

*A writer assigned a story that can save his magazine from demise is sent to get the life story of a mysterious older, still beautiful, wily woman lawyer who sees the interview as a way of saving her organization, which champions poor women. The writer's life is changed by the encounter.*

## **A VIRTUOUS LIE**

by Sam Halpern

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SAM HALPERN

A  
*Virtuous*  
LIE

A NOVEL

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# CHAPTER 1

Devon Emmanuel was lost. The rental car's GPS had failed shortly after he left the rental agency, and he was navigating by a brochure given him at the counter. The hand-sized map showed a maze of large and small streets, some names printed at angles, the type nearly unreadable. An eighteen-wheeler blocked his frontal vision, and cars flashed past in adjoining lanes, allowing him only seconds to check the off-ramp signs. He clutched the steering wheel, feeling sweat on his palms and physical discomfort as the subcompact he was driving scrunched his six-foot-two-inch body. Occasionally amid the multitude of vehicles, concrete overpasses, and July smog, he could see distant mountains.

*Where is the city? How can people build a city without a downtown?*

Downtowns made Devon feel secure. He loved his Manhattan. To him, Manhattan was a concrete security blanket. Los Angeles was a recipe for insanity.

A car cut him off. He hit the brakes hard, bringing a screech and a horn blast from the car behind. He steadied the wheel and tried to remain calm.

It seemed like hours since he had left his hotel, a journey of frustrating mistakes. Then just as he made the decision to get off the freeway for the third time and ask directions, he saw the exit sign he had been looking for. He needed to get in the right-hand lane. He moved timidly, irritating a driver who shot past and made an obscene gesture. Leaving the freeway madness, Devon pulled against a curb and parked. Sleepless hours on the red-eye had sucked his energy. He found the seat-adjustment lever, pressed it, closed his eyes, and felt his body morph into a semi-recumbent position. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and relaxed.

Alessandra Gittleman, Alessandra Gittleman, Alessandra Gittleman... a whole night flying at 35,000 feet, trying to learn something about Alessandra Gittleman with the plane's Wi-Fi going down frequently. Court cases by the dozens were associated with her name, constant battles with

people and institutions, but almost zero personal information. Famous, and yet, as unknown and mysterious as a jungle-hidden Mayan temple.

*God, I'm tired. Four hours' notice. Four hours!*

The argument with his wife before leaving New York suddenly emerged from his fatigued mind. He visualized ten-year-old David and fourteen-year-old Sarah peeking around the edge of the living room as their parents yelled at one another.

"How could you! How could you consent to leave tonight? We agreed I would always have a week's notice before you left town so I could arrange for help with the children! How many times have you done this, Devon? My work is important to me. Everything is about you! You and your precious *Walden!*"

"Sonja, they didn't give me any choice. I suggested other writers. They said this was a critical assignment and insisted I had to be the one who did the interview. I told them this would play havoc with my family and –"

"– immediately caved. If courage is a lion, Devon, you're a gerbil. How many days?"

"I have to make the goddam living! Do you expect us to live on what you make?"

"How many days?"

"Eight – nine – ten – I'm not sure. If everything goes right, I might be able to cut –"

"I don't want to hear it! Go! Do your interview. Nine days, Devon! Nine days, and I expect you back here. Furthermore, while you're gone, I'm going to work whatever hours the museum needs me!"

Devon's eyes snapped open as anger flooded his body. He brought the driver's seat into the upright position. He needed to get back on the road, but it was hard to push Sonja out of his mind.

Sonja! He couldn't stand the woman, yet every time he considered dissolving the marriage, he discovered reasons why he shouldn't. He could no longer remember all the reasons.

"There's no way out until the kids graduate high school," he muttered under his breath, as if reminding himself. He began adding up the years before escape was possible; then he erupted in a burst of body movement.

*The appointment! Christ, I'm late!*

## CHAPTER 2

Devon began driving again, looking about anxiously as his car moved farther away from the freeway and deeper into a hodgepodge of small businesses and modest homes. From the short briefing he had received, he knew the interview was to take place in East L.A., an area his editor had warned him was a drug-infested neighborhood he was to make certain he left before dark. The surroundings looked seedy enough to be violent, but he had seen worse in New York. He glanced at the map and recognized the name of a street. Only a few miles from his destination! Rejuvenated, he began driving faster, taking care to avoid the occasional grocery-basket-pushing, rag-clad man or woman.

Proximity to his objective forced him to consider his assignment again – an in-depth feature story on a seventy-four-year-old lawyer named Alessandra Gittleman. A legal friend of his editor had described her as having been very beautiful in her younger years, adding that she always dressed fashionably for court appearances. It was said of her by opposing attorneys, the friend offered, that she looked like Aphrodite and fought like Attila. Devon had heard of Gittleman, actually knew a little of her reputation, but the editor's briefing had intrigued him.

In Alessandra Gittleman's demands for justice for poor women, she had offended most of America's power structure. The objects of her wrath were usually California district attorneys, judges, mayors, governors, and the legislature. However, federal officials, both houses of Congress, and a variety of federal administrators were also victims of her venom. She had once referred to a sitting American President as a "greedy, mindless, war-mongering piece of Texas cow shit." That particular evaluation had been captured and aired on NPR, the station gallantly blocking the offending noun but leaving the "Texas cow" antecedent to vest the bleep with excremental clarity.

Alessandra was also egalitarian. Along with individuals both rich and poor, a variety of institutions, especially those she considered guilty of hypocrisy, were sometimes her targets. This had brought outraged rhetoric from the local rabbinate who accused her of being a self-loathing Jew. She

had responded to the latter accusation in a letter to the editor of a major newspaper, stating she had been born and reared Italian Catholic and had later married a Jew, hence the name Gittleman, and that further, the Jews of Los Angeles had turned into a group of wealthy insular heretics whom the prophet Samuel would have urged God to strike dead.

The Los Angeles Christian community, she asserted in the same letter, would have been disowned by Christ. She ended her comments by saying that the Bishop of the Los Angeles Diocese had used and abandoned the Hispanic community, and that the Catholic Church was an uncaring, self-serving, corporate evil.

Retaliation by the offended parties became the order of the day in Alessandra's early years; then her opponents learned the true meaning of the boxing phrase "low blow." What invariably followed a hostile response to a Gittleman attack was publication of embarrassing information she had gathered and held in wait for the purpose of maximizing her critics' pain if rhetoric escalated to action.

Regardless of the consequences, many attempts to retaliate had been made by the powers that ruled California and the nation. Alessandra Gittleman had been investigated by the Los Angeles Police Department, California Attorney General's Office, United States Secret Service, and, of course, the FBI, the last attempting to follow her funding to a source of disrepute. The hunt for malfeasance had been unsuccessful. Her nonprofit organization received no public funds, and she refused donations from all corporations, existing on her own funds, court-ordered settlements and contributions from the occasional true believer.

Amid this turmoil, Alessandra Gittleman, a woman considered by some a saint, by others the devil incarnate, lived and worked in near-monastic isolation. She was reputed to sleep on a cot in her headquarters, a building situated in the heart of what was perceived to be one of the most dangerous areas of Los Angeles. She rarely left the building except to go to court or occasionally to a restaurant she especially enjoyed where a table was kept in perpetual reserve for her, a perk conveyed as a grateful gesture by the restaurant's owner.

Of all California citizens and some non-citizens who loved Alessandra Gittleman, no group was as devoted to her as the Hispanic women of Los Angeles. She had served them faithfully for thirty-eight years. It was thought by many of the women (even though Gittleman was a professed atheist) that she had been touched by the Lady of Guadalupe. Gittleman's services, however, were rendered to all women in need of her assistance, regardless of race, religion or citizenship.

To anyone's knowledge, she had never granted an in-depth interview. Never in thirty-eight years. Until now.

## CHAPTER 3

Devon's initial impression of the neighborhood was inexorably reinforced with each grungy mile. Many buildings had bars on the windows and doors. Had it not been for indecipherable spray-painted graffiti, the environs would have been devoid of color. Even the vegetation was drought-ravaged brown. Adding to the effect of this stark world on Devon's psyche was his urgent need for a bathroom.

Suddenly, a white two-story building appeared. The structure had the architectural elegance of a cardboard box, yet the chain-link fence surrounding it was covered with beautifully kept bougainvillea, and the yard beyond was filled with playground equipment and happy, squealing children. An island of vibrant civilization in a barren, dangerous world.

Devon checked the street address. He had arrived. He began looking for a place to park along a street that was lined with rusty automobiles, some extending two feet from the curb. The first available space was nearly a half-mile down the road.

A hot, smoggy walk later, Devon approached the building, the heavy valise containing his equipment causing him occasionally to switch carrying arms. The wooden entrance door was arched at the top and would have been recognized by the inhabitants of a Tolkien novel.

*Architect had the imagination of a gnat...sense of humor though.*

Devon lowered his head to enter the building. The interior momentarily stunned him. He had expected law offices. What he found was...he didn't know. Fifteen feet inside the door of a huge white-walled room stood a four-by-six-foot desk. The front of the desk bore an impressionistic painting of an American eagle flying through a blue cloudless sky. Far below the eagle were mountains and rivers. An engraved placard on top of the desk read:

CASE  
Center for American Social Equality



A middle-aged Hispanic woman sat hunched over the desktop doing needlework. Her hands moved swiftly, the long sleeves of her colorful dress rippling as the muscles of her arms contracted beneath them. As Devon approached, the woman looked up and scanned his face.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked, with a slight Hispanic accent.

"I'm looking for CASE headquarters. From the sign on your desk, I assume I've found it."

The woman smiled. "You have, *Señor*. I am Anita Salazar. How may I help you?"

Devon felt the switch from "sir" to "*señor*" probably had significance, but ignored the nuance. "My name is Devon Emmanuel. I have an appointment with Mrs. Gittleman. I'm late."

The receptionist picked up the telephone receiver and hit a button. "He's here, *Señora*...Okay." She hung up and smiled at Devon. "She is expecting you. Go to the top of the stairs at the back of the room, and she will meet you."

Devon studied the room as he walked. The huge open space extended well beyond the reception desk. Four support columns, each altered to look as if they had been imported from ancient Greece, split the room.

To his left, over-filled bookcases lined much of the wall. Devon recognized a Dr. Seuss protruding beyond the other volumes. A bulletin board and a large toy bin were positioned at the end of the bookcases. In most of the bare white plaster areas between the bookcases were floor-to-ceiling murals of children playing in wildly colorful costumes frequently associated with Latin America. Tables, some seating four, others larger, were surrounded by folding chairs filled with kids reading or writing or talking quietly with young adults, most of whom looked Hispanic and appeared to be functioning as combination babysitters and tutors. Between the tables, small children played with toys. Other than a murmur of voices, the room was remarkably quiet. The left half of the room ended in a small, red-white-and-blue striped bathroom. Devon's urgent need for a urinal increased.

The right half of the room was so different from the left that it presented as non-musical counterpoint. It was populated entirely by adult women. In keeping with the children's side of the room, the white plaster walls here also bore murals, one a vast panorama of the Grand Canyon, and a few feet beyond it, Greek islands rising above a spectacular Aegean sea. The effect was peaceful. Two large bookcases, filled to capacity, stood near the center of the space. Small tables, each with a laptop computer, were scattered about and occupied by individuals working intensely, occasionally beckoning help from wandering adults. All but two of the wanderers – one black, the other white – appeared to be Hispanic and middle-aged.

At the back of the room, in the center, loomed the staircase. It was not elegant, but the polished hardwood was pleasant to the eye. To the right of the staircase was a small open kitchen, and in the corner of the room, another bathroom with a sign on the door saying "*Adultos.*" Devon eyed it longingly.

Suddenly the hum of activity stopped. Chair movements caused Devon to turn. Every adult and child in the room was standing and staring. He followed their gaze. Above him, at the top of the staircase, stood a woman in a simple purple shift buttoned high at the neck and extending to her knees. She was perhaps five-foot-eight, thin, with an attractive figure and light olive complexion. Black hair with a hint of gray, a bit unkempt, was parted on the left with gentle waves caught on the right in a long slender clip as they tumbled nearly to her shoulders. Her wide oval hairline gave fullness to her forehead, framing a face Devon could only describe as beautiful – perfectly angled cheekbones; a straight, but not sharp nose; full lips that looked as if they were toying with a smile, and brown eyes crowned by brows a Hollywood make-up artist might have admired. The only jewelry she wore was a heavy gold chain, at the end of which was a large gold medallion that rested atop her breast.

The woman fixed Devon with eyes that made him feel as if she could see the back of his skull.

"Are you from *Walden*?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I'm sorry I'm –"

"– late," she said, finishing his sentence. "Go use the bathroom and come up."

Embarrassed, Devon headed for the bathroom, locking the door once inside. The facility was immaculate. A large mirror sparkled above two white sinks. Several small framed pictures, most of them desert or mountain scenes, dotted the white walls.

Devon relieved himself, cleaned a careless drop of urine from the porcelain toilet edge, washed his hands, then stood in front of the mirror drying them on a paper towel. He tried, with modest success, to smooth the travel-induced wrinkles in his dark tan sport coat, then straightened his blue, thin-striped tie.

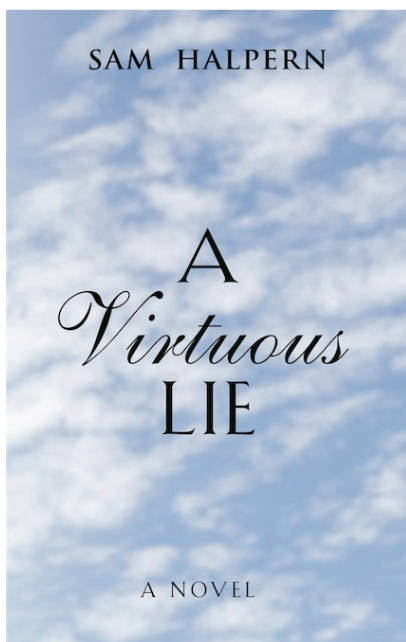
The image of the person on the stairs revisited his mind. If that woman was Gittleman, she was not what he had expected, even though the persona fit her history. Her manner offended him, and his anger began to grow.

*She could have suggested I use the bathroom if needed, instead of ordering me in front of women and kids.*

Devon swept back his dark, barely graying hair and inspected his face. He hadn't had time to shave after checking into the hotel, but the slight stubble was acceptable. What he also saw was a long, angular face he had discovered women admired for its craginess. It matched his tall, lean

frame. He had used those features to charm many female interviewees into revealing information they might otherwise have kept secret. This old woman, he thought as he straightened his tie again, would be as susceptible to his good looks as the rest of them.

*This is my interview and it's going to be done my way. I'm not going to put up with bullshit!*



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