

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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Betrayal

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Bil Holton

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*Dedicated to strong women everywhere!
May you always claim your power
and live your dreams!*

Chapter One

So help me – so help me, God. I’m going to pull the trigger.”

“Clarence! No! Please no. Don’t do that,” Pamela pleaded, wincing as she held the phone to her ear.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t end my miserable life.”

Pamela’s bickering thoughts forced her eyes shut.

“Because ... because we can ... ”

“We can what?” he shouted.

“We can work this thing out,” she recovered, trying her best to marshal her composure.

“Don’t even try that. You’ve already told me it’s over. You reminded me again five minutes ago.”

“I told you we could still be friends. We could ... ”

“Friends!” he yelled. “I don’t want to be just friends. I love you, Pamela. Don’t you understand that?”

“People who love one another are faithful to each other. How dare you say you love me when you ... ”

“I told you I was sorry. How many more times do I have to say it? I made a mistake – okay? It ... it just happened.”

“Clarence, I don’t want your apology. You can’t apologize for the inexcusable. Your affair with her was simply a product of your own arrogance. Yes! You made a mistake all right. You chose lust over love and expected me to tolerate it.”

“I told you it won’t happen again.”

“You’re right. It won’t happen again, because I’m not putting myself in a position to get hurt again.”

“See. You still don’t get it, do you?” he blasted. “If you had been there, I would never have let her into my room. I had a bad day that day and she listened. She was there for me. That’s more than I can say for you. Your work was more important than me.”

Pamela’s mouth flung open in disbelief as she wrestled with his absurdity.

“What a terrible thing to say. You know I work for a living. I can’t follow you around the country and watch you play football.”

“I make more than enough money for both of us,” he bellowed.

“And you remind me of that every chance you get. That’s one of the things we never worked out. I love what I do, Clarence. You have always made me feel that what I do is silly ... that it’s unimportant. I may never make as much money as you, but I’m making a living doing something I enjoy.”

“So am I. I love football.”

“So where do you think that leaves us.”

“With me holding a gun to my head,” Clarence replied.

Pamela bit her lip and hesitated before she chanced a reply.

“I’m sitting here holding this .38 caliber pistol to my head, wondering why I haven’t fired it yet.”

Pamela stiffened again in response to his suicide threat.

“Why haven’t you?” She asked, realizing she was entering risky territory.

When he didn’t respond immediately, she became agitated.

“Clarence, why are you putting us both through this? I don’t want you to hurt yourself. I’m still willing to be friends, but we’ve got a lot to consider before we even think about continuing our relationship.”

“On your terms or mine?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, finding it difficult to justify further conversation.

“Are we going to settle this your way or my way?”

“I was hoping we could reach a mutual agreement.”

She listened to his labored sigh.

“Such as?” he replied, purposefully blunting his own input.

Pamela bit her lower lip as she moved slowly to the side of the sofa.

“When you called me, you said you would do anything to get me back.”

“That’s right. Anything.”

“Then why are you threatening to kill yourself?”

“Because you don’t want me anymore. I make one mistake and you want to throw me away.”

“It was a pretty serious mistake, Clarence. We were engaged to be married.”

“I told you I’m sorry.”

Pamela huffed her resentment.

“I would like us to remain friends ... but ... ”

“But the marriage is off, right?” he countered.

She held her breath and then let it out.

“As it stands right now ... yes.”

Click!

She heard him cock the trigger.

“It’ll take time to work things out,” Pamela pleaded.
“Please don’t force things like this. You’re asking me to promise something I can’t ... ”

“Can’t or won’t? I don’t want time to be friends. I want time to be your husband. I want you to forgive me.”

Pamela frowned.

“I want to forgive you, too. You really hurt me, Clarence ...”

“But you don’t want me to be your husband, do you?”

“No. You’ve pretty much destroyed any chances of that happening.”

“Then there’s nothing left for me to live for, is there, you unforgiving hussy? You think just because you’ve got the body and looks that you can treat a man any way you want ... you”

“Once upon a time, this body and my looks were just for you!” she interrupted. “I enjoyed looking good for you. You obviously grew tired of me or you wouldn’t have done what you did. Looks didn’t have anything to do with it. It wouldn’t have mattered what I looked like, how thin or heavy I was, how rich or poor I was, or how over-sexed or under-sexed I was. People like you think only of themselves and what they want for the moment. You didn’t care if you hurt me. And as for your high opinion of me, what did you just call me ... a hussy? I never did anything to you that justifies that label.”

“You left me.”

“No. You left me when you had the affair ... and now you want to blame me for your own bad judgment.”

“You sound like you don’t care what happens to me,” he teased.

Pamela gritted her teeth, but held her tongue.

“How are you going to feel when I commit suicide because of you? I’m begging you to take me back. Please! Are you going to save my life?”

“Why you manipulative hyena. You’re enjoying this aren’t you?”

“I’m begging you. Say yes or I’m going to splatter my brains all over this room.”

“If you promise to get counseling, I’ll consider taking you back.”

“You really are a hussy. You know that.”

“Clarence. What you did can’t be repaired just like that. It’ll take time. And if you want to continue this conversation, you’d better clean up your language.”

“Then stop acting like a little hussy. Thanks to you my time’s running out.”

“If you want to take your life, I can’t save it. Nobody can. If you insist on calling me names, I’m going to hang up.”

“I’m going to put the gun in my mouth.”

“Clarence. Please stop this or I’m going to hang up.”

“Okay!”

“Okay what?”

Bang!

The sound of the gun blast drove the phone from her ear as she screamed in horror. When she heard the gun drop to the floor, followed by what sounded like his lifeless body falling to the floor, she screamed again. She fumbled with the phone before she brought the receiver back to her ear.

“Clar ... Clarence!”

She listened, hyperventilating her fear.

“Clarence!” she yelled through disbelieving lips.

Oh, my God. He’s shot himself.

She listened for any sound. Any indication of life. Anything that might tell her he botched his own assassination.

“Clarence! Please come to the phone if you can.”

She pressed the phone to her cheek to erase the rush of air from the furnace which announced another cycle of warmth through the vent at her feet.

Please tell me you didn’t do this. Please tell me ...

She lowered the phone as she sank onto the chair. Her trembling fingers allowed the phone to fall into her lap before she could catch it.

Damn you for doing this to me. Damn you for making me witness your vulgar act of cowardice.

Pamela suddenly felt the urge to vomit and barely reached the bathroom before she emptied herself. She hugged the commode seat for support until she felt she could stand to retrieve a washcloth to whip her mouth.

Then she pulled a towel off its hanger to wipe her face and leaned against the sink to regain her composure.

The sound of the gun blast rifled through her emotions, sending her fist crashing against the sink.

“I hate you for doing this to me,” she said aloud, kneeling over the commode again in response to a nauseous lump in her throat.

She readied herself for another unpleasant reunion with the toilet, but managed to avoid the need for the sour deposit.

“I’ve got to call someone,” she instructed herself. “I’ve got to report ... report his death.”

She stood beside the sink and dampened a cloth again to wipe her face and neck.

Her soulful glance into the mirror showed the affects of just having witnessed a suicide. She was as white as a sheet and her unsteady legs struggled to support her weight.

This is unreal, she announced to herself as she made her way to her cell phone, which was in her purse tucked beneath her desk. She couldn’t use the office phone because Clarence’s phone was still live. “I’ve just heard a man shoot himself.”

She picked up the phone and listened, hoping her pilgrimage to the bathroom had somehow altered reality and that he would be on the phone, arrogant, but alive.

Still no sound.

“Clarence! Clarence!”

She listened again and then picked up her cell phone to make the dreaded emergency call.

“If he’s just wounded himself maybe I’ve got time to get help. I’ll never forgive myself,” she chastised herself as she sat in the office chair to keep herself from fainting.

Her finger flew across the phone screen, calling up the app for the 911 emergency number as she took a deep breath.

As soon as the 911 operator announced herself, Pamela explained who she was and speeded up her report so much the operator had to slow her down.

“Ms. Justice, first, give me the name and location of the victim.”

“Clarence Blount.”

“Clarence Blount?” the operator repeated. “And where is he?”

“At his home in San Francisco. I think. His address is 4824 Pacific Avenue. It’s near Navato ... just across the bridge ... The

Golden Gate Bridge. You've got to hurry. You've got to get someone there. He may still be alive," Pamela accelerated her words again.

"All right, Pamela. I'm having paramedics dispatched to that address, but I want you to stay on the phone and tell me everything you can about it."

"He shot himself while I was on the phone with him. I ... "

"Ms. Justice ... Pamela ... I want you to calm down. Okay?"

"Do you have Mr. Blount's phone number?" asked the operator, sounding mechanical, but efficient.

Pamela gave it to her.

"I'm going to give this information to the operator next to me, but Pamela, I want you to stay on the phone. Okay?"

"Okay," Pamela repeated shivering her obedience.

In a few moments the operator was back.

"Pamela?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"We've already notified the San Francisco police. I need you to help me clear up a few details. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Do you want someone there with you? A relative ... or a friend?"

"No, I'm okay."

"You've had quite a shock. I'd be happy to call someone for you."

"No. That's okay."

"If you change your mind, let me know."

"I will." Pamela assured her as she glanced at the office phone sandwiched between the Rolodex and the laptop on her desk. "I've still got an open line," she told the operator.

"I beg your pardon?" replied the confused 911 operator. "You mustn't hang up."

Pamela would have chuckled if she weren't so upset, but she let her jaw drop instead.

“No, I mean my connection with Clarence’s home phone. I’ve got that line open, too.”

“You’ve still got an open connection between the residences?” exclaimed the operator.

“Yes. He wasn’t able to hang up.”

“That’s okay. You’re doing just fine, Pamela. Leave the office phone line open. Okay?”

Pamela sat beside the desk holding both phones, but with her cell phone to her ear.

“Leave the office phone open,” came the operator’s hurried reply. “Pamela, listen to Mr. Blount’s connection and tell me if you hear anything.”

Pamela lowered the cell phone and raised the business phone to her ear. She narrowed her eyes to improve her hearing and listened intently for a few moments.

“Yes, I hear something,” she said excitedly. “It ... it sounds like ticking. A clock I think,” she blunted her own sentence realizing she wasn’t speaking into the cell phone.

She repeated what she’d said into the office phone so the operator could hear.

“The clock is the only thing you hear.”

“Yes, just the clock,” Pamela confirmed, not knowing whether to feel relieved or disappointed. “I didn’t hear it before. I ...”

“Pamela, that’s okay. You ... wait ... hold on. I’ve just gotten word that the San Francisco police are at the Pacific Avenue residence. Stay on the ...”

Pamela quickly exchanged phones, silencing the 911 operator’s voice.

She could hear what sounded like muffled voices in Clarence’s room along with the ever-present ticking of the clock.

She exchanged phones again, running into a mild, but firm reprimand from the operator.

“I hear voices. The police are in his townhouse,” exclaimed Pamela.

“Pamela. Ms. Justice ... Pamela!” crowed the operator. “The San Francisco police want to speak to you. Keep both lines open ... Don’t hang up. But speak to them. They’re on your office phone.”

Pamela exchanged the phones, placing her cell phone on her desk.

She lifted the office phone to her ear.

“Hello.

“Ms. Justice?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“This is Sergeant Anderson of the SFPD. Are you the one who reported a possible suicide?”

Pamela swallowed hard and sensed that her throat was dry. Her first attempt to speak produced a cough.

“Yes. Yes I am.”

“Well, we’re here at Mr. Blount’s apartment.”

Pamela began to hyperventilate as she struggled to get her words out.

“Is he ... is he ... ? I heard him shoot himself. I ...”

“Ms. Justice. Mr. Blount is standing right here. You couldn’t have heard a suicide.”

A stupefied look jumped on her face, and her mouth flung open.

“Ms. Justice, are you still there? Did you hear what I said?”

Her eyes darted across the surface of her desk top as she tried to get hold of herself.

“You mean ... he’s ... alive?”

“He’s standing right here in front of me.”

“He ... he didn’t shoot himself?”

“Here. He wants to talk to you.”

Her knees suddenly felt weak, sending her back onto the edge of the desk.

“Pamela, what’s wrong with you? Are you crazy? You told these people I committed suicide? Look, I’ve put up with your threats and lies all I’m going to. I don’t want you calling here again. I should have hung up on you this time, but I figured you needed the catharsis so I laid the phone down. But to say I shot myself over you ... you need to get a grip on yourself. You need to get a life. But most of all, you need to leave me alone.”

He slammed the phone down, sending her phone from her ear.

I can’t believe this. He didn’t shoot himself. It was all just a game. A horrible manipulative game.

“You jerk!” She raised the phone to throw it across the floor, but, screamed her vehemence instead.

She bridled her anger when she spied the cell phone lying face up on her desk.

Oh dear, she heard me scream.

Apologetic hands grabbed the phone and lifted it to her ear. She could hear the woman’s frantic voice pleading with her to get back on the phone.

“Operator ... operator. I’m back. I’m sorry I frightened you. I ... he’s okay. He didn’t shoot himself. I guess you heard.”

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right. You sound distressed.”

“Yes ... well ... It doesn’t matter anymore,” Pamela whispered. “He’s ... he’s playing games with me.”

“Ms. Justice, are you sure you’re okay? Do you need me to call someone?”

“No,” Pamela replied, letting out a sigh. “I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“No bother at all. That’s what we’re here for. I can tell by your call you believed you were reporting someone’s death. We’re glad your friend is okay.”

“Friend! That jerk’s no friend ... Am I in trouble? You know, for calling in a false alarm?”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that. You seem sincere. If we need to clear up any details, the watch commander will probably call you. Most of our calls don’t end this happily. If you’re sure you’re okay we need to clear this line, Ms. Justice.”

“Yes. I’m ... that’s fine. Thank you, operator.”

“Good-bye then.”

“Good-bye.”

Her lips tightened as she placed the phone on its base.

That common, no good piece of trash. He deliberately manufactured his suicide to harass me. I definitely made the right decision to end our relationship.

She raised herself from her desk and plucked the business phone from the desktop.

“I’m not going to be intimidated again by that moron,” she hissed, as she picked up speed walking toward the kitchen.

She spied the Halloween candy on the counter and realized it was Halloween night.

“Of course. It fits him perfectly. His troll-like behavior was perfect for tonight. He’s put a whole new meaning on trick-or-treat.”

Pamela grabbed a piece of candy and headed toward her bathroom.

A long shower will wash his stench off. Then I’ll call Karen to see if I can pay her an early holiday visit.

It was Pamela’s practice to contact her sister whenever she felt wounded by relationships. Both Karen and Geoffrey, her childhood friend, would take turns consoling her, repairing the hurts, soothing the emotional wounds.

She pulled her clothes off and wrapped herself in one of the huge bath towels her grandparents bought her. Then she did a proper job on the candy.

Intuition took her back to the calendar in her office.

My schedule's too full between now and Thanksgiving. The first week of December looks good. I'll see if I can get to Asheville then. Maybe Geoffrey will help me decide what to do.

Pamela penciled in the Asheville trip and reversed her steps to the bathroom.

Geoffrey's a cop who ought to be a psychologist, she praised him to herself. There's no doubt in my mind he can put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

She turned on the shower and flung the towel over the glass shower stall.

She felt soiled by the whole episode with Clarence and wanted to be cleansed by the warm water.

Her troubled steps carried her into the shower and separated her from the harsh realities of a few moments before.

"Ummm," she said softly as the warm water cascaded over her. "I'm going to wash him right out of my life."

Tonight will be fun serving the trick or treaters in the neighborhood.

She tilted her water soaked head toward the skylight above the shower.

The sky is beautiful. I'm going to put my frustrations behind me and turn tonight into an Oktoberfest. He can't intimidate me without my consent. And I'm not giving it anymore!

CHAPTER TWO

It had been a month since his fake suicide call, but Clarence called on Thanksgiving Day just to harass her. As soon as she realized it was him, she let the phone ring.

Why can't he just leave me alone? She asked herself as she laced her shoes. He picks the holidays to grandstand his contempt for me. I wish he had pulled the trigger.

"What am I saying?" she chastised herself aloud. "I don't wish that way out for anyone, not even Clarence. I can't let him form outposts in my mind."

Pamela shot a quick glance at Hans, her sister's lovable four-year-old German Shepherd. He stood protectively at her side, facing into the raw, icy wind that encircled them. His wet nose quivered constantly, as a plethora of odors reached his nostrils.

"Thanks, young fella, for escorting me this morning," she addressed the obedient canine. "It's great to have such good company."

When she gave him a couple of quick pats on the head, Hans let out a small yelp and moved impatiently in a clockwise motion around her.

"Just a minute, fella," she said encouragingly. "I'm almost ready."

Hans voiced another impatient plea as she pulled her second glove over well-manicured fingers. Pamela's eyes narrowed into emerald slits underneath dark lashes in response to a refrigerated blast of air that hit her in the face.

Hans continued his doleful recital by barking his impatience.

A mere apology will not suffice, she reasoned. He's ready to go.

"Okay, okay, Rudolph. I know you want to get this show on the road. But in a couple of weeks it'll be Christmas. And I'm the one with the red nose," she teased. Her levity at his antics spiraled into laughter as she reacted to his latest series of playful yelps.

Encouraged by her mild protest, Hans barked again and lunged forward, sending the nylon lease into a perfectly straight umbilical cord.

Pulled off balance by his exuberance, Pamela staggered momentarily to regain her footing on a pavement spotted with icy patches.

"Hans," she said agitatedly. "Stop it. No! What's gotten into you? Now, come on, take it easy. You're going to make me fall."

Obedient to the tone of her voice, Hans sat on the icy pavement and waited for her direction.

"I'm sorry, boy," she apologized. "After all, I'm the one who got us up at seven-fifteen on the coldest morning they've had in Asheville this winter. And for what? A thirty-minute jog. I ought to have my head examined."

Hans looked at her disciple-like, pitching his massive head from side-to-side as if he understood her.

"I promised Karen we'd be back around eight-fifteen or eight-thirty," she told Hans, referring to the hastily scribbled note she'd left on the kitchen counter for her sister to find. "So we'd better get started."

Hans lunged forward immediately, prompted by her advance.

Leading Hans from behind as she jogged down the icy sidewalk, she remembered the conversation she'd had the night before with Karen about going out this morning. There had been a couple of robberies downtown and a woman was attacked in

broad daylight. She was forced at knife point into her car, driven near Riverside Cemetery, and then beaten and raped.

The holidays, it seems, brings out the best, and unfortunately the worse, in people, she reminded herself believing Clarence to be the chief Grinch. She glanced at Hans admiringly. I'm safe with you around, aren't I, fella? You won't let anything happen to me, will you?

Her thoughts took her to her current painful situation. She was spending Christmas at her sister's before leaving for Europe. She was flying to Brussels, Belgium the day after Christmas to start a six-months consulting contract as a multi-cultural meeting facilitator with NATO. The real reason for her accepting the contract was more personal than professional.

She ended an emotionally and physically devastating relationship with Clarence at Halloween, but her abusive fiancé was making it difficult for her to remain in Raleigh, where she lived. His threats were escalating, and she was getting little help from the Raleigh police. Despite her precautions, he had breached her security several times and left dead bouquets of flowers and taunting notes in her house.

The restraining order she served on him only intensified his relentless harassment. Fear for her life and concern for the safety of her family and friends prompted her to take evasive action. Only her immediate family knew about the overseas assignment.

Her reverie was interrupted suddenly by the harsh voice of a woman, who clucked mild irritation at her.

"Watch where you're going, young lady, or whoever you are. You can't tell these days. You almost knocked me down." Then she cursed at Pamela and raised her fist in self-righteous defiance.

Pamela slowed her pace almost to a stop and turned toward her accuser to make amends, but saw that the woman, quite happy in her tirade, was still shouting obscenities at both her and Hans, who stood, wagging his tail, pleased at the

commotion. Pamela proffered a quick apology and wheeled around, giving Hans more slack. They continued their trek up the icy street which was sprinkled with dozens of skeletal trees whose branches and trunks glistened with the light layer of ice that had fallen overnight.

The streets were desolate and, judging by the reception she just received at the last corner, uninviting. Only an occasional pale yellow light emanated from the snow-speckled windows of the houses that lined the streets.

Not many people up this early on a Saturday morning, she observed, a wry smile cracking her face.

There was a decided iciness to the arid gusts. December had ushered in the foulest of weather.

“Hans, old boy, most people dream of white Christmases. I think it’s really a wish for more time off of work. Who in their right minds thinks this kind of weather warms up the holidays?”

The unpleasant sensation she experienced earlier with the agitated woman returned, sending a chill through her. There was an edge to the atmosphere that had nothing to do with the weather. The morning felt diabolical, as if it had something unpleasant in store for her.

Suddenly Hans pulled hard on the leash, pivoting her around to face him. Pamela slipped on a patch of ice and clung to the taught lease for support.

“Hans! What have you found?” she demanded agitatedly.

Oblivious to Pamela’s mild reprimand, Hans was occupied with the discovery of a recently-discharged excrement deposited just off the sidewalk by a canine relative. Pamela had just missed stepping in it moments earlier as she jogged down the sidewalk.

“No, Hans, no!” she shouted disdainfully, pulling him away from the fecal waste. Ignoring his brief objection, she pulled on the leash again. “Enough of this dilly-dallying,” she remonstrated. “Stay away from that.”

When Pamela pulled on his leash a third time, Hans surrendered, satisfied with his abbreviated visit.

“Owners who let their pets defecate on public walks should have their irresponsible noses rubbed in it,” she said aloud. “Isn’t that right, boy?”

Hans signaled his innocent approval by trotting a few paces ahead of her, looking for something else to catch his fancy.

§ § § § § §

“You piece of shit,” the hung over driver screamed as he bent down to retrieve the car keys he dropped. He went ballistic when he dropped the keys again, allowing the obscenities to come uncensored.

His three passengers, heavily clothed, scarved and booted for winter weather, watched — amused at his clumsy attempts to hold onto the keys.

Suddenly the driver slipped and fell, cursing the trio of passengers and the keys for their insolence.

“Let me help you,” said his wife as she inched closer to him.

He ignored her and shouted a few more expletives at the insubordinate keys, which ricocheted off the icy curb and slid next to the front tire.

“Come here, damn you,” he ordered the keys. It was early in the morning and he was still suffering the effects of too much partying the night before. He used the door handle to pull himself up beside the car and pointed the key at the lock.

“That’s the wrong key. Here, let me do it,” his wife volunteered, placing her gloved hand over his.

“Get outta my way,” he slurred, pushing his wife aside. “If I want your help, I’ll ask for it. Otherwise stay the hell outta my way.”

She grabbed the car to balance herself, recoiling in waxen silence from his vehement outburst. The faces of the other two

passengers turned as ashen as the endless tones of grey that blanketed the landscape around them, giving the trio a ghostlike appearance under the designer clothing they wore.

“I think you’d better drive,” the alcoholic’s wife said to one of the others.

“Like hell he will,” hissed the drunkard.

“You’re not in any shape to drive,” his wife challenged.

“The hell I’m not!”

“You can’t even unlock the door. Just how do you expect to drive?”

“There! It’s unlocked,” he praised himself, pretending he didn’t hear her.

Despite another impotent rash of protestations criticizing his driving ability, the driver stubbornly threw himself behind the steering wheel, inadvertently locking the car when his elbow bumped the electronic lock. He angrily unlocked the car again and ordered the passengers to get in. Without exception, all three confederates flew into the sedan, taking their places without so much as a word between them.

§ § § § § §

Karen hastily snaked out of her nightclothes, ran her fingers through her shoulder length auburn hair, and then shook her head from side to side as if to complete the aeration that busy fingers had only begun. Nonchalantly, she rifled quickly through her middle dresser drawer and retrieved her favorite red sweater. She quickly pulled it over her head and arms simultaneously, allowing it to cascade down over small but round, upstanding breasts, unconfined by a bra.

A pair of knee-less blue jeans was draped across the antique oak and hickory rocker in the corner. She loved the sense of freedom she felt when she wore them. So without hesitation, she confidently sheathed herself in jeans that were loose-fitting, and purposefully air-conditioned.

It's funny, or maybe not so funny, Karen thought, as she gazed intently at her reflection in the beveled mirror attached to the back of the antique oak dresser. I spruce myself up whenever Pamela visits. She has that affect on me.

She glanced at the photo of Pamela on her bureau.

"You've always been the pretty one, Sis," she addressed the photo aloud. "But you've never made me feel less than beautiful. Sometimes you make me think I really am beautiful. Maybe that's why I step up my looks when you're here."

She playfully tugged at the collar of the sweater, a gift from Pamela, and smiled wryly, catching her reflection again in the mirror. Normally, Saturday mornings found her snuggled in one of her sweat shirts, inexpensive trophies rescued mainly from yard sales or flea markets. Occasionally she would purchase one at half-priced sales proffered routinely from the proliferation of shops which sprung up like weeds throughout the town. Merchants competing for customers lowered their prices, keeping her in sweatshirts, music books and house plants.

The muted roar of the furnace coming alive brought her attention to her bare feet, which were beginning to get cold the longer she stood on the bare hardwood floor. One final scrutiny of her hair yielded a perfunctory tussle to fluff the left side a little more. Satisfied, she flew quietly over to other large dresser and confiscated a pair of woolen socks. Her small but strong hands, artist's hands, made short work of pulling her socks over appreciative feet. She glanced around the room, and her blue eyes squinted momentarily to focus on the numbers on the clock face.

"Seven forty-five," she whispered to herself. "I've probably got enough time to give Hans a walk, start the coffee, and get out the tree ornaments before Sis wakes up." She'd purposely neglected the tree, hoping Pamela would want to help trim it when she arrived.

She extinguished the Santa Claus night light in the hallway, and glanced at the door to Pamela's room. It was shut. She

paused, listening for any sound that might indicate activity. Except for the rush of the air from the furnace forcing its way through the overhead vents, and an occasional chorus from tenacious birds broadcasting the start of a new day, here was no evidence of anyone else up.

Content that her movements had not disturbed her sister's sleep, Karen retreated quietly down the stairs, skipping over the third step from the top which usually announced anyone's passage by creaking loudly.

CHAPTER THREE

There was a decided spring to Pamela's confident step as she rounded the next corner to begin her descent toward McDowell Street. She passed an untenanted section of Reed Street. The old houses that once lined the right side of the street had been torn down, leaving vacant lots to punctuate her path.

As she stepped carefully over a clump of sooty ice, she slipped on a patch of black ice, too gelid to be water, yet too clear to be seen. Arms flailing and legs scrambling, she made quite a scene as she struggled toward a spastic recovery.

Hans came to life and circled her, barking and wagging his tail, wanting to join in on the fun. He liked her new game and interpreted her less than graceful moves as part of the fun. In her valiant effort to stabilize herself while holding on to his leash, she was thrown off balance completely when Hans bolted toward her. Down she went, legs going north and arms going south. She hit the pavement hard, banging her right elbow on the frozen sidewalk.

"Damn it," she yelled. Then she moaned as she held her injured elbow and attempted to sit up.

Hans was on her in a flash, jumping her from behind, his paws landing on both of her shoulders.

His attempt to lick her face was met with vociferous disapproval as Pamela raised her voice, "Hans, No! I'm hurt, I think I've cracked my elbow."

When she registered her complain, Hans buried his wet muzzle in her neck and face in an attempt to console her.

“It’s okay, boy,” Pamela encouraged, rubbing her elbow. Then she reached over to pet Hans, “Good boy,” she continued, “I’m okay. Oh, no,” she added painfully. “I think I’ve broken a nail.” When she pulled off her glove she confirmed her suspicion. The tip of the nail on her ring finger had broken off, leaving an exposed jagged edge.

Her momentary disappointment turned to laughter as Hans accelerated his licks, moving in at every opportunity to wash her face. The harsh coldness of the pavement finally forced Pamela to her feet, slowly at first, then with a modicum of stability a she lifted herself cautiously from the icy patch.

Still rubbing her elbow, she began to walk, then jog, regaining her disciplined step. She continued her trek, lifting her eyes occasionally to scan the ashen sky and gaze at the bleak landscape as she moved down the ice-encrusted streets that stretched out before her.

The pain began to subside in her elbow and she was able to move her arms in rhythm with her stride. The crunching of her patterned footsteps on the frozen streets and sidewalks, and an occasional jingle of Hans’ identification tag were the only sounds in the early morning air.

She could see the McDowell Street Bridge through the mass of skeletal trees, made anorexic with the loss of foliage. The scenery was brushed in savage grays and painted with innumerable hues of ashen charcoal. Forgetting the murkiness of her surroundings for a moment, Pamela’s eyes turned into jade slits, as she peered once more through the sparsely endowed treetops to catch a better glimpse of the bridge.

“We’ll cross the bridge,” she told Hans, referring to the McDowell Street Bridge. “That’s as far as I’ll take us this morning. I told Karen we’d only be out half an hour, so we’ll make the bridge our turn-around point.”

As she approached McDowell Street and the majestic entrance to the Biltmore Estate, she glanced at the shops along the street. Their storefront windows were filled with displays and their exteriors were adorned with Christmas lights that crawled up corners and crept across the eaves, framing each shop with hundreds of multicolored lights. The storeowners' holiday spirit spilled onto the ice-laden tree limbs and hearty shrubbery that proudly bore sprays of Christmas lights and garlands.

She made her way through streets spotted with ice and lined with oaks and hemlocks and hickories, and came upon a beautiful cluster of gnarled rhododendrons, long-time residents of Asheville. Most were ten to twelve feet high, spilling their dark green foliage fifteen or more feet into yards punctuated with an assortment of azaleas, junipers and cedars.

Pamela's breath came out in short, white puffs of air, visible in the frigid coldness, as she jogged steadily toward their destination – the McDowell Street Bridge. Another cold blast hit her, and she gasped as she spoke once more to her faithful companion. “Hans, what have I gotten us into this morning?”

§ § § § § §

He took another defiant sip of coffee.

“Are you satisfied now? I'm drinking coffee.”

“I'd feel better if you'd let someone else drive,” his wife petitioned cautiously.

“That way you could give the coffee a chance to work,” pleaded the woman in the back seat.

“You two are enjoying this, aren't you?” retorted the driver as he swerved into the curb and back out into the street again.

“If that skid was on purpose, you idiot, it wasn't funny,” hissed his wife. “And no, we're not enjoying the ride. You've got a hangover and I'd prefer someone else to drive.”

“This holiday trip is my treat and I intend to fulfill my civic duty by staying behind the wheel.”

“Then stay on the road, damn it,” shouted his wife, who threw her hands on the dash as he ran onto the curb and ricocheted off a packed mound of crusty ice before settling back on the street.

“Oops! Must have hit an icy patch.”

“That does it,” blasted his wife. “Stop the car. You’re going to let someone else drive before you hurt somebody.”

She reached over to grab the steering wheel, but her husband blocked her move with his right arm, spilling his coffee.

“I told you it was a patch of ice. Anybody would have skidded into the curb. Now look what you’ve done. You made me spill my coffee.”

Suddenly the car spun out of control, sending them toward an icy embankment.

Both women screamed as the car completed its three-sixty spiral, skidding to a stop that left it facing toward its original line of travel.

“Everyone all right?” questioned the male passenger in the rear seat as he straightened himself.

“Yes, I’m fine,” whispered the blond beside him.

“I think I’m okay,” replied the driver’s exasperated wife.

“Here,” snapped her husband as he threw his half empty cup of coffee at her. “You need this more than I do.”

Coffee spewed from the small opening in the lid of the cup before the top came off, sending the rest of it over his wife’s coat, the car door, and the dash.

“Why, you common son-of-a ...”

“Don’t you dare say it. You didn’t get burned did you?” mediated the male passenger.

She threw him a befuddled look.

“I don’t believe he did that. He threw a hot cup of coffee at me.”

“It was either that or shutting you up with my fist,” countered the driver, leering at her.

“All right. That’s enough, you two. I think we’ve all had enough excitement for one day. How ‘bout it, old boy? Suppose I drive home. Looks like you two could use a little space between you.”

“I could use something to get these coffee stains off my coat,” his wife said, trying her best to keep her composure.

“Probably the only thing open this early are service stations,” chimed the blonde-haired woman.

“Then that’ll have to do. This is a brand new coat. I hope you haven’t ruined it, you jerk.”

“Okay,” soothed the male passenger. “I’ll see if I can find us a service station. Come on, old boy. We’re only a few blocks from the Biltmore entrance. I think there’s a service station near there.”

“Then let’s not keep the lady waiting,” teased the hungover driver as he floored the accelerator.

“What are you doing?” his wife yelled. “I thought you were going to let him drive.”

“You want the stains off your over-priced coat, and he wants to drive. So why waste time? You’ll both get your wishes in a couple of minutes.”

He silenced the screaming tires by lifting his foot off the accelerator, allowing the car to slow almost to a stop. Then he inched the car forward.

“See, I’m fine. I promise to keep it under a hundred until we get to the bridge.

None of the passengers challenged him. All of them kept their contempt to themselves.

§ § § § § §

Tentative steps took Pamela across the paved entrance to the Biltmore Estate. The sidewalk was dry except for a few

patches of ice. She paused to catch her breath, and gazed at the ornate entrance to the estate. It reminded Pamela of the interesting tidbits Karen had shared with her – information she'd picked up while doing some interior design consulting at the Estate. She recalled that the two-hundred and fifty room French Renaissance-type chateau was built for George Washington Vanderbilt, and it had seventy-five acres of formal gardens designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the same man who designed New York's Central Park. Visitors the world over paid homage to its splendor. Each year hundreds of thousands of tourists came to see the Festival of Flowers, the Victorian Celebration of Spring, and the Christmas Candlelight Tours, all lavishly sponsored by the estate.

The gardens are natural magnets, she thought, attracting tourists who speak dozens of languages, yet share paraphernalia common to tourists all over the world: cameras, maps, guide books, bags filled with souvenirs, clothing decorated with the names and pictures of places they've been. She smiled at her appraisal. Oh, and inquisitive stares, a nervousness with unfamiliar currency, and fingers pointing in all directions. Can't forget about that.

She unceremoniously bent down to give Hans a quick, vigorous rub. Cupping his massive head in her gloved hands, Pamela rubbed Hans' ears and brought his muzzle up level with her own face. Dog lover and obedient canine were lost in each other's gaze for a moment, each drinking in the other's affection both feeling the effects of a frigid blast of air, fierce and raw as it introduced itself to exposed skin. Even Hans seemed pinched by the cold.

Suddenly she caught something coming toward them out of the corner of her eye. A lone figure, silhouetted against the slate mist and light gray sky which enveloped the bridge, was moving steadily toward them. Her full attention was riveted toward the solitary jogger whose easy stride was all too familiar to her. And the hat, a cap, a light blue cap protected his head.

“Geoffrey,” she shouted in recognition, and then waved her acknowledgement while bringing her other hand up to shield her eyes from a burst of frigid air. “Hans, it’s Geoffrey! What a wonderful surprise. Geoffrey, it’s me, Pamela!”

Geoffrey returned her salutation with a wave of his own and slowed his pace to compensate for the slope ahead of him as he shortened the distance between them.

Pamela’s four-legged protector steadied himself. His gaze steeled on Geoffrey, Hans publicized his recognition by wagging his tail vigorously.

Pamela shivered. The blast of air that just slapped her face seemed like a warning. She felt the strongest urge to shout for Geoffrey to hurry. There was nothing observable to justify her alarm. And she wasn’t going to embarrass herself by over-reacting in typical female fashion to a feeling, an intuition that had no basis in reality. She quickly dismissed her uneasiness and instead began to slowly jog up the bridge to meet him.

CHAPTER FOUR

*H*ans! Here, boy,” Karen called, expecting his obedience. A lightning fast surveillance of the kitchen convinced her Hans wasn’t there, so she wheeled around quickly and took an unscheduled tour of the living room.

It was a fairly large room, an area in which Karen’s artistic and musical preferences were apparent everywhere. Her piano, an old Wurlitzer, was a graduation present from her grandparents. The brass music stand, a recent addition, occupied a permanent place next to the old piano ever since its arrival.

Bookcases, repositories of songbooks, musical awards, instruments of all types and sizes and her collection of metronomes, bore silent witness to the extent of her melodious talents and interests. Windows and doors intersected the walls, emphatically displaying their wide oak facings and lacquered surfaces, but there was a spaciousness and a warmth which balanced the austerity and asceticism characterized by Karen’s simple tastes and preference for understated and unpretentious furnishings. The result was a cacophony of oak, walnut and pine furniture, all from different eras, uncoordinated, but filled with character.

“Not in his favorite corner,” she whispered to herself. “Where could he be?”

“Hans!” she flushed “don’t do this to me.”

Intuition told her to check the kitchen again and another thought surfaced just as quickly that he might be upstairs

rooming with Pamela. That realization comforted her. After all, Hans had taken to Pamela, especially the ear rubs which melted him into voluntary submission. She decided to recheck the kitchen first. That's where his food dish was.

She stood for a moment framed by the massive doorway as her eyes shot across the kitchen. She noticed a piece of her favorite note paper taped to the coffee pot. There was something scribbled on it, in large lettering, cursive style. She recognized the handwriting immediately, and a look of relief slipped onto her face as she read the message. Abbreviated, bulleted, and to the point, it read:

*Good morning, Sis,
Decided to go jogging.
Took Hans
Keep the coffee hot
ETA- eight-fifteen to eight-thirty
Call Geoffrey. See if he'll join us for lunch.
Luv, P*

*P. S. I'll help you trim the Christmas tree
before we hit the shops.*

She breathed a sigh of relief, sending her tense lips into a smile as she glanced at the clock over the sink.

"Seven-fifty-five," she said aloud. "That gives me half an hour to start unboxing the Christmas tree ornaments and grab a cup of that coffee Pamela brought with her last night."

"Hazelnut Cream and Peppermint Candy," she said half aloud as she moved toward the refrigerator. "I think I'll try the Peppermint Candy first. It has a candy cane taste that's hard to resist."

She took the half-pound bag of coffee out of the freezer, peeled back the folds that sealed in the freshness, and with some ceremony, held the open bag up to her nose. Not getting the

aromatic kick she anticipated, she retreated to the grinder dumped a couple of scoops of coffee beans into its wide mouth, capped it tightly, and with a whimsical smile pushed the button, sending the brown nuggets to their inexorable fate. Her anticipation mounted as she removed the plastic cap on the grinder exposing the rich aroma of freshly-ground coffee. She inhaled slowly, savoring the caffeinated moment. “Um ... mm! I love the smell of freshly-ground coffee,” she whispered aloud.

A few minutes later she carried her coffee mug into the living room, took a sip, then set it down on the raised stone lip of the hearth. It tasted as good as the inaugural cup she’d enjoyed the night before, when Pamela presented her with a small electric coffee bean grinder as a birthday gift, celebrating her thirty years on the planet.

“What a treat,” she chimed aloud, “a peppermint jump-start.”

She licked her lips after the next sip and then shook her head slowly, savoring the gourmet blend’s wet residue on her lips.

“Outstanding,” she cheered, and then busied herself by plucking the first set of tree lights from the box marked “Tree Ornaments.”

§ § § § § §

Pamela’s eyes were glued on Geoffrey, his silhouetted figure becoming more recognizable as their steps brought them closer together. She found, to her surprise, that she was gawking as she admired the ease of his descent. His carriage was that of someone used to running.

Geoffrey Fitzgerald Collins, III, was a policeman who was the product of a law enforcement family. His six-foot four inch frame was powerfully built, forged by the crucible of flesh meeting iron six days a week in gymnasiums designed to tear musculature down just to build it up again. His massive chest, held superb by a narrow waist and carried by muscular thighs

and calves, won him a place on last year's national law enforcement Hard Bodies Calendar, sponsored by Gold's Gym.

His stately features were bordered by well-groomed blond hair, and his eyes were slate gray, set deep in sockets above well-formed cheeks. Prominent and warrior-like, they added to his vital and energetic appearance. His perfect set of teeth, magnificently showcased a smile so completely intoxicating that he could mesmerize – instantly – anyone caught in his charismatic presence.

Locked in a prolonged moment of reverie, Pamela hadn't noticed Hans' strong pull of the leash as he struggled to free himself to greet Geoffrey. Her gaze dropped down to Hans as she became aware of his dilemma. She stopped jogging and unhooked the leash from his collar, sending Hans racing toward Geoffrey, who was only a few meters away. Hans stutter-stepped at the start, slipping on a patch of black ice, but regained his momentum and was on Geoffrey in seconds.

"Come here, fella," Geoffrey coaxed, as he slowed to a walk and patted his hand against his thigh. Then he looked at Pamela and grinned his welcome.

"What a nice surprise," Pamela squealed. "I didn't expect to see you until tonight."

"You're as beautiful as ever," he said affectionately, his rich baritone voice filling the morning air. "Am I seeing you tonight?"

"You'd better, silly. Hasn't Karen called you this morning?" Geoffrey looked at his watch.

"It's only five after eight. I doubt she'd call this early. Besides, I left my apartment over an hour ago. I wish I had known you were going to be out this morning."

"I didn't decide myself until I woke up."

Geoffrey's sigh was followed by an attempt to catch his breath.

As he reached down to pet Hans, the dog reared up on his hind feet and placed his icy paws on Geoffrey's nylon jacket.

Tail wagging like a metronome out of control, Hans capitalized on every opportunity to lick Geoffrey in the face.

“Slowing down in your old age, huh?” Pamela teased.

“I’ve been jogging since seven,” he countered good-naturedly.

“Poor baby,” she bantered.

“And it’s been a cold jog at that. The wind’s been brutal since I left the protection of the buildings.”

“Yes, I know. I was beginning to wonder if it’s worth it.”

“Me, too!”

“Bad idea, huh?” she winced.

“Not if there’s a hug involved,” he smiled.

She took a couple of steps toward him, but before they could embrace a strong gust of icy wind caused each of them to take a step sideways. As soon as they steadied themselves their eyes met, acknowledging their mutual lunacy for jogging on the coldest day of the year.

He cupped her head in his gloved hands, placing them around the outside of her hood, and then pulled her to him. At the same time he repositioned himself so he could shield her from the icy blasts of air that seemed to come with renewed vigor.

“I see you’ve been shopping,” His quick wink was allied with a comedic smile.

“Shopping?” she repeated, not catching his curve.

“Your suit,” he asserted, and squeezed her hooded neck for emphasis. “It’s new, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes, do you like it? She rallied innocently, placing her hands on her hips as she posed mannequin-like for his approval. Her attempt at modeling invited his good-natured teasing as he grabbed her again and proceeded to give her a playful head rub.

“Yes, I like it, you silly girl,” he chided playfully. “It looks good on you. Those are your favorite colors, aren’t they?”

Her sweat suit was forest green, sprinkled with a touch of gray and mauve and slashed with a couple of well-placed ribbons of Confederate gray, which punctuated the suit, giving

it a graceful yet streamlined look. It was perfect for Pamela's naturally slim, athletic build. Its dark green color complemented the brilliant lights coming from her eyes, making them appear more jade than emerald.

Her shoulder-length hair was pulled into a ponytail which stuck out of the opening in the back of the mauve ball cap she tucked under the hood. The cap had gray lettering on it which read Civilized Leadership – the name of her Raleigh-based company.

Pamela nodded. "I bought it in Chicago. I had some work up there at a decent wage and decided to leave some of my hard-earned money in the windy city."

Geoffrey laughed. "Nothing wrong with that." He hesitated, then changed the subject. "Looks like we've got a windy city of our own. Suppose we grab some breakfast at Karen's place."

Pamela consented immediately sliding her arm through his. She had not noticed until this moment how extremely treacherous the surface of the bridge had become. A light mist covered the macadam with large pockets of black ice, which blanketed the entire surface of the bridge from top to bottom.

After they took a few tentative steps, Pamela stopped and asked, "Would you mind ... " She hesitated, then looked directly into Geoffrey's eyes. "Do you mind listening to a sob story on the way back?"

"We've had these chats before, young lady." He looked at her with a hint of concern. "You don't have to apologize. And yes, of course I'm happy to listen to anything you have to say."

Pamela shot him a grateful look.

"I'm so lucky to have you."

"I feel the same way about you." Geoffrey tossed her one of his patented smiles. "You want to talk about ass hole, right?"

"Geoffrey!"

"Oops. Did I say that?" he pretended embarrassment by placing his hand over his heart. "Forgive me. You want to talk about what's-his-name."

Pamela raised her eyebrows and tightened her chapped lips.
“Clarence is still harassing me.”

“He can’t leave well enough alone, can he?”

“I should have listened to you from the very beginning,”
Pamela confessed.

“Stop shoulding on yourself.”

“What?” She gave him the most incredulous look.

“I said, stop shoulding on yourself. If you should do anything at all, you should listen to your own heart, Pam. Listen to that inner voice deep within you that knows what’s best for you. Trust your intuition.” He squeezed her arm, for emphasis. “There’s someone out there in the same predicament as you. He’s looking for a woman of your qualities. He’s Mr. Right.”

Geoffrey smiled again, but remained absolutely serious.

“And he will be the kind of guy that will truly love you, Pam. You’ll know it because he’ll treat you right. He’ll be compatible with you in all of the important things. Like communication. And sexuality. And finances. And interests. He’ll respect you. And he won’t be threatened by your independence, intellect or beauty.” He paused, waiting for his thoughts to catch up. “And most of all, Pam, he’ll find you permanently irresistible. And he’ll be a man of character.”

Her gaze rested on his face with great intensity.

“I wish I could believe that,” Pamela spoke softly. “I don’t think Mr. Right exists.”

Geoffrey sent her a frown.

“That’s part of the problem with women.”

Pamela shot him a puzzled expression.

“Oh, you don’t say, Dr. Freud.”

“Oh, but I do say,” Geoffrey pulled her close to him so that they faced each other. “Most women think Mr. Right is a fantasy. So they settle for less. And when they settle for less ...”

“They get somebody like Clarence,” she interrupted.

“You got it.” Geoffrey agreed. “He’s got money, looks and an NFL contract. So you thought ...”

“He was Mr. Right,” she finished his sentence.

“Yep. You were looking for Mr. Perfect, not Mr. Right.”

“And I found Mr. Wrong. Dead wrong!”

Geoffrey rolled his eyes.

“Well, you’re lucky. You’ve got a chance to right a wrong. Right?”

Pamela nodded her agreement.

Just then Geoffrey stiffened. Pamela could see that he was looking over her shoulder. His eyes were riveted on something behind her.

In the split second it took Geoffrey’s consciousness to move from Pamela to Hans and then to something as yet unnamed behind them, it was too late.

Everything appeared to transpire in slow motion. Geoffrey had only hesitated a fraction of a second. His lightning fast comprehension of the danger they were in sent him into a flurry of evasive action.

“Run, Pamela, run!” he screamed instinctively, as he lunged forward convulsively and grabbed Pamela’s left arm at the elbow, flinging her in front of him with considerable force.

Pamela winced and let out a scream as Geoffrey’s vice-like grip sent shooting pains down her arm.

She staggered again, gripped in panic, trying to find purchase with her feet, only to slip again. As each foot failed to take hold, her weight and momentum carried both of them off balance, sending her left leg skewed sideways as she went down on one knee hard on the ice, so that she heard her knee crack.

Pamela cried out. The pain, sharp and excruciating, traveled up her leg, paralyzing her for a moment. Her heart was pounding so hard she was sure her chest would burst. She held on to Geoffrey for dear life as she felt his strong pull.

Geoffrey’s body blocked her view up the bridge, but his evasive actions told her they were in serious trouble.

Then she heard it. Metal against concrete. Broken glass.

“Oh, my God!” she screamed. Chills streaked up her spine.

Unbridled terror spread across her face as her eyes surreptitiously found his eyes. His entire countenance was one of urgency and action, yet devoid of fear. His decisiveness reassured her, if only for a moment. Thoughts and emotions melded into a numbing buzz. Her own terror rendered her obedient to Geoffrey's evasive movements.

Pamela was transfixed, chagrin washed over her face. Her peaceful Saturday morning rendezvous was being torn asunder. She let out another full-throated scream, and suddenly realized that the roaring sensation in her head was much louder than the mere rise in internal blood pressure.

Not fifty feet from them was a black Mercedes, skidding toward them out of control. It was traveling very fast and would be upon them any second.

Terror immobilized her.

The driver saw them as soon as he crested the bridge. His reaction time, dulled by the effects of a hangover was too slow, putting him too close to the joggers for any reasonable abortive action.

“Shit!”

The look of discomfort on his contorted face turned to mortification when he realized the finality of the event he had carelessly set in motion.

“Shit, shit!”

His passengers reeled in horror as the Benz hydroplaned over the ice, slamming into the cement railing, sending sparks resembling hundreds of tracer bullets along the passenger side windows.

“For Christ sake, hit the brakes,” came a panicked voice from the back seat.

“We're on ice, you idiot,” hissed the driver who was holding on to the steering wheel for dear life. “I can't stop,” he lamented, “it's no use. Shit!”

The backseat passenger wished he had insisted on taking over the driving responsibilities when they left the service

station. Now he was experiencing the consequences of his cowardice.

The driver shuddered as he stared helplessly at the two people struggling to free themselves from the path of his car.

Pamela was yanked to her feet, whiplashed by Geoffrey's Herculean strength, as he pulled her to him. In a matter of seconds the car would be upon them. Incredibly, Geoffrey ended their retreat and flung her in front of him, cradling her in his arms.

She could feel the power of his tense embrace.

The two friends clung to each other in a frenzied tangle of desperation and resignation, facing the out-of-control metallic missile that rocketed toward them.

Reacting on an impulse driven by her instincts for survival, Pamela tried to extricate herself from Geoffrey's bizarre incarceration. But his strength denied her flight. Escape was impossible. Waxen, she chanced an incredulous glance at his chiseled face. His gaze was cemented on every contorted movement of the oncoming car. Hans stood beside them barking at the oncoming car.

Suddenly Pamela shrieked. She understood what Geoffrey was going to do.

"No, Geoffrey," she gasped. "My God, no!"

Fully aware now of how this thing would play itself out, she closed her eyes, resigned to her fate.

"We're going to die," she whispered, but her cry was vaporized by the sound of concrete meeting obstinate metal and glass.

His eyes still riveted on the projectile, Geoffrey said softly, but loudly enough for Pamela to hear, "Trust me."

An instant later, just before impact, he inched his left foot up against the curbing to give himself the leverage he needed.

In the odd stillness of the moment just before the Mercedes bulldozed into them, screeching in its own metallic agony as it scraped along the thick cement railings toward them, Pamela

felt Geoffrey tighten his grip. Then she heard him whisper as calmly and as clearly as she had ever heard him, “I love you, Babe.”

Another voice shrieked, but it was inaudible to Geoffrey and Pamela. It came from one of the passengers in the car. “We’re going to die! Oh, my God, we’re going to die!”

“Shut up!” came a venomous reply from the driver as the Mercedes continued its lethal slide along the cement railing.

Geoffrey flung Pamela away from him just before impact, with such force that he lifted her off the pavement. Airborne and dazed by his heroic act of sacrifice, she heard his gut-wrenching groan as he attempted to leap over the hood. The car sent kisses of sparks as it gauged and ripped it way along the railing and struck him with the force of a locomotive, sending him over the cement abutment and into the ravine twenty feet below.

A few feet away, Pamela hit the pavement hard, cracking her elbow again as she fell. A panicked look in Geoffrey’s direction caused her to gasp. The battered car had careened off the abutment and was headed directly at her. Before she could get out of its path, the underside of the vehicle passed over her, pinning her in its accelerated slither. She was caught under it for thirty or so feet before it left her behind. It completed its scything down the bridge, and coasted to a gliding stop at the base of the bridge.

The occupants remained seated, in stunned amazement.

“Anybody hurt?” queried the agitated, but somewhat shaken voice of the driver.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Me, too.”

“Yes, thank God,” came the third reply. “Oh, my God, what have we done?”

“Stay in the car,” the driver commanded, in a tone that demanded obedience.

As he stumbled out of the lacerated Benz, he inched his way toward Pamela’s body. She was lying on her side, one leg

twisted over the other. Her left arm, elbow up, hung at her side. She was motionless, sprawled like a toy doll that had been thoughtlessly dumped at the side of the road.

As he took a few steps closer, his bloodshot eyes caught a glimpse of something approaching him from the base of the bridge. Then he heard a growl that almost sent his heart into fibrillation.

A dog, a large dog with an attitude, was headed his way.

Sensing his peril, he quickly retreated, stepping back into his car. Testing the car's capacity to move and finding it drivable, he sped off despite the objections of his horrified passengers. The car slid past Hans as he advanced tentatively toward Pamela's broken body. He sensed her predicament and whined his concern. Then he began to lick the blood off her face and neck.

Pamela's injuries made her oblivious to Hans' loving attempts to resuscitate her. Her whole body seemed glaciated, numbed, cemented to the surface of the street. She sensed she was lying in her own blood, yet she felt no need to move ... no sense of fear – only an odd acceptance.

Part of her seemed to burn. How strange, she thought, as she began to lose consciousness, how very strange. An odd mixture of fire and ice seemed to be taking control, washing over her, numbing her.

Another chilling sensation drowned her senses, liberating her. She could feel herself slipping away. A peacefulness made its presence known, slowly at first, but evolving steadily, slowed only by the passage of time. A gentle lessening of the need for struggle touched her senses. Can't move, she sensed. No need to try.

Her eyes glazed over, dimmed by the dual impacts of car and pavement, harsh co-conspirators when it came to damaging flesh. Her beautiful emerald eyes lost their radiance. Their light was extinguished as her eyes slowly drifted shut, sending her into darkness. Oblivion welcomed her to its fathomless depths.

CHAPTER FIVE

All right, that's enough! You've made your point," *A*he exploded, half slurring, half spitting as he launched a venomous counterattack from his cramped position in the back seat. "You've taken over my driving responsibilities. So let me be. You can all go to hell," he blasted.

His rage filled the interior of the car, giving it an air of combustibility.

"That's one place we won't go with you, you drunken buffoon," came his wife's scornful reply as she pushed away from him. She was repelled as much by the latest edition of his verbal abuse as from the scent of alcohol mixed with vomit that she noticed on his clothes.

His cockeyed smile extinguished a caustic slur that started to leave his foul mouth. The look in his bloodshot slits for eyes held her rebelliousness in check just long enough for him to rebut her angry reply with a well-timed, repugnant belch.

"Oh, how every adult of you," she said disdainfully. "That would be the perfect opening remark in your speech next week. Give 'em a great big belch. Just barf it out ..."

"Shut up," he cut in sharply. "Just shut the hell up."

"No, I won't shut up. You're the one who ought to shut that filthy mouth of yours."

His wild, spastic attempt to slap her across the face missed, sending a plethora of nasty expletives from his lips, unintelligible for the most part as he began to get wound up again.

“That’s enough. I’ve heard enough,” the driver said trying to hold his irritation in check. “We’ve got a major problem here,” he announced, marshaling his composure to cool his rage. “You’ve left us with a considerable public relations problem. It’ll call for some serious damage control.

“Damage control,” screamed the drunkard’s wife from the back seat. “We’ve killed ... ” she paused to catch her breath, “he’s killed two people and you call that damage control?”

The driver frowned his disapproval. “What would you call it?” he leveled convulsively.

“Murder,” she screamed hysterically. “Second degree murder. Manslaughter, on two counts. Maybe even premeditated murder. What would you call it?”

“It was an accident. Wasn’t it?” came the meek little voice in the passenger’s side of the front seat.

“We left the scene, brainless,” snorted the drunkard. “That’s called a bum-and-run. Do you know the penalty for ... ”

“That was more than a bump-and-run, you idiot,” interrupted his wife. “It was a hit-and-run ... Kill and run!”

“Shut up!” the driver usurped his authority once again. His anger caused him to hit the brakes too hard, catapulting the two in the back hard against the leather backs of the front seats, as he brought the Mercedes to a sliding stop along the side of the road.

“What’s the matter with you people?” he scoffed. “This kind of verbal karate is getting us nowhere.” He twisted in his seat and placed his arm over the back of the driver’s seat, fixing his gaze on the drunkard who straightened himself up in his seat. “Not one more word out of you until you get a decent tongue in your mouth.”

“He’ll need more than a bath to clean up his language,” his wife fumed. “His filth goes more than skin deep.” Then, tauntingly, she placed her finger and thumb over her nose and spewed, “Of course, a bath would be a good place to start.”

“Aw, come on,” lamented the driver, trying his best to diffuse hostilities. “Let’s all chill out. Okay?”

There was a lengthy, unpleasant pause as the driver traded eye contact with everyone present.

The drunk in the back seat stilled himself, sensing that immediate compliance was in his best interest. Trying to summon the dignity he lacked, the dullard straightened himself as best he could. He decided to remove his soiled sweater over his head in a feeble attempt to extricate himself from his smelly garments.

“What are you doing?” yelled his wife as she reached over to arrest his ridiculous attempt at disrobement. “Just how much do you plan to take off?”

“Shut up,” he hissed, spewing spittle over the inside fabric of his expensive sweater.

His recoil against her attempt to free him from his self-imposed straight jacket only succeeded in stretching the arms of his sweater in such a fashion that his elbows were caught, suspended above his head. His entanglement gave him the appearance of a headless ogre from a fairy tale or rock music video. He sat there as befuddled as he was embarrassed.

Her second attempt to free him from his self-inflicted bondage met with the same results, so she settled back in her seat and crossed her arms defensively.

“Go ahead, be that way,” she rebuffed sourly. “You’re just cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

Wordlessly, he leaned back in his seat, arms still suspended over his head. He was exhausted, frustrated at his ineptitude to free himself.

The driver forced a smile. “Now guys, we can’t just leave him in suspended inebriation like that,” he pleaded, laughing at his assessment of the drunkard’s predicament.

His attempt at comic relief brought nervous laughter from the others, which lightened the tension. Even the drunkard cracked a covert smile under his Coogi head wrap.

The young woman in the front seat motioned for his wife to unravel him. “Have a little pity,” she pleaded. “I think we’ve ridiculed him enough.”

“Yeah, have a little pity,” mimicked the alcoholic.

“Are you going to let me help you?”

“Have pity on the poor lost soul who can’t find his way out of a sweater.”

“Is that a yes?”

The woman in the front seat intervened again. “She wants to help you. Tell her yes, for Pete’s sake.”

“For whose sake?” he driveled. “Oh, for my sake,” he corrected himself. “Yes, for Pete’s sake ... for my sake – for everybody’s sake, help me see the light.”

While the antics in the back seat were coming to a peaceful conclusion, the driver restarted the car and headed cautiously down the road.

“I didn’t realize he was in such bad shape this morning, did you?” petitioned the blonde.

“No, I didn’t. Or I would never have allowed him to drive.”

“It’s not your fault,” she consoled. “He’s a hard man to say no to, especially when he’s been drinking.”

The driver nodded his agreement. “Just the same, I should have driven. I knew he had a hangover, but I let him drive anyway,” he repeated apologetically.

“What’s going to happen now?” she asked, training her frightened eyes on him.

“We’ve got to get him home, and hide this car. They’ll be looking for us.”

“Then you’re not going back?”

He threw her a mournful glance, then shook his head. “No, we’re not going back.”

“I didn’t think so,” she sighed, redirecting her gaze to the road ahead.

The driver remembered he hadn't turned the radio on when he assumed chauffeuring responsibilities shortly after they left the scene of the accident.

He punched the power button for the radio and tapped the seek button until an Asheville station announced itself: ... and that's the news at the top of the hour. Stay tuned for Asheville weather coming up just after this word from our sponsor.

His eyes darted to the clock on the dash panel: 08:13.

"Just missed the news," he announced fretfully. "Maybe they'll air the accident later, in a special bulletin or something."

"Yeah, maybe in an APB," hissed the alcoholic's wife, still feeling the slights of a few moments ago.

"Let's hope not, my dear. Not while I'm driving the get-away car."

"Do you think anyone saw us?" asked the alcoholic, beginning to shake off the effects of a night of celebration.

"I don't know. It's hard to say. We were out fairly early. Most people sleep late on Saturday. Even if they were up, the weather probably kept them indoors."

"I wish we had stayed indoors, too," voiced his wife, her misgivings apparent.

"I wish I hadn't been such an idiot. I should have let you drive. We wouldn't be in this fix if I had."

"Do I hear an apology – a touch of conscience?" chastised his wife.

"Let's not start that again," the driver pleaded.

"Alcohol and driving don't mix," volunteered the blonde.

The tact of her remark was lost on the alcoholic who glared at her, the fire in his eyes glowing red. His dagger-like stare prompted his wife to touch his arm in an attempt to quell another confrontation. She made eye contact with him and shook her head, hoping he'd take the hint. Her peacekeeping was successful.

He breathed deeply and slumped back in the seat, combat weary and thankful that he was being spirited away from public embarrassment.

“This could be a career stopper,” he confessed, in intoxicated garrulousness.

“And very well may be,” added the driver. “Leaving the scene of a fatal accident wasn’t a very smart thing to do.”

“I didn’t even see them until it was too late. Drinking or not drinking, I couldn’t have stopped on the ice. Besides, I’ve always been able to hold my liquor,” he rambled, ignoring his wife’s rueful stare. “What else could I have done?”

“You could have laid off the brakes, for one thing,” corrected his wife. “They don’t work on ice.”

“You should have stopped and helped those people.” Another indictment came from the blonde in the front seat.

“Oh, sure, and what would I have told the police, ‘Pardon me, officer, but I was drunk at the time and decided to run over two people.’”

“Stop it!” demanded his wife. “Your sarcasm isn’t helping matters one iota.”

“And neither are our self-righteous attacks,” interjected the driver. “If we had stopped, his career would have stopped. They would have locked him up and thrown away the key. And, heaven help me for saying it, he may have been right about the accident. Sober or hung over, he may not have been able to stop. There were icy patches all over that bridge. It might have ended the same way no matter who was behind the wheel.”

The alcoholic nodded, but didn’t take his eyes off the floorboard.

Both women grimaced their disbelief. But neither dared to speak. In each case they stifled their outrage, realizing they were helpless confederates.

Determined to present his most pragmatic face, the driver continued, addressing the drunkard’s wife. “You said it before. They would have charged him with manslaughter on two

counts. The state of North Carolina would have prosecuted him with malice. It's one of the toughest states in the country on DUI's. One thing's for certain," he continued, an air of objectivity evident, "we're involved ... we're all involved, whether we like it or not, in a hit-and-run. That means we're all guilty." He emphasized his comments by banging his hand on the steering wheel. "We're all accessories before and after the fact."

His next appraising glance at the blonde caught her weeping. Her hands cupped her face, and tears streamed unabated down her cheeks.

Disconsolate, he brushed a tear back from his own reddened eyes, and announced in a voice filled with emotion, "If we're lucky enough to get away with this," he stopped to reconsider his last statement. "If by the grace of God ... ," he paused again, "if we survive this damnable mess you've gotten us into ... damn you! ... " He cut himself off and gazed scornfully in the mirror at the alcoholic.

"Damn you for implicating us." He took another deep breath. "You promise us now – you give us your word that you will seek immediate help in some sort of alcoholic rehabilitation center, alcoholics anonymous, detox center or whatever. Or so help me I'll turn around right now and take your pathetic alcoholic ass to the Asheville police before you can say Pepto Bismal."

Before the repentant alcoholic could respond, the group's attention was drawn to an announcement on the radio:

We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you this special announcement ...

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