

*The Winter Hexagon — the sequel to *The Eye in the Ceiling* — is a fast-paced and humorous thriller that accelerates through Boston and beyond in a race to find the mysterious Winter Hexagon Salon.*

## **The Winter Hexagon**

By Julie Sampson

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# THE WINTER HEXAGON

JULIE SAMPSON



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## *Chapter One — Gemini*

It all started as I stood on the garden balcony, observing the Boston Harbor skyline, hazy with June humidity. I downed my cold brew coffee — the clink-clink-clink of ice cubes rattled a harsh reminder of the prior night’s vodka-tonic overindulgence. Below, chalky dust drifted up from the construction work in the street. The jackhammers pounded in concert with my throbbing temples. I studied the boss lady — an asphalt cowgirl wearing a yellow cowboy-style hardhat. The wide brim shielded her face from the sun’s intensity. She marched her steel-toed boots toward two slackers gawking into the hole in the road.

“Chop! Chop!” she hollered, commanding the slackers to pick up their shovels and get back to work.

American flags hung motionless from each building in observance of Flag Day. The construction crew labored in the street, excavating a sinkhole the size of a moon crater. A relentless din of equipment and trucks rumbled up and down the block. Workers in hardhats and yellow vests used long-handled rakes to level the steaming gravel of fresh asphalt. The smell of smoky kerosene overpowered the humidity.

Pedestrians calculated the best direction to avoid the *Men at Work*, according to the orange sign. Shouldn’t it be *people at work*? I took a closer look at the asphalt cowgirl corralling the crew to move further up the block. The forty-gallon hat — give or take a few gallons — made her head appear orangutan-

oversized atop her broad shoulders and Popeye forearms. She whistled for the rake crew to ride up the block in one of the empty dump trucks. A crewmate offered his gloved hand to pull her up. She cracked a comment, making him laugh. The crew shifted to make room for her.

On the liftgate, a man stuffed his work gloves into his back pocket and leaned against his rake. He wiped a red bandanna across his face, chatting with the man next to him. The workers watched the approaching steamroller that smoothed over the street they'd just patched. I caught a glimpse of yellow-gloved hands — the size of catcher's mitts — appearing from the back of the truck. The hands pushed the shoulders of the man with the bandanna. For a second, I thought the guys were joking around, but the gloved hands shoved the worker so hard his sunglasses jolted from his face. The rake sprung from under his arm, throwing him off balance. He grabbed the side of the truck, but slipped from the chrome trim. The guy next to him lunged for his arm, but it was too late, he went airborne. His hard hat flew from his head as his body dropped into the street.

“Stop!” shouted the man.

The fallen worker face-planted into the black tar, shrieking as his bare hands hit the steaming black aggregate. Workers on the truck yelled, signaling with their rakes at the lumbering drum roller whose operator, in the cab at the rear, was looking backward. The scalded worker frantically attempted to crawl commando style toward the sidewalk. His screaming wails were hideous. Two men jumped from the sidewalk, grabbed his hands, and dragged his dead weight toward the curb. His

hips barely cleared the curbside before his legs were steamrolled. The man emitted sounds that humans aren't designed to make — part coyote yip-howl, part screeching bobcat.

The steamroller halted right before the rear roller hit him. Several workers rushed toward the injured man. He was in shock, trembling on the sidewalk. His legs were reduced to flattened blood-stained denim. His mangled work boots looked like squashed recycled soda cans with bloody shoelaces.

The oblivious operator of the double-drum roller stopped and shouted out the window, “What the hell’s going on?”

The asphalt cowgirl radioed for medical help. The crew on the truck scattered toward the sidewalk. Within a minute, in the distance, sirens were heard as emergency vehicles penetrated the city traffic.

I couldn't ignore what I had just witnessed. This was no accident. The guy was shoved off the truck. My innate investigative nature kicked into gear. I grabbed my press pass for interning at the *Patriot Lodestar* and raced from my apartment out to the ruckus in the street. I saw that one man bunched up his sweaty shirt to pillow under the victim's head, then knelt beside him to hold his scalded hand.

“We're getting help. Hang in there, Chuck.”

Two police cruisers arrived seconds ahead of the ambulance. The EMTs assessed the injuries and loaded him onto a stretcher. The cops pushed back the crowd of horrified

onlookers. I should have stepped back with the crowd, disappeared into the day and offered up a prayer for the accident victim. But I didn't. It felt as if I'd stepped in wads of bubblegum gluing my flipflops to the sidewalk. My head told me to leave, but my heart said stay, be a responsible reporter.

"Let's go. Move back," said a police officer.

I flashed the laminated press pass attached to a lanyard that I'd draped around my neck. I told the cop, "I'm a reporter." He looked me up and down, assessed my shorts, flipflops and Martha's Vineyard t-shirt.

"I get it, First Amendment rights, but this seems a bit opportunistic if you ask me," the cop growled.

"It's breaking news. That's what reporters do."

"Fine," the cop said. "Just stay out of the way."

I jotted down all the details of what I had witnessed from my balcony. I approached the shocked crew who mumbled amongst themselves.

"Any idea how he fell off the truck?" I asked.

They shrugged and remained silent. The asphalt cowgirl side-eyed me and asked, "And who are you?"

"Paige Moore. I'm a reporter with the *Patriot Lodestar*. Do you know what happened?"

"This is what you call a classic accident. That's what happened, an unfortunate construction-site accident."

She adjusted her hat and stared down at me. She was a few inches taller than me, but the hat pushed her into the six-foot range. Her straight brown hair was tucked behind her ears, revealing a football shaped raised mole on her right jawline.

“Did he slip? Was there a bump in the road and he lost his balance? Something of that nature?”

“Yeah, put that. There was a bump in the road and he lost his balance,” she said, tapping her finger on my notepad.

Another worker stepped forward. “What’s this about?”

The asphalt cowgirl said, “She’s with the *Lodestar* —”

“There’s no story here. He needs privacy, not headlines.”

The patch on his work shirt said *McGregor*, so I asked him his first name.

“It’s Jake. Why?”

“I need your full name in case I quote you in the article. And yours?” I glanced up at the asphalt cowgirl. There was no name on her shirt.

“You don’t need my name cuz I said nothin’ quotable.”

McGregor returned to the crew. I noticed yellow work gloves tucked in the back pocket of his jeans. I scanned the other workers, they’d all removed their gloves — standard issue with matching hard hats and vests.

“Hold up a minute. Can you tell me the accident victim’s name?”



McGregor sighed. “Charles McKim da fourth. Goes by Chuck. Not that you need his name because there’s no story here. Look, we’re all upset about this —”

“How long have you worked with Chuck?”

“Long time. We’ve been with the Public Works Department for twenty years.”

“Are you friends outside of work?”

“Work is work. Chuck shows up on time, gives an honest day’s effort. Reliable.”

I flipped to a fresh page. “How old is he? Wife and kids?”

“He’s my age, late forties. No wife, no kids. Smart man, if you ask me.”

“It’s a shame what happened to him,” I said, glancing at the stretcher. The EMTs must have medicated him because he momentarily ceased his wailing moans. I moved closer to the ambulance to take one last look before they loaded him into the ambulance. His eyes stared into blank space. His lips quivered as if he were freezing. The bridge of his nose and cheeks were scalded and raw. He turned his head and squinted at my press pass. He stared straight at me as if nothing was wrong and he wanted to invite me out for a beer.

“Come closer,” he whispered.

I put my face closer to his.

He mumbled, “You’re *Lodestar*?”

I nodded.

“I trust the *Lodestar*. It was Bauhaus. They stole the key to the Winter Hexagon Salon.”

“The what?”

“Step aside,” said the EMT. They hoisted him inside the ambulance and slammed the doors, so I wrote down his gibberish — probably the last words the poor guy would ever speak.

I pulled out my phone and googled the Winter Hexagon Salon. The only thing that came up were other local hair salons and spas. Then I googled Bauhaus: Brutalist architecture, arts and crafts movement, Walter Gropius design school.

“What did he say?” asked McGregor, who appeared alongside the ambulance with the asphalt cowgirl. He narrowed his eyes on my notepad.

I stepped back. “Gibberish.”

“He’s been talkin’ a ton of nonsense lately —”

“Really? What’s he been saying?”

“Early dementia, probably. Asphalt fumes can do that to a guy. I’m sure he’s in shock. Did he say anything else?”

“No, why?”

“Just curious,” said McGregor. He and the asphalt cowgirl stared back at me until I shoved my notebook in my bag and

left the scene. My stomach roiled — stinking hangover — or was I nauseated about what I'd witnessed?

I headed back to my apartment to change my sweaty t-shirt and wash my face. My clothes smelled like asphalt. Inside, a blast of cold air remedied my pounding forehead. I glanced around my apartment: flipflops tossed by the door, half-used sunscreen bottles cluttered the bathroom vanity, empty cans of High Noon overflowed the recycling bin. I figured I should attempt to tidy up for the cleaning lady, so I bundled up the kitchen trash and headed for the garbage shoot.

I was a rising college sophomore, with only two basic responsibilities: one, my internship at the *Patriot Lodestar*, and two, helping Tanya Goforth set up her new coffee shop in Quincy Market. Aside from that, I read *Rolling Stone* online by the rooftop pool most afternoons and met friends in the evenings for concerts and parties.

The glass atria at the newspaper headquarters looked like a fishbowl anchored with a curved receptionist area. A security guard leaned against the wall near a bank of gold elevators. He eyeballed me when I scanned my pass to go up to the newsroom. I wasn't planning on staying long at the office which is why I looked like I rolled off the beach, even though I'd freshened up with a Polo shirt. I was just an intern, a few notches below the editorial assistants and freelance writers, but I was supposed to look professional. I wasn't expected to cover

news-breaking events, but I figured reporting on a scoop like what I saw was a smart move considering the internship perks.

I typed in my notes at an empty work station in the back of the congested newsroom. I recalled what the accident victim told me. Pilar Kuhlkoat, the managing editor of the city desk, was known as a crotchety grammarian, slashing hard copy with a red pen like a ninja. Reporters allegedly feared her rants about dangling gerunds, word-choice blunders, and awkward sentence structure. They all cowered behind their computer screens as she summoned reporters to her office.

When the office assistant showed me around on my first day, she mentioned, “You’re just an intern, so you should be safe. She intentionally leaves her door open so the verbal thrashings are heard by the entire staff. Take notes on what triggers Hot Throat — that’s her nickname around the newsroom.”

I was tempted to put on my noise-cancelling ear buds to block the phone conversations and newsroom chatter, but I didn’t want to look like an obnoxious Millennial.

A balding middle-aged man occupied the desk across from me. “New hire?”

“Intern,” I said.

He kept his eyes on his screen. “What’s Hot Throat got you working on?”

I hesitated to answer. There’s a long backstory to how I got the internship. I also didn’t want anyone to know that I was

closely connected to Pilar Kuhlkoat — so connected that I was living in her luxury apartment free for the summer. Last year, as a reward for certain actions, I was promoted into the ranks of the greater Boston Ancient Order of Druids (AOD for short) and Pilar became my AOD mentor, training me in druid rituals.

“Horoscopes,” I told him.

He guffawed. “Hey, Eddie, get a load of this.”

Eddie sauntered over. “What’s up?”

“Hot Throat brought in a new intern for horoscope duty.”

“Nothing but the facts,” chuckled Eddie. “I thought we took that nonsense off the wire service.”

I felt my face burning. “It’s one of my interests.”

“I’d love to write about what I’m interested in,” said the middle-aged man.

“What? Porn?” Eddie cracked up at his own joke. “Good luck with Hot Throat. She scares off most of the interns in the first week.”

I said, “Horoscope columns entertain people and spark conversation. You might like it.”

“Whatever kiddo. I’m Fred. Go to Eddie if you have any questions. Just one piece of advice: don’t get all teary-eyed when Hot Throat rips you a new one. She gets even meaner when she smells blood. You need a thick skin around this newsroom.”

“Got it,” I said. “Thanks for the advice.”

I overheard Hot Throat command a reporter to call the mayor’s office for a statement. Hot Throat was barely five-feet tall, and looked shorter by the extra thirty pounds she carried around her hips. She waddled to the Keurig machine and popped a fistful of trail mix into her mouth while she waited for her coffee. Keyboards clattered with a renewed urgency, sounding like heels smacking against marble flooring.

Fred called across the newsroom to her. “I’m waiting for a few call backs to get more quotes. I’ll forward the bullet points for what I have so far.”

“Get crackin’, it’s the top story,” she said, softening her tone when she saw me. “Paige, would you like some coffee? Come join me in my office.”

Fred muttered, “Beware. She starts out nice. Then she bites.”

Some of the staff watched me as I approached Hot Throat’s domain. On the large wall behind her desk was a collage of framed black-and-white photographs shot by *Lodestar* photographers throughout the years. I eyed the photos of old-time cars parked on Boston streets and the bell-bottomed protesters carrying protest signs of their times.

“Shut the door. Take a seat,” she said, chugging her coffee.

I angled the chair in front of her desk as she rolled her desk chair around to join me. I noticed editors and reporters sneaking glimpses into her office.

“The hard deadline is Thursday. Please email your horoscope column to me in advance so I can review it before the copy editors pick it apart. Watch your word count, don’t run over or it will get slashed.”

“No problem,” I said.

“All things considered, I certainly didn’t think it would be a problem,” she said glancing over her reading glasses. “What’s happening in Aries these days?”

I reflected for a moment. “The waning crescent phase of the moon invites deep catharsis and release. The moon is moving into Pisces for a few days, so this is the perfect time to let go of any resentment and control issues. The best way to release is through music and movement, so wear your headphones and take long walks.”

She laughed. “*Touché!* I need to let go of my resentment toward my mother-in-law. We’re both trying to control my son’s birthday celebration and it’s like the clash of the Titans. I’ll take your advice. My poor husband is stuck in the middle of all the bickering. My husband’s a Pisces. What do you have for him?”

“Pisces? A personal goal will be unlocked this week for him. If he has been trying to do a headstand-to-crow balance pose in yoga, for example, then he will unlock that goal. I think a personal accomplishment will connect for him. Also, it’s a big family week, so personal time is crucial. He should carve out a sanctuary for himself.”

She rolled back behind her desk and jotted a note to herself. “You just gave me an idea to make up for all the stress I’ve dumped on him lately: yoga sessions at the new studio in town.”

Fred appeared by her door and she waved him in. “I just heard about a construction accident near the seaport. One of the workers got crushed by a steamroller. Should I pursue it?”

She nodded. “Get on it. Let me know as soon as you have more details.”

I interjected, “I was there. I saw the whole thing.”

“Seriously?” asked Fred. “What’d you see?”

“First of all, it was blindingly sunny —”

“Blindingly? I didn’t ask for adverbs and a weather report,” snapped Fred.

“A man in his late forties fell off the back of an asphalt truck onto steaming black aggregate. He started screaming from the burns, then he tried crawling out of the way of the oncoming steamroller. Some of the workers tried to pull him to the sidewalk, but the front roller crushed his legs before the machine came to a halt. It was gruesome.”

“Jeepers Creepers! D.O.A.?” asked Hot Throat.

“Undergoing surgery now,” said Fred.



I interjected, “He’s been on the job twenty years. A seasoned worker. Reliable, according to one of the men I interviewed.”

“You interviewed someone?” Hot Throat’s eyes popped.

“I figured while I was there, I should try to get some details. Plus, it didn’t look like an accident to me. The way he fell, it seemed like someone pushed him from behind. Anyway, I wrote up my notes.”

“Wait. He was shoved?” asked Fred. “Did anyone verify this?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. But that’s the way it looked to me. I’m not positive. Like I said, the sun was in my eyes.”

I didn’t want to make accusations, but I had a strong feeling he was shoved. My instincts told me to trust my gut, always.

Fred pressed, “Did anyone in the crowd see him get pushed?”

“I didn’t talk to anyone in the crowd.”

“Always talk to the spectators. Always get names,” he said.

“Understood.”

Hot Throat stood behind her desk. “Did you ask anyone at the scene if they saw what happened?”

“One of his co-workers said they hit a bump in the road and he fell off the back of the truck.”

“To begin with, why was he on the back of the truck? It doesn’t sound safe,” she said.

“It was hot and it seemed like a quicker way to get up the street, I guess.”

“Fred, ask around, see if you can find any witnesses,” Hot Throat commanded. “Submit your notes to Fred, put me in copy. Fred will take it from here. What’s the man’s name?”

“Charles McKim. They call him Chuck. I’ll send you my notes,” I said, heading toward my desk. Fred followed me.

“Were you stoned when you saw this? Hungover? I mean, workers generally don’t shove each other off trucks in broad daylight. You seem pretty calm considering you witnessed a human get virtually pancaked.”

I smirked at Fred. “Not stoned. Definitely hungover, though.”

“I hope you checked spelling on all the names.”

“It’s all accurate. I’ll forward what I have.”

Hot Throat summoned me back to her office. She closed the door and paced behind her desk. “Keep this to yourself: Chuck McKim is a Boston AOD. His great grandfather was Charles McKim, the architect who designed the Boston Public Library. This is obviously not information for the article, but I want you to be aware. Whenever there’s a hit on a fellow druid, we go on high alert.”

“A hit?”

Her forehead was scrunched, making deep wrinkles. I couldn't tell if she was upset because a fellow druid had been badly injured or if she was angry about something else.

"You have a gift for understanding architecture. The way you interpreted Henry Hobson Richardson's architecture to find the ark of the covenant, that was genius-level. Charles McKim mentored with Richardson. Perhaps you should focus on McKim's architecture. Expand your repertoire. It's a shame a McKim descendent was targeted."

"Targeted?"

She waved it off. "Don't mind me, I'm thinking out loud."

"Who would target a McKim?"

"I shouldn't even mention it, but there's an underground operation affiliated with city planning and zoning," she said. "It's mainly construction worker thugs griping about unions and fair wages. Chuck McKim was a longtime construction guy. He probably stepped on the wrong toes."

"The wrong Bauhaus toes?"

Her eyes popped. "What have you heard of Bauhaus?"

"Chuck McKim told me he doesn't trust Bauhaus. But he said he trusts the *Lodestar*. That's probably why he talked to me."

"Interesting." She stroked her chin. "He said that?"

I nodded. “Tell me more about the underground Bauhaus operation.”

“My understanding is that it protects Bauhaus style architecture and looks for opportunities to expand its modernistic presence. There’s a gross plan to demolish early American architecture to make room for more Bauhaus construction. Bauhaus wants to obliterate Richardson’s and McKim’s buildings in Boston starting next summer.”

“Next summer? They can’t do that, can they?”

“Search and destroy is their motto. Rumor has it they’ll hoard what treasures they find for their own power and turn the rest to rubble.”

“Why would they wipe out Richardson and McKim?”

“To spread the Bauhaus architectural wasteland. Look up Bauhaus. But don’t waste a lot of time, you won’t be impressed. There’s no signs or symbols or Solomon’s temple designs. Someone like you will think it tedious.”

“You’re right, I prefer Richardson Romanesque over modern Bauhaus-style. But, to be fair, I’ll look into Bauhaus.”

She shook her head. “Stay focused on architects like Richardson and McKim, the elder. You have an extraordinary talent. Look at the symbols and meaning in their work. Maybe you can find more meaning in what Richardson and McKim were designing. I shouldn’t have mentioned this Bauhaus business, but I just want you to be aware. I only know about the operation because when *accidents* happen like this, then it

becomes suspicious. But we may never prove Bauhaus is behind this.”

“Should I go back to the accident scene —”

“Definitely not,” she snapped.

“But what if Bauhaus did it? They should be held accountable —”

“Listen, kiddo. They’re no-nonsense thugs, especially if they think someone is sticking their nose where it doesn’t belong. I have a feeling Chuck McKim set them off. As an AOD he should have known better, as should you. Fred will handle the reporting. Not you.”

Back at my apartment, my afternoon nap was interrupted by Melissa, my college friend and Quadster comrade, who pressed the door buzzer so many times it sounded like a fire drill. She’d come straight to my apartment after she finished working at her summer job at Hancock Insurance.

“My job blows big time,” she complained as she barged into the kitchen. “I’m just a pretty face at the front desk. Bigly boring. How’d you end up with the cushy life?”

“Cushy? I had to go into the *Lodestar* office today.”

“Not dressed like a cabana boy, I hope,” she said, taking an inventory of my outfit. She helped herself to a hard lemonade from the fridge. “What are you planning to wear to the stoplight party?”

She'd already informed me that a stoplight party is where guests coordinate their shirt color with their social availability. Green is a go (available), red is a no (in a relationship) and yellow is fair warning (sort of taken, but not really).

"Maybe I'll wear purple. Anyway, I've only gone out with Nolan twice, so there's nothing official. What do you think?"

"Green" she said, never short on advice. "But not Kelly green. More of a jade, that would work well."

"What color are you going with?" I asked.

"Lance is gone all summer, so it's a hard green for me. Exact shade of green not yet determined. I brought three options," she said.

I laughed to myself because she and Lance weren't really dating even when he was around. But in her mind, he was marriage material as a trust-fund baby. Nolan, who was meeting me at the party, was a guy I'd met at a concert, but we were just friends.

I rummaged through the cabinet for a cutting board. Melissa glanced at my block of smoked Gouda and said, "Paigester, you need to up your charcuterie game."

"Charcuterie?"

"Spruce it up with some crackers and grapes. Mixed nuts. You know, a proper nosh."

"I'll get on that."

She wore a mini-skirt and Gucci sandals with a tight teal V-neck that showed her cleavage. I'd planned on shorts and flipflops, but with Melissa joining me, I needed to ramp it up a notch. I decided on a solid black skirt and black leather Birkenstocks.

She gawked at my choice. "Don't you have strappy sandals? Those look like Jerusalem cruisers."

"Jerusalem cruisers?" I looked down at my feet, wondering why I let her fashion comments get to me.

"You look like you're rolling deep with the Dirty Dozen."

"The Dirty Dozen?"

"The Apostles. Team Jesus. You can do better." She whipped past me to go investigate my closet. "This apartment is totally Cosmo. Can I move into the second bedroom? Check out this walk-in closet! I'd have it filled in no time."

The apartment was all mine for the summer courtesy of Pilar Kuhlkoat and the *Patriot Lodestar*. The apartment was used by VIPs — which became my distinction after I found the ark of the covenant and joined the AOD. Pilar, a longtime Boston druid, taught me the secret signs and abundant rules.

I first met her toward the end of my freshman year when she came to the North Easton town library where I was working. She chatted privately for an hour with her old friend, the head librarian Ms. Montgomery, before I was summoned to join their meeting. She knew all about how I found the ark

of the covenant and was there to recruit me to join higher-ranked Boston druids.

I recalled my first conversation with Pilar; my responses to her questions spun things in a direction that I hadn't expected. She asked me about my infatuation with astrology, early American architect H.H. Richardson, his use of the zodiac signs on Memorial Hall in North Easton. I dazzled her with my understanding of astrology in relation to human affairs. I explained how I used the Solar House System to determine what trends were presenting and how the night sky was interpreted.

Pilar had asked me about her sign, Aries. I answered her like an authority on the night sky: Optimism and boundless energy filled her interactions and she felt flirty and conversational to amuse herself. Mercury, the planet of communication, was in Aries and there was a new moon which meant she had a chance to plant seeds for the future.

Pilar had asked, "I'm offering you a special opportunity. What would you like to do for the *Lodestar*? Name it. The sky's the limit —"

Once she said *the sky's the limit*, it hit me. "Horoscopes."

At first, she stared at me as if she hadn't heard what I'd said. I wondered if I was supposed to take more time, mull it over, then choose something mainstream like sports reporter, cover the Celtics and Bruins.



“Horoscopes! You got it,” she said, snapping from her trance. “Listen hon, having your own column is just the beginning of what’s coming your way. The internship — for lack of a better word — has more perks than you’ll know what to do with.”

“Like what?”

“Unlimited car service. An open pass to museums, buildings, libraries, and whatever else you want access to. Tickets to concerts, sporting events, shows. Open-tab dining at *Lodestar*-reviewed restaurants —”

My eyes bugged. “Wow.”

“You can stay in the *Lodestar* VIP condo for the summer. Get to know Boston better. You’ll love it.”

I’d glanced at Ms. Montgomery, hoping she didn’t mind that I was moving on from the library internship. She’d cracked a smile. “Go on. You’re in good hands with Pilar. But you must stay in touch. I can’t wait to see what you do next.”

I couldn’t wait to see what I’d do next. I studied the art of horoscope writing and memorized the major tone of each house. I accumulated stacks of notebooks with my research. I bought a set of astrological charts that showed each planet in relation to each sign, illuminating how the planets move and when they come in and out of contact. They were color-coded which helped me calculate pressing issues and changes for each sign. I became obsessed with what was stirring in each house.

And there was always something stirring.

I called the *Lodestar* car service for a ride to Peabody Terrace where the stoplight party was hosted by Nolan's friend, a teaching assistant who lived there with his fiancé. We were picked up in a Mercedes SUV with tinted windows and a professional driver. Pilar had boasted about the German engineering and advanced safety features in the *Lodestar* fleet, encouraging me to use the car service whenever I needed it.

Melissa grinned when she saw the Benz idling outside the apartment.

"It's good to have friends in high places," she said, elbowing my ribs. "Is Nolan serious dating material or just one of your boy toys?"

"I wouldn't know what to do with a boy toy."

"Make him a friend with benefits." She winked and elbowed me again.

The city lights reflected on the Charles River as we headed toward the north bank. We pulled up to the Peabody Terrace. The building resembled cinderblocks on steroids. We rode the elevator up to the efficiency apartment. Nolan greeted us at the door in a red shirt. His face dropped.

We each took a beer and Melissa whispered, "He's cute. You should've gone red. Is he good in the bedroom?"

"I wouldn't know."

“You always drag your heels,” she sighed. “You should’ve worn yellow, the way you keep one foot on the brake all the time.”

“Do you like the apartment?” Nolan straddled the arm of the gray felt couch. It had square screw-on legs, probably Ikea.

Melissa made a horse sound with her lips. “You should check out Paige’s condo overlooking Boston Harbor. Her place is right out of *Architectural Digest*.”

“I’d love to see it.”

“Trust me, you won’t want to leave,” Melissa added.

I was distracted by a familiar face in the kitchen. “I’ll get us some beer.”

“But we just started —”

I beelined for the kitchen toward the tanned stud. I gushed, “Remember me?”

His chiseled jawline eased toward a polite smile. “I wish I could.”

“Last year at the tailgate. Hash brownies?”

He chuckled. “If there were hash brownies involved, then you must have met my brother. We look like each other, but I don’t bake.”

“I didn’t realize Axel had a brother. Do you row crew as well?”

“I’m Xavier and no, lacrosse is my game. I’m in Cambridge for the summer working at the lacrosse camp.”

“How about Axel? Working a crew camp?” I blurted and thought, slow down, Paige, that was three rapid-fire questions.

“Training every day at the boathouse.”

“Is he coming tonight?”

“He’s at the BPL. Working on a paper for a summer class he’s taking.”

“The BPL?”

“Boston Public Library. I have to pick him up soon. Care for a ride?”

“Sure.” I followed him toward the door. I glanced at Nolan and Melissa and said, “Be right back.”

Xavier revved his Jeep Rubicon. “First time at the Peabody Terrace?”

I squinted at the building. “I’ve been reading about Brutalist style. Architects like it, but everyone else hates it. It’s ugly as far as Harvard buildings go. I could picture it in Soviet Russia.”

“True.”

At Copley Square Xavier searched for a parking spot, and finally settled on a side street a few blocks up from the library. I followed him through the lobby, noticing the marble floor with inlaid brass designs that included all of the zodiac

symbols. I followed him to the Abbey Room where Axel stood close to a beautiful woman with long flowing dark hair and an olive-toned flawless complexion. My heart sunk, seeing them together. Axel stared at me for a moment before a high-wattage grin spread across his face.

“Hey, you! Want a brownie?”

“Is it gluten free?” I joked, excited that he remembered me.

Xavier stood on the other side, the goddess sandwiched between them. I wanted to hip-check her across the room and take her spot.

“This is Thalia,” they said in unison.

She giggled. Her delicate hand reached to shake mine, and she said, with an accent, “Nice to meet you.”

I thought: one, drop-dead gorgeous; two, sexy accent; and three, I don’t stand a chance.

“Did you make any progress?” Xavier asked them.

“I was getting nowhere on my own,” Axel admitted. “But with Thalia’s art history knowledge I’m actually starting to develop a greater appreciation for Edwin Austin Abbey.”

He pointed toward the mural — *The Quest and Achievement of the Holy Grail*. The mural started with the infant Galahad and moved through Galahad’s search for the holy grail.

“Galahad wears a red robe in each panel. It symbolizes spiritual purity,” Thalia explained. She showed us the last panel where Galahad becomes king of Sarras. “Here’s where Galahad achieved his life mission to find the holy grail. The grail is rendered in raised relief — three dimensions.”

“Who is this guy?” I asked, pointing to a maimed man.

“That’s King Amfortas, the Fisher King. He was the last in a long bloodline of keepers of the holy grail. His groin injury left him handicapped, so all he could do was sit in his boat and fish near his castle, Cordenic. He waited for a noble who could heal him by asking a certain question.”

“Do you go to Harvard as well?” I asked.

“I’m an exchange student, but not Harvard. I’m starting at Kew College in the fall.”

“Hey, I go to Kew! Where are you from?”

“Delphi, Greece. Look over here,” she said, leading me to an expansive mural at the top of the stairs. “It’s Apollo and the muses on Mount Parnassus. Delphi is at the foot of Mount Parnassus. That’s where I grew up. I’m excited to meet someone from Kew. I don’t know a single soul.”

“I’ll show you around the campus.”

“Thalia’s our cousin,” said Xavier. “What do you say we head back to the stoplight party?”

“First cousin?” A choir of angels resonated in my head, until I recalled Eleanor Roosevelt married her fifth cousin Franklin. But what were the chances of that happening?

On our way out of the library Thalia paused. “I’m infatuated with these Daniel Chester French doors.”

There were three sets of bronze doors sculpted with bas-relief figures of women that she said represented music, poetry, knowledge, wisdom, truth and romance. I pointed to the allegorical woman on one door who was holding up a veiled object.

“It’s great to see a woman holding the holy grail for once. I don’t know why Galahad gets all the credit,” I said, guessing that the grail was under the veil.

“I like the way you think, sister,” she said, looking closer at the details.

The brothers were already outside waiting for us. I paused to admire H.H. Richardson’s Trinity Church across Copley Square with his signature archways and ornamental stone carvings; it was another of his Solomon’s temple replications.

“Are you familiar with the architect Richardson?” I asked.

Axel followed my gaze. “Who?”

“Architect, 19<sup>th</sup> century American. He designed that church. He designed two buildings on Harvard’s campus, and he was a member of the Porcellian Club back in his day.

Richardsonian Romanesque — the only American architect to have a style named after him.”

“Never heard the name before,” said Axel.

“I have a thing for him. His protégé was Charles Follen McKim,” I explained and stared above the library entrance where carvings of twin boys held the library seal. I froze for a moment when I realized the twins represented Gemini. When I studied Richardson’s architecture, I was infatuated by his use of zodiac signs in the ornamentation. I pondered the possibility that McKim the elder used the zodiac in his architecture just as Richardson had done. It was Richardson’s zodiac symbolism that inspired my interest to study the zodiac and constellations. I made a mental note to further explore zodiac symbolism in McKim’s architecture, as well as all of Boston’s architecture. I decided to start with the Gemini twins because it was June and work my way in monthly order through the whole zodiac.

“McKim designed the library. See those twin boys above the entrance? That’s Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ work. Both were members of the Beaux-Arts inspired era, as was Richardson.”

Thalia paused to study the detail. “You must be an architecture major.”

“I’m not, but don’t get me going, I could talk all day about it. My dad is an architect so I was exposed to this stuff.”

“My mother is a painter.”



We stopped in front of the library near a bronze sculpture of a woman with a palette in one hand and an artist's paint brush in the other. She hovered over eight inscribed names: Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Phidias, Praxiteles, Michelangelo, and Donatello.

"I could show you loads of buildings that feature a lady in a chair."

"Why a lady in a chair?"

But then the boys beeped the horn and we headed for the Rubicon. Xavier tossed t-shirts to Thalia and Axel — both green. Thalia pulled hers over her tank top while Axel removed his shirt for the switch. I eyeballed his muscular physique and hallelujahs reverberated through my whole body. Axel, in his green shirt: fair game. Sorry, Nolan.

The stoplight party was in full swing with loud chatter rising above the thumping music. Melissa's mouth dropped when she saw me strut in with the three Greek beauties.

"God almighty!" she huffed her beer-breath close to my ear. "Where'd you find these two? The dream bank?"

I introduced Melissa. "Thalia will be joining us at Kew in the fall."

Melissa assessed the competition. It was an awkward moment before Melissa greeted her with a casual, "You should definitely live on my floor."

*The Winter Hexagon*

Nolan returned with four beers, one for himself and the rest for the ladies. The brothers needed to fend for themselves. Melissa couldn't take her eyes from Thalia and when I told her she was from Greece, it seemed to fuel her infatuation.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket: Hot Throat. I let it go to voicemail, but when it buzzed a few minutes later, I figured I better answer it.

"He wants to see you in person. He's at Mass General," she blasted.

"Who wants to see me?"

"Chuck McKim. The guy in the construction accident. Someone from the hospital called and said he keeps mumbling for the *Lodestar* reporter he spoke to after the accident. Go talk to him."

"What does he want from me?"

"Go find out before he dies," she commanded.

## *Acknowledgements*



Soon after *The Eye in the Ceiling* was published in 2021, the writing of the sequel kicked into gear.

Every step of the way, my nephew **Brian Sampson** was on hand with his architectonic ideas, spreadsheets and inspiration gathered from his ongoing bike tour of the world. Naturally, pandemic restrictions set back his journey, but Brian returned to the road, tallying 42,000-plus miles throughout the United States and Canada. The camping aspect of Brian's trip turned his sights toward constellations, particularly the Winter Hexagon which became a significant detail in the sequel.

As we wrapped up the writing and editing of *The Winter Hexagon*, Brian had toured 49 states and 11 Canadian provinces as he continues his checklist from Patricia Shultz' book *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*. Implementing his specialized rating system, Lake O'Hara in Yoho National Park received the highest rating because of its mesmerizing blue lake, mountain peaks and glaciers. Follow Brian's bike tour — [justfeltlikebiking.blogspot.com](http://justfeltlikebiking.blogspot.com); Instagram [@brian.sampson4](https://www.instagram.com/brian.sampson4).

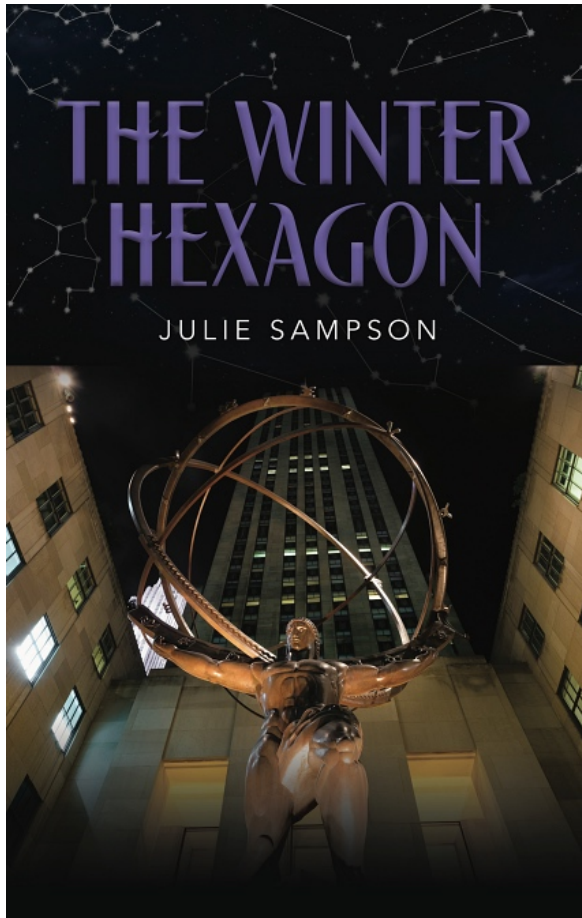
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*The Winter Hexagon — the sequel to *The Eye in the Ceiling* — is a fast-paced and humorous thriller that accelerates through Boston and beyond in a race to find the mysterious Winter Hexagon Salon.*

## **The Winter Hexagon**

By Julie Sampson

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