



Savannah has always been a mysterious and magical place. But recent events have brought its seedy underbelly into focus. A secret death cult has captured Patrick's undivided attention; a lot was on the line; his marriage and his health were hanging in the balance, and he was running out of time to expose the ugliness behind the Beautiful Death.

THE BEAUTIFUL DEATH

by Quinn Fernandez

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The Beautiful Death

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ISBN: 978-1-64718-478-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

CHAPTER ONE

"In everything that you do, withhold no mercy, tolerate no injustice, and the good that is within your power, do with all your might."

— Queue McPherson

Patrick

It was just before noon on a balmy Monday in late October. The sun was high in a bright, cloudless sky as I pulled into the parking lot of Savannah's Live Oak Public Library on Bull Street.

I climbed out of my aging, but still quite sexy, XK Jaguar coup, stretched broadly and inhaled a chest full of crisp, clean autumn air. A couple of men, seated at one of the nearby park benches, turned and stared at my shiny, black roadster with open admiration, (or maybe with dark intentions), you never can tell.

I scratched my cheek and yawned wearily.

"Good Lord, Patrick...You seriously need some sleep."

I caught my reflection in my tinted, driver's side window and groaned wearily. My deep-set hazel eyes looked strained, making me appear especially gaunt. My eyes were usually just about the only youthful aspect of my face; they shimmered with a vitality that belied my stress ravaged face. In contrast, my forehead was riddled with worry lines, and even my

"laugh-lines" were becoming sadder-looking each day. One could best describe my overall appearance as battle-hardened.

I reached in and grabbed my laptop case from the back seat, took it, and slung it over my shoulder, then locked the car up and started across the parking lot.

"Good morning," I offered, nodding to the two men as I passed.

One of the men nodded back and mumbled something unintelligible, while the other continued to evaluate my Jag.

"Is that a two thousand?"

"Nope. Ninety-nine."

"Sweet..."

Winter was nowhere in sight in this part of Georgia, though Halloween was just a couple days off. Birds still fluttered about, chattering incessantly, as I made my way through the park that leads to the ornate library entrance.

As I walked, a cacophony of girlish laughter caught my ear, and I looked over to see maybe a half-dozen kids, presumably college students, passing the time together on the outdoor seating provided by the Foxy Loxy Cafe. It occurred to me that they were probably killing time between classes at the Savannah School of Art and Design, or SCAD, which is arguably

the most prestigious art school on the planet, (mainly if you are arguing with a Savannah-an).

All it would take is a quick stroll through the Savannah Historic District, hearing the acronym "SCAD" flow incessantly from nearly everybody's lips, for any visitor here to conclude that SCAD is the very heart and soul of this cultured Georgia city.

I winced visibly in response to a particularly shrill squeal of laughter coming from one of the ladies in the group, partly due to the headache that still haunted me from the previous night's bout of tossing and turning, and partly due to my innate distaste for raucous laughter.

"Hey! Watch where the hell you're walking."

The angry words came from a shabbily dressed man in his forties, who lay sprawled out on the steps leading up to the library's front entrance. His bloodshot eyes and unkempt appearance made it clear that he'd decided to sleep off a bender in this less than ideal location, and I saw no point in debating who was in the wrong.

"Sorry, man. My bad," I offered.

"You're damned right; it's your bad. You got eyes, don't you? You see, I'm sitting here minding my business..."

From somewhere nearby, a man spoke up,

"Easy there, Jimmy Ray. He wasn't watching his step is all..."

"Listen to the man, Jimmy Ray," I growled as I continued up the steps. There was a menacing tone in my voice that surprised me as I continued up the steps.

"Hey. Look at me when I'm talking to you!" He shouted after me.

I could feel Jimmy Ray move toward me, but chose to ignore his approach, continuing calmly up the steps as though his aggressive behavior was of no importance. It never entered my mind that I might be in danger.

But things went south for Jimmy Ray the moment that he grabbed for my elbow.

"I said I'm talking to you, asshole!"

That's when things got strange. A distant rhythmic thumping sound began pounding in my ears, like the noise of some massive military parade stomping its way along Bull Street. It grew louder and then faster, as though what had started as a march was rapidly becoming a rampaging double-time.

My hand went involuntarily to my chest as it became clear that the pounding noise was coming from my heart. A cold, radiating flush began coursing through my body. It seemed as though some thick, mentholated vapor was streaming through my veins, kicking my pulse rate dangerously higher.

Then, without warning, I felt myself free fall into a cold and exhilarating calm. My pulse still raced, but my hands and

forearms relaxed noticeably, dropping to my sides. My breath came gently, and my eyes narrowed to the noonday sun.

Something was missing at that moment, something subtly absent. While my body was still showing all the signs of fury, of a fierce and indignant rage, there was neither fury nor rage present, only the shadowy presence of some impassive observer within. It was as if I were missing.

From somewhere in that Zen-like moment, I felt my body turn, and I watched as my hands seized the collar of the man's shirt. With one smooth motion, my would-be assailant found himself pinned down in the middle of a concrete-walled flower bed. My left thumb, seemingly of its own accord, found the pulse point marking the man's carotid artery and was now applying just enough pressure there to make a point.

"I said I'm sorry," I whispered into the man's ear, in a voice that I barely recognized as my own.

"I...it..it's cool man! Ain't got no beef with you, no beef at all!"

But Jimmy Ray's eyes said far more than his words ever could. Something had terrified him far more than having my hands at his throat, and I knew that something was what he'd just seen as he looked into my eyes.

I let the man up, and stood there for a moment, watching him struggle to regain his composure. He tried in vain to button his filthy shirt, where the button was now missing.

Nearby, a young woman sat, wide-eyed, huddling against the tree where she'd been reading in the shade. She was clutching a copy of "Girl Interrupted" close to her chest. I couldn't help but appreciate the irony.

"The movie is even better than the book," I said as I walked away.

In my adrenaline-induced euphoria, I took the last set of steps in a single leap and headed for the entrance.

Two men were standing in the open doorway, watching me as I approached. One of them was a short, stocky, thirty-something looking man. He wore a name tag with the name "Dave" in gold letters and clearly worked for the library. The other man was much taller than Dave, maybe six feet two inches, with salt and pepper hair, and sporting a rather stylish Van Dyke beard. he had a piercing set of cobalt blue eyes behind a pair of silver-framed glasses, and at that moment, those eyes were studying me, as though I were a fascinating new species of insect.

"Can I help you, boys?" I snapped as I slid past them and into the lobby.

Dave was clearly torn between the impulse to check on Jimmy Ray and his duty to alert security, so he did neither. The tall gentleman, on the other hand, had no such ambivalence. Just as I passed through the theft-detectors and turned into the men's room, he was already heading my way.

CHAPTER TWO

"A gift consists not in what is done or given, but in the intention of the giver or doer."

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Franklin

I'd never been able to stomach these stuffy, glib librarian types. They represent, at least to me, a sterile form of intellectualism that is as dry and faded as the books that they pander, but this Dave character was bringing my perception of the library sciences to a pathetic new low. Dull and obtuse, he was somehow managing to enhance my disdain for him by being so excessively pro -Dave.

"...so, with the plans that I've drawn up for the third-floor reset, and with the support that I've managed to garner from among my various connections, I'm confident..."

Blah, blah, blah. The whiny, nasally voice assaulting my ears droned on and on.

I waved my hand in his face, hoping it would stop the endless verbal barrage.

"I can assure you..." I interrupted "that my organization will be very forthcoming with its funding and other resources in return for your support and cooperation."

I pushed open the door to exit the library and prepared to make my escape when I noticed the makings of an altercation. A young man, maybe thirty years of age, was climbing the steps towards me. Another man was stomping towards him and looked like he'd spent the weekend under a tree.

That's when I witnessed it.

A virtual transfiguration occurred right before my eyes. It was not unlike the clarity of sight you get after a bolt of lightning illuminates the entire landscape on a black, stormy night.

In an instant, the lanky young man who had been casually shuffling up the steps, stood upright, his shoulders squared up, and his knees bent as he shifted onto the balls of his feet and his hands curled into claws. But what registered the most for me was the marked look of calm resignation on his face, that rare and tenuous quality that the ancient Greeks prized so much, and termed "ataraxia" shining brightly from his eyes.

The ensuing takedown was neither elegant nor fluid. It was not the work of a black belt or Green Beret. It was not carried out with the studied confidence of a martial artist or with the brutal efficiency of a trained commando. It was the ferocious response of a large predator, protecting its kill from some annoying carrion eater trying to steal from his feast.

He took his assailant down hard and fast, planting him ingloriously in the decorative flower bed that ran along the edge of the steps. Then, with hands firmly at the man's throat, he leaned close and whispered something in his ear. Whatever

he said, his would-be assailant wanted none of it; and promptly relented. He released him, and calmly watched as he dusted himself off.

As we stood in the door, the man came bounding up the steps, never even glancing back at his assailant turned victim.

"A natural," I whispered to myself with a burst of delight. Perfect.

As he squeezed past us, he shot us a harsh look and said,

"Can I help you, boys?"

As I watched him cross the lobby and make a Bee-line for the men's room, I said to myself,

"You certainly can, young man," and I smiled.

Perfect.

CHAPTER THREE

"What we resist will certainly persist if we are doing it in our power since this power itself is among the obstacles that we have set out to transcend."

Queue McPherson

Patrick

I was standing in the library restroom, rinsing my face and hands, trying to freshen up and regain my composure after the scene on the front steps. It was a foolish spectacle, however necessary, and did not bode well for the day ahead. My hands still trembled slightly from the residual adrenaline as I scrubbed them vigorously under warm water. I stopped and took off the antique gold bracelet I was wearing; I rubbed droplets of water off of the goddess image engraved in the gold plate and laid it carefully on the shelf above the sink. It had been a gift. My wife bought it for me to commemorate our big move from Denver last year. She said it was Turkish or something. God, had it only been a year? I sighed heavily. My heart rate was slowly returning to normal, but I could still hear and feel it in my ears.

"Quite a performance."

The voice came from behind me. It was the tall man from the front door, leaning against the hand dryer and smiling.

"Thanks. I'm on again at eight."

My sarcasm only made the man smile more broadly.

"So what happened out there, exactly?" He asked.

"The man got out of line. Kinda like you're doing now."

He raised his arms in mock surrender and laughed.

"Easy there, tiger. I come in peace."

He smiled disarmingly.

"My name is Franklin," he extended his hand and held it out until I grudgingly took it, leaving soap suds on his tailored blue suit jacket.

"I'm here on business, from Cambridge, Mass, and I'm even thinking of calling Savannah home."

I raised my eyebrows and smiled sweetly, patiently waiting to find out why I should give a damn,

"And?"

His laughter was like a shotgun blast, echoing off the bathroom walls like a ricocheting bullet.

"Man, you are one tough nut to crack," then he stopped laughing and fixed me with a sober, steady gaze.

"I know what is happening to you," the statement took me back. I swallowed more noticeably than I would have liked and, in a feeble attempt to convey sullen indifference I stared hard into his gunmetal blue eyes and growled;

"Brother, you don't know the half of it."

To my surprise, he neither flinched nor wavered.

"Oh, you would be surprised at what I can see...and have seen," With that, Franklin's steely-eyed gaze suddenly went soft, and though he was looking directly at my face, his eyes appeared to be gazing far off into the distance.

"When you're ready," he continued, handing me his card, "you'll know where to find me."

With that, he showed himself out, leaving me alone with my thoughts in a cramped public restroom, feeling sullen...and more than a little bit intrigued.

CHAPTER FOUR

"To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your control, that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame."

—Martha Numbness

Halley

I stood there, lost in my thoughts, gazing out of our third story bedroom window and taking in the sights and sounds of Savannah's bustling Forsyth Park.

From my reflection in the east window of my apartment, I could see my dark, wavy hair, fresh from the shower, cascading down my bare shoulders and delicately framing my face. I found myself smiling as I watched a little girl's delightful antics take place in a grassy section of the park just across Whitaker Street. The child was so lovely, no more than five or six, I would say, with curly blonde hair and enormous eyes. She was wearing a simple checkered sundress and was spinning round and round wildly, like a tiny whirling dervish. Soon she collapsed into a joyous heap, laughing gleefully as her parents come over to check her injury status.

"That's your life, Halley," I whispered, "Spinning happily and painfully out of control."

I turned away from the window and reached for my blouse. I stood there a moment, fussing with the fabric moistened by my shower wet hands, but before I could slip it on, I collapsed abruptly onto the king-sized memory foam bed that was Patrick's gift to me for my twenty-seventh birthday a few months earlier. He was so sweet.

He tried so hard to make it a surprise gift, as though a four thousand dollar purchase, requiring a half-dozen probing questions, a delivery crew, and lots of logistical planning to get it up and into a third-floor condo can be in any way surprising. But the thought was there, and the heart, the gentlest, most loving soul I've ever known in my life.

I gazed up at our most recent studio portrait and smiled sadly. There we were, side by side and grinning broadly, a vibrant and beautiful young couple gazing happily back at me from the dark maple wood mantle over our bed. Yet something about my husband's smile was out-of-place, it betrayed a deep undercurrent of sadness, and his steady outstretched hand seemed to cling desperately but tenderly to my own.

I'd tried to isolate when the change in Patrick had appeared, but the transformation was so subtle that no single event was to blame. The only clue that I'd gathered was that my husband's descent into the doldrums had coincided seamlessly with our rapid leap into prosperity. We had never had it so good. Luxury cars, a beautiful home among the Savannah affluent with a grand view of the park.

Yet, as our fortunes grew, my husband's character had shifted. His shift began with the quirky and unorthodox idealist; the man whom I'd fallen madly in love with when I was just an aimless young grad student out of Oklahoma University, and culminated in the man in this photo; driven, focused and relentlessly overachieving. His heart remained just as beautiful and tender as ever. Now there was a wound there, thinly disguised by pretense, an invisible wound that was now bleeding the life out of the only man I'd ever loved.

A tear welled up into my eye and began meandering down my cheek and on toward the corner of my lips; I flicked the moisture away impatiently with my fingertips and sniffed softly;

"Please stop hiding from me, my angel," my voice broke with feeling, "I want to help you. Please let me be there for you," I whispered.

I sat for a moment to compose myself. My honey would be home soon, and I couldn't risk that my tears be detected; but despite all my efforts, the sobbing began, first in my belly and then, before I knew it, the tears poured down freely like a Savannah summer rain.

CHAPTER FIVE

"While we are postponing, life speeds by."

— Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Franklin

I looked up from my tattered and dog-eared copy of 'The Golden Sayings of Epictetus' and fixed my visitor with a firm, steady gaze. He was a tall, thin young man with a buzz cut and a kind face. His jawline was angular and robust, and his dark brown eyes were bright and intelligent. I knew him to be in his early twenties, and it was clear that he'd successfully endured a proper Christian upbringing, because he stood respectfully in the doorway, "beanie" hat in hand, waiting for permission to enter.

"Come on in Mr. Stoker. Please, have a seat."

"It's Demarius, Mr. Winters, plain ole Demarius." He flashed a big toothy smile as he made his way toward my desk.

I smiled benignly and did my best to disguise my contempt for the show of modest simplicity that he didn't possess. He settled into the chair across from me and began nervously brushing imaginary dust from his worn trousers.

"Well then, plain ole Demarius; have you given any more thought to my offer?"

He weighed his words carefully before he spoke.

"Yes, sir, I have. But, if you don't mind, I was hoping you could clarify some things before we went any further."

"Yes, by all means. But, first, I'm going to need you to put aside all this "Uncle Tom's Cabin" horse shit and talk to me; man to man. Can you do that? You are a man, I assume?"

Demarius sat up straight as an arrow, eyes flashing, then he eased back in his chair and gazed at me with amusement.

"You're damn right I'm, Mr. Winters."

"That's good to hear, Mr. Stoker."

We sat silently for a moment, letting the tension of the moment slowly drain away.

"Okay," I said, clapping my hands together, "Back to the subject at hand. You require some clarification?"

"Yes, Mr. Winters. I've been..."

"Franklin," I interjected, "Call me, Franklin."

"Okay, Franklin. As I was saying, there are certain aspects of this program of yours that I'm a bit fuzzy on."

"For instance?"

"Well, for instance, why would you want to offer anybody room and board, a clothing allowance, and a stipend that

amounts to more than the average full-time wage in Savannah, in exchange for...?" Demarius' voice trailed away, leaving the question floating in the air between us.

"Commitment, Demarius," I said, finishing his sentence, "In exchange for commitment, and a great deal of perseverance."

I paused for effect, and then continued;

"Let me put it to you this way," I fixed him with a measured gaze,

"You are preparing to experience a radical life shift. An experience that is so extremely transformative that; if I were to reduce your available resources in the slightest, you would endure an overwhelming sense of financial constriction that could easily propel you into a crime spree."

Demarius shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"You will be acquiring potent powers of persuasion, keen observation and analytical skills, and a measure of willpower comparable to that of elite warriors and world-class athletes. Combine these with poverty and you would almost certainly wind up in Montana or somewhere orchestrating a subversive government overthrow or kicking back in a high-security cell of a maximum-security prison."

Demarius paled visibly.

"What the hell am I getting myself into?" He laughed nervously.

"You, my friend, are getting yourself into greatness. You are on the ground floor of a social revolution, the likes of which this world has never seen. When I'm through with you, your mother won't recognize you."

Demarius sat in silence, stunned, suspicious, and very much intrigued. He was in. He knew it, and I knew it.

"Why me?"

"Because you meet a particular set of criteria."

"Those being...?"

"In the simplest terms, you are a world-class underachiever."

Demarius' eyes flashed angrily, and his jaw clenched hard, but he held his peace.

"Don't take offense, Demmy. May I call you Demmy?"

I waited for a response that never came, so I shrugged and continued.

"Consider the facts, Demmy. You, my friend, have a Weschler scale IQ score of 152, placing you in the top one percent of America's population. You possess the ability to recall what you've seen from memory after only seeing it once, a rare

ability I can assure you. You even earned a full-ride scholarship from one of the most prestigious art schools on the planet. Then, armed with all that ammo, you managed to land in Savannah; become a college dropout, take a job stocking groceries part-time at night; and from time to time you sleep in Forsyth Park when your paycheck can't cover the weekly room that you book at the La Quinta."

I watched the man's face go pale, a curious site on a black man.

"And that, Mr. Stoker makes you the ideal clay for a master potter, and I'm the master potter that you've been waiting for, whether you knew it or not."

I folded my hands on my desk and waited in silence.

Demarius drew a deep breath and sighed.

"Where do I sign?



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