

SLAP HAPPY is a quirky, riotous ride through the Galaxy with con men, cephalopod nymphs and desperate writers to a crazy, hilarious parallel universe that might make a skeptic's dreams come true. A deal with a Uni parolee named Bob could be the ticket to fame and fortune.

SLAP HAPPY

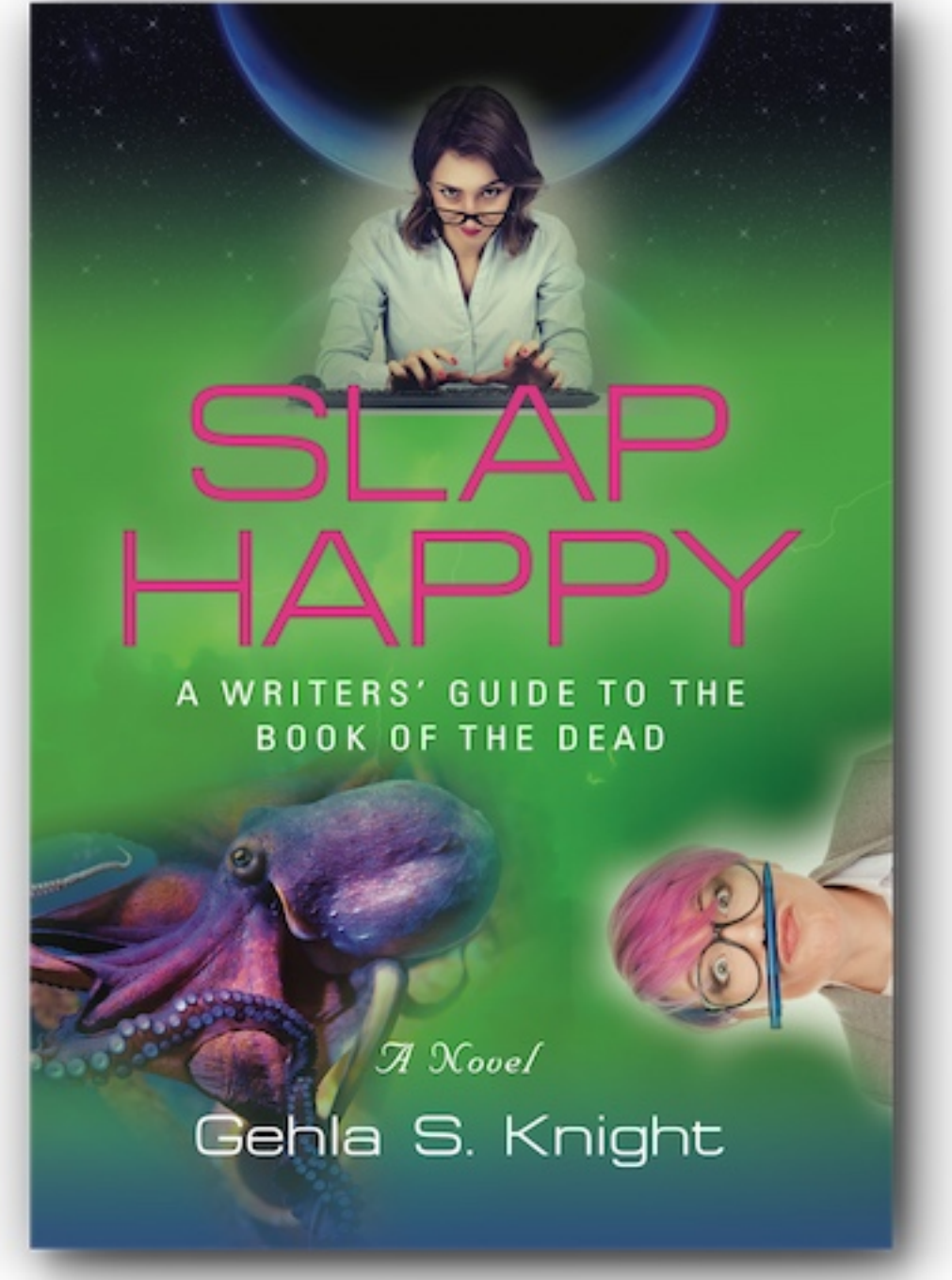
A WRITER'S GUIDE TO THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

by Gehla S. Knight

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SLAP HAPPY

A WRITERS' GUIDE TO THE
BOOK OF THE DEAD

A Novel

Gehla S. Knight

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Sullivan

1

It's not about writing. *Writing*—hell, it's like the old joke. That ain't writing. It's typing. Anyway, it's about storytelling. Tell me a story. That's it. That's all it is. To hell with great writing, literary style, Pulitzer prose and all that bullshit. The bottom line, Baby, is that it's all about the *story*. The *guts*." He sloshed down the rest of his beer, wiped his chin and nodded. "No matter what they tell you—all *lies*, bullfucking shit. It's not even *about* writing. Hell." He smacked the bar with a fist. "I'm a helluva writer. Put my goddam blood and sweat and *soul* by god into it. But who gives a lousy shit, huh? You know why? Huh? You got any idea at all why none of those motherfuckers give a good goddam?"

She shrugged. "Maybe you should try to write something romantic. I like the real tearjerker stuff. You know. Where the guy is tall and handsome and always gets it up, even if he's balancing his butt on a buckboard. And the heroine always has some fatal disease that makes one eye droop or something."

"What the hell do you know?"

"Well, I read, don't I?"

"What? Hackneyed shit you can find in any bookstore? Formula shit a monkey could write?"

"I know what I like. And what I like is romance." Her head tilted back, and her eyes rolled dreamily. "I think cowboys are my favorite. The guys are so damn strong and forceful. I mean, they don't take shit off nobody, do they?"

"Horseshit."

"I love Louis Lamour. I bet I've read a dozen of his books. Maybe two or three all the way through."

“You call that writing? You think Lamour is an *author*?”

“Yeah. Lots of people do. And he actually *sells* his books, Sully.”

“Hell, all he does is rehash the same old plot over and over again.”

“Well, I like him.”

“Same story. Just different color horses. Christ.”

She pushed away from the bar and pulled her bra strap over a sloped shoulder. “You know something, Sullivan? You’re in a lousy, shit-assed mood when you’re drunk.”

“Who said I was drunk? I’m not drunk. I’m just salving my sorrow with Mother Nature’s natural elixir to help losers like me believe in something for a while.” He grinned at his clumsy attempt to spout something halfway philosophical. He didn’t quite nail the suffering artiste motif, but who cared anyway? His bar mate wasn’t listening. She was scoping out the tall dude with the reptile tats who was ogling the blonde barmaid. “Besides, better drunk than stupid. When I wake up in the morning, I’ll be sober, and you’ll still be dumb as a stump.”

“Piss off.” She hiked her skirt down and sashayed across the dance floor.

Sully emptied his glass and zigzagged through the thinning crowd toward the door. Then he walked back to his apartment. Alone. Again. If he felt like it, he could finish off that bottle of tequila in his dresser drawer and forget about the whole damn weekend.

Monday he had felt pretty good about things. It wasn’t as if he could feel the hot breath of failure falling on his neck as he drove through Times Square West with four pineapple and ham pizzas on the passenger seat of his junker. They slid to the floorboard at the first stop. He ran up four flights to deliver his load, collect the dough—no tip as usual. Cheap bastards. He was glad he’d shoveled the pies back in the box with the floormat crap blended into the toppings. Anyway, he was muttering to himself as he drove back to Domino’s, she had called him back. Twice. First time he missed the call he was on the can with a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. Best book ever written for his money. Read it two or three times a year just for inspiration. If he could write like that, he wouldn’t need Evie Weissfalter. But he couldn’t, and he did.

Desperation was the next marker on his sliding failure scale. His car was running on fumes, had a tire leaking air, and he had exactly

fourteen dollars between him and destitution. As depressing as that truth was, it hadn't stopped him from whistling down a cab in the rain, and that was a goddam miracle this time of the year. Especially on a Saturday night. And his VISA card still had twenty-four bucks left on it. Things were looking possible.

When the cab pulled up at Weissfalter's co-op, he stiffed the tip and huddled in the shelter of the building's skimpy overhang. Evie let him stand outside the foyer and push the buzzer five times before she picked up.

"Yeah, who is it? That you, Benny? I told you I'm doin' my nails. The polish is still wet for crissakes. Where's your fuckin' key?"

"It's Sullivan Fleece. We spoke on Friday, remember?"

There was a pause, long enough to make his big toes cramp.

"Who?"

"You called and left a message. Twice actually."

"Who?"

"Sullivan Fleece. Annie Blumenhaus said I should ring you up after our conversation, and I left a message, and you called me back, and my cell was charging and—"

"Annie's a friend of yours?"

"Not exactly. But she gave me your cell number, and I left a—"

"Annie shouldn't give my number out to people I don't know."

"You returned my call, and I—"

"Sorry. I really can't recall."

"You remember we met at the Neufeldt's bar mitzvah? You were talking to someone at the bar."

She sucked air in through her teeth. He heard fingernails clicking against the receiver. "Annie? Neufeldt bar mitzvah? Was that for that little monster Marvin Neufeldt?"

"I didn't actually attend the temple ceremony. I came to the dinner afterward. I was invited by Annie Blumenhaus. She said you might look at—"

"Who?"

"Annie—"

"On Forty-Fifth Street?"

“Last Friday. Nathan Fromme used to work with a neighbor of mine in the Village, and he knew Annie, and they knew the Neufeldts and were going to the bar mitzvah, and so they said I should come over after and meet some people they knew who might be able to help me with my writing and—”

“So you’re a friend of Nathan’s?”

“Not exactly. I’m a friend of his ex-neighbor so he asked me to come along, and I met you when you were talking to Annie Blumenhaus about all things literary. And—”

“Annie was there? She can’t stand that Marvin any more than I can. Rude little shrimp deserves a good drowning.”

“As I said, you and Annie were discussing new writers—”

“Who?”

“Novelists, especially new writers. Annie said she’d like you to meet someone who she’d brought along with her, and you said—”

“I don’t remember who you’re talking about. I said a few words to Hannah Pester and her friend Carlos—he hardly says a word. Ought to have him stuffed and put in a museum for mutes. I went home early. To be honest, I don’t think the salmon was fresh.”

“Annie Blumenhaus. She told you about new writers, including me. She thought you—”

“I don’t remember.”

“She had on the blue dress with the silly feathers in her hair, and I sat next to her, and we talked about Hemingway and Fitzgerald’s crazy wife. You thought my—”

“Sorry. I hate Hemingway. He’s over publicized. He was insane, you know. Drank himself to death thank god.”

“You asked me to call you, and I did, and you weren’t home, and I left a message, and then later in the week you called me back, and my cell wasn’t charged. So here I am. If you could just—”

“So you’re a good friend of the Neufeldts? How long have you known Sol and Lili?”

“I don’t actually. I’m a friend of Nathan Fromme’s neighbor who used to live next door to Annie Blumenhaus and—”

“What’s your name again?”

A splat of rain trickled down his collar. “*Fleeeeeece*,” he shivered. “Annie said she worked with you as a junior editor at Penguin. I think she—”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“In the nineties. She said you used to date her cousin or something. That was—”

“Oh, yeah. *That* Annie. Book doctor. So how do you know Annie again?”

He wiped a blob of water from his watch face. It was getting late. If this witch kept him standing out in the weather much longer, his fucking shirt would shrink. “Annie and I were sitting together at the Neufeldt’s, and you joined us, and we spoke about great American writers of the last century. Then Annie asked you about the new writers on your list, and you said I should—”

“Not many. Mostly shit these people are sending me. Lots of survivor stories—*I Was Kidnapped at Coney Island and Held As a Sex Slave in the KarmelKorn Booth, An Olympic Juggler’s Confession: I Had Hitler’s Love Child*. Who reads this trash?”

“Annie wanted you to meet me because she thought I might persuade you to take me on. I’ve just written a—”

“I don’t remember. I don’t like to talk business at social gatherings. Are you sure Annie was there?”

“You spilled fondue on the carpet, remember? I cleaned it up, and we—”

“Fondue? I hate that shit. Gives me diarrhea for a week. Can I give you some advice? Stay away from cheese. It’s full of bacteria. Does a real nasty number on your guts. My gastroenterologist told me that.”

“You were with a tall, balding fellow with funny, squinty eyes, and you—”

“My brother Dov?” she snapped. “He squints?”

He tacked into a stiff wind. “I’m the guy who told you about my uncle’s sailboat in Long Beach. You told me—”

Finally he could hear the light bulb come on. “Oh, sure. *Sheridan*. I remember you. Yeah. You had the little thing on your lip like Pauli Rabinowitz before he had that awful accident. Got his lips stuck to the ice sculpture at the Liebermann wedding. Tragic.”

“No, I—”

“Peach fuzz. Made your ears look bigger.”

“I shaved it off this morning. It was just something I was experimenting with. You know, testing different looks, more mature, studious, more literary. You thought I—”

“It all comes back to me now. Of course. Sorry I missed your call. I was very interested. You have to jump on these things.”

“Right, right. Great. So—”

“So is your uncle gonna sell me the boat? How much? I won’t make any promises, you know, not until I have a surveyor take a look. Even if he *is* your uncle, he’s not gonna unload a piece of shit on me. You know what I’m saying, Sherman?”

“It’s Sullivan, and I’m not trying to sell the boat. I was hoping you would—”

“No? It’s not for sale anymore? Somebody beat me to it?”

“I don’t know. I’m not here to sell you my uncle’s boat. I don’t even know—”

“What *are* you selling?”

“Nothing. Look—well, maybe that’s not exactly true. My book is what I—”

“I don’t let peddlers in. You should ring the super first.”

“Wait!” He pulled his collar up. Rainwater was dripping off his eyebrows, and his jacket leaked like a beer-bottle baby. “It’s not about the boat. Annie said I should call you up about the *book*. I’m calling about the book you said you would like to—”

“What book?”

“*My* book. Don’t you remember? We talked about it at the Neufeldt’s. My manuscript. You said you thought the premise was exciting—very edgy. And so Annie said I should call you, and we missed each other, and then Annie said I should just come on over when I was in the neighborhood, and well, here I am. So . . .”

Her voice lowered ominously. “You came all the way over from the Neufeldts? In the rain for god’s sake? You could have called to let me know the boat’s been sold.”

“Not from the Neufeldts. From *my* place. And it’s not about the boat. *Nothing* about the boat. It’s about my manuscript. At the party you said—”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing, Sheldon. I mean, what is said in social conversation at a private party is one thing, I’m sure, but I didn’t expect you to come over in the middle of the night to dump a manuscript at my door. You have no idea how much garbage is unloaded on me every day of the week. Where do all these shits come from? It goes right in the incinerator.”

His heart was pounding almost as loud as his head. Why was all this torture necessary? Did he have to forfeit his soul, grovel in the muck just to force this sadist into a civil conversation? Why couldn’t he have been a house painter or a mechanic? They worked for people who had a heart, a conscience for crissakes.

“I apologize, but it’s only seven-thirty, and I’m not dumping anything off, Miss Weissfalter. We spoke at some length, and I told you about the book, and you expressed some interest and said you’d like to take a look sometime so I thought—”

“Well, you thought wrong,” she snorted. “Totally wrong. It’s out of the question.”

Her put-down stung like battery acid. “But, but I assumed when you said you liked the protagonist’s blind parrot—”

“I mean, you have to understand my position, Mr. Uhhh . . .”

“Fleece.”

“Really? You mean like with sheep?”

“I thought I could maybe just talk to you about the manuscript. You remember that I described the sub plots, and you said it reminded you of Fitzgerald’s early work? Then you told me you—”

“No bells are ringing. Nothing. Quiet as the grave, Sheldon.”

“Annie thought it might be something you’d be interested in. She said—”

“Oh, yeah? Annie read your book?”

“No, not exactly. She doesn’t do mysteries anymore, she says. But she felt it would fit you—”

“Oh. Well, honestly, Mr. Fleece, I don’t either. She should have told you. I’m working on a deal with Dell right now for a western

romance. Very exciting, new, dynamic author. It's beautiful, absolutely gorgeous writing. The protagonist is only five-feet tall, has a lisp and rides a black Shetland pony. Can you see it? It's a totally new twist for the market. The hero is riding a *black* horse. Jet black, not even a blaze, not even a trace of any color but black. Honestly, it's revolutionary for the genre. And the heroine is the only survivor of triplets born to a woman who was kidnapped by the Comanches and then forced to make beaver handbags for the pony express riders. She survives all this, *and* she has a fatal case of hoof and mouth disease she caught from the rustlers. When the lovers kiss for the last time, she foams at the mouth. It's gonna be big. Very big."

"Miss Weissfalter, if we could just chat for a minute about *my* book. Please, just let me—"

"Is it a western?"

"No. It's not. But—"

Another onerous sigh made him shudder. "Oh, yes. You said it was a mystery. Something about a parrot. Hitchcock already did the thing with all the birds, and nobody is interested in that anymore. Frankly, Mr. Sheep—"

"*Fleece*. It's *Sullivan Fleece*. If I—"

"As I was saying, frankly, and I may speak frankly?"

"Certainly."

"Well, frankly, mysteries are dead right now. Dead dogs on the market. I can't move a thing with private eyes, cops and robbers. Deader than dead. You have a private dick, right?"

"Not exactly. No. There's a—"

"Spillane, Gardner, Chandler, Francis, Parker, Truman, Kellerman, Whatshername with the alphabet—it's a totally saturated market, I'm afraid. I mean, what could you have that's new to offer? It's all been done too many times before. I'm just not handling that type of fiction these days, Mr. Fleece. God knows, maybe someone who's utterly desperate might still handle that crap, but I won't touch it."

"*Wait!*" He thumped a fist against the door. "Annie said this would be something you might like. Then you said my plotting was so human, *poignant*. You especially liked my description of the dynamics

between the policeman and the transvestite barber, and I remember what you—”

“I’m afraid not. If you—”

“Just as you were dipping a rye crisp in the fondue, you said you loved the fact that the central character collected snail shells and sold colored hair spray for bald guys. You said it showed human compassion in a barber that had universal appeal given all the alopecia in the world. You thought it would be a perfect fit for your fiction list and—”

“Oh, right. I think I remember now. Green tweed, brown loafers and tortoise shell glasses?”

He smiled. “Yes. Sullivan Fleece. We—”

“You really should lose the glasses. Nobody is wearing tortoise shell. Frankly, and I may speak frankly?”

“Yes, yes. Please—”

“You were really the odd duck at the party. I’m surprised frankly that Nathan has such acquaintances. But he always was a collector of weirdos. Are you a disciple of Hector Romero’s Writers’ Universality Studio?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I’m—”

“All crazy-assed pot freaks in my opinion. I mean, honestly, Sheldon, what does existential polarity have to do with literary genius?”

“It’s *Sullivan*. And I don’t know anyone named Hector. Or Romero either for that matter. I—”

“Well, let’s say he’s not on *my* guest list. Not since that dart gun incident at the Macy’s parade.”

“Please, Miss Weissfalter. If we could get back to my book. It’s a dramatic tragedy that has—”

“What about your book? I really don’t recall the conversation.”

“When Annie introduced us, you were standing at the fondue table, and I told you about the plot, remember? You especially liked the parrot and—”

“You got some of that cheese crap on my lavender sling backs. You know, that’s hell to get out of suede. I even tried seltzer for god’s sake. Shoes still look like shit.”

“If you could just take a look at the first chapter, maybe—”

“I don’t think so, Mr. Fleece. I don’t have the time. And to be frank, I don’t read paper anymore. It’s all pdf, Microsoft Word, Sheldon. Agents don’t have time to collect a lot of paper crap, read through every goddam line of juvenile drivel and porno trash people send out. And if I let every Tom, Dick and Sheldon who wanted me to read a chapter of their stuff dumped on my doorstep, now where would I be, I ask you? Where? I’m sorry Annie put you on the wrong track, really, but I don’t read unsolicited material.”

“But when we spoke, you said you’d take a look. Don’t you remember? I told you about the plot, and you loved the title, and you said I should let you have a look at the first few chapters, and I definitely would not define that as unsolicited, Miss Weissfalter.” The desperation in his voice scalded his throat as he tried to engage her interest for even a moment longer. His fingers gripped the doorknob and twisted, wringing her neck vicariously. “I did not come all the way cross town in the fucking rain to dump my manuscript on your door, dammit. You invited me to share a chapter or two of my book. And I dropped my last buck on a taxi just to stand out here in the fucking rain looking for a little human compassion, and you—”

“There’s no need to use foul language. That shows your total misunderstanding of the business. And I don’t know why you’re so upset, Sheldon. If literary agents didn’t have firm policies for unsolicited material, we’d be buried up to our noses in slush and have no time left for our paying clients.”

“When we met at Neufeldt’s party and discussed my book, you took a real interest. And it was perfectly natural for me to assume that you were sincere when you told me I should let—”

“I always talk to strangers at parties, even weirdos with tortoiseshell glasses and holes in their socks—especially if they’re hanging out at the bar.”

“It was the fondue table, and Annie said to call you, and I did. You called me back, and unfortunately, I wasn’t able to take the call. I’m not trying to invade your privacy, but I thought you were perfectly clear encouraging me to let you read my work. All I’m asking for is a little consideration, a touch of humanity for crissakes, just a few minutes of your time to explain the main plot and—”

“Minutes? Surely you jest. Do you have any idea how long it takes to paw through the Great American Novel all you schmucks think will win the Pulitzer? If you saw even half the crap that gets dumped on my desk from these losers who think they’re the next Steinbeck. The stories I could tell you.”

“Please, Miss Weissfalter. Just let me—”

“Well, I am sorry, Sterling. But my nails are still wet, and I do not read unsolicited material.”

“If I could just have a minute to drop off a synopsis, maybe a few pages, just the first chapter—”

“Try Morty Gundelfinger. I swear, he’ll read anything.” She hung up on him.

He stood there with the rain splatting on his head, leaking like a flophouse mop.

The door suddenly pushed open as a tenant hurried out. Fleece’s manuscript spilled onto the puddled step as he tumbled backward down the stairs. When he rolled to a stop, sprawled flat on his ass at the bottom, a weak face peered over the stoop at him.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m just fucking fine. What the hell does it look like, you cripple-minded moron?”

She hurried off and left him sitting in a sidewalk sea with his manuscript metamorphosing to a pulpy stew.

2

Sullivan Fleece had to stand back and take another look to check the address. Must be a mistake. The numbers were painted on the ocher brick facade along with pee stains, soot swipes and poetry-reading posters. Three thirty-seven West Thirty-Ninth, third floor up.

Mortimer Gundelfinger's office was at the end of the hallway. His name was partially scratched out in a slalom streak across the door. LITERARY AGENT & THEATRICAL MANAGER.

Before he knocked, Sullivan paused and glanced up the hall. This was a dump. Smelled like fried onions. The floor had more buckles than a rodeo champ. The radiators wheezed and spit. No successful agent would be renting a rat hole in this trap. If there was any other name in the literary community he had not already exhausted, he would never even consider bringing his manuscript up here. He had enough rejections stacked up to rival the old Borough phone book. Was there any place he could go that was worse than this? Had he sunk as far as he could go for crissakes and still pretend to be a wordsmith?

He slicked back his hair and knocked. No answer. Another knuckle rap made the doorknob rattle. Nothing. Nobody home. Jeez, in this dive, the guy was probably conked out with his feet up on the desk, snoring, soused and surly. What a fucking waste of time. He turned around and hugged his manuscript to his chest.

Then he heard a voice. "Come on in. It's not locked."

What the hell. He was already here. He might as well make his pitch, take his knocks and get it over with. He went in and looked around. Sullivan stood in a waiting room furnished with a punch-drunk filing cabinet listing against the wall, leather divan with butt prints on the cushions, a gooseneck lamp and a water cooler. Behind the frosted

glass windows, he could see a silhouette beckoning him to the inner sanctum. Sam Spade's digs.

"Come right on in. Don't be shy."

Sullivan heard the door close behind him as he stepped forward and extended his hand to the rotund figure who rose from behind the battered desk. "Hi, there," he began, looking around for a chair.

"Howya doin'?' Have a seat." He gestured to a creaky swivel chair a la US Army Salvage which would have looked more at home in a post-flood yard sale.

"Uh . . . Sure. Thanks." Sullivan sat carefully, still hugging his wrinkled masterpiece.

The room was thick with cigar smoke. The desk was bare except for two manuscripts neatly stacked and tied with red ribbons. No telephone. No PC. No laptop. The file cabinet had tabs on each drawer marked **INS** and **OUTS**. Bogie could have entered stage left and felt right at home.

"So you like the oldies?" A baritone boom-box banged against Sully's ear drums. "Noir pics?"

He twisted his neck around. "Uh, sure. Golden oldies?"

"Bogie films. Seen 'em all, but *Maltese Falcon* is the best. How many times you see it?"

"Uhhh, Bogart? Uhm, heard of it, yeah. Don't think I've seen it yet."

"Oversight, my boy. Oversight. You have to get to know real art before you can try to create anything new."

"Uh, sure. Right. But I—"

"I hired a special decorator to do the office, used to work at MGM. So whatcha think? Original, huh? Authentic down to the ashtrays."

"Sure, uh, yeah, I guess so." He sat and clutched his masterpiece with both hands. His lungs were already full of nasty-smelling smoke. "I don't really know much about decorating."

"Of course you don't. You're more the artistic deadhead."

"The what?"

"Never mind. Details. Just details for the record."

Mortimer Gundelfinger was three-hundred pounds of compressed blubber pressed into a nifty pinstripe three-piece with sleeves that

reached the end of his pudgy digits. He had a mop of untamed hair the color of fireplace ashes combed straight back over his bulbous forehead, horned-rim glasses perched on a needlenose snout and a black, Fuller-brush mustache. He peered with trout-speckled eyes across his desk, taking stock of the rumpled clump fumbling with a limp, dog-eared ream of paper.

Sullivan noticed Gundelfinger's flashy pinkie ring on his right hand. A watch fob with diamond studs dangled from his vest pocket. How the hell did he afford all the bling operating in a dump like this with what looked like no more than three manuscripts within reach?

Sullivan locked his knees, sucked in a gulp of air rich with tobacco fumes and cheap cologne and cleared his throat. "I, uh, I got your name from Evie Weissfalter."

Gundelfinger didn't even flinch. "Is that your manuscript you have there, Mr. Fleece?" His hand was already out, palm up, the fingers waving like sausage anemones.

"Uhm . . . yes." How did Gundelfinger know his name? Had Weissfalter called? Maybe he had misjudged her. At least, this guy wasn't trying to push him out the door before hearing about his book. "I was hoping you could take a look and see what you think. An ex-editor from the Blumenhaus Agency said it had considerable promise."

"That's a good agency. But they have no literary fortitude, no forceful spirit to discover genius in their midst. Very mainstream. Pedantic philosophy stifles the true creative writers like you who are breathing new vigor into the market."

"Well, I haven't actually published anything yet." A sheaf of papers fluttered from his grasp and skittered under the desk. "Sorry."

"What brings you to me, Mr. Fleece?" Gundelfinger leaned back and stuck the cigar between his fleshy lips while Sully scooped up his opus, the one with all the water stains.

"Well, it's not quite right for their list. And, uh, Evie Weissfalter isn't handling mysteries right now, so she thought you might be interested."

"So it's not a hot topic, eh? Not a western then."

"Uh, no."

“And you don’t write trashy nonsense with vampires who wait tables, supernatural aliens taking over the planet, talking polar bears, mystical princes slaying dragons with light sabers.”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Decided not to try a legal thriller or gay and lesbian erotica and go for the really big bucks, huh? Too smart to be in the literary groove?”

“Uh, I suppose. Something like that.” He gripped the remains of his manuscript, feeling more like a beggar than an author. Was there really any point in this? The bozo didn’t look like he could sell unscreen to an albino. “It’s a murder mystery with a twist.”

Gundelfinger laughed. “Oh, there’s a twist, is there? There’s always a twist. Only problem is, it’s all been done. Old story.” Before Sullivan could rise to the challenge, Mortimer waved him off through a blue cloud. “No matter, Mr. Fleece. Don’t let it get to you. You see, the literary market is driven by the whimsical appetite of the public. Selling books is no different than selling vegetables. The timing is everything. The product has to be fresh, alluring, tempting the fussiest buyer to imagine the taste buds bursting with flavor at the first bite. Isn’t that so?” He leaned forward suddenly and pierced Sullivan with a dead-eye stare that riveted him to the chair. “So you’ve written something you think is pretty damn good, and nobody is even willing to give it a fair read, is that it?”

“Well, uhm,” he gulped back his chagrin. Actually, that was the whole truth of it. “I’ve had some interest from agents, but you know how it is when something doesn’t fit their usual list, and they tell me they—”

“Ah, yes. No guts. Trenders not visionaries, Mr. Fleece. The mundane is their meat and potatoes, I’m afraid.”

“Well, if you could take a look at a few chapters, maybe you’d have some suggestions for me.” He stood up and fumbled with what he was able to corral from the floor. “I don’t want to take up a lot of your time, Mr. Gundelfinger.”

Two meaty hands stretched out to receive his masterpiece. “Let’s start with a six-month contract for all domestic publishing rights. I believe the paperback edition will be even bigger than the hard cover.

Mysteries need to have the perfect packaging—tits and blood on the cover.”

Sullivan’s eyes bulged. “I beg your pardon?”

“Sit down, Mr. Fleece. I have the standard contract forms right here. Why don’t you take a minute to look things over, make sure we’re all kosher, and then we can get down to business.”

“You mean you want to represent me?”

“You’re gonna make a mint off this book, Fleece. As your agent, I stand to make a small fortune myself. Sit back and make yourself comfortable.”

“I don’t understand exactly. I mean . . . You haven’t read the manuscript yet.”

“Look, I buy writers not manuscripts. Hell, all the good stories have been told a thousand times already. There are no new plots. Packaging is the name of the game. I buy and sell writers, Fleece. And you *are* a writer, aren’t you?”

“Yessir. That is, I want to be.”

“So sign the contract. I can make you famous.”

“But what about the parrot? Annie especially liked that twist. Actually, it’s the bird who tips off the transvestite barber and the bald cop who—”

“Yes, yes. Don’t sweat the details. Just look things over and sign at the bottom.” He thrust a fountain pen at Sullivan. “Just put your signature on the bottom line there.”

His knees suddenly felt like slinky toys as he sagged back into the chair. The room was a hazy shade of turquoise now with all the smoke and diffused sunlight streaming in. “I don’t understand. You want to represent me based on . . . on. Based on *what*? Don’t you even care about my book, the plot, the characters I—”

“Well, it’s a mystery, right? So what’s to know, huh? You got a beautiful babe with big knockers?”

“My heroine is an aspiring dancer trying to break into Broadway, and she—”

“Yeah, yeah. But big bazooms, right?”

“I guess so. She’s attractive.” Gundelfinger smirked, and Sullivan pointed a finger at him. “But that’s not the point. She’s smart and

innocent, a small-town girl who suffers from psoriasis. She was a drum majorette at her high school and dated the football quarterback until he was expelled for vaping steroids. Heartbroken, she moves to the Big Apple and becomes a talented ballet dancer who performs Swan Lake while she's twirling a baton. For an encore, she twirls *two* batons that light up like Tinkerbell's wand. All she needs is a break, but nobody will give her a chance because she comes from some little hick town and has no connections. Then she's mugged at Battery Park and meets this cop who is about to be kicked off the force because he has a rare skin disease that made all his hair fall out and boils break out on his butt so he can never sit down. Then his pet parrot—"

"Yeah, yeah. Look, Fleece. It's all been done before. You got the babe, the boobs, the blood, dumb cop, city lights and the druggie freak hot after the sexy chick, right?"

"Well, not exactly in those terms. See, there's a murder at the barbershop, and the transvestite with the clipping shears—"

"Natch."

"And the transvestite just happens to have written a screenplay on his off time because he's also a frustrated artist, and the parrot tells him—"

"So what we need is a snappy title." Gundelfinger squared the manuscript on his desk. "Let's see what you got, Fleece." He looked down at the first page. "Not bad. But this is better." He pulled out an antique fountain pen, dunked the nib in a bottle of ink he pulled from a top drawer and swirled a new title over the heading. "How's that?"

Sullivan leaned over to peek at the edit. "*Blood of the Lambs?*"

"Fits with Fleece. I like it." He holstered the pen, inhaled on the cigar and blew smoke at his newest client. "I like it." With another deft maneuver, he pushed another contract across his desk and tapped a manicured finger over the dotted line. "Put your John Doe on the bottom there, Fleece. All boilerplate. I take thirty per cent of the gross. You get the rest less expenses."

"What was wrong with my title?"

"No pizzazz, no bang."

"I liked *Wounded Heart*."

“You write, Fleece. Leave the marketing details to me. That’s what agents are for.”

It still hadn’t sunk in. He had an agent. Almost. He was a signature away from being represented by a bona fide agent. But it didn’t feel right. It didn’t meet the dreams he’d chewed on for the past three years while he struggled to finish his book and place it in the right hands.

“See, there are certain people in the industry who . . . Well, I signed a contract a few years ago with someone who was supposed to market my book to Signet and had an in with Putnam, and then they charged me three-hundred dollars for copies, editing, postage—”

“Scams, Sully, my boy. Suckers fall for that crap every day of the week. But you’re wiser for the experience. No harm done.”

“I suppose so, but I want to be sure—”

“Nothing to worry about. I run a strictly legit agency.”

“Mr. Gundelfinger, I’m not ungrateful for your confidence, but I wish you’d at least take a look at the book before we make any binding decisions. If you could just—”

“You tell me what you want, Fleece.”

“What I want?”

Mortimer sat back, rolled the cigar between his thumb and forefinger and studied the ceiling which was partially obscured by the smoke. “You’re a writer. You work hard, dream hard, get kicked in the balls fighting to promote what you believe in, right?”

“I guess so. It’s not an easy thing to do, Mr. Gundelfinger—write a book and then try to convince somebody else they should take a chance on you. It’s like—”

“You see, like a lot of writers, you confuse art with commerce, Mr. Fleece. Literary agents, editors, publishers—all they want is the mighty dollar in their pocket. Writers are a means to a lucrative end, nothing more. The best literary works were very hard sells, lucky accidents or perhaps . . .” His eyes narrowed and stabbed through Sullivan’s vacant gaze. “Perhaps, Mr. Fleece, the result of a propitious exchange such as I offer you here today.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“You want to spend the best creative years of your life delivering Domino’s pizzas?”

“No way. That’s just temporary until I—”

“Look you want this book to be published. Is that right?”

“I’ve spent thirteen years of my life writing *Wounded Heart*. It’s like I’ve had to—”

“Naturally. And beyond doing it for the sake of art, you’d like some recognition to reward all your hard work, validate the belief you have in yourself, live up to the expectations of your over-bearing, starry-eyed mother who thinks you’re a fucking loser who still believes he’s another J. D. Salinger in the rough.”

“She always wanted me to be a plumber.”

“Of course. Every mother wants her boy to succeed at something. The hours and hours of toiling away in solitude, the sacrifices, the heartache at seeing crap on the bookstore shelves while you can’t get an agent to give you the time of day.”

“I suppose so. But—”

“And if the book sold and earned a modest fortune and made your name a common household handle, you wouldn’t object to that, would you? If it made your mother proud of her golden boy?”

“No. I guess not. If they liked the book.”

“The book is not the point, Mr. Fleece.”

“It isn’t?” He choked on the smoke.

“The point is *you*. What *you* want from this book. The book is only the means to achieving what you really want, what everyone wants. Fame and fortune.”

“Not exactly. I mean,” he faltered, clearing his throat. “That is, I believe in my craft. I’m a wordsmith who strives to achieve perfection in my writing, something to uplift society, enlighten the hopeless, inspire the downtrodden, heal the sick at heart.”

“Sully, Sully, please. Let’s be honest with one another. The book is your tool, nothing more. You talk about art as a Holy Grail. But let’s be reasonable. If that were your most noble goal, why even seek publication and royalties? You could take it to a vanity press and then offer it to the masses as your creative gift.”

“Well, not exactly. That is, I . . . uhhhh.” He blinked away the haze and peered at Gundelfinger. “What exactly are you getting at?”

“Altruism aside, let’s talk about what you really want out of this book. As your agent, I am prepared to deliver publishing success for this manuscript. Paperback rights. Multiple book deals which will keep you bent over a keyboard for the next five years pounding out one best seller after another until you’re as well known in literary circles as Hemingway, Steinbeck and Fitzgerald and Grisham combined.”

“Someone said my plotting style was similar to Fitzgerald’s,” he boasted.

Gundelfinger grinned and flashed a gold incisor. “There. You see? You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Signing autographs every evening when you go out for dinner with your gorgeous girl of the month?”

“Girl of the month?”

“Come now, Mr. Fleece, you don’t expect to be tied down to a single lover with half the women you meet throwing themselves at your feet?”

“Uh, well, I guess not. Not exactly, I suppose.” He was beginning to nibble at the dream. Not buying it all, but it did have persuasive elements that intrigued his imagination, dented and bruised by countless rebuffs and rejections from heartless agents. He was talented, lots of acquaintances had said so starting with his Aunt Madeleine and his fifth-grade teacher Miss Harpooster. Why shouldn’t he be rewarded with acclaim and financial success? Every single day he read absolute drivel, cheap trash at the chain stores about pet cats painting abstracts, transcendental tomes on living off the grid, *How To* books up the gazoo. Obviously, much less talented writers had made it based on something other than their literary merits. Why shouldn’t Sullivan Fleece make it to the top and taste the sweet fruits of fame and fortune?

“You continue to write—mysteries, westerns. Whatever takes your fancy, Mr. Fleece. I guaranty I will sell your books to major houses, make you a millionaire by next year, send you on a world-class book tour to promote *Blood of the Lambs* and deliver to your doorstep the dream you’ve been torturing yourself with for the past thirteen years.”

Sullivan paused to draw in a sober breath. “That sounds great, Mr. Gundelfinger. But, honestly. Well, I mean, how can you be so sure? Don’t you think you—”

“Mr. Fleece, as your agent, I will attend to all the details. After all, what risk do you have? I’m the one accepting the risk here. With an unknown author, a first book, a formula whodunit nobody much cares to read.”

Sullivan croaked a weak rebuttal. “But you said it would be successful, make me a fortune and—”

“It will. Marketing, salesmanship, a little fizz is what makes a winner. That’s my job, Mr. Fleece. All you do is sign on the dotted line and leave the rest to me.” He tapped the contract with a pen. “Sign, Mr. Fleece.”

Sullivan looked down at the paper. He gasped when he got to the last paragraph. “Uh, this says you’ll represent me for this and all future works of whatsoever kind and nature.”

“Of course. We are entering into a fiduciary marriage, Mr. Fleece. Whatever products you produce, I will sell and reap the rewards with you.”

He gulped back his outrage as he read aloud. “Aforesaid literary agent will receive thirty per cent of author’s first \$100,000 and fifty per cent thereafter from all earnings, royalties and income generated from said works.”

“It’s boilerplate, Mr. Fleece.”

“*Half?* You can’t do that. I mean, this says you’ll get half of what I make as long as I continue to write? Nobody in their right—”

“First, you have to consider the fact that you haven’t earned me a red cent at this point. I have to ensure you make the first hundred grand before I can increase my own earnings. It’s in my interest to make you a millionaire, Mr. Fleece. There’ll be plenty for both of us, believe me. More than you can even imagine. Sign right here.” He tapped on the paper again.

“I don’t know. I mean, there’s so much to think about that I can’t really—”

“To be frank, Mr. Fleece, I do have other pressing clients. What do you have to lose, after all? Has anyone showed the slightest interest in reading your work let alone even representing it?”

“Well, not exactly, but there has been some general interest in some literary quarters.” Did it matter if the main topic of interest was the Gorgonzola fondue and his uncle’s sailboat?

Gundelfinger shook his head and scolded with a raised finger. “Now, now. Don’t delude yourself, Sullivan. We can have no secrets from one another. The closest you’ve been to achieving recognition is when a rheumatic old pants pisser on the subway hung over your shoulder and read a few paragraphs of the first chapter laid out on your lap and told you it was the best novel he’d ever not read. Face it. You’re going nowhere. Your book will never be read by anyone but yourself, your myopic mother and jealous competitors who’ll steal your ideas.”

Sullivan was leaning so far forward in his chair, his chin skidded to a stop at Gundelfinger’s pinkie ring. “You haven’t even read the book. I’m not sure I should—”

“Details, details. Tell me, Mr. Fleece. Sullivan.” He scribbled over a blank line on the contract. “That’s Fleece with two E’s?”

“Uh, yes, but—”

Gundelfinger gathered up the manuscript, tied it with a black rubber band and wrote “INS” on the title page. “Sully, let’s be honest about this. Do I really have to read your insipid, maudlin mystery to believe you have great aspirations as a writer?”

“Not really, I suppose.” He seemed to be descending into a trance, stunned into silence by the thick pall of smoke and musky cologne stinging his nostrils.

“And isn’t it the dream of every writer to become not only published and read but rich and famous?”

“Sure, but—”

“Then banish any worries from your feeble brain. It seems a fair enough bargain.”

“Why not, I guess if—”

“Uh uh,” he scolded. “No ifs. No buts. No doubts, no addenda, codicils, exceptions or redactions. You must commit to this, your career and your talent with your whole being.” He drilled his victim with a stare that could have stripped the varnish off the woodwork, if there’d been any. “You have been honest with me, haven’t you,

Sullivan? You do believe in yourself, in your work, in *Blood of the Lambs*, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Uh uh uh."

"I *do*. Of course, I do but—"

"And you want success more than anything else in your miserable, shabby, little life. Am I right?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it miserable or—"

"Exactly." He slipped the fountain pen in Sullivan's hand and positioned it over the contract. "Just sign here and prove it."

As he rolled his signature on the paper, Sullivan's eyes caught the few thin lines in the addendum. It was hard to read the extra fine print, but as his fingers flexed, his brain catalogued the language of the bizarre bargain he had struck:

Aforesaid literary agent reserves the right to cancel or rescind the terms and conditions of this agreement at any time without written notice. Upon such termination of contract, said Author Sullivan Fleece will surrender to Agent all properties and any and all particulars of whatever nature, design or description claimed by the aforesaid Author.

"What exactly do you mean by 'all properties and particulars'?"

As soon as the pen was lifted from the paper, Gundelfinger whisked the contract into the INS drawer of the filing cabinet behind him and held out a hand. "Don't worry about the details, Mr. Fleece. Just footnotes to keep the lawyers happy. Can I call you Sully?"

"Sure, but what—"

"You'll be hearing from me soon."

"How will I get in touch? Don't you want my number?"

A slight smile creased the agent's face as he herded Sullivan to the door. "Oh, yes, indeed. I have your number, Mr. Fleece. And I know exactly where to find you. We'll be in touch soon. Good day."

Sullivan turned around to request a copy of the contract, but the door closed. When he pulled it open a second later, Gundelfinger was gone. Through the side door? Hiding behind his desk? In a closet?

"I'll be damned," Sullivan swore, feeling naked without his manuscript.

Now that the battle was won, he was unsure of his reserves, uncertain as to how he could release his pent-up frustrations. It was still too early to believe this Gundelfinger character would actually deliver on his promises. What worried Sullivan Fleece the most was giving up his manuscript. It was his last copy.

3

“What do you mean you have an agent?”

“I signed the contract. They’re representing me. Officially. They’re very enthusiastic about the manuscript.”

“Oh, yeah?” She cocked a penciled eyebrow and blew smoke through her nose. “Where’s the contract? Lemme see it. I can’t believe it. You’ve been thrown out of every agent’s office in the City, maybe the whole fucking state. What agency is this?”

“A big one,” he quibbled, sipping his beer as if it were champagne. “They’re very successful in the mystery genre.”

She plopped her butt down on his lumpy futon. “Oh, yeah? What’s their name?”

“You don’t know any agencies.”

“Yeah, but I know some. Is it ICM?”

He smirked and tried to dodge her exhaust. “No way. This is an agency who appreciates creative, cutting-edge authors.”

“So why’d they take *you*?”

He set the bottle down and turned to take a really good look at her. Megan was thirty but told all his friends she was twenty-five. That was because she’d bleached her hair, got a blue rose tattoo on her left breast, wore shocking-pink leggings and spike heels and way too much sparkly eye shadow. What the hell did she know about literature for crissakes? She worked as a counter girl at Blumberg’s Cafeteria and hung with her half-sister in the Bronx who was on welfare.

“You know, Meg, why do I even care what you think anyhow? What the fuck do you know about writing?”

“Well, I sure as shit know the crap you write isn’t worth any decent agency wanting to get it published. I told you already—you should write romances, the hairy, heavy-breathing fuck-me-quick stuff. That sells.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I know what the fuck I’m talking about. Why haven’t you got the hint, Sully? Huh? Nobody gives a fuck about your big, bad-ass novel. Blind parrots that solve crimes? Are you fucking nuts or just stupid?”

“The bird doesn’t solve the crime. He gives tips to the bald cop who falls for the transvestite barber’s sister, the ballet dancer with the skin thing and they—”

“Shut up! My brains’ gonna explode from this shit!” She stood up and shook the taco-chip crumbs off her velvet skirt that barely covered her ass. “So who cares if you found some schmuck who likes your *Wounded Heart*? I still think it’s a lotta bullshit.”

“It’s not *Wounded Heart* anymore.”

“So? Who gives a flying fuck what you call it? Shit is shit.”

He stood up. Still three inches shorter than she was. This was a mismatch from the beginning, and now that he was a successful artist, an author about to electrify the literary world, he could do better. Much better, like Gundelfinger said. It was time to snip the cord. Even if he did appreciate the groceries Megan lugged up to his handkerchief-sized castle every week.

“It’s been reborn as *Blood of the Lambs*, and it’s going to be very big.”

She grabbed her over-sized bag and headed for the door. “Yeah. Well, let me know when you get on the *Times* best-seller list, okay? I’m late for work.”

He stopped her halfway into the hallway. “You know, Meg, I’ve been thinking.”

“There’s a newsflash.”

“You and I are like opposite poles. What I need now is someone supportive of my art, someone who can encourage me, share the success and the fame that’s coming my way.”

“Oh, for cripe’s sake, Sullivan. Get real. You can never figure out when you’re being played. I gotta go.” She trotted to the elevator, banged on the button then fled down the fire stairs.

When she was gone, Sullivan pulled down the shades and took a deep breath. He was starting a new chapter in his life, and with it his fortunes were bound to improve. He had walked through fire, suffered a thousand slings and arrows in pursuit of his art, and now he was going to reap the rewards. How could this be a set-up, a scam, a rip off? He didn’t have anything worth taking.

He sat down and reached for the carton of Chablis Megan had shoplifted for him. He still didn’t feel comfortable leaving his manuscript with Gundelfinger. Maybe the guy was going to steal his ideas, sell them off to another author stuck trying to figure out a plot.

He bolted for the corner where his cell phone was buried beneath a molehill of writers’ bibles: *How To Get Published, A Guide for the Desperate Author, A Thousand Best-Rated Vanity Presses Who Want To Read Your Manuscript NOW, Ten Steps To Success For The Rejected Writer*. And his personal favorite *Why Even Lousy Agents Don’t Want To Read What You Write*. He had that one in the hardbound edition.

He grabbed his phone. “Shit.” He didn’t even know the guy’s number. He’d use 411.

Just as his finger was poised to punch the number, it chirped. The screen flashed “unknown caller.” Must be a robo call. More insurance or the jerk who tried to sell him aluminum siding when he lived in a fifth-floor cubby hole on the East Side.

“Hello.”

“Sully, glad to catch you. Have you celebrated your good fortune with a glass of good wine yet?”

“It’s just a generic carton of Chablis.”

“You’ll need to start acquainting yourself with the better things in life, Sully my boy.”

“Mr. Gundelfinger, I was just going to call you, but I realized I didn’t have—”

“Been working on our plan, Sully. Gotta talk.”

“I was wondering if—”

"I've been thinking, too, Fleece. The story line's all wrong. The girl—she's too young. Her name doesn't fit either. *Heidi*? All wrong. Half the population of Switzerland's got sheepdogs named Heidi. We need something that rolls off the tongue, has a dash of intrigue, sex appeal."

"But the reason I wanted to call you was—"

"Exactly. Just what I was thinking. A major rewrite. Let's make this the best it can be, Sully. Minor details to work out. We'll sort everything out."

"Sure, but—"

"New plot line, revamp the voice—jazz it up. Too dull, needs a kick in the ass. You know the drill."

"But I thought you said you had an instinct identifying talented writers, so I thought you'd like *Wounded Heart*, and my author's voice would make it a sure sell. I thought—"

"Uh uh, Fleece. Remember? That's what you have an agent for. We handle all the details. You handle the creative part, okay? We'll take care of the business end."

"That's the other thing. You see, I was wondering who is the 'we'? I didn't notice any other people at your office, and I was wondering—"

"There's a whole workforce of dedicated professionals behind the Gundelfinger Literary Agency, Fleece. Too many to mention, all craftsmen, all across the country seeking just your type of forward-thinking authors. We don't sign those hacks who churn out the trendy shit cluttering up the shelves. But you'll be dealing only with me. I'm the agency head so you should flatter yourself, Sully. You hooked the big fish."

"But I—"

"After all, we have a contract you and me, right? We're a team now."

"Right, but I was wondering. Are you a member of AAR? I can't seem to find your name in the—"

"AAR? That's for losers who couldn't sell the New Testament to Jesus Christ. Look, you heard of Grisham? *The Client*, *The Firm*, *A Time to Kill*, *Runaway Jury*?"

"Sure, but—"

“How about *Red October*, *Crimson Tide*, *Top Gun*, *Avatar*?”

“Who hasn’t? They were all your clients? I thought they—”

“Blockbusters, Fleece. Some agent broke his butt getting those dogs on the market. Membership to some old hacks’ society club doesn’t make you a success. Don’t worry about all the initials after an agent’s name. It’s the rep he has in the industry.”

“I understand that, but—”

“So I’ll see you in the office tomorrow morning first thing. We’ll get to work. In the meantime, Fleece, think about your image. You’re on the fame fast track now. You need to start thinking like a winner. Lose that tramp you’ve been running around with. She’s a born loser.”

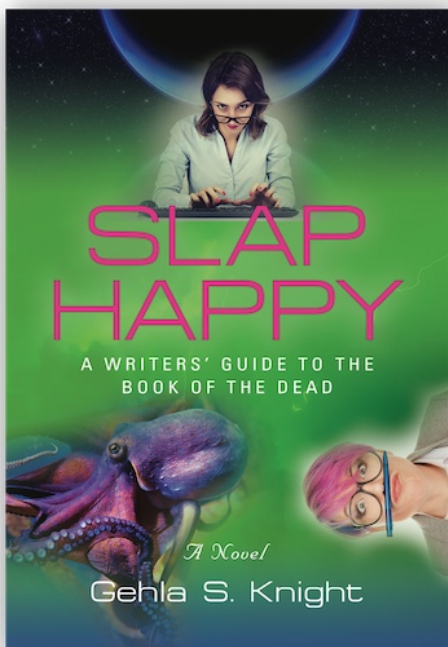
“Megan? How’d you know—”

“She’s a real downer. A train wreck, Fleece. What you need is a supportive influence, somebody who can keep you focused on your career, keep you excited about your writing. And you deserve a decent lay from somebody who doesn’t sleep with her brother-in-law.”

He choked on his spit. “*What?* How do you know—”

“Okay, okay. Don’t take my word for it. Ask her. Ask her where she got that love munch on her boob. And don’t forget to get your key back. She is one bitch who would filch your PC and trash your Enya CD’s.”

“Hey, how can you—” The line went dead.



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