

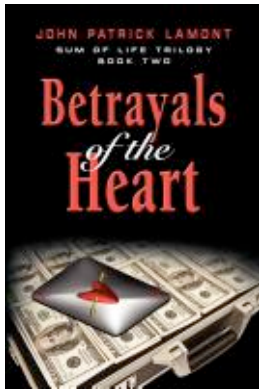
JOHN PATRICK LAMONT

SUM OF LIFE TRILOGY

BOOK TWO

Betrayals *of the* Heart





Betrayals of the Heart delves into the shadowy world of fraternal financial societies - loosely regulated, tax-exempt businesses run by a carefully chosen inner circle. Behind benevolent public facades lie arcane rituals, gross mismanagement and dangerous, secret power struggles.

Sum of Life Trilogy

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Sum of Life



Betrayals of
the Heart

Sum of Life Trilogy

John Patrick Lamont

Book One – The Worst Kind of Lies

Book Two – Betrayals of the Heart

Book Three – Fall From Grace

Chapter 1

“Sir, would you like a pillow and some pretzels?” asked a strikingly attractive red-headed flight attendant.

“Well, that’s the best offer I’ve had all day.” Ted Fisher grinned as he looked into her pale blue eyes.

She handed him the items over the empty seat between them with a bright pearly smile.

“Our passenger roster is light on this trip. Please take two pillows, and thank you for flying Golden Goose.”

He watched her move on to the next passenger, and then settled into his seat with one pillow behind his head and the other beneath his thickly bandaged hand. With little else to do, he set the tiny bag of pretzels on the fold-down shelf in front of him, thought again of Abigail and tried to sleep.

“I have another pillow if you’d like one,” whispered a voice close to his ear. He could feel her warm breath on the side of his face. With a start, he opened his eyes and saw only small pools of light scattered around the cabin. Turning his eyes to follow the voice, he was surprised to find a woman sitting close-by, her face shrouded in twilight.

“Ah, okay,” was all he could think to say as he reached over to accept it.

“No, just relax. Tip your head forward and I’ll tuck it in for you.”

“I’ve never received service like this before!”

“We aim to please as best we can.” She touched his cheek with her soft hand. “My, you must be a very busy man not to stop to shave. I’ve always admired men who could grow a full beard. They look so powerful.”

“I – I never thought of it that way.”

He froze in his seat as she began to play with his hair and run her fingers lightly along the side of his face. She slid so close that he could feel her head press gently against his. Her breathing echoed in his ear as her perfume wrapped around him like a heavenly veil.

“If you’d like, I could give you a shave,” she offered softly as she moved her hip against his. “Everyone nearby is asleep. No one would know what we were doing.”

“That’s a very kind offer, but –” he began, then stopped as her hand slid down and across his chest.

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“Oh, your muscles are so big!” His buttons easily popped loose, allowing her burning hot hand to slip unhindered beneath his shirt and onto his bare skin. His leg was pulled aside as she wrapped hers around it. Feeling lost in the moment, he did not resist as her hand danced lower.

“I’ve wanted you from the first moment I saw you, Ted.”

“Ted?” He stopped suddenly as he was turning to kiss her. “How did you know my name was Ted?”

Reaching up quickly, he jabbed the overhead light button. To his shock and horror, the light exposed not the Golden Goose Airlines flight attendant who had greeted him, but rather a laughing Cerbere Kuislane, personal assistant and henchwoman to Felix Hurdsman, president and CEO of his company. Petrified with shock, he gaped dumbfounded until a stabbing pain jolted him into awareness.

He opened his eyes to bright lights and a concerned flight attendant. Following the path of pain upward, he saw some small spots of blood seeping through the bandages of his injured hand. He regained his composure as quickly as possible and assured her that he had just been dreaming and was no threat to the safety of the plane or its passengers.

I must be going nuts to be dreaming about sex with Hurdsman’s private assistant! This is one nightmare I won’t ever share with Abigail. She’d never speak to me again!

“Probably,” agreed Jack Farley, Ted’s sometime guardian angel, ghost, conscience or personal demon. “*And here I thought you were just getting cozy while I sat next to you.*”

Don’t, Jack. This isn’t funny!

“*Hey, you’ve been under a lot of stress.*” Jack reached for Ted’s tiny bag of mini-pretzels. With a look of dismay, his hand passed right through it. “*I was going to help, but you’ve been so testy lately that I just stayed out of the way.*”

Good idea! Stay out as far as possible. Ted turned to look out into the blackened sky.

Jack shrugged as he faded away. “*Suit yourself. Pleasant dreams!*”

Chapter 2

Clicking heels echoed through the green and gold marble walls of Titanic Insurance's home office. Cerbere Kuislane hurried to meet with her boss, president and CEO, Felix Hurdsmen.

If these stilettos weren't such an effective tool, I'd have happily replaced them with some nice soft flats! She grimaced as pain throbbed in her ankles.

How would I survive without my toolbox of tricks? Walking into one of our departments and finding people pressed to their work and sweating proves that announcing my arrival is worth it. Having a reputation for destroying careers makes these sheep so much easier to handle. It frees up more of my time to focus on my own advancement and the special little tasks Felix has for me. Once he's fulfilled his plans and retired, I'll have the power and influence to do whatever I want without him wasting my time.

With a satisfied smile, she walked into Felix's darkened office.

"Ah, Cerbi! I heard you coming. I want to show you something."

Most of the room lay in shadow except for a framed picture of a striking blond woman on a glass shelf along the sidewall and two short-legged chairs before a teak desk on a raised dais. A thin ribbon of smoke curled its way up and through the illumination from spotlights recessed in the ceiling.

Cerbere avoided the chairs, having suffered neck aches in the past. Sitting in chairs with three inches removed from the legs left her looking up uncomfortably. The desk and chairs were designed to intimidate the visitor by making them feel small and unimportant. Instead, she stepped up onto the platform and stood at the front of his desk.

Felix smiled and fanned out a deck of normal-looking playing cards.

"Pick a card. Any card."

I don't have time for this crap. And, don't call me Cerbi! She frowned as she reached forward and pulled one out.

"Now, lay the card off to the side, face down on the desk. Good girl." He beamed at her as he reshuffled. "I'm going to tell our future with these cards. Few people realize that a modern deck actually comes from the ancient Tarot fortunetelling cards. The appearance and number of cards have changed over the years, but their power to predict the future hasn't. Observe closely."

She watched as he dealt six cards off the top of the deck, laying four in a diamond pattern on his desk with one beneath another crosswise in the center. He then placed three cards in a vertical line on one side.

“We have several challenges before us. There are a few troublesome key people who are affecting the completion of my master plan. This may help us identify them. Turn over the top center card.”

She obeyed and saw that the card was a jack of spades.

“That card represents myself as the seeker. Now, try the card that was crosswise beneath it.”

“It’s the jack of hearts. I’ll bet that’s Ted Fisher.”

“Good guess. He appears to be my main obstacle. Now, try the card close to you.”

“Queen of hearts. What does that one mean?”

“My ultimate goal. I’ll let you wonder about what that is. Turn over the one opposite, facing me. Hmm, ace of diamonds. That’s my foundation and resources.”

“Obviously money. You can buy anything or anybody if you have enough money.”

“Not necessarily.”

Felix frowned as he pointed to the card on his left.

She turned that one over and found a jack of clubs.

“That’s what’s behind me. Best leave the past buried and move on to the future. Now, pick the one on my right.”

“Queen of diamonds? Who could that be?”

“That’s who or what we’re moving toward. It’s obviously Golden Arrow. They’re a fraternal insurance company run entirely by women. Aside from social events, their focus is on money just like the rest of us in the industry. We need Golden Arrow to complete my plans.”

“Couldn’t it be Ima Gaffe instead?”

“Ha!” He reached for the cigar smoldering in the tray beside him. “God, no. She’s no threat to us. We’ll brush Ima aside soon enough.”

“I have something special in store for Golden Arrow. Those women are neck deep in internal squabbles. All the time wasted by fighting amongst themselves has left their leadership in shambles. Even though they have a lot of cash on hand, their good employees and membership are disappearing.”

“If they keep losing income from premium payers, they’ll have to start dipping into their party and special bonus funds. I want to get in there and show them how their cash assets can generate a good return and continue to fund their cushy clubhouse. Once we have control of their money, it’s just a

matter of time before we can absorb them into TICoK. If we keep them happy, they'll be so busy with their tea parties they won't see it coming."

"Sounds like you have it all figured out."

"No, but I'm working on it."

He smiled as he took a draw from his cigar and blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. Stifling a cough, he pointed to the top card of the three on the side.

Cerbere turned it over. "King of spades."

"Yes, that makes sense. It represents my inner attitude or disposition. People should know enough to stay out of my way. I'm on top and will stay there. Next card."

With a shrug, she flipped the next one.

"The joker! How'd that get in there? That card's supposed to represent my immediate influences. Maybe there's a joker hiding somewhere trying to screw things up. Okay, now reveal the last of the three. It'll be my hopes and fears."

"King of hearts. If my suspicions are correct, Abigail Bishop is the queen of hearts. Is the king supposed to be you or Ted Fisher?"

"Good question. Since I'm the one holding the cards, I'm confident of that answer."

"What about the card I pulled from the deck?"

"Pick it up and tell me what it is. It represents the final outcome of all my dreams and ambitions."

Cerbere stood for a moment with the card in her hand and then said, "Ace of hearts."

"Of course! I knew it! It's going to be winner-takes-all!" He laughed, leaning back and taking another long draw on his cigar.

She gathered up the cards. "Say, I recognize this deck! It's the one from the poker game in Caracas. It's marked!"

"Well, yes and no. That idiot Fred Frangelico damaged it so much by trying to smooth off the nicks and other marks that I can't manipulate it very well anymore."

"Why do you keep it, then?" She looked closely at the backs and edges before setting it back down on the desk.

"To remind me of how much satisfaction I got out of having his fingers broken and the crap beat out of him. Now he knows better than to try to cheat a cheater. Especially one like me! I'll be glad when I have that Milltown district office all cleaned out. Those agents don't know their proper place in the Company."

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“So, what’s next?”

“I’m working on a proposal to the board of directors of Golden Arrow. I want you to go to our banking division and bundle together all of our high interest bearing sub-prime mortgages. I have someone on the inside that can help sell them on the idea.”

“But those are Liar Loans! To qualify for the money, the borrowers falsified the value of their assets and income on the applications. We’re only holding them to make our Numbers look good. Won’t they see that those loans are just ticking time bombs waiting to default and lose money?”

“Well, consider that Golden Arrow is run by a bunch of women who think a high school education and being liked enough to get elected are sufficient qualifications to manage millions of dollars of their members’ money. As long as we show good current returns, our offer should look like the best thing since sliced bread.”

“Okay, Lyen Bank will be my first stop from here.” She stepped down off the platform. “Is there anything else?”

Felix began coughing uncontrollably.

“No, Cerbi,” he gasped after a moment. “Just let me know when you have those Liars ready to unload.”

She clicked back down the green and gold marble hall.

Good trick telling fortunes with marked cards. The funny thing about it all is that the last card wasn’t the ace of hearts. I suspected telling him that the ace of spades symbolized the outcome of his dreams wasn’t going to make me very popular. I’ve seen messengers of bad news killed too many times around here to let it happen to me, too. When it’s a matter of survival, maybe lying to a cheater isn’t so bad.

She entered the Lyen Bank division. *Hmm, I wonder if Felix was right about the queen of diamonds? And who’s the joker?*

Chapter 9

The evening sun glowed crimson on the horizon as Ted's footsteps crested Henderson Hill. Elm trees arched and embraced high overhead, creating a patchwork canopy of green leaves and dusty-red early evening light. Cracked and raised by the slow, relentless advance of the trees' huge gnarled roots, the broken concrete sidewalk forced walkers to watch every step along their path. The journey was especially hazardous in the late evening when the few street lamps cast only small, intermittent pools of light.

Easier to walk in the street, he thought, stopping for a moment to look up at the silent giants.

Funny they're still here. The Dutch elm disease took all the others around town. The only thing that changes is that I'm older every time I come here.

At 7:30 sharp he stepped through the corner door into the cool, dark interior of the Black Lantern. Only the eyes of a sparse group of regular Thursday evening drinkers and the aroma of gin-soaked oak floors greeted him. Ligeia was nowhere in sight.

Hmm.

He loosened his tie and bellied up to the bar.

"Hi, Konnie."

"Why, if it isn't Ted Fisher!" the man declared as he looked up from washing glasses. "I haven't seen you since you helped me with that death claim for my Aunt Pearl. I heard about what you did for Fred Frangelico after he was attacked in Caracas. We all hope he gets better soon."

Not likely. News sure travels fast!

"Fred's a good man. I did what I could. We all wish him the best."

Konnie glanced down at Ted's heavy bandage.

"How's your hand?"

"Still hurts like Hell, but it's on the mend, thanks. Did you happen to see a woman with auburn hair and blue eyes come by tonight?"

"Sorry, Ted. It's been a slow night, and no one like that's come in."

"Well, okay. I'll wait for a while and see if she shows up. How about fixing me two fingers of scotch on the rocks and a snifter of VSOP cognac?"

"Sure. Coming right up. I'll bring them to your table."

“Is that cognac for me?” asked Jack with excitement. *“I take back all the bad things I ever said about you behind your back!”*

Ignoring him, Ted paid and walked to the nearest booth. It wasn't long before Konnie had brought the drinks and returned to the bar. Settling into his seat, Ted leaned back and drained half his glass of scotch.

“Do you think Konnie would have a flowerpot around somewhere?” asked Jack from the opposite side of the booth. *“It seemed like that ancient Greek libations-for-the-dead thing was working at the piano bar in Caracas. Using the flowerpot instead of a funerary urn to pass the drink into the underworld was a great idea. Too bad you passed out before we knew for sure.”*

Ted said nothing, sipping his scotch until he could clearly see the myopic world that exists through the bottom of empty bar glasses. When he checked his watch, 8:12 told him it was time to pack it in for the night.

As he reached for the snifter, a delicate white-gloved hand gently covered his.

“How could you have known I prefer cognac?”

He glanced up and recognized Ligeia through the shadowy light. She was now dressed in a scarlet silk evening gown. Auburn hair cascaded in thick curls past bare shoulders, perfectly framing her face. Her sparkling blue eyes and radiant scarlet smile glowed in the dim light.

Unable to stop himself, he felt his jaw drop. His hand trembled under her soft touch.

“May I join you?” she asked as she slipped in beside him.

“I didn't think you were coming,” he croaked, unable to take his eyes off her. He was vaguely aware that his heart was pounding and he felt a bit lightheaded.

She pouted.

“Oh, will you forgive me for being so late? It took me forever to find the right dress for tonight.”

Ted just stared at her and nodded.

Without saying another word, she released his hand, picked up the snifter and sipped cognac as she looked dreamily into his eyes.

“I – ah, I'm happy you're here. I guess we should have discussed dinner arrangements before I left you at Daddie O's. Is there somewhere you have in mind?”

“I haven't been to the Pilot's Wheel Boat Club on Dynamite Island for ages!”

"I don't think I could afford even the drinks there, and besides, I'm not a member."

"Nonsense! I can, and I am. Let our first date be my treat. I even planned ahead and made a reservation. I'm at your mercy for transportation, though. I took a taxi here."

He ran through a list of objections, searching for some plausible excuse to go elsewhere.

Money? No! Reservations? No! Dress? No! I'm still wearing my business suit. Too classy? God, no!

As he took a deep breath to answer, her perfume swirled around in his head.

"I would be a fool to decline your gracious invitation." He made a small mock bow. "By the way, what's that perfume you wear?"

A brief look of surprise crossed her face. "Oh, men rarely notice it. It's called Irresistible! Do you like it?"

"Yesssss. It's very subtle but seems to carry quite a punch!"

She smiled. "I'm glad. I'm rather hungry and I've finished my cognac."

"That was MY cognac!" blurted Jack.

Ignoring him, Ted said, "You made me an offer I can't refuse. I would be honored to escort you to the Pilot's Wheel."

On the way out, he slipped a ten-dollar bill into a jar labeled Fred Frangelico Recovery Fund. Ligeia gave him a curious look, but said nothing as he stepped ahead of her to hold the door.

The sun had set, leaving behind a warm and sticky July evening. Ligeia slipped her arm through his as she stepped down onto the cracked sidewalk with her three-inch red silk heels. Ted immediately broke out in a sweat, not knowing if it was from her touch or the heavy air.

"You'll have to excuse my car. Getting fired this morning hasn't given me a chance to clean out all the forms and sales literature."

"Well," she replied with mock disdain, "I realize that this is your work vehicle. Please try to pick me up with the Rolls next time."

He laughed with relief. "Sorry, no Rolls available. But I might manage a Bentley!"

Avoiding the numerous cracks and roots in the sidewalk, the beauty with the beast reached Ted's car. Throwing a stack of annuity packets aside, he offered her a seat in his late model off-white chariot.

The drive to Dynamite Island began in silence, with Ted feeling awkward and, for one of the few times in his life, at a loss for words.

"Don't talk about the weather or sports," Jack suggested.

Shut up!

Unexpectedly, Ligeia asked, “Who’s Fred Frangelico?”

“He’s a semi-professional jazz pianist and veteran agent from my former office. We both just returned from a sales conference at a resort in Caracas. He was mugged.”

“Oh, my! Those resorts are usually heavily policed and very safe. How did it happen?”

“I suppose you could say it was his own fault. You see, he’s very handy with cards and sometimes entertains people with tricks at our company Christmas parties and summer picnics. Even though he can stack the deck, he never cheats and hates cardsharps.

“While we were in Caracas, he attended a party given by TICoK’s president and CEO Felix Hurdsman and was invited to play at one of Hurdsman’s infamous poker games. Fred caught him cheating and secretly countered most of his manipulations. Because of that, Hurdsman lost the game. Unfortunately for Fred, Hurdsman found out what he’d done and hired thugs to break all of Fred’s fingers as a payback.”

The gasp that came from Ligeia was so loud that Ted turned to look at her. Her perfectly composed face had transformed into a mask of shock and concern.

“Oh, Ted. I – I’m sorry to hear that!”

“Yes, we all feel for Fred. As you’ve learned from your own experiences, this can be a nasty business we’re in. Money, greed and the lust for power can create monsters.”

The rest of the drive to Dynamite Island didn’t take very long. He tried a few different topics of conversation, but she remained in an almost sullen, thoughtful silence. Crossing the short bridge onto the island, he turned and drove down Pilot’s Way to the boat club and marina.

“We’re almost at the gate of the Boat Club.”

His voice shook Ligeia from her silence. Reaching into her red silk purse, she pulled out a passkey card with a small, bright orange float capsule attached.

“Just slip this into the sentry lock.”

The ornate iron gate swung silently aside.

Handing the passkey back to her, he drove on through the gate toward a massive, gleaming, white four-story structure. Lampposts lined the walkways, while spotlights illuminated the building’s exterior.

The Pilot's Wheel Boat Club was a remnant of the riverboat era in its heyday. In fact, it was built out of salvaged parts from many wrecked boats that hadn't made it through the treacherous Sylvan Rapids.

Glaciers from the last ice age ten thousand years ago had pushed through the area. They dredged a new channel for the Mississippi River, creating the rapids and two large, rocky islands. River barons claimed the smaller.

The river's channel ran close and deep next to the site chosen for the Pilot's Wheel. Some said the water was unnaturally cold due to ice caves deep in the limestone shelf. Dynamite Island and the Pilot's Wheel shoreline had always been filled with riverboats, many in one stage of repair or another.

The Pilot's Wheel had been a hotel, restaurant, bordello, gambling house and bank. It offered rest and excitement for weary travelers until the completion nearby of the first railroad bridge to span the Mississippi. That bridge was the first toll of the bell ringing out the decline and death of the riverboat era.

The Pilot's Wheel continued to live on through many incarnations, however. From a steamboat port of call, it had become one of many speakeasies in the area. After the end of Prohibition it was the center of a thriving amusement park, with sunbathers lined up along the island's sandy beaches. During the Great War munitions were temporarily stored there, the island's popular name consequently being changed from Windigo to Dynamite Island. Then, almost a half-century later, developers had purchased most of the island, building an adjacent marina and turning the derelict Pilot's Wheel into an exclusive private club for rich and powerful Milltowners.

"Boy, this place brings back memories," remarked Ted as the valet left with his car.

"Oh, you've been here before?"

"Well, yes, but not for a very long time."

He took her arm and they turned to ascend the eight-foot-wide polished mahogany staircase to the veranda. "When I was a kid this was an empty, derelict building. My friends and I would come here to fish for walleye. If the fish weren't biting, we used our slingshots to knock out a few of the remaining windows. Children don't have any sense of nostalgia. This place was just somewhere that kids could play and bums would take shelter. The old Pilot's Wheel almost burned down one night when transients started a chimney fire."

Ligeia smiled at him as they strolled along the large circular porch enclosed by an ornate spindled railing with gingerbread edging on the bottom.

“I’m certain you’ll be pleased with the improvements they’ve made while maintaining the old charm of the riverboat era.”

“I hope so,” he agreed, suddenly looking down. “Once, on a dare from my friends, I went down the coal chute and into the old slaves’ quarters in the cellar. It was cold and dark, and rusty shackles still hung from the walls. Not everything was charming in those nostalgic old riverboat days.”

All of a sudden from somewhere overhead the sound of a trumpet sprang to life. Ted immediately recognized the music as New Orleans jazz.

“Let’s go see!” said Ligeia excitedly.

They found a wide staircase built to mimic the style used to connect boat decks, and hurried upstairs.

Several couples surrounded a jazz trio consisting of a trumpet, a piano and a bass. To Ted’s surprise, TC Champion was the trumpet player.

Ligeia tugged on Ted’s arm eagerly and led him to an open table for two along the riverside of the promenade deck.

“Let’s get something to drink and listen to the music,” she suggested. “We have plenty of time to eat.”

A waiter arrived as soon as they sat down.

“Why is TC Champion playing here?” asked Ted as the waiter took their order.

“Oh, he’s here by special request. If there’s something you’d like to hear, please write it down and I’ll give it to the bass player.”

“Wow, I never thought I’d see TC Champion doing a private appearance,” Ted remarked as the waiter hurried off.

“Is he someone special?”

“Well, I guess you could say that, yes. He’s one of the top jazz trumpeters in the US. Fred talks about him a lot. TC used to play with Fred’s father before he died.”

“Is that the same Fred Frangelico you mentioned earlier?” She looked at him closely.

“The same. I wonder if TC knows what happened to Fred.”

Ted took one of his business cards from his pocket, looked at it and thought about how worthless it was now. With a shrug, he flipped it over and scribbled awkwardly with his left hand, “TC, FYI. Fred’s been hurt. Please see me for details if you didn’t know. Ted (Friend of Fred’s).”

When the waiter came back with their order, Ted gave him the card.

“Please read this to TC and tell him I’m here if he’d like to talk. Here’s something for your trouble.”

With a nod, the waiter pocketed the ten-dollar bill and left in the direction of the musicians.

“Don’t you ever stop working?” she asked as Ted returned his attention to her.

Ted grimaced. “Oh, yes. I know what you’re asking.”

“Here you are Ted, unemployed, sitting with a beautiful woman in one of the ritziest places in the entire Milltown area and all you can think about is Your People,” admonished Jack as he leaned against the railing. *“No wonder that psychiatrist told you that you needed to find activities outside of work! She was dead wrong about me, though.”*

Doing his best to ignore Jack, Ted continued in a happier tone.

“Let’s talk about you. I just realized that I don’t even know your last name.”

She put down her drink quickly and got up from the table.

“Aren’t you going to ask me to dance? They’re playing some slow ones. I promise not to step on your feet.”

Smiling, Ted stood. As he stepped close to her, he was once again reminded of how perfect she looked. Her hand lay delicately in his and her body felt warm and soft next to him. As he should have expected, she followed his lead wonderfully as they floated around the promenade deck. When the music changed to a faster beat they returned to their table and found a note waiting.

Taking a sip of his scotch, he picked up the note. “‘Mr. Champion says he didn’t know about Fred and he’ll find you during a break.’ Well, that’s good. If this will interfere with dinner, I can make arrangements to talk with TC later.”

“No, not at all. I’d love to meet him.”

“Say, is your surname as beautiful as your Christian name?” he asked in an attempt at pleasant conversation.

“Oh, my name’s not Christian.” Her melodious laughter gave Ted a feeling of joy and contentment. “I’d much rather talk about you. And besides, if I tell you my last name, you’ll laugh.”

“No I won’t! Why would I laugh?”

“Oh, you will eventually. Everyone does.”

“Try me.”

“Okay, it’s de Bullés,”

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“Sounds French,” he remarked, finding nothing funny about it. “What does it mean?”

“Let’s talk about something else. How do you like the Pilot’s Wheel so far?”

“No, you piqued my curiosity. I’d really like to know what your name means.”

“Here’s a friendly warning, Ted. When a woman tells you three times she doesn’t want something, don’t ask a fourth time, or you’ll be sorry.”

Ligeia smiled unhappily.

“Let’s make a wager. I bet you can’t get an autograph tonight on a photo of you, TC Champion and myself. If you do, I’ll tell you what my name means. How’s that sound?”

“Well, TC Champion doesn’t really know me. If he talks to me, I’ll ask. But how would we get a photo developed fast enough for him to autograph it?”

“Technology provides opportunity,” she answered, pointing to the other side of the promenade deck. “There’s a camera girl who takes digital photos. They’ll have the photo printed and in your hands within minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll take that bet.”

“Good!” She smiled, returning to her gracious self. “Let’s go to dinner and see what happens.”

Chapter 16

Ted sat at his kitchen table leafing through the yellow pages and sipping from a steaming cup of coffee.

Hmm, if I dump insurance sales, what else could I do? I suppose I could go for car, copier or vacuum cleaner sales.

"I'd pick door number three," suggested Jack from the other side of the table. He looked like an animated bust sitting on the tabletop because the chair hadn't been pulled away from the table.

"I don't understand why you're bothering to look for a job in Milltown. There's nothing left for you here. Why don't we hop a plane and go see Abigail? There are parties going on all the time in sunny California. We could hit all the insurance companies, meet your job-hunting requirements, and have plenty of time to spend with her. Sounds like a win-win proposition to me. Those are much better options than your three."

Ted snapped the phone book shut and glared at Jack.

"There's no 'we' here, Jack! I'm the one having the relationship with her, not you. What do you think this is? A two for one sale at the local Five and Dime?"

"You know what I meant. I just try to help. Remember what a good job I did for you at the Pilot's Wheel?"

"And look where that got me. I haven't seen her since the fishing trip. I've left her a couple of messages, but she hasn't called me back."

"Hey, that fishing trip was all your game. I didn't interfere."

Ted sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's been a tough couple of weeks. I don't mean to take it out on you."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about it. After all, it isn't like I'm someone with feelings."

A knock on his apartment door saved Ted from the task of wrestling with that metaphysical paradox.

"What next?" he mumbled as he walked to the door. "It's been so peaceful the last couple of days."

A quick peek through the spyglass showed Peter Wong standing on the other side.

"Peter!" he exclaimed as he opened the door. "How are you? Come in and have a cup of coffee."

“Thanks, Ted. It’s good to see you. I can’t stay long. Les has begun tailing us to make sure we’re going on appointments. I managed to dodge him for now because Aubrey Patel and I left at the same time. Les is far more interested in exploiting his potential Rookie of the Year than in my meager talents. This was my best opportunity to see how you were doing and to check in with you for Jacob Tower.”

“Ah, I almost forgot about Jacob. Pull out a chair and sit. What do you take in your coffee?”

Peter smiled as he sat in the now vacant chair. “Black’s fine.”

“How’s everything going with Trixy?” Ted asked as he set a cup down for Peter and took the chair opposite him.

“It could be better. I was foolish to get romantically involved with someone I was spying on. I feel like I’m living a double life.”

“Well, yes, you are. I don’t envy you. If Trixy found out you’re working undercover for the Iowa Director of Insurance it wouldn’t endear you to her. Have you told her anything yet?”

“No, I don’t dare. You know how volatile Trixy can be. I can’t take the chance of blowing my cover and exposing our investigation. Jacob would have my hide. I’d probably end up like Beholder.”

“Beholder?”

“He was another DOI agent working on this case. Beholder was his code name. Jacob went ballistic when he realized he might have been able to prevent Corban Phaust’s death if Beholder had been doing his job right. Jacob fired him following their return from Caracas. I heard from the office staff that the conversation with Beholder’s father, a former US Senator, wasn’t pretty. He’ll probably suffer politically for that move.”

Ted shook his head. “Isn’t there anything in life that doesn’t have political connections and people motivated exclusively by self-interest?”

“Only for martyrs.”

That statement caused Ted to stop and reflect on the current course of his own life.

“Anyway, Ted, Jacob wants to know if you connected with INTERPOL.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact! I’m not sure where it’s all going, but there’s definite potential. I find myself in limbo at the moment, though. I think there are things happening that I’m not aware of, and that makes me nervous. I’m afraid that there are many surprises in store for me before this all ends.

“Peter, I know that INTERPOL is investigating some of the Board. I’m not sure how much I should tell you since it’s out of the legal realm of the state of Iowa’s authority.”

“Then don’t. I have enough going on just inside the district office. If I tell Jacob I don’t know anything about INTERPOL, then he’s less likely to want me to do follow-ups and get even more information from you. You may want to give him a call soon, though. He’s working closely with Gabriel Israphel.”

“Oh, yes, there’s another person I’ve forgotten about. For an FBI investigator, Gabe didn’t seem very interested in Phaust’s death and Hurdsman’s fraudulent actions. He told me they don’t help with private vendettas and hostile takeovers in corporate America.”

Peter frowned. “I never try to figure out the FBI. I have enough problems right here in Milltown.”

“What’s happening inside the office?”

“Oh, Mary’s trying to squeeze more sales out of everyone. She’s stomping especially hard on Les and Luís. Other than that, we might have a new recruit from Golden Arrow coming on board.”

“Golden Arrow? Did Mary decide to start selling insurance at tea parties and ice cream socials?”

“Very funny. All I know is that she’ll be joining Luís’ staff and that Phil Verdehue will get a nice bonus for recommending her.”

“Oh, wonderful. I’ll bet there’s a story behind that, too.”

“Her name’s Lenore Corbie. She’s a large woman who dresses in black and is supposed to be very smart. Phil’s been bragging up his new recruit in the ‘agents’ lounge.’ Someone said he overheard Lenore complaining about Golden Arrow’s constant infighting. She’s supposed to be one of their best agents. If so, it’ll be a big blow for them to lose her.

“Oh, there’s one more item of concern. Charley let it slip that Fred’s best clients are being distributed among Luís’ agents. I heard that Luís had no choice but to comply with Mary’s orders. It sounds like she’s making sure that Fred doesn’t have anything to come back to. Personally, I don’t get it. Fred was always one of the office’s top producers and he’s popular with his clients.”

Ted gazed down at the tabletop in front of him, lost in thought for the moment. Suddenly pain in his right hand brought him back to reality. He unclenched his fist, cradled it in his left hand and looked up at Peter.

“You’ve given me a few more things to think about. I’m glad you stopped by. It’s good to sit and talk to a friend. This apartment is starting to get on my nerves. After I make some phone calls I’m going to visit Fred.”

“I need to be on my way, too,” Peter replied as he got up from the table. “Thanks for the coffee. I’ll try to keep you updated. If you need my help, please call.”

“Thanks. It’s good to have you close by. I’ll see you to the door.”

Ted returned to the table to contemplate Peter’s news, only to find Jack seated in his chair.

“It sounds like breaking Fred’s hands wasn’t enough for Felix Hurdsman.”

Ted groaned as he slumped in the opposite chair. “It just gets worse and worse, Jack. Fred spent his entire career building a solid base of decent clientele, and now they’re being ravaged just to generate short-term profits. I’m certain that it’s not just Fred’s book of business that’s being raped. Veteran Company agents nationwide must be compiling lists of quick sales to finalize their retirement plans. Anyone who knows this business sees that Hurdsman’s running it into the ground. It’s like a machine that no one bothers to oil. Eventually it tears itself apart and comes to a grinding stop. All that will be left is a burned out piece of scrap.”

Pulling his cell phone from his pocket, Ted dialed Ligeia’s number and reached her voice mail.

“Ligeia, this is Ted. Do you know someone by the name of Lenore Corbie? If so, please call me back. Thanks.

“Well, Jack, let’s head down to the hospital and pay Fred a visit. Even though he won’t be pleased to hear what’s happening with his clients, I’m sure he’ll want to know. Maybe we could stop at a drive thru and get him some good coff—”

His cell phone rang. Checking his caller ID, he saw that it was Ligeia.

“Well, that was fast! How ar—”

“Who told you about Lenore Corbie, and how do you know her?” she blurted.

“Ah, I was speaking with one of the local TICoK agents,” he explained in surprise. “He said that she might be a new hire at the Milltown office. Why, do you know her?”

“Do I know her? She’s one of the architects of my demise at Golden Arrow! Lenore’s a conniving, lowlife, mean-mouthed, backstabbing bitch!”

Ted held the phone away from his ear. *Well, tell me how you really feel.* “It sounds like you have bad feelings toward this Lenore. Please calm down and tell me about her.”

“Ted, I don’t think it’s a good idea that we see each other any longer,” replied Ligeia more calmly.

“Nonsense. I enjoy your company very much, and it’s rare that I have anyone to talk with as intelligent and interesting as you.”

“Ted, I’ve enjoyed your company, too, but there’s so much you don’t know about me. I’m certain that you’d hate me if you knew everything.”

“How could you say that after our fun fishing trip?” he laughed, not taking her seriously. “I’ll tell you what. I’m planning to visit Fred Frangelico in the hospital. How about if you come along? Would 11 o’clock work for you, or would 2 in the afternoon be better?”

Ligeia laughed despite herself. Ted had used the old “will this time work or would this other time be better” routine for getting appointments. The object is not to let the prospect weasel out of making an appointment. Every agent knew and used it.

“All right, I’ll go with you. I’d like to meet Fred since I’ve heard so much about him. I think it would be a good time for us to talk. There are some things I want to straighten out with you.”

“And you’ll tell me about Lenore Corbie?”

“Yes, if I must.”

“Great! I’ll pick you up at 11.”

“No, Ted. I’d prefer to drive separately. How about if we meet at the hospital at 11:15?”

“That works for me. I’ll see you there.”

“Okay, goodbye, Ted,” agreed Ligeia with a note of sadness in her voice.

Mercy Hospital was little different from all the other religion-based medical facilities across the Midwest. The days of charitable free clinics for the needy were gone. Now, only huge patient-processing centers existed for those who could afford the care. Few of those patients knew, and even fewer wondered, how such places qualified for tax-free not-for-profit status.

Ted and Ligeia met in the parking lot and walked inside to request Fred’s room number. Ted had picked up a cup of coffee for Fred on his way.

A smiling, chubby gray-haired woman with bright, shining eyes sat behind the reception desk watching them approach.

“May I help you?”

“Yes, ah, Eliesse,” replied Ted as he checked her nametag. “Would you give us the current room number of Fredrick Frangelico?”

“Of course.” She began typing on her keyboard. “He’s in room 405. Just follow the blue line on the floor. It will take you to our elevators.”

“Thank you,” said Ted as he and Ligeia turned to go.

“Ted, do you always call people by their first names?” whispered Ligeia.

“I guess it’s just a habit from being in the insurance business for so long.”

“You spent a lot of time looking at her name tag.”

“Oh, I seem to be running into a lot of women named Elizabeth lately. I was relieved that it didn’t happen again.”

“I believe Eliesse IS a form of Elizabeth,” remarked Ligeia as they entered the elevator.

Now it’s all getting too weird. Sometimes it seems like I’m a rat in a maze full of opening and closing doors. One way or another, the doorkeepers are always named Elizabeth!

He forced a smile. “That’s good to know.”

They quickly found Fred’s room. He was sitting alone, staring out the window over a landscape of homes and trees. A quick knock by Ted on the open door got Fred’s attention.

“Hello, Ted, come on in!” He stood up from the padded chair. His hands were in casts. “The only thing you can catch in here is old age! Who’s this?”

“Fred, this is my new friend, Ligeia de Bullés. I told her a lot about you and she asked to come along to meet you.” He placed the cup of coffee on the tray next to Fred’s bed.

“Hello, Ligeia! I’m happy to meet you. I’d shake your hand, but, like Ted, here, I returned as a casualty from our vacation to Caracas.”

“Fred, I’m sorry you’ve suffered so,” answered Ligeia solemnly. “I wish you a rapid recovery.”

“Thank you. Please sit down and chat for a while. Ted, you’ll have to sit on the bed. Ligeia, please sit in the other chair. I rarely have an opportunity to visit with such an attractive lady.”

Ligeia laughed as she seated herself across from Fred. “Ted, you didn’t tell me he was a flatterer. It’s always a pleasure to sit with a gentleman.”

“Fred, I haven’t had time to talk with you since Caracas. How was your trip and what do the doctors have to say about your recovery?”

“Oh, I mostly hear, ‘we’ll see.’” He sighed. “The doctors think I’ll regain some use of my hands. A lot depends on how the surgery and therapy go. The good news is that I’m going home soon. The next surgery is scheduled in a month. They have to give the bones a chance to heal before the next phase. So, enough about me. What’s new with you? Have you heard from Abigail?”

Ted nodded and forced himself to think about Abigail instead of Fred’s prognosis. “Yes, but only for a few minutes. She seemed rushed and couldn’t talk. I’ll try to call her again later today.”

Fred gave Ted a questioning look and gestured in the direction of Ligeia, who was looking out at the landscape with a thoughtful expression on her face.

“I’ve told Ligeia a lot of what’s happened and our connection to Hurdsman. It’s safe to talk with her here.”

Ligeia turned at Ted’s statement, looked at both of them and replied, “You’re too trusting. Be careful who you take into your confidence. You should assume that Felix Hurdsman has spies everywhere. From what I’ve learned, he’s a very devious and dangerous man.”

Ligeia’s statement settled like a lead balloon on the jovial atmosphere that had previously occupied the room.

“Fred, I met Ligeia at the unemployment office. Her story’s similar to mine. She worked for Golden Arrow and was the victim of a political coup. I’ve learned that destructive manipulation by management isn’t unique to TICoK. Ligeia was stung hard by several would-be queen bees and workers inside GA.”

“This insurance business sure makes for an interesting life.” He made a face.

“Fred, there’s something I need to tell you. Mary’s ordered Luís to disperse your clients among his other agents. She thinks you won’t recover and return to work. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but I wanted you to know before you started getting calls from your people asking what’s going on.”

“Luís has already called and told me about it. There’s nothing anyone can do. He checked, and Mary’s correct about the TICoK agent’s contract giving them the right to cheat me out of my clients. I’m certain there won’t be anything worth returning to when and if I recover the use of my hands. It sounds to me like Hurdsman wanted to impart a farewell gift on my way out

of the Company. Looks like my only recourse is to go on disability and forget about the insurance busi—”

“That would be a terrible waste of your talent and years of knowledge and experience!” interrupted Ligeia. “Your clients need you.”

Turning to Ligeia, Fred replied sadly. “Oh, you don’t understand most clients’ mentality. We’re just looked upon as barely trustworthy servants. I’ve seen many agents quit for a lot of reasons over the years. Some of them were the best I’ve ever known. They took good care of their clients, but few ever received any recognition for it. To most people, we’re little more than a money-processing machine on-demand anytime they choose.

“When an agent leaves, the Company sends out a notice informing clients that their old agent no longer has any authority and that someone new has been assigned to service their policies. Almost no clients ever inquire what happened to their old agent. Even if our home number’s listed in the phone book, no one ever calls to ask why we left. Life just goes on as if we never existed. It all comes down to that old saying, ‘It’s a good life as long as you don’t weaken.’ Once we do, we’re easily disposed of.”

“I’m sure you don’t really mean that.”

“Oh, but I do. But that’s all just water under the Milltown Memorial Bridge. Say, I don’t mean to be a party pooper, but I’m a bit tired. Would you two mind coming back again later? If you can’t make it while I’m here at Mercy, give me a call and come by my house. The coffee’s much better there.”

Ted reached into his suit coat and pulled out a large envelope.

“Sure, Fred. I just wanted to show you this before we left. We happened to meet TC Champion at the Pilot’s Wheel Boat Club. He was kind enough to autograph a photo for us.”

“Yes, he told me he did.” Fred smiled as he looked at the photo. “He doesn’t do that often. Thanks for telling him that I was here. We talked a lot about old times and my father. Hang onto that photo. TC’s not in the best of health. You may never get a chance to get another one.”

Ligeia watched sadly as Ted tucked the photo away safely inside his coat.

Fred chuckled as he stood. “Well, I need some rest and you don’t need to get sick. Get out of this hospital and back outside in the healthy, fresh air. If you don’t mind, I’ll see you to the door and close it behind you.”

Ligeia smiled and touched him on the shoulder. “I’m glad I got a chance to meet you. I hope you recover quickly and that things go better for you.”

“Good to meet you, too. I’m glad that Ted’s making new friends. I hope to hear more of your Golden Arrow story. Bye, Ted. Thanks for the coffee. I’ll ask the nurse for a straw. Take care of that hand!”

“You’re welcome. I’ll call you soon, Fred. Bye for now.”

As they walked to the elevator Ligeia asked, “Ted, is there somewhere close-by we can talk?”

“Ah, yes, I think I know a place. I was going to suggest the hospital cafeteria, but it’ll be too busy this time of day. How about if we go to the hospital chapel? I’ve walked by it many times and rarely see anyone in there.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Chapter 30

Cerbere shuffled her notes and crosschecked vacancy information over the Internet.

Making all these last minute flight and hotel accommodations is a real pain! Our corporate jet will get everyone to Anchorage quickly, but we'll either need to rent a bus to Homer or charter two small planes to fly us directly to Ouzinkie. The small plane option is the fastest, but the risk of one of the planes possibly going down and losing half of our handpicked, well-trained Board isn't an option that's appealing to Felix. So, we'll have to do the eight-hour trip by limousine, stay the night at the best hotel in Homer and board the ferry to Kodiak City the next morning. That fifteen-minute shuttle by floatplane to Ouzinkie shouldn't inconvenience our Board too greatly, I hope.

That old bitch Ima Gaffe knew exactly how much trouble her demand for an emergency board meeting at her lodge would cause. With the damage the leak about shutting down the districts has generated, Felix would have agreed to have the meeting in Hell to temporarily appease Ima.

The closer we've come to completing his master plan, the more irritable and withdrawn Felix has become. Lately, he just sits at his elevated desk grumbling to himself as he stares at the photo on that shelf in his office. The steroid inhalers give him less and less relief from those miserable hacking fits. I hope he lives long enough for me to get what I want. After that, he can either die, have his lung transplant, or sit and count his money for all I care.

Too bad we can't afford letting anyone else in on this game of his. I could use the help. She wadded up a page of notes and angrily tossed it into the trash. *When I proposed having our Company travel department make the arrangements, Felix went ballistic and brought up that incident with Dee again.*

"Your performance in some areas lately has left much to be desired," mimicked Cerbere aloud. "Look upon this small task as a means to redeem yourself."

She frowned. "Redeem? Well, redeem this, Mr. Hotshot who lives on a pedestal."

With great satisfaction she stood up and shoved nearly everything movable on her desktop into the trashcan next to the desk. It made a

satisfying thump. Less than a heartbeat later, a buzz came from the only remaining object on the desk besides her computer.

With a grip that would have strangled the receiver if it were alive, she pulled it to her ear.

“WHAT? I told you I wasn’t to be disturbed!”

“There’s a Ms. Phillips here to see you. She said she had something important to tell you and that you’d see her even when you said you’d be unavailable.”

“Oh, yes, she’s definitely an exception. Send her right in!”

Well, maybe things are about to change. Perhaps old Ms. Bible Thumper is going to give me some choice bit of inside information that will be useful at the board meeting at Ima’s lodge. I could use a zinger right now.

Eliza entered Cerbere’s office looking tired and worn. Her once proud, bolt straight back was bent, and she held her head like it was almost too heavy to carry. When she glanced at Cerbere, a smile came to her lips and a spark of her old self appeared to resurface.

“Thank you for seeing me,” she remarked before crossing the room to sit in the chair in front of Cerbere’s desk. “You’re looking well. I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time.”

“Oh, no, not at all. In fact, I’ve just cleared my desk. You look – like you’ve had a long journey. What can I do for you, Mother?”

“I heard about the emergency board meeting in Alaska and came here as soon as I could to talk with you.”

“Oh, I suppose the Milltown office is just teeming with gossip. Did they let any more choice inside information slip?”

“Why, no,” she replied, clearly surprised by the question. “Mostly, everyone seems to be holding their breath waiting to see if they’ll lose their jobs. That’s not why I’ve come to see you.”

“Oh, I see,” replied Cerbere flatly as her friendly smile disappeared. “So this is just a nice family get-together? Shall we do lunch? Actually, I can’t. I’m busy preparing for the trip. Just tell me what you want and get out.”

Fighting back tears, Eliza sighed heavily.

“Cerbere, I flew four hours from Savannah so we could talk face-to-face before you left for Alaska. I’m concerned about the way your life is going and I want to help you make positive changes.”

“Yes, and you’ve been helpful with the information you’ve passed along from Regina Stoneking. But for me to reach my goals and be successful in

my life, I need you to do everything I ask. That's the only way you'll atone for abandoning me."

"Oh, Cerbere!" She clutched her purse to her breast. "I've tried to show you that I never really abandoned you. My sister loved and cared for you. She did all she could, but life wasn't easy or fair for any of us. I've tried to compensate for my misjudgments and give you every opportunity that was available. I've even betrayed my friends for you. I can't go on living like this. You ask for too much."

"Too much? Yes, you were my favorite Auntie Eli, but you were never my mother! My mother wouldn't have let me spend those years rotting in the slums of Boca Raton. She would have saved me from Rat's Mouth.

"What do you suppose it was like for a pasty-white black child trying to survive on the streets? I may as well have carried a sign that said 'Abuse Me, I'm a Freak!' How many times do you suppose I heard, 'Hey, white girl, whatcha doin'?' Ya don't b'long here!' Do you have any idea what it was like growing up like that, and especially alone?"

"The world is full of cruel people who hurt others because they appear different. With the exception of skin pigment, we're the same. You're blood of my blood. I always look upon you as special!"

"Is it special to be condemned to a world of in-betweens? Wherever I go or whatever I do, no one accepts me. 'Different' means bad, not special. The only people who seek out albinos are the ones who think we're magical. Even today, black albinos in Africa fear for their lives because ignorant superstitious bastards hunt them down and sell their body parts on the black market as good luck charms. Fishermen weave albino hair into their nets thinking it'll give them a good catch.

"Even Mother Nature is against me. I mix sunscreen with my makeup to filter out UV rays. Otherwise, I'd have welts from even the smallest amount of exposure to sunlight. I wear special contact lenses, not only to help with my poor vision, but also to give me some relief from bright lights. Lacking skin pigment also means little or no eye color and iris to shield my retina. Although I don't dare show it, I struggle every day to be what everyone else considers physically normal. That's how special you made me!"

"Yes, I brought you into this world and unjustly cast you away. I tried to protect you and would have come for you, but I didn't think that John would understand. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that our niece was my illegitimate daughter. I was afraid, Cerbere. Afraid that knowledge would ruin my marriage!"

“Sometimes I wonder how different my life would have been if I’d had a mother who didn’t abandon me because some man might think she was a loose woman. A real mother would have saved me and cared for me!”

“My choices were never easy. If you’d been less spiteful and destructive, I may have been able to talk John into welcoming you into our home sooner. Sometimes you acted like a wild animal.”

“I was trying to survive on the streets! Who was there for me after Mommy Patzy died? I’m a product of my environment. Besides, Uncle John liked me well enough after I moved in. In fact, he liked me so much that he couldn’t keep his hands off me. He got what he deserved.”

“Oh, please, don’t! You know I pray every day for him. Your affair was sinful enough, but when he fell into despair and took his own life he damned his eternal soul to Purgatory. My hope is that I can save yours before I’m gone. If only you’d change your ways and repent, it would help John find salvation, too.”

“Repent? For what? A guaranteed ticket into a mythical realm of goodness and light? My life is cursed because of you! The best thing you can do is help me to be successful in the here and now. Are you going to help me? Or let me down like before?”

“Cerber, I don’t think the little information I have is of much use to you.”

Eliza sank lower in her chair. She looked even worse than when she had arrived. Life itself seemed to be draining out of her. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out her Bible and rosary and faced Cerbere.

“But I can help you redeem your soul. Please pray with me. If we look in my Bible, I’m certain we can find answers to the challenges in your life. We can then know God’s Will and follow His guidance.”

Cerber gazed at Eliza’s desperate expression, and then at the Bible and rosary held firmly in her grip. At first Cerbere appeared to be feeling ill, but then a violent rage set in. She placed her hands on her desk and leaned forward menacingly.

“Redeem?” she screamed. “My soul doesn’t need redeeming! And I don’t give a rat’s ass about God’s Will!”

Quickly circling the desk, she came at Eliza. Her hands darted forward like talons and snatched the Bible and rosary from the grasp of her startled mother. Holding the two holy relics before her, Cerbere savagely yanked the rosary apart. The beads scattered noisily around the room. Then, grasping the Bible with both hands, she ripped it viciously in two along its spine and hurled it onto the floor.

“Now, you listen to me very carefully,” she hissed. “I am the one to be the judge of the information you can provide. Just tell me everything you’ve heard, and if it’s useful, I’ll let you know.”

“I – I haven’t heard anything more,” stammered Eliza, white-faced and shaking. “I don’t think Regina knows more than what I’ve already told you. Please, Cerbere. Don’t treat me like this. I don’t have anything left to give.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, too, MOTHER,” replied Cerbere coldly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do. There’s still a lot to be done before we leave for Alaska. I’ll call for a taxi to take you back to the airport. In the future, tell me you’re coming and we’ll do lunch.”

Eliza gazed down at the two halves of her precious Bible, given to her by the priest at her Confirmation ceremony many years ago. It lay on the floor like two birds shot from the sky. She reached down with trembling hands and gently gathered the halves. Carefully smoothing the bent pages, she put them back into her purse. Few parts of her rosary could be seen.

She left without a word or look at Cerbere.

As Eliza waited for her flight, she tried to pray for guidance. Never in her life had she felt so alone. Convinced that God also had abandoned her, she was frightened and uncertain of what to do.

It wasn’t until she was on her flight home that she pulled the desecrated Bible from her purse. Laying the two halves gently before her, she read Matthew, Chapter 27, Verse 4.

“‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’ ‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’”

“I have betrayed innocent blood,” mumbled Eliza as she looked out the plane’s window upon the heavenly cloud-covered landscape.

First Cerbere’s and now Regina’s. Cerbere is lost to me. I see that now. But I can still take responsibility for my deeds. Perhaps the only way to save Cerbere’s soul is to make her accountable to God for all the innocent blood she has betrayed. That might even give John some peace in Purgatory.

With renewed belief that she was following God’s Will, Eliza began planning for what she must do next.

A confession to Regina and asking for her forgiveness should be the first step, decided Eliza as fatigue started to overwhelm her. Perhaps, if I do my best, I can redeem both Cerbere and myself.

With her bisected Bible locked tightly between her hands, Eliza spent the rest of her flight in the peaceful sleep of the righteous.

“I’m exhausted, but glad we’re here,” said Ligeia as the bus pulled into the Homer terminal. “I think I would have flown to Alaska just for the bus ride down Route 1. The passage through the mountains just south of Anchorage was breathtaking.”

“Yes, I got some great shots before the terrain leveled out. That word game of yours was fun, too. Spelling wasn’t my strong suit when I was in grade school, and I suspect you used every word in the English language ending in Y just to punish me.”

“No, of course not!” She laughed mischievously. “I didn’t use abbacy.”

“Forget it, Ligeia,” he answered with a quick smile as they stepped from the bus into downtown Homer. “I ran out of words STARTING with Y a long time ago.”

“I wonder if the bed and breakfast will have Scrabble? We’ll have a couple of hours before we turn in.”

“NO! I’ll have the alphabet swimming around in my head all night as it is.”

“Night? What night? It’s after eight in the evening and it looks like an overcast day in late afternoon in Milltown. How do people know when to go to bed in this Land of the Midnight Sun?”

“Well, they still need eight hours of sleep, and there’s recreation, of course.”

“Oh, hmm. You did book separate rooms, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I thought I did. We’ll have to wait and find out if there’s a VACANCY!”

“Funny guy, Mr. YES-MAN. Now I’m definitely going to ask if they have Scrabble!”

Within a few minutes they had their luggage packed in a taxi and were on their way to the bed and breakfast. As they approached, Ligeia read the sign on the picket fence that ran along the stone sidewalk.

“Oh, no! Did you pick this one for the Victorian atmosphere or the name?”

“Neither, why?”

“The Iliad? Your Alaskan Odyssey?”

“I don’t get it,” he replied, pulling their bags from the trunk of the taxi.

“Well, this IS Homer, right?” she asked as she grabbed her carry-on bag.

“So?”

“Haven’t you ever read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer? Don’t you see the connection here?”

“Naw, it’s all Greek to me,” he confessed as he rang the doorbell.

She gave him a hard look as the Iliad’s door swung open.

To their amazement, staring up at them from under a big floppy hat was a girl about five years old. She had brown hair and hazel eyes. A blue-sequined evening gown hung from her shoulders and flowed out behind her on the floor. A string of floor length pearls finished her ensemble.

“Are you our new guests?” she asked.

Ligeia was the first to recover her voice.

“Why, yes, young lady. Is the lord of the household in?”

“Lord? This isn’t no church! You wait here and I’ll go get Mommy.”

Standing in the open doorway, they watched the little girl rush off with her gown trailing behind. Soon she returned without the hat, gown and pearls in the arms of a larger copy of herself.

“I’m sorry for not being here to greet you. I was in the kitchen preparing for tomorrow’s breakfast. I’m Penelope Pennock, your hostess. You must be the Fishers. Please come right in.”

Penelope looked to be in her late twenties. Even though they could see that she took pride in her appearance, the woman looked drawn and overworked.

“You must be tired from your long journey. Please set your bags off to the side, take a seat in the parlor and relax. If you’d like, I can brew you some fresh coffee.”

“Oh, that would be kind of you,” replied Ted, muscling the bags toward a coatrack. “I’d like to get us registered soon, though.”

“No hurry.” Penelope lowered her daughter to the floor. “There’s only one other couple staying here tonight and they’re out at the moment. It’s good that you’ve arrived early in the week. There’s a world-class kayakers’ competition near here later this week and all of the lodgings in the area will be full. Alexis, would you show these nice people to their seats while I prepare some coffee?”

“Yes, Mommy. Could I have some cocoa, too?”

“Of course, sweetheart.” Penelope smiled at her as she turned to go. “Now, be a good girl while I’m in the kitchen.”

Reaching up, Alexis grasped Ligeia's hand and led her across the polished wooden floor.

Ted stood up from arranging the luggage just in time to see them disappear through an archway to an adjoining room, and hurried to catch up.

In the parlor was a nice set of practical and comfortable sofa and chairs. Ted was relieved not to find stiff, uncomfortable old horsehair Victorian furniture. The coffee table contained a copy of the local newspaper and some Alaskan travel magazines.

He selected a chair next to the sofa occupied by Alexis and Ligeia. Even though he had been on the bus for eight hours, it was nice to be in a seat that was not vibrating and shifting from side to side.

Alexis was already entertaining Ligeia with information about herself and the house.

"...and there's a dark, smelly basement, but the attic has a big trunk of old clothes and stuff," she bragged. "I like this house because there are lots of places to play."

Ligeia laughed. "Yes, I can imagine. How long have you lived here?"

"Mommy and Daddy bought this house about five years ago," she replied, holding up her right hand with fingers spread wide. "They fixed it up so people could come and stay with us. My mommy runs everything, but my daddy will be back soon."

"Did he go on a trip?" asked Ligeia.

"Oh, yes!" she replied proudly. "Daddy used to be a city policeman and weekend war-yer, but the President asked him to go across the water to make some people free to put gas in our car. When he gets back, he'll help Mommy run the house again. I get lots of letters from Daddy, and Mommy reads them to me."

Ted was at a loss for words. He was afraid to say anything that might change her view of reality. To his relief, she changed the subject.

"Where are your kids? Are they coming, too?" she asked hopefully.

"No, Alexis. Ted and I don't have children."

"Well, you should get some soon. You're very pretty. Kids from pretty mommies have to be pretty. Before my mommy had to do all the work alone, she used to be very pretty. That's why I'm pretty, too."

Ted listened to their conversation, unable to find the right words to reply to her honest but simplistic viewpoint of the complicated thing called Life.

"Alexis will talk your head off if you give her a chance," Penelope stated, looking at the child fondly as she brought in a tray of drinks. "It's time for you to get ready for bed, young lady."

“Oh, Mom!” she huffed. “I never get to have any fun. I like this lady.”

“Now, Alexis, you need your sleep,” replied Penelope more firmly. “I’ll tell you what, if you get ready for bed quickly, I’ll give you the whisk after I whip the cream tomorrow morning.”

“And the bowl, too?” she negotiated.

“Well, okay, but you have to be quick with your pajamas,” cautioned Penelope as she set the tray on the table in front of Ligeia.

Alexis pouted. “But what about my cocoa?”

“You can have that after you get ready for bed, but you’ll have to brush your teeth afterwards.”

“Okay!” she squeaked happily as she ran out of the room and up the large wooden staircase.

With a sigh, Penelope poured two cups of fresh coffee and set the steaming mug of cocoa topped with whipped cream on a coaster.

Ligeia drank her coffee black, so she was already sipping from her cup as Penelope turned to offer Ted his.

“Are you okay, Mr. Fisher?” asked Penelope with concern.

His face was the mask of a man struggling to stay composed.

Reaching for his cup, he made himself relax and managed a smile.

“Yes, please pardon me,” he replied. “I’m very tired. This cup of coffee is much appreciated. You’re very kind.” Taking a sip, he smiled and added, “You’re lucky to have such a wonderful little girl. I’m glad we chose your bed and breakfast for our trip through Homer.”

Returning his smile, Penelope replied, “Yes, I am. Some people say that she has a charm that makes them feel at home. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go up and get your room ready.”

He caught a look of concern from Ligeia and replied, “Ah, could we have separate rooms?”

“Yes, of course, but I thought you were married,” Penelope answered in surprise.

“I think I might have been in too much of a hurry finalizing our travel arrangements. We’re associates on a business trip. I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you.”

“Oh, I’ll adjust, but I’ll need to also adjust your bill.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” he assured her. “Let’s take care of that in the morning. We’ll need to leave by 5:30 so we can catch the 6 a.m. ferry to Kodiak City.”

“Then, shall I have your breakfast and bill ready for you at 5 so you don’t have to hurry?”

“That’d be wonderful.”

“I’ll be back shortly when your rooms are ready.”

Penelope hurried out of the parlor.

“What’s wrong, Ted?”

“You don’t want to know,” he stated glumly as he turned to face her.

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t,” she replied. “You look like you’re in pain.”

“Very perceptive of you. There’s still a lot you don’t know about me.”

Giving Ted a thoughtful look she asked, “What happened to Mr. Marz after we arrived in Anchorage?”

Ted’s expression changed quickly.

“We shouldn’t talk about Marz,” he whispered. “In fact, all he would tell me was to look for him at Ima’s lodge and to refer to him as Victor Sefuwa, a coffee merchant from Kenya. If you or I ever call him anything else but that name, he’ll know there’s something very wrong.”

“Okay. So, Victor is some sort of policeman or private detective working undercover and you don’t want to tell me what he’s doing, right?”

“Ah, actually, yes. But, it’s nothing personal.”

“And, you think that me not knowing will in some way protect me if he’s found out and the doo-doo hits the fan?”

“Well, I suppose that sums it up.”

“Ted, understand this. If, when we have our talk with Ima Gaffe, I’m not fully informed on what’s really going on, I’m walking out. You and your group of rebel fighters can carry on your corporate war without me. I’ll not risk my tush without knowing why. Is that fair?”

“It’s more complicated than you might suppose.”

“I’ve worked inside an organization run completely by women. Statistically, women can be more vindictive and underhanded than men. I think I could show you a few ways to bushwhack that you haven’t thought of yet. The male mind doesn’t think the same way as ours, and I managed a whole building full of queen bees with big stingers. You have a lot to learn about the finer points of treachery.”

“Okay, I promised you back in Milltown that you’d be told everything, and that’s what’s going to happen.”

“Good! Let’s enjoy the rest of our trip. Here comes Alexis with a stuffed animal of some sort and a book. Maybe you could read to her?”

“No!” he replied a little too loudly.

“Then I’ll do the honors,” she declared, giving Alexis a warm smile and opening the book.

“Ah, I think I’ll step outside for a bit. Let me know when you’re done.” He stood and moved quickly toward the front door.

“I will. We need to get up early tomorrow,” she called as he disappeared.

Ted stood on the front steps of The Iliad and stared off into the twilight sky.

“*It’s no good torturing yourself, Ted,*” remarked Jack as he appeared and leaned against the railing.

“I just can’t handle the knowledge that little Helen might have grown to be as wonderful as young Alexis, here. I don’t have any way to answer the grief it causes within me. I can’t turn it off.”

“*I’ve never asked you to forget Jeanette and Helen. All I’ve suggested is that you forgive yourself. You’ll never forget them and what they meant to you while they were alive. But their story can’t be changed. Yours can as long as you have life inside you. Don’t miss the opportunity to improve your life.*”

“More easily said than done, Jack.”

“*Too true, but if there’s anything I can testify to, it’s the rock bottom finalization of death. All potential for change and happiness is gone at that point.*”

“So, I’ll work on it.” Ted sighed heavily as he returned through the front door. “Maybe I still have time to read a page or two.”

Smiling, Jack tagged along as if attached by some invisible thread.

“*I always said you were coachable.*”

Chapter 34

Gordon Komakhuk saw a silver gray blur streak by as he approached the central portion of Ima's lodge. His major focus for the past week had been the preparations for receiving Ima's guests. Three heartbeats later he heard the sound of the heavy horseshoe knocker striking the front door.

Gordon had long ago given up trying to figure out how Sasha knew when something was near the lodge. Since then, he used the dog as an early warning system that was better than any electronic device on the market. Besides, she didn't have little flashing lights, annoying beeps, and her batteries never ran down.

By the time he reached the main entrance, Sasha was waiting patiently in her usual spot off to the side of the door. She looked like an ornamental statue in the pose of a sitting guard dog. He knew that she was a mass of potential energy ready to instantly explode if the need arose. Peeking through the small cut glass window, he grasped the wrought iron handle and pulled.

Standing before him was a man dressed in colorful African robes, a pillbox hat and large glasses with lenses that blended from dark at the top to light at the bottom. At his feet was a large black suitcase.

"Yes, sir? How may I help you?"

Displaying a broad toothy smile and offering a formal business card, the man said in heavily accented yet perfect English, "My name is Victor Sefuwa. I am a coffee merchant from Kenya. Is your mistress at home?"

"We've never had door-to-door solicitations here before," replied Gordon in surprise. "Our location is a bit remote. Most of our supplies are shipped in."

"Oh, you misunderstand my purpose here. I am a friend of Mr. Theodore Fisher. He told me that your mistress, Ima Gaffe, requested my services. I have preceded his arrival so that I may discuss what I have to offer with Ms. Gaffe personally. Is she available?"

Gordon looked at Victor, down at the business card and then back up at his smiling face.

"Please step inside and set down your luggage. Miss Ima is currently in her study. She instructed me to alert her immediately to anything associated

with Ted Fisher. I can't imagine that would include coffee orders, but I've been wrong before. I'll take you to her and we'll see what she says."

Stepping through the doorway, Victor froze for a fraction of a second as he noticed Sasha for the first time. Sasha's eyes followed Victor's movements as he calmly set down his bag.

"Please follow me." Gordon led the way to Ima's study.

Sasha raced past them and was already seated on her carpet in front of the large south-facing window when Gordon and Victor arrived.

Ima was seated at her desk. She raised her eyebrows in question. "'Tis a bit early fer da vis'tors ta be arrivin', Gordon. Who's dis?"

He stepped forward and presented Victor's business card.

"This gentleman says that you requested his services, and that Mister Fisher recommended him."

Her expression hardened into one of shrewd anticipation at the mention of Ted's name.

"Yes, Gordon," she replied as she set Victor's card on her desk. "I bin tinkin' lately dat our coffee's a bit bitter. Wit' dose highfalutin' board members comin', mebbe we could impress dem wit' sometin' special. Please bring mister Sefuwa, here, a chair. We need ta discuss da matter right away."

As Victor stepped forward to take the seat offered by Gordon, Sasha rose from her place by the window and sat next to Ima's chair. Ima patted her and motioned for her to lie down.

"Tank ya, Gordon. Don't let me keep ya an' make yer job any worse dan it is. I'll make da arrangements wit' mister Sefuwa an' let ya know what I decide."

"Yes, Miss Ima," he replied, and quickly returned to his tasks.

Looking closely at Victor she said, "Okay, mister Coffee Merchant, are ya FBI, CIA or INTERPOL?"

Smiling, and now with a purely British accent, he replied, "INTERPOL, madam. I knew that this might be the only opportunity we would have to talk unobserved, so I hastened here as quickly as I could. We have appreciated your communications and the efforts Ted has made on our behalf. I need to propose some joint action to help move my investigation forward. If I can gain your cooperation, the results should benefit us both."

She laughed. "Well, yer jus' da kind a man I like dealin' wit'. Ya git right ta da point wit' no dillydallyin' around. Whatcha want?"

"Please include me as your guest here. I have brought a supply of the best Kenyan coffee available, plus some Kenyan Gold Coffee Liqueur and a

selection of teas from around the world. I think my cover will hold up and allow me to interact with your guests during informal times.

“I need to get as close to de Sabot and Palolo as possible to learn their movements and look for opportunities to catch them smuggling. Both of us may never have a better opportunity to eliminate them.”

Ima leaned back in her chair. After a short pause she replied, “I don’t want no killin’ on my property or in Ouzinkie. I’m too fond a my people here ta risk endangerin’ dere lives. Ya kin do as ya judge bes’ utherwise an’ I’ll instruct Gordon ta follow yer requests if’n it don’t work agin my interests. I don’t like cloak-an’-dagger stuff, but we need ta fight fire wit’ fire, I s’pose. If’n ya catch ’em, what ya gonna do?”

“That is hard to say at this time, my lady. I’m constantly receiving updated intelligence reports. I’ll try to keep you abreast of my intentions, but I may need to depart occasionally. I’m hoping to apprehend both de Sabot and Palolo somewhere here in the Kodiak Archipelago, but I cannot say where or when as of yet.”

“Well, I hope we kin still have a quorum on da Board cuz I want ta nail dat rascal mister Felix, too. Acorse, havin’ dose uther two outa da way’ll make Board resolutions more favorable ta me. If’n ev’rytin’ goes as planned, mister Felix won’t know what hit ’im.

“Okay, mister Sefuwa.” She offered her hand. “We’ll follow yer lead an’ hope fer da bes’. Is dere anytin’ else ya need?”

“No, I think that’s about it for now. One thing that might help is a code word for danger. If I need to be notified that there’s some threat, just mention Ted’s Uncle Gus. I’ll know to be cautious and look for the problem.”

“Dat sounds good. Now, let’s git dis ball rollin’. Sasha, please look fer Gordon.”

Sasha’s ears went up and she immediately jumped to her feet and was off, but then stopped at the study’s doorway and looked inquiringly back at Ima.

“Go on wit’ ya!” she exclaimed with a kind smile. “I’ll be okay here wit’ mister Sefuwa. I need Gordon now.”

Sasha left at a run.

“That’s a smart dog!”

“Yep, but a bit too protective sometimes. She tinks she knows what’s better fer me dan I do. I sure love her.”

Sasha soon returned with Gordon in tow. Ima instructed him on her agreement with Victor Sefuwa and asked him to show him to a room. Then,

as Sasha curled up on her carpet at the south window, Ima went back to her preparations for the board meeting and coup d'état.

As Ima bent down to pick up a fallen pencil, the room seemed to explode around her.

Ted and Ligeia rushed off the ferry and headed for the office of Alaskan Goose Airways.

“When you said the ferry ride was approximately nine-and-a-half to twelve hours, I assumed you meant inclusive,” grumbled Ligeia, dragging her luggage behind her. “It’s good that I wore flats.”

“You’re absolutely right,” agreed Ted as he reached for her luggage. “The sight of a woman running in high heels always makes me shudder.”

“No, my point was about the length of the ferry ride, not about my shoes.” She wrestled her snagged purse strap off her carry-on.

He laughed. “Well, whenever I have to rely on Mother Nature to manage my travel arrangements, I try to use the same level of patience as with any female. Whether it’s blasting through thin air, sailing on a huge body of water or competing against a shuffleboard demon, if I can survive the experience in one piece, I’m happy.” He picked up his pace. “When I get this far outside the manmade concrete jungle we normally live in, I think of myself as the guest of a reluctant host, one that doesn’t need much reason to throw me out on my ear. Going With The Flow would be an appropriate cliché right now.”

Alaskan Goose Airways took up a significant portion of the Kodiak City shoreline. What looked like brightly painted beached fishing boats from a distance were actually functional floatplanes.

“I thought we’d be riding in one of those little Piper Cubs with pontoons instead of wheels,” exclaimed Ligeia with a worried look.

“No, we got lucky. Our arrival in Kodiak City gives us an opportunity to fly to Spruce Island in a Goose.”

“What is it with these ‘goose’ names?” she asked testily. “First it’s ‘Golden Goose,’ then ‘Alaskan Goose.’ I feel like I’m being laid every time I get off a plane.”

“What’s wrong, Ligeia?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She sighed. “Maybe it’s horm– no, I have to stop saying that. What I really mean is that I can’t shake a feeling of foreboding

about this trip. Maybe it's the amount of time that's passed since we left Milltown. Or perhaps it's the rapid changes I've been going through since Golden Arrow dumped me. I seem to be constantly fighting for my survival. Now I'm journeying off into the Wild to meet with TICoK's dowager empress to discuss reclaiming her throne. I feel like I'm still on the ferry trying to get my footing!"

Ted fell silent, stopped and put the luggage down.

Ligeia stood next to him in confusion as he took a moment to give her a hug.

"Dowager empress?" he asked solemnly. "Ah, I think you may revise that a bit after you meet her. You're not alone, you know. The past several weeks have been a life-altering experience for everyone involved. Sometimes I dream that I've fallen off a cliff and I can't see the bottom. I know it'll show up sometime and I probably won't like what I see, but while I'm still on my way down I keep looking for a branch to grab onto."

Ligeia felt the stress and anxiety draining out of her. Taking a deep breath, she pushed Ted back gently and said, "I'll carry my own bag. Even though you try not to show it, your hand isn't fully healed."

"Yes, you're right. From what I can see, there isn't much activity around that office up ahead. We may as well take our time."

Slowing their pace a bit, Ligeia was able to safely pull her bag along the black sandy beachhead that separated the Alaskan Goose Airways office from the bay. They arrived just in time to see a red-haired man dressed in a well-worn green flight jacket exit the building.

"Excuse me, sir. We're on the flight to Ouzinkie."

"Delayed," he replied as he continued on his way to the nearest boat-shaped plane.

"It's good that we hurried," she grumbled as she let go of her luggage and checked the condition of her shoes.

Ignoring her comment, Ted entered the Alaskan Goose office to check on their flight. Ligeia followed.

As they stepped up to a counter, she noticed a man sitting behind a battered wooden desk. He was wearing a baseball cap and a blue striped mechanic's shirt with "Bob" on the pocket.

Ted gave him a friendly smile. "Hello, we have reservations for the afternoon flight to Ouzinkie."

"Delayed," replied Bob without looking up from his writing.

"Yes, I heard. Will it be leaving soon?"

"Don't know. Depends on the weather in Ouzinkie."

“I’m sorry. I’m not from around here. What does that mean?”

Bob looked up at Ted and pointed with his pen to the radio behind him.

“We get regular reports from our destinations that tell us what the weather’s like. If we can’t land, we don’t leave. It saves fuel, lives and a whole lot of repair on the planes. The Kodiak islands are filled with microclimates, and the weather’s often unpredictable. That’s why we rely on eyewitness reports.”

“Thank you for the explanation,” replied Ligeia, butting in.

Bob reached down to pick up a pair of glasses that lay by him on the desk. His eyes widened as he put them on.

“You’re certainly welcome, little lady. There’s coffee and some of our local specialty pastries over there next to the departure bench if you’d like to try some. I’ll let you know when we’re leaving just as soon as we’re cleared to go.”

“That’s very nice. Thank you again.”

As they were making themselves comfortable, Ted’s cell phone rang.

“Hello? Ah, Regina, how are you? – Bad news? – Eliza Phillips? – WHAT? With Cerbere? How could she? – Hurdsman, too? – She did? – But, why? – Her daughter? You’re kidding! Okay, okay, I know you wouldn’t joke about something like that. But why did she tell you?”

There was a long pause before he asked, “Do you think Eliza’s mentally unstable? – Yes, religion can do that to people. So, what does she want from us? – Can she be trusted? – I don’t think I can answer that, Regina. You know her better than anyone. I’ll discuss her with Ima and see what she thinks. Hopefully, I’ll be seeing her within the next few hours. – No, I’m not there yet. We’ve experienced some delays. – I can’t tell you yet. I’ll contact you as soon as I can. – Okay, that’ll work. Remember, you’re three hours ahead of me. – Yes, I’ll tell Ima you couldn’t have known. We’ll work this out. At least we’ll have one less surprise waiting for us. – She did? Maybe that’s a sign she’s sincere. – Yes, you’re right. I wouldn’t want to be Eliza, either. Okay, we’ll stay in touch. Thanks for calling. Take care of yourself. Bye.”

“Oh, that didn’t sound good,” remarked Ligeia.

Ted paused to push back the anger and disappointment that had bubbled to the surface as he listened to Regina. Forming his words carefully, he calmly said, “Eliza Phillips sold us out. Hurdsman knows almost everything we’re doing.”

“What? How? Why? Where? When?” demanded Ligeia like a rapid-fire pistol.

“Give me a minute and I’ll tell you,” he murmured as he rubbed his temples with his fingertips. “The good news about Eliza is that she regrets what she’s done and that she didn’t know as much as she thought she did. There are forces at work here that only Ima, Abigail and I know about. But Hurdsman knowing we’re actively working against him is no small problem.”

“Remember, you said you’d tell me everything before I decided whether I want to be involved?”

“Yes, I intend to tell you all I know when we talk with Ima. I’m certain she knows more than even I do. Now, before you ask anything else, please let me tell you about Eliza.”

Ted filled her in on the information he’d just learned from Regina.

“Her daughter? How bizarre! Families certainly can have their hidden secrets. It’s not as uncommon as we’d think for a child to one day discover that a sister or an aunt is actually their mother. From what you’ve told me, Eliza provided well for her. How could Cerbere have turned out like she did?”

“I suspect that Eliza paved her path with the best of intentions, but never gave Cerbere the one thing that she needed most after Patzy died. She never received the lasting, unquestioning and profound dedication of a devoted mother. Eliza chose to put her fears above her commitment to her child. Combined with Eliza’s actions, Cerbere’s childhood shaped her into the person she is now.

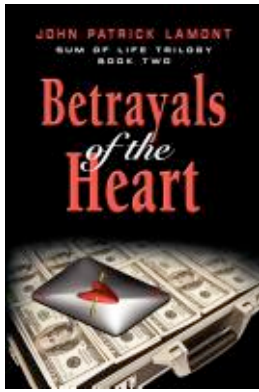
“I’d like to think that we’re more inclined to have poor judgment when we’re younger, but I’m surprised at how often it still happens to me. Eliza’s made a lot of mistakes. We’ll have to wait to see if she’s of any help to us. I hope we can stay out of future conflicts between her and Cerbere. Even though Cerbere didn’t choose to suffer the childhood she did, she’s still responsible for the path she’s followed. We’re constantly offered choices. Cerbere is making the wrong ones.”

Ligeia frowned. “Caution’s needed with dangerous people, regardless of how much understanding you give them. All her choices may be bad for you.”

“Yes, you’re certainly right about that! Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m going to see if there are any salmonberry turnovers on that table. I overheard someone talking about them on the ferry.”

“Salmon berries?” she asked suspiciously. “Those aren’t anything like mountain oysters, are they?”

Ted laughed. “No, Ligeia, they’re nothing alike at all.”



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