

# *In Search Of*

*Marc Teatum*



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## CHAPTER

The night is dark, early for this time of year it seems. Maybe it's the cloud cover, blocking the half moon that sits high up and away, maybe it's this part of town, an area that developers haven't discovered and raped in the name of progress and growth. Street lamps that have the wattage of a flashlight and a third of the storefronts vacant tend to create shadows that outnumber the pools of light. Nothing good ever dwells in the shadows. The mystery of the blackness rarely hints of happy times. Around here, anxiety runs high and imagination runs rampant, often for no reason other than the fear of the unknown. The smell of inactivity in the air isn't as bad as that of the old garbage strewn about or the puke from doorway dwelling drunks trying to sleep off the too much cheap whiskey purchased with the coins collected from rattling coffee cups along the sidewalks for hours. But it doesn't fill the senses lovingly like floral and fauna.

The city feels half asleep as the office workers have all headed home and the urban dwellers have yet to come out as a high powered custom motorcycle sits all alone idling, rumbling, at a traffic light for no one else. Its rider is sheathed in black leather from head to toe. The flat black full face helmet matches the paint job on this machine as the rider's boots stand flat on the rough pavement below. The red light from the signal overhead draws a thin line down the center of the visor almost cutting the head perfectly in half.

Most times there's a feeling of accomplishment, of satisfaction, when a job is done and delivered. Most times. In the private security business, those times are few and far between. More often than not when you present the final report, everything just turns to shit. Tonight was one of those times. Telling one business partner that the other was robbing him blind and lying about it for years never goes over well. Having to slide your chair back to stay out of the path of flying bottles of beer as two guys leap over a table at each other, clawing, swinging and cursing isn't like Shakespeare in the Park. People suck and relationships that start out with such promise often fall apart when dishonesty, envy, and greed get in the way. Or maybe sometimes it's just the fault of an addiction. Drugs. Gambling. Sex. It doesn't matter. Each can destroy lives, make people do things to loved ones that they normally wouldn't do. Addictions can turn saints into assholes. And this particular job was just another testimony to weakness.

Picking neutral ground to deliver bad news is always a good idea and tonight's *'on it's way down'* tavern was the perfect choice. Neither party had a stake in the business, so it couldn't have been used as fuel for starting a fire as in: "See all this? If it weren't for me, none of this would have been possible." Or the corollary of "See all this? If I didn't take a chance, all this would be lost". Sometimes hints of revisionist history and justification are as dangerous as a fifty

caliber gun on top of a Humvee in a foreign land. The only way a professional can survive is to play the center of the road, ride the yellow line, don't pick a side. You don't care who is right or who is wronged. As long as the payment is made in greenbacks at the time of delivery, the two of them could tear each other from limb to limb. Just don't care. Just take the money and walk away. It's a helluva way to make a living, but it's better than floral arranging. And as the dust starts to rise, a good investigator knows when to collect the fee and walk. In this case, it was immediate and quickly. Then it's out the door and be on your way.

The light turns green and the thunder of the machine echoing off the granite office buildings is deafening as the bike launches and grows louder and deeper as the motor works its way upward through the gears. It's a comforting sound for the rider leaning onto the entrance ramp to a short tunnel that exits the city and empties out onto the North Shore of Boston.

Forty minutes of fast paced riding along streets that were originally cow paths; nothing in a straight line, weaving along oceanside roads that are a series of hard turns, brings the bike closer towards home. Racing the waves that crash on the sand, zooming up a side street in a beachside town and into a condominium development that sits high on a hillside, the rider hits a small button on the handlebars and the garage door on one of the units slowly rises and the sound of the engine is once again thunderous in this small suburban cave. The garage is spartan by choice, the space is designed for this machine alone, with a workbench at the end, a large rolling tool box on one side, and a hydraulic motorcycle lift taking up the other. The floor is flat gray coated with an industrial grade paint and there are stereo speakers in all four corners. Two six foot long fluorescent light fixtures illuminate the room. The bike comes to a halt and the door behind closes quickly. The rider hits the kill switch, turns the petcock valve to the gas line and using the thick heel of the black boots, knocks down the kickstand, leans the machine over to one side in a smooth routine movement. Dismounting and pushing a button on each of the hardcased saddlebags, a mechanical 'ppzzzztttt' sound fills the void where the rumble of the motor was moments before. Reaching over, the rider extracts a padded laptop case from one side, and a neatly folded karate gi with its black belt tied tightly around it, from the other. Placing them both on the floor, the rider pulls off the helmet and her long thick black hair tumbles out. She hangs the bucket on the wall to the side of the door and runs her hands through her hair to give it life again.

Punching in the security code on the lock to the interior of the house, She turns the handle and steps inside. A deep breath and She feels the comfort that can only come from a place that is home. Yet it feels as empty as the city just left behind. The contrast of the quiet now to the rumble of the past journey

doesn't go unnoticed. She lives alone by choice, as she likes to remind herself and any of the few close friends she has when they want to set her up on a blind date. Standing in the dimly lit hallway, she reaches for the light switch to bring visibility to space only to feel a hand on her left wrist.

"I've been waiting for you" is whispered into her ear, as a man's bulky body is felt pressing in from behind.

Dropping both the laptop and the gi, she spins to her left, grabs the hand that grasps her wrist and pivoting in the reverse direction while pushing back, she takes control by pinning the man against the wall holding both of his hands at his sides.

Staring the man straight into his eyes, she says "I knew giving you the combination to the front door was a big mistake".

He forcefully raises his arms straight out along the wall, knowing that his reach exceeds her grasp, and using long strides and the weight advantage, he steps toward her and now it is her turn to be pinned against the opposite wall.

"That's not what you'll say in the morning" he says as he leans down to kiss her lips as he relaxes his grip on her and reaches for the zipper of her leather jacket.

Just as his mouth is reaching hers, she grabs the front of his shirt and sweeps her right leg under the man, and he falls to the floor of the hallway.

Standing over him, she says, "Let's just see if you last until morning, Jimmie" as she finishes unzipping her coat. She sheds the heavy leather, revealing a snow white tank top against her olive toned skin tucked neatly into her pants.

Dropping the jacket on top of the man, she steps over him and heads to the stairs to the upper level of the condo that houses the kitchen, living and dining rooms, "I hope that at least you made me one of your fabulous Mai Tais?"

Pulling the garment off his face and watching her long legs in the leather pants move away, he comments "Don't I always take care of you?"

Tossing her thick black hair as she turns to look back over her shoulder at him on the floor, "Yeah right, like you're in any position to take care of me" she laughs.

## CHAPTER

The bedside clock screamed 3:15AM. And even at its lowest setting, it's red numbers illuminated the bedroom, making shadows on the walls from what few sparse furniture items She populated the space with. It was another one of those nights of tossing and turning. So wound up from the meeting, and arriving back home, to find that a minor transgression, giving a casual *friend-with-benefits* access to her place, her sanctuary, was invaded. Yeah, invaded, that was the best way to describe it. A mistake for sure, giving him the combination. The sex wasn't a mistake. It was just sex. It was good. He was good. It was just sex. No commitment. No promises. No future. They both knew that. At least She did. This was the second time Jimmie let himself in. Invaded. Not invited. That was Her way of thinking.

The only child of hard working parents, she was raised in a Midwest state in a household that taught respect and education were the two greatest assets a person could have. She was smart, but she was also wild. She got high grades all through school, but also circled around the hard partying crew. Always knew her limits and never overstepped her bounds. Eyes always on the larger target of A Good Life by her own accord. College was a breeze. Not one of the top ten, but not a bottom of the barrel institution either. A degree in Liberal Arts that would look good on any job application was almost worth the money paid out for it. The first husband was clearly a mistake. Both of them, 22 years old and just out of college. Sure they settled into a new life, first job, in a different city, she wanted something of the old ways to hold onto to. Marrying a boy from her hometown who had moved to the same new city after one year of dating didn't seem like such a bad idea. His degree in geology gave him the perfect background to be the head barista at the Starbucks on 4<sup>th</sup> and Vine. He was much too good looking for his height, and motivation wasn't his other strength. After a year and a half of working two jobs in order for them to live two steps above the poverty level, while he spent his time and money on weed, she decided it was time to quit.

It was the act of moving back home that got her involved with yoga and martial arts. Her mind needed something other than what she considered a failure to focus on. Her parents welcomed her with open arms, reminding her the value of family and the reality that nothing in life is perfect. Yet she used these two practices to get to a level of comfort and feeling of success.

Eighteen months later, when she was ready to spread her wings again, she was off to the next new city.

A year after that it was the next new husband. It was a bounce back relationship for sure, a guy who purported to have the skills to get things done. He talked a good game, even got her involved in his start up business of safari

tours. But after three seasons, she realized she was not only carrying customer's luggage, but most of the responsibility of running the business as well. When things took a downturn in finances and the tours became less and less popular, his new habit of abusing her on every day that had a "Y" in it started. The first time he raised his hand to her, and she reacted with all the martial arts training she had absorbed. She didn't accompany him to the ER she sent him to. She packed her bags and left town before he was released. She learned there were strengths in her she didn't even know about; strengths involving self-protection and survival

Making her way to Boston, and needing to earn money to pay rent, an advertisement in The Boston Herald caught her attention. She took a job as a process server; it was the easiest job to get. All she had to do was knock on doors and hand someone a piece of paper. In the beginning it was a cake walk. As the weeks went on, the office gave her more and more difficult assignments; addresses that were old, people that didn't want to be found or people who flat out denied they were the one she was looking for. It became a game of hide and seek for her, and she enjoyed playing. Mentoring is a phrase that is tossed around in large corporations and in graduate level seminars at business schools. The practice didn't exist in this world. She learned by listening and watching the others in the office; about what to do, and what not to do. No one took her under their wings, for to do so made them less money by losing and wasting their time, and made an interoffice competitor who potentially cut down on a veteran's income.

After two years of serving, she left to go work for a personal injury lawyer on the North Shore as a fraud investigator. Much better pay, but the ethical philosophy of the firm was thin and flimsy at best. Honesty was a luxury and truth was a commodity and its value rose and fell with the case at hand. She honed her interviewing and personality interpretation skills to a fine edge over the course of the next two years, all the while learning how a legal services business operates. More than once, she accompanied one of the associates to community fundraising events and understood the importance of networking and flattery. She wasn't in it for the long haul for sure and she put money aside with every paycheck.

Taking the next step to self employment seemed not only obvious but nearly effortless as well. She built her future on service and on time delivery without excuses, never taking on a project that she couldn't finish to her satisfaction; which was always more than the clients. She sought out tough jobs that would be reputation builders and by the time she was closing in on the last years of her 30s, she was comfortably secure in her profession. Secure in her personal life was another matter.

Jimmie's breathing was steady, not necessarily silent, but he didn't sound like a dump truck idling in the driveway either. His muscular body didn't take up that much room in her bed. It took up more space in her mind. More than it should. More than She wanted. Not from him anyway. Not because of him. He was nice enough. It's just that Jimmie wasn't the relationship She was interested in. She wasn't sure she wanted a relationship at all.

This wasn't a revelation. It's not like lightning came down from above to jolt her. Nothing ever did. She never let it. She survived so far by reading the landscape and understanding the borders, the tone, the intent of everyone, anyone, involved. She controlled her own destiny. She took that control years ago. She worked to keep that control. She liked her life that way.

No more uninvited visits. She would change the combination. A deep breath and she felt a calmness return. Another decision made. One more deep breath, then one more look at Jimmie.

When the sunlight forced its way through the blinds, and white light overpowered the clock face glow, She nudged him.

"Hey" She whispered.

He mumbled and slowly climbed out of his sleep. "What? What is it?"

"Time to get up and go. I'm heading out to do my workout."

"Huh? No breakfast this morning?"

"Not this time, handsome. I've got some heavy lifting to do when I get back and need the space."

"Oh so this is the woman's version of *'wham bam, thank you Sam. Here's some cabfare?'*"

Smiling, She replies, "Sorta, I guess. But no cabfare."

She'd do all the explaining to Jimmie at another time. She'd sell it to him the way she convinces clients to retain her and pay her fee in a way that they feel comfortable with the arrangement. She is good at it.

Quickly dressing for her workout and slipping on sneakers, she left the room. Stopping at her desk, she opened up her laptop, fired it up, and immediately went to her security settings. Changing the combination on the front door took less than a minute and She just as swiftly shut her whole system down and headed to the front door. Stepping out into the clean morning air, She took in yet another deep breath, and closed not only the door behind her, but another segment of her life. There would be others, but that one had to go. No remorse. There can't be remorse if love wasn't involved. And She had to think hard to remember when the last time love was involved.

## CHAPTER

The morning sun was low, creating long shadows and pockets of light and dark due to the tall pines nearby. A thin mist wafted through the rough wooden rail fence that encircled the large broad pasture and lay down a thin blanket over the grass. A solitary female figure, slight and graceful, was in motion. Barefoot and wearing only black, she stood out in relief against the nature that surrounded.

North of Boston, in the middle of one of those upscale suburban towns with aristocratic sounding names, littered with mansions sitting on multiple acres of finely manicured lawns, with large circular driveways, a rider sat on a vintage Harley Davidson in a line of traffic on a two lane waiting for a city bound commuter train to finish it's crossing just ahead. Despite the loud ding-ding-ding of the bells that remind the drivers that the large red and white striped gates lowered across the road were there to block their travel, He was distracted by just a hint of movement from the field to his left. He turned his head.

Slow and deliberate, her movements were fluid. Swinging a long staff around her body, across her shoulders and back to her waist, then forcefully poking the air here and there, pulling it back toward her again, bringing it up, parallel to her body, stopping, staying still. Even from this distance, He could almost see her breathing, And then starting again; an obvious routine, practiced action and reaction until perceived perfection is achieved.

When the car in front of him started to move, his attention was pulled back in front of him. He jammed his left foot down onto the shifter peg as his left hand squeezed the clutch lever on the handle bars. *Clunk*. First Gear. And with the release of his grip, his motorcycle began to move. The motor settled into that low rpm rumble that Harleys are known for, and it brought a peace to him that transformed the rest of the ride into a meditation zone for him. He was just starting out on another exploration trip and had found a short route up through the horse country north of the city that would bring him to the rugged coastline. Some say that a 60 mile trip might actually be more harmful to the machine than the good it does to his psyche. He knew that whatever damage might be done to the motor and the cost would be to repair, the benefit provided to him by not having to be stuck in a cage or worse, be like cattle on that commuter train, was priceless. The asphalt was smooth and it rose and fell and twisted with the terrain. Little pools of sunlight littered the surface as he journeyed under a canopy of trees. The wind rushed past his face and thanks to his open faced helmet, he could smell the pines that filled the woods on his right, while taking in the aroma of the small herd of horses on his left. Through it all, the vision of Her kept dancing around in his mind. He felt that something about her was different.

Different in a way that resonated in him, and he didn't feel that way about many, especially for a woman that he didn't yet know.

Despite the combined sounds of the train and traffic nearby, She was totally focused on her workout and paid attention to neither. She was aware of them, but not distracted. She let very little distract her when She practiced. It had been over ten days since She changed the combination to her place and the conversation with her former lover had gone exactly as She wanted, not necessarily how he wanted. They left that part of their relationship behind quickly and settled back into the enjoyable friendship that it was before the physical aspect arose. All was right in her mind.

Her bare feet, wet from the morning dew and her oversized sweatshirt damp from her sweat didn't register in her mind either. Forty five minutes of training every morning may bring her closer to a perfect kata, but her muscles ached a bit just the same. Those she felt. She loved the practice, not for the opportunity to use the martial arts skills she was perfecting, but for the discipline, the pleasure of the art in the movements that it brought her. As graceful as a ballet dancer, the bow was her partner this day. Six feet of oak, sanded smooth. Her crafting of it from raw wood obtained at a lumber yard was as much of the art as the movements she made with it. This was not an object bought at a martial arts supply store. From her teachings, the user created it; bonding with the natural material, over time, as it was being fashioned from rough form to finished product. Tomorrow it would be the Sai, the short swords made of iron, with spiked hilts. The day after, there would be no weapon, just her body. No matter what implement was used, it was all about form, about grace, about discipline. It was never about killing or aggression.

She finished her daily ritual, thanked the sun for being so strong on such an early spring day and looped some wide rope around the ends of the bow and slung it over her shoulder and stepped into a pair of canvas sneakers. She ran toward the railing fence and vaulted the four feet up to the top rail and stepped on it with one foot, pushing off and landing on the other side without stopping a bit. She jogged along, weaving through the streets for just over three miles looking forward to a shower, a change of clothes and the rest of her day.

She bought this condo unit in particular, not because it was on one of the first streets in a wonderfully wooded development that was a dozen streets deep, or for the convenience of its location, being situated close enough to the city, the seashore and the countryside of southern New Hampshire and Vermont . She bought this unit because this street was one of the few that was a cul du sac, which meant no one would come up the street that didn't belong there. And if someone did, everyone on the street would know it. Hers was the end unit in the last building and it afforded her a view of the conservation land and golf

course below that bordered the development, and that reminded her of her favorite place: Colorado.

Fresh from a hot shower and outfitted with jeans and a simple t-shirt, she padded from the bedroom to her office space carrying a bottle of water and planted herself down in front of her computer. Tapping out login credentials brought the system to life and all three of her monitors slowly brightened up.

The best part of being self-employed was the control She had over the workload coming in and picking up what she wanted and not having to do jobs that smelled like the workout clothes she just put in the hamper. Private Investigation, PI, Pinkerton, Gumshoe. These are all names that books and Hollywood have anointed with the kind of security services she provided. She rarely dropped any of those in casual cocktail conversation. She typically avoided saying at all what she did for a living when asked. She only let those who could be potential clients know. The reputation she built over the years, and her choice of lifestyle allowed her to charge rates that didn't require carrying a huge case load. She worked regularly, not incessantly, and rarely had to go scrounging for new business. Referrals from one high paying client to another potential She knew were essential, so when she worked, she put her all into a case. She wouldn't take on matrimonial cases; no peeping into motel windows or sleeping in her car for hours waiting to get pictures of cheating spouses. Likewise, she didn't take on jobs requiring the digital trawling of finances; too dull. She had contacts who were great at it, and if part of an investigation called for it, she called on them. But if it were totally a financial forensic task, She passed.

This day's task did require some cyber-tracking of a subject, the gathering of a foundation of facts, so she set to it. Scouring databases, social media, business forums and such takes time and patience and after hours and hours the details she uncovered were added to the dossier she was building, that all too familiar 'ding' of an incoming email message pierced the relative silence of the room.

A meeting with one of her regular clients was being called; not one of Boston's largest law firms, but one that had enough partners to provide a steady flow of both work and billings. No preamble to the invite. Just a date, a time and the usual location of one of the firm's conference rooms. Not a request to see if she was available, just the invite. The implication was that She would be available. No agenda provided either; they never put clients names or the matter at hand into the digital atmosphere. Despite corporations claiming they have encryption security, everyone knows that's a joke. If someone wants into your network, they're going to get in. She does it all the time. A simple "Click" with her mouse and she accepts and adds it to her calendar.

Pushing herself back from the desk, She stretched. Her eyes were tired and she needed to clear the cobwebs and breathe the air again. Screen time needs to be balanced with real time. And nothing cleared the head like a good long ride. Maybe swing by one of the fish markets and pick up something to eat. Heading over to her closet, She quickly makes a selection, dresses and heads down to the garage to mount up and head out.

## CHAPTER

He was still learning his way around, cruising along the back roads on smooth asphalt two lane roads, with gentle curves that easily flowed one way then the other. The area was just what he was in the frame of mind for, and the hours spent exploring in the warm sunlight was a wonderful reward. The best part of this area wasn't the uniqueness of the landscape, for sure much of New England was the same. Beautiful low mountains, if you've ever been west of the Mississippi where real mountains are, mountains in the east are nice, but not spectacular. What makes New England a joy to ride through is the variety of the landscape. In one day, over the course of a half dozen hours, you can ride along the rugged seacoast of New Hampshire or southern Maine, and with an easy turn toward the west, traverse through forests and mountains with valleys affording amazing views. Add to the list that there are good sized towns and even three small cities that bustled outside the Boston city line, He was beginning to be glad he chose this area for his latest stopover.

But when He felt the bike cough once, then twice, before the '75 Shovelhead motor sputtered, backfired and stopped running, He thought, *Oh great. What now?* Pulling in the clutch, allowing the machine to roll free, He pointed the bike to the side of the road. Reaching under, he turned the key killing the juice from the battery and put her on the kickstand. He knew how to work a wrench on his bike, it's not like it hadn't broken down before. It is a Harley, after all. But stupidly, that morning, he had emptied his saddlebags to carry a few food supplies he hoped to get at any one of the many farm stands that dotted the area. What now?

Now, time for Plan B.

Still astride the bike and reaching into his leather vest and retrieving his cell phone, he figured his only option was to call to get some kind of roadside assistance.

No bars. How can there be no bars! Every service provider screams how they have the most coverage, but not here, not now. No coverage. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, He thought: Time to use Plan C. Time to walk. But in which direction? He wasn't familiar with this area and hadn't seen a garage, let alone any sign of life, for the past half hour. He was stuck. And pissed off. After kicking up the dirt with his steel-toed boot, he walked through some overgrowth on the side of the road over to a fieldstone wall that could have been constructed just after the Revolutionary War. Loose stones, but piled perfectly. Leaning up against it, he started to think about his options. He had been on the road for hours, criss-crossing his way through three counties and he was starting to get saddle sore. And sweaty. The last thing he wanted to do was walk a couple miles

to get help. Maybe he'd just lay down in the grass and sleep in the great outdoors.

Pushing off the stone wall, and stepping through the high grass, He made it to the edge of the road. He hoped to flag down a passer by and ask for help. Of course, being on a backroad, there wasn't much traffic to flag down. Being in the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of the week, and him being new to the area, He had no idea how long he would have to wait. But being a Harley owner, breaking down is just part of the life. He got used to it long ago and while it bothered him every other time it happened, it didn't push him into being a raving lunatic.

The first few cars that happened to pass by were mini-vans or SUVs piloted by parents with kids inside and even though he waved his arms, they sped by. Can't blame them, He thought, he presented not the most appealing image. A pickup came from the opposite direction, but that driver just waved back.

While pondering his options, as limited as they were, he heard the familiar sound of a Vtwin roaring from further up the road. The bike approached and slowed.

She slowed down as she neared his bike and then spotted him off to the side. She came to a stop. Planting her feet on the ground, she cut the engine and took off her helmet.

His heart stopped. It wasn't the shock of long black hair that came tumbling out. Although that would have been enough for any man. He could swear on a stack of repair manuals that it was the same woman he took notice of earlier, exercising in a field on the side of the road.

"You okay?" she asked quizzically as he just stared at her.

Gathering his thoughts, "No, not really, she just died on me and I don't have any tools to fix her." He finally blurted out.

"Oh, that's too bad, I can't help you there. I don't have any tools on me but there's a shop just down the road.

"That's great, but I don't have cell service here. Do you?"

Pulling her cell out of her pocket, she looks down and then back up to him. "Nope, me neither. Don't ya love technology?" she smiled

"She's a cruel mistress for sure."

Looking this man over, She begins to fall into her natural habit of assessment. It's something that she does all the time. Every day. Just like breathing. Judging. Is this person a threat? Is that person an ally? How much space is between Her and the next person? It was part of Her training that was drilled in over and over. Learning to read situations and environments to use everything, use anything, to Her advantage, to make sure She stayed safe.

This guy, She decided, wasn't a threat. He didn't present like a neanderthal, a half wit with an agenda. He was, in fact, rather cute. Six feet tall, around 195, she figured. Not an adonis but no pot belly either. His light brown hair was long, or longish, could stand to be cut, but not unruly. He probably dragged a razor across his face yesterday, and maybe he might do it again tomorrow. Relatively clean jeans and a leather jacket that showed some wear without being worn out. It was a rugged look that she liked.

With a threat assessment level in her head registering low, she offered, "How about a lift?"

Looking at her machine, he didn't know just what to make of it. It was based on Milwaukee V-Twin mechanics that was evident enough, but the frame and seating position was unlike anything he had seen before. Not a Sport bike, but not a cruiser either.

"On that?" he exclaimed.

"The passenger seat is small, but it beats walking, doesn't it?" she smiled matter-of-factly.

Given the hour of the day and the definite lack of success with getting help from any passerby, He realized his choices were limited.

"What the hell," He gave in, "let me grab my bucket." He wheeled his broken machine further off the road, took his helmet then walked back as She started up her bike.

This was the first time He had ever ridden on the back of a woman's bike. He put his arms around her waist tightly, more to get a sense of her shape than to hold on as he clamped his legs to her backside and thighs.

"Hold on" She laughed as she kicked the tranny into gear, let out the clutch and twisted the throttle.

She gunned the engine and they shot off like a rocket making his head snap back a bit forcing him to hold on even tighter. It was thrilling but he hoped she knew what the hell she was doing. He had a hard time trusting anybody else in the driver's seat let alone this slender woman. After a few minutes, he settled in for the ride and allowed himself to get comfortable. He nudged his face into her long black ponytail taking in the smell of her shampoo and the sun baked scent along her neck.

"Down boy." She yelled back over the roar of the engine. He laughed and tossed his head back.

Within a few miles, he realized she did, in fact, know how to ride. And ride real well. After making several quick turns down smaller country roads and coming out on one of the few sparsely developed sections of US RT1 running through the Northeast, she again throttled up and the bike jumped to 65mph with ease, even with the two of them onboard. The trip wasn't more than twenty minutes, but in that span, he learned to respect this woman's talents.

He sighted a garage up ahead on the right. She pulled off the pavement and onto the dirt driveway stopping in front of a building that dated back to the late 1940's and hadn't seen updating since. She brought the bike to a stop and instinctively, he waited until the motor was shut down then stood up on the rear pegs, and swung his body off. She felt the movement and when he was done, she kicked the stand and rested the machine down.

## CHAPTER

The sign over the door read: "Earl On The Hill, Motorcycle Repairs". The building looked like it dated back to the late 1940's and hadn't seen an update since. A tall thin middle aged guy wearing a moderately stained one piece dark blue overalls wiping his hands looked like he was just closing shop for the day as he walked out of the garage.

"Hey Girl! Haven't seen you in a while" he started.

"Yeah Earl, you're slipping. That last upgrade you did actually held up" She teased.

"Well, don't let it get around. I have a reputation to live up to" was Earl's sarcastic reply. "And what do we have here? Didn't think you were the type to pick up strays."

Stretching out his hand, He offered it up to Earl.

"I have a small problem with my '75 Shovelhead."

Looking over his shoulder, Earl continues to tease. "I don't see any bike. Where is this Shovelhead?"

"Well, I'm not really sure."

Like a puppy dog looking at a new food dispensing gadget, Earl tilts his head to one side.

"I mean, I'm new to the area. Just moved into Beverly, and I know 'where' it is, I just don't know the name of the road."

"It's down on Mill Road, just over the Ipswich line, near Appleton Farms" She chimes in.

"What's wrong with it?" Earl asks

"Yeah, well, it sputtered once or twice, backfired and then just died."

"Any horrible mechanical sounds?"

"Nope. No clanking, no screeching metal against metal and no loose parts on the road behind me."

"Maybe it's something simple. It's gonna get dark in an hour or so. I could go get it. Wouldn't want to leave a classic like that on the side of the road for long."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that."

He smelled the diner before he spotted it across the street. The aroma of grilled food wafted out the kitchen vents and into the air. Looking over her shoulder, he spied a classic stainless steel Streamliner type of joint. A two color red and blue neon sign screamed "Open" hung in a window by the door.

"While he goes and gets my machine, you want to grab a bite?" He asked hoping she didn't have anywhere to be.

It had been a long day for her as well, She hadn't picked up anything for dinner yet. She really wasn't in the mood for a 'date'. She didn't really 'date' anyway, but her curiosity about this tall stranger was going into overdrive.

"Sure, what the hell." She responded. "I could use some fried chicken". She continued, "Earl, you think this is something this guy should wait for?"

"Well, if you take your time, I should at least know what's going on one way or the other by the time you get to desert" Earl said, then paused. "If you have the coin."

He looked Earl in the eye, and without hesitation, said, "I have it. You'll be covered."

"Good thing you didn't say not to worry. Earl always worries when guys say not to worry" She chimed in, as they all laughed.

He passed Earl the key to his bike and they turned around and avoiding traffic, crossed the road to the diner and slid into a booth. The interior was exactly what you'd expect in a time capsule diner sitting on a barely surviving stretch of one of the oldest highways in the country. Booths lined the walls. Each having both a window to the outside and a coin operated jukebox to distract you from that world. Twenty chrome based and vinyl covered backless stools, bolted to the floor ran the length of the establishment so people could sit at the counter if they wanted. And of course, the seats swiveled. Pressed chrome cases with glass fronts housed homemade pies, and other deserts and above them, a menu that utilized press-in plastic letters spelling out specials of the day or reminded customers that, yes, indeed, this place still serves breakfast anytime all day long or that franks and beans can be had if you're on a truck drivers budget. Pure Americana. He was glad to see that a food business like this can still survive in the age of drive up drive through national franchised branded characterless options that can be found at just about every other exit on every other interstate across this land.

The waitress came over, dropped some menus and two mugs on the table in front of them.

"Hi Guys. I'm Lydia. Have some coffee and I'll give you a minute to see what interests you."

"Actually, could I get some tea?" She asks.

"Sure hon, you want something earthy crunchy or is the regular type ok?" Lydia replies.

"Just your regular brand of tea, as long as it has caffeine, and I'll be fine, thanks" She answers.

"You got it" Lydia says as she walks away.

He looks around the diner, soaking in all the vintage chrome, vinyl and formica.

"This place is cool" He says as an ice-breaker.

"So you said you were new to the area?" She asks

"Yeah, I got here back about a month ago."

"From where?"

"Oh, a little of here, a little of there. I move around alot."

"Hiding from your ex-wife's lawyer, are you?" She laughs out a reply. "Or is it the mob, or the IRS?"

Lydia comes back and delivers Her drink.

"What'll it be?" Lydia asks, pulling an order pad out of her apron front pocket, and a pen from the pile of hair on her head. Right out of central casting, she wasn't more than 25 years old, and you could picture her being there for the next twenty years or the next 20 days. Life at a roadside diner is like that. Very flexible. She takes their food orders and quickly disappears.

Picking up the conversation without missing a beat, "Maybe it's all three" He responds with a wink and a smile.

Taking a sip, She shoots back, "Oh great. Another smart ass tough guy. Just what this world needs" immediately destroying the smile he was sporting.

"Maybe I misjudged you. I thought you could handle the banter. You looked like the type"

"Type? You've typed me already? I can banter with the best, but I really like the nice hole you are digging for yourself" She says. "Keep talking."

Lifting the cup to his mouth, he gulps down a healthy portion and starts, "Everyone in this world is a 'type' whether we want to be or not. It's just the way we've evolved."

"I suppose that's true. Personal brand is a phrase that's being tossed around alot these days" She says. "So, what's my brand?"

"Well, from what I have seen so far, your scooter certainly wasn't purchased down at the local Milwaukee Factory Outlet. It's been built. Specifically for you, I think. You pilot that rod like a pro, you're no Sunday rider. You're on a first name basis with a highly qualified wrench monkey for, from what I figure, the local 1% crew, and they're a loyal but expectant bunch. But we're not in Red&White territory, no, this area isn't Hells Angels land. So it's got to be one of the lesser clubs. You have brass balls enough to take a stranger on the back of your ride to help out. So there's a good girl streak to you. You're no one's Old Lady. There's no "Property of" patch on your back, or attitude in your voice. And I'm figuring that for some reason you're tough enough to stand on your own because you want to. Since you quickly agreed to stay and eat with me, you aren't tied down to a husband, 2.5 kids and a picket fenced split level house. And you don't have the regular 9-5 insurance office job either. Why else could you be out riding on a Thursday in the late afternoon? And from what I've felt, you work out every morning, but you're no gym rat. You like the outside

world, being in nature. With less than a ¼ tank of gas left, you've already been out for a while before you bumped into me" He said and picked up his cup to take another sip. "How'd I do?"

She has been soaking his words in from behind her cup. She watched his eyes as he spoke. Deep blue, not soulful, but not sorrowful either. A clarity that shone. They never left staring straight at her, no wandering looks around the place or out the window. He spoke with intelligence. Intuitive. Observant. When the smoke cleared, she loaded up and shot back.

"You're no smart ass, that's for sure. You're smart. And you know it. And you like to show it, when the time is right. And you notice a lot, like a 21st century Sherlock Holmes. And you decided now was a good time to show off. But not smart enough to understand the motor that you rely on to get from point A to point B otherwise you would have known why it stopped running. Or maybe... maybe... you *do* know what's wrong... but you didn't want to come out and say it. No, you know that no mechanic wants to work on a stranger's machine when that stranger claims to know exactly what's wrong. You gave Earle just enough information to start somewhere. It's the end of the day, you need the bike fixed now, not wait until tomorrow or the day after. You know he'll find the problem in short time. And that's good for you because you want to be able to keep moving on. Or maybe you need to. That's why you're new to the area, why you keep moving. Your bike is sporting out of state plates. And not one that borders this one. You're not far from home, but home isn't an hour's ride away, either. You've got one of those voices that has no twang, no accent that would place you in a specific part of the country. You can chameleon your way into just about anywhere. Which means that you don't have Donna Reed waiting somewhere, with a meatloaf and french fries. No, not you. You noticed my machine, how I ride, and how I knew exactly where to bring you. You've come close to the mark on the home/work/workout life too. Ex-Cop? Detective? Not a local yokel, though. You're too good for that. State level, not Fed. Feds have a stink like black leather lace up shoes and four door Fords, and I don't smell that on you. But you know outlaw colors, you know about sacred territories and border lines. You understand patches and places in that lifestyle. How? Can't be in WitSec. In that program, if you had ratted out a club, you would have to give up riding and with a classic like your Harley, that isn't the case. And yet, you were willing to hop on the rear fender of my scooter and go, where? You didn't know me from the frog on the side of the road. Why? Oh wait.....your expression when I stopped. You think you know me. I've got a great memory. I have a memory that goes back a thousand years. I remember traits, facial ticks, expressions, voices, mannerisms.....I don't think we've ever met face to face and right now, I can't think of a reason for me to be a target. Maybe this was truly one of those chance meetings. How'd I do?"

Taking another sip of coffee, "Much better than I expected, but I expected a lot" He says.

"I like to do more than expected" She shoots back with a sly smile, bringing banter back to the forefront.

## CHAPTER

Lydia arrives and drops their dinner order and puts a plate with three pieces of the most gorgeously golden colored fried chicken in front of Her.

"Yazowa!" She exclaims as she picks up a knife and fork.

"So, how'd I do?" She asks in between bites.

"Fuel filter" is his reply.

Now it's her turn and She assumes the puzzled dog position; head tilted to one side and eyebrows furrowed.

"Earle is going to tell me that my fuel filter is the problem. Yeah, I already knew that and you're right about a stranger telling a mechanic what the problem is".

"What about the rest?" She asked.

"You have some of it right, sort of. I'm not running from anything. I just really don't have an anchor anymore. At one point not too long ago I did, then things changed and I decided that I wanted to keep moving. I had lived enough of one life and in order not to sing the 'what if' song as I lay on my back, gasping my last breath of air, I needed to change things. So, now, I go from place to place as my whims and desires push or pull me."

"Must be very convenient to be you" She says.

"I'd say 'convenient' is a bit of a stretch, but I get by ok" He replied, taking a bite out of his chicken salad club. "How about me? How close did I get?"

Talking through a mouthful of her dinner as gracefully as she could, She says, "Spot on in some spots, nowhere near this county in others. That ride was custom built for me, to my specifications. I've been into two wheels ever since I can remember. Something about the freedom that attracted me from the start. And no, I'm no one's Old Lady, inside a club or not. I don't do the 'belonging' to a group or a club thing. I do know lots of patch holders around here though. I own my own business, call my own shots, and that's why I can be out riding on a Thursday afternoon. I'm curious about the gym rat comment though. How'd you figure that one out?"

Deciding that She deserves honesty, he tells her, but hedges his bets by saying, "I'm pretty sure I saw you working out in a park this morning as I rode along 1A heading north. You looked like you were in your own little world standing in a grove of tall pines."

She starts to smile. "Yeah, that was me. When I rolled up on you earlier, I thought I recognized your bike from the other day."

"Really? You sure are observant."

"Oh, there aren't many Shovelheads like yours around here" She replies.

"Part of the job? Being observant?"

"Essential" She smirks as she replies.

"Do tell", He inquires.

Just as she's opening her mouth, Earle comes through the door and heads over to their booth.

"Hey" is all he says.

"So, what'd you find out?" He asks.

"As it happens, it was just the fuel filter" Earle says as he slides in. She looks at Him, smiles, and says, "Want to have some pie with us?" He liked that She offered up the invite, how comfortable and friendly She appeared to be. He took that as a check in the plus column. She was not surprised that He practically wrote the script on how his repair would turn out. His knowledge of his machine and the situation impressed her enough to start a checklist of her own. Very rare for her to develop a list at all, in fact. She treasured being on her own, but something about this stranger intrigued her.

"Nah, I wanna be gettin' back home. It turns out the gasket around the filter rotted away enough to clog the petcock valve with crap to stop gas from getting down to the carb. The problem was that the bowl in the carb collected the old rubber crumbs, so in addition to the new gasket, I had to blow out the bowl."

"Glad to hear that it wasn't more serious. What's the damage?"

"Including picking it up, a buck and a quarter ought to do it."

Wiggling around in the booth to get into the front pocket of his jeans, He pulls out a small bundle of bills. Peeling off a one hundred dollar bill and three tens, He passes them off to the mechanic.

"Keep the rest. Tomorrow morning's coffee is on me. Thanks for taking care of this so quickly."

She immediately liked that He didn't argue or negotiate on the diagnosis or the cost. The work was done, and he paid.

"Well, kids, I gotta go" Earle says as he slides out as easily as he did coming in. "Your key is in the bike and it's out on the side of the shop" he continues, gesturing out the window.

As Earle walks out the door, He turns to her and asks, "So? Are you interested in pie?"

"Not tonight" She replies as the smile from His face begins to disappear. "But, I'd like a rain-check."

Nodding His head, he says, "I like the sound of that. Ready to go?" Turning back around, he gets Lydia's attention and starts making the motion of scribbling in the air, indicating he wanted a check. Lydia gives him a thumbs up and comes over and pushes a slip of paper across to Him.

"Thanks for coming in. You can pay Diane at the door" Lydia says.

"I'm going to hit the loo before I hit the road" She says. "meet you across the street?"

"Sounds good."

Coming out of the bathroom She could see him across the street in the fading daylight. He wasn't poking around her machine, nor was He sitting on his machine tugging on a cigarette. Both good checkboxes in her mind. She passed through the door of the diner and strode across the roadway. He watched from the distance and noticed her stance and cadence was one of confidence. He liked that. The fact that she didn't pull out a pack of cigarettes and light one up was something else he liked but was also not surprised. Anyone who worked out like She did, wasn't about to put that poison into herself. The fried chicken was a different matter, he laughed as he thought. Within minutes they were both pulling on their helmets and firing up their machines.

"Do you know where you are going?" She asks.

Sheepishly, he replies "Not really. I know I'm north of where I have to be, but not exactly where. I have to get to the Bass River Marina in Beverly."

And for the second time in the same evening, She finds herself doing the puppy dog stance.

"I'm living on a boat in the marina until I find something else. It's free, and in exchange, I provide overnight security by having someone on the grounds."

Nodding She says "I can get you to RT97 and from there, you can take it right into North Beverly".

"Better than GPS. Works for me" He says as he pulls the clutch lever in and drops the transmission into first gear.

She does the same and takes off in a small roar leading the way down RT1 south. From three feet behind Her he continues to enjoy the view while maintaining a safe distance. For Her part, she checks her rear view mirror every thirty seconds it seems. Seeing Him riding closely behind, in a position off to the right, to stay in her mirror told her that he too, was no Sunday rider. He's experienced.

Twenty minutes later, She pulls over into the empty parking lot of a small strip mall office park just shy of an intersection ahead. He follows and stops next to her.

"Take this next left, and in three or four miles you'll bump into 97, take that south into Beverly" She says over the sounds of the two idling motors.

"Thanks. For everything."

"Not a problem. It's been a nice adventure." She answers.

"And just how am I going to bump into you again. Should I stop next time I see you working out?"

"Hope you don't do that. I hate distractions when doing my routine."

"Nice to know that I'm considered a distraction" He says.

Smiling at him and his personality, She says, "Give me your phone" He immediately understands what she is planning on doing, He retrieves it from his vest pocket and hands it over. She dials up her own phone and after it rings a couple of times, she hangs up.

"Now you have my number. I know of a few places that serve good pie, next time you're in the mood" She says.

Pulling out her own phone, she checks the call history and changes the numerics in the call history to read his name. Without flinching, hopefully without him noticing, she also grabs a shot of his license plate. Done with that, She puts her bike into gear and waves before She pulls back out onto the road.

Grinning, he drops his machine into first, looks over his shoulder, lets out the clutch and makes the first left turn.

A half a mile away further down RT1, She ran through all her gears and was up to 65mph with ease and had a million thoughts bouncing around her mind. Thoughts that she hadn't had for a long while. Even though her place was less than ten miles from the marina where he was staying, at that point, she didn't want him to know where she lived. Separating this way, she's off on a fairly major roadway heading in a slightly different direction and he would be none the wiser.

In some ways, it bothered her that she always has to be so protective of herself, of not trusting of others, but she learned long ago that survival is a game of wits. And while she really enjoyed the short time they spent together, and actually looked forward to seeing him again, there was still that level of protection that she felt she had to have around her. Of course, having his license plate number helped too. If and when he ever reached out to her, she'd run it to see what she could learn before she spent any more time with him. "*helluva way to live*", She thought to herself as she sped along the highway.

## CHAPTER

Two days later, sitting in the conference room twenty eight stories above Boston Harbor, She took her time appreciating the view as the Suits around her droned on endlessly about the importance of the client and the need for secrecy about the upcoming task. It was mid-morning the next day and the sun shone down on the water, creating sparkles like diamonds on the surface.

She long ago grew tired of real live, flesh and blood, breathing humans being referred to as 'clients', 'targets' or 'assets'. She was definitely out of place in this environment. All the men were dressed in the latest business attire: dark suits, white shirts and ties. The designs and colors of the ties were about the only thing that the average person could use to tell them apart. That and their shoes; black only, wingtips or not; loafers were not an option at this firm.

The women, too, were uniformed in corporate culture wool. Not a pantsuit in the entire company. Knee length skirts and sensible shoes were the mark of an older member, shorter (but not too short) skirts and higher (but not too high) heels indicated a young turk looking to make her mark on the world.

High heeled boots, leather pants and a black long sleeved v-necked shirt certainly set Her apart from the other women and placed her outside the hierarchy of regular staff.

"Excuse me." She interrupted. "Does this client have a name?"

At the head of the long table, the senior most partner in the firm stopped his monologue long enough to look halfway down the right side of the table to the obvious outsider.

"You will be given that information when the time is right, as usual, Miss.....and just what is your name again?" one of the partners said in the condescending tone you'd expect.

"You'll be given that information when the time is right. As usual" She replied.

The grumbling around the table was proof enough that no one appreciated her sarcasm or her timing.

The senior partner turned to another further down the line, "You need to remind our guest of the requirement of respect and protocol if she wants any more work from this firm". Closing his laptop he rose and exited the room, followed by a small herd of minions.

The recipient of the mild tongue lashing, her employer at the firm, stood and walked. She followed, down the hall to his office, the combination of her long legs and heeled boots made her stride confidently stylish. She knew she was in for a bit of a dressing down and the door didn't even close before he started in.

"You know, your talents and skills will only allow boorish behavior to be tolerated for only so long."

As she sat in a chair facing a gargantuan dark wooden desk, She said, "My ability to deliver what your firm requires with a 100% success rate, regardless of the constraints of time, distance and difficulty allows me the luxury of not having to tolerate fools like Senior Partner Pompous Ass in there for any longer than I have to. But you're right. I should have been more respectful. Maybe next time. Maybe."

"I would expect as much." The lawyer sighed as he took his place at the desk.

The office, on the same floor as the grand view conference room and reception area, indicated his stature in the firm. Having two windows to look out from, in addition to the oriental rug, impressive book cases, and other office furniture that matched the dark wood of the desk further reinforced his position. Non-partnered attorneys or lower level associates were relegated to interior offices or lower floors within the building. In places like this, location of office space was parallel to power and prestige.

"So what do you need me for this time?" She asked.

"Our client," the lawyer started, until he looked up and saw the expression on her face that screamed: *'You're kidding, right?'* "I'm sorry, Mrs Benson is a very important long time client of mine here in the estate department. Her family owns several buildings in this city that both the investment and real estate departments of this firm also consider important."

"You guys are nothing if not a supermarket of service to humanity. Your billings must be through the roof already this year" She put in sarcastically.

"Yes well, we have to make our money somewhere or where else would we get the funds to pay expensive subcontractors like you" the lawyer retorted. "Anyway, over the years Mrs. Benson has accumulated a large quantity of exquisite stones and other jewelry that she has decided to liquidate and has come to us to assist. Of course we told her we'd be happy to be of service"

"For a fee I'm sure"

"Of course. 10% is usual and customary in matters such as these."

"Why do you need me? Don't you have some lackey that can just take the goods down the street to the diamond exchange and make a deal?"

"Perhaps I didn't explain this correctly. We're not talking about grandma's pearls and garnets. In her eighty six years on this earth, she's amassed quite an impressive collection. We've had a sampling of the inventory appraised and on the conservative side, the value of the entire package falls at just over the three quarters of a million dollar mark."

"That's a nice place to fall. So for being an errand boy to the right gem dealer, you guys will pocket nearly one hundred grand. Obviously my question

still stands", She said as she crossed her legs, the sound of crunching leather permeating the air, "Why do you need me? What's wrong with Wells Fargo?"

"We've contacted an international gem broker who will be able to maximize the return on the sale of these items. Unfortunately this sale will not be taking place here in Boston as his time in the States is limited. We have to transport the goods to New York City. Further, due to the nature of his business and clientele, all business conducted needs to be done as discreetly as possible. Mrs. Benson, following his lead, agrees. No large armored truck, no uniformed guards, no fanfare. That is why you've been called in."

She sat still for a moment. Looking out the window behind the lawyer, she could see planes taking off and landing at Logan Airport and already the windmills in her mind were turning. She ran her right hand through her long black hair once and then stood up and walked over to the window and gazed down at the streets below. At that time, in the financial district, they were almost empty. Too many workers toiling in too many offices and cubicles and not being outside enjoying the late spring warmth.

"What haven't you told me?" She asked without turning back to the lawyer.

He leaned forward resting his hands on his desk, "I was waiting for this question. With the proceeds from this sale, Mrs. Benson will be donating the funds to various charities."

"Charities that your firm either manages or are active on the boards of, no doubt" She interrupted.

"No doubt" he replied.

"Big surprise there" She sarcastically said under her breath. "You guys really like to cover all bases, don't you?"

"Regardless, her children don't exactly agree with this plan and we have reason to believe that each would not like to see their share of whatever inheritance might have been coming their way disappearing because of this."

"So my job is to get the gems safely to some guy somewhere in New York. Seems simple enough" She said.

The lawyer was silent at his desk until She asked: "What *e/se* haven't you told me?"

## CHAPTER

"So my job is to get the gems safely to some guy somewhere in New York. Seems simple enough" She said.

The lawyer was silent at his desk until She asked: "What *e/se* haven't you told me?"

The lawyer closed his eyes, took a breath, slowly let it out saying, knowing that this last part wasn't going to be well received.

"Mrs. Benson insists on accompanying the goods to the point of sale."

She turns from the window, pivoting at the waist, staring down her nose at the lawyer at his desk.

"You're kidding me, right? An eighty six year old woman and close to a million in stones on a road trip to New York. Why does this sound like the plot of a bad Disney movie?"

"No movie plot here, just a job."

"What's the timetable?" She finally asked.

"There is a broker that will be in New York for three days at the end of next week."

She walks away from the window and back to the chair and drops down in front of the lawyer. The carriage clock that sits on the credenza off to one side of the office can be heard ticking away as the lawyer stares at the woman looking out into space past the landscape paintings of nearby Cape Cod. Just as he is about to ask her something, She begins to speak.

"Fifteen thousand, non-refundable, paid up front, I pick the team and I pick the time of the operation. No interference from this firm, no status reports will be made, no requests for updates, no meetings after this. Additionally, I want whatever resources this firm has at my disposal immediately upon request. Mrs Benson needs to be ready to go with 12 hrs notice at any time within the time period the broker will be in New York. You will arrange the date and time of the appointment and confirm with me. I will not interact with the broker, your office will. Those are my terms."

The lawyer leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands together and looked at her.

"I can give you seventy five hundred, but I will need to know your team and require updates every forty eight hours."

She rises, and before turning to leave, she says, "Forget it. This isn't a flea market and we're not talking about a set of metal mid-century folding snack tables".

She strides to the door of his office and as she puts her hand on the doorknob, he calls to her, "OK, OK. Fifteen, but half now up front, the rest upon successful sale of the stones."

Turning around plants her feet slightly apart, She crosses her arms before she fires back, "Fifteen thousand, plus expenses not to exceed twelve percent of the fee. Ten Thousand, wired to my bank by the end of the day. The balance upon delivery of the stones and Mrs. Benson to New York regardless of the outcome of the sale. I have no control over that action."

After a few moments of pondering which department in the firm will be able to squeeze the difference out of future billings to Mrs. Benson, he says: "Agreed".

She walks back to the lawyer, extends her hand to officially finalize the deal and continues, "Email me the standard service contract and dossiers on Mrs. Benson, her children and any and all information you have on this broker to my DropBox by the end of business today."

The two shake hands and she turns and walks out the door and doesn't make a sound as she threads her way through the maze of cubicles and offices toward the bank of elevators. Only then is the click click click click of her heels heard on the tile floor in front of the vertical transport. She pushes the button and steps in upon arrival. Pushing the lower level service floor, lets out a screech of victory, just as the doors close.

"Yeah baby!!" is heard at the reception area, but the staff there has no idea where it came from.

When the elevator doors open in the garage area, She begins to walk over to where She left her motorcycle.

Within four or five steps: "Shit" She exclaims as she bends over to pull the boots off her feet one at a time exposing athletic socks on her feet. "How the fuck do hookers wear these things?" She ponders out loud.

Carefully tip-toeing across the rough concrete parking garage floor She finally gets to her machine. Leaning against the bike, she activates a button that opens the hard saddle bags on either side and pulls out a pair of sensible motorcycle boots and stuffs the hooker boots in. They did their job for the day, and she was done with them.

She pulls a pen out of her pants pocket and hits a button, "*... upon delivery of the stones and Mrs. Benson, regardless of the outcome of the sale. I have no control over that action. Agreed*".

She turns the device off and adds it to the other contents of her saddle bags, clicks them closed. Pulling her helmet on she fires up the bike and thunderously roars up the exit ramp and into the streets of downtown Boston.

Her mind racing with the details just absorbed, she quickly snakes her way out of the city and heads north. Within a half hour she glides off the highway and starts picking her way along smaller roads, using the speed and the twists and turns as cogs in a gear that move her mind, planning begins.

## CHAPTER

Four hours later, barefoot, wearing a pair of blue jeans and black tank top, sipping a cup of tea, munching from a small bag of potato chips, She was sitting in front of a laptop in her home office reading up on Mrs. Benson and her family. This lawyer was nothing if not quick. Her living space was like her mind; organized and uncluttered. Furniture was a mix of American vintage pieces fabulously restored and asian/euro modern. Art on the wall was sparse, but all originals. No stacking from floor to ceiling, and no rows upon rows filling the space. Placement and quantity was well thought out. Some works dated back one hundred years or more, purchased through estate sales and provided something that could pass for ancestral possessions passed through the generations, while some were obtained at local galleries and art association exhibitions. Nothing purchased was done to make an impression on visitors nor in terms of getting a return on investment. All selections were made based on the emotion they either portrayed or emotions they elicited from her.

Widowed just three years ago, Mrs. Benson met her husband through family friends in the close knit Greek community of Ipswich Massachusetts when she was only 23 and new to America. He was five years older than her, an immigrant who had been in this country for ten years already who turned his love of land ownership into a multi-million dollar real estate investment company buying, rehabbing and selling hundreds of half run down apartment houses within a 25 mile radius of the Boston Common and being landlord to half that number at the same time. Two children were born early on in the marriage and wanted for nothing. Private schools, overseas vacations and any toy they ever wanted was provided to them; given out of guilt by a father who worked long hard hours constantly to provide for his family. When the children were young, he was sometimes nothing more than the sound of footsteps that came in after dinner and left as they were just waking.

The first born, a daughter, was raised with the expectation of fame and celebrity that the current level of social media has foisted on this current generation. Elizabeth Anne excelled in good looks, exquisite taste and moved within the community of new wealth. It was not uncommon to see her face in the newspapers participating in one party or another throughout Boston. But, as a woman child of an old world Greek immigrant, she was never asked or expected to join the family firm; that was for men only. Instead, she stayed connected as she built her own company that designed the interiors of buildings to look like it was ready for the next issue of Architectural Digest Magazine, but came in at one third the expense by using cheaper materials that had the appearance of what everyone desired. With her father's reputation in the real estate market, she practically had a built-in flow of clients. She lived an

expensive lifestyle, but also according to the financials provided, it didn't appear like she was a drain on the family fortune. Any funds loaned to her by her parents were always paid off.

The son, Frank William, younger than the daughter by two years, on the other hand, took and took and took, and never participated in the business. He lived off his father's guilt and was never satisfied. He had an arrest record for minor infractions of assault as the result of drunken behavior. He frequently sold off his father's gifts to pay for his gambling debts and then asked his father to replace what was sold threatening to withhold his affections and attention to the family if he didn't get what he wanted.

Experience told her that either one could be a problem. One was obvious, the other less so, but both had vices that made them hungry, and hunger always creates the opportunity for bad decisions. But experience also told her not to assume anything. The law firm did a decent job of providing background. Not great. But decent. It was a good starting point.

Opening up a new email window, her fingers quickly danced across the keyboard reaching out to a contact she had deep in one of the many government security agencies this great country has with way too many initials in its acronym to make it hard for the average American to remember.

Encrypting her message, she listed each child's name and social security number and a single line of instructions:

*"Research threat assessment potential. Financials/Associates. ASAP-need in 12hrs"*

Standing up from the desk, She walked across the 12x15 room to a white board, picked up a red felt marker and started to devise a plan. A white board is old school, but for Her, it was still the best way to lay out a project. Lists of tasks were created under headings that read: Intel, Logistics, Crew, Recon, Vehicles, ComSat, Contingency, Timeline.

After three hours, it was just past 7PM and the white board was filled. It looked like what you'd expect to see at the front of a college level math class, with some English thrown in for good measure. Without knowing the facts, it wouldn't make sense to the average visitor. And having thrown up all that She had in her head, it was time to go shopping

It wasn't Nordstrom's that she was headed for. It wasn't Trader Joe's either. With this shopping trip, she wasn't after food or fashion. She was after the first member of her team.

## CHAPTER

Descending to the garage, She pulled on a leather jacket, grabbed her helmet from its usual hanging place on the wall and stepped into her baddest black riding boots. Her custom flat black V-Rod sat before her in the center of the space on a large circular steel plate just a little more than 8ft in diameter. With a toe kick to a small latch on the floor, the spring mounted plate slowly spun the bike around to face the front wheel out to the street. Her design of this contraption made getting out a breeze, and while the shop which did the fabrication doubted it would actually work, was impressed the first time they saw it. Climbing on and pushing the electric starter switch, the v-twin roared to life and quickly settled into that rhythm that all bikers love. Dropping the shift lever into first gear, and expertly letting the clutch do its job, she motored out and hit the main roads wheeling her Harley toward The Cabaret Lounge on Route One South.

To call The Cabaret a gentleman's club, would be like putting lipstick on a pig. It was a strip club, pure and simple. "Open All Day With Continuous Entertainment" the sign boasted. Set well back from the highway, and on a plot of land that put it about 30 feet below the surface of the road, it was well suited for anyone who wanted to go and not have their vehicle seen by anyone driving by at 55mph. The interior was dark and the lighting spotty. The bar was from the time of the First World War and most of the chairs needed replacing.

Six pm on a weekday night meant that there was no cover charge yet, and that the day shift of 'entertainment', college girls and others trying to pick up extra money, was about to give way to more seasoned, experienced exotic dancers. It also meant that her target was about to finish up and disappear for the next 18 hours. And She needed to recruit this one first.

Swinging her front end down to the front door, She stopped her bike and pushed it back between two larger Harley baggers that made up a row of four in the "Motorcycles Only" spots to the left of the smoked glass doors. Dropping her kickstand to the pavement, She hung her helmet on the handlebars and headed in.

Pulling the first of the two doors open, She unzipped her leather jacket far enough down so that her tank top showed, but not all the way to expose the collapsible baton that she had strapped to her belt.

"Are you here for amateur night?" the fat man sitting at the front door asked. "If you are, you gotta see Frankie back there", he continued, motioning to a tall dark and not yet handsome man at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> bar, deep in the room.

"Oh hell, she's got too much class for our stage! Can't you see that, ya dumb ass!" was yelled from the barmaid not more than a dozen feet away.

Turning, She saw an old friend standing there smiling.

"You are still here?" She exclaimed

"Where the hell else would I be?" Deb replied. "Come over here, girl. Don, it's OK, she's a friend of half the people in here."

She walked over, as Deb came out from behind the bar to give her a hug.

At five feet three inches tall, and curvaceous as hell, Deb, single mom, ex-wife of a local outlaw mc patch-holder, knew that if she was going to compete with the girls on stage for tips, she would have to show off her attributes as well. Being behind the bar at The Cabaret, though, meant due to the amount of spilled drinks, and the porous mats that were laid out to ease the stress on the legs, high heels were out. Deb always sported a low cut tank top, tight black jeans and the whitest of sneakers. The Tribal Tat that ran around her left arm showed she had the strength to back up any customer that gave her grief.

As She sat down, Deb asked: "I haven't seen you in a long time. You look good. You still drinking those virgin Mai Tais?"

"You don't forget much. Yeah that hasn't changed. Is Chip still working the sound board?"

"Hell, you don't forget much either. Yeah he is, and I'm sure you know that tonight is one of his regular nights. Don't you?"

"Well, I was hoping it was" She said just as she heard an almost familiar deep smooth voice come over the receding music that was accompanying the dancer on stage.

"And that's the lovely Monica....Give her a round of applause and remember, she'll be here all night and available for private lap dances on the Throne up on the upper level...get her early..."

"Could you let him know I'm here and want to talk to him" She asked Deb.

"No problem" Deb replied as she picked up a phone under the bar and punched in a couple of digits that connected her with the sound booth behind the stage.

The two women caught up a bit in the fifteen minutes it took for Chip's shift to end and soon he was heading to the barstool next to her. As he sat down, Deb dropped a freshly opened bottle of beer in front of him.

"Hey, it's been a while" Chip started in as he took his first sip.

"Yeah it has. How's things been?"

"Well if they were any better, I wouldn't be a DJ in a strip club on Route One would I?"

"Don't kid yourself...there are a dozen guys who would love to have your job."

"Yeah maybe...until they had my job and had to actually listen to all the women around here!"

"Hey hey hey....don't bite the hand that feeds you, buster" Deb chimed in.

As they all laughed, She gave Deb a nod. She needed some privacy with Chip. Recognizing the motion, Deb made her way along the bar and began chatting up the white collar office guys taking in the talent before heading home to a meatloaf dinner with the wife and kids.

"Besides making music for the ladies here, you still driving?"

"Yeah I am."

"You still any good at it?" She asked.

Chip picked up his bottle of beer, and without even looking at her, said: "You bet your ass I am. Don't forget, I'm the one who made the Kessel Run in less than twelve parsecs. I'm fuckin Han Solo" and then took a long pull.

Smiling at his humor and his self confidence, She said, "I've got a job for you, and five others of your choice, but my approval. Three vehicles, six hours of driving to New York City. Two in each vehicle. I want them briefed and ready within a little more than a week. And you've got to prep three rental vehicles. I'll take care of selection and rental. I'll give you twelve hundred and the others get \$600 a piece. Double down if any of you have to use your muscles."

"What's the cargo?"

"That's on a need to know basis, and until you commit, you don't need to know. I can tell you this much. It ain't illegal, and it ain't nuclear waste. If all goes well, it should be an easy job."

"Don't fuck with me sweetheart. If it was easy, you wouldn't need me."

"What I need is a good driver who can pull together and work a team. Now, last time I checked you were at least two out of the three. And you know me. I don't take on anything that isn't going to make me money and not get me hurt" She said, looking straight at the side of his face. "Are you in, or not."

Emptying his beer and signaling Deb for another, Chip replied, "Yeah, I'm in. What else do I have to look forward to? Just another four hour shift of naked women dancing to bad music. When do we start?"

With her lead driver in place, She had one less thing to worry about, but still had more work ahead of her. So many little details needed to be put in place for this job to be considered safe and successful.

"Send a pool of candidates that can be whittled down to the final five to my cell phone in the morning" she said.

She pushed back from the bar, and headed toward the door. She drew just as many stares and surprised looks as she did when she entered.

Walking to her bike, she zipped up her leathers and pulled on her helmet. Effortlessly, she swung her leg over the bike and mounted. She hit the starter button and the V-Twin came to life. She passed two incoming patch-holders riding hard tails on her way to the highway's edge. Her single headlight poured illumination onto the roadway and she waited for a break in the traffic before pulling out onto the pavement. With a twist of the throttle and a roar of the exhaust she put the place behind her.

## CHAPTER

A week after their first encounter they had a second date. Maybe it was really a first date She told herself. The first was an accident. They really just came across each other, by chance. Fate. Not on purpose.

He called her and said that he was looking for a good seafood place. One that was authentic. Real New England. Not a Long John Silver kind of dump, referring to the chain of seafood restaurants that started in Lexington Kentucky. How can you trust a place that serves seafood that is situated some five hundred plus miles from the nearest ocean? And she understood.

Picking the next day, as good weather was forecast, they agreed to ride up to Rockport. A well known bastion and predictable tourist destination far north of Boston on Cape Ann, there are still a few establishments that are not as well traveled by the out of staters.

"Meet me at the Sip & Pump on the corner of RT62 and 127 at 4.30" were Her instructions. "It's about six blocks from the marina. We'll take 127 north."

After he agreed and hung up, she realized she still had some work to do. She needs to find out more about this guy.

Starting with the basics, she heads to social media. Google, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIN, all get his name entered in.

Click, return. Click return. Click return. Her fingers dance along the keyboard. Nothing. Time and again, nothing comes up.

"Nothing? Are you serious? Not even tagged anywhere or quoted in anything?"

Pulling out her phone, she finds the image of his license plate. Opening her laptop, and using sign-in credentials provided by one of her sources, she enters the numbers into the National Crime Information Center database, and while it scrapes data, she opens another window and heads over to the Interstate Identification Index website, and on a third, the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications Systems network.

Pulling a bag of potato chips out of the box that is ever present next to her desk, she starts munching away as she runs from site to site reading, copying and saving info that the three systems have provided her.

Running the license plate matches, she finds that the bike is registered to a living trust managed by a small legal firm in Brooklyn. A quick reverse search of the cell phone number reveals the same firm as the owner of the device. A search of the NYS RMV records provided a confirming photo that matches him. His name isn't in the NCIC database meaning there's no criminal record. Nothing in the Triple I list either. The National Law Enforcement Tele Systems comes up blank as well. No social media presence at all. No Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIN.

Nothing. A simple Google search brought up several results, but none of them was Him. This guy is squeaky clean. A ghost that you can see.

Wiping her hands on the legs of her jeans, she bounces over to GoogleMaps, and pulls up the location listed. It turns up a warehouse in the Red Hook section near the East River.

“What the...?”

She opens one more window and types his name into the registry of deeds database for Kings County, New York City, crumples up the empty potato chip bag and tosses it into the garbage pail, and waits as the antiquated system pushes info through the interwebs to her. Impatiently, she gets up, heads to the kitchen to put up water to make herself a cup of tea. Returning to her seat, the results finally appear. His name is associated with the sale of a house in the Sheepshead Bay area three years ago. Owned for twenty years, the large mortgage paid off ahead of schedule. No new purchases.

Red flags all over the place. From her investigative training, she senses something is not quite normal with this guy.

She opens one more window, and heads to the USA.Gov site and routes to the military records tab. He types in his name.

The kettle in the kitchen is screaming for her and she gets up and grabs some loose tea from a container in the cabinet and dumps some into a mug and heads back.

Nothing. There are no military records of him.

She pushes back her chair, sips her tea and begins to ponder.

“Who is this guy?...who doesn’t have any record, no traffic violations, no drinking in public, no disorderly? No military record. No marriage record, no divorce proceedings. Just a driver’s license and one piece of property. And industrial property at that.”

## CHAPTER

She arrives at 4.20 to find him in the shade on the far side of the building standing next to his bike. He was early. That told her lots. Either he was looking forward to seeing her as much as she was seeing him. Or. Or, as a defensive move he wanted to be prepared. She couldn't decide which. Once again, her mind went in way too many directions for a simple dinner date. And she disliked this part of herself.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting long" She sarcastically said.

"Not at all. I needed gas anyway," He replied. Not waiting for anything more from her, he swung a leg over, sat on his machine and thumbed the starter.

For the route, She chose a small state highway that ran along the coast, one that played peek-a-boo with ocean views and wound through a half dozen towns barely larger than the size of a Walmart parking lot. Architecture was quintessential New England with some houses set close to the road, but others were 10 acre mansions with expansive lawns behind high gates as well as several open pastures and farms.

The restaurant of the day had a deck that hovered above the rocks of a small harbor. As the tide comes and goes, the water is either just below your feet or yards down. The ocean breeze is constant but not annoying and the smell of the sea delightfully tickles everyone's nose. They rode their bikes right up to the front door and found a spot to park. Shutting down, pulling off and storing their helmets and leather jackets, they strode in and were seated almost immediately.

Looking around at both the restaurant and the wonderful views, "Does the state department of tourism underwrite this place?" He sarcastically asked.

"I'll bet the owners would love that. Guaranteed income. But, no. This place has been around for ages and it's got everything you want in a restaurant; location, great food, terrific bar and fantastic staff."

"And it has you," He added with a smile.

"Oh, you are so smooth," She says as she laughs out loud.

"A bit much, you think

"Not for a second date. But you don't really have to turn up the charm too much"

"Really?", He replies.

"I said yes when you called. Shouldn't that give you an indication?"

"I suppose"

"Do you need me to guide you around the menu?" She asks.

"Haha, no, I am familiar with all sorts of seafood, I was just in the mood for some and I figured that you would know a good spot"

"Ah, we're back to making assumptions, are we?" She poked him.

"Well, in this case, I didn't think I could get myself in trouble" He said with a smile.

"So far, so good" She replied, meeting his smile. "But the night is young"

"Plenty of time to screw up, you mean"

"Yes indeed" she says thinking prophetically as she had so many questions to ask.

And as before, they settled into a very comfortable conversation, but there is an undertow in her thinking. She's watching his every move. How he holds his utensils, how he sits up straight, but not too straight, how he looks directly at her, but how he also steals glances around the room. Looking for clues that might lead to usable details that might lead to information about him. She certainly couldn't blurt out that she couldn't find anything at all about him, nevermind on social media, but not even when she went deeper. Of course if she did, she'd be showing her hand before she was ready. How do you casually mention, *'oh yeah, so, I make my money as an investigative security specialist for hire and I can't find shit about you anywhere'*. Yeah, that isn't happening anytime soon. So she tried a different tact, playing up to every man's ego. Get them to brag about themselves.

A waiter arrived and after explaining the specials for the evening as if he were auditioning for a Broadway play, detailing the life history of each as if an autopsy had just been performed while they ordered cocktails.

"A dry white wine, please" She said.

"Double Bourbon, neat. Soda water with a lemon on the side" was his choice.

She immediately filed that in her head; non-brand specific, simple, with enough alcohol that could last him and something with bubbles and flavor to cleanse his pallett in between. This gave her a starting point.

"So, you prefer your booze dark?"

"Yeah, I've been a bourbon and rye guy since I can't remember when."

"No particular favorite?"

"Oh I do. I just wasn't interested in listening to a performance that asking what brands they had would bring."

She laughed at the thought.

"And getting a double up front, I don't have to chase him for more, 'cause I limit what I take in when out on the bike."

More data for her mental file folder.

"And you? Always white wine?"

"No, not always. I pick the drink based on everything else that's going on. Like you, if I'm riding, I won't do heavy cocktails. This place is definitely a white wine kind of place."

Actor-boy waiter came back, delivered their drinks and took their dinner order. As he walked away, She raised her glass.

"To second dates"

"May they not disappoint and not dilute from the pleasure of the first one" He added.

She smiled and their glasses touched.

"So, tell me about you" She launched without hesitation. "Your bike has out of state plates. What brings you up here?"

"Me? Well, I like to travel. I like to go from town to town seeing, learning, exploring, experiencing it all."

"No home base? No place you go back to?" She pulls out the mental shovel and starts to dig.

Without hesitating, He replies, "Not anymore. I used to call New York City home. I was born and raised there, but I left a while ago."

"Never got an answer last week at the diner, Earle kind of interrupted us. Running from something?"

Taking a sip, without looking away, He says, "Not running away, just moving on."

Sometimes not saying anything is the best bait to get someone to talk. If you don't speak, chances are good that they will get more uncomfortable with the silence than you and start talking.

She places one hand under her chin and tilts her head provocatively slightly to one side...and smiles.

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## CHAPTER

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"I guess I just got tired of the life that I was living down there and there were some changes that made moving on the best choice."

He took the bait. The hook is sunk. Now to play with the line a bit.

"What happened?"

Simple one question shots are more likely to get answered. Pepper someone with several multi-leveled queries at one time and it just seems to muddy up the chances of getting a real answer.

"Well, you weren't close last week, when you asked the same question. No ex-wife's lawyer looking for me. No loan sharks wanting to take my pinky for not being able to make a full payment for money due."

"So, how do you get by? You pulled out a fair amount of cash to pay Earle."

"I'm part of what the business media is now calling the gig economy. Years ago, some people were called bums or hobos, now they are the homeless issue. For the longest time, day workers were just laborers that got paid at the end of the day. Now, they're gig workers. Doing one gig one day, and another gig the day after. I find work when I need money."

"And how often do you need money?"

"About the same as everyone else. Money for gas, food and for putting a roof over my head."

Ah! An 'in', She discovers a topic that gives her a chance to begin her inquiry.

"So, you don't own or rent anything anywhere?"

"I used to own property in one of the boroughs of New York City, but things changed and I didn't want it anymore, so I sold it. I have a Brother who owns a small business in Brooklyn, and I use that as my legal address."

"So you've been living off the proceeds of that sale?"

"Yeah. I try not to pull from that pile too much. I don't subscribe to living the life of the landed gentry, so to speak. I find temp jobs as I travel around for immediate expenses. The bulk of my money is sitting in a bank for the time

being.”

“What kind of jobs have you been able to get?”

“Oh, there are tons of gig jobs out there, if you know how to live cheaply. Bartender, warehouse work, security guard.”

Her ears perk up.

“Security? Like a bodyguard?”

Laughing, He replies, “Haha, nothing that glamorous. Like I said the other night, right now, I’m the overnight security for a boatyard.”

“Oh yeah, I think you mentioned that” she says innocently. At the same time, thinking, *well, at least he can keep that part of his story consistent.*

“And family? Are they still in New York?” She begins probing.

Hesitating for a second, He replies, “Nope. No one left but me.

The hesitation. The first ‘tell’ he gave off to her. *There’s more here. More He’s not saying,* She thinks.

“So, no one? No parents?”

“No. They died a while ago. I haven’t seen my brother in years, for lotsa reasons. I have a few cousins scattered around the country. And when I see them, it’s like we just saw each other last week; we pick up like no time has passed.”

Another ah-ha moment, and she thinks she’s caught him.

“Wait a minute. You just said that you haven’t spoken to your brother in years, but that your brother who has a business in Brooklyn that you use as a legal address. I don’t get it.”

“Ah. Yeah, well, my younger brother, the one who is from the same mother, I spell with a lower case ‘b’. The Brother in Brooklyn, I spell with a capital ‘B’. He’s a true Brother.”

“As in, an MC Brother. That’s why you knew so much about club life”, she says.

“Exactly.”

“So you’re a patchholder?”

“No.” He replies.

“No, as in ‘not anymore’?”

“Never got the colors. Was more than a hang-around, but never a prospect. It put me in a strange place. One that I liked at first, but grew weary of over time.”

“How come?”

“Wasn’t interested in making that kind of commitment”

“Does commitment scare you?”

“A bit of a loaded question on a second date, don’t you think?” He says, laughing.

She joins in the laugh, “Yeah, you are right, haha”.

Taking a sip of her wine, "I'll bring it up again on our third date" She says looking at him over the top of her glass, smiling, thinking all the while. She has to decide if this guy is worth digging deeper into or not. Immediately the other side of her brain comes to life, screaming. She's not ready for a relationship. Too much going on in her life, too much going on in her head. With the work she has gotten into, her business is based on the farthest thing from trust that you could find. She has to suspect everyone is lying and that everyone has an agenda, be it personal or professional, that has very little to do with the information laid out in front of her at the first three or four meetings. It takes a toll on a soul. The walls of defense are tall and sturdy, while the weapons of offense, of the ways of getting in, have to be strong and consistent. That is, if she's going to be successful. And being successful meant being independent. Of not relying on or needing anyone other than herself. At the oddest times, mid day, midnight, mid bath, there were regrets that tried to seep in and flow down into her heart and up into her mind. Regrets of not having that one person or two who She could turn to, for solace, comfort or just someone else in the room to hear her breathe, to remind her she was alive and not alone. She thought she had love before. And that love was tested. And it failed. And yet, here she was standing on the precipice of something new. Of someone new.

"Where'd you go?" He asks.

Without realizing it, she had gone silent after that last volley of flirt tossed over to the other side of the table.

## CHAPTER

"Where'd you go?" He asks.

Without realizing it, she had gone silent after that last volley of flirt tossed over to the other side of the table.

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking"

"Thinking is good. Sharing is better" He replies.

Wow. He is good at this, She smiles to herself.

"Now, what about you?" He asks.

"Me? Self employed free lance research analyst and producer."

"Does that title even fit on a business card?" He jokes.

"Does anyone even use business cards anymore?" She replies.

"So what does that mean, anyway?"

And here it comes. That moment of truth. She knows herself very well. Reach down into that bag of half truths and lies she always carries, and like a vaudevillian magician from eons ago, watch her pull a rabbit out of her hat and present it like manna from heaven.

"It means I get hired by law firms, accounting firms, construction firms, investment firms and anyone else with money, to look into issues, discover problems, find and implement solutions."

There. That wasn't too much of a lie. In fact, if She were called to testify in front of a Senate Sub-Committee on Jobs, She'd come out smelling like a new car.

"Have you practiced that line a lot?" He says laughing.

Joining in with a chuckle, "Yeah. I guess I've said it a few hundred times."

Actor-boy arrives with a sidekick and their dinner is presented as if it were the signing of a peace accord. Both plates are placed down at the same time and both servers step back in synch.

"Enjoy your meal. I'll be back shortly to see if everything is satisfactory" one of them says.

They each pick up utensils and dive right into the offerings. She made a good choice, He thought. The food was fantastic and just as enjoyable as the banter they tossed back and forth. While there were periods of silence, and not just during the time when they were filling their mouths with food, She was surprised at how natural it all felt. No awkwardness. No scrambling for words, no scanning of the mind's files to discover a subject to start on. Both of them seemed to enjoy the peaks and valleys of the evening.

The waitstaff wandered over from time to time as promised, but they were enjoying each other's company to pay my attention. When the check arrived, She started off by suggesting they split it, He resisted.

"I asked you to join me. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me handle this one."

She relented quickly, not out of deference, but more out of respecting his point of view.

"I suppose that when we decide together to go someplace, I hope you'll agree to split it" She offers up.

"You mean, like, as in a third date?" He smiled.

"I could imagine worse" She smirked as she replied.

She was startled at the feeling of relaxation with someone else that She hadn't felt in a long time. Taking his arm as they exited the building, She was pleasantly surprised to find that He didn't flinch. It seemed as natural to him as to her.

For those who ride, there is a certain level of tranquility that comes from being on your machine, under your own power, all within your control that brings a sense of center. At peace is a phrase that has been bantered about within the two wheeled community. The sound of the wind rushing past, the vibrations coming from the large motor pounding beneath you, as your tires roll along the asphalt surface gets pushed into the background. It's not that you aren't aware of them, the experienced knows for sure that these sensations are present, they just aren't where their mind is. They are slowly becoming one with the world around them.

On a night like this, for the two of them, this couldn't be any more true. Together, side by side, they rode. The warm air caressing their faces, as it slowly swirled around their bodies, enveloping each separately, is something they would relate to the other as they glanced back and forth at the landscape around them as they traveled. The sky slowly turning from one shade of blue to one slightly darker as the minutes click off, and slightly darker still again minutes later.

After forty five minutes, they reached the same location where they met. Pulling into the parking lot and slotting their machines within feet of each other, they both shut their engines, dropped kickstands and dismounted. As fluid as dancers. Stepping close to Her, He gently placed a kiss on her lips.

"Thank you" He said.

"Oh, you're more than welcome. I really enjoyed our time together" She replied. "I'd like to return the favor someday."

"What do you have in mind?" He asked.

"Why don't you come to my place for a meal?" She asked.

"That sounds nice. Thanks for the invite" He replies

And immediately her mind went into overdrive. What was she thinking? What was she thinking! Her place. Her domain. Her kingdom. It's always been her cave. Her safe place. What was she doing inviting him over?

And, it's as if She can't help herself, "Great. Let's be in touch in a day or so. I've got some things to take care of in the meantime."

"And you don't want any distractions, right?" He says with a bit of a smile.

"Exactly" She replies.

## CHAPTER

The morning was bright, the sky was clear and it hadn't gotten too hot yet as she worked out. Her concentration was deep. She kept her balance as she moved through her routine of stretches, lunges and katas, both open hand and with her small collection of wooden swords and staphs. Breaking a sweat was not unusual, nor uninvited. There was something to the salty taste on the edges of her mouth that was evidence enough that she was working at it. The sun was just clearing the treetops after forty five minutes and she finished her daily routine with a brisk 2 mile run back to her place where she showered and changed into jeans.

As she reached for a pair of respectable boots, her mobile vibrated and despite the caller ID showing "no name", she knew. Opening the text message, she had the names of her lead driver's choice for his team. Grabbing a sweater, she pulled it on and headed to the garage.

By 10AM she was standing in the local Ford dealership, walking between the rows of unsold plain dark colored vans. After a few minutes, a typically overly friendly sales dope approached her.

Within an hour she had arranged for the rental of three identical Ford Windstar minivans. Telling this eager beaver that they were being used as background of a movie being filmed nearby she said she'd need them available by the end of the week.

"If there are two, not three, and if they aren't all identical in year and color, my team won't take them. And if they aren't, you'll join the ranks of the men that have disappointed me, and I'm not interested in adding to that list, But, if they are.....I'll personally slide you a C-note on the side" she said to the young man running the counter.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you. Just tell me, is Ben Affleck involved in the movie? I could have sworn that I saw him the other day...in disguise of course...but I thought for sure it was him. I'd love to meet him. Can you arrange that? You could keep your bonus if I could meet him? Can you do that?" the man said.

"Sure...maybe we can arrange that..." She said, lying through her teeth at his childish ways. And for good measure, she winked at him.

Noontime found her sitting on a stool at The Trackside, a small, really small, local eatery situated behind the District Court building in Peabody, MA. It was a favorite of the Court Officers as it was close. And cheap. Two important factors for any place that catered to the worker bee level of the judicial system. With only ten stools and half dozen duces for tables, if you weren't a regular, you soon became one after your first visit.

She was nursing a cup of mediocre coffee when her almost favorite CO came in and walked up to the counter next to her. In one glance, he realized who she was and his eyes went skyward.

"*Jaysus*", he started, his natural Irish accent as thick as pancake syrup, "why is it, girl, that whenever I see you, I always know that it isn't purely by happenstance?"

"Hey Corky, nice to see you too" She replied. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"Hell no. Can't be seen sittin' with the likes of you in a place like this. You wanna talk? Let's put some hooves on it" he replied

She dropped a five dollar bill on the counter and followed the barrel chested man out the door. At 5ft 10 inches and 210 pounds, his pace wasn't fast, but it sure was purposeful. The jangling from all the professional hardware hanging from his belt set a cadence to his step and alerted everyone around to his presence. There was no way he was going to sneak up on anyone. And while she had no problem keeping pace, she needed more than the three minutes it would take to walk back to the courthouse to get her request out.

"Whatcha be needin' this time out?"

"I need you to run these names and see what floats to the top" She replied as directly to him as he had to her. "I need it by close of business tomorrow" She added as she slipped a piece of paper containing the names that Chip was recommending for the upcoming task in his pocket. Like all good employers, She was wading through the pool of options and checking out their references; the best five got the job. She promised Chip an answer in short order and She was certain to get it. "Use the same email address as before, and watch for an envelope for you at the usual drop spot when you deliver."

Corky's eyes never diverted from looking straight into hers as she pushed the paper into his pocket.

"You are a piece of work, you know that?" He says.

"Yeah, my momma is real proud" she laughed as she walked away.

After she rounded the corner, pulling out her cell phone, she dialed her lead driver up.

"Hey, it's me. Meet me at Hobb's in The Willows at 6pm tomorrow tonight and I'll bring you up to speed on transportation. I'll also let you know which of your candidates makes the grade. Don't keep me waiting. 6pm."

And with that, she slid the phone back into her pocket.

## CHAPTER

No one likes being hit. And sometimes it's better to terrorize someone rather than actually lay a hand on them. Have them think they're going to be hit, sitting with the anxiety that comes along with the anticipation, and you can get more than you ever hoped for from even the toughest egg. Fear is a great motivator.

And when someone owes him money, Dimitri Badenov believes that the best way to get what's owed is to make the debtor fear for his life. Fear enough to deliver what's due, but not so scared that they run away. While he does have a vast network and a far reach, spending the time and effort to chase someone will cut into his profits; and even though he is a killer, he's more of a businessman.

And for that reason, Frank Benson is sitting in a chair opposite him in his office.

Loansharking, racketeering and extortion are not a business where you can just hang a shingle out on the main street of any town, and Boston is no exception here. But tucked away on Causeway Street, just down the block from The TD Bank Garden where the Bruins and Celtics play, up and away on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Dimitri has an unlabeled place to conduct and coordinate his wide variety of operations. It's far enough off the radar, and yet close enough to major highways and Logan Airport that if need be, slipping out of town is a piece of cake.

The office is not impressive, but it's not shabby either. A large heavy wooden desk from the turn of the century acts as its centerpiece. Brought over from Russia by his grandparents, it's a family heirloom, and Dimitri revels in the connection and refers to its origins when chastising both 'customers' and employees about the importance of family history. He uses these references to reinforce that failure to perform or pay is like robbing from his family. Not that he has any. His parents are dead, his brother was killed by a rival organization years ago and while he has many women in his life, most of them hired for the pure pleasure they are adept in bringing, there is no wife, and no kids. He has no illusions of 'feelings' and believes that to be successful in his line of work, you have to be able to walk away from anyone and everything with 5 minutes notice if you have to.

It's not that the room is dark, rather it's darkened. One desk lamp and one on a side table next to the couch that's directly behind Frank is all that illuminates the space, leaving puddles of light here and there. Frank knows there is someone behind him. Maybe more than one, he really can't tell at this point. He knows he was escorted in by one. There are plenty of shadows for people to

stand in. All he saw when he entered the room was Dimitri sitting behind that desk, and a standard leather office armchair directly in front of him.

His escort led him to the chair and with one large hand on his shoulder, firmly sat him down and then backed away two steps. Not gone, and still within arm's reach of this gorilla.

Frank is uncomfortable. He knows he is in trouble. In the past, his money has always kept him out of trouble; he's been able to buy his way out. In the past, it was always chump-change that kept him safe. This time it's different. This time it's lots of money owed....lots. And Dimitri can't be bought off. Dimitri needs to be paid. In full.

"Why do you make me drag you in here?" Dimitri asks. "We've been doing business for quite a while now. Why?"

He pauses for a moment to let the question linger in the air between the two.

"You owe me lots of money, Frank. Lots. " Dimitri continues to say slowly. "And yet...you ignore my phone calls, you miss appointments to make things right...you disrespect me."

Frank stares at him, collecting his thoughts and he begins to perspire.

"I know Mr. Dimitri, I know. And I do want to apologize." Frank responds. "And you are right. We've been doing business for quite a while. And haven't I always paid what I've owed you?"

"Yes, you have...but you've really got yourself in deep this time. \$150,000 is a lot of money. I gave you a long leash. And you've walked out rather far. But now it's time to pull that leash in a bit. You've been out walking a little too long. I want to make sure you fully understand the importance of paying this debt." Dimitri says.

And with that, one of his employees steps out of the dark from behind Frank as the original escort, lunges forward and holds Frank's hands down on the arms of the chair.

"What? What are you doing?" Frank says as he begins to struggle.

"I'm just making a point. I want you to remember that you are not untouchable simply because of your family's vast wealth. No one is untouchable. You need to take this responsibility seriously." Dimitri says as he nods to the goon behind Frank.

The sound of a small blow torch being lit is heard as the gas mixes with the oxygen. The goon steps from behind to stand next to Frank, playing with the valve until it's adjusted and the flame changes to a nearly invisible blue color.

Frank's eyes go wide and his perspiration turns into full on sweat as it pours down the sides of his head and soaks the shirt under his jacket.

"You don't have to do this. I know what I have to do...you don't have to do this", Frank pleads as the goon pulls a 6 inch blade from its sheath on the man's belt.

He holds the blade in front of the torch for a few minutes, as Frank continues to beg.

"You have my word...you know I've always come up with what I owe you!" he frantically says.

"The problem is, that I know you have drained most of the money your mother has given you...I know you are in a tough spot with her right now....She's not willing to bail you out again. Am I wrong?"

"I will get you the money!!!! I'll get you what I owe you and more. But I'm going to need your help." Frank screams as the goon with the blade steps closer and brings the glowing red hot steel closer to the top of Frank's left hand.

"What are you talking about?"

He can feel the heat emanating from the steel inches from his skin.

"Our family has a ton of jewels. I'm saying they're worth more than what I owe you!"

"So, what? Do we look like burglars? We don't do burgling....."

"Look, I owe you 150. Suppose I told you that in one place, you'd be able to lay your hands on close to much more than that amount?"

"Really? And just what would I do to get all this jewelry?"

"In a few days, my mother is going to sell part of what she has. She's been told it's worth 750K. Then the crazy bitch is going to donate it to some friggin' charity. Even fencing it at 50 cents on the dollar, you're looking at over three hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

"And just what are you going to do to get me these goods?"

"I'll get you the where and when of the location of the jewels....and you take care of the rest. You're better at this than I am, right? You do what you do best, take it all and then you and I are free and clear."

"How do I know that I can trust you?"

"You think I'm in any position right now to screw with you? You know I will come through for you. I always have in the past, you know I will."

"Oh I know you will. But I want you to know that I am serious." Dimitri says as he nods. The goon presses the flat side of the blade onto the flesh of Frank's back hand.

The scream is deafening, and it would make a normal person cringe. But the men in this room are not normal. And to them, it's as meaningless as the sound of a kitten purring.

"I want particulars. I want them accurate and I want them yesterday." Dimitri whispers in Frank's ear.

"Get him out of here" he barks.

Frank sobs as he is lifted out of the chair and his shoes drag along the carpet as he is walked from the room.

As the sounds of sobbing fade away, Dimitri asks his muscle man, "What do you think, Slavic? Can we trust him?"

"I trust no one. I say, we take what he gives us, we follow up on it. And if it doesn't prove to be truthful and we end up empty handed, I kill him for you."

"I say, we take what he gives us, we follow up on it, and if it proves to be as he claims, even if it turns out to be half of what he claims, and we get our money, you still kill him."

## CHAPTER

"Good thing you're not late", She says as she pulls the last potato chip from the small bag and pops it in her mouth.

The Willows is an amusement park dating back to the end of the 1800's and is situated at the dead end of a promontory in her town. It's one long strip of storefronts of food and arcade entertainment ranging from the latest digital escapade to more mundane skee-ball sitting opposite a two acre park edged on two sides by natural beaches sitting on the town harbor. Behind it, there's a 12 block square neighborhood made up of summer homes that have been renovated into year-round Victorian styled residences that are so packed together, if you open your living room window, you can water your neighbor's planter boxes with very little effort. You have to want to go there, to be there; you'll never be just driving by it. The Willows is popular with everyone except the yuppies. Old folks love the memories of when they were kids courting by listening to the high school band concerts in the amphitheater, Families like it because it's safe enough that they can give little kids a couple of bucks and they can run free in the Arcade for an hour or so, riding, shooting, playing a wide assortment of both old-school games and the latest high tech video attractions. Teenagers like it for a cheap date. And everyone seems to get along.

She liked to have meetings there because it was public enough with several escape routes should something go south, and yet it was nowhere near as busy as any of the enclosed shopping malls filled with the huddled masses looking to spend their money.

"So? What's up?" Chip asked.

Pulling a slip of paper from her pocket, she handed it over to him.

"Here's your crew. One of them didn't check out so well. He's got an outstanding warrant for Driving Under. The others are fine. Hire them."

"That's it? You had me give up half a shift for this? You could have called me on the phone for this."

"I wouldn't be in this business very long if I did *this* kind of business over the phone, now would I?" she slammed back at him. "My job, my rules. There's nothing new here, Chip."

"Yeah, yeah, I know" he replied as he started to jam the paper into his pocket.

She reached over to him and puts her hand on his arm. "Look at the names" she said.

Chip looked down at the paper, and then back up at her.

"OK...so now what?"

"You don't need to keep that" she said. "You've seen the choices", she adds as she takes the paper back from him and proceeds to pull out a lighter

and set it ablaze before dropping it into the empty Lays bag. Crumpling it with her hands, she extinguishes the flames and drops the bag into a nearby trash can.

"I'll have the vehicles tomorrow afternoon. You have 24 hours to modify them to perform the way you need for this run. But one of them needs to be fitted to be made as comfy as possible, as if for your elderly aunt on a long trip. Oh, and there will be a box with all the secure ComSat hardware you'll need in one of them, as well as a burner phone with one number programmed into speed dial. I'll have one on me at all times so we can be in touch as need be" She says and stands there for a nano-second. Without another word, She turns and begins to walk away.

"It's a pleasure working with you...." Chip sarcastically begins, before she spins on her heels and puts a finger to her lips and giving him that, *don't you dare*, look, just as he's about to mention her name.

She walks down the row of storefronts until she makes a turn between two buildings.

Within moments, the sound of her high powered bike erupts like a volcano from the space before the machine and rider are spit out onto the roadway, as she turns and speeds out of the area.

Chip just shakes his head as he heads to his car.

"What a strange woman" he says to himself.

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Midday, sitting atop a leather stool at The Oak Bar in the Copley Fairmont Hotel in Back Bay, Elizabeth, the daughter, is sipping on one of the most perfect Cosmos in the city.

In Boston history oozes out between the cracks of the sidewalk, The Oak Bar is legendary. Situated inside The Fairmont Hotel, with ceilings that go up two stories, luxurious leather seating at the bar, plush upholstery at the tables for eating, brass and oak warm lighting could make an iguana look pretty. Taking up the corner of the northwest corner of the building on St. James Avenue, it's easy to take in the grand Boston Public Library across the street on one side and Copley Square with its expansive lawn and plaza leading up to the steps of Trinity Church, a gothic structure that dates back to the late 1700s, on the other, through the large windows.

No one would look at her and confuse her for a lunchtime drunk. She is the picture of glamor society. The linen skirt, the silk blouse, the heels and jacket artfully slung over her shoulders, with her legs crossed, her seat pivoted 45degrees outward toward the door for maximum effect to all who enter.

Next to her is a guy who is clearly out of place, despite his efforts to blend in. A sport jacket of questionable origin that should have been sent to the cleaners a month ago that doesn't quite fit right, chinos and relatively clean work boots. As she is a regular at the Oak, Michelle the hostess and Phil the bartender have accorded him the respect that Elizabeth's money brings.

And while she is smiling as she converses with him, she is not pleased with the conversation that is transpiring.

"You cannot just shut down both the Clarendon Street and North End jobs now. They need to be finished and completed on time" she says, annoyance dripping out of her mouth.

"I understand your concerns, Ms. Benson. But please don't talk to me about 'need'. My guys need to be paid, they need to feed their kids, I need to pay my bills. We don't all live the silver spoon life like you do" He shoots back. "You are way way behind on cash flow. I don't want to shut down, but I have other projects that are waiting, and those have financing in place. You need to come up with something to give me."

"How much would you need to keep moving?"

"To keep both projects moving, I figure around four hundred grand."

She takes a sip of her cocktail, never taking her eyes off of him, thinking. He's right. It's not like she really needs the profit that these projects will bring. It's more about cache. It's about firming up her reputation in the architectural and design community. She's getting so close to being the person everyone wants to have. It's about being referred to in the culture publications, It's about being the first name mentioned when it comes to taste and style. It's about acceptance.

At the same time, Elizabeth is thinking about where she can get that kind of money.

Placing her drink down on the bar, she leans forward, places her hand on his arm, in the hopes of softening his position a bit with a bit of old fashioned feminine whiling says,

"Give me a couple of days. I have a couple of resources I'm sure I can lean on."

He smiles, and says, "You're good....really good...but I've been up and down the ladder a few times, been seduced and fucked by the best, but I'll give you a week. If you can't present me with some form of solid cash flow, I'm pulling my guys."

He downs his overpriced craft beer, places the empty glass on the surface, rises off the stool and leaves.

Spinning back to the bar, takes another sip of her cocktail and starts the wheels in her mind turning.

Using her index finger, she spins her cell phone around the bar top. Then she goes through her contacts list until she finds her target. Hitting the button, she signals Phil for one more cocktail. She's very good at multitasking.

"Hi, It's Elizabeth Benson" she says into the phone. "Yes, I've been fine. And you?"

Minor chit chat lasts less than a minute when she says "I'm looking to get a 400K loan, quickly, and for a short term. Only six to seven months. Who do you know that would be interested? Collateral? Sure, I have it. How do you feel about family jewels as collateral?"

## CHAPTER

With just about every piece in place for her project, She feels the need for a distraction. Well, that's not one hundred percent true. Distractions tend to be dangerous in her line of work. She wants to see Him again. In a rare moment of whimsy, She had mentioned that He should come by for dinner at her place. Whimsy or insanity, She isn't sure which, but She does remember offering up the option. To invite him to dinner was problematic on so many levels for her. For so long She has kept this place her cave, her safe place. You could count on one hand the number of people who have been there in the past year. It's a way she's lived, private and alone for as long as she can remember. No chance for anyone to judge anything about her. Her tastes, her likes, her choices of furniture, fabrics, layout, none of that. It's not that She lives like a felon in a bare prison cell. It's not like she doesn't keep a neat and orderly environment. It's not that she lives with a Salvation Army dining room or Walmart living room furniture. She doesn't; her place is decorated well with well made materials. It's just that, with her work and all, She just doesn't entertain that much. If at all. Like so many other parts of her life, She's created a world that fits for her. Fits her needs, fits her personality.

On another level, it gets a bit stickier. The truth is, She doesn't cook. It's not like she can't cook. She can. If she has to. She doesn't have rows and rows of cookbooks on a shelf in the kitchen. She doesn't rip out recipes out of magazines or newspapers. And it's not like she's unknowing of good food. She is. She just hasn't done it for company in a long time.

The other truth is, She isn't just inviting him over for dinner. She wants to take it to the next level. With all that's been in front of her, He was never far from her mind.

Picking up her cell, She holds it in her hand, just looking at it, for what could have been five minutes or it could have been thirty seconds, which is still a long time.

She's staring at more than a phone. She is staring at an abyss. A gap that She's about to cross. She's staring at a portal into another dimension of her life. And while the simple act of inviting someone over for dinner to others shouldn't create such a heightened level of anxiety, or concern, for Her, this is a big step.

She's begun to feel again. She's begun to develop feelings for someone. She's begun to feel emotions, a personal connection. She's been down that road before. More than once. And it wasn't a pretty journey.

She looks at the phone again.

She thinks of Him again.

And this time, a smile creeps onto her face.

She finds his number and taking a breath, she hits: Dial.

As the instrument makes all its technological noises going through its paces to make the digital connection, She, momentarily, considers hanging up. But then, She thinks of Him again. And she thinks about what She feels.

In the nanosecond before the first ring occurs She realizes that She's ready to take that next step. Not only is She ready, She wants to. She wants to experience Him. From the few times they have been together, He has made her feel, in small increments, better than She's felt in a long time. And She wants to feel more, almost blushing at the idea. And then thinking that She hasn't blushed in a while. It isn't like her to blush. Blushing would give away intentions and emotions and She's spent so much time and effort pushing those down deep. Like a good poker player without a tell, not letting on what's really going on inside, mentally, is the only way to win. But this isn't a contest, or a competition. And it's not mental, this is emotional. This isn't cerebral, this evening is going to be about being physical. He may not know it yet, but in her mind, it is.

"Hello?" She hears.

"Hi" She says into the phone. "It's me" She continues.

"Well, hi to you too" He replies simply.

Straight to the point, She figures, taking a cue from all her training, "Would you like to come over for dinner tonight?" She asks.

Without missing a beat, He says, "Not only would I like to, I'm available to as well!"

Quietly, She lets out a long slow breath.

"That's great. Does 6pm work for you?" She says.

With the time agreed upon, She gives him directions and hangs up. And just like with her work, phase one of the project is done. Now, on to phase two; to relax enough to enjoy the evening. Mentally she's going down this checklist and starts to chuckle at herself

~ ~ ~ ~

"So? Did you do a good job protecting the downtrodden while appropriately fleeing the corporate world today?"

He had arrived right on time. The doorbell rang, she checked the security camera mounted outside and there he was. She went down, opened the door and took in the sight of him. She breathed in, smiled a nice broad smile. He returned the gesture easily. Dressed in jeans, and sporting a black button down collared shirt, his leather vest and cleaned up biker boots, She could tell he put some effort into looking presentable. Given that his wardrobe is limited, due to the way he lives and travels, she was duly impressed.

"Wow. You clean up nice" She said sarcastically. "Did you buy that shirt for the occasion?"

"Yeah, I did. You'd be amazed at what people donate to Goodwill these days" He shot back.

She had spent so much time since she had hung up with him preparing for this event. She picked up around her condo, not that it needed it. She isn't one to have three month old magazines or four day old socks, sitting on top of week old jeans piling up on the couch. No mugs with a drink from two nights ago cold and ignored sitting on the floor next to an easy chair. She's just orderly. Not in an OCD way. She just likes things in place. It's easier for her to live this way; it makes sense to her and isn't an effort. It's very normal and natural to her. Ever vigilant about privacy and security, She did a sweep in the second bedroom that served as her office. As she was closing the door, she did a quick visual scan; laptop closed and off, no notes, no loose papers, no file folders were present in sight. Her white board hanging on the wall was turned around and the large colorful poster that was mounted to the backside now showed. Instant Art, if anyone looked in and She knew it would take any one with half a brain and half an hour to find that the other side contained info on whatever project she was working on. At least if someone just happened to peek into the room, it would look pretty benign.

She gathered all the ingredients for a simple meal, laid them out on the kitchen counter or stacked in the refrigerator. Lined them up in the order they would be needed. She was nothing if not organized. This wasn't going to be a night to try to impress with her culinary abilities. There wasn't going to be any night like that in the future if her past had anything to say about it. She's not a cook. She's a combiner of ingredients with the goal of getting something palatable in front of anyone who happens to be at her table. She's not going to get any awards, but then, no one would ever get ill from eating what she concocts. And that's just fine with her.

The rest of the time spent before He arrived was spent getting herself ready. She wanted to show a different side of her to Him. All he has ever seen her in was jeans and riding tops and her leather jacket, that is, if you don't count the workout clothes she wears. She wanted to do something different. After going through all the things in her walk in closet, outfits used for business meetings, casual events, and even some items used when on a surveillance task, She came across and a wrap dress in light cotton, with a floral pattern that was timeless; not vintage, not hip, just something that was flattering. And easy to take off. Tonight, that was a requisite feature.

"So? Did you do a good job protecting the downtrodden while appropriately fleeing the corporate world today?"

She walked into the living room, sat down and crossed her legs slowly, she left one leg exposed and replied: "One job finished up and paid for and I have an appointment tomorrow with a client. I may actually make the mortgage this month.

Dinner with Him was a treat, exactly what She wanted, before she even realized it. Talk bounced back and forth with vague references to what she was working on at the time. Her private security work alternated between boredom and death. In some cases, She'd rather watch paint dry for a living; and other times if she wasn't subduing an unruly interloper she wouldn't feel successful. And while She was careful not to give too much information like client's names or specific situations, it was nice to be able to at least talk candidly, if not a hundred percent honestly, about what she does.

There was also light chatter about whatever it was He had going on, which typically was nothing special, as there was still so much She didn't understand how he spent his days. But the evening was full of talk about plans they both had, and banter about where they would love to ride their bikes to. She felt as happy, as relaxed with another as she ever had in all of her 42 years.

As the simple dinner was finished, She gathered the plates and utensils and loaded them into the stainless steel dishwasher. Before She could turn back to see what else needed to be cleared, He was behind her with one hand around her waist, and the other gently pulling back her hair to reveal that sweet spot on her neck that She loved so much when it was kissed properly. He knew exactly how to kiss it properly. His mouth was warm on her skin and as he applied his lips, She took a deep breath in and just reveled in the passion she was enjoying.

The evening was going just as she wanted it to. And obviously exactly the way He wanted it to as well.

She turned her head and met his mouth with hers to return the attention that was being lavish by him, on him. They eventually turned to face each other as the warmth of each breath and the pressing of their lips became more and more intense.

"Your belt buckle is cold", She said, "It's gotta go" Leading Him into the bedroom She lower the lights to a more romantic level. Within seconds He was bedside, taking his shirt off to reveal his muscular torso.

She opened her dress all the way in breathless anticipation of feeling his skin against hers.

He leaned over her, placing his hands on the mattress on either side of her arms, hovering for a moment, looking deep into her eyes. He eventually bent down far enough to skim her lips, then moved to her neck again, taking his time to enjoy the taste of her skin. After a minute... or twelve, he continued on down her body with his mouth as she lightly moaned her approval.

Holding her close, their passion led them to a wonderful rhythm of movement that brought smiles to them both. Within minutes, easily and happily, what they both craved was reached. Collapsing into a heap of body parts and sweaty skin, they roll to face each other and almost in the same unison that gave them the recent pleasurable explosion, he exclaimed: "Whew! Where'd you learn to do that!"

## CHAPTER

As they lay in the bed, her leg sticks out from the one layer of cotton that almost covers them both. The sweet smell of satisfaction lingers in the air. Night has fallen, the day is not long passed but gone enough that forgetting about it, or at least pushing it out of mind isn't too arduous a task.

Leaning on one elbow facing her as she lies on her back looking up at nothing in particular, he is tracing the outline of her face with his fingers. Rough and scarred digits sliding across skin as smooth as silk, like skating on ice. The faint glow of a single candle lit hours ago barely illuminates the room.

"Tell me about your day" he whispers as she breathes in and out slowly, letting her heart rate return to a more normal pace.

"Oh...just the usual...."

"The usual, as in mayhem, or the usual as in research and recon? At this point, I don't know which way the winds blows in your world."

She smiles at this. She wants to open up to him. But 'want' and 'should' are playing tug of war with her mind. Walking on a tightrope without a net is what it feels like to her. So much of her life is about secrecy and distrust. Always needing to know exactly what to expect around the corner. What she didn't expect was to have feelings for this guy. She knows so little about him; there is so much more to find out about him. Her instincts are strong though, and a feeling of safety rises in her and the desire to connect with him takes over. She breathes in and says,

"I have this new job. It could be a walk in the park, or a trip through the valley of death. I don't really know yet. There's this extremely wealthy eighty plus year old widow, with a ton of gems and jewelry that's being sold to a broker in another city next week. But one of the requirements is that she wants to be present at the sale, so I have to get her and the goods there without a scratch. The task comes off as a simple delivery job...and I made a deal so it brings me a boatload of money, but life is never simple...." She says as the last words trail off into silence.

And so it goes. When it comes to intimacy, there's more than one kind. He and She have begun to cautiously navigate the different pathways. It was a wonderful balancing act perpetrated without a balance sheet. There was no keeping track of who did what for whom this time, or last time, and no waiting for the next time to catch up....there was no catching up. They each accepted what was offered or given or performed each time without any attached or implied need to reciprocate. But they did reciprocate. Not because of a requirement, or an expectation. They reciprocated because they wanted to.

Emotional intimacy was a path that was before her. And She wanted it. She wanted it to be followed along simply, honestly and openly. She wanted it

with no regrets, no jealousy, no competition. She wanted a relationship whereas issues come up, they'd feel comfortable in raising them for discussion. To understand emotional pain was something they both learned years ago. Each had other relationships in the past; ones that succeeded for a while, but not forever. They learned how to deal with accepting love unconditionally, but also knowing that love only lasts if each can shed the pain of disappointment in others and acceptance of all facets of someone's personality.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asks.

She takes another breath and realizes there's a wall here. One they both built. Brick by brick, over time, through each of their past. Not one to take chances, chances are what get you hurt, She hesitates. But without taking chances you also don't know what happiness might be.

"It involves a family and money", She starts.

"... always a dangerous mix," he adds.

"Yeah, there's truth to that...and it's a no-brainer that this widow has more money than is good for any of her kids. From what I've been shown, the son is deep in debt, not sure from what though. The financials show money flowing from the mothers bank account into his at an alarming rate. And the daughter has been raised to think that there's a bush that grows cash in the backyard. There's not a lot of love lost between these kids either.

"I hear ya....not having a responsible outlook when it comes to money is a helluva crutch" he responds.

And she just slowly turns her head to look at him in amazement.

"I like you, you're awfully cute and all, but...where do you, of all people, get off saying that?"

"What do you mean?" he says.

"We haven't known each other for long and in that time, I don't think I've see you put in a day of work since I met you."

"I get by" he replies.

"Uh..yeah...that's about what I'd call it."

"Hey, where's this hostility coming from?"

"It's not hostility...its honesty. Sometimes I just wonder...how *is* it that you actually get along?"

Turning to him, her mood morphed from one of afterglow to one of annoyance in the span of a breath. His question had some legs to it. She wasn't exactly sure where this was coming from. This natural habit of protecting herself kicks in at the oddest of times, She thinks. It's by habit, it's second nature. It's always been with her. While it is thorny, it has helped her get to where she is in life at this point. She's self sufficient. She's independent. She's strong.

"I really treasure our time together, but I've got some history. I've been married, been the major breadwinner. If it weren't for my efforts, there would be

no food on the table, no roof overhead, no cars, no vacations...I didn't like it then, and I won't live like that again."

"And you think that's what's going on here? That I'm looking to ride the gravy train to a life of palm trees and endless cocktails?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know what it is you want. Other than the obvious."

"Wow. That's a bit harsh, don't you think? Don't you think this could be..." and He lets the rest trail off.

"You're going to bring up love? Don't talk to me about love. I don't know what love is. I don't know if it's real. I've had what I thought was love and it's been tested and the results aren't pretty."

Realizing that the waters they've just waded into run far deeper than He expected, his mind turns to the full marathon of possibilities of finding out more about Her. Because He wants to know her.

Her mind is racing faster than a speeding train, and she is starting to question her own motives and methods. He's right, where did this hostility come from? Why was she attacking him when all she thought she wanted was to know him. She was about to speak, to make light of the whole issue, as a way of avoiding the problem for the time being, until she could regroup, rethink and research Him some more. Giggle, roll over and be coy; that usually worked with other guys. And just as she's about to, He says

"Tell me about your husband...."

Boom. A big question. Direct. There's no avoiding it now.

"Which one?"

## CHAPTER

Boom. A big question. Direct. There's no avoiding it now.

"Which one?"

"How many have you had?"

"Does it matter? Is one number better than another? Is two better than four?"

"I'm not sure I'm going to like where this is going..."

The last words hang in the air as if He could see them. He almost wanted to reach out, take them down and put them back.

"Two"

"Two what?"

"I've had two husbands so far"

"So far?"

"Well, I'm not dead yet."

"Do you have a wife?" She fires back, already knowing the answer, but wanting to gauge his answer.

"No, but I'm hopeful."

"Hopeful about what? The concept of a successful marriage? For me, married life was like walking around in shoes that almost fit, wearing them every day despite the blisters that they gave me."

"And what about fate? Do you believe in fate?"

"I've lived for a while now, and the one thing I've learned is, fate doesn't get to decide everything. People get to choose."

"Don't you believe that there is a right person out there for everyone?"

"About as much as I believe that I can pick this week's winning lottery number."

"You're not a very positive person, are you?"

"I'm positive that I woke up this morning, but beyond that, no...."

"That's a shame"

"Why?"

"Being positive is healthy"

"I am healthy. I run 3-5 miles a day, I train in martial arts, I eat well, I don't drink to excess...."

"I'm talking mental health"

"That's a can of worms and you know it. What's mental health, once you get away from schizophrenia, bi-polar and manic depression? I mean, they're the tough ones."

"A good outlook on life is important"

"A good lookout on the roof is more important"

"Why does everything come down to protection with you?"

"Don't knock it, it's what's kept me alive. And you like it that I am alive, right?"

"That's true"

"Why do you care about husbands?"

"I think partners say a lot about a person"

"Yes they do...whether you want them to or not"

"So?"

"Not going to happen"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if I tell you that after husband number one and I got married, he ignored me for days at a time, except when he wanted to be fed or fucked, and I stayed with him for a few years out of basic insecurity until I finally realized that I was meant for something better. And what if I tell you that husband number two beat me on every day that had a "t" in it for 11 months before it ended? That creates a certain personality stage for you to place me on that may or may not be based in reality"

"But it gives me some place to start."

"All it gives you is a diving board into a pool of assumptions"

"But it's a start"

"This. This is a start. This bed, this room, this time is all the start I am interested in"

"God, you're a cold one sometimes"

"And yet....here you are...with a smile on your face and the memory of what will probably be one of the best lays you'll ever have"

"And confident too...my my"

"Save your *'my mys'* for when its worth something"

"Yeah well, I'm not them. I'm not your husband. In fact, I'm neither one of them. I'm here because I choose to be here, because I want to be here. I'm not looking for a free ride. I have a place of my own, a world of my own out there. The difference is, I don't need you. I want you. This,... here," he says as he points back and forth between the two of them, "this is by decision, not by chance and not by design."

"Yeah, well, maybe sometimes it doesn't feel that way. Sometimes, it doesn't look that way. I feel like there's this wall up. I don't know where you live"

"You know where I live. Currently it's a 35ft sailboat up on stilts in a marina. It costs me nothing 'cause my being there saves the marina the cost of overnight security. Plus, I don't own it. It's not mine."

"Well there's a metaphor for you. Living on someone else's boat sitting up on dry land."

"Look, I don't have the stability of living situations that you have. And it's not because of the financial end of things. It's by choice, not by circumstance. I like my life now that way. Is that a crime?"

"I'm sure it's not a crime, but it is damned convenient."

"Convenient for who? There's barely room to bend down to put a pair of socks on without bumping my head on a wall. I have no idea how long I'm going to be needed there. And I'm ok with that. But god forbid I even mention that I like being here, with you, in this space, you take it as I'm trying to latch on. And you get very hinky....like you are now."

"I just won't be taken advantage of again", She says. "Maybe there's that 1% of the time that I want to feel protected, instead of always protecting."

"OK. I hear that. Now you hear this. I really like you. But if you don't trust me, don't trust what I feel, don't trust in what you feel....what's the point? You say you want protecting sometimes, but you keep an arm's length between us."

He gets up, and pulls his pants on, and then his t-shirt, as he reaches for his boots.

"You want protecting. I can get my head around that. It's part of human nature. But you also enjoy the fact that with your training you can probably toss me down on the floor. But then talk about protection? I don't know, baby....I don't know."

She looks at him from the bed. Not wanting to say a word. Not knowing what words to say. Her breathing is the only sound she is making. The fine line that's being walked hurts. She wants to trust him. She wants something to work out for her.

She feels like there is an anchor around her ankle and the other end is held by her past. A past that wasn't perfect. A past that molded her. No one can truly escape their past. You can only hope to live through it, live beyond it. Take from your past, live your present, and plan your future. Sometimes the best map will not guide you, sometimes it just leads you to dark places. Sometimes it works out. Sometimes it doesn't. It sure wasn't looking like it was going to work out at this point. She was letting her innate distrust in not knowing everything about him, not being able to find out enough about him, to make her feel vulnerable. And she didn't like that feeling at all.

He looks at her, wanting her to contribute something to this craziness. And it looks like, more than once, she's about to say something...but it's the silence that endures. A silence hangs between them like a thin shower curtain; you can still see through, but what's on the other side isn't clear.

"We'll talk" He says "but right now, I gotta go" as he walks out of the bedroom. Through the hall, down the stairs. The front door closes, not with a slam, but with a finality that cuts as sharp as any knife.

She stays in bed, pulls the covers up around her and stares straight at the ceiling as the sound of his motor from down the street rattles deep into her bones. It's a sound that cuts, a feeling that slices and a loneliness sets in that's as deep as the exhaust tones. The sound slowly fades, but the emotions don't.

Sure, She justifies, she's strong. She's self sufficient, she's independent. But now, She's alone. Again.

Tears well up in her eyes, as she draws in a deep breath. And in two minutes, she's wiping her eyes on the pillow next to her, taking in his scent left behind, embedded in the fabric, pulling strength from within, clawing at her soul to regain level ground, wanting to believe that what she had done was the right thing.

## CHAPTER

Sometimes, even the rumblings of a high powered V-twin beneath Him can't soothe the tension, the hurt, the uneasiness that resides in his soul. He knows. He's used moto therapy before. Put a hundred miles between you and your problems and the world starts to look better. Put a thousand, and problems just become mists of memory. Twisting the throttle, splitting lanes, running red lights in the dark, just didn't do it this night.

Behind the apehanger handlebars, He let his mind wander, always dangerous for some, but to him, riding is as second nature as breathing. As second nature to him as caring about Her has become. He grasps for a reason why he didn't just tell her.

Love is a word that is sometimes spouted out far too easily in this world. Love you...air kisses...you see it all the time. It's added to the end of just about every digital message sent: 'xoxox'. >insert heart emoji<, add a GIF to a text. But real love is harder to find. Real love is earned, through time and deed. It's a gift to give, it's a treasure to receive and He believes that it shouldn't be squandered on the undeserving. And He wanted to be deserving of hers, just like She, in his mind and heart, was coming to the point of deserving of his.

The distaste of her turning on a dime with him hit hard, beyond mere words. He wouldn't take that from anyone else. He never has. People who turn on him typically regret it. It's been more than once, maybe closer to a dozen times, that He's woken up the following morning having to re-clean and re-bandage the knuckles on both hands.

With Her it was different. There was no doubt in his mind, it wouldn't take a fraction of a second thought, he would never raise a hand to her. Not in a million years, not in a nanosecond. That kind of violence just isn't in him. And it had nothing to do with the fact that She could take him down in a heartbeat. Not because She was trained either. He was a fighter, but not skilled. Not that She could out-shoot him; he had no problem making a tight three shot pattern on any target. With Her, it was the first time in all his years that he felt he had found someone who didn't demand, or expect, respect. She earned it. Every day, with almost every breath and every step she took. In the world he occupied, Respect, uttered with a capital R, was revered and referred to frequently. And She earned it every day. He learned that from day one with her.

Thirty seconds turned to thirty minutes and before knowing, He had traveled thirty miles. He realized that he couldn't bring himself to go to where he was living. Maybe She was right; it was a hell of a metaphor. He doesn't even know how to sail. He found himself pulling into the parking lot of his newest favorite bar. It was a place that had the atmosphere of just about a thousand other bars in just about every state. No name worth remembering, no decor

worth reviewing. It didn't serve up fancy cocktails with cute sounding names, nor was the kitchen so creative or talented that people beat down the door to put their names on the list to get a seat. It's the kind of place you walked in and sat down. And that was it. With a little luck, He would make it inside in time for last call.

Entering and finding the place about as empty as he expected, he took a seat in the middle of the bar, and before he had a chance to even speak, a drink was dropped down in front of him. Looking up, he just nodded at Harry, the owner who backed away without saying a word. Like all good bartenders Harry knew how to read the silent signals and gauged when to interact and when not to. This was clearly one of those 'not to' times. After the same Jack on the rocks sat in front of him so long that it was more like bourbon flavored water, He realized it wasn't the drink he was after, it was a feeling like he belonged. Belonged somewhere. And despite the fact that he wasn't born around the corner, this place just filled a need.

And that was when He recognized that he even had a need. Needing wasn't something he was comfortable with. It wasn't something he was used to. But, yet, there it was.

A need that He had come to know from her.

But, like an hour earlier when He knew he had to leave, He knew it was time to hit the road. His elbows hurt from leaning on the bar, and Harry wasn't much in the mood for idle chit chat, he probably wanted to go home.

~ ~ ~ ~

Her workout the following morning was probably the sloppiest She's had in a long while. Kata forms didn't flow, her breathing was wrong and She gave herself a nice little bruise on her upper forearm when spinning her bow went haywire and when she missed a passing grasp for the polished wood resulted in it slamming down hard. She stopped more than once, cursed herself for her ineptitude and began to center her mind again.

A foundation of self awareness is being conscious enough to know when to stop. *'You can't run a cat up a slack rope'* her sensei taught. In the dojo, in practice, if it's not working, there comes a time to step away. "If push has come to this, then this must be shove" wrote Ani DiFranco.

Returning home brought very little comfort. The orderly sparseness of her space normally brought some peace. Not this time. All She felt was conflict. And frustration. And anger. In herself. It was as if she could smell the fear oozing from her pores. Fear of losing what might be a good relationship. She disliked fear. Fear put her off balance. She was not centered. She had to get into a routine to bring her back around again. She knew that. She knew that to head to

the garage, fire up her Bike and hit the road to clear her head was the wrong way to go. Getting on a high powered machine, mixing in with traffic in pursuit of an empty road and a wide landscape to focus was a recipe for an accident. She knew that too. Training didn't work. Riding was out of the question, so She turned to the only activity she does best. She went back to work.

Picking up the phone and dialing, She connects with another woman, part of her network of support workers. Over the years, she's collected people from all walks of life. People that she can call on for small, incidental tasks of importance. People she can rely on to take on a job and deliver without excuses. The list isn't long, but it's well built.

"Hey Didi, it's me. Yeah, it's been a while. How've you been?" The conversation starts easily and quickly turns to business.

"Are you available? I have two targets that need watching next week. Morning time, early straight through mid afternoon. Can your sister tag in? They'll be in separate locations.....Yeah? Great!.....two fifty each, does that work?.....I can Venmo payment the morning of.....get burners out of the money...cheap ones...terrific....I'll text you the specs about exact day and targets in a few....yeah. OK. Take care" and just like that, the conversation is over.

The next phone call is to her contact at The Law Firm. Having the private cell number makes going through the labyrinth of receptionists, admin assistants, or paralegals a non issue that She always negotiates up front. The added plus of not having any of these calls logged by the client also guarantees a certain sense of independence that She demands.

"Good Morning. Thanks for taking the call." Always polite and proper at the outset She sets the tone of the interaction. There's time for it to turn more confrontational at a later point if need be, She believes.

"What can I do for you?" the Lawyer replies, knowing not to use her name. Also part of the protocol She established.

"I need to review the material involved in our current project" She says.

"And why is that?" the lawyer questions.

"Two simple reasons. First, as I am being contracted to ensure safe delivery, I have the right to examine them. Secondly, I want to put the contents into containers of my choosing, having my security systems for them in place." She replies.

Continuing, She says: "I will be at the client's location tomorrow afternoon to do the preparation. Please advise them accordingly."

"Very well" the lawyer replies.

"The cases will remain with the client until the day of departure. You and the client will remove them from the client's safe and I will meet you at the end location and provide you with the ability to open them at the appointed time. Any questions?"

"No. You are very thorough, if not a bit heavy handed with the cloak and dagger machinations" the lawyer says.

"All part of the service, which you seem to be continually satisfied with" She shoots back.

"Yes, you're right. Very satisfied."

## CHAPTER

His motor starts soon after the rest of the world has gotten to the office. There's no point in sitting in commuter traffic if you don't have to. And he didn't have to. Topping off his tank at a filling station close to the highway and taking time to do a last minute shakedown check to see if any of the extra baggage that has been tied on will fly off at high speeds, He was confident all was well. It's a good check, and not enough riders do this. It's a click to turn on the ignition, a push of a button and thunder roars in the open air as the motor comes to life. Pulling in the clutch lever, a quick tap on the shifter peg, and that all familiar sound of 'clunk' and the Harley is in first gear. Throttle up, clutch out, and the large machine moves onto the asphalt.

Not a word was spoken between them since he walked out. A thousand times He picked up the phone to call. Another thousand times He got on his Bike to ride over and stand at her door. Then He stopped. Stupid stubbornness, Pride, Ego...whatever the psychology professionals tag they hang on it, He stopped. And he knew he was being stupid, prideful, egotistical. But what do they say in therapy? Knowing is the first step to acceptance. He never was in therapy, but he read about it on a bathroom wall. Or at least that's what he told himself. Still, he did nothing. He was once told, *'no decision is still a decision whether you like it or not'*. After being 'a guy' for days, He finally called and She, to his surprise, picked up.

When the caller ID showed "MysteryMan", it took her by surprise. She wasn't sitting around pining for Him, but she was glad it was Him.

"I'm not ready to give up. I want to show you something" He had said over the phone four days earlier.

"You say I put up walls. That you don't ever really feel like you've been let in. I want to fix that."

"What do you have in mind?" she replied.

"Can you clear your calendar for three days and pack for that amount of time? Plan on being in the saddle for a few hours the first and last day. I don't want to say more than that right now."

"And this is going to get me...what?"

"It's going to get you on the other side of the wall. If you're still interested."

She was. The silence between them since He walked out the door bothered her. While she had lots of work to do, planning, reviewing, revising the plan with her current job, He was never far from the center of her mind. Always lingering there, like a reflection in the mirror you catch for a moment, but when you turn to look, it's gone. And in that quiet, in between her real work, she did more research trying to find out more about Him.

"Where and when?" was her only reply.

Heading west northwest at 10am means that the sun was on his back. No squinting to start the day off. Easy on the eyes for sure. By the time he'd get to his first major turn, heading more north than west, the sun would be warming him and still not be in his eyes. Every ride should be so well planned out.

Within 30 minutes on Interstate 93, He realizes that She has kept her promise. They have just over a three-hour ride ahead, and He was looking forward to it. It's more than a full tank of gas for the average bike. But the best part of any journey, of all journeys, is the chance to stop once or twice, to stretch your legs, soak in some of the local sunshine and personality. That's what makes it a journey, not a trip. In time, there will be stops. but right now, it'll be all about throttle, clutch, throttle, feel the motor beneath, the air as it whips around you as you gain speed.

Under an approaching overpass, a biker sits, motor running, in the breakdown lane, staring into a rearview mirror, looking down onto the highway. As He approaches, He downshifts, and as his speed decreases slightly, the other rider accelerates and slides into the highway and within moments is riding parallel to him in the same lane. They twist throttles and settle into a familiar side by side riding position as if connected by a steel rod. It's not hard to do. Some who ride together prefer it this way, rather than staggered slightly behind, visible in the rearview mirror, but you have to trust your partner; you need to understand the way they think, you need to know the way they ride, the way they would react given traffic, road surface, weather. It's like dancing; asphalt dancing. It's intuitive, and natural. Not a power play, not a test. It's the ultimate in partnership, for at this speed, one miscalculation can cost each of you dearly. He turns his head for a moment, and at 70mph, She casually nods at him. His smile in return is as broad as the sky above.

The next hundred miles are spent on a two-lane highway that winds up and around the mountains of central New Hampshire and Vermont. Ten-mile views down into valleys from the smooth roadway as it crests the top never gets old, no matter what the season or time of day. Dense green foliage and bright blue skies are the rule here this time of year. Not a word was shared. It's not possible at that speed. But neither felt alone. There is a connection that riding together creates that is like no other experience.

Just before the black ribbon of a highway crosses the Connecticut River, He raises his right hand high to get Her attention and wags his finger at the upcoming exit. Down the ramp, She falls behind to follow through the traffic light at the bottom and the two machines pull into the parking lot of the 4Aces Diner. They slot their machines next to the front door and slide into a booth by the window. After a couple of hours in the saddle, a diner stool is the last place either one of them wanted to be. A booth allows them to stretch out.

## CHAPTER

Settling in, the waitress swung past and instinctively dropped two mugs and menus in front of them. "Milk for either of you?"

"Actually, could I get tea, please?" she said.

Sometimes, caffeine, in whatever form, and a club sandwich are the best fuel a biker needs; simple, fast, easy and filling.

Strange how sometimes, after being together, roaring along side by side, the wind screaming in their ears, and not having said one word to each other you'd think conversation would flow like, well, like the coffee pouring out of the machine behind the counter opposite them. But no. not this time.

As soon as He said be ready for a ride of three to four hours She started calculating the possibilities. Heading south would have put them close to New York City. Southwest, would have put them in PA. Direct west would have put them in the Hudson River Valley near Albany, and so on and so on. But the minute he told Her where to join him on the highway, She realized they'd be heading Northwest. And they had been since they left. Taking this break as maybe a halfway point in the time frame making it three and half hours of travel, at an average of 70mph put their destination 227 miles away. More or less. Not that she calculated this out. Given the time and the direction of their current travels, unless He made a radical left or right turn, they'd be in the center of the Green Mountains by mid afternoon.

"I'm really glad you came" He started. "I've missed you"

"I'm glad you called" She replied. Not ready to say the same. Defenses still up, trust not near the surface yet.

"You holding up ok?" He asks.

"Not a problem keeping up." She says. Again, not giving an inch. Not yet.

"The views are tremendous, aren't they?" He adds, trying to break the ice.

"Do you know the mountains by name?" thinking the answer might be a clue as to how well he knows the area. Always searching for information, gaining an edge. Even now. When she's trying so hard to trust him.

"No, not all. Just some."

Cat and mouse, still. A game they both played well. Maybe too well.

"I've missed you too" She finally says.

Lunch finished with not much talk and soon, bladders emptied, gas tank re-filled, the bikes left the diner behind and the speedometer dial was rapidly moving its way into the upper digits again and the highway tango continued.

Somewhere north of the capital of Vermont, traffic that was already severely lighter than what She was used to in the Boston area got even more sparse. Signs indicated Burlington was another 45 miles. Checking her watch,

doing some quick math, it fit into the timeframe He outlined. But when he raised his hand to signal an exit again, she was lost.

The next twenty minutes of road were so unlike the last three hours. This pavement was pure New England, as if pulled from the pages of an official Department of Tourism pamphlet. One lane in either direction, smooth asphalt with gravel shoulders. This route wound past many an open field, edged in low rock walls patterned with light green moss and lichen, pulled from the ground when the trees were cut down to make way for plantings or pastures. Parts of the land was fallow with scrub brush, others were like huge lawns of green grass that scores of livestock grazed on. Since coming off the interstate, other than a filling station, there wasn't a business to be had. Around a bend, a large lake came into view. Looking to be nearly two miles long and oval in shape, small mountains rung the sides and far end from where they were. As they passed, She noticed a small store that sat close to the water's edge; the kind that sells everything from nails to vegetables to meat to toilet paper. "Elmore General Store" said the half faded sign hanging over the steps that led up to the covered porch that you had to cross to get inside.

Without warning, He swung his bike to the right, and she instinctively followed onto a packed dirt road that ran closer to the lake. The ride was less smooth as this wasn't paved, and she was grateful that it was past mid spring as the town had already sent a grader along to smooth out all the ruts that a long hard Vermont winter and the following mud season would have created. Later on in the summer, the road would become drier, and with her current riding position slightly behind him, the dust level would be horrible.

Along the way, there were houses on their right, between the road and the lake. None too close together, and all looked as though they had been there for generations. Some in better condition than others, and but all appeared to be in good shape.

She heard the downshift of his motor before she saw the brake light shine, and he slowed to a near stop before turning into one of the driveways. The maneuver was a sharp 180 degree turnaround for them, and a short decline. She mirrored his movements and pulled up parallel to him just short of a garage in front of them. He kills the ignition switch and kicks the stand down with his heel. As she does the same, he pulls off his helmet and takes a deep breath in.

The house to their left is modern, not a cabin or a shack, with clean, sleek lines and She can see it is well maintained. There are no windows on the road side of the building, save one, and that's just fine as the garage blocks any view to or from the road anyway. There is an 8ft high wooden fence that runs out from the sides to create the illusion of a much larger presence. To the left of the building, there is a door built into the fence to gain entrance. As the structure is on the incline, it sits slightly below the level of the dirt road that they just left.

The driveway is a cup handle affair between the road and the house, with a single car garage sitting in the middle of the path. There are overhead doors on either side of the structure; you can arrive and leave without having to back up. Its design matches that of the house. A lot of thought has gone into this property.

She, too, shuts down her machine, swings a leg over and dismounts. Pulling her helmet off, She realizes that his deep breath was not one of resignation, but more the opportunity to take in the sweet fresh mountain air.

"Holy crap, the smell is amazing" she says.

He smiles, and without saying a word, he walks to the door and pulls a latch, and looking over his shoulder, as if to say *well, are you coming?*, walks through.

## CHAPTER

"Is this your place?" She asks.

"Well, technically, it's owned by a real estate trust. It has been in my family for years, and when the last of them died, it came to me. The building was really just a three season cottage. With the money in the trust, I rebuilt it. I plan on renting it out from time to time, when I won't be here."

*More facts*, She thinks. At least this tidbit of info can give her a starting point.

"Well? Are you coming?" He finally says.

As she follows, she finds herself on a small wooden platform, with a stairway descending to the lake, as an attempt to walk down the hill would result in more of a slide into wetness. At the bottom, a dock reaches out into the water.

"Wow, that's a long way down" she comments.

"39 steps"

"As in the Alfred Hitchcock movie?"

"When I was building them, I did the math and figured out I could make it work, just for fun."

"So you do math...for fun?"

"No, not the math, the symbolism, as an inside joke. So, yeah, I guess you could say it was for fun."

"You are really strange."

He turns and enters a code into the lock on the door and it pops open. It's dark inside and She realizes it's due to the floor to ceiling curtains that hang along the entire lake side length of the building. He walks through the space confidently, knowing where each potential obstacle would be and when he makes it to the far side of the room, he draws back the drapes uncovering a wall of sliding glass doors and the sunlight pours in. Like unveiling a work of art, the illumination reveals the layout within.

A large room is to her left, down one step, to mimic and follow the shape of the hillside. There's a dining area with a table to easily seat six, and a living room area with an "L" shaped sectional with one side creating a casual separator between the two. That one side faces a full length natural colored brick wall with a fireplace. The other side faces out to the water. There's a four foot high wall that, except for the stairway down to it, separates those spaces from a hallway that leads deeper into the house. To her right is an open kitchen of modern design with clean lines, sparse details.

He walks back up from the windows and past her. Opening a cabinet on the far right wall of the kitchen, he throws a heavy duty switch.

"Electricity" he says. "I don't run anything when the place is empty. It'll take about 45mins before we have hot water. The 'fridge should be down to temp in an hour.

Heading down the hallway, he hits a switch and a couple of recessed bulbs come on. She notices that there are three more rooms down that end of the house. He gets to the end of the hallway and swings a painting on the wall out and reaches into the cavity there.

"Propane" he calls out. "I have a shut off valve here to prevent any possibility of a gas leak and explosion when I'm not here."

She walks down and on the right side there's a guest room and a full bath. On the left, also a step down, there's a massive master bedroom. He is already in it, pulling back another set of drapes, exposing the same sliding glass door wall, and the same lake view as from the other room. The fireplace is double sided. The heat and atmosphere created by the flames can be enjoyed from either room. Of course the bed is facing out to the world to take in the beauty of the view, as well. The other wall is outfitted with closets and storage.

"This is amazing. It must really impress your guests"

"I've never brought anyone up here before"

Stunned, she stands there for a minute.

"You're telling me no one has seen this before"

"Other than the plumbers and electricians, and oh yeah the roofer...but I wouldn't count him, he only saw the outside. I guess you'd have to count the guys who help me carry in the furniture and the appliances..."

"Oh stop!" she laughed, "you know what I mean"

"No. No one. There hasn't been anyone I've wanted to share this with until now."

"Oh yeah, then why the guest room?"

*'Always distrusting'* she thought to herself. *'Even now, as he is opening up, you are always questioning....'*

"When I drew up the plans, I needed to get a licensed architect for the building permit. That was the architect's idea. She suggested the guest room. Said it would add resale value in the long run, and make the master bedroom bigger, if I was going to keep the footprint symmetrical."

She turned away, headed down the hall and into the living room. It was then that she noticed the deck that ran across the entire length of the house. It was nearly a three story drop down to the sloping ground. Unlocking one of the doors, she stepped out and on to the surface. The sounds of gentle lapping of water against the dock, coupled with the wind slowly blowing through the trees nearby was almost magical. Again, She took in a deep breath of the clean mountain air. Closed her eyes and tilted her head back.

He slid his arms around her waist, and her hands rested easily on them as he lightly kissed her neck.

"I was hoping you'd like it".

It was the first physical interaction they had in over a week, since he walked out. After She turned on him. She surprised herself as she took it in gladly. It wasn't overbearing, like the first step in a major seduction episode. More lovingly. A nice icebreaker.

"What's not to like?" She replied, meaning both the location and the kiss.

And they stood that way for a minute, or seven, soaking in the view until he quietly stepped back.

"Not to break this spell, but we have to get supplies. I don't stock anything here."

"Not even toilet paper?" she teased.

"Sorry, not even toilet paper. We'll head down to the store and pick up what we need."

"As good as we are, we're not going to be able to carry much on the bikes"

"Oh, we won't be using them. Come on." He said as he bounded through the living room and out to the front door.

By the time she caught up with him, the garage door had been rolled up and there sat a not quite new, not really shiny deep green 1985 Jeep CJ5. The doors were off and hanging on the inside walls of the garage, and the soft top had been peeled back.

"I thought of nicknaming it, *My Mule*, but that seemed like such a cliché. And then I went through all the romance language translations of 'mule', trying to be clever....but in the end, I figured *Jeep* was good enough."

"You really are really strange. You know that?" she said, climbing into the passenger seat.

He pushed a remote door opener attached to the dash, and a door on the other side of the garage slowly rumbled up. He started the engine, pushed in the clutch, shifted into first and drove out and up onto the road. Turning left, he headed back in the direction they came and bounced along the same road and quickly came back to that small general store with its wooden porch and overhead sign with its slightly faded paint lettering that they passed earlier.

## CHAPTER

Walking up the steps and through the door was like going back in time to a simpler way of life. It felt like the operation hadn't changed in 100 years. The wide board wooden floor was worn smooth and light in color where people have been treading up and down the aisles. With the porch overhang in front, even with the large display windows fronting the building, the interior wasn't bright like a Safeway Supermarket is. Lights still hung from the ceiling in singular bulb fixtures, six or eight feet apart creating pools of light on the merchandise. The aisles ran away from the entrance, four rows across, like long parallel lanes on a highway. The inventory was not vast; there weren't twelve offerings of toothpaste and two dozen types of bread for sale. Proof that life up here was simpler. There was enough to choose from.

As He grabbed a metal shopping cart just inside the door, She couldn't help but notice that if it were in a different environment, it would be called antique, vintage or collectible and carry a three digit price tag. Here, it was just normal.

Without a list, they cruised up and down the aisles, dropping items in as the wheels squeaked along. Two single rolls of toilet paper; they didn't sell 12 rolls shrink packed together here. Two rolls of paper towels, a package of dinner napkins, half dozen eggs, a quart of milk, four rolls fresh from the bakery, some green vegetables, one or two pieces of fruit, two kinds of local cheese. She walked up and down the aisles, marveling at what used to be a common place to get provisions. Time and economics had changed all that years ago. She noticed the thoughtfulness in his purchases; being in the house for only a few days, why buy more? The staff was friendly, not overly friendly, no one referred to him by name directly, and He didn't either when talking to them. He could have been anyone, or no one to them. At checkout He paid cash.

She noticed. *Nothing traceable*, She filed that away.

After backing the Jeep down the driveway and into the garage, He put their purchases away. They both went back to the bikes, off loaded whatever clothes they brought, and pushed the machines into the garage squeezing them in behind the jeep. Back in the house, they dropped what little clothes they had brought in the bedroom.

"I thought a shower first is in order, then some dinner would be a good plan. I'm not sure about you, but the idea of heading back out to eat tonight after riding isn't high on my list" He says.

"I'll bet the sunsets here are fantastic" She replies by way of agreeing with his plan. She heads to one of the sliding doors and steps out onto the deck.

"West is to your right and at this time of year, the sun goes down between the two mountains at that end of the lake" He says.

And as if on cue, the faint sound of church bells rang out, signaling the hour.

"Our Lady of The Lake is on the north edge" He informs her.

And if that wasn't enough, the deep tone of a completely different bell was calling from the other direction. It chimed only once.

Smiling he says, "That's the Tibetan temple on the south west side. They ring out only once, on the hour. There's something in that group's teachings about noting the passing of time, but not the measurement of it. That's why there's only one bell sounding."

As the sounds fade, He says, "You first" as a way of indicating it was her turn to shower. "The water should be hot by now."

Thankful for the chance for even a small bit of alone time, She heads down the hall and into the bedroom to peel off her riding clothes. Despite the full wall of glass that faces the lake, and the vulnerability it presents, she doesn't hesitate to undress.

Padding across the hall to the bathroom, she starts the water running. The shower head is one of those modern 'rain' styles, not like a fixture from any of the Marriott's she has stayed in. The water falls from the wide stainless steel perforated disk that hangs in the center of the stall. The walls of the shower stall are large light gray slate tiles and there is a skylight directly overhead. The floor of the stall is a slotted wooden platform for the water to drain through. The effect is as if She was standing under a waterfall.

In the kitchen, he spreads out a large uneven circular layer of dough, kneading it out, spreading it and starts to make a homemade pizza. Using local tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella and because they were in Vermont, local cheddar. Some red peppers and onions and suddenly, He has the beginnings of a great meal. From the cabinet below the counter, he pulls a bottle of red wine that has been lying there from his last visit, pops the cork, giving it a chance to breathe, and sets it on the counter. Taking a head of iceberg lettuce, he cuts huge wedges and drizzles some olive oil and balsamic vinegar on top and then adds crushed black pepper across the plate. Just like when he is working on his bike or any other activity that he takes on, it is done with precision and thought. Lots of thought. He learned long ago and has lived his life with the philosophy that nothing happens by chance.

She walks down the hall, wrapped in a deep blue colored fluffy, slightly oversized bathrobe and watches him for a moment or two.

Trying not to sound too accusatory, She asks, "I suppose this is for the guests you say you never bring?" tugging on the collar of the garment. Another crack in the wall of trust begins in her head.

Looking up, "Umm....that's mine, actually" He replies sheepishly.

She scrunches up her face, in an effort to be both cute and hide the awkward feeling running rampant through her emotions, inwardly feeling a slight burn of embarrassment at his reply.

"You wanted me to open up" he says. "You wanted to be let in. Now you know I like fluffy bathrobes."

"Not really what I was thinking, but not a bad first step either" she replies. She turns and heads back to the bedroom.

"Don't change on my account" He calls toward her.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm sure I'll be wearing it again before we leave."

"Oh good" He murmurs to himself.

She retreats to the bedroom, zips open her bag, pulls out a simple sweater and fresh jeans as he enters.

"My turn" He says from behind as he strips off his clothes and haphazardly but neatly folds them and drops them on the bed. Padding across to the bathroom, She watches his naked body and smiles.

## CHAPTER

As His shower water runs, She heads to the kitchen and begins to rummage through the cabinets for set ups for dinner; plates, utensils, glassware and heads to the dining area table. She builds the place settings so they can both take in the view.

Within minutes, He arrives back in the kitchen.

"Oh, I see you've made yourself at home" He teases.

"Yeah, well, I'm used to taking care of myself. Hope you don't mind" She says.

"Not a problem. I'm pretty much the same way. Except in restaurants and surgery suites, I'm not all that comfortable with people doing things for me."

"I get it." She says. "Hotels are about the only place that I let someone else 'do' for me. B&Bs are different. I typically end up making my own bed in a B&B."

"My problem is, I like doing for others, doing for strangers mostly."

"Is that your only problem?" She teasingly says.

"Hell no. Get a pencil and paper, my list is going to be long" He laughs.

"Looking forward to it" She replies.

And truth be known, She really is. So many years of protecting herself, being an island far from other land, She has learned to live for herself, by herself. She's felt after her years of being open and the pain that came from being taken advantage of, the only path to survival was to put up bricks all around herself. Create boundaries and barriers. Protection. She'd let people peek, but not many in recent years have been let inside.

After a simple dinner, the few dishes and utensils are cleaned and put up to dry. The conversation since then has been quite sparse. And this was by choice. She wanted to just be in the moment with him. It had been a long day and there were only so many questions that had been asked, with so many more that needed to be. But not now. Now was the time to just be. And She was ready for that. Not that She let her guard down, nor was She falling into a space of complacency. No, this was almost like a truce; a safe place to rest from all the relationship issues that were ahead of them.

She wanders out onto the porch, and in a few moments, He joins her. In the early twilight of a warm country summer evening, the peepers and frogs have begun to serenade, surrounding them with a quiet symphony of nature's sounds.

He reaches out his hand and she takes it willingly, but cautiously still, not knowing exactly where this next move was going to take them. Without saying a word, He steps toward Her, never taking his eyes from looking into hers. She doesn't avert her gaze either and they are locked together, no other visual registers in their minds but what is directly in front of them...each other.

She is the first to move closer, lips just inches apart. She can feel his chest against her, rising and falling with each breath he takes, every move he makes. He slips a hand around her waist, pulling her tight, yet not binding. She responds by putting one hand on the back of his neck and the other on his hip. She can feel the heat that seethes below the surface, the desire for her that oozes out into the space between them. Her ears ache from the pounding of Her heart and She gently loops one ankle around his lower leg and moves her lips closer still. His hand slides up from her waist, and two fingers slowly draw a line up her spine. Even through her top, she feels a tenderness behind the motion. He gazes at her, as if he were looking directly into her soul. Not a word is spoken, there is only the sounds of nature and their breathing.

And for a moment, she has this overwhelming fear of vulnerability; totally antithetical to all she strives for. For in this moment, she begins to understand the true meaning of trust and of, dare she say it? Dare she think it? Love? For years she's been thinking of her own protection that it makes her scared to feel this way. Her love has been tested before. She's not sure if She's ready again. But Love? She scoffed at the word when He tried to toss it around. But now, it's as if her heart were mocking her. She's been hurt before, betrayed before. The memory of that is just poison in her veins. She doesn't want to wake one day, wishing the person she loved had never existed, just so she'd be spared such pain. She knows that the opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference. It's the middle of the road and that's been a place she's been very comfortable in. If you maintain indifference, you don't get hurt. You can still be involved with people, you can still be part of their lives, just on the surface, no deep diving. And maybe She should keep it that way.

She is about to step back, but his lips meet hers first, and in that moment, that sweet moment, all fear is lost, for in it she feels both passion and love; both desire and caring. It is like no other she has felt in a long long time. While scared of what hurt might be in the future, during this moment, she responds in kind, meeting his passion with some of her own. The kiss is long and with fervor that holds them together.

## CHAPTER

Morning came and with it a glorious sunrise and He rose to find himself alone in the bed.

Through the windows He could see the light streaming across the landscape like syrup over a stack of pancakes. The air is crisp. The water in the lake is motionless. She was a much earlier riser than he. She cherished the break of dawn the way some felt about diamonds.

He pulled himself out of bed and walked into the kitchen to put up a short pot of coffee and She was nowhere in the house.

She couldn't have gone far. He wasn't awoken by the sound of either of their Bikes. She didn't know the code to the lock on the garage. But of course, he knew that couldn't stop her if she really wanted to get in.

Walking across the living room and standing at the wall of glass that looked out over the lake, he saw her.

Standing on the floating raft, an eight by eight foot wooden platform sitting on top of airtight plastic containers, out on the lake. Chuckling to himself, he realized that she figured out the system that he devised; one end tethered to the end of the dock, the other anchored to a weight deep in the water, just pulling hand over hand over hand, you can tie off the platform just about anywhere along the 100ft line.

He watched her. She was performing her ritual.

Rising before Him gave her the opportunity to get her thoughts together about what was going on here. She did want time to herself. She was so used to that. It's almost like She needed it.

Yesterday's ride up wasn't grueling. She had ridden farther than that in a single day many times before. But this was different. And She didn't mean just the countryside either. They were exploring a new area of their relationship. She took a chance with Him, taking this trip. She rarely ever ventures anywhere without knowing the landscape. She's that way in her work, and certainly that way in her personal life. But with him, especially after the way they separated the week before, not with hostility, but with the frustration of wanting to be with each other, but not yet fully trusting each other. Not yet.

She desperately wanted to trust him. This was a very good first step.

The riding together was natural, the way he effortlessly and without looking to be congratulated or credited, he took care of everything. Even their lovemaking that first night back together was a wonderful combination of caring and passion. One neither taking over the other.

But, as morning came, while many of the defensive feelings and anxieties began to creep out of the corners of her psyche, She knew the best way to quell them was to stick to her routine.

Sneaking out of the bed, doing her best not to wake Him, She made her way out the door and down to the dock at the water's edge. Seeing the rope and the raft She figured out the mechanism that he devised. Grabbing the rope, she hopped on the raft and began to pull. In short order she was twenty yards out into the lake with no more rope to pull on, threading through a small float on the surface, the other end dropped to the bottom and was tethered to a weight. She tied the raft off and it stayed in place.

Slowly moving through her katas, the practiced motion is as smooth as the glassy surface of the water she's floating on. Disciplined, she made every effort to practice every day, regardless of where she was. For her, it is a meditation and exercise; a way to maintain good health, both mental and physical.

Breathing, stretching, extending her arms, moving her legs, placing her feet...every movement with purpose, with strength. Confined to the small space her movements are fluid and constant; punches, kicks, spins in the air, she never moves more than a foot from the center of the platform. Every muscle is taut, ready for the next movement. Her focus is unwavering. Over and over again, each form is repeated, each better than the last, a little faster when required, a little slower, more deliberate when needed. Always with controlled breathing, and that sniper-like focus on the movement. Yet, with all this physical activity, all this movement, a wake is barely created on the water's surface.

A thousand thoughts mounted an attack at the forefront of her mind and just as many emotions bounced around her heart when she rose this morning. But right now, there is nothing but the physical act of what she is doing that has a vise grip on her attention. Nothing gets in the way of this practice; this art. It has taken her years to compartmentalize, to be in this moment only. No stray doubts, regrets, contemplation of the past, worry about the future enters into her. It's all about the movements. All about the precision of the body and the focus of the mind on the moment at hand. Not yesterday's practice, not last week's. Just now. No comparisons that are made are to movements executed moments ago.

From his vantage point, He watches in awe. And in admiration.

Twenty minutes pass, and in a final movement, She brings her arms up directly over her head, palms up, deep breath in, slowly brings her arms in full circle down to her side, and with a purposeful exhale, pushes her hands out in front of her, palms out, sending all her energy back out into the world around her.

She breaks the trace she has been living in, and even from this far away, He sees her body relax. Turning, she lifts the rope that is attached and easily pulls herself and the platform back toward the dock back at the shore's edge.

"Good morning" He greets Her as she arrives at the top of the steps.  
"Tea?" He says as he hands her a mug.

"Morning" She replies as she plants a kiss on his lips. "Thanks. I hope I didn't wake you as I left".

"Nope. You tired me out so much from last night's enjoyment that I slept right through it"

He says with a smile.

"You hungry?" She asks. "I make a mean over easy egg".

"I could do with that. And after breakfast, there's something else I want to share with you".

"You mean there's more?" She smiles as she steps past him.

## CHAPTER

The sign on the side of the road simply said: "Airport" with an arrow pointing left. He turned the Jeep and within moments She realized why He had opted to use four wheels instead of two when at breakfast, He asked: "Do You Trust Me?"

"What kind of question is that? I trust you only so far at this point. How far are you expecting me to trust you?"

"I want to take you somewhere that I doubt you've ever been before."

Her mind reeled. Uncertain about where this line could possibly go, She really wanted to take him upon his word. He had been wonderfully honest about so many things, had opened up about so many things in the short time they had been together that her own walls were starting to come down.

After the road turned from asphalt to dirt and the angle of incline increased a few degrees as they continued to climb, She realized what he had in mind.

Upon arriving at the top of the mountain, he turned left again past the "Warren Airfield" sign and into a packed dirt parking lot. Stopping the Jeep, She looked at the large expanse of level grassy area with a single paved strip that ran for three or four football fields in length. Right in the middle was a two story structure with a porch running along three sides of the upper level. Off to her right, there were several long low buildings made from metal. Getting out, he took her hand and led Her to a gazebo situated off to one side, in the middle of a large expanse of grass.

"Wait here. I'll be right back" He said. "Let me check in" and headed over to the building.

As he walked away, a single engine low wing plane circled in the blue sky overhead once and then headed for the runway. It touched down and rolled far down the end of the strip almost out of sight. She walked out a little closer to the asphalt looking in the direction of where the plane went. To her surprise, a few scant moments later, the roar from the engine increased dramatically and the plane was now heading back in her direction. It passed by and right behind it, a craft smaller in size. Too close she thought until she saw it lift off the ground and realized it was being towed. It was her first sight at a glider.

"Pretty cool, huh?" as His voice came from behind her.

"I never saw one up this close before" She replied.

"How about getting closer?" He asked.

"You mean, like, a ride in one?"

"That's what the sign says, doesn't it?"

She smiled at the prospect.

"Sure. Are you going to come with me?"

"Well, I'm going to have to" He replied.

Again, a quizzical look came over her face.

"I'm going to take you up. I asked you if you trusted me. And this is what I meant when I said I wanted to share something with you."

"What the F...." She stammers out. "You can fly one of those things?"

"Yeah, I have a pilot's license. Been doing it for years.

She looked up at the vast blue sky, with its collection of huge white puffy clouds. Being at the top of this mountain, She could see a valley to the south east, and more mountain tops on the other three sides. High above, what others might think were a few birds, were actually two gliders, silently moving along.

"Do you trust me?" He repeated, as he took her hand.

"Up to a point, yes"

"You ready to take the next step?" He asked.

There was a slight hesitation. This was not a question to be taken lightly. Like when an unknowing 'citizen' enthusiastically asks a Biker for a ride, and the Biker replies with the question: "Are you aware you could die?" Depending on the answer, the rest of the day could play out in a thousand different ways.

A simple nod was all it took. That next step. She looked Him in the eye and smiled.

"Yes, yes, I am" was all she said.

And while that was true, it wasn't 100% true. The glass of 'trust' isn't quite half full, but it isn't half empty either. She *so* wanted it to be more than one than the other. But trust takes time and it takes effort and it takes actions. They hadn't talked about the situation between them that separated them in the first place. And She didn't like that, it's not the way She usually did things. Always looking at both sides of the coin to truly understand its value, She took His phone call and She did accept the invitation to come with him, to an unknown destination. That took trust. It took a leap of faith. She didn't do that normally. But it looks like this relationship wasn't going to follow the normal rules.

"Excellent. I'm going to do a pre-flight. I'll get you in a second."

She watched as He walked over to the ship that would take them up.

Cutting a wide circular path completely around a bright white streamlined fiberglass soaring aircraft, He looked the whole ship over. She watched as he slowly slid his hands along the smooth surface, first one wing, then along the length of the fuselage, casting his eyes and running his palm up the tail, then along the other side of the fuselage, and moving on to the other wing. All parts that should move, moved. All parts that were meant to be stable and static, behaved properly.

Her skin started to show goosebumps. They weren't from fear, or anxiety. Hours earlier, those same hands had provided her with so much pleasure, with great care and sensitivity. She knowingly smiled at his attention, realizing that it was a

trait that was ingrained into his being. It's part of who he is; taking care, being aware of every aspect of whatever he came in contact with, living or inanimate, that's in his core. And she realized that perhaps they weren't that different in their approach to living. Her martial arts practice day in and day out assures her that both her body and mind are ready for whatever is thrown in front of her. She could not survive surprises in her line of work, nor did she want any in her life. Anticipation, preparation is key to staying healthy, and alive. She saw this same philosophy in what he was doing right now.

His smile was radiant as he walked toward her. It made her return the gesture with ease.

He motioned to the front seat indicating that was where She was going to sit.

"Are you serious?" She turned to him quizzically.

"This isn't like a bike. I have full control in the rear seat. And besides, the view is better up front. And not for nothing else, it's all about proper weight distribution. The lighter stuff goes up front", He said smiling.

Getting in isn't graceful, even for someone as limber and fit as She is. Cockpits on these crafts are small, tight and the seating position is sloped down at a ridiculous angle. Swings one her leg over, she climbs in, and maneuvers her way down. She easily clears the dashboard in front of her.

"I thought you said you were going to fly this thing!" She says. "I have a control stick and there's lots of dials up here."

Laughing He says, "All two seaters here are trainers. Don't panic, I have all the same controls back here."

"Whew" She replies.

"Just don't touch anything" He adds. "Be like a good passenger on a bike, just go with the flow."

After She was all buckled in and looked up to see the tow plane had returned and was positioning itself. The grounds crews connected the tow rope, checked and double checked the hook, and gave him the OK sign. Pulling the canopy down and latching it, He fitted the headset and moved the microphone down to his mouth.

It was cramped, even with all the adjustments. His six foot plus frame pushed his head less than an inch from the clear acrylic that separated him from the sky. The false silence in that space prior to take off was something that he treasured.

Switching the comms headpiece on, he says, "Seven Three Hotel to Warren Control"

"This is Warren Control " He heard back. Becky's smooth voice belied her 76yrs despite the questionable quality of the transmission.

"Hey Young Lady, any last minute atmospheric you want to tell me about?"

"What you read on the board still stands. If you want to keep Tim hanging out for another 15 minutes, there might be an update." Sarcasm is not wasted on Becky. She's a queen of it.

"Pawnee to Seven Three Hotel" Tim's voice from the tow plane squawked in.

"This is Seven Three Hotel"

"Keep yapping and I'll add 1000ft to your tow charge to make up for the gas I'm burning over here."

A curmudgeon of the highest order. Tim, a long time tow pilot has been flying since surviving his time in Vietnam and at nearly the same age as Becky, he has earned the right to bitch.

"That's a roger, Pawnee. Seven Three Hotel ready for take off. Heading two six zero north north west, looking to release at five K please"

And with that, Tim throttles out, slowly taking up the slack in the tow line, a yellow rope laid out in a zigzag pattern across the green grass now looking like a snake dashing down the field until it's just about taught. Tim powers back the Pawnee for a moment. Standing at the tip of the right wing, grounds crew gives Him a "thumbs up", signaling all clear. From the cockpit, He returns the gesture and wags the rudder signaling a full "go" to Tim who's watching in a rear view mirror. The motor in the tow roars as His ship moves forward. Bouncing along the terrain, the ride is anything but smooth. 20, 25, 35, 40.... the airspeed indicator swings clockwise as the ship gently rises off the turf.

Finally a smooth ride. The pair of aircraft starts climbing. Being towed is like dancing without seeing your partner's eyes to anticipate movement. A tandem act requiring true understanding of and respect for each other's skill. Eight minutes after leaving the surface, He hears, "Seven Three Hotel this is Pawnee. Approaching 5K. You good to go?"

Looking left, right, up and down to double check for traffic, He replies: "Pawnee, this is Seven Three Hotel, release in three, two, one"

And with a yank on a small handle on the side of the cockpit, the resulting 'clunk' and slight decrease in airspeed, He banks to the right, watching Tim and the Piper Pawnee dive off the left, the bright yellow tow rope trailing behind like a tail.

The altimeter reads 5100 ft and the mountain ridge due west will provide strong enough updrafts to take them up several hundred feet more with very little maneuvering. Skimming along mountain ridges is a rush that she has only previously felt when directing her motorcycle through a long highway curve. At 5500ft, with a 15 mph wind coming from the west, He plans to turn nose in and with a slightly aggressive angle of attack gain another 400 feet in the next few minutes. With that altitude, He'll have no trouble making it over to Lake Champlain.

She's never seen the world from this vantage point before. Few have. Oh sure, she's flown in commercial airlines, nearly everyone has. But this is different. It's not the silence she expected it to be. Everyone expects soaring to be silent, like a bird in flight. The reality of an airship that's 30 feet long with a wing span of 45 feet makes a fair amount of noise cutting through the sky. It certainly is quieter than the single engine tow plane they just separated from, but it's not without some sound. Regardless of that, the only word that comes to her mind right now is: amazing. A relatively clear day like this, visibility is nearly 80 miles. Mt Washington, one of the highest peaks in the northeast at just over 6200ft is not only a bump on the horizon line, but there's the feeling that they were almost looking down at it. The ride isn't always smooth either, there were variations in air density that caused the ship to drop a half dozen feet at a time. First time it happened, she watched the gauges jump. Feeling his hand on her shoulder, he reassured her: "Think of them as potholes" His voice came through the headset.

For the next hour their flight continued. Out to the edge of Lake Champlain, above the city of Burlington, making a turn and back toward Camels Hump, a small mountain near Duxbury. Following the flow of the Winooski River, he piloted the ship expertly not trying to hot dog it with aggressive movements in an effort to impress her. He didn't need to. This wasn't the point of this step in the journey. This wasn't chest beating time. This was 'let me share this with you' time. And she was soaking it all in. Gliding between clouds, watching them change shape as the temperature rises and falls in small pockets of the sky, impressed her. Seeing nature's energy from this vantage point was a gift.

At one point, He said "look up".

She had been so absorbed by looking down and out that it didn't occur to her to do so. When She did, she realized that they were scant inches from the bottom side of a large flat cloud. If she could open the canopy, she could reach out and touch it. Her hand came up to the clear acrylic and she flat palmed the surface, the same way a convict does when a family member is visiting.

In her mind, She's screaming "oh wow!", but no words come out.

He keeps the craft there for a few minutes as they fly along. Then He drops the left wing and the ship swings as they cross over the top of Mount Ellen and starts to descend and return to the airport.

Earlier, She watched as the landscape beneath her had become nothing more than a pattern. Heading back, the few structures that the Mad River Valley has scattered about began to take shape and distinction. As they dropped below the tops of the mountains and that long range visibility morphed into a closer point of view, she had to chuckle to herself at how now her frame of reference would be changed forever.

"Incoming Seven Three Hotel to Warren Control" he speaks. "Requesting clearance for Runway 22".

"This is Warren Control", she hears. "You are clear to land. Be advised wind speed and direction at ground level is one nine coming out of the northeast heading four seven degrees."

"Roger" He replies, and slowing the glider down to a landable airspeed and for what seems like forever, they glide above the old asphalt before the single wheel under the fuselage finally hits the pavement.

For another 50 yards, they roll along until He turns off the runway and onto the grass where the bouncing starts all over again. Slowly, the ship glides to a stop, He is first out, unbuckles her and helps her out.

Standing still for a moment, She re-focuses and throws her arms around him and kisses him like never before.

"Thank you" He says.

Puzzled, She looks at him, then understands why. He wasn't thanking her for the kiss. He did enjoy it, but it was more than that. He was thanking her for taking that next step. For trusting him with her life. For being willing to take one more step.

She simply replies, "Your Welcome".

## CHAPTER

Coming down from the mountain top into the hamlet of Warren and rolling across a short bridge, He turns and pulls into a dirt lot next to a small two story wooden structure. The sign hanging off the balcony on the upper floor reads: *Warren General Store*. Climbing out of the Jeep, She walks to the front door ahead of Him like she knows where she's going. She's happy and that makes her confident.

Once inside, she stops to take in what She sees. It's a bit more upscale than the general store down the road from his place. OK, it's a lot more. There are bottles of white wine lined up in the modern refrigerator, there's a deli counter with pastrami and corned beef and brie and other fancy cheeses and a butchery down back. Not a meat and poultry department like in the other stores but a *butchery* that stocks hand cut grass fed beef and free range organic poultry. There's a gourmet coffee stand with seven different kinds of roasted beans and eleven different kinds of tea to choose from. It's not so much a tourist trap, but it certainly is a place where the vacationing wealthy can get a nice crisp Chardonnay to go with filet mignon that they will take back to their mountain retreat.

He walks around Her and heads to the deli counter where they go up and down the menu. Finally making a selection and ordering a pair of sandwiches and grabbing a couple of bottles, they exit through the front door. A swooshing burbling sound off to her right captures her attention and She notices that the Mad River runs past the store. Spying a few flat rocks, She climbs down and finds a shady spot. With the heavy snowfall that past winter, the water level is high enough so that when She pulls off her boots and hangs her legs over the edge of some of the rocks, her bare feet dangle in the fresh, swiftly running cool water. He does the same and hands her a sandwich.

"What are you thinking?" He asks.

"It's funny. I'm finding out I'm not as tough as I thought" She says. "I was scared about going up."

Surprised at her opening remark, it's not at all what He expected.

"None of us are. It's not about toughness, it's about strength, He replies.

"You have that, and more."

She takes a bite of her sandwich and looks away.

He continues. "You have compassion and curiosity. And I am hoping you have the capacity to let me in."

She's also very cautious, She knows this about herself. Sometimes she is overly protective of herself. She doesn't want to be beholden to anyone again. Not without trust in them. Trust that they won't hurt her. Trust that they won't use or abuse her. She won't be taken advantage of again.

But him. She's learning about him, just as He's learning about her. And She likes what she's learning.

"What is it you want?" She asks, turning toward him.

"What do you mean by that?"

Damn. Is this going to be like pulling teeth? She thinks.

"I just want to know what you are looking for here?" She asks.

"You mean between you and I"

"No, I mean between you and this river" Her sarcasm drips and she knows it. She's not going to back down now, though. "Of course I mean between you and I. I know little about you. You meet someone and you are interested, attracted to them and you want to find out about them. But when we talk, I get half answers, answers that only lead to more questions. And here, you talk about being let in. How about letting me in?" She says.

## CHAPTER

“What do you want to know?”

“Oh no. I’m not going to play the interrogation game. I want you to tell me. You talk, and when you get to a point I don’t understand, or where I want more details, I’ll join in.”

Taking a breath and without breaking eye contact He says, “I was a little burnt out on people. A while ago, I looked around at the people who I was surrounding myself with. People who I was involved with. And at some point, I realized I was less than happy. I didn’t want any part of the life of polished cars gliding to cocktail parties with people I could care less about. Walking past shop windows glittering with all sorts of things no one really needs.. Branded clothing, fancy watches, cakes too elaborate to ever think of eating. I didn’t want to be from the world of malls, internet shopping and anything Elon Musk. Relationships had become like walking a tightrope. At work, with relationships I was in, friends and others. I found that with so much of it, there was a lot of effort put into keeping a balance sheet going. I did this for you, you did this for me, we did this for them, they did this much for us. It got tiring. Like dragging around an anchor. So very tiring. I’d proven who I was so many times that the magnetic strip was worn thin, constantly feeling like I needed to prove my worth to others, so many times I’ve had to show value. I never knew what they all wanted, so I gave them everything. I learned that you only get the future you want when you walk away from the future you don’t. I decided to get out of it all. I wanted something more, independence that I’d only heard of. And I was willing to accept whatever the losses ended up being. I was that done.”

“You just left?” She asked incredulously.

“I unloaded everything. I shed the ‘stuff’ that held me, made me responsible for anything other than my well being. I shed people, property, nearly all the things that weighed me down. And I took to the road.”

“Did you have an idea where you wanted to go, where you wanted to be?” She asked.

"Sometimes even the best map will not guide you. You never know what's around the bend. There are days I scan this crowded land, searching for a way to the 'next' place. I didn't 'just leave'. I set things up so that I could leave. It took research, time and planning. Life is like an hourglass that's glued to the table, and I got to the point where I wasn't about to watch all the sand run down."

"And you kept going, never looked back?" She asks.

"If you spend time checking your rear view mirror, you'll miss what's right in front of you."

"And what about the people? The people you left behind"

"I'm not saying what I did didn't cause hurt for some people. It did. I know that and have to live with that for the rest of my life. It haunts me sometimes. And sometimes, thinking about the choices I made, I feel at peace with it. If I stayed longer, I wouldn't have been the kind of person I wanted to be. I would have been one of those guys who roll their eyes and mutter curses under their breath when someone opened their mouth. Hearing the sound of someone's voice and just cringing and dreading the next few seconds, praying for them to just stop talking. That's not the way I wanted to live and I could see myself heading down that path and I didn't like it."

"But you kept the place up here. You said you didn't want an anchor. How do you explain this?"

"There's a difference between an anchor and a hearth, even though they can weigh the same. An anchor holds you down, something that inhibits movement. That's the place I was at before. A hearth is a place that you can consider safe. A thing that can bring comfort. This place is my hearth."

"And people? Do you feel the same way about them too?" She  
He says, "There are people who bring meaning to someone's life. Then there are some people who demean life. I wanted to get to the point in life where there is more of the former and less of the latter. And that means doing what I can to find that balance."

"But you're a ghost" She counters. "You aren't anywhere. And I've looked."

## CHAPTER

"You looked?" He asks.

"Of course I did. I don't swim in dark waters without knowing how far down the bottom is. I've had my love tested and in the past, it's received a failing grade. So, a while ago, I took up the practice of studying up on anything that looked like a possibility. And I gotta be honest, yeah, I did look. You know that's what I do. ."

"And?"

"Like I said, I couldn't find much of anything. But, there's little out there about you. It was quite frustrating."

"I can understand that. But that was done on purpose. It's not that I legally or financially owe anybody anything. I'm not skipping out on mortgages, or past due bills. While it looks like what I am doing is avoiding responsibility, it's just that what I am doing is to avoid contact. "Don't you miss those people? Aren't they missing you? That seems awfully cold, to just disappear."

"Oh, I didn't just vanish. It's not like people think I'm dead and the body just hasn't been recovered. I let certain people know what I was doing. Not everyone, because, as I said, I lost interest in what they wanted, and what they would have said and I had to focus on what I wanted. What I needed."

"And how long ago was that?" She asks.

"It's been four years now" He replies.

"And how's that working out for you?" the sarcasm drips out.

"Well, considering that up until recently, I was pretty pleased with the way I had rebuilt my life" says He.

"And what happened that changed everything?" She inquires.

"You." He replies. "You happened."

She stares at him, with part of her not sure whether she should believe what he is saying. Her suspicion and well developed sense of distrust rising like a high powered engine running through its gears. The more he talks, the higher the revs go. Before the situation gets out of control, before this whole relationship does a crash and burn, like riding her bike heading to a sharp turn in a mountain road, she pumps the brakes a bit.

"Wow. Does that line usually work on women?" She says, spooning out another dollop of sarcasm and dropping in the middle of the conversation.

"Don't know. Never said it to anyone else before."

She lowers her head an inch and looks up at him, raising one eyebrow.

He continues, "I'm learning about you every day. I'm watching, I'm listening, I'm hearing. You are not perfect, and I am not thinking of ways to change you. You have qualities I respect, many that I admire in a person. Your outlook on life, despite the kicks and smacks it's laid on you, is one that I want

to be around more. I'm not perfect, and yet I get the sense that you're willing to accept what I am and you're not thinking that you want to change me."

And just as She takes a bite of her sandwich, He asks, "And what is it you're looking for?"

With a mouthful of food, she gives him another version of that raised eyebrow look, and despite the food, She asks, "Did you time that question on purpose?"

Laughing, he says, "Of course I did!"

She smiles a bit and swallows. Picking up her bottle of water, she takes a long slow sip, drawing out as much time as She can as her mind races through the possibilities of answers and the potential of damage to or support of the foundation of their future each would bring.

Answering in any direction carries so much weight. In her past, that weight, having that kind of choice in front of her was daunting. It caused anxiety. The concern that it had to be the 'right' answer was so important. Don't offend. Don't push away. Don't scare the shit out of someone. Don't open the door to let yet another mistake into her life was a helluva choice. Pandora's Box. The Lady or The Tiger. The historical analogies were all out there for comparison.

Honesty was always somewhere further down the list.

But that was the past. She has grown to know that the only right answer was the honest answer. It was something that didn't come easily. Not to her at least. There were times in her life, relationships that she lived through that being honest didn't make life easier. Or more expected. Being honest brought pain and heartache. Sometimes more of the former immediately and then, at some other point, more of the latter. Of course, she learned how to live with pain and heartache. But in time She came to know that wasn't living. That was pretending. Pretending that everything was ok, just for the sake of survival, just for the sake of keeping the peace. Or sometimes for keeping the roof overhead.

And that worked for only so long. There came a time where she decided that She didn't need to be anything but truthful. Truthful to herself, to who she was. Truthful to others, so that She could expect, no, so that she could demand truthfulness and honesty from others. If she couldn't give it, why should she expect it in return? It cost her, too. Cost her in love, in business. Building something that was truthful took time. Building something honest took effort. But She learned to believe that the reward was tremendous and She wanted that. It took less energy to be honest than it took to maintain a false facade. What is that saying about it taking more muscles to frown than to smile? A facade that wasn't real wasn't worth whatever was behind it. She worked hard at it. Like her martial arts training; every day it was put into practice. And in time, it became who she was. And damned if she was going to give it up now.

"I want trust," She started. "I want to grow into love, not fall into it. I want to want someone, not to need them. I want to want them, not be obligated to them, not be obligated for them. I want to belong with someone, not belong to someone. I want independence with a fringe of believing that there is someone I can rely on for both the small stuff in daily life and the big things in the future. I want independence peppered with knowing, without having to think twice about it, that there is someone who I can rely on. I want someone I can trust that they'll trust in me."

He hasn't moved his eyes from staring straight at hers.

"Does that scare you?" She asks finally.

"Not in the least" He replies firmly.

She takes a breath in. A deep, long breath, filling her lungs. At the same time, taking his words into her mind, hoping that she was taking truth into her heart.

It's been a day with an experience and sharing like none She's ever had before. Confessions for sure. But it was more than that. It was like looking at a roadmap of each other's lives. Paths, direction, intersections, exits, bumps and the inevitable tolls, stops and starts along the way.

## CHAPTER

The sun disappeared more than an hour ago, and darkness is just setting in. Night birds have begun singing. The sky above looks like the world has been covered in a blanket of gray fleece. Far in the distance a rumbling grows, like the kind in your stomach when you haven't eaten for six hours. Thunder. Across the lake and further west. Then a small flash of light on the horizon to the south. After their lunch, they made their way back to his place. Standing on the deck, He sips his coffee, She sips her tea. Standing close together. No words are spoken. A storm is coming, from the southwest. Slowly though, and there is no need to rush inside just yet.

Thunder again, a little louder this time. A little closer. Not enough to raise a flag of caution. The temperature drops a few degrees in a few minutes. Then more lightning. Minutes pass. Another flash, stronger, brighter this time. Across more of the sky than before. And that's when She noticed. The sky is not one solid covering. There are sections where lightning flashes poke through openings; like slits made in that blanket by a sharp blade. Long thin stretches as if a knife has cut through. As soon as the light dies, the sky returns to the illusion of complete covering. Another flash, more thunder. The sky morphs into something not like before, and in a nanosecond returns to its former self. With the wind, the tears in the clouds change shape and size with each reveal. Over and over again.

She breathes in and out soaking in the energy that this natural phenomenon brings to her.

He never takes his eyes off the sky as he slips his hand into hers, interlacing their fingers.

Hand Holding is much more of an intimate activity than most people give it credit for. Arms around each other can be both comforting and protective. Enveloping another to shield them from harm. Or surrounding with affection. Not arm in arm, like sisters walking down the street, congenial, best buddy kind of connection, but hand holding, connected by very small but very sensitive sections of skin, that's intimacy.

It's a feeling she realizes she likes. Very much. Fingers, palms, touching, connected, close, not overpowering, just together. She takes her thumb and gently caresses the side of his hand without moving any other muscles in her body, but putting all her soul into it. Slight movement, barely an inch in either direction. Intimacy on a grand scale with barely any motion.

With the next flash She realizes that there are two layers of clouds. The upper level has the power of the storm within. It contains the elements that create the light to show the lower level and its holes and tears with a backlit presentation. The display continues with an off syncopated duet of thunder and

light dancing across the wide spread sky above for nearly half an hour. And they just stand there taking it all in.

The sky is quiet for more time than usual than it has been for the past thirty minutes and you might think that the storm had made a left turn and disappeared, but a surprisingly bright flash and bone shaking thunder announces that Mother Nature isn't done just yet.

"Here comes the show," He says.

And sure enough, more light and more thunder, closer in proximity than She's felt in a long time. The tears in the lower clouds are more pronounced and the flash of light and the crash of thunder come at almost the same time, a harmony of energy. Twice, three times, and as the fourth finishes, the winds pick up in intensity. Jumping from a gentle, interesting slow breeze to 20mph gusts. Tree branches bob and weave like a boxer in the ring, the night birds have stopped, and the sweet song of the pipe chimes hanging in the nearby tree of earlier, now scream. Within seconds, scattered raindrops the size of dimes drop hard and quick.

They retreat inside, pull the glass sliders closed, and reaching over to a switch on the wall, He turns on spot lights down near the dock so they can watch the world outside. From the living room, with the darkness on the other side of the glass, the shore's edge is illuminated and the lake disappears into darkness until the next lightning flash, with the falling rain having turned to a pounding on the roof and skylights overhead, there's a magical 3D effect that's created.

She is mesmerized by the performance, then at the same time, energized. Her love of nature's power, nature's ability to overwhelm all the technological strength that humankind has convinced itself it has, in believing the stroking of the ego that each new invention lies on society, is proven once again.

She turns and in the silence between them, takes the cup from his hand and places it on a table at her side. Then puts both arms around his neck.

"Come to bed with me" She quietly says. And puts her lips to his.

## CHAPTER

The sheets are wonderfully wrinkled as the morning light filters through the trees and spills into the room. Their bodies, half covered. Morning birds are her alarm clock this day. She is exhausted from the night's activities, her limbs may ache, but satisfied she did the right thing by coming up to this place with him, satisfied in a way that almost brings her peace. Almost. She is, nonetheless, restless and not one hundred percent comfortable yet. Trust is a place that requires a long journey, metaphorically almost as long as the road from the north of Boston to central Vermont. She lies on her stomach, looking at him, staring, while he slowly wakes.

Surprised to find her there, in that He expected She would be off deep into her daily training ritual, He's happy nonetheless.

He wants to know more of her. Their conversation that started yesterday, before they went at each other in bed, was more one-sided than the physicality that lasted long into the evening.

Answering each question from Her, openly, honestly, like never before.

Taking chances is something he has done all his life; you don't get anywhere without stepping over that line. And while the smoothness of her skin, the smell of her, the way her eyes just penetrate his soul is two steps beyond amazing, and knowing he might ruin the moment, he rolls over on his stomach to match her position.

His hand brushes her cheek and even in a half sleep, the feelings of both comfort and strength permeated her consciousness. The coolness of the morning betrayed the heat of the night before. She felt his touch. She was swimming in the memory of the last few hours in the dark not wanting to start the day just yet and while She knew it wasn't showing on her face, a smile was consuming her psyche.

"A quiet storm" is what She told him He was.

A quiet storm that now raged in her head and heart. She admitted that at times she wanted to ride straight into the eye of the storm; to withstand the torrential rush of emotional wind and rain, to prove to herself that she could come out safe, intact and whole on the other side. She'd done that once or twice before, before him. Other times she wanted to ride the long way around that storm, giving herself months, years, moving, looking for the clear skies that gave Her the space to think, to find peace. She wondered if this inner conflict would ever give way to peace. Peace. A word that is individually defined in depth, height, width and distance. Distance in time and space. How long would Peace last? How far could She take Peace into all the parts, components of Her life? She wondered if Her definition of Peace could be had with Him. She could prepare for His storm, assume protective posture, so as not to be hurt by its

impact. Like donning a rain suit, layered over what you normally wear. Protection from what's being inflicted on you. She liked that idea. It's the way She had been living for the past several years. In people's lives, but not involved with them; talking to them, only to gain information or access, not to learn about them, but how to use what they say to Her advantage. Akin to the difference between walking through a light morning mist and standing on the ocean's edge just before an incoming hurricane. Sure, you get damp from the mist, you understand the concept of wet, but it doesn't make you think twice about anything. But get pelted for an hour by raindrops the size of dimes, driven by a 40mph wind, blowing horizontally up the coast, withstand that until the wind dies down to a whisper and you get affected by the experience. He was like that.

His touch again, She felt it on her head, stroking her straight black hair, slowly, gently, all fingertips from the top of her head, continuing down to her chin. She started to crawl out of the deep sleep She was in.

"Morning" He murmurs. "How are you doing?"

One eye opens reluctantly. A deep breath and slowly the other eye joins the first and the world, while not quite in full focus comes into a three dimensional view. And Her smile surfaces at the sight of Him.

"Mmmmm....great way to start the day" She says.

And the storm starts to build again, only to be interrupted by the chirping from her cell phone. Rolling over, She reaches out to the nightstand and picks it up. A text. From Chip.

"One member out; unexpected hospitalization. Instructions?"

'*Shit*', She exclaims to herself.

Quickly typing out: "Stand by. Stay on schedule. Will update by EOD", She finishes and returns the cell face down. She's got work back in Boston to take care of.

"I hate to say it, but we, I mean I, need to be getting on the road again. I've got stuff to take care of."

"Sure thing" He replies and starts to get up. Before his feet hit the floor, Her hand is on his arm, pulling him back for one more kiss.

"You're right, you're a great way to start the day" He says.

She bent toward him until her forehead rested on his and held still for a moment, breathing in the smell of his skin, the warmth of the cotton sheets, wanting to remember each detail of the room. As She falls back into the bed, she wonders how long something this good could last.

And her old self begins to emerge, and in that moment she starts to get annoyed with herself.

But at this point, She's got bigger problems. It's three days until this job launches and there's a fly in the ointment. She hates flies. She likes things all buttoned up. Neat. Tidy. No loose ends. It's just part of her nature. Her training.

Precision is what keeps her fed and alive. As her mind is running in twelve different directions, He reaches back, kisses her neck.

"Hello in there" He says.

Turning to him, She realizes that she disappeared again.

"How soon do you want to get on the road? You seem to have gotten preoccupied pretty quickly there."

Laughing lightly She says, "Yeah, I have a habit of doing that."

Not wanting this time to end, she suggests, "Let's have breakfast here, just the two of us. You cook. And when I'm cleaning up, you can do what you need to shut this place down again. How's that sound?"

"Works for me. I'd like to suggest something: if you're not in too much of a hurry, we can take a state road south and jump on the interstate further down. It would only add about forty five minutes to the trip and I think you'll like this route. There's some very cool views along the way."

She loved how he also wanted to squeeze every bit of pleasure out of their time together, even if it only meant a different way to get to their destination. In the past, in her relationships, She was often not the focus of consideration. In the past, decisions were made without her input and only changed when challenged. Challenge made, negotiations conducted, and final decision made. It was always transactory; I do this for you, you do this for me. It was never *what would you like to do?* She figures this is one of the reasons why she went into business for herself. The ability to call her own shots. Make decisions for herself. If She didn't like certain options, She wanted to have the ability, the power, to walk away. Here, He offered. He didn't dictate. And She liked that.

"That sounds great" She immediately replied.

They climbed out of bed and She headed to the bathroom. As the shower started, He stripped the sheets and rolled up the blanket and stuffed it back into the closet. When She emerged from the bathroom, He was already in the kitchen. She could smell the coffee brewing and the rattling of pans and the clinking of silverware being gathered. In turn, She dropped the bedding into the small washing machine at the end of the hallway, added her towels and headed back into the bedroom to pack up what few belongings she had.

## CHAPTER

Arriving in the kitchen, she noticed how far along He had gotten with their morning meal. A cup of coffee in hand, He was juggling toast, eggs, and had cut up some fruit. At a seat at the counter rested plates and silverware...and a mug with a tea bag at the ready. A kettle was boiling on the stovetop. He thought of everything. She was both impressed at his efficiency and his remembering about her preference for tea over coffee.

"We need to get gas for the bikes, so to make the most of our time, I figure I'll shower when we get back to the North Shore. You ready for food?" He asked.

"Wow, yeah, that makes sense. Good thing we're riding, I'd hate to be stuck in a car with you if you haven't showered" She joked.

"Funny Girl!" He laughed back at her.

This was the kind of banter She could get used to, she thought.

Dropping plates on the counter, He walked around to join her. But before He sits, She puts her arms around his waist, and pulls him close.

Planting a warm kiss on his lips, "Thanks" She says.

"I hope you like the eggs" He replies.

"I'm not talking about the food. Thanks for all of this" She says.

Kissing her back, slowly, purposefully, He says, "You're welcome. It really has been my pleasure."

"It's been both our pleasures" She adds.

"Yes, it has" He says.

Taking their time, holding each other, looking into each other's eyes, She feels a sense of comfort and peace that seems almost foreign to her. She gladly accepts it nonetheless.

Sitting down to eat together might feel normal to most people, but to Her, it was anything but. She was beginning to like it more and more. And it scared her.

After all the food was gone, She took the plates to the sink and began to clean up. He walked down the hall, turned on the washing machine and shut down the propane feed to the building, closed and locked up all the windows, pulled the blinds. From the bedroom came the noise of Him packing up. He came out, walked past her and out the door. More evidential sounds of work as he pushed their bikes out of the garage into the driveway, prepped the Jeep then closed and locked up the garage. A quick run down the stairs to lakeside and within moments, the floating dock was secured and He was back in the house. She had stacked the dishes, silverware and cooking utensils in the dish drainer. The washing machine was into its spin cycle, so He closed the main water valve to the house and opened all the facets to let the pipes empty out. They gather their overnight bags and head for the door.

All this while she observed his movements and like before, She's impressed by his efficiency. Maximum results with minimal efforts. In short order, the bikes are loaded and she starts hers.

He heads back into the house, pulls the bedding out of the washer and quickly runs a clothes line down the center of the hall, drapes the bedding over the line, shuts down the electricity, closes and locks the door and joins her in the driveway.

"All shut down and locked. You ready?"

Smiling, she nods her head.

"Where to?" She asks.

He throws a leg over his machine, twists the throttle to get some gas into the motor, hits the starter button and after it settles into that rhythmic thumping that is so familiar, he says, "Out and up to the road, turn right and we'll hit Route 12 in a bit. Take that south all the way to Montpelier, then grab Route 14 south to the New Hampshire border. We should have enough gas to get to the border. We can fill up there. How's that sound?"

"Lead on, big guy" She replies and falls in behind him as he pulls out.

Five minutes later She realized that he wasn't lying. The roads heading south were fantastic. Smooth sweeping well paved surfaces that rose and fell with every hill and valley. At that time of year, the woodlands neighboring the state road were green, lush and full of pockets of sunlight and shadow depending where you were. The smells of the forests filled the air and mixed with the aroma of every farm they passed. Cow pastures, if not seen, were definitely evident by their pungence. Fresh cut mid summer hay also filled her senses, as she began the Biker dance of letting the throttle slide, downshifting, leaning into a corner, then twisting the throttle and upshifting again, and feeling the machine beneath and torque propel her along the next stretch. The power in her hands and under her is always intoxicating, but doing it in this environment was amazing. Certainly, She's ridden on similar roads before not exactly in this part of the state, but being with Him, added a special bit of spice. It wasn't that He was leading her, He was just in front of her. This feeling, after the times and experiences that they had just shared in a few short days, riding together was another activity that they would share, and while there was something missing, it wasn't anything that She wished she had. What was missing was the feeling of someone who shared something for the credit of. Sharing an experience so they could say: "look what I gave you". Someone who shared something to make them feel superior. "Wasn't I right? Wasn't that a great stretch of road?" She didn't miss that. Not at all. She felt that He was genuine in his desire to share something special. No strings attached. He liked that route. He hoped She would too. She had a gut feeling that there would be no proclamation about the value

of the 'gift' of the road at the end. She was beginning to trust in him. Worst of all, She was beginning to let him in. And still, She smiled at that thought.

As the trip south continued on, as She got into the pattern and rhythm of the road, She allowed herself to think about her task ahead and the news that Chip had dropped on her. Project management thoughts came to mind. One driver down. Her plan required a team of six. Three vehicles; three drivers plus one co-pilot each. Now She's down one with three days to go. Barely enough time for Chip to recruit a replacement. No time for her to vet a replacement, even if he did.

*Think think think* as a childhood cartoon character would say.

## CHAPTER

The sun cascaded through the branches that hung over, warming Her as she rode and she began to devise alternative scenarios, one after another.

Postponement was out; the buyer was in place. The client has initiated the meeting. To postpone might jeopardize the financial gain to be had, which would be bad for both her client and her client's client ... bad all the way down the line. She didn't do bad.

*Downshift, lean into the corner.*

Postponement was out; that was not the way she worked. She promised to deliver given the time frame and logistical parameters that was what she was going to do.

*Upshift, twist the throttle and power out of the curve.*

She calculated the risk factor by proceeding with only two vehicles and immediately discounted it. Her original plan was solid and all but guaranteed security for the client and success for her.

*Crest a hill, take in the view of the valley beyond, and twist the throttle again, watch the RMPs rise and the sound of the exhaust fill the sky.*

Suddenly, an idea came to her. But like hitting a pothole at 70mph, this one brought a chill through her body. Throttling back, the motor naturally brakes the machine and She immediately falls far behind Him. Putting some space between them on the road was the perfect maneuver to make as she pondered the question that now bounced around her mind as if the road suddenly turned into a rutted mess.

Can She trust him? Truly trust him. They are sharing so much of each other, letting each other into parts of their personality that have been closed off for so long. At least She was. And the question in her mind sat: was He? Had he been telling her the truth? Was he being real with her, or was He just playing a game, spending time for the time being? She thought back on all that they had done these last few days and despite her automatic reaction and response was to distrust, to believe but verify, there rose in her a feeling that had been dormant for so long. Her love had been tested before. Her trust in others, her faith in others had been tested. Her hopes of a secure relationship had been dashed.

And yet, here He was, building a foundation of something that She never thought She would have again. He was clearly putting in the effort. An honest and true effort. A real effort with no expectation of reward or getting back the same.

But now, She came to the conclusion that she needed something from Him. And she truly disliked being in that position. To be needing something from someone She was falling in love with. But She prides herself on seeing both sides

of a situation. Looking at things from many vantage points, researching information, analyzing options and picking the path to success.

*She downshifts to drop the motor into a gear that will give her the power to move up to Him and twists the throttle. The wind rushes around past her as her speed increases and the engine roars.*

On the narrow country road, She pulls alongside Him, straddling the solid yellow line down the asphalt. Surprised at this dangerous maneuver, He pulls slightly to the right, to give her more room in the lane to share. Turning and tilting his head, in that unspoken language of all Bikers: "What's up?" He asks.

Seeing an abandoned roadside farmstand up ahead, She motions toward it. Understanding the signal, but not knowing why, He pulls in and far enough off the road to be safe.

Not shutting the bike down, He says, "Is everything OK? I saw you dropped far back a few miles ago"

She shuts her motor off and dismounts, pulls her helmet from her head and walks over to him.

He takes the hint and follows suit, turning the bike off and removing his helmet.

Without preamble, She starts in.

"I need to talk to you about something. And I need to ask you a question."

His mind starts racing, and if it were an engine, the RMPs would be high in the double digits. He wouldn't call it panic, per se, but He thought things between them were going really well and wondered if an unforeseen problem, or words spoken that were harmful were said that He didn't notice.

Taking a breath in, as one would do preparing to dive into deep waters, She starts, "The text I got just before we left, presented me with a problem with this next job waiting for me back in Boston. I'm the kind of person who likes to have all her bases covered and everything buttoned up and now, it's not. And it's not sitting well with me. And an idea came to me and I want to run it by you."

Splash. There she was. She did it. She stepped off the edge of her comfort zone and hit the waters. Now the only question in her subconscious was will she get back to the surface and be able to breathe again.

Smartly, He sat in silence, seeing whatever was on Her mind weighed heavily. This wasn't going to be 'where do you want to eat tonight?'

"You said you do gig work. I have a gig job that I need to fill. Like in, fill immediately. It's something I think you could handle."

"Go on" He replies.

"This job requires complete buy-in, no slouching, no half assed participation. It starts in three days. It pays well, you'd be part of an existing team but one member had to drop out at the last minute. If you say yes, you need to be in one hundred and five percent."

"Go on" He repeats.

He's smart, She thinks. Just like her, He's gathering info before making a decision. Don't commit to something just because you are being asked.

"Remember that family job I told you about before we started this trip?"

"You mean the conversation that led us to taking this trip? This wonderfully romantic, wonderfully intimate trip?" He says with all the sarcasm that he could draw on.

Not breaking concentration, She starts, "A client is taking a trip from Boston to New York to facilitate the sale of merchandise. Very valuable merchandise. Merchandise that some would rather not be sold. There's a chance that this merchandise could be the target of theft in transit. I have been contracted to ensure safe passage and delivery. And to succeed, my plan requires the correct number of my crew. But now, I'm one short."

He could see that She was in no mood to banter; this was serious. But there was something more. "What aren't you telling me?" He asks.

A broad smile crosses her face. It's the same question She asked the Lawyer several weeks ago. She smiles realizing that He thinks the same way She does. Information is power. Information provides the foundation for good decision making. Once you have information, you can make a judgment call about whether or not to move in any one direction.

"The owner of the merchandise will be along for the ride to be present at the point of sale."

She pauses. "And she's an 87 year old widow"

"So, you're driving a lawyer and an old lady from Boston to New York with something worth lots of money, with a good chance there will be a replay of robbing of the stagecoach scenario as seen in western movies? And you need another hired gun to ride along? Do I have that right?"

"Well, until you tell me you're on board, I'm not going to say any more."

There. It's out there. She's let him in farther than anyone else has been in a long time. She's crossed that bridge from the personal to the professional parts of her life. Some think that's like playing with oil and water. Money and religion. You just don't do that. The potential for disaster is incredibly high. The opportunity for damage to a relationship is higher. Given this was a new relationship, in its infancy, barely out of the shadows, She again realizes the huge chance, the firepit, the scary roll of the dice She's just embarked on.

But the surface of the water is visible above her. She can see the sunlight through as if she is getting closer to be able to gasp a bit of fresh air.

And She understands why she took this plunge. She trusts him. A rarity for her.

He sits, on the seat of his Bike, on the side of the road, seeing a precipice of his own in front of him. He sees She is taking a calculated risk. More of a

calculated risk than getting into a ship to glide among the clouds with someone at the controls that She just learned has the credentials to do so. She is taking a chance that He is both trustworthy and capable and up to the task. She's taking a much bigger chance. She's taking the chance that this next step won't bend, spindle or mutilate their new relationship. He has begun to value this woman, much to his both pleasure and surprise. And he wants this relationship to be a success.

"And if you don't want to, no foul here..." She starts to say, before He cuts her off.

"I'm in."

## CHAPTER

She breaks the surface of the water. Taking in that first glorious breath of clear fresh air, the smile to Her face returns again.

"Great" She says, surprised. "Don't you want to know how much? Don't you want to know more of the particulars?"

"No. At this point, from what I've learned of you, if you've gotten to this point, where you trust me enough to let me into that part of your world. I trust you."

"OK then" She says, breathing a sigh of relief. "When we get back to Boston, I'll introduce you to the crew."

"OK then" He replies.

And just as quickly as the conversation started, it ends. Short and sweet and to the point.

She is relieved, on the one hand, and anxious on the other.

She has the last word with any of the crew she hires, that's a known fact. It's the only way she'll work. He didn't fall in line like an obedient puppy. He didn't say yes based on money. He didn't question her plan. Hell, He didn't even ask about it. He said yes because, as He said, he trusts her. And She found that refreshing.

"Well then. I guess we could get going again" She says, and turns and heads back to her Bike. From over her shoulder, She hears the sound of His machine start up and idle waiting for her. Helmet on, motor started, kickstand up and 'clunk', her boot drops the transmission into first gear and slowly lets out the clutch and joins him at the edge of the road.

Taking off together, She, again, falls in behind to let him lead and they continue the ride south along Route 14, through small town after small town, and at no point does She ever stop marveling at, being enthralled with the landscape around them and the joy of cruising along this beautiful two laned state road.

Within another hour and half, they are crossing the border into New Hampshire. Pulling into a service station near the entrance ramp to the Interstate, they each fuel up their machines with barely a word. Not for any specific reason, save that there isn't anything to say. Immediately after replacing the gas hose to the pump, He walks over to her, and again, without saying a word, He puts his arm around her waist and brings his mouth to hers. Kissing her warmly, simply, full of passion, he looks into her eyes.

"That should hold me for the rest of the ride" She says.

"Oh, maybe for you. I may want another soon" He teases as he turns and heads back to start his Bike.

"Gladly" She says to herself.

Pulling out her phone, she quickly sends a text to Chip. "*Replacement acquired. Meet day after tomorrow for intro. Will send details*" and slides the instrument back into her pocket.

The process of pulling up the ramp and getting on the highway is almost exhilarating as His kiss....almost. Thirty, Forty, Fifty Five, Sixty Five....their speed increases in seconds and each settle into a completely different kind of riding. Sure, the energy expelled by their machines propels them along, with the force of the air they are cutting through trying to pull them out of their seats, yanking on the grip they have on the handlebars. But for a Biker, this feeling is all part of the reason they ride.

As soon as they are running down the Interstate, She easily pulls along the right side of him. Again, he moves slightly to afford her more space in the lane. They're close, but not too close. Matching speed for speed, movement for movement, they are like mirrored images of each other. Intimacy at 70mph. Together. Like a dance. The combined sounds of their machines are like two musicians playing an improvisational duet. The vibrations felt by one are known by the other simply by experience.

In a movement that comes quite naturally, He extends his right arm, his hand palm up, fingers out. Noticing, She holds on tight to the handlebar and reaches out with her left hand. Their fingertips touch, and for a few moments they are connected. Physically, at dangerously high speeds, precariously within inches of each other. This thrill of intimacy runs through them both, and they feel it. Even for a scant seconds. This moment is theirs, and theirs alone.

## CHAPTER

At first light, there are three Transit Vans parked, idling, on the street outside the gate to the Benson mansion. Not nose to tail, but not a mile between them either. The middle truck has enough space to pull out easily if need be. Each vehicle is dark blue. Not black. Not a color that could be described as Navy Blue. Some would call it Midnight Blue. A color that with the next sneeze pushes it into Black. Identical to each other, tinted glass all around save for the windshield, same hub caps, same style of outside rear view mirrors, no missing nameplates, no added trim, same black plastic frames around the license plates that are covered in acrylic shield so dark so that you really can't read it. And if you could, you'd see that all three vehicles are sporting the same number. Just one of Chip's way of saying "fuck you" to the cops. Nothing that you could quickly tell one from the other by looking at it. That was the point. And it works.

The Benson Mansion sits on a six acre lot on Sky Top Road in the town of Manchester By The Sea, a small town 35 miles north of Boston. This is acquired land. This isn't a family estate that has been handed down through the generations. The Benson's bought it when times for them were good, and times for everyone else wasn't. Being both Greek born and hardworking, it was a dwelling that was well deserved and certainly not taken for granted. As a young couple the Bensons sacrificed a lot, saved a lot and worked a lot to provide a home for the family. Each was expected to participate in the efforts to reach the goal; neither's efforts were measured more important than the other's.

A quarter mile drive bordered by tall young trees cut through a wide well kept lawn lead up to a center entrance Federal styled two story building, with a twelve foot deep patio with a short 20inch high brick wall running the full length of the main house. Single story wings hang off each end of the main house; one that is three sides of glass windows. Four steps down to the driveway make arriving an almost grand event.

In the front vehicle, the driver sits quietly, earpiece uncomfortably jammed in his ear, waiting for instructions. Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, he checks his mirrors every few seconds, his partner for the day, sits in the passenger seat, eyes constantly moving across the landscape in front of them. The driver checks his watch. The digital numbers slowly click past.

"Come on....come on...." He mutters.

"Chill Number One" Chip says into his mic, lighting up the driver's ear.

Chip has come through in the short period of time that She gave him. The vehicles arrived on time and modified exactly as instructed. All interiors were stripped, save for one. That was re-fitted with a very comfortable seating arrangement, carpeted for quiet, a small refrigerator for cool drinks, and even a

12volt powered brewing pot for either of the well stocked selections of tea or coffee depending on the passenger's choice.

Two days earlier, after Her return to Boston, She arranged to meet Chip. A coffee shop at two in the afternoon in a far corner of town made for a quiet place. She and He were waiting in a booth near the back, and watched through the window as Chip pulled into the parking lot.

"Chip, here's your new member of the crew." She said succinctly as soon as Chip sat down.

Looking him over, Chip talks directly to Her without averting his gaze.

"I'm not used to taking on just anyone. How do I know he's any good?"

"And I'm not used to having the rug pulled out from underneath me with virtually no notice. I didn't cancel the whole job and screw you out of some earnings, did I?" She shot back. "We all have to be flexible."

Continuing to look directly at Him, Chip says, "Do you know what the job entails?"

"I know enough" He says, staring right back at him.

"And you know that I have the final word?" Chip says.

"I know that She has the final word" He says, nodding to Her sitting next to Him.

"Fair enough" Chip replies

Turning his head now towards Her, Chip says: "And you're confident he can do what's needed?"

"I am" She replies simply.

"OK then" Chip says. "I've got a date with a half dozen strippers. Welcome aboard" he continues and extends his hand.

He takes it firmly, and says, "See you later".

The team met for the first time much earlier that morning at the garage where the three vehicles have been stored. Introductions are short and numbers are assigned to everyone. No names are mentioned over the air in an effort to keep the identity of them as quiet as possible. Numbers are easy to remember. Instructions are that communication is to be kept to a minimum. The plan, the timetable, the route have all been presented, reviewed and reviewed again. And then reviewed again, until there were no questions. The weather was checked right up until the hour before picking up their client. The lead vehicle will have a driver and co-pilot. Traffic will be monitored by this co-pilot crew while in transit to ensure the ability to avoid delays. Police frequencies will be monitored while enroute as well. He has been assigned to drive one of the other vehicles.

Chip is watching the numbers tumble on his watch. As the digits read: 9:15, he taps the comm link. "Green Light everyone. Move."

And like a commuter train, the vans begin to drive. In sync, through the gate, right past the front door, and make a hard left hand turn and continue to a

side entrance. While it's blind to the street, there's scaffolding running the full depth of the house, extending out twenty feet and draped in white plastic, the structure takes in all three vehicles effectively and establishes total privacy for all activity taking place.

They roll to a stop, bumper to bumper this time, with the first van waiting by the door.

There they sit for ten minutes, motors running.

At 9.25am Mrs. Benson and her lawyer emerge. In grand fashion, the elderly woman is elegantly dressed in a middle length dress and stylish shoes, and a light wool coat. The man trailing her is straight out of central casting; a tailored blue suit, white shirt, no overcoat and is carrying a large leather satchel. The two make their way to the van without looking left or right. The crew member in the passenger seat gets out, and opens the slider door to the van and the two of them climb on board.

Both are pleasantly surprised at the luxury of the interior as they settle into comfort.

Closing the door and getting back into the passenger seat, not a word is said by Chip the driver or his partner.

The convoy sits still, motors running. Chip dials up a burner phone.

"All aboard" is all he says.

"Good to go" is the reply he hears.

He taps his comm link one more time.

"Three and Five? Are we clear?"

"Five clear"

"Three clear" He says.

"We're green again" Chip repeats into his comm as he drops the van into gear and gently steps on the gas. The vans stay close and head to the front gate, pull through and make a right turn onto Sky Top Road and travel no more than 100 feet before they all stop again.

From behind trees on opposite sides of the street, two figures dressed in dark jackets and pants emerge and head to the last two vehicles and climb into the passenger seats.

Placed an hour before the arrival of the vans, the lookouts made certain that no one was staging an ambush upon their arrival nor getting ready for one when they emerged. As soon as the doors closed, the three vehicles began moving again.

Dialing up the burner again, Chip says: "In transit. Time check"

"9:31"

"Check" Chip replies and hangs up.

## CHAPTER

On a commuter bus traveling at 65mph south bound on Interstate 95 just outside Providence, She hangs up and slides the phone into the outside compartment of a backpack.

It was 7.30 in the morning when She boarded a Fung Wah Company Transit bus at the corner of Kneeland and Tyler Streets in the Chinatown section of town. A regular Boston to New York run for this company, the bus was populated by a wide range of the downtrodden segment of society. Some running away from a life they don't like, with all their belongings in whatever they could carry, others heading to another city hoping to get a better job, or maybe to a job waiting for them. With a fare of \$20 each way, collected in cash at curbside, this was the easiest, cheapest, most below the radar way to get in and out of either city. Dressed like an average college student traveling on a budget in jeans and a sweatshirt, she slid into anonymity in the sparse crowd and took a window seat halfway down the row. Being the middle of the week, She was almost guaranteed to be sitting alone. This made phone conversations totally private.

By her calculations she'd arrive in Manhattan at least 90 minutes before the caravan. She went over the plan again. Timing was key and there was no reason to believe that her plan wouldn't yield success.

She's been in transit for two hours already and in that time, after going over all the nooks and crannies of this assignment, Her mind starts to wander. Dangerous for sure in many situations, but She is confident in her team and the progress, so She allows herself this small luxury.

Closing her eyes, she leans back, and not surprisingly, He surfaces. It's one thing to let your mind wander and think about inconsequential things like the passing landscape or when the last time you changed the air filter in your home furnace, but if mind wandering brings you to personal relationship matters, leading to a deep dark rabbit hole in the middle of a mission, it could be dangerous. This new wrinkle in her life has taken up a fair amount of mental real estate and she finds that she is beginning to care too much to ignore the attention it is grabbing. Does She have the strength to take the next step, the courage to take a chance, the fortitude to hold her own and hope for a future that She thought was long lost to her? Life alone has had its advantages, but She feels an ache for something more. Something that brings a coat of comfort. Being alone provides a freedom, an independence that is unparalleled by anything else. You don't have to answer to where you were. You don't have to create a committee to decide where to go. You just do it. Being free means that you are the only one who knows where you are at any given point in time. She's learned that it takes more effort to be on her own. There's no one to take out

the trash, empty the dishwasher or make the bed in the morning. Of course, if you're alone, you take out the trash when you want, you may not even use a dishwasher, if you're cooking for one, there aren't a lot of dishes to get dirty. And making the bed is strictly an option.

The other side of the coin is that being alone isn't for everyone. Being alone robs you of the basics of having someone with you emotionally, as well as, physically. That momentary touch of two hands grazing against another as you pass by in the hallway, of reaching out to stroke the hair of someone who might even purr a tone of satisfaction, of connection, at the action.

Of course, She also thinks about all the couples that don't get along; that roll their eyes when the other begins to speak; the muttering under their breath as the other calls out from across the room or the outright physical reaction of finding something out of place in a household. She's experienced that, and it stained Her soul for a long period of time.

But like the polar ice caps that are melting over time, perhaps She, too, was beginning to feel some warmth. From Him. Because of Him. Even as glaciers dissolve, the dangers of rising waters threaten the safety and security of some coastal communities, this dissolution of that wall that She has built around her could mean disaster.

Or not. She had no idea of knowing. Learning the hard way, through living experiences in her life and being a spectator of her client's lives, there are no guarantees in life. When it comes to love, sometimes it takes a leap of faith. When it comes to business it takes research, analysis, more research, planning and more planning. But when it comes to love, all it takes is listening, sharing thoughts and dreams, honesty, caring, supporting and believing that everything will turn out all right. Yeah, that's all.

'That's all' She thinks and smiles.

At the next corner, the lead van turns left, while the other two turn right. All the while, the crew is watching the mirrors and keeping an eye out for any possible trouble. None gave much attention to a white Mercedes coupe passing in the other direction and making the left turn and up Sky Top Road. Given the make and model of the car, it fits right in with the neighborhood.

The two remaining vans wind their way toward the center of the small town. A mile further on, the trailing van makes a right turn and disappears. The one remaining vehicle continues along the small streets of town, heading to the on ramp to RT 128 South.

Behind the wheel of the Mercedes, Elizabeth Benson is dressed in simple black jeans, red linen top and black leather jacket. A hot fresh Starbucks in her hand, she throws a quick eye into the rearview mirror to watch the three vehicles continue on their way.

"Thank you Isabelle" she whispers to herself, acknowledging the phone call she received from one of the maids alerting to her mother's departure.

## CHAPTER

Passing through the gates, she pulls her car up and heads around to the side entrance. Having to stop short, she's surprised by three workmen beginning to dismantle the scaffolding.

"What the hell?" Elizabeth asks as she throws the car in reverse and backs up to the front door. She would have preferred to have parked around back, to stay out of view, but figured she wasn't going to be there that long. Grabbing her oversized handbag and exiting the car, she strides through the door, she's met by Magdalena, the head housekeeper.

"What's going on? What's with that scaffolding on the side?"

"Not certain, Ms. Benson. A representative of your mother's attorney arranged for it's set up last week. I was told that there was some exterior work that needed to be done. But I didn't order it, which is strange as, you know, that is my responsibility. And just as mysteriously, these gentlemen came to take it down."

"Is my mother at home?" Elizabeth asks, knowing full well the answer.

"I'm sorry, you just missed her."

"No matter. I left some papers in her library that I need today."

"Shall I have some coffee brought in for you?"

"No thank you, I'm all set. I won't be here that long."

"You should have called, Ms Benson. I could have had one of the staff bring them to you downtown."

"Too kind, as always Maggie, but it's a glorious morning for a drive. I will be out of your hair in no time" She says as she walks past, and heads down the hallway to the library.

"I'll let your mother know you were here. She'll be sorry she missed you" she replied, the sentence dripping with all the sarcasm and distrust ensconced in the words, echoing the uneasy relationship between the two.

The head housekeeper turned on her heels and walked into the kitchen. Speaking to one of the staff, she says, "Ms. Benson is in Madame's library. Bring her some coffee immediately."

"Yes ma'am" a young woman says.

"And tell me exactly what she is doing when you are done" Magdalene instructs.

Elizabeth hasn't spent more than five minutes in the room, when the door opens and in walks the servant with a tray with a single coffee cup on it.

"Ms Maggie told me you wanted coffee" she says.

Looking up from the desk she is sitting at, Elizabeth replies, "I can see that Maggie is forever looking after everything, Isabelle. You can set it here".

As the woman places the tray down, Elizabeth reaches into her pocket and pulls three one hundred dollar bills folded neatly into a small package, conceals it in her hand and offers to shake her hand.

"Thank you, Isabelle, for bringing this to me, and for everything" she says as she slides into the palm of the servant.

The young woman just nods and says, "Anytime, Ms Benson. I'll let Ms Maggie know that you are all set" letting Elizabeth know that she was expected to report back.

"You do that".

Stuffing the cash into her pocket, the maid leaves the library and returns to the kitchen to find Magdalene waiting.

"Well?"

"Ms Benson is sitting at the desk, going through some papers" she replies.

Climbing down from a chair that she pushed under the one security camera in the room, having slowly pushed the lens into a direction so that it wasn't pointing at the location of the safe, Elizabeth was now quickly working the combination.

It was her mother's practice to keep all her valuable jewelry at home, rather than in a safe deposit box in a vault in the city. The elder Benson woman liked to have these items close by. She felt that jewelry such as hers was better protected and more accessible if they were at home. It was a hold over from the old country. Banks were easily robbed, and if there were ever a time that she and the family needed to be flexible and be ready to move at a moment's notice, she thought that having items of value to trade for favors was important. Old world thinking for sure. But it made her comfortable and she held her ground, much to the dismay of her children, her household staff and her lawyers.

It didn't take long to figure out the combination. After trying everyone's birthday, both frontwards and backward, as well as the European formatted number, in both directions, the loud click was heard when she used her mother and father's wedding date.

"Tada" Elizabeth purred. Pulling the handle down and yanking the door open, she leaned back.

"What the....???" she cried out.

Of the eight shelves that housed trays of jewelry, only three remained filled. Their contents were far less than Elizabeth needed.

"*Isabelle*" She calls out as she closes the safe and turns Isabelle strides into the room.

"Who was with my mother when she left?" Elizabeth asks.

"Her lawyer."

"And where did they go?"

"I don't know. He was carrying a case of some kind, and there were three vehicles that arrived and they got into one of them. And they left. Then a crew came to take down the scaffolding."

"Why didn't you tell me that!" Elizabeth scolded.

"You didn't ask. You only wanted to know when your mother was planning on leaving" Isabelle replied.

"Shit....shit shit shit!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

## CHAPTER

On an overpass further south on Route 128, where the exit for the Massachusetts Turnpike gently loops westbound, a black Audi four door sedan sits. Behind the wheel, a man has binoculars trained on the traffic.

Into his view he spots a transit van maintaining a respectable speed, with practical spacing between all the others. Another vehicle could get in, but it would be tight and annoying for all involved.

Hitting the hands free cell phone controls on the steering wheel, he makes a connection.

"Hello? Fucker was right. Right on time, Transit van, dark in color, south on 128, center lane."

"How many occupants?"

"Can't tell. Windows are tinted."

"OK. Fall in and follow. The basic info was correct. Let's see if the rest holds true. Backup will meet you on the road in a few minutes. If they go the way that we've been told, we'll take them out in an hour or so, once they clear the city. If they don't, let me know."

The driver hands the binoculars to his companion in the seat next to him, starts the car and heads onto the highway.

In Boris' office in Boston, Big Bad Guy hangs up the phone, walks across the room and stands over Frank.

"So far, so good. You were right. They are on the road now."

"I told you. I got a maid on the inside who'll do just about anything for a couple of bucks. She feeds me good information."

"Very smart of you," Dimitri says from behind his desk. "I would hate to think about what we'd have to do to you if you were wrong."

Big Bad Guy laughs from inches right behind Frank's ear.

"We've got people on the road to intercept them in a little while." Big Bad Guy says.

"You might as well relax. We're just going to sit and wait." Dimitri adds.

The Audi is keeping a respectable distance from the Transit Van when another four door sedan slides in behind him. Raising his middle finger, he acknowledges to the other occupants he knows he's there. In return, the following car speeds up and taps the rear bumper of the lead car. In the rear view mirror, he sees the driver laughing.

The two sedans trail the Transit van from a comfortable distance along the highway. Passing an entrance ramp, they are taken by surprise when a second identical Transit Van enters the highway and quickly takes its place behind the first.

"What the fuck?!" exclaims the driver of the first car as he dials up.

The ringing phone in the office breaks the silence as Big Bad Guy picks up.  
"Yeah"

"We got a problem....there are now two vans. Identical. Black. Tinted windows. Can't see the plates. No way to tell them apart."

Big Bad Guy turns to Boss.

Boss turns to Frank.

Frank turns white.

"I thought you said you knew everything?" Boss menacingly says.

"I did!" Frank frantically replies. "I don't know anything about another van!"

"Have them stay on them both" the Boss says. "But tell the boys to be careful. I don't want them to be noticed"

"Stick to the plan for the time being, don't attract attention. ok?" Big Bad Guy speaks into the phone.

On the highway, one of the sedans drops speed and shifts lane position to the right and two cars behind the other.

The comm in Chip's ear crackles: "Vehicle two in place".

"K" is his only reply, checking his rear view mirrors.

Traffic is light this time of day, and moves along briskly. The two trailing sedans shift positions every ten minutes and do so smoothly so as not to attract attention.

Within a few minutes, as US1 merges with RT128, the third Transit Van glides down and like a dancer joining a chorus line, the second of the two vans slows enough, and the new addition slips in between the other two, and the spacing with all three closes in.

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?!" the lead Audi driver screams as he dials up again.

The phone is immediately picked up in the office.

"What now?" barks Big Bad Guy.

"Three. There are three of them now!"

Handing the phone to the Boss, Big Bad Guy, backhandedly slaps Frank across the face.

"You are an idiot, you know that?"

Speaking into the phone, Boris says, "You need to deal with this and get the job done. I want it done quietly, don't want cops showing up. And I don't want to be disappointed. You hear me?"

"OK boss. I'll take care of it."

As he hangs up with one call, he instinctively calls his cohorts in the other car.

"Hey dickhead....yeah, I know, I see it too. I don't care. So, we didn't plan for three vans. We still have to get what we came for. I'm not about to go back

to Badinov empty handed. Are you? Yeah, I didn't think so. We know they are going all the way to New York, give me some time to figure this out. Just hang on."

Chip taps his comm link and says: "Heads up everyone. Time to shuffle. On my count. Three, two, one. Now!"

And on his mark, like the typical three card monte game played out on a thousand urban street corners by a thousand con artists every day, the three vehicles begin to shift positions on the highway. At 60mph, the lead van pulls into the left hand lane as the #2 van pulls forward, the trailing van pulls into the right hand lane and pulls forward of all three, and the van in the right hand lane, slides left in between the other two.

Looking up the road, the driver of the lead Audi watched and shook his head. "Oh great....now we have to play games now...."

Bad Guy in the lead Audi calls other car: "We have to figure out which van is our target. They're traveling with an old lady. They're going to need to stop for her to piss at some time. When they do, we'll take out a few of them and even up the odds."

And so it goes, over the hour, Chip gives the signal and the vehicles shuffle again two more times. Smoothly, without disrupting any of the other traffic.

It was on the third shuffle, when he noticed.

Two expensive yet plain black sedans have been on the same stretch of roadway, behind them all the while, in each in different lanes from time to time. They have powerful enough engines to pass the caravan with ease. But they don't. They're there.

Tails. Insects. Trouble.

But he wants to be sure before he alerts Her.

Tapping his comm, he speaks: "Everyone? Maintain position, drop speed to 50."

The caravan slows. Other cars pull around. The two sedans don't.

Tapping his comm again, Chip says: "Everyone. Accelerate to 70 and shuffle." As they execute this maneuver, Bad Guy in the lead sedan calls up his partner vehicle.

"They might have made us. Let them get a lead. Hang back."

Speaking into the comm again, Chip says, "Number three, watch your ass. Think we have two insects, black four door sedans. They may not stick with us right now, but keep an eye out. Everyone, be alert. This is where you'll start earning your pay."

And as he is shutting off the comm, the lawyer's head pokes up between the two front streets.

"Mrs Benson needs a bathroom soon."

Using a tablet, the crew member in the passenger seat pulls up a map and reviews.

"Ten minutes. We'll be at a rest area"

Chip joins the conversation with: "This is how it's going to work. We park as close as we can to the service building. One of my guys goes in first, then two more escort Mrs Benson. You stay here. As soon as she's finished, we move again. This is to be quick and quiet. No lingering or loitering."

"What about me? Suppose I need to use the bathroom?" the lawyer queries.

"When she leaves the vehicle, you can piss in the porta potty under your seat cushion. You're in possession of the merchandise. You're not going anywhere."

"I beg your pardon?" the lawyer balks.

"My vehicle, my mission, my rules" Chip replies. "I guess you didn't get the memo."

The lawyer retreats to his seat next to Mrs. Benson and lets her know of the plan.

Chip taps his comm one more time.

"Heads up. Bathroom break for our guest. Service area coming up. Eight minutes out. Box formation upon arrival. Number 5, scout the building. With an all clear, #5 waits outside the bathroom, #3 leads her to the door, goes back outside with #4. #5 heads back to the trucks. No one else goes in. When she's done, 3&4 bring her back. If any of you have to piss, do it in the bucket in your trucks. No lingering or loitering."

After two hours of travel, the lead sedan driver sees that as expected, as anticipated, turn signals start blinking and the caravan of three vans pulled into a service area on the Wilbur Cross Parkway in central Connecticut.

The caravan parks at odd angles, one is parked in the conventional manner, but one is perpendicular to the first one and the last is backed into a parking spot, creating a large empty space in the center. To the average citizen, it looked like just a bunch of selfish travelers taking up five slots.

As he had taught them before this journey started and under Chip's direction, the configuration had all passenger doors facing into that large open space. Only a birds eye view could reveal which van any of the passengers exited from.

With no fanfare, the He exits one of the vans and heads in first.

Within moments, Chip's com chirps: "Clear".

He turns to his passengers and nods.

The lawyer rises and helps Mrs Benson from the back of the van. Flanked by two of the crew, she heads to the service building.

The two dark sedans pull in the service area. First one parks close to the buildings as they see Mrs Benson being escorted. The other car pulls all the way through the service plaza and sits at the end of the parking lot.

## CHAPTER

The two dark sedans pull in the service area. First one parks close to the buildings as they see Mrs. Benson being escorted. The other car pulls all the way through the service plaza and sits at the end of the parking lot.

The two thugs from the sedan closest to the service building are on the phone with the leader.

"They are heading in. There's three of them with the old lady. I say we take them out now."

"You idiot. Do you see anything that looks like it can hold all the stuff we're after?"

"Well, no...." the thug stammers.

"Neither do I, stupid. If you want to make yourself useful, do something to even up the score. Take out a couple of them. But do it quietly....I don't want every cop on our ass. We still need to get what we came for."

The two thugs start to exit the cars and move toward the service building.

Chip's comm comes live again. As He is heading back to the vans, He says, "We have company, incoming from one of the following sedans, two targets."

"The other car is positioned here in the lot." Chip adds. "Looks like it's dancing time. Be ready. They're after the package, not the client. Keep her safe, though."

"I'm heading back" He says.

"We're heading back inside to her" #3 says into his comm.

"I'll get the client at the front door in two minutes" Chip says as he starts the van and backs out of the parking space, speeding in reverse toward the building.

Just inside, the two thugs are about to set upon two of Chip's team.

He makes his way into the building by the front door and bypasses the others and heads to the door of the bathroom to intercept Mrs. Benson.

Quickly, #5 taps his comm.

"We gotta go. Now. The band is striking up a tune in here, and two of our boys are listening to the music. I've got the client and coming out the front" is transmitted for the entire team to hear.

From his belt, Number 3 pulls out a stainless steel bladed combat knife, while #4 puts up his fists.

One of the thugs pulls out a small pistol.

"No. Quietly. Remember?" the other says, as he pulls a pair of brass knuckles and fits them onto his left hand. The fighters approach each other.

"I'm coming back" Chip barks, as he slams the van into reverse and quickly backs up even with the door to the service building.

As Mrs Benson exits the bathroom, He gently takes her elbow. "We need to move quickly Ma'am. I'm told we're running a bit behind schedule" He says as he leads her to the door.

The sounds of screaming coming from the cashier inside the store as it's being destroyed in the fight seeps out into the sunshine as two of the Russians are being pummeled.

The lead van slams to a halt right at the door and He swiftly gets Mrs. Benson into the van. She's barely in her seat when the door is shut. Chip accelerates down the lot, heading for the exit lane, and He runs to his vehicle and climbs in, starts it up and backs it out.

In a song of screeching tires, the Audi with the leader is moving to take up pursuit. As it comes parallel to the remaining van, the thug in the passenger seat pulls out a pistol and puts a bullet in the tire of the remaining van.

Now it's one on two.

Back in the building, #3 is badly injured and #4 lies on the floor unconscious. One of the bad guys is completely out of the picture, bleeding heavily from his ears, as the other one starts limping out. That thug's knee is history, but he manages to keep moving, making it to the car and starting it up. As badly injured as #3 is, he manages to get out of the building and as the other sedan tries to pull away, he looks around for a way to stop it. Seeing a loose brick lying on the side of the building, he grabs it and hurls it toward the moving vehicle. Smashing the windshield and surprising the driver, the car swerves, hitting one of the gas pumps. The airbags explode, fire suppressant material sprays all over as attendants rush out of the building.

Falling to the ground, he taps his comm unit, hoping that Chip is within transmission distance.

"Number 3 here. We're out. But so are two of them" it crackles in Chip's ear.

"Acknowledged. Status?" Chip replies.

"Will rebuild and see you at home" Number 3 says, as he struggles to get up and back inside to get his teammate.

Traveling at 65mph along the narrow two lane Merritt Pkwy, Chip reaches over and hits speed dial on the burner.

Checking her watch, She realizes that this is an unscheduled call.

"Yes" She says tepidly.

"Mile 23South on the Merritt. We've had an attempt."

"Status"

"Failure, but not aborted. One insect still close at hand. Dark Euro sedan, two occupants. One insect out of commission."

"Team Status?"

"Number 3 transport out. Team damaged by not downed. Numbers 5 and 6 still in play."

Taking a deep breath, knowing that as the last member to join Chip, more than likely assigned him a high number, She felt He was safe.

"Extraction or support necessary?"

"Negative. In control of situation. Will update as needed."

"Gotcha. Stick to the plan. Contact again in 45." She says as she disconnects.

Checking her watch, she does the calculations. She'll arrive at the NYC Bus Terminal on 8th Avenue in one hour. Whoever is behind the attempt will not give up. Since they attacked in mid Connecticut, and the Benson family and business is based in Boston, Massachusetts, She summarizes this hijacking has been planned for a while and by professionals.

Dialing the burner, it gets picked up in one ring.

"Where's our girl?" She asks.

"Sitting in her office. Was up at the mansion earlier in the day. Stayed twenty minutes, max. Left a hail of gravel in the driveway...not very happy I gathered. No visitors" responded the tail that She put on Elizabeth.

"Stay on her until I wave you off" She says and hangs up.

Dialing again, another voice picks up and simply says: "Go".

"Where is he?" She asks the surveillance she put on Frank.

"In an office near the North End." the voice says. "Was picked up by two musclemen at sunrise and was escorted into a nondescript three story walk up on Valenti Way."

"If you get a visual, let me know" She says and disconnects, not waiting for an answer.

She now had a good idea as to who was behind this. Certainly not the daughter. Elizabeth arrived at the house to grab what she could after her mother left, that much was true. She knew where the merchandise was. Chip had confirmed that the client was in possession of a satchel taken from the safe at the mansion, so there was very little of value for Elizabeth to take. If Elizabeth had anything, she'd be meeting with someone to get rid of it.

The fact that the son was in a not so upscale section of the city, escorted there by two thugs at the break of dawn on the same day that Her operation commenced could only mean that whoever he owed money to had put into motion the process of being collected. That and Frank was being babysat until whoever it was had what they wanted.

She settled back into her seat. She had a plan, she assembled a good talented, experienced, well paid and loyal crew. She dealt with an emergency with that crew and moved forward, on schedule. There's only so much She could do and she had done it. Like the katas she practiced daily, She knew that

being prepared, being ready and able are the only choices anyone has in life. This assignment was just another example. There are no guarantees, only options to choose when situations play themselves out. She took a deep breath in and slowly let it out. Twice.

The phone rang in Badinov's office as they all sat in silence.

"What is it now?" Badinov says quietly.

"They were on to us. Two guys and one of our cars are out."

"Where?"

"Mid Connecticut, Merritt Parkway. I'm still on them."

Badinov turns to Frank. "Where are they headed?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know exactly which hotel they are going to" Frank says.

Speaking back into the phone, Badinov speaks, "I'm going to get you help. Any idea which bridge they are going to use to get into the city?"

"At this point, it could be either one. I can't tell yet for sure, but I'd lay money that they'll go down the west side of the city. It's more direct. The other way, it's too complicated."

"I'm calling Yuri in Manhattan, get him to grab a couple of his boys and be in touch with you. Stick with them" and he hangs up.

## CHAPTER

The New York City Port Authority Bus Terminal sits on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 41st Street on the west side of Manhattan. It's not a pretty area. It's very NYC utilitarian in the sense that it's filled with bland office buildings that reach to the sky and a wide variety of stores that populate the street level. No architectural award winners here. You won't find it on any seventy-dollar double-decker tour bus ride popular with tourists from Kansas or Tokyo. Right across the street, however, are the offices of The New York Times. That's impressive. Not so impressive that She's going to give it a second glance as She walks out of the building onto Eighth Avenue. Stopping just outside the door to stretch and to work the kinks out of her bones after the long bus ride, She relishes in the strong sunlight that is falling on her. With all the skyscrapers in this city, there are scant few places where the sun actually hits the pavement, but this is one of them and she's thankful for it.

Checking her watch, she figures she's got a fifteen minute walk downtown along Eighth, a left turn onto 35th Street, then straight to the Renaissance Hotel, her destination. The Renaissance was selected for its easy access for the inbound caravan, being only five blocks from Twelfth Avenue on the west side that they would be using to get into town. No heavy midtown traffic to get caught up in, and with the latest development, less likely an area that another hijacking attempt could be made.

With her backpack slung over her right shoulder and dressed in jeans, sneakers and a Hoodie with an NYU logo on it, She looks like a hundred other college kids on their way to school. The sidewalk is typically crowded. It is New York City after all. People on their way to the office or rushing to meet someone. There're delivery people pushing carts, people on bicycles, hundreds jostling for space on the concrete. There's food vendors offering coffee and breakfast sandwiches, there are people selling everything from sunglasses and pocketbooks to cell phones and clothing from tables set up at the curb. Cabs are honking, and there always seems to be a siren screaming somewhere. The atmosphere is electrifying and it's easy to see how tourists get distracted. City dwellers are a different story; they walk like they are on a mission. They ignore everyone and are in their own world. Anyone who hesitates gets bumped and knocked about. This area outside the bus terminal is prime territory for every scammer, every pickpocket, every hawker vying for everyone's dollar. Given all of this, She too, is on a mission. She's got to get to the hotel. She's got a timetable to keep.

A few yards along Eighth Avenue, She sees two young guys standing in a doorway. Early twenties in age, She observes they are also in jeans, sneakers and sweatshirts. But these are not college students. They are not waiting for a

cab. They are scanning the crowd. Looking for targets. The taller of the two nudges his partner and nods in her direction and straightens up.

She notices and immediately goes into risk assessment mode. Are they after her or someone else? Is there an easy exit path? If not, how will She defend herself here? Fight or Flight? Deep breath, keep moving. Keep assessing as these two move toward her. She quickly runs her arm through the other strap of her backpack so it now sits squarely and securely on both her shoulders.

They stop right in front of her.

"Where you heading, sister?" the tall one asks.

That settles it. They've picked her as their target. Maybe their first for the day. It is early after all. Looking straight at him, She takes a step back.

"Just walk away. You don't want to be doing this"

"Aww, come on, girl, we just want to talk to you"

"No you don't. We all know what you want."

Menacingly, the short one starts in, "Don't give us any trouble. Just give up the backpack and whatever else you have in your pockets" as he takes Her arm to pull her into the doorway nearby.

She resists and pulls back, "Get your hand off me." Yanking on her, the short one continues to pull.

It's exactly what she expects him to do. She quickly steps into the man, using her weight to push him off balance slightly. He reacts by pushing back, which is exactly what She wants him to do. Using his forward force and reaching to grab his hand on her arm with her other hand, She leans down and in rapidly, and then just as quickly, twists and pivots.

Down he goes on his knees right in front of his partner. She rams her elbow right into the side of his head. He releases his grip, falls to the ground and She steps back again. The tall one starts to advance but is hampered by his partner on the ground in front of him.

Reaching behind and to the bottom of her backpack, She retrieves a collapsible steel baton from the place where it's been velcroed. With a flick of her wrist and the crisp click sound, it fully extends in her right hand. Taking a well-practiced defensive stance, She prepares for the next move.

"You mutha..." the tall one says stepping over his partner and heading toward her, "you gotta have something worth protecting in that pack"

"I'm telling you, step away" She replies.

Instead, this skell lunges.

She steps to the left, and as He comes parallel to her, She swings the baton and strikes her attacker on the knee.

As he screams out and starts to fall, She swings again and connects with the back of his head. Without another sound, he joins his partner on the ground. With the two of them down, She slams the tip of the baton on the sidewalk and

it collapses back into its compact size and returns it to its storage place on the bottom of the backpack.

Straightening up, She turns around and is not surprised to see that despite this whole interaction taking just over two minutes, no crowd had gathered.

“Sheesh...New York...typical” She thinks as she briskly crosses the street to the east side of the avenue and walks away. Taking long strides and watching the reflection in every window that has one, She keeps an eye on what, if anything, is going on behind her. Within a block and a half She’s convinced her attackers haven’t taken up pursuit, but that doesn’t mean she’s slowing down.

## CHAPTER

As the Merritt Parkway narrows and merges with other highways heading into New York City, Chip checks his rear-view mirror, sees that the other van is still close behind and taps his comm one more time.

"What's going on back there?"

His earpiece lights up with the query and from behind the wheel of the following van, He says "We're right with you. But so is one of those cars." "How close?" Chip asks.

"Two or three car lengths back. They haven't made any aggressive moves. Just seem to be along for the ride."

"There's a good chance they're just shadowing until we all get closer to the city. I imagine some of their friends will be waiting for us ahead. Stay alert."

He responds, "We're down one vehicle and a third of our team. Add to the mix that they now know which van our guests are in."

"All the more reason to stay alert. Playing shuffle is out at this point. Stick to the route, stay on plan. Here's where you earn your pay."

Crossing the Henry Hudson Bridge, they pick up speed on the West Side Highway as it heads south into Manhattan. Chip picks up the burner and hits speed dial again.

The phone in Her pack rings and while walking along Eighth Avenue, She answers.

"Yes?"

"We're thirty minutes from the door. One insect still attached."

"Be on the lookout for more. We're in the home stretch and they know it."

"Affirmative" Chip replies.

At the same time, He taps his comm to get Chip's attention.

"Reinforcements have arrived and are at my back door right now. Black Lincoln Town Car riding parallel to the Audi."

"Are you positive?" Chip asks.

"A hundred percent. There's no other reason why it would travel at the exact same speed for so long."

Going back to his burner, Chip brings Her up to speed. "You were right. We've got company."

"OK. Do your job. Get the client to the destination. If you're not going to be on site as planned, send up a flare"

"Affirmative" Chip says and hangs up.

In the middle of a three-lane expressway on the west side of Manhattan, the Lincoln and the Audi pick up speed and roar towards the two vans.

"They're making their move!" He barks into his comm.

"Hold them off or get rid of them" Chip commands Him.

From the trailing van, His partner speaks for one of the first times since this adventure began.

"Well, shit, we get extra pay for every bullet used. I could use the bonus," His partner says as he climbs out of the passenger seat and heads to the back of the van.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" He asks incredulously.

"Yeah, didn't know? It's standard policy when working with Chip. Extra effort gets you extra pay" his partner laughs as he pulls a 40caliber automatic from under his shirt.

"Don't worry. I'll just shoot out the radiator. I'm not going to kill anyone."

And with that, he swings open one of the back doors and quickly gets off five of the six shots directly into the front grill of the Lincoln in the lane to the left behind the van. As the driver of the car reacts and starts to swerve, he empties the clip of its last bullet into the front tire. The Lincoln swerves erratically left and right and decreases speed as it becomes immobile and ends up on the small shoulder. Within moments it's just a spec in the rearview mirror as his road partner climbs back into the passenger seat.

"Mission accomplished," the guy smiles. "Plus, a bonus for me to boot. This is a good day."

His comm lights up again, with Chip, "What's the status back there?"

"One car out. Just one left. I'd say we're good to go" He replies, but his words are interrupted by the jolt of being hit by the Audi who has pulled along the driver's side.

"Shit. Getting banged up back here" He says as he battles to hold the van in place.

"We're at 57th Street" Chip says, "Another ten minutes and we can make it to the hotel. You gotta take care of them."

"Yeah, I hear ya. Go on. We've got it from here" He says as the van takes another hit from the Audi on his left.

Turning to his partner he says, "We're on our own to handle these jamokes. Hang on."

His partner at this point is reloading the clip of his 45. "Let's see if I can up my bonus."

"I have a better idea, let's see if we can do it without any more gun play, if you don't mind. I'm not interested in being bonus fodder for these guys either. Buckle up"

And with that, He abruptly turns the wheel which forces the Audi into the concrete divider separating the north and south bound lanes. Screeching metal permeates the air and both vehicles bounce against each other as He does his best to hold the wheel steady and control of the van. Pulling slightly to the right

to release the two for only a moment before he swings left again as the driver's side of the Audi is scraped along the hard surface of the divider. Seconds later, three shots ring out as the driver's side of the van is pierced with bullets from the passenger side of the car currently being squished.

"I hate being shot at!" His partner yells as he pulls his gun and fires off three rounds through the side in return at the Audi.

The reverb in the van is astounding. That's one thing they don't point out in most movies. The noise. A 45-caliber shot in an enclosed environment makes a ton of noise.

"Do you mind!!!" He shouts back to his partner. "I've got an idea."

Keeping the car pinned bouncing and scraping along the median, He sees that the 42nd Street interchange is up ahead. The intersection was designed to allow for traffic to make a left turn and head east across the island of Manhattan. It also means that the median is about to end.

He keeps the Audi jammed up, hoping that the driver is paying more attention to Him and the van and the other cars on the road than anything else. At 55mph they approach the intersection. As the median ends and with one more hard swing to the left, He forces the van into the Audi, moving it a few feet to the left. Not much, just a few feet at the most.

That small amount is enough for the Audi to hit the start of the next concrete median on the other side of the intersection. At that speed, the front corner of the car crumbles like paper and gets caught up in the structure. It begins to spin and flip. Doing so, it tags the back of the van with such force that the van starts to swerve uncontrollably. The screeching of the brakes and tires of the surrounding traffic fills the air as He holds steady and watches the ensuing chaos in his rearview mirror.

## CHAPTER

Every hotel has a service entrance if you know where to look for it. And She knew exactly where to look. It's amazing what you can find from the comfort of your laptop and what Google Earthview can reveal. One of the things that Manhattan has for it, with its just over a million and half inhabitants, is anonymity. And with New Yorker's innate bravado, if you look like you belong or know what you're doing, people leave you be. This works to Her advantage as she enters through the side door of the hotel and heads to the guest services area.

Quickly and casually grabbing a housekeeper's uniform off the rack as she passes by, She heads to the nearest bathroom to change. Finding an empty stall, she pulls a belt pouch out of her backpack, removes her clothes, stuffs them in her backpack and then dons the maids outfit.

Leaving the bathroom, She heads to the front lobby and stops at the bellman's station.

"The kid in 1307 asked me to put this here for him. He's got stuff she wants to keep hidden from her parents" She says casually.

"Kids today. Better not be weed" the head bellman says, handing her a claim ticket.

"Hell, if it was, it would never make it here!" She says as the two share a laugh.

As she turns to head back, She nearly bumps into a guest making their way into the lobby.

"Excuse me" She says as she bows her head, to avoid making eye contact.

Mrs. Benson and the lawyer are standing at the front desk: "I believe you are holding a reservation for me" She hears him say as she moves on.

Right on schedule. Looking over her shoulder and out the front door She realizes she's looking at only one Transit Van at the curb, and her heart skips a beat.

Where is He? She starts to panic. The burner is in the backpack locked up with the bellman. She can't get a hold of Chip for an update. Her client is headed to the meeting.

She has to stay on task.

No matter how much She feels for Him and right now She's learning she feels an awful lot for Him, She has to do her job.

The lawyer and Mrs. Benson cross back through the lobby and into a waiting elevator. As the doors are closing, She passes by. The lawyer looks out and with a quizzical "you look familiar" glance she is gone from sight.

She turns and heads out of the lobby in the opposite direction to grab a service elevator and get ready for the next step in her plan. One last look to the

front door to catch a glimpse and see if He is out there yields nothing more than the first time. He isn't there.

The elevator doors open on the seventh floor and Mrs. Benson and the lawyer head down the hallway to 709.

Opening the door, the lawyer sees that the room is large, just as requested, with a sitting area containing a couch, a side chair and a desk separated from the sleeping area by a half wall. A perfect layout to conduct the business at hand.

Entering and seeing that all is in order, the lawyer guides Mrs. Benson to the upholstered side chair, pulls a cell phone out of his pocket and dials up.

"Good afternoon" he says. "We're here and ready to meet as soon as you are available" speaking to the gem dealer. "Very good then" he says concluding the call and pockets the phone.

She arrives on the seventh floor carrying a small pile of towels and watches from a distance as a man emerges from a room on the opposite side of the hall, goes directly across and knocks on 709.

Startled, the lawyer looks through the peephole and recognizes the gem dealer.

Opening the door, he says, "That was quick!"

The dealer enters and in impeccable English with a heavy French accent, dripping of privilege and wealth says, "I took the liberty of securing a room opposite yours, in order to be able to meet at a moment's notice."

"And our firm reserved the rooms on either side of this one, for security purposes" the lawyer added, doing his best to one-up the dealer.

"Ah, that is why they were unavailable to me. Good thinking, sir" the dealer said, giving his conduit to the merchandise a small victory in the eyes of his client.

"Shall we get down to business?" the lawyer says. "I'd like to present, Mrs. Benson"

The dealer steps forward and offers a small respectful bow as Mrs. Benson presents her hand.

"A pleasure"

"And a profitable one, I hope" Mrs. Benson replies smilingly.

The lawyer turns and picks up the case he's been holding on to for the last four hours and places it on the desk. Pulling his cell phone out again, he texts a number She provided that connected to Chip's burner.

Down on the street, Chip's phone vibrates. He opens the text and types in a series of eight digits and hangs up.

The lawyer reads the numbers and as She instructed days ago, in reverse order, begins to dial in the combination.

The locks click and latches snap open. The lawyer lifts the lid and steps back.

The dealer behind him looks in and straightens up.

"Is this a joke?" he calmly asks.

Beads of sweat begin to form on the lawyer's brow and his shirt collar starts to feel tight as his heart rate climbs as the two of them stare in bewilderment at nothing but piles of folded and bound newspapers in the case.

Mrs Benson rises and sees what they see and gasps and begins to set back down again.

"Oh my..." Mrs. Benson exclaims as her voice trails off.

*Knock Knock Knock* is heard on the door

## CHAPTER

"Housekeeping" the three of them hear.

"What do you want?" the lawyer calls out.

"Towels, I have towels for you" the voice on the other side of the door says.

The lawyer's heads to the door. Peering through the peephole again, recognizes HER and opens the door and steps aside.

She swiftly moves into the room.

"Nice to see you again" the lawyer says as She walks past everyone.

"What's the meaning of this?" Mrs. Benson asks.

Outside the front door of the hotel, Chip is leaning against the back of the van parked at the curb. His road partner is standing in front of the vehicle watching everyone walking by as He approaches.

"Got a light?" He sarcastically asks.

Chip has no patience or interest in jokes at this point.

"Where's your vehicle?" he asks.

"Dented and sitting at 12th and 40th."

"Drivable?"

"Yes...sorta.. and awaiting instructions"

"And you're here because?"

"I thought given what we've run into so far, you might want a little back up, so I hoofed it over. #3 can take care of the vehicle and I figured the last thing midtown Manhattan needed was another van to clog up the works."

"Take a position across the street and keep your eyes open. Don't do any more thinking until I tell you too. Got it?"

"Got it." And with that, He moves into position with his back against the wall of the building and did a quick scan of the street.

Upon entering the hotel room, She confidently speaks, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Benson, Monsieur Frenchman. I am sorry for the confusion" she says as walks over to the desk. "I am an associate of Mr. Lawyer."

SHE removes all the bundled newspapers from the case and drops them in the wastepaper basket. Pulling out the black velvet liner of the case she lays it flat out on the desk.

Reaching under the borrowed maids uniform and pulling out the concealed belted pouch, SHE zips it open and pours out the cache of jewels that SHE was hired to protect. The gems and precious metals glisten in the light.

Turning to the occupants in the room, she smiles and says, "Mrs. Benson, would you be so kind as to check and confirm that all the merchandise you need is here."

Incredulously, Mrs. Benson rises and walks over to the desk. Mr. Lawyer

removes a sheet of paper from his suit jacket pocket, unfolds it and presents a print out of the inventory Mrs. Benson had intended for sale.

"I believe you can now conduct what business you came for." SHE says as she backs away from the desk. Off to the side, SHE pulls the sheer curtain aside and glances out and down to the street below.

A small smile begins to grow on her face as she sees Him leaning below.

Mrs. Benson takes her time going through the objects on the cloth in front of her. Mr. Lawyer standing attentionally beside her, playing the part of an interested participant, like any good law stooge would. Monsieur Frenchman dutifully stands aside, maintaining a professional distance, but SHE could see that his eyes were scanning every piece, no doubt already calculating his profit.

"Yes, everything seems to be here" Mrs. Benson finally announces.

"Very good" the dealer says, stepping forward.

She moves back toward the desk.

"It's been a pleasure, ma'am" She says as she extends her hand to the elderly woman.

Taking Mr. Lawyer's elbow she guides him a few feet away. Reaching back into the bundle from where she retrieved the merchandise, SHE pulls out an envelope and hands it to him.

"Two first class airline tickets back to Boston tonight. In three hours, there'll be limo car service waiting at the front door to get you to the airport."

"Well, you think of everything, don't you?"

SHE replies with a smile saying "I expect the balance of my payment by the end of business today."

Not waiting for him to reply, SHE turns and exits the room. Making her way down the hallway, She gets back into the service elevator and takes it down to the lobby. Crossing the ground floor, she pulls the baggage check ticket out of her pocket along with a ten dollar bill and hands it off to the head bellman.

"Damn kid now wants her shit back. But at least she's a decent tipper. Here's your half."

Shaking his head, the bellman takes the cash and hands off the backpack.

She takes the bag and heads off to the service area to find a place to change back into her street clothes and returns the maids uniform to where she found it. No sense just dumping it; that would only make some hard working woman's day that much more difficult.

Ten minutes later, SHE is striding back through the lobby as the confused head bellman is considering where he's seen her before.

Midtown Manhattan streets barely get any sunlight. The tall buildings and narrow crosstown streets don't allow for the light to fall on the pavement. Sure, when you're out on the wider streets like 34th, 42nd and 57th daylight is evident. But here on 38th, it feels like a prison cell. If it weren't for the bright

lights of the storefronts, it would be dismal. SHE doesn't understand why anyone would choose to live here.

SHE strides out the front door to find Chip standing at the ready at the curb.

"All done" SHE says. "What's the damage?"

"Van number two and that crew are on their way back home. Both boys are a bit banged up. Nothing that requires hospitalization, but they may be wanting some kinda bonus. Truck number three is damaged and down there at the end of the block. It's drivable, I'm told, although you're gonna have a helluva adventure with the rental company with it's return. Your new guy is across the street. He came running down to help" Chip says as he signals for HIM to come across.

As HE arrives to join them, SHE says, "OK. Good job. Change of plans. I'm not riding back with you. Neither is he. Get the other van and head back north, get the last one, and drop them at the rental gate after hours. I'll deal with them when I get back. "

"Whatever you say, you're the boss" Chip says without giving the new plan a second thought.

"I'll be by The Cabaret to settle up with you and collect the comms tomorrow night" SHE says.

And just as quickly as the conversation began, it's over. HE takes his comm piece off his belt and hands it to Chip as SHE loops her arm into his and they walk away. Within seconds they have blended into the NYC sidewalk flow and are gone.

Chip repeats his often-used phrase as he climbs behind the driver's wheel: "What a strange woman."

## CHAPTER

The cellphone in the jacket pocket of the main thug rings in Boris's office and everyone flinches a little bit. But it's Frank who tenses and begins to sit up straight.

Hitting the button, the thug doesn't say a word. He just listens. Within seconds, he slowly places the phone back in his pocket and walks over to his Boss. Bending down, he begins to whisper into his ear. Boris' nostrils flare and his chest fills with air in disgust. Waving his henchman away, he stares at Frank for a long time before he speaks.

"You continue to be a major disappointment."

"What's the problem?" Frank quivers as he asks.

"You've cost me. You owe me a lot and I'm still empty handed. The collateral you said would be easy to get has been delivered and now it's out of my hands. And I've lost a good man in the process" Boris says.

"What are you saying?"

"I have nothing for all my troubles. Nothing that you promised has been delivered."

"Wait, wait. I told you the what, the where, and the when you could put your hands on much much more than what I owed you. If you couldn't get your hands on the stuff, how is that my fault? How?"

"All this work and I have nothing. The *why* at this point doesn't matter to me. What matters to me is my money. The money that you owe me. And as far as I'm concerned you haven't paid your debt."

"Hold on here Boris. This isn't my fault!"

"It's still your debt. It's still a debt that's owed to me that hasn't been paid as far as I'm concerned."

"Ok Ok Ok, I get that. I'll figure out another way to get the money I owe you. I'll figure it out" Frank stammers out.

"No, I'm telling you your days of figuring things out are over" Boris says "Get him out of my face. I don't want to see him again" he continues coldly.

"No no wait a minute....hey! come on, wait a minute" Frank screams as he is pulled out of his chair.

"Make sure that anyone who owes me gets the message about what happens if they don't come through" Boris says to his lead henchman as Frank is led out of the office.

The door slams but Frank's voice is still heard screaming as one of the henchmen tosses him down the stairs.

~ ~ ~

Turning the corner onto 7th Avenue, the sun finally hits them and She finally lets out a long deep breath. Sensing the stress that's been pent up inside of her, HE ventures, "Tell me what you need."

It takes her a few minutes to answer as SHE focuses on letting all the tension bleed out of her. Exhale the past, inhale the future. In and out. Deep slow breaths.

"This is your town, right? I could use some food. It's been a long day. Know of any place that's quiet enough to be ignored for an hour or so?"

"Well, midtown wasn't exactly my backyard, but I'm sure I can find something that'll work"

"I hope you like trains" She blurts out after a few more steps.

Curiously, He asks, "Any particular reason?"

"Yeah, I've got two first class tickets on the 7pm out of Penn Station tonight"

"Well, you think of everything, I see" HE says.

SHE smiles with satisfaction with hearing that for the second time that afternoon.

"You did well today" SHE says.

"Thanks" is all he replies as they walk.

"You know, I could get used to this" She says

"This? Just what is 'this'?" He asks.

"Having you be an important part of my life" She ventures.

"And would that be so horrible?" He asks

"Not for me. If nothing else, it sure will be interesting!" is Her reply.

"Interesting isn't such a bad place to be" He says.

Her cell phone rings in her pocket and she pulls it out to answer.

Listening, she is told by her lookout sitting down the street in Boston about Frank being dragged out and hustled into a car at the curb.

"Do you think you can get a photo of him and whoever he is with?"

"I can try. No promises" is the reply.

"I understand," She says and hangs up and shoves the phone back into her pocket.

"Problems?" He asks.

"I don't know yet. It looks like this is one of those jobs that just keeps on giving" She sighs.

## CHAPTER

The mid-day sun was hot. It was August after all, and the summer so far in Boston had been brutally unforgiving. She had spent the morning at her client's office twenty stories above the pavement hammering out the details of a new assignment she was hired for. Explaining things to people who aren't actually doing tasks doesn't come naturally to her. Having to do so in the trappings of the legal corporate environment made her even more uncomfortable. The black linen skirt, white silk top and matching linen jacket was bad enough, but the three inch heels were the killer.

"How do corporate women wear these all day?" she wondered.

Of course, the truth is they didn't. The smart ones didn't anyway. They didn't commute in them. They traveled in something sensible with the pain makers in shoulder bags. They wore them from meetings and back to office; but in the privacy of their workspaces the shoes were quickly stowed under desks, always at the ready to step into all for the benefit of clients or senior partners who expected the uniform to be worn.

The air conditioning in the building provided relief from the oppressive environment outside. From the large glass windows of the conference room above the city, everyone below looked like toy action figures.

At the close of the meeting, there was no opportunity for the client to approve or deny any aspect of the operation. This was not a democracy. As with all her work, this was her show. Her choices, her decisions. For the payment of the five figure fee charged, She was basically granting them a seat at the first rehearsal.

She thanked them for the coffee. Pulled the thumb drive that held the PowerPoint presentation from the laptop provided and dropped it in her shoulder bag. Shaking hands all around finalized the visit and She walked to the elevator bank without a word to the associate who escorted her. No need or desire for banter, all she wanted was escape. She loved their money but couldn't stand their company for longer than absolutely necessary.

The doors opened at the ground floor and she click-click-clicked her way across the lobby and out the front door into the heat. Like a wet blanket it hit her and the simple act of walking became arduous.

Making her way to the public park across the street to seek relief in the shade from the weight of the high temps and matching humidity, the sounds of children and running water capture her attention at the same time He came into view, reading a copy of The Boston Globe.

"How was it?" He asks, placing the newspaper down on the bench. The headline on an article in the Metro section reading "*Man's Body Found in the Charles River Identified as that of Wealthy Benson Family*" faces up.

"Just another adventure in promising the client a happy ending." Looking down at the newspaper she says, "Let's hope that it really will have a happy ending this time."

"You can't control everything. That wasn't your doing" He says as he walks along with Her.

"Oh, I know. It still just sucks" She replies.

"And you did supply the cops with a picture of him in the car with those goons" He added.

"For all the good it did" She says. "Chances are they will never find those guys."

Seeing a large city owned wading pool ahead, replete with two or three fountains shooting arches of water into the air, and splashing back down, half filled with herds of kids, not breaking stride, She hooks her arm in his and heads directly for it.

At the water's edge, she steps effortlessly out of her heels, down into the water and wanders in.

"Come on!" she says, looking back, holding up the edge of her skirt even though it's nowhere near the surface of the pool.

He stands next to her shoes and without bending over, uses one foot to pull His boots off, first one then the other, reaches down and yanks off his socks. Dropping them into one boot, He rolls up his jeans and walks out to join her. For a few minutes, they stroll through the water, taking in this oasis. The concrete flooring is rough on their feet, but the feeling of relief sends chills up their bodies. Standing close to one another, the cool water soaking them from the calves down, He takes her hand in His and brings his lips down to Hers until they are inches apart. He can feel Her heart beat as they press together.

"I want to be with you" He says. The words fall like the water from the nearby fountains, from his mouth down onto her.

"You are with me", she replies as she kisses him gently.

His hands find their way to her waist as he pulls her in and continues the kiss for as long as he can. It's warm in its intimacy and heated in the passion they share, but still, it's gentle, full of the care they have for each other.

Only the splashing nearby as a little girl swims and crawls along the concrete pool floor brings them back down to earth.

"Child! Don't do that! Get ova here" a Caribbean lilt fills the air as a nanny calls to the toddler making faces at them from below.

"Hello there" She says as she bends down to the child.

"I'm sorry" says the nanny as she takes the child's hand to lead her away.

"It's OK. I deal with children all the time" She smirks as she looks at Him. And just to prove it, He kicks up some of the water in Her direction as they make their way back to the hot dry concrete surrounding.

~ ~ ~

Barely two blocks away, in part to quench her thirst, and in part to help in her grief over the news of her brother, Elizabeth is lounging in a leather covered banquet near a window of the newly refurbished, newly named, latest hot spot of a hotel sitting on Arlington Street bordering on Boston's Public Garden, sipping on her second cocktail of the hour.

Not surprisingly, a handsome man approaches. It happens to her all the time. She's used to it. Sometimes she welcomes the attention, sometimes, with the wave of a hand, she dismisses them, like swatting away flies. In this case, she allowed herself a few moments to run her eyes over him, much the same way that men have done to women since the dawn of time.

A well tailored suit. Current design. Not flamboyant, but not subtle either. Crisp white shirt, No tie. Definitely Euro in style.

"Excuse me" the man says. "But I was wondering if I could join you and refresh your drink. Champagne, isn't it?"

And before Elizabeth has a chance to object or even reply, the gentleman unbuttons his suit jacket and sits down.

"Yes, it is champagne, as a matter of fact. You noticed."

"Oh yes, I noticed. I know more about you than you are aware of, Ms. Elizabeth Benson."

"Really? That's not all that difficult. I do have a reputation, after all" she replies slyly.

"You certainly do." the gentleman says, sliding closer, "but I know more than most. For instance, I know that you are looking for new financing so you can finish two of your current building projects."

Raising her eyebrows and looking at him with one eye, Elizabeth says, "If you know that, you also know that I need to be discreet about it. Who are you and what are you after?"

"After? I'm not after anything. The man that I work for is always looking to help people with....let's say, creative financing. To the benefit of everyone involved."

"Then let's get you a drink and we can talk." Elizabeth says as she signals the waiter.

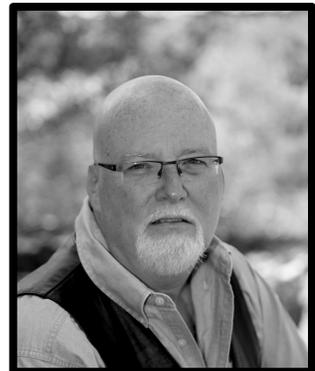
His voice and his diction drip of upbringing and class. His accent is clearly Russian.

## ***IN SEARCH OF***

by Marc Teatum

A woman who makes her living fixing problems isn't unusual. More often than not, women are just better at it. When those problems start at a downtown law firm, with clients that are challenges, the managing partner knows who to call to get the job done.

A crime thriller/relationship exploration story filled with love, loyalty, betrayal, abandonment, and redemption. It's set in Boston and around New England, and follows a woman owner of an independent security company and her need to balance a dangerous current assignment and a developing new love. The main character is slightly off center and sometimes that's exactly what's needed. Twice divorced, the only child of blue collar hard working parents, she is skilled in covert operations, a master of surveillance, goes deep in research, rides a motorcycle, is skilled in martial arts, has the charms of both a snake and a nun, could sell an eskimo ice cream and Satan a space heater. Amazingly competent, at least on the outside. On the inside, she's as insecure as you or I. Throughout the book, our heroine and the new love interest remain nameless, referred to only as "She" and "He". Names immediately conjure up a mental image in readers minds, so in this way, using only descriptions of these characters, it is you, dear readers, who get to complete the visual on their own.



Marc Teatum is an author of contemporary fiction. In 2011, Marc co-authored his first novel, *One Light Coming* with Edward Winterhaler. He went on to co-author two more in A Biker Story series: *The Moon Upstairs* and *The Blue and Silver Shark*. All are available through Amazon, Barnes&Noble, all retail outlets and as both audio books and eBooks. In 2016 his first publication in The Boston Sunday Globe feature: Fifty Words launched his interest in this medium. Between 2016 and 2023, The Globe published seventeen of his works, more than any other contributor.

Also in 2016 Marc began work as a monthly columnist for Motorcyclist Post magazine where he expanded on the fifty word theme for the motorcycling community. His second book of poetry. His first, *Moto-Haiku: 50 Words on Being a Biker*, was published in December 2020.

Visit [www.marcteatum.com](http://www.marcteatum.com) for audio clips from his books, samples of his other writings as well as his interview on *Those Diner and Motorcycle Guys* radio program.



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