server.

They prepared a five-course degustation.

Field mushrooms with eggplant filled with goat cheese, with a rich tomato sauce baked in the wood-fired oven. With Roquette salad and crispy pine nuts.

House-made tortellini filled with ricotta, leek, and spinach, in a brown sage butter sauce with walnuts.

Beef fillet aged tenderloin, mushroom, caramelized carrots, parsnip, artichoke potato puree, red wine jus & roasted potato.

Crispy duck, twice baked, with potato puree, cherry tomato jam, broccoli and tomato salsa.

Lemon mousse cake, orange segment and fruit salad.

Thus, in a private ceremony and celebration, they commemorated their polyamorous married life.

A Promise to Keep

Duke stared at the inside panel in the back of the gray prison van. A corrections officer kept him company, but he ignored the man. Instead, he reflected on why he was here.

Dave Wintle owed him a lot of money. He offered Dave a way out. If Dave played his role right, Duke would forgive his debt. Dave took the beating without complaint, then reported the assault to the police with a generic description of an African American man who'd assaulted him. He obtained a copy of the police report and handed it to Duke as agreed.

A word to his lawyer, who met with an Assistant District Attorney and an agreement was reached. A confession in exchange for misdemeanor assault and a ninety-day sentence.

The van pulled up inside the prison gates. Duke got out but didn't look around. He knew what to expect, complied with everything the officers said as he was processed and before long found himself escorted to a cell.

Pushing him into the cell, the officer said, "Hill, you got company."

Duke dropped the bedding, toothpaste, and toilet paper on the vacant bed. "Duke," he introduced himself.

"Salim Hill," his cellmate offered.

"I need to talk to Prince Dele," Duke explained. "Can you show me to his cell?"

Hill looked unsure, but Duke had the air of someone used to being listened to. "Okay, com'on."

Hill led him to the end of the block. Two large bodyguards stood outside. "This is my new cellmate, Duke. He asked to meet the Prince," Hill said, as he looked nervously at the bodyguard.

"He's expected," the bodyguard responded. Hill nodded and left. "His highness heard you was in. Remember, to get out you gotta pass by us, so no trouble."

Duke nodded and entered.

"Dele," Duke said.

"Duke. How long ya in?"

"Not long. Got somethin' to take care of. Personally. I don't want no trouble while I'm here. Might be a couple of guys with a grudge, so I need someone watching my back. Not concerned about them, but neither of us wants to see me jammed up for a long time."

"True."

"I'll need a shank, straight razor preferably. Something that'll cut a throat."

"Ya only needed to get word to me, and I would've had it done for ya."

Duke shrugged. "It's personal."

Dele nodded.

"If we can come to an arrangement, I'll have a five-stack dropped into your wife's place today."

Duke could see Dele was trying to hide the shocked expression that flashed across his face. He smiled. Message received.

"Done," Dele agreed.

“One more thing. I need a key to the protection unit. I understand I can rent one from an Aryan motherfucker, Hamlet.”

“He’s dangerous.”

“So am I.”

“Ox,” Dele called.

One of the large bodyguards stuck his head into the cell. “Yeah.”

“Duke is under my protection. Nobody causes him any trouble. He needs to talk to Hamlet, escort him.”

If Ox was concerned by his task, he gave no indication. He nodded his head to one side to indicate Duke should follow, and they left.

When they reached Hamlet’s cell, the door was open. Hamlet was standing in the middle of the room, trousers around his ankles, with a young white guy sucking him. Hamlet didn’t bat an eyelid when he glanced at the two big men at his door. “Won’t be a minute,” he said.

Ox grunted and he and Duke stepped back to wait. As good as his word, they heard Hamlet moan and a few seconds later, the catcher, who was little more than a boy, scurried out of the room.

The two men entered Hamlet’s cell. If he was concerned by two large African Americans entering his space, he didn’t show it.

Ox said, “Hamlet, this is Duke.”

Hamlet looked at Duke, obviously assessing him. “What do you niggers want?”

Neither reacted to his insult.

“I want to rent your key to the protection unit,” Duke said.

“What makes you think I’ve got one, and if I did, why the fuck would I give it to you?”

“Rent, not give,” Duke responded. “Five K rental for the key and no bullshit from you Aryan motherfuckers. Agree and I’ll have the cash dropped into 34 Johnstone Road this afternoon.”

Hamlet stiffened and took a step towards Duke, who didn’t flinch. Instead, he held Hamlet’s gaze. “You threaten my wife and kids, ya nigger cunt? I’ll fucking off you in a heartbeat.”

Duke maintained his gaze. “No one’s threatening anyone. As long as no harm comes to me during my brief stay, no one will be hurt.”

“If anything happens to them, I’ll find you whether you’re inside or out. Before I kill you, you’ll wish you’d never been born.”

Duke smiled. “So we understand each other.”

“If the money arrives today, you’ll have the key tomorrow. If I don’t get it back, the fine is another five.”

Duke nodded, touched Ox on the arm, turned and left.

Ox said, "Fuck man, you've got some balls on you. In here five minutes and you've threatened the two most dangerous men in the place."

Duke shrugged. "Insurance. Besides, they both need me. Their suppliers buy from me, which they know. Don't want them getting ideas. Actions have consequences."

"So you didn't need to pay them. You could have threatened their supply."

"They understood the implication and paying them lets them know they're not being screwed."

"And the Spics?"

"I don't need anything from them, but they know one person controls all the tits in this city."

"I'm out next year. If you can use muscle..."

"Sure, come and see me and we'll find something. Do we have anyone in the protection wing?"

"Yeah, bent cop. He's only alive, so we have someone in the unit, and he knows it, so he plays ball."

"Have him ask to go to the library tomorrow afternoon. I'll tell him what I need. Tell his highness there'll be a small gold wrapped package with his delivery tomorrow morning. That's mine."

Ox nodded. He glared at Hill. "Duke is under The Prince's protection. Anyone comes round, let it be known."

Hill looked at Duke, then back at Ox. "Yes."

The next afternoon, Ox led Duke to the library. He pointed to an inmate sitting in front of a computer and went to distract the guard.

Duke sat beside the skinny African American guy. "Do you know who I am?"

Jim, or Slim Jim to his friends, nodded. "They told me."

"Got a little job for you."

Jim nodded again.

"When will they let you back here?"

"Wednesday."

"Before you come, make coffee for everyone, including the second guard. Not that mousey little asshole."

"That cop killer? He'd think something was up if I did."

"Don't take no for an answer." He passed the small gold wrapped package to Jim. "Sleeping tablets, nothing harmful."

Jim slipped it into his pocket and nodded a third time.

"Any problem, get word to the Prince."

On the way back to the cells, Duke said, "They have a trustee who cleans in the protection unit, delivers meals or something?"

"Yeah. Old white guy. Cockroach. Don't know his real name. Been here a long time, a survivor. He'll do what Hamlet says."

"We need to collect the key."

"Rec room I guess."

Hamlet was playing cards with three of his crew. Duke ignored the looks the Aryans gave him and approached Hamlet. Ox followed him, covering his back.

Hamlet said to one of his companions, "Go talk to the screw."

When the guard was distracted, he slipped his hand down the front of his trousers and extracted a key, which he discreetly passed to Duke. "Lose it and ya pay double."

"Understood," Duke confirmed. "I believe you have a Cockroach who has access to the unit. Tell him to answer my questions."

Hamlet nodded. "Done."

Duke and Ox turned and walked away.

Cockroach found Duke the next day. "You want something?"

"Describe the protection unit."

"Ten cells, seven on one side, three on the other. Five inmates, four ex-cops and the creep. Two guards. Passed the three cells is the shower room. Before the three cells is the rec room. Small kitchen for drinks and stuff. Half a dozen tables and chairs, for eating, playing cards or whatever. TV on the wall. Guards' office is a small room off the rec room with a large window."

Duke nodded. "Cameras?"

"Just one. It's an old prison. Focused down the main hall. Hug the walls and you'll avoid it."

"Any cameras in the cells or rec room?"

"Nup."

"How secure is the drain in the shower room?"

"Screwed closed, but nothing else."

"Make sure the screws are loose and I can undo them by hand."

"Okay, they'll be ready for you."

"You smoke?"

"Yeah."

"You'll be looked after."

Cockroach nodded and wandered off.

Duke walked into his cell and told Hill, "Keep an eye out for guards."

Hill grunted and stood in the doorway, making it difficult for anyone to look in.

At the sink, Duke ran the water and softened the soap, which he then molded around the handle of his blade to dry.

He slid the shank behind a book on the shelf and left the soap laminated handle to dry.

“Okay,” he said to Hill, who grunted again and returned to his bunk.

The next day, Cockroach wondered past and nodded to Duke, who already had the blade in one pocket, and the key in the other. Ox fell in beside him. Two inmates began arguing, pushing, and shoving to distract the office’s attention.

Duke unlocked the door, and pocketed the key, being careful to touch nothing. He walked past the protective custody inmates and their officer. Most were asleep on chairs, some had been standing and had fallen to the floor, which was decorated with a few broken cups and spilled coffee.

Hugging the wall, he made his way to the cell, Cockroach told him was Mouse’s home. Duke slipped in to see the sick bastard sitting in a chair with his face buried in a book.

Mouse looked up and squinted at a tall black guy. Mouse’s words reflected the confusion displayed on his face. “Who? What?”

Mouse began to stand, but a large hand on his shoulder pushed him back down. Duke was behind him. A hand on his forehead pulled his head up and back. Duke’s other hand whipped round and dragged the blade across Mouse’s throat.

“I promised Daphne,” Duke said, as he watched Mouse bleed out, his blood decorating his cell. Mouse’s expression didn’t change. He stared ahead in confusion and disbelief. There was no reflection of either understanding or awareness on Mouse’s face when Daphne’s name had been mentioned.

Duke made his way to the shower room, lifted the cover off the grate and dropped the blade in. He replaced the cover, tightening the screws by hand. Then took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the grate and the screws. He ran the water in the shower closest to the drain for a few minutes.

He turned, left the shower room, and once more hugging the wall, he walked past Mouse’s room without a glance, walked past the sleeping inmates and guard, and exited the protective unit. Duke locked the door, and slipped the key to Ox, who headed to find Hamlet and return the key.

As arranged, Cockroach approached the protection unit an hour later. “Officer,” he called out.

There was no response.

He went to fetch another guard. “Officer,” he said. “I think there’s somethin’ wrong in the protection unit.”

The officer opened the protection unit and went inside. “Wait here,” he said to Cockroach.

Having entered the unit and seeing everyone apparently drugged, he sounded the alarm. When he looked into Mouse's room, he contacted his supervisor who put the prison on lockdown and the inmates were corralled back into their cells.

Flash Jack Hawkins was in his office. The task force had disbanded, and he was working homicide, waiting for his next assignment. His phone rang, informing him that Kirk Douglas Davis had been murdered in jail. He smiled. *Not surprised.*

He put on his jacket and left for the prison.

Jack spoke with all the inmates and the Corrections Officer who'd been in the protection unit. They all had the same story. They drank coffee and woke up hours later.

Officially, the assumption was that one of the former police officers in the secure unit had drugged everyone, committed the murder, and then drugged himself.

However, Jack had been provided with a list of inmates, and he doubted that was the truth. He spoke to Cockroach and a few others he selected at random, and finally to the one he wanted to talk with, Duke.

When the officer left after escorting Duke into the room, Jack stood and offered his hand. "Duke."

"Sergeant."

Jack sat and nodded to the chair opposite which Duke took.

"Our Mousey little friend got himself killed in the protection unit today."

"Is that so? Can't say I'm sorry."

"I don't suppose you know anything about it?"

"First I've heard."

"So you didn't get yourself locked on that bullshit plea deal to exact revenge for Daphne?"

Duke smiled. "Isn't the protection unit locked? How would I get in?"

Jack nodded. "Good point."

He stood, as did Duke, and offered his hand again. "Thank you," Jack said quietly.

Duke nodded and left the room.