

## Methuselah's Daughter: Part 1

### Where The Sidewalk Ends

*Child of mortality, whence comest thou?  
Why is thy countenance sad,  
and why are thine eyes red with weeping?*

(Anna Letitia Barbauld, 1743-1825)

## Prelude

*Wisconsin Territory, November 1835 CE*

Jeremy was dying and we both knew it.

The sound of his breathing filled me with dread, for it was wet and rasping. When he coughed it was with the roughness of agony and ruin. The fire was as warm as one could hope and I had done what I could towards sealing our dilapidated cabin against the wind, but the chill remained far too deep. Nonetheless I coaxed Jeremy to unwrap himself and lose some of his fevered heat to the air, particularly when his temperature would soar and his mind would become clouded with delusion. When he was lucid I plied him with hot cups of herbal tea made from plants and roots I knew could be relied upon to ease his discomfort and aid his breathing. The pickings were slim, for the season had long turned, but there was enough to be found in the grounds surrounding the cabin and from my kit to provide a slender reed of hope to which we both could cling.

As it was we were lucky to have found this empty cabin in our wanderings. Meager as the little wooden stand was, Jeremy had become too sick to travel. Its walls helped me keep him sheltered from the cold better than could our tent. The ramshackle cabin was not meant for more than temporary quarters, being no more than a small square room built entirely of cut logs, wadded balls of dried grass and mud. It appeared to have been built by trappers based on the few things they had left behind since their last visit: a broken trap, a skinning knife, and two furs that looked as if they had been discarded due to rot or improper tanning. The floor was dirt and the furnishings consisted of only a rude table, a simple wooden bed piled with moldy straw and a crude fireplace in the corner near the bed. I had worked to stuff the many cracks between the logs with whatever I could find: dirt, some spare cloth, and occasionally some packed snow were all that I had. Against the north wall I had laid the canvas sides of our tent to keep out the worst of the hungry, howling winds. It was not much, but he might even now be dead had we not found it. I tried my best to hold at bay the notion this was merely staving off the inevitable.

“This is vile,” he rasped after sipping at my latest concoction, “but I prefer it to the bloodletting and purgatives of the doctors I’ve known.”

“I’ll do my best to keep you from the clutches of those fiends!” I laughed, showing far more cheer than I truly felt. He was so very ill that a visit from a real doctor might well kill him.

I listened to the wind outside, which had been gentle at dawn but was now picking up as the sky turned a dull, depressing grey. The temperature was falling and the scent of storm was in the air. The trees were bare and lifeless, only the majestic spruce and firs showing any signs of willingness to struggle through the coming storms of late November. We had been fools to travel alone in the Wisconsin territory so close to winter, but Jeremy had been adamant about wishing to see this place and to meet with the old friend who had written to tell him of the marvelous fur trade business he had built here. I cursed our foolhardiness as I gathered my coat tightly about myself and scoured the ground about the cabin for useable stones. The cabin’s fireplace was open and placed near the north corner, with only a smoke-hole in the roof. If I could pile enough stones in that corner as a backdrop for the fire they would catch heat and conserve the warmth.

Our mule, tied on the leeward side of the cabin, shifted nervously, grunting noises of unhappiness as he chewed the slender fare I had gathered for him. I had thought to bring the mule inside with us, but I knew I would soon have to shoot him for meat and I preferred to do that work outside. It would be a dangerous corner turned once done, for it would mean spending the winter in this cabin. It would mean Jeremy's death, for we were in no way prepared to spend four or more cold, harsh months in this place.

I had made two trips out and back, each time returning with several large stones for my makeshift hearth, when I heard the sound of hooves on the frozen ground, accompanied by the voices of men. My first thought was to run back inside to fetch the pistol. I silently chided myself for neglecting it, but then the voices were upon me, coming from the trees along the same path Jeremy and I had followed three days prior. I stood straight under the overhanging logs of the crude roof outside and leveled my gaze upon them. Their demeanor was unthreatening as they approached with their horses at a slow walk, each trailing two pack mounts.

One of the men was older as evidenced by the grey in his full beard, and as he turned to look at the other man and gestured his head toward me, I noticed that his right ear was missing, the hole in his head surrounded by rough frostbite scarring. He had obviously seen other harsh winters in this land. He sat easily in his saddle and I could see no threat in him. The other man was younger and, while not sporting a full beard, certainly had several days' growth on his face. He too appeared unthreatening to my eyes. They were likely father and son and as they brought their mounts to a halt before the cabin they both tipped their wide-brimmed hats to me.

"Mornin', ma'am," the older man said by way of a greeting, "I'm Tom Kelly. This is my boy, Will."

"Elaine," I replied, adding after a moment's hesitation, "...McAllister."

I surprised myself at feeling hesitation over that small lie. I had never presumed to call myself Jeremy's wife even though we freely allowed others to see us as married. For some reason I felt it necessary to be explicit with these men. I only hoped Jeremy would not expose the lie.

"A bit surprised to see anyone out here, what with the winter startin' to set in and all," the gruff-voiced man said from the back of his horse. "We use this cabin ourselves now and then but wouldn't want to spend a night here this time of year. We wasn't goin' to stop but we seen the smoke, so we thought it best to see who was visitin', if you take my meanin'."

"We stopped here three days ago. My husband is very ill and I had no inkling of the distance to any town. When we happened upon this place it seemed prudent to..."

The door to the cabin flew open with a crash and Jeremy lurched through it, his rifle in his hands. His eyes were glazed and he was shaking violently, his skin gone ashen. Mr. Kelly and his son both reined their horses back, the boy reaching for his own musket before his father stayed his hand.

"What goes here?" Jeremy roared, "Who are these men?"

I turned just in time to catch him as he staggered, his knees buckling. I put my shoulder under his and bore him up as I took the rifle from his hand. I heard the men dismounting behind me, then a moment later Mr. Kelly took Jeremy's other arm. Together we brought Jeremy inside and settled him back upon his bed of blankets. He was on fire with fever, now moaning incoherently between

racking coughs. I struggled to settle him down again, holding him down and speaking soft soothing words.

Both Mr. Kelly and his son were inside the cabin and as I looked up at them I could see the grim certainty in their eyes. As I turned to face them I set myself firmly, meeting their gaze in defiance. Mr. Kelly frowned, and his eyes wandered over the interior of the cabin, settling on the fire and the stone hearth I had been constructing. He nodded approvingly.

“That’s a fine idea, Mizzus McAllister,” the older man said, and then turned to his son. “Will, why don’t you go help the lady gather up what she needs to finish this up? Mr. McAllister and I need to have a few words.”

I looked back at Jeremy where he lay. His eyes were open and clear, his sudden fevered delusion easing, and he nodded at me. Mr. Kelly drew a tattered book from within his jacket, a Bible, and pulled the one stool we possessed over to Jeremy’s bed. I was reluctant to leave for I knew what these men, so polite and gallant in their certainty, would have to say to one another. Nonetheless the young man’s help with the fireplace would be appreciated, so I gathered my coat and hat and set out with the younger Mr. Kelly. I would deal with the good-intentioned foolishness of my man and Mr. Kelly once other tasks were well completed.

“Me an’ my pa kinda got a late start,” Will Kelly told me as we gathered stones and piled them into a sack. “Should’a been back t’ camp near a week ago,” he went on. “Got held up dealin’ with the traders back at Fort Brady. But the Good Lord has his ways and all,” he said with a slight shrug.

“Your camp,” I inquired, “how far off is it?”

“Maybe two days ride due north, if’n the weather holds. Sure don’ feel like it, though. Gonna be in a real state o’ things, we don’t make time. That’ll be tough on ‘em that’s waitin’ on us, we get ourselves dead out here.”

“You’re bringing supplies? How many are there?”

“Oh, it’s a good tradin’ outpost, maybe a dozen. More, dependin’ on who straggles in for winter.”

I digested that as we hefted more stones into the sack on our mule’s back. The trading post he referred to must be the one owned by Jeremy’s old friend. A two-day ride was tantalizingly close, but there was little chance Jeremy would survive even one day of travel in his condition, particularly not with his fever and this cold. Grimly I kept my thoughts to myself as we gathered stones. These men had four loaded packhorse, and the trading post might enjoy those supplies, but I doubted it was a matter of life or death. My thoughts were going down dark paths I did not wish them to follow but I took their full measure regardless. Contemplation of such things was heavy on my heart, particularly with this young man working by my side.

As the son and I returned to the cabin we found that his father had been working on the hearth as we gathered stones. We added our stones and after some time and grunting he pronounced it as fit as it was likely to get. Midday was closing in and the sky was still grey and cold, but things had not noticeably worsened, giving us hope the storm might stay its hand. Perhaps things might turn out better than I had feared.

All hope of that died when I spied my own pack fully loaded and propped up near the door. I had not noticed it while we built the rude hearth, but I suddenly stood still and stared at it. I then looked to Jeremy as he lay propped in a sitting position near the fire.

“Elaine...” he began.

“No.” I said, quietly but firmly, shaking my head.

“Mizzus McAllister...” Tom Kelly began, a pleading tone in his voice.

“No!”

“Elaine, please,” Jeremy pleaded, “come here and listen to me.”

Angry and determined I moved towards him, intent upon explaining in no uncertain terms why I would not be sent away, but as I passed Tom Kelly I was suddenly seized from behind, strong hands gripping my arms and pulling them back. I struggled and lashed backwards with my heel, but Mr. Kelly slipped aside, then caught my legs and firmly, but carefully, pressed me forward to the ground.

“He said you’d fight like a wildcat,” the elder Kelly grunted in my ear. Jeremy looked away as Kelly continued. “Now Mizzus McAllister, listen here, your husband and I had a long talk and this really is for the best.”

“You’re going to leave him here to die!? That’s for the *best*?” I tried to squirm out from under the man but his grip was strong and he held me fast. “Jeremy! Tell him to let me go!”

Jeremy coughed spastically, shaking his head as he held out his hand, trying to signal me to stay calm. I stopped struggling, listening to his breathing as he brought the coughing under control again. There were tears in his eyes, and surrender was writ upon his face.

“Elaine,” he whispered, his voice too hoarse for anything else, “I am done. Look at me... *look at me!* I’ve been holding so... afraid to leave you alone.” I stared at him, calculating what I might say. “I told him you would fight, my love,” he pleaded. “But...” he coughed uncontrollably a few times, and then looked at me weakly. “Elaine... you must, you must go. Preacher Kelly will take you to safety. He’s given me his word.”

I stared at him some more, my heart ripped by his nobility, his sacrifice and his utter stupidity. I knew in that moment that I could not reason with him and would just have to fight. Everything dissolved then into a flurry of screaming, kicking, cursing and pleading as the Kelly men finally lashed my feet together and bound my hands, there being no other way to control me. The Elder Kelly then hefted me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and turned for the door. Jeremy was slack in his huddle of blankets, eyes closed, his face pained as he wheezed for breath.

“He’s unconscious!” I wailed, “You can’t leave him like this! He’ll die if the fire fails!”

Outside, our pack mule had been added to their train of horses and I was carefully laid over the mule’s back, face down. I pleaded with them, then cursed them as they calmly secured me in place. Young Will Kelly carefully wrapped me in blankets against the cold, moving stiffly as I pleaded with him not to do this. Then Tom returned and stooped down to look into my face.

“He’s awake, ma’am, and I stoked the fire right good for him. We’ve left whisky and water and food, more’n he’s like to need. I don’t expect you to thank us. I know you’ll be cursin’ my name ‘til your dyin’ day, but at least that’ll be some time down the road, not this winter and not in this place.”

“Please!” I wept, “You can’t do this! You can’t!”

“Will! It’s time we got on our way.”

## Chapter 1

I usually play video games with my wife and son on Thursday nights. Our rule: if the phone rings, we ignore it unless it's important. Since not much is more important than helping my son blast assorted nasties to bits, the phone rarely was answered. Still, I'm no fool, and when the caller said, "...we have a freelance job available for you from a well-paying client if you can pick up the phone now. Are you in? It's now 6:15pm Eastern Time and if you can get back to me before..."

"Dude, frag that Elite!" I yelled as I picked up the phone. Then I forced a smile into my voice. "Hello, hello, well-paying client? What can I do for you?" I try to be moderately informal, even in business. I only freelance on the side, so I like to have fun with it. I don't like dealing with uptight clients anyway.

Caller ID showed a blocked number, but he identified himself as working for a company in Boston that was offering me \$10,000 if I would fly out to Colorado on Saturday morning.

I laughed a little. It wasn't the biggest offer I'd ever gotten. On the other hand, it was the biggest I'd gotten in a few years. He repeated that he was serious, but wasn't allowed to give me any more details. He said that if I could accept delivery of a package with a written offer tomorrow morning by 10AM, and call him back by 11, I'd have the gig. Otherwise, he had a list of other people he needed to call right now instead.

"Well, what the hell," I said. I told him I'd accept his package and call him back.

The next morning, at about 9:15, I got an overnight envelope. I opened it, looked through the contents, then called my wife.

"Hey babe," she said. "Did you get that envelope?"

"Yeah."

"So what's in it? Lots of money, I hope."

I laughed. "Well, there's what looks like a short story manuscript, a first-class ticket to Denver, and a traveler's check for \$10,000 from an M.G. Baker."

"You're kidding, right? A traveler's check? Not a company check?"

"There isn't even a company name, unless 'M.G. Baker' is a company. Then there's just this note that says I should send it back if I don't want it, but if I come to Denver, I can keep it, and pick up another one just like it when I get there."

"Short stories? You don't do a lot of that kind of work."

"Yeah, I know, but that's what it looks like. There aren't many details. I just have to call this guy by 11 if I accept."

"Why haven't you called him yet? When do you leave?"

That's my woman. Short, to the point, and not many questions when money's on the table. That's what I love about her.

"The ticket has me flying out of Detroit Metro at 5:05AM tomorrow."

"Call him. I'll make sure you're packed and ready."

"Hey, ten grand will buy a lot of beer."

"Twenty. They said another ten thousand when you get there." She never misses a beat.

We hung up. I sat back, shuffled through the thin packet of papers, and looked it all over again, airline ticket, traveler's check, note with a phone number, and a hand-written story snippet. The snippet had been in its own sealed envelope and was obviously a photocopy.

I gave it another read:

—[Begin Journal entry]—

*16 November 2004*

Dennis is screaming at me, his hands gripping my arms, shaking me, his face, twisted with pain and rage, screaming.

*"Why couldn't you save her? Why did she have to die? Why?"*

Driving away... then nightmare images, the world spinning, pain and fear, my chest on fire, *I cannot breathe!* Hands on my shoulders, forcing me back, too many, too strong, voices trying to be soothing, voices shouting, agony in my belly, fuzzy images of my abdomen laid open, men in masks, shouting.

*"Dammit, I can't work with a conscious patient!"*

*"I'm pushing the limit now! Just finish it..."*

There is momentary nothingness, blank oblivion. Then thoughts, a memory of pain and horror as consciousness returns as if from the bottom of a cold, dark cave. It is slow and confused and wrong in so many ways. I want to retreat into the darkness, but I cannot, I know I must not.

My eyes open, the light painful to behold, but I compel myself to look through the dazzle and blur, attempting to force sense to emerge from the unfamiliar shapes and forms around me. My teeth close about something thick and resilient—there is a tube down my throat. Suddenly the sounds and images snap into stark relief: a hospital. I can hear the rhythmic whirring of what can only be a respirator. Carefully, quietly I assess myself, flexing my feet,



my legs, my hands... I cannot feel my left hand or my left leg. My chest and belly are sore, but not unbearably so. My head hurts, but my thoughts grow clearer by the moment. I am in a cervical collar. My hips are immobilized.

I am starving.

Movement catches my eye. There is someone in the room, a doctor? His back is turned as he makes notes on a hand-held device. I cannot speak with the tube so I raise my right hand. I notice that it is in a restraint, but one that permits a fair range of motion. I manage to snap my fingers after a couple of attempts. He turns with a start. The surprise on his face is evident as I wave him over.

“Well now, are we... awake?”

I gesture to the tube. *Take it out.*

“The tube? I’m a nurse and I’m afraid that’s up to the doctor, but I’ll page him for you. But first, can you focus on my finger? Just follow it with your eyes...”

He runs through a basic neurological examination. I do as he asks and when he is done I fix my gaze upon his until he looks away. A bit flustered, he tells me he will go get the doctor right away. He avoids even looking at my left side as he leaves looking uncertain, and I count off the minutes waiting. Finishing my internal audit I conclude that my left arm is missing at the elbow, and most of my left leg seems to be gone. The right side is sore but functional. Finally, the doctor arrives outside the door, and I listen as he and the nurse murmur about me. Both are incredulous, but I cannot make out the words. Finally he enters the room and approaches me. He is a young looking forty or so, with the unmistakable bearing of a dignified black man from Africa.

“My name is Dr. Omar. I was one of the surgeons who took care of you when you were transferred up from our emergency room. Do you understand me?” He has a Nigerian accent.

Thumbs up, then a gesture to the tube: *Take it out.*

“I’m sorry, nobody likes the tube,” he says in a loud, carefully enunciated voice. “But you have been hurt very badly and have stopped breathing more than once. I have some questions we need to answer. Are you up to it?”

I make a gesture, miming writing.

“Of course. Here you go.” He lays a pad on the small rolling table and slides it over to me, handing me his pen.

*How long?*

“You came in five days ago. Do you know what happened?”

*I was in my car, don’t remember, an accident, yes?*

“Yes. Miss Baker, are you a drug user?”

*No. Take out the tube.*

“We’ll see after we check you out again. I asked about drug use because we had a very tough time with you. You came out of anesthesia three times during your surgery.”

*I remember.* That gives him pause.

“I didn’t see any track marks but... your blood work was unusual.”

*Enough. Take out the god tube!*

“I’m going to examine you,” he says. “You’re not going to try to hit me again, are you?” I blush. I do not remember that. I form an “OK” with my fingers. He unbuckles my right hand and says, “I need to leave your left side immobile for now.”

He is obviously being reticent, but I let it go. He is trying to be kind. He begins a chest evaluation, probing for pain, listening to my breathing. He repeats everything the nurse did and clicks his pen light into my eyes. Eventually, he relents. Soon two nurses and another doctor extract the tube. After a few moments of coughing and clearing my throat I feel much better.

“I’m hungry,” are the first raspy words to pass my lips, followed by “I need to make a phone call.”

—[End Journal entry]—

Scrawled at the bottom were five words: “Come. I will pay you.”

I don’t do a lot of fiction, but I figured this could be interesting. I gave the guy a call and told him I’d be on the plane first thing in the morning. He told me I’d be met at the gate.

The sun was up but the skies were still gloomy when my plane landed. Stepping out of the gate, I immediately spotted two guys holding a sign with my name on it. One was obviously a driver from an airport limo service, and the other was a young guy in a three-piece suit. The latter worried me a bit because I hate neckties and I hate clients who expect me to wear one. Still, I smiled and shook the guy’s hand. He kept the conversation carefully confined to light pleasantries and indicated that we’d talk business once we got to the car.

The limo was a little odd. Instead of your typical airport limo, it was a white, stretch party job, the kind people normally rent for weddings and such. When we got in and I noticed that the driver’s compartment was sealed off from us, I got the idea. I also noticed that the bar was stocked. He offered me a drink but I declined. I’m not opposed to eye openers but I’ve been trying not to drink so much lately. He launched right into it once the car pulled into traffic.

“You should know that your client is Miss Genevieve Baker. I’m an attorney with a law firm that represents some of her interests. I know it sounds odd but, Miss Baker is such a stickler for privacy that she prefers not to let people know she’s our client. So for now you can just call me Mitch.”

“I’m not entirely comfortable with all this,” I said.

“Hey, it’s not like I’m a secret agent or gangster or something,” he chuckled, making little quote marks with his fingers. He certainly seemed normal enough. “It’s just how our client wants it.”

“So, ‘Miss’ Baker, eh? Kind of an old-fashioned lady?”

He paused and cocked his head. “Well, yes,” he said, drawing out the second word slowly. “In a weird sort of way. In other ways, no. No, no, no.” He paused. “I’d say she’s eccentric, but she’s a little young for that.”

I smirked. I didn’t say anything, but now it seemed obvious. She was probably a rich brat and a frustrated novelist. I’d never done any ghostwriting work and wondered where the hell she’d gotten my name. My buddy, Jerry, maybe? But I kept silent. I was pretty sure I had the idea now. This probably wouldn’t be much fun, but the money could be useful.

“Anyway,” he said, sobering, “I assume the Boston office explained her current condition to you?”

I paused. “Uh, no.”

“Oh. They should have... oh. Okay.” He ran his hand through his hair, sighed, sat back for a second, then leaned forward with a pained expression and serious voice. “She was in a terrible car accident last week. It’s been horrible seeing her. Not that I’ve known her for long, but I mean... Christ. It’s bad. It’s a miracle she’s alive at all.”

My mouth went dry. “But she’s been writing stuff?”

“Oh yeah, I’ve been getting clearly written instructions from her for a while, and that hasn’t changed since she came out of the coma. I can’t believe how calm she is. But a few of us from the firm have been sent out here to negotiate with the hospital for her. The hospital doesn’t want her to move and she’s agreed to that for now, but she’s unwavering about wanting certain things done certain ways and won’t bend an inch. It’s been like trying to negotiate a Middle East Peace Treaty. Money talks though.”

Suddenly, he stiffened, and looked at me a little sideways. “I’m sorry, that’s more than you needed to know. In fact, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention that I was complaining. I...we at the firm are very happy with her as a client.

“Anyway, now that you’re here, she wants me to give you this envelope. There’s a check in there for you, and a note. She’d like you to follow the instructions on it. Oh, and here.” He pulled out a small flip phone from his breast pocket. “She says you can use this for anything you want while you’re here. My cell number is on the first speed dial entry, here.” He spun a little wheel, and his name showed up on the screen. “Call me any time. I won’t be going up with you today, but I’ll be around the hospital. And yes, you’re allowed to use it in the hospital. Anything else for now?”

I sat back and contemplated. There didn’t seem to be anything else to ask. I opened the envelope and saw the traveler’s check and the note. I decided not to read it until we got to the hospital.

When we arrived, the limo dropped me off at the visitor's entrance. Mitch said he'd take care of my luggage and that they had a hotel room set up for me. He said that Miss Baker had been very specific, that the note would have all further instructions I'd need, and that he was to have me come up alone. So I was left standing there, my briefcase and the note in one hand. In the other I had a fairly heavy, pink carrying case that he said I was to deliver to her. He gave the case an odd look just before closing the limo door and riding off.

I set down both cases and opened the note. It was written in the same handwriting as before, but a bit crisper and more elegant:

—[*note begins*]—

*20 November 2004*

I apologize sincerely for the secrecy. I am aware this seems quite melodramatic, but I assure you it is necessary. I need you to understand that at this point, after we meet, you need not tell me whether you will accept my commission. If you choose, after our meeting, you may simply call Mitch and tell him you wish to be sent home. You may keep both traveler's checks as gratitude for your patience and inconvenience.

I need your help. This is a matter of some importance to me, hence the machinations employed to bring you here. You are uncomfortable, walking blind, alone and with no proper introduction, into a sick woman's room. I ask that you recognize I find this awkward as well. I plead necessity for reasons I cannot entirely explain in this note. I am certain you have many questions and when we meet this morning I promise to answer those questions. Rest assured, you have nothing to fear from me.

Go to the reception desk and tell them you are here to see me. You are expected, and I eagerly look forward to our meeting.

Yrs,

MGB

—[*note ends*]—

I stood there for a minute, thinking about what was happening. It's tempting to say that I found it all bizarre, but really I just found it a little uncomfortable. So I picked up the cases, walked inside, gave my name and said I was there to see Genevieve Baker.

When I reached her floor I couldn't help but notice how gloomy it was, but Intensive Care Units are usually like that, lit at a constant, dim level. I checked in at the nurse's station, gave my name again, and told them whom I was there to see.

Several of the nurses stopped and looked at me. One of them in particular frowned, and her mouth got small. I smiled nervously and said I was just a visitor. They directed me to the appropriate room. I heard the annoyed one mutter something about "her majesty" but one of her companions shushed her. I began to wonder just what kind of hellion I was about to encounter—in an Intensive Care ward, no less.

The doorway was unusually wide, and completely open. I knocked politely on the doorframe. There was a brief pause, and then I was relieved to hear a friendly contralto voice sing out.

“Please do come in!”

I walked in self-consciously, bracing myself for what I would see. It was way less gruesome than I'd imagined. There was no blood, no smell of sick. She was pale, with a number of machines hooked to her, but mostly through thin wires or tubes tucked discreetly under blankets. She was sitting up with no tubes near her face, and no breathing mask. Her right arm rested comfortably below her chest, with only a single IV going into her wrist.

She looked like no more than a pretty coed who'd been pulled through the wringer.

Her cheeks were sunken, and her eyes were bulgy and dark under the lids. Wisps of red hair stuck out of the bandages around her scalp. She looked like she hadn't eaten in a week and was very tired. A fierce energy seemed to vibrate out of her large green eyes, an energy that turned surprisingly friendly when her eyes met mine.

She smiled brightly, greeting me by name, and gestured toward a chair set next to the foot of her bed. “It's so gracious of you to see me. Please do sit down.”

I thought for an instant about shaking her hand, but it would be a bit awkward to maneuver around the machinery, and she put her hand back down so I just sat. As I did, I put the cases on the floor. Looking up, I noticed that her eyes had seized on the pink one as if it was suddenly the most important thing in the room.

Her voice changed completely in tone as she asked, “By chance, is that the case Mitch had made up for me?” She looked ready to lunge at it.

“Uh, yes,” I said. I gestured toward it and said, “Would you like me to...”

She stared at it a bit longer, then gazed back up at me with the same disturbing look in her eyes. Before I could say anything further she suddenly flashed me a smile. “Thank you for bringing it. I must apologize again for the unusual circumstances under which you were brought here. I trust you were not unduly inconvenienced?” Her look was friendly again, although that fearsome intensity still seemed to burn beneath. Her eyes were very large and very green.

I sat back and shook my head. “Well, in my line of work, traveling on short notice is isn't all that uncommon.” I gave her a half grin, still trying to take her measure.

She nodded graciously. “I promised to answer your questions. First, did I write that manuscript, and was it written shortly after I awoke? I did, and it was. Writing helps me to organize my thoughts. I have kept a journal of sorts for... quite some time. The accident was very traumatic.” Disturbingly, she lifted the bandaged stump of her left arm, but I was careful not to flinch. “I lost most of my left leg as well, but that is not my primary concern at the moment.”

She paused, looking at me intently. As I gathered my thoughts, she continued. “I need to tell a story, and I hope you will be the one to write it. I will be at your disposal to answer questions, discuss details, and provide evidence. I am offering a large sum of money up front because once this begins

you may decide that I am at best a liar, or at worst, deranged. You are already wondering if it's the latter, and I accept that.

“Here, this is for you,” she said, reaching to the small tray-table next to her bed to pick up a smallish silver box. “It’s a digital recorder. I’ve taken the liberty of activating it already, so you will have a record of our conversation today, and may review it at your leisure. You’ll also need it as we go forward—assuming that we do.” As I stood and took it from her outstretched hand her fingers brushed lightly against my knuckles, and she smiled at me brightly. I sat back down, looking at the recorder. It had apparently been running since I’d walked in.

“I ask only that you listen, suspend your disbelief and let me give you what you need to draw your own conclusions. You are under no obligation. At any time, for any reason, you may choose to walk away and all monies you have been paid are yours to keep, but I hope I can convince you to give me just a few days before you make up your mind.

“I chose you because I saw qualities in your writing that I believe will be enormously helpful, but I had to meet you to be certain, hence my efforts to bring you here. Having met you, I am now convinced you are the man I need for this endeavor. There are others who might suffice, but I do believe you and I will be able to work together.” She paused and took a sip of water from her bed table. I was startled at the certainty in her voice because I really hadn’t said much of anything yet.

“So this story,” I said, “you’ve written some of it already? I’d like to look over any other material you have. That manuscript was a bit... intense.”

She gave a short laugh, not creepy but a little loud. “You have *no* idea. Assume nothing. I’m going to have Mitch make you an offer you’re unlikely to refuse. This would be your primary focus over the next few months at least, so I’ll want you to take a leave from your day job. It will be worth it, believe me. If you’re willing to consider this, Mitch will have a set of documents for you to review. I’ve also arranged for you to have full access to my doctors. They are under strict instructions to share everything with you.

“I’d like you to stay nearby for the moment, but you won’t have to remain in Denver too long. I’ll likely be leaving soon myself, once I convince the doctors I can survive without their ministrations. Please, do give this a chance. I need your help.” She suddenly looked vulnerable, then snapped back to the moment. “I’ve arranged a room at the Hyatt Regency. It’s yours for as long as you choose to stay. You should find the accommodations adequate. Whatever you need you may simply charge to the room account—*anything*. Call Mitch if you have any issues or questions. He is at your disposal. He can contact me here at any time if there is something urgent you need to ask.

“I understand how this sounds. I understand you have reservations, but please, give it careful consideration—just a few days are all I ask. Do you have any other questions?” She sagged back into her pillows, suddenly looking small and very tired.

“No, not at the moment, other than, ‘what next?’” I said.

“Mitch will take you to your hotel. Read, and consider. I’m sorry for making this so brief, but as you can see I’m not entirely well. I am unaccustomed to being so unforgivably rude, but I would take my leave of you now.”

“Of course, I understand,” I said. I picked up my briefcase and turned to leave.

Then with an odd inflection to her voice, she asked, “Umm, before you go, could you lift that case on to my bed? I’m somewhat tethered here.”

I hefted it onto the bed for her. “Thank you,” she said. “One last thing,” her look burning into me now, “If you agree to do this I will never lie to you, *ever*.” I almost felt sucked into her green eyes as she went on. “There may be questions I cannot answer because I believe the answers will harm others, and if so I’ll tell you. But trust is the most precious coin I have in this arrangement. I’ll not squander it between us.” She sat back again and closed her eyes. “I’m done hiding things,” she whispered.

Uncertain of what to do I said, “I hope you’re feeling better.” Lost in thought, I walked out. I suddenly realized that in the last ten minutes she had answered almost every one of my questions without my having spoken much at all. I also realized that I was going to accept her job, for now, if the money was any good. I also realized that she probably knew all this. I found that a bit unsettling.

I pocketed the digital recorder and called Mitch. Both he and the limo were waiting for me when I got downstairs.

Mitch looked at me and grinned. “She can be intense, can’t she?”

I nodded. “Did she go to school in Europe or something? She seems a little... affected.”

His grin just got bigger and he shrugged, then held out a thick manila envelope and said, “Did you want this, or...?”

I took it and said, “I guess I’d like to go to the hotel. Need to call my wife.” Then I started a bit and asked, “Oh, by the way, what the hell was in that case?”

“Just some food,” he said. “She’s been complaining about the food here for three days.”

## Chapter 2

She had been as thorough with the hotel arrangements as everything else, and impressive with how she used her money. When I checked in I found out I was in a luxury suite. This told me something about her status. Anyone who thinks of a luxury suite at a Hyatt Regency as “adequate” has a lot more money, and is used to spending a lot more money, than a vast majority of the population.

Before dropping me off Mitch told me to check in with the concierge desk, that they would have a rental car waiting for my use. He was as good as his word. They just asked for my license, had me sign a few things and handed me the keys to a black Cadillac El Dorado that was already in the hotel parking lot.

I had encountered serious money a few times before in my life, but this was impressive. She was obviously a person with serious resources. I found myself wondering how someone that young could possibly have so much cash. An heiress seemed the obvious possibility, although she didn't seem to have much of the rich brat attitude that some children of the wealthy are famous for.

After settling into the suite, I examined the packet from Mitch. Clipped to the front was a short list of phone numbers: Mitch and his cell phone (again), the office and pager numbers of a Dr. Omar Momadou, Dr. Janelle French, and Inge Sorenson, L.C.S.W. Opening the packet I found a police report, a thick packet of medical records and a written job offer.

The job contract was something else. She wanted to write her autobiography. She was offering me a substantial fee up front plus a nice weekly amount until we were finished. We could take as long as necessary, with a minimum estimate of three months. I could work mostly from home if I wanted, but I would fly out (at her expense) to see her at least once a week. I thought it seemed like one hell of an expensive vanity project, since it probably wouldn't sell. “Miraculous recovery” stories are a dime a dozen. But maybe she knew a publisher. Hell, maybe she owned a publisher.

The police report was typical; functional, businesslike, mostly form stuff. Surprisingly, she'd made no effort to obscure anything before giving it to me. Her name (“Mary Genevieve Baker”), address, date of birth (January 10, 1977), driver's license, social security number, and other basic information were right there. I was surprised to learn that she'd been driving a mid-sized 2004 Mazda she'd rented from Hertz. Why would someone with that kind of money be driving such a plain, smallish car?

Setting that mystery aside, I read the rest of the report. It looked to be a fairly typical accident report, with no unusual surprises. On the night of November 12, 2004, a 17-year-old girl was driving her father's SUV, a Ford Expedition, and ran a red light. They estimated that the giant vehicle was moving at about 60 miles per hour when it plowed into the driver's side of Baker's rental car which was proceeding through a light witnesses said was green. The police thought that Daddy's Girl might have been drag racing, although the girl claimed she was just trying to beat the yellow light and her friend in the passenger seat insisted that they were “just talking.” In any case, the seat belts, air bags and a couple tons of Ford iron saved Daddy's Girl and her ‘bestest’ friend from any serious injury. Neither one was drunk or appeared high, nor were any drugs found in the blood tests. Daddy's Ford was probably repairable.



The mid-sized Mazda and its driver, however, were not so lucky. Apparently the Mazda spun and rolled over a couple of times, and the left side was practically obliterated. When the fire department got there, they had to use the “jaws of life” (or what rescue workers often refer to as “the can opener”) to get her out. The accident photos were about as gruesome as you’d expect. Genevieve’s whole left side was mangled and she had severe scratches and cuts everywhere, including her face. But accident photos frequently look worse than they are because blood gets everywhere, and it mixes with sweat which just spreads it around and makes it look worse. Apparently some of those scratches were pretty minor because they’d cleared up by the time I saw her that day.

The left side of her body was nowhere near so lucky, though; a small puncture wound in the side of her skull from a shard of glass, arm crushed, ribs smashed, gut sliced open with metal sticking into it, left leg crushed with more metal sticking into it. And that was just the initial police report.

After reading this, I had to stop and snatch a beer out of the hotel mini bar and compose myself a bit. It’s not that I’d never read police reports before. If you’ve read enough of them, you know that this accident was only above average for its violence. I’d read reports of far worse. People smashed so bad they’re basically nothing but goo, or whole families burnt to death.

What fascinated me was her behavior after the fact. I looked at the calendar on my watch. This accident happened nine days ago, and she was in a coma for five days after that. How does someone go through something so traumatic—the loss of two limbs, for God’s sake—wake up in a hospital room, and immediately decide to write a journal entry about it, and hire a writer to help her tell her story? That’s when it finally struck me. There were many odd things about my first interview with this woman, but the oddest thing was how eerily calm she was about her fate, almost as if the emotional parts of her brain had been shut down.

I ordered lunch and began to flip through the much thicker medical documentation. I was again astonished at the fact that it all seemed to be there, every last thing you could imagine, with no effort to hide any information. Height, weight, age, date of last period (unknown) whether or not she was pregnant (no) and so on. There were several sets of X-rays, some MRI scans, and countless reports from the emergency room, the operating room, the surgeons’ and the ICU nurses’ reports. I even found three different psychiatric evaluations. I spent the rest of the afternoon reading through all of it, and a fairly complete picture emerged, with a few items of confusion.

The doctors had to take the whole forearm, right up to the elbow. The leg was even worse. They couldn’t even save the knee. She had fractured some ribs, one of which punctured her lung. A chunk of metal lodged in her gut, and she had to have a bowel resection, losing her spleen, parts of her large and small intestine, and even one of her ovaries in the process. Her pelvis had several hairline fractures. They had to open her up a second time when a subsequent MRI showed that they’d missed a piece of glass in her belly.

Just as she had suggested, the surgeons’ reports showed that she had a tendency to come awake under anesthesia. The first time it had happened she had given her anesthesiologist a black eye and dislocated a nurse’s shoulder. Except for those incidents she did not fully regain consciousness until five days after being admitted.

There were several hairline cracks in her skull, and a thin slice of glass was lodged some four centimeters into her brain. The extraction was without incident, and she fortunately did not wake up during that procedure. Subsequent scans showed no evidence that anything was left behind. That last part, however, marked the first of several strange things about the case of Mary Genevieve Baker.

The first odd thing was her blood. They were completely unable to type it on the first day and were forced to take the step of simply giving her Type O-negative whole blood. This is considered a “universal donor” blood that you can put into anybody, but doctors prefer to use type-matched blood, particularly in surgery. Her type was Kp(b-), which is quite rare. It’s generally found only among white people from certain parts of Europe, and there are only two registered donors on the continent. By the time they had her typed and located a supply, she’d already had two surgeries and several transfusions. Fortunately, her system handled it without any apparent difficulty.

Routine checks for drugs in her system presented some odd and contradictory results. Subsequent, more detailed tests were ordered, which showed unusually high traces of carbon in her bloodstream, as well as some inorganics. She looked sort of like someone with a mild case of metal poisoning. Doctors decided to let it go for now since the levels were probably too low to justify immediate chelation therapy.

Her cholesterol was through the roof, even for a patient under severe stress— HDL of over 600 and LDL of over 800, which were both ridiculously high and out of normal proportions. Once again, they had more pressing concerns than a 27 year old with high cholesterol, so they wrote it off to stress and suggested looking at it after she healed some more.

Then there were the MRIs of her brain. Most of the rest of her body was completely normal but her brain was odd in a few ways. First, the sliver of glass had apparently been quite thin and not as dangerous as first thought. Subsequent scans showed no discernible damage to that part of the brain, so whatever problems it might cause her were likely to be minor. However, she had an unusually high number of fissures and convolutions for a woman her age. Not freakishly so, but well above average. More importantly it looked like she had a large cancer on her corpus callosum. Doctors were fairly sure it was cancer based on the way it resonated in the MRI scans, although it was odd because it was so smooth and regular, teardrop shaped with small, thin extensions. The specialists were pretty sure it would be a difficult operation, and that they’d have to sever the *corpus callosum* to do it. Once again, doctors set this aside because they had more pressing things to worry about, but an oncologist and brain specialist had been consulted and would probably be consulted again.

Another peculiarity: on the evening of November 16, 2004, at approximately 10:15 PM, Mary Genevieve Baker became fully conscious, and had resumed a fairly normal, if heavy, sleep schedule since then. Coma patients normally wake an inch at a time, but she’d gone from unconscious to fully aware as if somebody had just thrown a switch.

The psychiatric reports were almost boring. They noted, as I had, her rather unsettling matter-of-factness, her flat emotional response to her injuries. They noted that she was usually calm and polite, but occasionally angry and even moderately violent, to the point of throwing things or shoving people—not enough to warrant locking her up, but it bore scrutiny. All other tests showed her to appear normal. The psychiatrist was, as they so often are, dry and clinical, suggesting her emotional response was “due to trauma,” and advised adjusting her pain medication. The social workers’ reports were a little more touchy-feely and opinionated. They said she was probably in “the denial phase of the grieving process” for her lost limbs, and would probably need extensive further counseling.

The ICU nurses’ reports were alternately upsetting and amusing. The words “NOT COOPERATIVE” appeared an awful lot along with the acronym “JPN”, often underlined in angry slashes and decorated with numerous exclamation points. She had removed her own IV a couple of times, and threatened to remove a catheter. She complained frequently about her diet, and once

actually threw a tray at an orderly. She hadn't hurt anybody, but it was clear that she was pretty much hell on wheels in the Intensive Care Unit.

After digesting all of this, I called Dr. Omar Momadou's office and learned that he usually just went by "Dr. Omar." I inquired politely, and he confirmed that he was from Nigeria. He spoke excellent, very precise English. He was a little unused to speaking to a layman who wasn't a relative of the patient, but after I asked a few fairly sophisticated questions he stopped talking down to me. Basically, he couldn't tell me much more than I'd already learned, except that she was healing remarkably quickly. He did mention that he was deeply concerned, especially about her diet. He asked me if I had brought her food, because she needed to be on a liquid or at most very soft food diet. She might need further surgery if she ate whole foods right now. I demurred, but I worried. She'd gotten that case at least nine hours ago at this point, and if it were going to kill her there was nothing I could do about it right now.

In concluding the conversation he said, "I don't know what to do with Miss Baker. She is healing very well; really remarkably well in many ways, and some of her injuries, like her pelvis and her head injuries, they seem not to have been as bad as they initially appeared. But she is I think much too confident and careless and will not understand that her condition is fragile, and I worry daily that she may do something to cause herself to bleed internally. She does not appreciate how delicate her situation is. And we still don't even know what to make of this apparent brain tumor. She knows about it but seems as unconcerned about it as anything else. We don't know if maybe this is the cause of some of her behavior, and the psychiatric doctors don't seem to be sure right now. She is, however, perhaps the most unusual patient I have ever dealt with."

Gathering it all together, I called my wife. After discussing it with her, we agreed that I should take the job. I could arrange for a vacation from my day job on Monday, and could probably get a leave of absence—but even if I couldn't, the up-front money alone was too good to pass up. So I called Mitch and told him I'd like to take the gig, but I'd like my own attorney to review the contract just to make sure everything was in order. He sounded relieved and promised to let Miss Baker know.

On my way out to dinner, he called me back.

"Miss Baker wanted me to tell you that she considers her word her bond and she promises we'll work out any concerns your attorney might have. She'd like to consider you on board right now, and wants me to send a few more things for you to read in the morning, and to see you around noon. Would that be acceptable?"

I thought about it and said, "That seems like it should be okay." My return flight home wasn't leaving until tomorrow evening anyway, so there would be plenty of time.

## Chapter 3

The next morning I got up around eight and ordered breakfast, called home for a while, and read the paper. Around ten Mitch dropped off another packet, and I was relieved to see it was much smaller. He let me know that he was running a couple of special errands north of town so he wouldn't be around, but I should still call him if anything really important came up. "She's really glad you're on board," he said as he left.

That's where the trouble began.

I opened the packet and found some additional medical records. It seemed a bit fanatical considering that it was just routine reports from the last 24 hours. There was also a paper notebook, with a note clipped to the front saying, "You'll want to see these." She'd apparently gotten this notebook just a few days ago because right on page one was the November 16<sup>th</sup>-dated item that she'd had photocopied and sent to me the other day. I flipped through to the end, noticing that she was almost fanatical about dating everything. The very last entry was this morning's and was mostly complaints about sleep and food and trying harder not to abuse the nurses. Flipping back some more, I scanned some stuff about how her plans were taking shape now that I was on board and how she hoped it would all work out. I spotted one entry in particular which was a little disturbing, but which I had to admit was funny, especially since she still appeared to be alive this morning:

—[Begin Journal entry]—

21 November 2004

Finally the woman leaves and I attack the latch on the case. To anyone else the aroma would be underwhelming, but my mouth waters as I tear open the first foil-wrapped package. They are condensed rations—a high-energy blend of carbohydrates, fats and proteins meant for soldiers in the field or those who spent long stretches in the wilderness. Each packet contains 2500 calories. I am finishing the second when a nurse looks in.

"Miss Baker!" she exclaims, striding to my bedside with obvious intent. I lash out with my one hand, seizing her by the front of her tunic and pulling her face to mine.

"Touch this and you'll take your next meal through a straw!" I hissed, "*Now get out!*" Then I push her away and continue eating. She scurries out like a scared rabbit.

Dr. Omar arrives within minutes. I actually like him, but he is still an obstacle. He watches me as I polish off another ration bar and shakes his head in that endearingly patriarchal manner of his.

"You so enjoyed your surgery that you wish to have it again?" he says.

"How were my X-rays?" I reply and smile as I watch his face sour. "From the look on your face can I assume there's no need for the rest of this fiberglass?" I ask, flicking my finger against the pelvic cast.

“We are still reviewing the results,” he says. He is a terrible liar, bless him. Now that my stomach is not screaming at me quite so much, I can relax and smile at him.

“Dr. Omar, I am a terrible patient. Just ask the nurses. They’re trying to do their job and I’m making a mess of things. My attitude is atrocious and I treat them like prison guards. If my pelvis, my blood pressure and everything else are stable, you’ve no more reason to keep me in the ICU. I’m not asking you to discharge me, just move me downstairs where I can have the freedom I need without turning this place into a circus. Now, do the pictures bear me out, or are you going to force me to call my lawyer again? I assume this facility’s legal department is growing weary of being harassed on a daily basis.”

—[End Journal entry]—

I shook my head. There it was again, that odd mix of personal drama, strict manners and firebrand. “Hospital food that bad, Princess?” I muttered to myself. As I was chuckling over that, I was surprised to hear the little cell phone she had given me ring. I picked it up.

“I do apologize for bothering you, but we will be making our engagement at noon, yes?”

“Yeah, sure, I just got the packet and I’m looking through it now. You should be nicer to those nurses.”

There was a pause. She was breathing a little heavily. “Yes, you’re probably right,” she finally said. “It’s just that I’ve felt like Prometheus chained to his rock these last five days, and they’re the people I see most often.”

I rolled my eyes, but reminded myself that she was in a bad way. So I kept my voice pleasant. “Well, anyway, I’ve read through most of it, and I’ve got several questions I’d like to ask you.”

“I’m sure, and I want to talk to you about it as well, especially as I’m sure some of it seems strange. But speaking of our meeting,” she said, still breathing heavily, “I made a dreadful mistake this morning and sent Mitch off before I remembered... I normally wouldn’t do this, please believe me but... I’m very, very hungry and they won’t give me anything but liquids here, and... could I impose upon you to pick up a few things for me at the market on your way up? Just to get me through the afternoon, until Mitch gets back?”

“Certainly,” I said, frowning. “Just let me scribble it down.” She rattled off a list, thanked me gushingly, and hung up.

Now I was getting a little more disturbed. I wouldn’t mind grabbing her a burger or something, but where the hell was I going to get two whole pounds of beef jerky, two pounds of cheddar, and a bottle of antacids? And should she be taking those anyway?

As I sat there, I noticed there was one final envelope inside Mitch’s packet. It was from a big-name security company, and it contained reports, on me, on my wife, and our son. They were not particularly detailed, just credit checks, criminal record checks, other basic background information, and also some photos taken from our family web site. But what the hell was she doing having these

people investigating not just my background, but also my whole family? Wasn't some of that against the law without authorization? And these were dated three days ago, on Thursday!

I was growing livid. I sat down and scrutinized her journal more carefully, reading it thoroughly from the beginning. When I got to the part where she described our meeting the previous day, I got up and went to the hospital.

I barely waited after knocking as I strode into her room. She looked startled and moved into a slightly defensive posture.

"Okay, Princess, here's the deal. You may be sick as hell, but you seem to be in denial about that, and plenty tough otherwise. So maybe it's time you answer to someone." I heard a mild bustle in the hallway behind me, but I ignored it. She looked up at me, her eyes big, but her face otherwise expressionless. I continued.

"One, I do not shop for you. Two, I want to know what the hell this is." I dropped the background checks into her lap. "I know you're sick and maybe I'm yelling at a cripple, but if you're well enough to push other people around, you can sure as hell explain yourself."

I had to give it to her. She looked a little surprised, but her voice stayed even. "I apologize. I will not ask you to shop for me. Let me look at this." She picked up the background checks and looked at them. "Oh, this must..." Her voice trailed off. She looked back up at me. "You must understand. I wanted to show you everything. I see now I should have..."

I interrupted her and said, "My family is off-limits to you, do you understand that? And what the hell does my credit, our credit for God's sake, have to do with any of this?"

She opened her mouth, but before she could speak I dropped the notebook in her lap, opened to the page where she had described our meeting the day before. "You know, I think it was when I read this that I decided I wasn't interested in working for you."

Her eyes turned to it:

—[*Begin Journal entry*]

I am instantly aware when he arrives. The nurses are unaccustomed to having their careful procedures disturbed by anything other than medical emergencies; an admirable efficiency, but antithetical to my needs. Forcing others to my will is not my preferred way, but I have been left no choice.

He enters the room, hesitating just a moment before his shoulders drop in relief. He had expected far worse. I smile, greeting him by name, watching his reaction, his stance, and the track of his eyes across my form. Empathy, not pity.

"I'm so pleased you chose to come. Please, do sit." I gesture to the chair I had arranged to have placed in my room, and he takes a seat, setting down his briefcase and a large pink carrying case. My stomach identifies it before my eyes do. Suddenly I am almost drowning in saliva. Then I return my attention to him.

I let him know that I enjoy his writing and try to answer all the obvious questions I know he wants answered. I flirt with him, just a little, as is my way when meeting new men. When I hand him the digital recorder, I brush his knuckles a bit with my fingers, and when I do so I become certain that he will take the project.

I then let him see my weariness. I hate to push someone out so quickly, but there is the case, and there is time to see him again if things do not work out. I believe he will suit my purposes. I make sure to give him my best smile as he leaves, and put a little warble in my throat as I do. Then the fool nurse comes in just as he walks out. She is fortunate I do not take a bite out of her arm.

—[End Journal entry]—

She looked up at me, her eyes a little wider.

“Are you always this manipulative?” I asked.

Fury flashed in her eyes, but when she spoke her voice was cold as ice. “I will not be spoken to in this manner. You are not even giving me...”

“Do you know what I think of you?” I interrupted. “I think you’re a spoiled rich drama queen who’s pushing people around, playing head games and manipulating people because you can’t come to grips with the fact that you’re a cripple and just might die. Well, I’ve seen people with worse tragedies in my life, honey, I really have, and this crap don’t fly with me. I’m real sorry about what’s happened to you, but neither this nor your money gives you any right to treat people like objects. You get yourself another writer.”

I flipped the recorder onto her bed, turned, and walked out the door. Three of the nurses gave me quietly restrained cheers as I left.

In the car on the way back to the hotel the cell phone began to ring and I snarled at myself for not throwing it in her face along with that recorder. I ignored it. It only rang a few times, then stopped.

A few hours later as I was packing, it rang again. It was Mitch. I was polite and so was he. I apologized for yelling at his client, but told him I just didn’t see any point in our working together. He wanted to tell me some things, and I agreed to listen. At the end of the conversation, I agreed to spend some time thinking about what he’d said.





## Chapter 4

—[Begin Journal entry]—

22 November 2004

The hospital is almost tolerable tonight. The Intensive Care ward is kept under constant low lighting, but I have been moved to a room at the far end of the unit where it is somewhat quieter and the brighter lights from the nurse's station do not intrude so much. The bustle and noise of the day has begun giving way to the quieter cadences of night, and my distance from the patients requiring the most attention of the nurses has increased. All this permits a reasonable facsimile of sleep to take me until my phone beeps quietly.

"Hello, Mitch," I say.

"He wants to see you. I wasn't sure you'd be awake."

"It's alright. I told you, he gets whatever he wants. Please ensure the hospital does not interfere."

"Of course. I..." He hesitates for a moment.

I sigh a little and say, "Go on, Mitch. Is something bothering you?"

"I just want to say I'm sorry for what a mess I've made of things for you. I was trying to do what you told me to, and..."

"No, Mitch," I say. "It's my fault, not yours. An old, dear friend of mine once counseled me never to make irrevocable decisions when one is either tired or hungry. Unfortunately for me I've been doing almost nothing else for almost a week. Something was bound to blow up on me sooner or later. It's not your fault. But do try better next time, okay handsome?" I force a smile and a sound of approval from my voice. He really is a good young man, and I can practically hear his spine straightening.

Ye Gods. He's twenty-five, and fresh out of Law School-- barely sentient, by my standards. He thanks me and we hang up.

I quietly comport myself, readying for my visitor. I am uncertain as to what I should say, or what I should expect. I find that unsettling. Equally unsettling is that I have come to understand just how important it is to me that he accepts this task, that this stranger should accept me for what I am. I confess this much to myself. I may not have the courage to start all over again. It may be this one, or no one.

A quiet commotion outside tells me he has arrived, and I listen to the duty nurse reminding him how terribly unusual this is. He is surprisingly calm with her. He is not easily intimidated, this one. He knocks at the doorway, and I invite him in.

“Please leave the lights down,” I ask as he reaches for the switch. “Once they’re on I’ll be unable to go to sleep again.”

“Sure thing.” He keeps standing near the doorway, hands in his coat pockets. He looks at his feet. “I’m sorry for overreacting this afternoon.”

“It is entirely my fault. I accept full responsibility.”

“Mitch told me you didn’t order the security checks.”

“It doesn’t matter. They acted under my imprimatur and that makes me ultimately responsible. I was careless. I suspect they were merely going overboard to protect me—or just looking for an excuse for more billable hours. But it’s my fault. When I told Mitch to send you everything on hand that you might possibly want, I don’t think he knew they were important, and I didn’t know he had them.

“But I want you to know,” I go on, “that I didn’t see them, and I do not do business like this. I trust my instincts, not men. I chose you because of those instincts and for no other reason.”

He shifts a bit, looks me in the eye and nods. “Okay.” He has decided to believe me, but he has not sat down yet. I must say more.

“You were right about what you said earlier, you know. I am manipulative, unhealthily so, at times. It’s been a long time since anyone had the courage to point that out to me so forcefully, and I am a cripple, in more than one way.”

He blushes and opens his mouth. I interrupt him.

“Please don’t apologize anymore. But it would make me happy if you would sit and talk with me.”

He relents and sits. “You’ve got an amazing story here,” he says, carefully. “You’re incredibly lucky you’re not dead.”

“It was a close thing, wasn’t it?” I say, smiling.

“No. Not really close. The only thing missing from those records is your autopsy report. Are you aware of everything in your records?”

I shake my head. “Although I know the basics, I haven’t been all that interested. I planned on giving them some attention after recovering more fully.”

“You lost two-thirds of your blood volume, and your blood type is so rare they had to call in a specialist just to identify it. You took a nasty shot to the head that was life-threatening all by itself, and those were the most *minor* things that nearly killed you.”

I listen quietly as he goes on, listing each major injury and several other things besides. He mentions every oddity detailed in my medical records, every time I should have died, everything odd about my recovery up until now, and the doctors' belief that I have a horrible cancer and possible brain damage. Finally he winds down, as if he has run out of energy. I can see that despite all this he is not confused or angry, just resigned. He has come to the conclusion that he is the wrong man for this job.

"I've thought about it for the last few hours and I've honestly come to the conclusion that I'm not your man. Yes, I have a bit of medical knowledge and can write popular accounts of such things fairly well, but I don't do biographies, and," he grimaces, "I have to be honest. The truth is that 'miracle recovery' books are a dime a dozen and aren't all that interesting to me." He looks at me, hoping he hasn't hurt my feelings. He has no idea how utterly endearing I find that.

"All that you say might be true," I say, "if I were trying to write such a book. But that's not the kind of book I want. I want something quite a bit more serious."

"Well, okay, but really? Why me?" he asks.

"I picked you because I have read your work. I admire your good sense and your honest skepticism regarding any subject you write about. You reject emotion-based pseudo-science while retaining your basic human empathy. You understand pain and treat your subjects with dignity—sometimes more than they likely deserve." I incline my head at him, and smile. His eyes glitter, but he says nothing.

I continue speaking, "I also just happen to like your writing style and, having met you, I have concluded that what I saw in your writing is a direct reflection of the man. I would therefore like to work with you."

He smiles only slightly and says, "That may be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me." He doesn't gush though. He will not be flattered. "Well, we do have your miracle recovery to start with. So what else would we be writing about?"

"I'm not particularly interested in telling the story of my 'miraculous' survival. In fact there is nothing miraculous about it at all, at least from my perspective." I pause then, but he is silent, waiting for me to continue. I have begun speaking softly, forcing him to listen and focus intensely upon me. I will not risk him mishearing me. "This is not the first time I have been gravely injured. Doubtless it shall not be the last. I'll grant that this is by far the worst physical injury I've ever suffered, but when you've lived as long as have I, these things are unavoidable."

He smiles with condescension and a bit of irritation. Leaning forward, he says, "Okay, you're very, very good at being melodramatic. I used to be that way a little too. But you're twenty-seven years old, and believe me, whatever you think you know about life..."

"Mary Genevieve Baker would be twenty-seven now, had she not died when she was eleven months old. I chose her because her name reminded me of someone who was very dear to me, very long ago. I've had to change names like that many times in order to be accepted by people."

He stares at me.

I take a deep breath. “My name... I’m sorry, I don’t say this very often. My name is Zsallia Marieko. I am some three thousand, five hundred years old. I cannot die, you see.”

He barely reacts. No snort of derision, no sitting back in his chair; just a slight dilation of his pupils, nearly undetectable in the low light.

“Sha-Lee-Ya,” he pronounces slowly. “That’s an interesting name. Hungarian?”

“I think not. I chose it because I liked the feel of it, and I was tired of my name changing every time I moved from one place to another. I don’t know how to explain exactly, but having my own name is important to me, even if only I know it. There are only two others alive at the moment who can put that name together with this face.”

He sits back noncommittally, and his fingers drum the arm of his chair very lightly. He is trying hard not to give away anything and he is not becoming angry, but he does not believe me. I sense no pity. He has decided to test me. I decide to let him.

“Are you aware that I have insane people in my family?” he finally asks.

Mildly surprised, I say, “No, not until you just said that. Do you believe me to be insane?” He pauses, trying to find a nice way of saying it. I decide to save him from it. “Yes, you do. I can accept this.” Then he surprises me a bit.

“What I believe in is Occam’s Razor. All things being equal, the simplest explanation is most likely correct. But since we’re laying it all on the line, Princess, I’ll tell you that I do consider that to be the most likely assumption.” He contemplates me for another moment, choosing his words carefully. “Are you aware that your doctors believe you may be mentally unbalanced?” he finally asks.

“Yes, although they do not know as much of the truth as you do now.”

He pauses, then chuckles. “Okay, you promised me something. Do you remember what it was?”

“Yes, I will not lie to you, because I need your trust, and I need to trust myself.”

“Do you think you’re deluded?” he asks, quite pointedly.

“No, I do not.”

“Thirty-five hundred years?” he says, finally getting back to it. “That’s a pretty long time.”

I blink in acknowledgement, inclining my head, but say nothing. He goes on.

“Where were you born?”

“To be honest, I’m not certain. I believe somewhere in northern Europe, perhaps Scandinavia, but I honestly have no way of knowing.”

“How old are your parents?”

"I never knew them. I'm not sure I had them," I say evenly.

"So you're some kind of spirit, maybe a goddess?"

I take a deep breath, and wish for a cigarette. I try very hard not to sound angry when I say, "*no*." It comes out rather more forcefully than I would like, but he does not seem taken aback.

"No relation to Prometheus?" he asks. I blush, and blush harder when I realize I am blushing.

"That was a turn of phrase. From a woman who was feeling very sorry for herself. Please...don't tease me about this. That's not what I am at all." This is becoming difficult to endure, but I keep a tight grip on my emotions.

He drums his fingers some more on the arm of his chair, then says, "So were you ever a mighty queen, ruler of a great people?"

I stare at him for a moment, and my mouth drops open. In my entire existence no one has ever asked me such a question. Startling myself, I suddenly burst into laughter. I find myself coughing, but I continue to laugh. My head goes light and I experience a bit of tunnel vision and worry that I have offended him.

As I get myself under control and blood begins to return to my head, I refocus on him. He looks concerned, but is leaning forward and grinning now.

"So that would be 'no,' I take it?" he asks and that causes me to laugh again, and my vision actually goes black for a moment. But this time I get it under control more quickly and manage to shake my head.

"No, no," I wheeze, looking for my water cup. "By which I mean, I was never a... no." I suddenly feel drained and light, but more relaxed than I have been since waking up after the accident.

"Well, you certainly are an interesting one, Zsallia Marieko, I'll give you that," he says. I let him know with my eyes that it is up to him where he wants to go next. But there is a twinkle in his eye. I think, perhaps I have almost won him over.

"So do you have any other super-powers? Other than not-dying, I mean?"

I look at him with a bit of annoyance, but say, "I've picked up a trick or two here and there," and shrug.

"Can you show me an example?" he says. He is half-hoping I will claim to do something he cannot see, or perhaps remove all doubt by levitating from the bed, although he does not really believe it. I look carefully around the room. Spotting the tissue box on my bed-tray, I pull out two, moisten each a bit in my water cup just to give it a bit of weight, and squeeze each into its own little ball. I hold them both in my right hand, then look him carefully in the eye. I begin to flip each deftly into the air into its own little arc, juggling them one-handed.

His head goes back in a loud laugh. Then he stands up, leans forward, and clasps my hand.

We have an agreement.

—[End Journal entry]—

## Chapter 5

I re-read her accounting of our meeting the previous night, shaking my head. “It’s a little disconcerting reading your descriptions. I’m supposed to be the writer, you’re supposed to be the subject.” I was sitting comfortably in her hospital room that next morning, waiting for them to move her downstairs.

“You watch me, I watch you,” she replied, a bit distractedly. She sat up, turned a bit to her right and began scooting to the edge of her bed.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting out of bed.”

I restrained myself from offering to help. If she wanted it, she’d ask. There was obviously no point in trying to talk her out of anything.

“These journals,” I asked. “How long have you been keeping them?”

“About 170 years,” she said offhandedly as she turned further to her right, and hooked her leg over the edge. I laughed. I loved the deadpan way she said things like that. She was clearly a flake, but the most entertaining flake I’d ever met. She flicked a look at me, smiled, and then concentrated again on her leg. I didn’t know where this relationship was going, but there was no doubt that it would be interesting.

“Well, I can already see how parts of the project might be done,” I said. “I think I can use some of your journal entries directly. Not all of them, since you ramble a bit, but I can definitely see how with a little work and careful editing we can lift parts of your journals straight into the book, maybe weave it in with some of our interview transcripts. Could be tricky, but might work. Do you write these every day?”

She scooted some more, grabbed the rail, and put her foot to the ground. She scratched absently at the stump of her left leg.

“You’d know better than I, but that sounds workable,” she said. “And no, not every day, but frequently, whenever something I deem significant happens or when something’s troubling me.” She was flexing her toes, testing the floor, wincing slightly at its cold temperature.

“They’re remarkably detailed. Do you have an eidetic memory?”

She shook her head. “No, but I’ve got a good one. Writing helps me remember things, keep my thoughts ordered.” She was rocking back and forth sideways, testing her balance.

“So where are the rest of them?” I asked.

Before answering, she startled me by standing straight up on her one leg facing away from me. I noticed then just how very thin and tiny she seemed. She couldn’t have been much more than 5’3”,

which astonished me because she had such a large presence about her. She didn't seem to care at all that I could see her backside through the open back of the hospital gown. She looked like she had almost no fat at all on her, which looked very unhealthy. With her back to me like that, I could almost believe her missing forearm was simply bent forward out of my vision, but the left leg was still obviously, tragically, almost completely gone.

She then startled me again by leaning backwards like a ballerina and slowly bending her back into a "U" shape. I could hear it crinkle and pop a little, and then she was staring at me upside-down.

She said, "I have some that I wrote some time ago in a steamer trunk. The rest I mostly destroyed. Except for the web site, which I'm still thinking about doing away with."

"Okay, that's three questions I have to ask all at once."

"Go," she said, straightening up, the back of her head to me again. Her hand was still on to the bedrail.

"Well, why do you write them if you plan to destroy most of them?"

"Because I write them for me, not for anybody else, and I already told you why I write them, to help me organize my thoughts and memories. Once I've done it I don't need them anymore, most of the time. Besides, most of them are trash, just rambles. Some would be dangerous if someone found them." She bent at the knee very deeply, almost touching it to the floor, then lost control and spun around, almost losing her grip. She sat there on the floor in an awkward, strained position facing me, her right arm and shoulder twisted severely.

I jumped up. She shot an angry look my way and I stopped. She was shaking a little, trying to pull herself up. Then her eyes relented.

"All right, this is very uncomfortable. I suppose I could use a hand." She was sweating and panting hard.

Marveling at her courage, I helped straighten her up and get her back into bed. It was like picking up a bird. She looked a little defeated, but still determined. I sat back down.

"I need a cigarette," she complained. "When the hell are they coming to move me out of this damned ICU?"

I ignored her complaints. They were a frequent eruption, not unlike Old Faithful. "Okay, steamer trunk?"

"Those were the first journals I ever kept, diaries of my... of my life then. They contain some very precious memories for me."

"May I see them?" I asked.

She looked at me gravely. "I'll have to think about that. I know I told you that very little was off limits but... it's a tender subject. Can I think about that for a little while? They are very old matters to you but still very close to my heart."



“Okay. Web site?”

“I kept a weblog for about a year. I quit around last Christmas.”

“A what?”

“A weblog. You know, a web-based log? An online journal.”

“Thanks, smarty-pants. I know what a weblog is. I keep one myself. I’m just surprised that you’d keep one.”

“Me too. I’d been thinking for some time that the modern world was going to find me sooner or later and I wanted to test the waters. I made strenuous efforts to hide my identity, but I decided to give it a try as a way to test people’s reactions to me. The result wasn’t entirely what I expected, or entirely to my liking. But it forced me to start confronting some things in myself and helped me to make some decisions. Maybe you should read it. I’ll give you the address,” she said.

“Maybe I should at that. You surprise me sometimes, my dear.”

“Yes, I do too. But now, how should we begin my story?”

“Usually the best place is the beginning,” I said.

Then the nurses arrived to take her to her new private room, away from the intrusions of the Intensive Care Unit.

## Chapter 6

—[Begin Journal entry]—

The new room has somewhat less of the prison cell about it; television, telephone, private bathroom and a door that can be closed. The nurses have yet to become hostile—I must endeavor to avoid antagonizing them.

He arrives a few moments after the nurse and the orderly depart and I motion for him to close the door. He drags a chair over from the corner and settles in, looking relieved. He disliked the lack of privacy in the ICU nearly as much as I. His desire to begin is written clearly in his face and posture.

“So, I’ve got to ask, how many famous people have you met?”

I stifle my urge to laugh. He is serious regarding the question, but not its purpose. I smile at him.

“Fame is poison to me. I learned long ago to avoid the notorious and the powerful, particularly the powerful.”

“Really? I would think that you might have some encounters to relate after so many years.”

I sigh, allowing myself to smile a bit condescendingly, then ask, “Can you name for me ten famous goatherds from any period in history? Five? Perhaps one?” He remains silent, but I can see my point is understood. “Have I met people you might find fascinating? Certainly. I met Samuel Clemens at a reception after the conclusion of his second world tour. He was charming. We exchanged a dozen words, no more. I could say the same of perhaps five others you might possibly recognize.”

“Okay, let me try something more specific. Why don’t you tell me what your earliest memory is?”

I pause and think. It feels almost physically difficult to think so far back, and I close my eyes to concentrate. “Rape,” I finally say. “And a headache.” As I open my eyes, I see he has gone stiff. He suspects me of being deliberately provocative. But there is nothing to do for it but continue.

“I remember the smell of a wood fire, the feel of rough cloth and fur. My head throbbed with pain and somebody was touching me, an old woman. I was lying with my head in her lap and she was bathing me... She was speaking, but it was gibberish to me... no, it was less than gibberish. I did not really understand that what I was hearing was speech. I didn’t understand anything, not that I was in pain, or that there was smoke, or that the one touching me was old or a woman.

“I was *Tabula Rasa*. It is hard to remember those early days. I understood nothing. What I remember is a jumble of impressions of events. I remember the chief of the clan, a man whose name

was *Gtochke*.” I pause. This is not exactly a pleasant memory, but not for the reasons he expects. “The second thing I have any clear memory of is him taking me.”

He looks disturbed, and I smile a little. People these days are so easily upset by the underlying realities of life. “They were hunters and they had a small farm going as well. They were actually rather wealthy by the standards of the time. They tolerated me, even though I was little more than an idiot in their eyes. I was healthy, and strong, and that had value. *Gtochke* in particular enjoyed my company, even after it became clear I was barren.”

“You... can’t have children?” he asks.

“No.”

He looks at me sharply, and his mind begins to churn. I grow annoyed, but I try to keep my smile. “It’s not a source of pain for me,” I say, “and not something that makes me delusional.”

He grins. “Sorry.”

I nod. “As you say, I can’t have children of my own,” I continue, “but I have helped to raise many of them, and they have enriched my life in many ways.” I pause, remembering. “One of them in particular was crucial to helping me realize that I was something more than... Well, more than chattel.” I pause again, feeling a little sad. “It’s always so hard to leave them, though I’ve found ways to minimize the pain of separation my leaving inevitably causes them, assuming I could keep them alive long enough, anyway.”

His face grows deeply concerned and he interrupts me again. “Keep them... alive?” he says.

I stifle an urge to anger because I can see what he is thinking. He is wondering if I am some sort of monster, and I find it difficult to be patient with this. “Please do not look at me like I am a deluded psychopath. My God, I would never hurt a child!”

I stop. He looks a bit hurt. I realize that I was starting to rant, and that is not appropriate. “I apologize,” I say. “Please give me a moment to think. This is... a bit more difficult to endure than I thought.” I think some more and mutter to myself, “Damn it, I need a cigarette.” He smiles at me and stays silent, but I am still a bit annoyed. “This is not some romantic fantasy I am sharing with you. I just have to remind myself how happily unaware you Americans can be these days. It’s...” I pause again. I must get this right, or I will sound like I am merely berating him. Finally, I think of how I may explain myself better to him.

“Allow me to attempt to put this into perspective for you. I would like you to imagine it is late spring. Morning comes before the sun is above the horizon. Usually the adults arise first; however, in short order the children are up as well. Breakfast, if it exists at all, is simple—bread, fruit or nuts, dried meat if there is any about and perhaps the milk of goats or cows, if you have any. Regardless, it is a quick meal for there is work to do. Always.

“The men head out to their chores, be it in the fields with a plow or other tools, or into the wilds to hunt, or to the shore to fish. Occasionally a few women may go out to help them, but usually not. The men’s work is always some iteration of a backbreaking struggle to wrest the essentials of life from the world around them, and back home, the women and children are just as busy. Any child who can walk and carry is put into service, perhaps to gather fuel such as fallen

branches or animal dung, or to help gather fruits or nuts to eat. They might tend to livestock or to whatever garden plot that may exist, if you're fortunate enough to have either one of those. There is wood to be moved, water to be hauled, feed to be poured, and bread to be baked. There are always things requiring mending; clothes, tools, dwellings, or weapons. Perhaps some of the older men remain behind to handle the heavier work while the women do finer tasks, but all are hard at work long before most modern peoples would have stirred from their beds.

"It is springtime, the easiest, most pleasant part of your year. Most of your existence is given over to preparing for the coming winter. Food must be stored, and the work of getting that done is absolutely essential for your people's survival. Women are often ingenious, and bend all sorts of knowledge to the task of taking what is in hand today and storing against need for tomorrow, but it is all labor intensive. Drying, smoking, salting—assuming you happen to have salt—mashing, cooking, preserving; depending on what you have on hand, you may have a few options that make your task more effective, but none of them are particularly easy.

"Midday is usually a respite. Perhaps a midday meal, often the only substantial meal you will take that day, is prepared. It depends on the nature of the village or clan whether the men will return to eat, or if they took whatever food they might need with them so as to remain at their own tasks.

"Afternoon progresses and it is time to finish what tasks must be completed before nightfall. There is a constant bustle to get things organized for the evening, see to it that the animals are secured and that none of the children have wandered off, sort through whatever has been gathered, and see that it is properly stored. If the men are hunting or fishing there will be the day's catch to be properly dealt with, and whatever was gathered fresh for the day must be prepared.

"Evening is the only regular moment of respite and it is brief by comparison to the day. A meal may be taken, perhaps it is large if times are good, but more likely simply adequate. Sometimes, in bad times, it will be desperately sparse. As darkness closes in there may be rituals to whatever spirits your people believe in, perhaps storytelling or singing. The hope is always essentially the same though: *"Dear Lord, please keep the monsters at bay."* When it is time for sleep it settles quickly, the reward for a hard day's work. There may be lovemaking, probably your greatest pleasure if your man is any good at it.

"If you are 15 years old or more, you are most likely pregnant if you haven't got a child already." I pause. He grins a little, and I can see he is amused, but catches my meaning, so I go on.

"If you're lucky, you got pregnant late last summer or during the fall so the child will be born soon. Winter is when most babies die, or are stillborn. The older and stronger the child is when winter comes, the better his chances. Either way, you hope that you will live through the birth. Most of the time you will—only about one in five dies in childbirth, so your odds aren't too bad. If you're lucky, your mother or one of her sisters is still around to help you through it. Otherwise you'll have to depend on friends, which is always dodgy because they've got problems of their own, and the men are virtually useless at least until the child can walk. The best men are kind and supportive, but they still can't do much besides offer you emotional support; you're needed to feed the child and can't be running around helping them hunt or pull a plow.

"If your man breaks an arm or a leg and survives, he is likely to be crippled for life and dependent on other men to help provide for you. If he dies from a fall, or an infection he gets from a wound or is attacked by an animal, you now must look to his brothers to help provide for you, if he has any. Or you must again look to friends and hope you have good ones. You might have to be traded off to another clan if no one has the means to take you in.

“If you are strong, and lucky, you will probably birth six to nine children before you die, with only one or two stillborn, and only one or two that die before they’re old enough to mate. Again, if you are lucky, you will live long enough to see grandchildren and spend your last days helping your daughters cope. You will hope none of them dies in childbirth, although if you have two or three daughters you know there’s a good chance that will happen to at least one of them.”

I pause again. He looks at me soberly. Good.

“You must understand something. Death in these days is a constant companion. Throughout the years babies are born and babies are buried. Children can die of many things—hunger, cold, infection, the occasional animal attack or clash with others, or sometimes from mysterious ailments no one understands, for there is no modern medicine. Many do not reach puberty. Those who do fare only slightly better. Once past puberty life is often just a span of thirty years or so. Hard living breaks bodies, and a man or woman of thirty would seem far older to modern eyes. In a relative sense they are older, really, as most are facing the end of their days by 45 or so if something does not cut them down sooner. Some live far longer, of course, but this is quite rare, and those few who do reach astonishing spans such as 50, 60 or 70 are generally revered for they are so rare and so wise. Burying the dead is a regular part of life and death is not so much a specter as an accepted fate, surcease to the struggle of carrying on from day to day.

“Of course, random events can break up the rhythms of life, forcing people out of their accustomed routines. Such random events might be a war, an earthquake, a fire or an occasional celebration.

“Life was not all toil and drudgery, but the vast balance was. That made the bright spots that much the better, while placing the darkness in some kind of proper perspective.”

To my surprise, I find myself feeling a bit sentimental. I squash the urge, for it is a pointless self-indulgence. He is looking at me now, quite seriously. He finds his voice and says, “Okay. I get it. But, um, didn’t you just say that you couldn’t...?”

“No, I couldn’t. So in my case a poor harvest in the fall would mean I was probably not there come spring. When times became particularly hard it usually meant I was on my way out, either driven away or sold for whatever value I might bring.” I smile a little sourly, remembering things I have not thought about in a very long time. “In fact, when I’d find myself in a new clan, I’d usually have trouble with the women since they saw me as a stranger and a rival. Once they knew I couldn’t have children, they often didn’t trust me around their own. In their eyes I was often just competition for their men’s affections and a draw on their resources. Sometimes I’d try to help the men with their tasks, sometimes the women, but it usually took a while to be accepted and sometimes I simply wasn’t.”

I stop then, and suddenly feel a wave of exhaustion. This surprises me slightly, but I have been surprising myself quite a bit these last few days. “I do believe I have just roughly described most of the first thousand years of my life.” I laugh a bit at myself.

He watches me with narrowed eyes, thinking. I am not sure what else to say to him at the moment. Finally, he stands and stretches before saying, “Well, okay. I guess I’d like to think about this a little bit, and maybe get some lunch.”

“Certainly,” I hesitate a moment, but there is no harm in asking. “I know I told you I would not ask you to shop for me, but...”

“Cigarettes, right?” He grins at me. “What’s your preferred poison?”

“Camels, please. Filtered, I suppose. Oh, and a lighter. I have some cash here in my purse...” I say, reaching for it.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’ll be back in an hour or so, if that’s okay?”

I nod and he departs. I review what we have discussed, and now more memories begin flashing through my mind. The orderly finds me staring into space as he delivers my lunch tray. I barely remember to thank him, and as I begin eating I force my mind out of the past for now, and confront my current issues yet again.

It is the circumstance more than anything else that sets me so on edge. I could bemoan my fate, but to what purpose? It is bad enough to rail against the doctors and nurses whose only offense is to believe their years of training and experience render them competent to care for me. Self-pity would constitute an obscenity beyond description.

After finishing the ridiculous hospital lunch, I reach over and pry open the pink case Mitch has had refilled for me. I try not to let the hospital staff see me eat from it, although they know about it. After eating my fill I feel much better and then look around the room. I hate being immobilized like this. I spot the wheelchair and manage to hook it with my foot to bring it closer.

It is simple enough to master once I understand I can lock the wheels so they roll together and I make my way out to the lounge. There is a four-footed metal cane sitting in the hallway outside, and I snatch it. When I reach the lounge I find that using it for balance I can do a fair job of hopping across the room. I stare out the window, contemplating, and I must confess to a certain grim amusement at the expressions I elicit when some unsuspecting nurse or doctor comes into the lounge and encounters me.

Dr. Omar wishes he had kept me in the ICU despite the near mutiny of the nurses, an amusing confluence of interests as they had been more eager to see me gone than had I to be gone. But even here, in this more relaxed ward, they insist on treating me as if I might at any moment collapse like the proverbial house of cards.

For so long I dreaded the revelation of my nature, that I might find myself the victim of some nefarious plot to deprive me of freedom and make of me a laboratory specimen. Fate being a fickle and perverse bitch I should have understood that I would face something far more insidious: simple disbelief. Never mind a suite full of trauma surgeons had seen my spleen and large sections of my bowel removed, my pelvis fractured, ribs broken, lung punctured, skull fractured and all the other myriad insults to the human form that are the aftermath of such events; nay, let that be set aside for there must have been a *mistake*. How else to explain that I am up and about a mere six days after awakening? It is an affected response, of course, but no less irritating for that.

The ends of my severed limbs ache. I find the stump of my leg itches more each day, and I scratch at it a bit. Events are unfolding that I cannot long hope to conceal. For three days now I have been feasting, the diet of combat rations giving way to an array of cheeses, sweet meats and wine; and mineral supplements, an endless river of them. Mitch was more helpful in that regard, and the hospital staff more pliant, once I managed not to die as a result of the first box of rations. I feel delightful if one is willing to forgive the missing limbs or my uncomfortable thinness. But I know what is coming and I wish to be quit of this place before it becomes too apparent. I would avoid all the poking and prodding and expressions of incredulity. Let them chew on what they have.

A friendly laugh barks out behind me. “You really are insane, aren’t you?”

I turn to find him grinning at me and at the scandalized young woman who has been so desperate not to stare at me for the past ten minutes.

I give him my best smile. “No, just a sideshow freak: Stumpette, The One Legged Ballerina.” I turn on my one foot for him and he laughs.

“Man, you’re something.” He pulls my chair from where I left it against the wall and wheels it over, gesturing for me to sit.

“Did you manage to pick up...?” but I know he has for I can smell it.

“Sure thing. Want to take a stroll outside?”

“Oh, absolutely!”

He wheels me by the nurses’ station and they merely nod at us as we pass. I snatch a blanket off a cart just before we reach the elevator and after a pair of minutes we are outside in the cool sunshine of midday. He wheels me over to one of the low tables set on the patio and digs inside his jacket, producing a new pack of Camels, which he graciously unwraps for me. I fish out a cigarette and take the proffered lighter, drawing hot smoke deep into my lungs, the flavor of it coursing through me as I exhale slowly through my mouth and nose.

Life is good once more.

“Nasty habit,” he says.

“Quite.” I fix my eyes upon his and smile. He is watching the cigarette smoke curling about me with a mixture of longing and dread—a reformed smoker. Fortunately the light breeze spares him. “I take it you have questions?”

“Yeah, but first...” he looks about a little uncomfortably, as we are not alone. I sink into the chair, snuggling a bit from the cold, though the hospital has a nice windbreak with heat lamps set up for those who insist on smoking. I am intent upon enjoying my first real pleasure since this entire farce began and I do not much care at the moment what others might think.

Looking a bit uncomfortable, he continues. “I need you to know that I like to think I’m doing the job you hired me to do, but I don’t take joy in dredging up uncomfortable issues for you. I need you to let me know any time you think we need to stop.”

“When I told you I wouldn’t lie to you or hide things, it was for my benefit not yours. There is little in my deep past that causes me undue pain, but much of it involves events I have not thought about for a very long time. If I occasionally become distraught, please simply indulge me and know that the responsibility is not yours. You are not an intruder here.”

“Okay, I’ve been thinking about what you told me. I get the basic idea, but most people would have a hard time dismissing ten centuries so quickly.”

“I wouldn’t. But I suppose you’re right.”

“So what we should try to do is talk about anything important that happened to you.”

I smile. “I’m not sure that’s a question. I also confess that I am not sure what to tell you exactly. I suppose that’s one reason I hired you.”

He chuckles again. “All right then, I’d like to learn more about the first people you were with. You really had no memory before these hunters and farmers and the chief you spoke of? You couldn’t even speak?”

“I remember nothing before it. I learned to speak, but slowly, and I was never certain I was being told the truth about where I came from. Supposedly I was captured in a raid on a band of wanderers and perhaps struck on the head. It made sense then, but now . . . how can I know? In any case I was not the creature you see before you.” I pause, remembering. “I am a very different person now.”

He waits, watching me.

“It’s hard to remember the first few years at all,” I continue after taking a few more drags on my cigarette. This is much nicer with nicotine to soothe the jagged edges. “There were castes within the clan. There was the chief and his woman, and their children at the top, and their mates joined those. There was no hard and fast rule about the woman joining the man’s clan. It was simply worked out informally when the match was made. So there were men in the clan who were not blood relatives of the chief and they formed somewhat of a second tier of power beneath the core family.

“Under that were the . . . the . . .” I grasp for the word, and finally remember it. “*Orjan*. That was the term we used. They called us *orjan*, meaning, well . . .” I think about it. “Captives who were outside the clan but among them. We were slaves, more or less, but not in the formal sense that you might think of it. But we had no mates, no family connections and were kept and protected because we had value of some sort.”

I stab out my cigarette and fish out another as he looks on. I light it and spend a moment or two simply enjoying it before I continue.

“At the bottom of them, there was me, the stupid, strange one.”

He frowns a bit and says, “But you said earlier that the chief . . .”

“He liked me, yes. That didn’t count for much though, and I’m certain that by rights they should have simply turned me out. But I was very healthy. I had all my teeth—quite unusual. I doubt I could ever tolerate visiting a dentist. The act of having my teeth examined has so many negative connotations . . . Anyhow, they had goats and dogs and I was allowed to sleep with them. In the winter they tolerated me in the lodge house, most of the time. It was easier if there was an unattached man available, but even then they could be quite dismissive of me.”

“So the chief, he enjoyed . . . he took advantage of your presence, but he wouldn’t let you stay with the family?”

“It wasn’t so much him, as the women. I was strange, wrong in the head. And I couldn’t have babies of my own. They didn’t like me near their men and they didn’t trust me near their children. They would argue with Gtochk about me sometimes, but he found me amusing, and occasionally



enjoyable, and was stubborn about it.”

I sigh a bit. Talking of this is more difficult than I had imagined. It is not the memories themselves, for they have no power to harm me. It is the simple act of speaking them aloud to this man that unnerves me and reminds me of how very weak I was then.

“So you said there were celebrations occasionally?” he asks, prodding me onward.

“Oh yes, those could be very good times. You’d spent most of your life looking at the same people, the same places, and a gathering meant seeing new people. Maybe some matches were made and there were new faces, or maybe somebody you despise *leaves*, which is almost better. But there could be problems, too.” I look at him, waiting for him to ask, but he is just watching me. He is becoming good at that. Still, my patience far outstrips his.

Finally he shifts and asks, “So, how long were you with these folks?”

“I’m not sure. The chief was dark haired when I first showed up and rather gray when I left. Ten years? Perhaps fifteen.”

“What made you decide to leave?”

I laugh. “I didn’t decide to leave. They got rid of me.”

“Why?”

I light another cigarette, taking my time about it. I know how this looks to him, as if I am stalling, but perhaps I am for I find myself feeling a little unsettled. Although, compared to so much else, this seems rather trivial, I do not like this memory. Still, I made a promise.

“We were at a gathering, actually. My clan and two others. It was late in the spring. There were a lot of people there. There was this girl, perhaps seventeen, and she had a baby with her, maybe two months old. I noticed her because she was complaining about carrying him around and she kept putting him down. She would leave him under a tree in the shade, or by a tent, something like that. Never for long, but she was doing that all day. When we were getting ready to leave for home, I was carrying two baskets loaded with cloth the women had traded for. I went to fetch them, and there he was, all bundled up and sound asleep on top of one of my baskets.

“I didn’t even think about it. I just drew the cover over the basket, picked it up, and we were off down the road. I couldn’t believe it was that simple. I wanted to be like the other women... to be treated like the other women. I was so happy... I just had no idea what I had done.

“Maybe an hour or two down the road he started crying. I tried to quiet him, but everybody noticed. The women went berserk, beating me with their fists, kicking me, demanding to know where I’d gotten him. The men were quieter, but a lot more worried, and Gtochk’s face was ashen. He would not look at me. This kind of thing could lead to a war between the clans.

“The oldest son and his mate took me and the baby and we headed back to the meeting ground. We ran into five men and the girl from the other clan not far down the trail. They’d been chasing us, and they were in a pretty ugly mood. The son explained what had happened and told them they could have me if they wanted, but they weren’t interested. They just took the baby and went home.”

He looks at me with a bit of consternation. "I guess you got off pretty light, huh?"

"Perhaps," I sigh, and I take out another cigarette, lighting it from the stub of the one before. "We caught up to our clan where they'd set up camp for the night. I was stripped and tied to a tree, and the son beat me with a leather strap until I was too exhausted to scream anymore."

His eyes widen, and I smile at him gently. "It was a long time ago," I say, "and I've been through worse. Don't feel troubled. But anyway, they left me tied there for the night. The next morning they cut me loose and let me get dressed, but they wouldn't let me eat or go near anyone. That night, they bound me again, though I was spared another beating."

"I got lucky. A family from one of the cattle herd clans happened by eventually, and one of the youngest sons took a liking to me at first sight. They traded me for a knife and a cured hide, which I suppose was a fairly high price. Of course they never mentioned I was barren, so I started off there on a pretty sour note once the truth came out."

He watches me silently for a long time, waiting to see if I am truly finished. I emphasize the point by putting out my cigarette and not lighting another.

"So in all the time you were there, there was never a clue as to where you'd really come from? Just that you thought they took you in a raid."

"Yes, I never saw my old clan again and the herders really didn't care. For that matter I didn't care until much, much later. No one had any reason to care. I couldn't have children and as such was less than nothing."

He looks uncomfortable. "I don't understand why that is so important. I guess it was a very sexist time, huh? Women weren't valued unless...?" his voice trailed off.

"I'm not sure I'd put it that way, no. Life is rarely so simple, and it's not as if men had easier lives in general. What you need to understand, I suppose, is that being unable to have a child simply put me in an awkward position. In small clans and tribes, even if a man takes you as his woman he will usually be done with you when he realizes you won't be giving him children. I had no siblings and no parents, so no mate meant no connection to any family. No connection to family meant I was expendable. So as a rule, for a very long time, I was simply sport and labor. Still, it was a life."

"A very hard life."

"For everyone. I'm cold. Let's go back inside."

—[End Journal entry]—

## Chapter 7

The next morning back at the hotel I found myself thumbing through her journal entries. Like lots of personal journals, they were scattershot and rambling, although sometimes compelling.

—*[Begin Journal entry]*—

Why would I allow myself to love? For me love is both a selfish indulgence and an invitation to despair. It is destructive to the object of my affections, for if they return my love they make themselves a part of a relationship that can only leave them childless and in their grave. One could reasonably argue that for me to allow anyone to love me borders upon naked criminality.

In very condensed form those are the arguments I use when I find myself tempted to fall into that delusional state. They carry no small weight with me, both morally and intellectually, and I wield them as a club to destroy any hope I might foolishly allow myself to hold when it comes to the subject of love.

But love is an insidious creature, determined to have her way, undaunted by the most vitriolic attacks and desperate defenses. Love is almost as much my nemesis as Time, seeking to draw me into a state of madness from which I sometimes fear I may never escape, taunting me with the promise of happiness, then fetching me up upon my personal Scylla and Caribides of reality and despair.

Love and Horror: opposing faces of the same bitter coin.

So, why? Weakness, selfishness, narcissism, jealousy, all those apply.

Weakness and selfishness are self-explanatory. Narcissism too plays its part, as my vanity would demand that somebody could love me. Those are weak forces in comparison to the lessons of my life, though I confess they still have some power to seduce me.

But there is also another force: Jealousy. It is a monster that gnaws at me. It is difficult beyond description to live amongst you, to interact with you, to become part of your lives even in the simple, mostly tangential ways I do. I see your friendships, your loves, your crises and your tragedies... and know that there is no way I can ever truly be a part of them. To always stand apart, knowing that all of what you call your lives will flow past me and vanish into the mists of what was but is no more... I will always remember, at least that small slice that I was permitted to share. But I shall be alone, insulated from your fate, an alien in every meaning of that word.

And in those times when my heart is cold and my thoughts are dark and lonely, I will hate you for that.

—*[End Journal entry]*—

She was a strange one. that was for sure.

I reviewed the recordings of our conversations, jotting down notes from memory, recalling how she looked and what I'd seen in her as she laid out her tale. Two things stuck out for me. First, she believed all this, which was disturbing in and of itself. Second, it lacked any hint of self-aggrandizement. There just wasn't anything in there that could be called heroic or inspiring. She also could have been piteous, but the way she described it, even when she got a little emotional, was so matter-of-fact that pity just seemed out of place. It also seemed consistent with the period she claimed to have lived in, though I was no expert there. I thought of calling a friend of mine who actually was an expert, but what exactly could I ask him? I decided to just outline it and save the deeper explanations for later.

I had an appointment in a couple of hours with the psychiatrist, Dr. French, and the head social worker, Ms Sorenson, who had been visiting with her since she regained consciousness. Reviewing their reports in my hotel room before the meeting just made the puzzle seem more bizarre. Both of them maintained that Miss Baker was in deep denial about her condition, but the only evidence they had of this was her attitude. She nodded, smiled and said she understood what had happened. She understood there was a tumor in her brain, that it was quite serious, and on, and on, only to finish by firmly, but oh-so-politely, declining to be visited by the oncologist or a physical therapist, or any other specialist.

To the hospital staff this looked like a classic case of denial. To me it all looked like a dangerous delusion, but that was because I knew things about her they didn't. That was definitely a problem. We'd had a rough start but I liked her, and she was doing things that were pretty self-destructive, assuming she didn't know what she was doing.

The meeting with the psych people was pretty strained and unproductive. They really had nothing to tell me. Instead they wanted me to talk about her, and that was something I didn't want to do. She hadn't ordered me to keep my mouth shut when talking to her doctors, but I saw that as a given. I probed them on her mental state. Did they think she was delusional?

"She doesn't exhibit any of the classic symptoms," Dr. French replied. "Her sense of time and location are solid, she draws reasonable conclusions and she's certainly not paranoid, at least not beyond her obsession with privacy."

"And that's becoming a major problem," the social worker offered. "I'm not even allowed to share my own reports with Janelle here," nodding to Dr. French, "without going through her lawyers. Frankly, she and I haven't been able to confer at all until you asked to see us both. HIPAA rules forbid it if she won't let us."

"Hang on," Dr. French interrupted, but Ms. Sorenson threw her a sharp look and continued on.

"It's like that with everything. All of her records are under lock and key now. Evaluations, x-rays, blood work—I can't even get at my own reports from two days ago! She's got an army of lawyers here and all they seem to do is prevent anyone from helping her, except to feed her and let Dr. Omar and the interns check up on her now and then."

What could I say? No matter how I chose to approach it, that was exactly what she was doing.

Later that morning, I found I'd made a decision without realizing that I'd had a question in front of me. I walked into her room after a courtesy tap on the door and found her sitting up talking on her cell phone with her breakfast tray still in front of her. She looked up at me and waved her left stump towards the chair.

“I just want you to tell him that I’m not angry. I never was. I understand these things. I just don’t want to bother him if he doesn’t want to talk to me anymore, but I’m open to it if he is. Yes, that’s all you need to say... Mm-hmm... Good... Yes, I understand that it’s a little awkward, and I do appreciate that... Good-bye. Oh, and Mitch? Thank you.” She folded up her phone then looked at me and smiled, “You’re a bit late this morning.”

I sat down and launched right into it. “I’ve got a lot on my mind. I met with your psychiatrist and your social worker.”

“Ah, that must have been interesting.” She looked down at her breakfast tray and seemed sad that it was empty. She reached over to her pink case on the stand next to her bed and pulled out a huge chunk of cheese. One thing about her, she sure could eat.

“More like uncomfortable,” I said. “They didn’t really have anything to tell me, but they had lots of questions for me. It seemed best to avoid answering them, for now.”

She sighed and said, “I’d prefer that you didn’t, but I suppose I could let you tell them everything you know. But what good would it do them, or you, for that matter? They would simply go from seeing me as being in denial to being delusional. What would that accomplish?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It might convince you to start trying to save your own life.” I gathered my thoughts. “Listen, Princess, I like you. You’re weird, but I like you.” She flashed me that smile of hers, but I ignored it and went on. “I’m taking this job because the money’s good and because you’re very interesting...” I trailed off.

Bemused, she kept smiling at me. “But?”

“But I don’t believe you.”

“Of course you don’t. How could you?” Her smile broadened, her green eyes wide open and earnest. I had to look away.

“It’s more than that. It’s not about believing you or not believing you. I *do* believe *them*. I’ve seen the MRI’s. I know what’s in your head, and I think you’re just refusing to deal with it.” I gathered my thoughts, trying to be kind. “I think I might be a part of your refusing to deal with it. I’m not sure I can live with that.”

She was silent then, and I felt relieved. At least I’d said it. I went on. “See, this has been fun. I like watching someone tweak the nose of the establishment, and you’re quite the little wrecking ball when you’re trying to get your way. But when this is all over I need to be able to look at the results and not feel like I did something wrong. Everything’s not about money with me.”

“Well,” she said, “I expected this, but not so soon.” She held up her hand as I started to interrupt. “I did not enter this hospital of my own free will. I was unconscious and couldn’t tell them anything about myself or make any decisions, so they had to do what they felt was best for me. I don’t resent that, but it is problematic. They found a growth in my brain. Everyone assumes this is something I was unaware of. Of course, I’ve never given them any reason to assume otherwise. It’s the price of my need for privacy that they are left with doubts and concerns that I will not set to rest. I have my own plans and my own priorities, and regardless of how it may appear to you, or to my doctors, I assure you that I know quite well what is in my own best interests.”

I thought about that for a minute. “So you’re saying you’ve known about this all along?”

She started to speak, then stopped. She looked at me contemplatively, and shrugged a bit. “No, you’re right, I’ve said no such thing. But I have said that I have not taken the easy path and that I know what I am doing.” She paused for a moment, contemplating me some more, then took a breath. “You have to accept that I am ultimately responsible for what happens to me. You cannot act for me. Honestly, it’s not your place.”

Her voice was soft, gentle as she said this, but it was no less a command for that. I didn’t resent it, but I didn’t really like it, either.

“Tell me something. Why are you still here? In the hospital, I mean. You’ve got the money to hire your own nurses, set yourself up somewhere, and you’re obviously not happy. So why stay here?”

She sighed and looked toward the window. “That is a very good question. I’ve been wondering myself if there was any point to staying any longer. Mostly I am here because it gives me a good excuse to have my lawyers here and makes it simpler to coordinate with them. Also, because leaving too soon would draw more attention than staying too long. I am also not certain I’m ready to go home and burden my family with this or attract too much attention there. It’s rather frustrating, really, because I am not entirely sure at any given moment what the best course of action would be.” She paused and looked flustered. “I find that more than a little disconcerting, really.”

“You have a family?”

“Well, of sorts. I have begun thinking of them that way, anyway. But not blood relations, no, just people I care for and who care for me.”

“So what are your lawyers doing here?” I asked.

“Damage control.” She reached forward to rub the stump of her left leg. “Their job is to run interference with the hospital staff and otherwise track everything down, lock everything up, and have as much of it as possible destroyed.”

I frowned. “That’s an unusual task.”

“An impossible one, really,” she sighed. “Too many specialists were called in on my blood alone. Other things have been noticed as well and questions are being asked. I’m really just waiting on one or two things and then I’ll quietly take my leave. Of course I’ll need to find a place to go until I’m fully healed.”

She scratched at her left leg again and I noticed that the stump looked unusual. It was wrapped in a sort of open-ended sock of stretch fabric tied off neatly at the end. I’d seen it clearly the other day, but now it was deformed. It had developed a bulge. I looked up at her and she grinned sheepishly, like she had something to apologize for. Then she calmly drew the wrapper off her leg.

It was surprisingly un-grotesque, with smooth shining skin bearing only hints of scars where it had been sutured together over the end of her leg. It had been rounded and a bit irregular when I first saw it, but now there was a clear protrusion extending from the center by some four inches.

“The long bones grow out, then the muscle regenerates. It’s going to be interesting to see how the knee is rebuilt, and I imagine that will feel somewhat funny. I think the lower leg will be some trouble for me until it firms up. I lost my feet once. It was fascinating. May I?”

I stared at her a moment until I realized she was holding the sock, then I nodded and sank back into my seat as she covered it and pulled her blankets over it. We sat quietly for a few minutes, me regarding her, her regarding me.

“It’s growing back,” I said. It was a statement, not a question. She nodded, her eyes fixed on my face. I could *feel* her watching me. “Your doctors haven’t noticed?”

“One of the interns noticed something yesterday, but I just said it was swelling. Since then I’ve not allowed myself to be examined. I really do think I’ll need to be leaving here very soon.” She waited a moment, just watching me and looking a little embarrassed. “I’ve no control over this. The only way I could stop it would be to stop eating.”

“Heh. I’ve seen you when you’re hungry...” But humor wasn’t what I was feeling just then. I looked at her left arm. She glanced at it too.

“Nothing there just yet, but I can feel it. I think the leg will take first priority, which makes sense, don’t you agree?”

“Sure...” I tried to formulate another question, but I couldn’t think what to ask. I finally stood and said, “I think I need to take a walk. Do a little research.”

“Certainly, and please do take your time. But promise me something? Don’t make any decisions until you speak to me again?” There was just a hint of pleading in her voice.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied. But her gaze remained fixed on me until I said, “Yes, I promise.”

I wanted to go straight to her doctor but I knew that would be a bad idea, not to mention a breach of trust. With the map of the area I’d gotten from the hotel concierge I set out for the library, choosing to walk because I needed the time to put things in order in my head. When I got there I headed straight to the public computers to make some queries before grabbing a librarian in the reference section to help me find what I was looking for.

After hours of looking I couldn’t find anything that could conceivably explain what I had just seen. Weird things happened when people lost limbs. You might see a splintered bone fragment or two work their way out. Odd growths and scars and swelling weren’t uncommon, but people don’t just grow back thick chunks of bone.

I thought about making some copies of some of the material but decided not to bother. I knew what I had seen. I hadn’t eaten, so I stopped at a bar and grill and allowed myself a couple beers with my burger as I thought about it. There was no way I could walk away from this story now, but I increasingly found myself wondering just how far down the rabbit hole I’d fallen with this woman.

I returned to the hospital after lunch, but as I walked back into her room she was sitting sideways on her bed facing a tall man with thinned-grey hair and glasses. He was seated and holding her hand in both of his. I had startled them and they both looked up at me with tears in their eyes.

Embarrassed that I had barged in without knocking, I quickly excused myself and went out into the hallway, trying my best to look busy.

Fortunately, after a few minutes he came out and approached me. He seemed a little awkward but offered me his hand. “Dennis Novak,” he said, by way of introduction. We exchanged a few pleasantries and I noticed him carefully appraising me. I wondered if this is one of her relatives, one of those people she said didn’t exist. Had someone finally come to bring us back to reality?

“So,” he began. “Writing a book with her, are you?” His voice sounded wary, and concerned.

“Yes, it’s quite something. The stories she has to tell are... remarkable.”

“I imagine. But I hope you’re aware of what you’re doing here, young man.” He looked stern and I began to worry. Was this the father of a deluded girl, here to tell me off?

“Miss Baker has quite a mind,” I said a little defensively. “I’m not a...”

He interrupted me. “You realize that what you’re doing here is dangerous, don’t you? It’s very difficult for her. I’ve never seen her so uptight.”

“Look, the doctors say she’s a little unbalanced but not dangerous, and she is an adult,” I said, feeling more defensive by the minute. “We can stop this any time if it gets out of hand. Are you a relative of hers, or...?”

He frowned at me and said, impatiently, “No, I’m not a relative. I’m just her friend. Maybe the only one she’s got now, and that’s something I take very seriously young man.” He started to sound a little angry and stepped toward me a bit.

I stepped back and raised my hand. “Wait, wait, okay, let’s calm down a little. Maybe we need to start over.”

“Listen,” I said, a little forcefully, “I’m serious. I do respect her. She’s really a very remarkable person. I am a writer, but I’m working for her, not the other way around. In fact I almost quit, thinking I might be exploiting her situation, and if you think I am, maybe I will. I wouldn’t take the job if I thought I was going to hurt her. I’m not that kind of person. Believe me, I’d quit first.” I looked him right in the eye. “I really would,” I said.

He looked at me for a moment, and then relaxed. “Sorry son,” he said. “I had a loss recently and it’s making me emotional. You’re right, she is an adult. God knows you’d have to call her that.” He chuckled wryly. “She probably knows what the hell she’s doing, and arguing her out of anything is like arguing with a brick wall, that’s for damned sure.” He contemplated me for a moment, then said, “Look, all I want is for you to be aware of what you’re doing. This whole thing is a huge strain on her and, honest to God, I’ve never seen her so scared. And that is the most fearless woman alive.”

That surprised me. I really wasn’t sure what to say.

“Please,” he said, “I just want you to be careful and show some respect for what she’s going through, okay? She may seem invulnerable, but she’s not. She’s really, really not.”

“I know that,” I said.



“Good.” He said. “Just remember that she’s easier to hurt than you might think. Especially in here.” He pointed to his chest. “But also, God knows what the world could do to her. So, show her some respect, okay?”

I nodded, a little numb.

“I have to go say my goodbyes to her for now,” he said, “But here’s my card. I’m semi-retired but still keep my hand in a little at the university. You can leave me a message there.” I looked at his card. Professor Emeritus, Department of History, Colorado State University, a phone number and office hours. “If I can help you, or help her somehow, I want you to let me know.”

I agreed and we walked together back into her room. He leaned over her bed and they embraced. She held him fiercely, her eyes closed. She looked ready to break his back she was squeezing so hard. They stayed like that for a long time. Then they relaxed and he straightened up.

“Thank you so much for the pictures, Dennis,” she said, her eyes brimming. “I’ll treasure them always.”

“Jackie would have wanted you to have them,” he said. “So would Dad. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Yes Dennis, soon. And please, please think about my offer. You have no idea how much it would mean to me.”

“It’s very tempting and I’ll give it a lot of thought. Okay?”

She nodded. He turned, looked at me, gripped my hand and said, “You call me any time, son.” Then he left.

She watched his back as he left, wiping her face. Talking mostly to herself she said, “He’ll be too old to take care of himself soon. I hope he’ll come.” I frowned a bit. The guy wasn’t that old.

“Is this not a good time?” I asked.

“No, I’m fine,” she said. She took a deep breath, smiled and continued, “Wasn’t that sweet of him to offer to talk to you? I didn’t know he’d do that. He’s a remarkable man. You should feel free to do that and ask him anything you like about me. I confess that I wonder a bit what he’d have to say. Would you like to see the photo album he gave me?”

My head was spinning a bit as I sat down. “Sure,” I said. As she handed it to me I asked, “So where do you know this guy from?”

She gave a happy, almost cheerful laugh. I opened the photo album. It was one of those little one-photo-per-page albums, each photo encased in plastic wrap.

“Well when I walked into his classroom back in 1967, I had no idea he would be teaching there. His name wasn’t even on the schedule, and I don’t know if I would have recognized it, Novak being such a common name. But that’s when our friendship really started. Before that I’d known him for a couple of years as a boy when I was dating his father. I’d met his father during the war and then ran into him again a few years later after the divorce.”

As she spoke, I looked through the pages, one at a time. On the first page was a label, "San Diego, 1943." It was an amusement park photo in faded black and white. In it, a huge, broad-shouldered sailor stood there grinning like the cat that ate the canary. He was dressed in his bell-bottoms, neckerchief and sailor's cap. His right knee was bent out at a sharp angle, and on his other side he had his huge arm around his honey.

Faded as the picture was, she was still unmistakable. Her hair was shoulder-length and curled. She wore a polka-dot halter dress, a hat with an upturned brim, dark sensible pumps and that smoky, enigmatic half-smile of hers. There was no doubt it was her. She didn't look a day over 25. My mouth went dry.

As I looked, she continued to speak, but I didn't hear her. Instead I looked at the next photo. "San Francisco, 1955" said the little label. There was the sailor, with the same smug grin on his face. Only this time, he was in a suit. He'd gained at least 30 pounds and his hairline had noticeably receded. He was standing in front of what looked like a brand new Edsel. He had one arm around the shoulders of a young, somewhat unhappy-looking teenaged boy, 13 or 14 maybe, sporting a crew cut and black horn-rimmed glasses. Standing there beneath his other arm it was her. Her hair was pulled back in a bun. She was wearing a floral print dress with a flared skirt, a broad v-neck collar, a huge waist-enhancing belt and that same smoky Mona Lisa smile. There was a streak of grey in her hair, but she otherwise didn't look a day over 25.

On the next page was the same serious-looking boy, a bit older, with that same crew cut and those same horn-rimmed glasses. He was in an oversized suit, surrounded by other somber-looking people in a church. "Dad's funeral. 1957. Thanks for coming," it said. She wasn't in the photo.

Then there was the boy again, a little older, still wearing the same crew cut and horn rims. He was wearing a cap and gown. "UCLA, 1964," said the little penciled-in label.

On the next page there he was in a faded color photo, standing in front of a VW Microbus. His hair was medium-length, with a side part. He sported a t-shirt and a pair of wire-framed glasses. On his right arm was a severe young woman with horn-rimmed glasses, a sweater and a plaid skirt, on his left, a hippie girl.

Her hair was curled again but hung down nearly to her waist. She was wearing low-cut hip-hugger jeans with a huge belt buckle, a billowy peasant blouse and hand-tied leather-and-bead jewelry on her wrists and neck. She had that same bemused smile on her face, although this time she was laughing a little. Her right hand gave a peace sign. "UC-Berkeley's coolest adjunct professor and his groovy chicks, 1967," said the little label. She didn't look a day over 25.

On the next page there was another graduation photo, this time of the severe woman in a particularly fancy cap and gown: "Jackie, a year ahead of me, as usual," said the label.

Then a wedding ceremony: The severe woman was in a bridal gown, looking reserved but giddily happy. He was in a corny pastel-colored tuxedo. On the bride's side, third among the bridesmaids, there she was again in a burgundy dress and shoes. She was standing back a bit and looking just a little wistful behind her smile. The little label said, "1971. Jackie always said you should have been the Maid of Honor!" She looked small and withdrawn not a day over 25.

She wasn't in the next several pages. The next was of him, in the same graduation getup: "Piled High and Deep! Finally finished it. 1972" it said. Then there were pictures of the two of them hugging a baby in a hospital, grinning like crazy. More photos, random pictures of kids and some

unidentified people, with various dates. "Missed you here," one said. "Here too!" another said.

There was a picture of a group of somber-looking people underneath a light blue banner. "Mondale/Ferraro '84!" it proclaimed. Almost everyone in the photo looked wistful; one girl was obviously trying not to cry, while everyone else was looking either somber or halfheartedly cheerful and defiant. There he sat, on the floor in the lower left, his hair obviously thinned considerably. The severe-looking wife next to him was looking stormy. Next to the wife, clutching her hand, there she was: hair in a crisped, poofy mullet, wearing a white leather jacket with fringes, blue jeans, white cowboy boots and that smoky half-smile. Her other hand was in her jacket pocket. "1984. You were the best part of a horrible year," the little label said. She didn't look a day over 25.

More pictures of children graduating, birthday parties. "Missed you here," one or two more were labeled. "I'm a grandpa! I'm so scared!" said another one, in which the thinning-haired, salt-and-pepper haired boy stood next to a grinning young man and a girl, hugging an infant. Then there were still more family photos, labeled with years and small random comments.

In the last photo there stood the boy in front of a beautiful house. His hair was solid gray, thinned into a bit of a horseshoe. His severe-looking grey-haired wife stood next to him. Both were smiling and waving. "2004. Jackie and I missed you a lot. We love you," it said.

He was clearly the man I'd met just a few minutes ago, whose business card I'd just stuck in my pocket.

I looked up. She'd stopped talking some time ago. She was watching me, her face a little sad. There was a tiny glint of fear in her eye.

She didn't look a day over 25.

I lurched to my feet. "I have to go," I said.

She looked afraid and said, "No, wait, please, that is, I mean, I need to talk to you about this." I ignored her and walked out. I heard her call my name as I left, but I kept going.

I got in my car, drove back to the hotel and walked straight into the bar. It seemed like the most reasonable thing to do.

## Chapter 8

—[Begin Journal entry]—

*10 November 2004*

Jacqueline Novak is dying.

On the flight from Harrisburg I find my mind running over my telephone conversations with Jacqueline's husband, Dennis, again and again. He is distraught almost beyond words, and when he realizes all his family are scattered literally to the four corners of the Earth he calls the only other number he can think of. Even in his fear and grief he is a wise and logical man. As I am carried towards Denver my people are moving Heaven and Earth to gather his family, people he needs far more than me. I am determined to be an adequate substitute until they arrive.

Oh, Jacqueline. I know this is inevitable, but why so soon? It is not the first time, but it tears at me nonetheless. I have buried too many of the people I love.

*10-November-2004 (later)*

Dennis sees me and leaps to his feet, crossing the distance from the lounge to the door in just a few long strides. He sweeps his long arms about my shoulders. He has been holding himself together by sheer force of will these past twelve hours, and now he can contain it no longer.

I hold him tightly for a long, long time as he weeps. Finally it all comes out, in fits and starts—the morning headache, her dizziness and the collapse at the doctor's office, followed by a heart attack two hours later.

“It's not supposed to be like this,” he says. “She was always worried about *me* leaving *her* behind. Honestly, I always thought it would be that way...”

Eventually he takes me to see her. I despise hospitals. I understand the need for the routines and regulations, but even the best facilities become terribly desensitized to the crises they are forced to deal with daily. The duty nurse attempts to interfere with us, insisting that only family should enter. With all the ice I can muster, I suggest that she call security, and we brush past her. I am being unfair, but at this time, in this place, I simply cannot make myself care.

She is a crumpled shell, merely a shadow of the vibrant woman I know. Her gray hair is carefully laid out about her, reminiscent of the chestnut mane she once sported, still silky despite the ravages of age. Her face is sunken and colorless, but her eyes are still open, so very blue and bright, and they fix on me with recognition. They plead.

“She can hear you,” Dennis says, “but she can't speak very well.”

I sit and lay my hand upon her left cheek, feeling the lax paralysis that tells of the ruin wrought by the stroke. Then I slide my hand to her right and I can feel her face respond even before I see it. She makes a sound, a burbling moan deep in her throat. I see her frustration.

“I hear you, Jackie,” I whisper. I feel her respond, see the shifting in her face.

“Dennis, give me some time with her. Why don’t you go get something to eat? I’ll sit with her. I’ll make sure they call you if anything changes. And take this,” I hand him my cell phone, “If it rings, just answer it and tell them who you are—they are expecting that it might be you.”

He protests only slightly, and then bends over his wife to lay his lips upon hers. He whispers to her, words of love and care and hope, straightening finally before slowly walking out.

It is a game of hit and miss, but I am very good at it, and she is determined to play. She is still my friend, still the astoundingly critical creature that so set her apart from her peers. Between us we work out the language of gesture and tension and half-articulate sounds until between us it is almost as a spoken conversation.

*I know I’m dying. I can feel it. I’m not afraid.*

“I know. I’m here for Dennis. I’ll take care of things until the children arrive.”

*So sad... to leave him like this. Not fair.*

“No, it’s not fair. It’s never fair to anyone. I’m going to miss you so very much.”

*It’s good... good to know you’ll remember me...*

Tears run their course down my face as we share memories, condolences and sorrows. This is too familiar by far. I cannot stop thinking of my Jeremy, so long ago yet so terribly close. She sees my tears and she understands.

*Want to wait... see the children... so tired...*

“It’s alright. They’ll understand. You can let go if you have to...”

*Dennis...*

“I’ll fetch him.”

I step out of the room into the lounge and call my cell phone from the courtesy phone. Dennis answers and I tell him Jacqueline wants to see him. He arrives within moments and hands me my phone before going in. The two of them do not need me to translate—they have thirty-five years of shared lives to bind them. I sit in the lounge, waiting until I feel I can go in again.

My phone beeps quietly. The number is not displayed. “This is Genevieve,” I answer, “May I ask who is calling?” It is their youngest son, calling from Germany. My people found him.

“Yes, you have the right number. You don’t know me, but I’m a friend of your parents. Has anyone told you what’s happened?”

“Only that my mother is in the hospital.”

There is nothing for it but to be blunt. “I’m sorry to tell you that she’s had a stroke, followed by a heart attack. It really doesn’t look promising at all. Please, let me get your father.”

This is how it goes for the next several hours. My phone rings and it is some member of the family. They were contacted by one of my lawyers and told to get in touch. Somebody is being quite resourceful at my law firm—I intend to find out who it is and see that he is commended. Their son John is on a private jet returning from Belize where he had been working on some government contract. Patricia is stuck in Sydney and cannot catch a flight for another two hours. She is most of a day away even after I arrange to have her met in Los Angeles and flown here directly.

*11-November-2004*

Dawn breaks as the children begin to arrive.

She is fading now, almost a full day after my arrival. I watch as the gathered children and their spouses are joined by aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews: the numbers swell impressively. I take satisfaction that at least this small thing I could do for them. Most of them look oddly at me, unsure who I am; the name is unfamiliar to them, and understandably so. Some secrets remain secret, even in times like these. I wish I could see her again but this is their time. I am loath to intrude. I have said my goodbye.

*11-November-2004 (later)*

Jacqueline Victoria Novak passes away at 11:01 PM, surrounded by her husband, daughter and sons. She is sixty years old. I wait until the family has left the room. Then Dennis comes to me, and together we pay one last visit to her side. Her face is peaceful. Truth be told, she looks better now than she did when I first saw her, even with death’s pallor upon her. The pain and grief are gone from her.

Suddenly I am aware of overwhelming anxiety from Dennis. He radiates it—his face, the stance of his body, the way he is breathing. He is exhausted and everything is crashing in on him. He turns, and I feel his hands settle on my upper arms, his grip strong, almost manic. Startled, I try to pull away, but his grip tightens, painfully so.

“Why?” he gasps, his voice trembling with grief and anger, “Why couldn’t you save her? Why did she have to die? Why?!”

Shocked and hurt, I simply stare at him.

He shouts at me and I wince, “With everything you’ve done, and everything you know... *why couldn’t you help her? Why?!*”

His face is twisted with rage and grief, tears streaming down his flushed cheeks as he demands to have an answer he has to know I cannot give.

*“Daddy!”*

Patricia rushes into the room and Dennis relaxes his grip on me, letting me pull away as his daughter forces us apart. He stares at me with a look that cuts me like a knife: sheer uncomprehending hatred. She looks at me as if to ask what has happened, but I am already backing out of the room. Others are coming and I force my way past them, then begin to run even as I hear him crying out.

*“Zsalll! I’m sorry!”*

I want to stop, to go back and tell him that I understand, that it is still right between us, but that would be a lie. I do not understand. I cannot ever truly understand.

I ache to rage against this, but the cold sanity of reason cannot be broken, not even by horror and exhaustion. I am a destroyer of lives, perverse and poisonous to those I love most. His children are with him. I brought them here. Perhaps that will be enough to tip the balance in my favor should I ever be brought to account for my sins.

—[End Journal entry]—

## Chapter 9

I'm not a huge drinker but when I decide to do it, I don't do it half-way and this just seemed like a made-for-sour mash kind of moment. I let the bartender set them up and I knocked them down at a deliberate pace while I tried to sort out what I *knew* from what I'd been *shown*.

This had to be a scam, it just had to be, but why me? I turned it over and over in my head and I just couldn't see what the point was. Sure, I'd gotten some nods for some of my articles, but I didn't have the ear of anyone with money or influence and wouldn't be able to deliver any major news headlines for her. What could she possibly expect to gain from this, from me?

I had turned the little cell phone off, which I figured might be rude, but I needed to think. So I was startled when someone I didn't expect to see at all interrupted me after barely an hour.

"Drinking alone is a very bad habit, young man."

Dennis Novak settled onto the barstool next to me. He casually ordered Southern Comfort on ice and just looked at me.

"Yeah, I got other bad habits, too," I finally said, looking at the bottom of my glass. "So, what, she called you?"

"Yes, but I hadn't gone far. Amazing, these cell phones. I went most of my life without even the idea of one, and now I don't know how I'd live without it."

I grunted noncommittally. "How'd you find me?"

"Oh, she knew where your hotel was, and I figured I might find you right in here. I did much the same thing thirty-odd years ago." He paused then and sipped at his drink for a minute, then swirled the ice cubes in his glass. "It's still hard to accept, even after all this time."

"I'm a professional skeptic. I'm having a hard time thinking this isn't a scam."

"Well, I'm probably more a New Age child than are you, but I had the same problem. Say, why don't we take a booth?" I looked at the bartender and motioned for another Jack Daniels, then nodded to Dennis. Once we settled into a booth, he asked me, "Why is it that you're willing to believe she's deluded, yet when confronted with evidence she's not, you decide it must be a lie?"

"Come on, Doctor Novak. This is crazy! She *can't* be what she says she is."

"Call me Dennis, please." He cocked his head. "But she is what she is. You said you saw the pictures."

"Give me a decent computer and I can show you pictures with me sitting between Stalin and Hitler."



He spread his hands and said, "Ask to examine them, then. They're home pictures, taken with our old Kodaks. Pick a lab. She'll gladly pay for the tests. She needs you to believe."

"Why?"

He frowned. "Well, because she does."

"Tell me something then. When did you really believe it? What made you sit down and throw your common sense out the window?"

"Oh," he sighed, sitting back as he blew that word slowly out through pursed lips, "I've always sort of believed in the paranormal, but that is still a little hard to answer."

"I got time," I said. He nodded.

"Alright. I met her when I was fourteen. My father introduced her as somebody he'd met during the war. She had that streak of grey hair, but he always complimented her on how well she'd aged. I guess she grays it on purpose sometimes." He looked into space for a moment and chuckled ironically to himself. "Some problem to have, isn't it? Well, anyway, my parents had divorced two years earlier because Dad hadn't been faithful. Now here was dad, with this pretty new girlfriend that he said he'd met during the war... Well, I really didn't like her very much at first. It felt like the nail in the coffin of any chance my folks would get back together."

I nodded at that. Divorce can be hell on the kids, so I could see where he might have had problems with her.

"The fact that she was very nice and pretty actually made it worse. I was spending summers with my father and that first summer with her there was about the toughest I remember. I was determined to hate her. Fortunately she just let me. The next year it was as if the first summer never happened."

"How long was she with your father?"

"I guess they'd just had a short fling during the war..." he sighed. "Damned old man, mom was home with me and pregnant with my sister. Ah, but that's old news. It wasn't her that caused the breakup; anyway, it had been a short thing. At any rate, Zsallia and my dad, I guess they ran into each other by coincidence later on in San Francisco and got more serious. They dated about three years total after that. That second summer I got to know her really well and she encouraged my reading. Dad used to want me to be into sports, but she got him to leave me be. He always listened to her." He smiled with a look of fond remembrance.

"So late in '56, my father was diagnosed with lung cancer. She stayed with him until he died in 1957. After his funeral I didn't see her again until 1967 when she walked into my European History class."

"That must have been a shock," I said with a laugh, lifting my glass and polishing it off.

"Actually, no. I saw her when she walked in, even in that huge lecture hall. Couldn't miss that hair. But I just thought 'wow, she reminds me of Claire.' It wasn't until later, after class, when she approached me and spoke to me that I really took a double take on it. But she didn't seem to know me, and her demeanor was so different, and I just chalked it up to memory playing tricks, maybe a

distant cousin. It was easy. There was a huge difference between that demure, very sophisticated woman my father had dated and this wide-eyed, outgoing, opinionated... bohemian.”

“She was a hippie,” I laughed. I had no idea why I found that so funny.

“Yes, exactly. Things were normal for a week or two and then Jackie got involved.” He stopped, then by way of explanation said, “She was my fiancée at the time.”

I nodded. “I saw the photos.”

“Right. Well, Jackie and I were just engaged and I guess she was a little jealous. Zsallia...well, she was calling herself Heather at the time, and ‘Heather’ was making a point of dropping by my office to chat about class work now and then. She was a kind of bubbly airhead and she used to drill me on obscure points of history. In fact,” he stopped, and laughed. “She was pretty mad at me the second week of class, wanted to know if I was sure there was never any Robin Hood who wooed any Maid Marian. She seemed pretty put out by that.”

I laughed. “What? Did she know them or something?”

“No, not at all, though I did ask her that later on, when I came to accept the truth about her. But at the time I just thought she was a kind of flaky and naïve girl, so when she asked me questions like that I liked setting her straight. I didn’t know the half of it, but it turns out that my class was the first time she’d ever taken an interest in academic history. Until then, I guess everything she knew from history mostly came from folk songs and poems and such, which is the way most people used to get their information. In fact,” he stopped, and laughed again. “Oh, Lord, I had forgotten. I remember when we were first arguing about it, she actually stopped and said, ‘I suppose you’re right. Besides, Marian was rather the slut anyway, wasn’t she?’”

We both laughed.

“It was doubly funny coming out of her, once you got to know her. She was a real wild child. But you know the funny thing is,” he said, wiping his eyes, “it’s easy to laugh, but she’s actually not ignorant at all. She just has weird quirks in her knowledge like that. At the same time, she’s got incredible insights... well, I guess they’re memories... of what life was like in the lower classes in bygone eras. Plus she has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of old French and English folk tunes.” He chuckled again. “She likes singing them, especially the bawdy ones. But anyway, she’s so good with them she wound up helping me some with my doctoral thesis. There was a real give and take relationship between us during those first couple of years even though she dropped out. She used to play a guitar and sing some of those songs for me. Some of them are known by historians, but the others, well, I’m not sure anyone knows them anymore but her. Lovely voice she’s got, too...” his voice trailed off and he looked a bit sad.

“Guitar, folk songs, sounds like it fit her image real well,” I offered.

“Oh yeah man, after she dropped out, sometimes we’d go visit her where she was living in Haight-Ashbury. We’d go to this little coffee shop and sometimes on open mike night, if it wasn’t too crowded, she’d get up on stage. She wasn’t exactly Joni Mitchell, but she had enthusiasm. She didn’t do it too often, though, since crowds made her a little nervous, but those are some good memories.”

“So, um, how did you come to decide she wasn’t just a flaky bohemian?”

“Ah. Yeah. Well before all that, during those first few weeks in ’67, she kept coming around, drilling me, asking me these off-the-wall questions, and I took a bit of a shine to her. Strictly platonic of course. I was still working on my dissertation, and Jackie was finishing her Master’s program. We were planning to get married after graduation. Then word got around about a pretty red-headed coed hanging around me, so Jackie naturally decided she needed to make her presence felt,” He laughed, a little ruefully. “It was a pretty tense couple of minutes, let me tell you. I never really understood how it worked out that they became such good friends. Two more dissimilar women you’ve never met.

“But Jackie was fascinated with her. At first I thought it was just curiosity about the lifestyle, but it was more than that, a lot more. Jackie was a very perceptive woman and she saw things that made her curious. Then one day I mentioned how Heather looked a bit like my dad’s old girlfriend. She asked if I had any pictures, so we dug out the photo albums. We were both a bit surprised at how close the resemblance really was. Jackie didn’t say anything, but I could see her wheels turning. To be honest I had been wondering a little about Heather’s background myself, but I figured her life was her own, and she’d said she was from Boston.

“Three weeks later I returned to my apartment after classes and I found the two of them together waiting at the kitchen table, laughing over a bottle of scotch. Jackie got serious and told me to sit down and poured me a drink. Then Zsalli told me she was my dad’s girlfriend Claire and apologized for lying to me.”

He stopped talking and stared at his drink for a minute before deliberately lifting and draining his glass. He set it back down and fixed his gaze on me. His eyes were just a bit hollow, as if he were remembering something traumatic.

“She told me everything about those three summers she spent with my father and me. She explained how she and my father met in 1943 just before he shipped out for the South Pacific and apologized for that. Then she told me how old she was.”

“And you just believed her?”

“Hell, no,” he forced out with a laugh. “But then she did this thing. I don’t know quite how to describe it. She didn’t change really, but her posture changed, her voice shifted a little and it was like everything about her changed, like she was suddenly a different person in the same body. She leaned over and she gripped my hand just like she used to, called me ‘Denny,’ just like she used to and I just knew it had to be her.” He paused. “Honest to God, she’s the best actress, and the best goddamned liar I’ve ever met,” he said, with a mixture of awe and admiration.

“So I left and got rip-roaring drunk. I was angry, confused and I told myself the whole thing was a lie, but by the time I sobered up in the morning I knew I believed her. She just knew too much, and when her demeanor changed like that... well, I believed she was my dad’s girl Claire, anyway. And the more time went on, the more I believed the rest of what she said. But also, Jackie believed, and that by itself was pretty much the clincher for me. You could never put anything over on Jackie.”

I’m a pretty good judge of people myself, and even with four double Jacks burning in my gut I knew he believed every word he was telling me.

“And Jackie believed her,” he repeated. Like that meant everything.

“Damn.” That was all I could think to say. I’d wanted him to be unbelievable, but he just wasn’t.

“But you said she’s a good liar, a good actor. . . .” I said, halfheartedly.

“Yeah, she’s good boy. Seems to do it without thinking and always slick and smooth. But honestly,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “when she lets her guard down you know it. I guess she just needs friends she can be real with sometimes. I suppose that’s why she revealed herself to us. And she’s never broken a promise to us, not once.”

I just kind of stared at his chest. “Damn.” I repeated.

“Hard to get your head around, I know. Try this. She’s in that hospital because of me.”

The waitress arrived then and we ordered fresh drinks. After she carried off our empty glasses I asked him to explain. He told me of his wife’s sudden stroke, and how Zsallia had flown in from Pennsylvania on the spot, and helped gather his family from literally all over the world. He told me what happened after she died, and how he’d acted toward her.

“I’ve never been so ashamed in all my life,” he finished.

“So, today is the first time you’ve seen her since?”

“Yes. Her lawyer called on me this morning and told me what had happened. I hadn’t heard from her in almost two weeks and I figured I’d never see her again. When he told me she wasn’t mad and would like to see me before she left town but only if I wanted to. . . .” He swallowed hard, then said, “Man, if I hadn’t lost control that night. . . .” he stopped then, his gaze dropping. He didn’t drink. Instead he just stared at his glass and said, “Dammit.”

Suddenly my drink had lost all of its appeal as well. “Still, she seems to have forgiven you.”

“Oh, of course she did,” he said, smiling ruefully. “I tell you she’s quirky, but when it comes to knowing people, understanding people, I’ve never met anyone sharper or who has her ego better in check. I also imagine,” he said, glumly, “that she’s been party to scenes like that before.”

“She certainly does seem to have her feelings dialed in pretty tight most of the time.” I grinned. “Except for that temper of hers.”

He looked up at me when I said that, his face turning very serious again, and said, “It’s easy to think that. Hell, she wants everyone to think that, but it’s not entirely true. Like the way I saw her today, and talking to her on the phone. . . .” He stopped and looked me square in the eye. “Buddy, I’ve never seen her more frantic, or more out of her wits.”

“Really?” I laughed, “From watching her, I’d think. . . .”

“You’d think wrong. Listen, you’ve got to understand. This girl’s been hiding from the world her whole life, and now all of a sudden, people six ways from Sunday have seen how she’s doing impossible things, and they’ve run all kinds of tests on her that she’d normally never consent to. It’s like a giant spotlight’s been put on her, with megaphones about to blare out to the world that she’s a freak. Even though she won’t admit it, she’s scared half to death what’s going to happen when

people realize she's not... well, not really human I guess."

I leaned back. "I guess I hadn't thought about it that way."

"Hell, you know what could happen here. You're a man of the world. You know how the people who really run the government and the big corporations can be, especially with that maniac Bush still in charge." I avoided laughing, but his Berkeley roots were showing. "Besides," he went on, "you've got to think in the long run. Maybe this doesn't get out now, but rumors get started. Before you know it, a year or two down the road someone starts snooping over this weirdness and the men in the dark suits come take her, maybe want to dissect her, God knows what. You know how power works in America."

"Well, I don't know that I'm as afraid as you are about that, but... Okay, I get your point."

"Well she sure as hell gets it. I'll tell you something else," he went on. "She's very good with people, very good at getting what she wants out of them, but she's got these... these... blind spots. Like, she doesn't really understand power. I talked to her attorney for a while today and he told me how she's been acting in that hospital. My God, typical Zsallia, but even worse than usual."

"Yeah, pretty heavy handed. Why, do you think?"

"Fear, mostly. That and she was probably almost crazy hungry because they wouldn't feed her. I guess her appetite goes nuts when she's injured. But anyway, what you need to understand is, when she deals with individuals she can be very subtle, very careful and very persuasive. Half the time it's like she can read your mind or knows what you're thinking before you do. But when she deals with large groups or institutions it's like the only thing she knows to do is either run and hide, or beat them into submission. I saw it at the university, and I've seen it every other time she runs into bureaucracy, lawyers or anything like that. Hell, back in '70 she had a run-in with the police in Arizona that she still refuses to talk about. There's just no subtlety to her in those circumstances, and right now I think that tendency is very, very dangerous to her because she's probably attracting more attention and pissing more people off than she needs to. She's trying to force everyone to shut up and making a spectacle of herself doing it."

"So what's she doing asking me to write this book for her? Sounds like exactly something she wouldn't want."

"You know I didn't get that when I talked to the both of you earlier this afternoon," he said. "She didn't want to talk about it, just told me you were writing her life story. I thought she was nuts but she wouldn't listen, just kept changing the subject. Hell, I thought maybe she was looking to kill herself. I just didn't know."

"I thought she couldn't die," I said.

"Her exact words, 'I'm immortal, not indestructible'. She's certain she couldn't survive things like decapitation, or being thoroughly burned..." he stopped and his eyes narrowed at me. "She denies it, but she's talked about things like that in the past."

"So I'm helping her write her suicide note?" I asked, my voice rising in pitch.

"I don't know. I don't think so, exactly. But I talked with her on the phone for about a half

hour before I finally came looking for you. You know what she told me on the phone? ‘Dennis,’ she says, ‘I’ve come to realize it really is fight or flight. I can either give up everything and go hide in some hole in the middle of the Sonora desert for the next hundred years and hope everyone forgets me, or I can make a stand. And I have come to realize that I simply don’t want to hide in the dirt anymore. The modern world is going to find me sooner or later. So I’m going to do what damage control I can, for now, try to tell the world my story on my own terms, the whole truth and nothing but, and then just let the cards fall where they may.’”

“And she picked me, a name she spotted on some articles, to help her do it,” I said.

He rubbed his face a couple of times with the palms of his hands, then put them flat on the table. “Yeah.”

I pondered that. What would I do in her shoes? Finally, I said, “So what do you think she should be doing?”

He just looked at me, pursed his lips and then let out a long sigh again. “I told her I didn’t want to lose her, that I wanted her to run, that I’d help hide her. She thanked me, started crying, said she was sorry, but no. Then asked me if I would try to find you.”

Now what do you say to something like that?

“Shit,” was what I said.

He nodded.

There didn’t seem much else to talk about. After a few more minutes he took his leave of me, giving me his home number and telling me to call him any time. He shook my hand firmly and urged me to do the right thing. Whatever that was.

I sat there for a while, ordering a light beer just to slow down. I felt pretty sober by the time I reached into my pocket, turned the cell phone back on and dialed her number.

“I’m glad you called,” she said, a little cautiously.

“Yeah.”

“So, I understand you spoke to Dennis.”

“Yeah. Good guy.”

“Yes, he is a very good man, and very dear to me.”

I paused. Finally, I said, “Okay, Zsallia Marieko, I believe you.”

Silence.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” I asked.

“As certain as I ever will be, yes.”

“Well then, I guess we have a lot more ground to cover. Should we meet again tomorrow?”

“That would be lovely, but I think it should be short. I expect you’d like to be on your way home early. Thanksgiving is the day after tomorrow and I’m certain your wife and child would like you home before then. You weren’t expecting to be here this long anyway. I’m sending my lawyers home as well, and I’ve had them arrange a ticket for you so you’ll be home at a decent hour. I believe they, and you, have done all that needs to be done here. I intend to slip out myself tomorrow night, or perhaps in the morning. All the senior staff will be at home with their own families by then, so it should cause less of a ruckus that way.”

“Where will you go?”

“Well, Mitch managed to find me one of those electrified wheelchairs and it should be deliverable wherever I go. I thought perhaps I’d either charter a plane, or catch the first flight out of the state I could, and find a hotel near whatever airport I land in. The room service bills will be ridiculous but that doesn’t matter. I intend to wait until I’m whole again before I go back home to Pennsylvania. You and I will be able to chat on the telephone and I’ll get a computer and an email address so you can send me things.”

“Jesus, where do you get all your money, anyway?”

She laughed. “Einstein’s greatest discovery was the theory of compound interest. It’s probably a bigger miracle than I am. When you go decades without spending much of any of your money, you tend to get nice surprises when you call your brokers.”

“Damn.” I laughed. Made sense. “Well, anyway, if you’re just going anywhere at random, why don’t you come to Michigan?” I asked.

She hesitated. “That’s very kind, but I’m not certain I should impose on you any more than I already have. Your wife might not appreciate me being so near, either.”

I barked a laugh. “She’s not jealous and you’re not my type anyway, Princess. Too crazy.” I heard her chuckle. “I’m perfectly capable of staying away for days at a time if I need to. If you’re going to just pick some random hole, it might as well be somewhere convenient.” I put a smile into my voice and said, “I might even help you out with a little shopping. As long as you don’t get too uppity with me.”

She gave a low laugh and said, “All right, my friend, Michigan it is. Where would you suggest I stay?”

I thought about where Dennis told me she’d lived in the ‘60s and grinned. “I bet you’d like Ann Arbor. I bet you’d like it a lot.”

## Chapter 10

*God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. (First Corinthians, 1:27)*

—[Begin Journal entry]—

25 November 2004 (Thanksgiving)

The windows are dark when I awaken and the clock on my bed stand says 03:02 in glowing red letters. To my great surprise, I realize that I must have slept through the entire day since early afternoon. I do not even remember the quiet interruptions of the nurses measuring my blood pressure and noting the other useless numbers they are required to collect every few hours. This both disturbs and pleases me; disturbs me that I should have been so unaware of my surroundings, but pleases me because I have not slept so soundly since first awakening last week from the coma. With guilty pleasure, I realize that I feel more refreshed than I have in many days, and far more calm—though it may well be the calm before the proverbial storm, I am content to enjoy it for now.

I am rested and I am leaving. Indecision, at least, no longer plagues me.

The final meeting with my lawyers went well, for they have done their best and I was sure to let them know it. My correspondent has accepted me and is anxious to continue work after the holiday. And my doctors.... well, it went as well as could be expected, though I feel a bit of guilt toward the best of them, Dr. Omar.

“So now you will not even let us examine you? Not even another x-ray to make sure...” he had asked me, incredulous.

“No, I am so sorry, but I have had enough of being poked and prodded. You are a good and wise man, but you may not touch me.”

“But you could at least show me again the wounds, for if there is an infection you might...”

“You are a fine doctor, truly. But I have no infection. You may continue to monitor me if you really must, but only to be sure I remain stable. That is all.”

“You still will not consent to at least talk to the oncologist, the cancer doctor? He has thoughts he wishes to share with you, questions he would like to ask you. Maybe it would not be so bad like you think, things perhaps can be done that would not...” But then his voice trailed off. He wanted desperately to help me, and the look of defeat was heartbreaking.

“No.”

His face, normally an impressive and impassive mask, finally cracked.



“You do not even need us, do you?” It came out a little hoarse. He is a man from a nation still plagued by shamans and witch doctors, superstition and demonology, and has worked his whole life to accept the ways of Western science and rationalism. But he can no longer deny what he saw on the weekend’s MRIs and x-rays, or the rapid healing of my surgical wounds that had so astonished him when I last consented to his examination. He now finally allowed himself to sense why I would not let him see and drew the conclusion his deepest childhood memories would force him to consider. His look betrayed a fear that I had not seen in many years, one that in a just world would never have marred his face: *she is a witch*.

When he turned and left without another word, I cursed myself. I curse myself again when I remember. It cannot be helped, but I add it to my private list of sins anyway, for it is not fair.

It is never fair. But I will remember.

In the dark of the hospital room, I light a forbidden cigarette, risking the nurses’ wrath, and turn on the little bedside television for company. Would that I had mustered the courage to leave a day or two sooner.

But enough. It is done. Decisions have been made and events shall unfold as they will. As I doodle now in this journal, I think again of this planned book, this revelation, this confessional tome. My ghostwriter tells me we will use some of these journal entries, and I find myself thinking of you whom may one day read these very words.

What are you thinking of me, as you read? I suppose soon enough I will know. I am ready to accept your judgment. Please know that much.

25-November-2004 (later)

It is a foolish obsession, I admit, but with nothing left to think about or do, and a few hours remaining before the chartered jet is ready to wing me away, I am no longer able to ignore the intriguing sign adorning the doors to the ward adjoining my own. It calls to me, just a curiosity... no, as earlier, I am lying to myself again, and that is never a good thing to do. There are signs listing liberal visiting hours and restrictions on who may enter, but I am certain I can exploit the open nature of that ward, if only for a few minutes. Today it should be especially easy, Thanksgiving having reduced the staff to a skeleton crew.

It is simple to do. I lack the notoriety here that I had earned up in the ICU. In a wheelchair and with some extra blankets, I look fairly normal and I wear a patient’s wristband. I blend in. Maneuvering the wheelchair with one hand and foot is maddeningly slow, if workable. So I quietly watch the routine, and when the breakfast carts arrive I casually push my way past those adjoining doors and into a new and brightly lit wing full of cheery colors and the smell of vitality, the sounds of life.

The Maternity ward.

There are many about, but they take little notice of me as I make my way patiently towards the large windows that open onto the nursery. I pass open rooms where women cradle their new sons and daughters, see the joy and exhaustion of new motherhood writ upon their faces and bodies.

“Hey, let me help you out there, little lady” a cheerful masculine voice startles me and somebody takes the handles of my wheelchair. I look back and see a man of perhaps sixty, wearing a silly grin, “Where to?” He asks.

“Just the nursery window, please.”

“Off we go!”

His name is Jack and he is finally a grandfather, and ecstatic for all that. I make encouraging remarks, but my attention is drawn to the small, swaddled forms lying in their neat rows on the other side of the glass as he pulls me up to the window. I touch the glass and hear myself making foolish noises. They are so small and peaceful, even those beginning to cry out for the attentions of the nurses. Precious and irreplaceable each one. How much better their lives are now, compared to the vast numbers I have seen before—it is still somewhat hard to accept that so many of them will live to see long lives and babies of their own. Some things are certainly much, much better than they used to be.

Jack takes his leave from me as his new grandson is taken to his mother’s room. I know I cannot remain long, particularly being alone like this, but I am rooted to my spot. The desire to simply wheel my way around to the door, to reach out and touch them, to drink in the scent of them... my chest is suddenly heavy. Perhaps this was not such a good idea after all.

I hear a gentle, laughing sob. I do not hear it so much as sense it, a strained undertone in an otherwise soft, smiling voice. I am unable to ignore it even knowing there is likely a whole world of someone else’s personal pain I might be invading. Post-partum depression can be devastating.

I find myself pulling my chair across the hall to a room across from the nursery. Cautiously I look through the door and there is a young woman cradling her child to her breast. She is smiling, but I see the unhappiness there. I should turn and go, but I cannot, not even after she looks up at me, a questioning expression on her face.

“I was just listening to you talk to your son,” I offer, “He is quite beautiful.” The words are unimportant; it is the expression, the open invitation to emotional intimacy that is key here. Within minutes she is sharing with me more and more of her personal struggle. She is a young woman, twenty-one, single and a college student caught at a crossroads in her life.

“I feel stupid for being so... so lost over this. I know I have a lot to be thankful for. Compared to others I mean, but...”

“You’re not where you thought you would be this time last year?”

“No,” she sighs, “not at all.” Her child squeaks at her and she lifts him to her shoulder to rub his spine. I do not attempt to conceal my envy but smile as I let it show. Her eyes close as she cradles him again and she continues, “I’m happy, but I’m not. It’s so... strange. I had plans, you know? My friends at school all thought I should have an abortion, but I just couldn’t do it. So I change my plans, right? It all sounds so simple.”

“And the father is where on all of this?” I see the answer before she even speaks.

“He doesn’t know.” I look at her, smiling a bit, and give a little knowing nod. “I know I should

find him, but it was just a Spring Break thing. We met up in Myrtle Beach. It was something that was supposed to last a couple of days and be over. I didn't even know how to find him and what was I supposed to say to him?"

"I'm pregnant would have been my choice, but then it's not my choice, is it? What will you do?"

"I don't know. I have to take some time off from school."

"And you fear you might not be able to go back?"

"My family... I haven't even told my mother. They won't be able to help much. She'd tell me to give him up, that I couldn't handle it myself. And," her voice broke, "she'd probably be right." Tears fell down her cheeks and she clutched him tightly.

"Adoption can be a loving choice..." I say. But she hears without listening, and isn't looking at me. She knows and is struggling with a choice no one can make for her, that no one should push upon her.

I hear a quiet conversation behind me and I know my time is up. I squeeze her wrist, smile at her, then glance at her chart. Amanda Beech, mother of Justin Michael. I know I cannot play Lady Bountiful for everyone, and the worst that can happen to this girl is better than what many others must face every day. But an idea is forming.

"You might be surprised what options are available, you know."

She looks oddly at me and is about to ask what I mean when a nurse intervenes.

"Ma'am?" she enquires, "You're not a patient in this ward, are you?"

"No, I'm from down the hall a piece," I reply, "I just got tired of hanging with the bedridden crowd."

"She wasn't bothering me..." the girl interjects, but the nurse is having none of that.

"This ward is off-limits to other patients," she begins, then a suspicious look crosses her face, "You're the one from the ICU."

"Guilty as charged," I grin at her as her face goes stern. I turn to the girl and say, "Don't let it worry you today. Enjoy your son. You never know what tomorrow may offer up, but I know you will make the right choice."

I allow the nurse to usher me unceremoniously off the ward. On the other side of the door she delivers a stern lecture on both the dangers of sick patients wandering into the maternity ward as well as the security issues that raises, but I am only half listening. I firmly promise to behave myself in the future and she looks somewhat deflated, as if she were anticipating an argument. I wheel myself back to my room to enjoy—if that is the proper word for it—my ridiculous hospital breakfast and finish off the last of my extra food.

For good measure, I finish the rest of the vitamin and mineral supplements. I have never bothered with such things before, but they do seem to help. Checking the time, I telephone the

limousine service and confirm that they should be here within the hour. Then, for the first time since my awakening last week, I look through what is left of my clothing from the luggage Mitch recovered from my hotel.

I am annoyed to note that my blue jeans are baggy on me and that I have lost so much weight I do not even need my brassiere. How utterly revolting. I must look almost like a boy or one of those absurd modern fashion magazine models. If I had someone to lodge a complaint with, I surely would. Ah, but patience I do have, and I should look better once my body no longer needs its resources for more pressing concerns. Fluffing my hair a bit will give me at least a little to be vain about in the meantime.

The phone chirps. It is the limo service. I tell them I will be right down and grab my purse.

Wheeling myself toward the ward's front desk, I confront the young nurse behind the counter. My attorneys told me I should always sign all appropriate forms, and I suppose if I have listened to their advice this far I must do this last thing.

The staff are mostly young this morning, most of the senior people either gone for the holiday or sulking in their offices. She looks panicked when I tell her I am checking out immediately, but before she can bolt for someone in higher authority I put a commanding tone in my voice and give her a steely gaze.

"You will find me the papers first, then you may go tell whoever you need to tell," I say. She looks like a deer caught in headlights. With an edge of impatience, I say, "Get me the papers, now." She fumbles about, finds the form, hands it to me, and then bolts into the back office. I give it a perfunctory signature and date and leave it on the counter.

As I grunt my way toward the elevators with all speed, a flight of scrub-clad nurses explodes from the back offices, their high-pitched voices blending together into a sound like frightened birds as they call out to me, saying silly things about insurance and needing to call doctors and asking me to wait. I keep going and make it just far enough to press the elevator button before they descend around me. I resist the urge to strike at them with my stolen cane but merely raising it causes them to flutter back a bit.

Making it very clear to them that I will brook no opposition, I consent to allow one of them to push me downstairs and outside to my limousine. Startling both the nurse and driver, I stand, open the door myself, throw in my one bag and hop inside.

"Get me to the airport, now. I don't have any more luggage I care about," I tell him as I slam the door.

As the car pulls away, I am disturbed to find myself shaking almost uncontrollably. I begin to realize that it is a wonder I did not go completely mad.

Lighting a cigarette, I lean forward and ask the driver how long it will be before we reach the airport. Satisfied with the answer, I lean back and open my window to feel the cold blast of icy wind against my face and chest, hoping it will brace me a bit. It does and after a few minutes I roll it back up again, close my eyes and meditate.

I *detest* hospitals.

As I relax, I check the time and calculate. It should be nearing noon in Pennsylvania. That thought brings a new and unexpected pain to my breast, the sudden hot pang of loneliness. They are gathered there, those people... *his people*, the ones he gave to me. Unable to shake the darkness closing in upon me I open my phone and dial.

Edna's son, Joshua, answers the phone. I apologize for disturbing him at home. He responds in mock outrage and tells me he expects to see me there for supper that evening. I demur, telling him I am still in Denver but that I wish I could be there.

"Joshua, I came across a girl here in Colorado who I think may be a good candidate for our foundation. I'd like to give you her name and some information on her. If you're going into the office for a few hours tomorrow, I'm hoping you could track her down before she slips away."

"Sure, just a second..." he locates a pen and I give him what I have regarding Miss Amanda Beech

When we are finished I ask him if Edna is available.

"Umm, she's down in the family room. I'm upstairs in my office, hang on." There is the muffled sound of Joshua shouting for somebody to pick up the phone. I hear the extension pick up and Edna's voice comes through.

"THAT YOU GENEVIEVE?!" she bellows, and I jerk my ear from the phone. I hear her son chuckle and hang up his extension.

"Yes, Edna, your Genevieve is here!" I yell back, suppressing a laugh. "And I can hear you just fine. You needn't shout."

"Sorry," she chuckles. "When are you coming home, child? It's not good for you to be wandering about the world so unattached at times like this."

My heart melts a bit and I reply softly, "I know, Edna. It can't be helped. I promise, it really can't be."

"You'll be here for Christmas I trust?"

I think hard about it. "I hope so. I will try, I promise."

"You know some things better than I ever will, but I am very nearly a hundred years old, you know." I smile to myself. She likes to remind me of that as often as she can. "I think I've learned a thing or two in my time," she continues, "and let me tell you, I've learned that you can't miss these chances when you have them. We want you here and not everyone can say they have people who do, you know."

"I know," I say, my voice growing softer. How is it that I sometimes feel so much the child when talking to this woman?

"Well, you'd better," she says. "I want you to make sure you're eating, girl. Are you eating well?"

I laugh out loud. "Yes, Edna, I am eating well! I can certainly promise you that!"

“Well all right then,” she grouses. “You finish your business and come home quick, all right? That wet-behind-the-ears quack of a doctor only lets me have one drink a month and I was saving this one to have with you. I’ve just missed out on that. Don’t make me miss another, understand?”

“I’ll do my best,” I say, feeling a bit of a strain in my voice.

“You’ll do better than try.”

I chuckle. “Yes ma’am,” I say with mock seriousness.

“Alright then.”

“It sounds as if you’ve quite a crowd there.”

“Oh, yes! You should be here! Would you believe my daughter Cathy came all the way from Hawaii? Her and her son, and the great-grandchildren... oh, it is such a treat! They’ll be leaving Sunday, but we’re going out to the house tomorrow, assuming that manservant of yours remembers...”

She goes on for several minutes and I let it flow through me, picturing the scene at Joshua’s house with so many generations gathered under a single roof for that day. No wonder Edna is so wistful in her desire to have me there with her.

“Are you alright, child? You’ve hardly said a word.”

“I wasn’t, but I certainly am now. Edna... can you find some privacy? There is something I need to tell you.”

“Oh... certainly, I’ll just step out... marvelous things these cordless phones, aren’t they? Okay, I’m in the loo. What’s wrong?” Her voice is immediately fraught with concern and I nearly balk at what I mean to tell her, but she is one confidante I cannot keep in ignorance.

“I want to tell you why I could not come home from Denver and I need you to understand first that I am okay...”

It comes out terribly wrong, but Edna is wise. She understands me and listens quietly as I explain the accident and its aftermath.

“Ann Arbor! Good God, why? All they have out there is hippies and bad football!”

“I need to be somewhere I am not known until... until I recover. Edna, no one must know. There will be too many questions. Do you understand?”

“Of course I do. I’m old, not stupid. I’ll be out there as soon as I can manage.”

My heart sings, *Yes*, but my head knows better. She is a stubborn woman but I manage to convince her to give me at least another week or two. As strong and energetic as she is I know she is not up to the trip, and I fear her reaction should she be confronted with my injuries in person. Eventually she relents, but her unhappiness is evident in her voice.

“You call me every day, do you understand? I don’t hear from you, and I’ll be out there in a trice.”

“Every day, I promise. I’m nearly to the airport now. I have to go... I’ll call from the hotel when I’m settled in.”

We part with uneasy words but I feel better now that she knows. The heaviness that had threatened to crush my heart is gone now and I find I can finally enjoy a drink from the limo’s bar. As I sip on my scotch I think again of the man who gave these people to me. I still wonder if his betrayal was worth it. Can I forgive him?

Ann Arbor and my uncertain future await. But for now, I am at peace.

—[End Journal entry]—