

Roland Metz is a funeral director with an obsession for romantic relations with his clients. Dead clients. Attorney Jack Lattiger stumbles on a dead girl's grave and is lead to the killer and the mortuary basement.

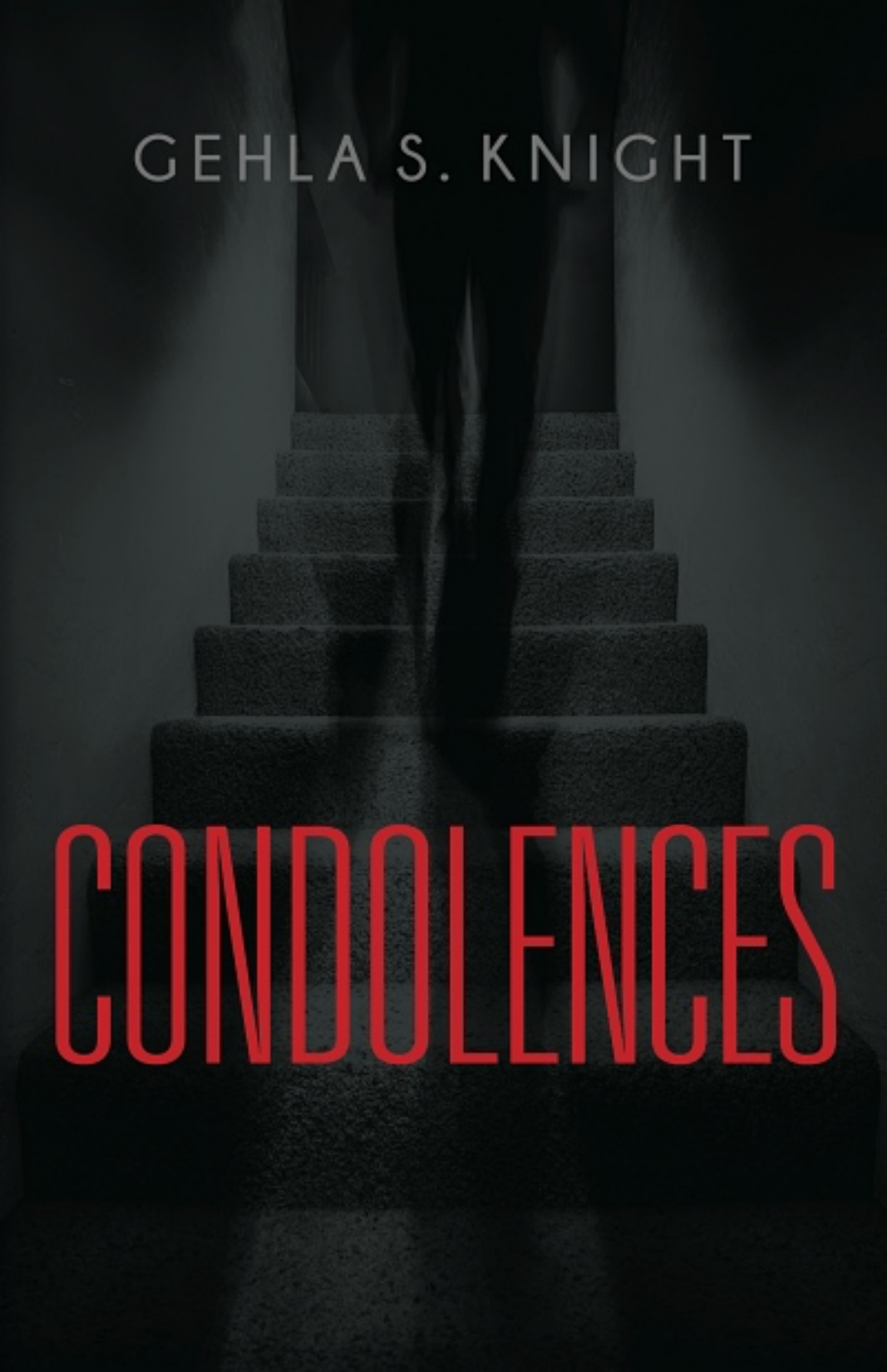
CONDOLENCES

By Gehla S. Knight

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GEHLA S. KNIGHT

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1

She wished she hadn't stayed. The word "creepy" hovered on the tip of her tongue while she looked around the room. What kind of a geek would want to live in a funeral parlor, with a coffin resting only a few steps from the living room? And God only knew what was in the basement, but she'd bet it wasn't pretty. Jeez, how could this guy sleep here at night?

He handed her a glass of Chablis as she perched on the edge of the sofa. She didn't even want the wine, but she had been raised to be polite, and she might as well get the social stuff out of the way, sign the papers and get the hell out of this dumpy dungeon. Afterwards, she'd stop at the Marriott, have a piña colada and forget all about death, dying and funerals. Her boyfriend tended bar at the Hotel, and when she perched on a stool and watched him mix exotic drinks, she conjured up tropical isles and Mediterranean shores dotted with yachts. No way was she going to let her thoughts linger on this creepy place once she was out the door and back into the sunshine.

"You have very pretty hair." The words slithered between his lips in a faint lisp that made her stifle a shudder. Gawd, what a weirdo. And this place was like a museum—heavy, velvet draperies, wall sconces and furniture that looked like it came straight out of a Hollywood set

for *Phantom of the Opera*. What Roland Metz needed was a decorator, an Ikea charge card and a personal buyer from Nordstrom. Metz was wearing a black suit and skinny tie that looked as if he'd robbed one of his stiffies in the front parlor. No surprise he was still single.

"I guess it's pretty hard to date, huh? Bringing ladies here, I mean."

"Yes," he sighed. "It *is* difficult, but then I'm so busy with the mortuary I have very little time for outside diversions. I treasure my solitude. Don't you?"

"No, not really. I like a lotta people around. Uh, I never knew anyone who worked at a... a place like this."

"A mortuary?"

"Yeah. The funeral home and the place where they dispose of the... uh, people who died."

"Crematorium."

"Yeah." How was she supposed to make conversation with this freak? Who wanted to sit around and talk about burning up bodies, dressing dead people and having to deal with grieving relatives all day and night? What a crazy occupation, one she'd never thought about before now and didn't really want to think of again for a very long time. It was hard enough losing someone you loved without having to dwell on mortality and the inevitable end awaiting everyone someday. Even her.

"I can show you around if you like. Our facilities are very modern. Have you ever wondered what an embalming room is like?"

"No." She jerked herself upright and almost spilled her wine. "Uh, no thanks. I really have to be going. Do you have those papers for me to sign?"

"Certainly. I do apologize if I've detained you too long. I so seldom have social visitors that I lose track of time, especially when I'm fortunate enough to entertain such a delightfully engaging and attractive young lady."

Her innards did a back flip at the smirky compliment. *Social* visitors? This dude was nuts. Absolutely. Jesus, she had to get out of here. What normal person would think anybody ever visited a funeral parlor for a friendly gab session? But then maybe she was feeling a twinge of pity for this Metz character stuck all by himself in this dreary, musty-smelling wax museum. No wonder he was so out of it and lonely. He could fix the place up a little, get a big screen TV, work out, join a gym, date some normal babes, ditch the undertaker's suit and be a normal human being. And he could talk like he hadn't just crawled out of a crypt somewhere instead of like Bela Lugosi in one of those black and white horror flicks on cable. It was his own fault he'd turned out to be so weird.

"Mr. Metz, I really do have to get going. I'm late already. Do you have the papers ready?" She set her wine glass on the table adorned with a Chinese vase filled with silk flowers the size of catchers' mitts. "I have a pen in my purse so I can just sign and get going."

Checking her watch, she started to stand up when he caught her arm. His fingers were ice cold. "Don't bother to get up. Why don't you finish your wine while I find the file? I'm sorry if I've kept you too long. I certainly wouldn't want you to miss your appointment." Before she could answer, he handed her glass back and disappeared behind a velvet curtain.

From the other room, she heard him opening a file drawer. Finally, he was getting on with it. When he brought the papers back, she could sign and then get the hell out of this freak show. For a split second there, she was a little uneasy. He seemed to be stalling, but that was probably because he was so eager for a little company. Just a few more minutes now, and she could go.

He returned with a manila file in one hand and the Chablis bottle in the other. "Shall we toast your future then?" He poured himself a glass and raised it to his lips.

What the hell, she was thinking as she sipped. Whatever it took to get out of here and keep him happy. The wine wasn't bad either. As he watched, she drained half the glass and reached for the papers he laid on the coffee table.

"You'll want to look these over. Be certain to read the last paragraph very carefully."

She quickly glanced at the top and scrolled down to the signature line. As she stared, it began to wriggle. "Maybe I need my glasses. This print looks awfully small." She fumbled in her purse. The pen slipped through her fingers. "What kind of wine was this?" She laughed at her clumsiness. For some odd reason, it was becoming difficult to steady her hand and keep her eyes on the page.

He sat across from her, put aside his glass and stared as she wiped a bead of sweat from her brow and sank back on the sofa. "You know, I think I might be sick all of a sudden. Do you have a restroom I can use?"

He didn't answer. Metz just sat there transfixed while her purse fell off her lap, and her eyes closed. When her breathing slowed, and she fell back on the cushions, he got up, closed the door to the reception foyer, drew the draperies to shut out the light and turned on the record player.

Shadows played on the wall like fingerlings dancing in the candle flame. The evening air cooled the rosy flush flowering across her throat and cheeks. She put a hand to her brow. Her skin was damp. Her stomach seemed to be floating, a water-filled balloon rising in her throat. She couldn't be sure if she was going to be sick or fall asleep. It was suddenly too confusing to figure out. Wrapped in a thick, fuzzy cocoon, she stared into the soft, golden ball of light, the only thing she could see. It was like she was floating in a fire looking through the flames.

"You have such lovely hair..."

There was something sinister about the reedy voice burrowing into her brain, menacing somehow. She couldn't name the feeling. Something wasn't quite right with the man, the room, the smell of the burning candles and the musty carpets. She remembered that voice, didn't she? There was a paper she tried to sign, a glass of chilled wine. Why couldn't she connect the rest?

"Such lovely skin... smooth as silk..."

She willed herself to look up at the face dissolving into a grotesque mask as she tried to focus her eyes. It was all wrong, so strange. Too dizzy to stand, to know which was up or which was down. Symphonic waves roared inside her head. She was trapped in a whirlpool she couldn't escape, turning her upside down, spinning and tilting until there was no strength left to pull herself from the black waters engulfing her.

His hands took hold of her shoulders. She was shocked when her head fell back, and her eyes closed as if she no longer controlled her own body. Her mind was racing with muscular commands, but nothing responded. Her limbs hung like useless appendages, limp and numb. What the hell was happening to her? Somehow, she had to try to resist. Was this a dream? A seizure maybe? Had she fainted?

"Ohhhh..." The moan bubbled from her throat when the cadaveric fingers coiled around her long, chestnut hair. She blinked her eyes open and saw a shadow emerge from the candle glow. She knew then that she was his prey, and she had to escape.

He lifted her easily and carried his trophy through the doorway and up the stairs. When she opened her eyes for the last time, all she saw was a plastered ceiling lit with a beautiful, pink chandelier.

"Is this the last thing on Earth I'll ever see?" she thought. With a final sigh, she slipped into a deep chasm of unconsciousness and merciful escape.

Then in an instant she was alone, walking down a long, dark tunnel and emerging into blinding light. She was stone-cold, chilled to her bones. Her skin seemed to have peeled away, exposing her organs to the damning freeze that held her in the darkest recesses of the dream. The light blinded her at first, but she summoned the strength to move on, and then she saw the familiar face of her mother reaching out to lead her through the glare. The deadly cold released her as a shaft of the wondrous, white light infused her with warmth.

“Oh, Mom, I was so scared. Where am I? What’s happened to me? I thought you were dead.”

She was submerged in the new radiance, her tears warm now as they trickled down her cheeks before she was folded in the maternal embrace which rescued her from the frigid, black abyss. She hung on and lost herself at last in pure love and forgiveness, let go the ethereal bonds and melted into her mother’s smile as her spirit soared and penetrated the night sky.

2

His breath made button-sized clouds as he sprinted across the avenue before the diesel fumes from the passing bus overtook him. Jack Lattiger concentrated on his breathing rhythm. Two breaths in, one out. He synchronized his strides with the aspiration cadence, jumped over a chubby boxwood hedge and turned to head into the wind. His face chilled in the early morning air. He ran beneath a row of weeping birches, their dripping branches leaning toward him in the fog, then veering left, jogged through the cemetery gates.

Granite and marble tombstones rose from the mist in silent ranks, their crosses and angels etched black in the wet stone. He ran by the enclaves of territorial ground held by parties at peace with their eternal neighbors: Johnson, Moriarty, Hyatt, Bailey, Henderson, Smith, Howell, Maniakos. Names that must have had a meaning somewhere to someone but now joined the anonymous list of dead that outlasted both their connections with the past and links to the present.

The soles of his Nike's slapped softly on the damp pavement as he ran. Up ahead was the giant holly tree marking his halfway point at two miles. Then it was only a short jog east past the mortuary gardens where he gained a little momentum alongside the laurel hedge flanking Fremont Street. His body was already steeling himself for the last leg of his run.

Jack Lattiger, BA, MA, JD, and TOJ—temporarily out of a job—was making good time this morning, despite getting a bad start. When the alarm rang, he had a hard time waking up. It was because of a dream he was trying to shake off, an eerie, faceless phantasm had pursued him through empty courtrooms, hurling books and

voluminous briefs to block his retreat. Comical in daylight, it was frightening in the grip of sleep. He'd awakened to find his sheets twisted around his torso and his pillow damp with sweat. His spit tasted like mothballs. After the first quarter mile of his morning run, he'd recovered and tried to focus on the opportunities a new day brought. It wasn't easy to dodge the distractions.

When he turned onto the last curve toward the main entrance, he saw a light flicker in the mortuary ahead. Early birds already at work. Doing what, Jack did not want to dwell on. A couple more minutes, and he'd be on the downhill leg where he could stretch his thigh muscles and glide over the homestretch like a racing shell coasting across the finish line.

A crow, annoyed by Jack's labored breathing and the smack of his shoes in the otherwise still surroundings, cawed defiantly and swooped low over his shoulders. Startled for a second, Jack looked up at the same instant his right foot stepped on a withered pinecone and turned under his ankle.

"Shit!" Cartwheeling to the ground, he threw his hands up to cover his face. His body hit the ground hard, rattling his bones and scraping both knees on the pathway.

The cranky crow lit on a nearby bough. It cocked its head and cautiously eyed the intruder who moaned softly as he sat upright and began examining himself. Several minutes passed as Jack massaged his wounds and berated himself for inattention and clumsiness.

"Shit, I think the bastard must be broken. What else can I fuck up?"

He vigorously rubbed his ankle until a reddish welt appeared. He wriggled his toes inside his shoe and then stretched the leg to test its strength. So far, so good. Nothing seemed to be terribly wrong after all. At least nothing was broken or badly sprained. He could probably hobble back home without too much discomfort.

Condolences

Another light flicked on in the mortuary building as he sat and massaged his ankle. The fog was rising to the level of the treetops, painting pastels on the rosy walls of the seedy, art deco structure beyond the statuary gardens. Twin yews stood sentinel at the portico. Defiant Boston ivy, denuded by the winter winds clung like barbed wire to the plaster columns. In front, a stone fountain sporting a blind cherub attracted a grateful blue jay who fanned its wings in the pool. The place could pass for Gloria Swanson's mansion in *Sunset Boulevard*. The cemetery buildings all looked to be from the 1920's and largely untouched by modern improvements. Definitely an anachronism in this yuppified neighborhood. They were dead storage sheds, waste management farms, that's all. The fancy landscape gardening and marble work couldn't conceal the fact that they were places people only visited out of painful necessity, ignored otherwise, pedestrians looking away as they passed, all too aware that sooner or later these mausoleums would be a repository for their own remains.

Jack didn't want to dwell on anything this morning having to do with death or finite resolutions. His life now was all about dealing with the future.

He leaned back and stretched his neck muscles tightening in the morning chill. Test-wagging his foot up and down, he felt a stab of pain. He'd wait a minute more, stand up, put a little weight on it and see how it felt. The sun was about to break through the overcast, steaming through the fog cloud looming over the cemetery grounds. Might as well rest a moment more until the throbbing in his leg calmed down. He didn't have to get to the office by eight. Not anymore. Nobody waiting on him at home these days either. Nobody there to give a shit except his cat Melodious. She'd probably still be curled up in her logger's boot, sleeping her usual sixteen hours a day. Jack's tabby was even more slothful and somnolent than the managing partner at his former law firm had been.

The sun finally broke full force through the haze. The blackbird hopped onto a marble slab an arm's length from Jack, cawing until he turned to stare.

“What the hell's your problem? You think you own this place?”

A shaft of radiant light broke over the hedge and lit up the bronze plaque by the side of the path. Jack squinted as a shard of sunlight ricocheted off the marker. The bird flew up and teetered on an overhanging bough. Jack followed with his eyes and read the inscription engraved on the bronze plate beside him:

Sarah Ann Morgenthau

In Loving Memory

1979 – 2004

Jack waggled his ankle and was pleased at receiving no negative feedback. He got to his feet, shook his leg and tested a step. Not too bad. He danced around lightly, up on his toes, one leg up, one down. He'd take it easy until the buzz wore off, lucky to have avoided a major injury. Goddam crow. Damned pinecones. He'd remember to keep his eyes on the ground running around these damned trees.

He looked down and glanced at the grave marker again: Sarah Ann. Pretty name. Might have been a pretty girl. So young to die nowadays. Only twenty-five. Most people assumed a long life into maturity and old age, barring accidents. She must have died in a car crash, maybe a drug overdose. No. Never, he mused, stretching his calf muscles. Not with a name like Sarah Ann. Car accident. Maybe some disease—cancer, brain tumor. Shame. Her family must have been devastated to lose someone so young. At the threshold of life—gone. Parents probably would never recover from the shock.

He grinned as the crow took off and soared over the mortuary roof. No guarantees the deceased was good-looking, he mused. She might have been a Grunge Rocker, a fast-food bottle blonde or a purple-lipped, pimply Pudge.

He pumped his legs up and down a few more times to get his heart rate back to speed. The sun was out in force now, steaming the dew from the wet grass and melting the frost on the stone tombstones.

When Jack was Sarah's age at twenty-five, he wasn't even thinking about mortality, his or anyone else's for that matter. Nobody close to him had died yet. He passed by cemeteries without a second glance at the tombstones, honked his way past serpentine limousines leading mourners through the Cedar Lawn gates and never even glanced at the obituaries in the *Oregonian*. Death was not a visitor to most people under thirty, definitely not a topic of discussion for a senior law student about to clinch a coveted clerkship and leapfrog over the heads of less talented peers. Jack Lattiger had sailed through his twenty-fifth year without once considering his allotment of time on the planet. Sarah Ann had obviously run into roadblocks.

"So long, Sarah Ann. See you tomorrow," he whispered, instantly feeling foolish for what he knew was sappy solicitude better spent on a mortal. Without another look down, he faced south and resumed his run, picking up speed as he bounded across Fremont and set his sights on home.

As Jack jogged across the gated entrance, a window shade parted on the east side of the mortuary, and a thin, miserly face with a robotic stare peered through the glass, watching every stride.

3

Jack picked up the telephone and carefully selected the number which didn't come to mind as effortlessly as it had only the week before. He was starting to forget things—names, numbers, cases, dates. It was starting then. The Unemployed Syndrome, feeling adrift professionally, cut off from associates and the career he had spent years building.

“Judge Donald’s chambers. This is Amy. Can I help you?”

Her voice was distracted and harried. He could visualize Amy's mottled face, one hand hovering over the keyboard, her expressionless eyes riveted to the Order of Judgment she was amending while the clock on her cluttered desk ticked off the minutes.

“This is Jack. Is Judge Donald in chambers yet?”

“Jack who? Jack Lattiger?”

“Right.”

“You’ll have to leave a message.”

The keys on her PC clacked as she continued with her work. He resented her brusque tone and curt dismissal and translated it as acknowledgment of his withdrawal from the VIP Club and his banishment to the ranks of the unemployed. There was only one other Jack listed in the state bar directory, a Jack Pollard who had just recently celebrated his seventieth birthday and announced his retirement from a rural practice on the southern coast. All of a sudden, this competent clerk did not know that trembling, elderly voice from Jack Lattiger’s.

“I'd like to talk to Judge Donald, Amy. Is he in yet?”

“It's only a little after eight. Why don't you call back in a half hour?”

He knew the Judge made a habit of opening his chambers before eight, and he spent many mornings as first in line to catch the jurist alone. He even brought muffins to this surly clerk, and now she acted as if he were pushing encyclopedias. “Can you let me speak to him for a minute?”

“What is it you want?”

It was a subtle message, but he read it nevertheless as another assault on his situation: ‘want’ implied a request to fulfill a personal wish; ‘need’ would have acknowledged he had official business with the court, a necessary legal matter to conduct with His Honor.

“I need to speak to him, Amy, before he gets tied up in court. Can you have him call me, please?”

“I don't expect him in until eight-thirty this morning, and then he has a sentencing and a bail hearing at eight-forty-five that will take him up to nine when he's in civil trial all day.” *Clack, clack, clack.* “Just give me your message, Jack. I'll see he gets it. He can give you a buzz at noon recess.”

“Could you ask him to call me back before trial? It's important or I wouldn't be calling.”

“It's always important. He's doing a marriage ceremony in chambers at noon.” Another phone was ringing in the background. “For Pete's sake, Jack, just give me the message. I gotta go.”

“I only need a minute, Amy. For crissakes...”

“You at home?”

“Can you please ask him to call me at—” The receiver clicked before he finished. Bleak thoughts bubbled to the surface with desperation, anger, frustration, rejection, depression. So far, he wasn't handling any of this well, and this was just the beginning.

He felt a tickle on his bare neck and reached behind him to stroke Melodious. She chirped in consolation and licked his ear with a sandpaper tongue. “You know something, Sweetheart? I’m just about ready to tell them all to fuck off. You think thirty-four is too old to grow up to be a fireman?” He scratched her ears to elicit an affectionate purr as she rubbed against his cheek. “Maybe I’ll just make up a sign to hang around my neck. ‘Will sue anybody for food.’ Think that’ll work?”

Her world was focused on food, and the tangy smell of Jack’s running sweats meant his next order of business was attending to her needs: canned salmon and kibbled goodies. When he got up, Melodious spurted into the kitchen and sat down to wait in front of her dish.

He fed the cat then stood in the bathroom and stripped to his socks. There was a red spot on his thigh morphing to an eggplant knot where he had landed on the path. A nasty scrape oozing a bloody signature marked his chin. It’d be a bitch shaving for a couple of days. Both knees were raw, and his right palm was bloody from acting as kickstand to break his fall. Otherwise, he was still in one piece. He turned on the shower and stepped over the side of the tub. The phone rang. He cranked off the water and padded to the bedroom where he caught the third ring.

“Jack?”

He recognized Judge Donald’s twang and was heartened by the fact the Judge had called him back almost immediately. Maybe he still had some respect lingering in the Multnomah County Courthouse.

“Thanks for calling back, Judge.”

“Oh, did you call earlier? I guess I never got your message, Jack. What was it you called about?”

Jack's heart sank to his gut with a sickening thud. Naked, stinking from his runner's sweat, he sagged onto the bed and pressed his eyes shut. "Not important now."

"I need a favor, Jack. You got a minute?"

"Shoot."

"Well, that scrap metal matter—*Bampton v. Travis Steel*? It came up for trial this week with Brian Holloman from the Castner firm. You may not recall the case."

"I remember." Was the Judge's belittling query inadvertent or simple ignorance? Did it matter? Jack Lattiger had argued all the pretrial motions in that case on behalf of Lyle Bampton before Judge Donald this past year. Now that Jack was no longer the shining-star litigator with a top-three law firm, his accomplishments were herded into an anonymous bin of lackluster lawyers all vying for this jurist's attention. Maybe Judge Donald was being careful, tediously avoiding a painful subject for Jack since it had been the Bampton case that had initiated the speedy downfall which forced him out of a pending partnership and propelled him toward the unemployment queue. But the slight rankled nevertheless.

"Well, it settled, Jack. Travis Steel offered four point nine mill right before voir dire, and Bampton took it. I think it was off-base, but what the hell."

Jack groaned. This was a major sellout. Bampton had been screwed by Travis Steel. The plaintiff caved in, folded, wimped-out. All because the plaintiff's attorney didn't have the balls for a trial fight, didn't have the mental agility to work his way through the complex expert testimony in the case which Jack had spent seven months preparing.

"Bobby submitted some special damages, Jack, and there's a discrepancy on what Bampton says he got from the Lloyd group and what the records show. We thought instead of holding up the

settlement disbursement, you could maybe give Bobby a call and straighten out the figures for him. Could you do that for me, Jack?"

His consternation sizzled like a sirloin on the Bar-B. There had to be a limit to his accommodating these bastards. He had called this doddering, dull-witted plodder to ask for his recommendation at the Miller, Hobbs firm, and the bastard had the balls to ask him to bail out good old Bobby, the prick who pushed Jack out the door and took over the Bampton case only to throw it away for fifty percent of what a jury would most likely have awarded.

"Could you call him today, Jack? It shouldn't take you long to get things straightened out so he can get a Stipulated Order of Judgment to me by the end of the week. I gotta take off for Maui by Friday noon, and I don't wanna leave this hanging."

"Judge, I have somebody holding long distance. Can I get back to you on this?"

"This is a favor for me, Jack, but I know how much Bobby appreciates your help. You did a helluva job on the trial brief."

Hollow praise, butt-licking bullshit. Jack was immune nowadays to idle, political polishing.

"Make sure you call me back by noon today, Jack. I hate to push, but I've gotta make some final trip arrangements yet. We're setting up a foresome. Say, have you ever played Kapalua?"

"I have an interview at Miller, Hobbs this morning, Judge, but I'll try to talk to Bobby."

"Oh, fine, fine, Jack. I appreciate it. Well, I won't keep you. Good luck with Miller, Hobbs. They're a bunch of cutthroats, you know." They both knew Miller, Hobbs was the most successful, brassiest plaintiff firm in the state. Judge Donald had never won a case against those "cutthroats" when he was a wimpy-assed lawyer on the payroll for the State Workers' Compensation Board. In Jack's opinion, if Judge Donald weren't sitting on the bench after a fortuitous

appointment by the Governor when Judge Howard died mid-term, he'd be the one patrolling Main Street with a cardboard sign begging food for legal work.

"I'll be in touch, Judge." He hung up and hit the receiver with his palm as he stomped back to the bathroom. "Fucking Asshole." He turned the water back on. "Bobby can rot in hell with the rest of those greedy bastards."

As he soaped with an energy driven by anger and frustration, he wove a fantasy of rocking back in a plush swivel seat in the spacious office of Parnell Hobbs, senior partner of Miller, Hobbs, Randhauser and Klineberg. He could visualize the steel-gray eyes boring into his like a torch through pot metal. "*Mr. Lattiger, I see you have a gap in this crucial area of admiralty law.*" The eyes narrowed to lizard-like slits in the ruddy face. "*And where in hell is your California ticket? Everybody here has his second ticket, Jack. Half our revenue comes from those LA fat cats. Where in hell you been? Time to wake up and smell the coffee, Jack.*"

Jack raised his face under the spray of hot water. "Ow!" He touched the raw zone on his chin. Scrubbing his scalp, he recalled the crow screeching at him, the path spiraling below him as he tried to catch his fall, the wet grass, the light flickering on in the pink mortuary then looking up at that damn bird and Sarah Ann's grave marker. He couldn't remember the last name.

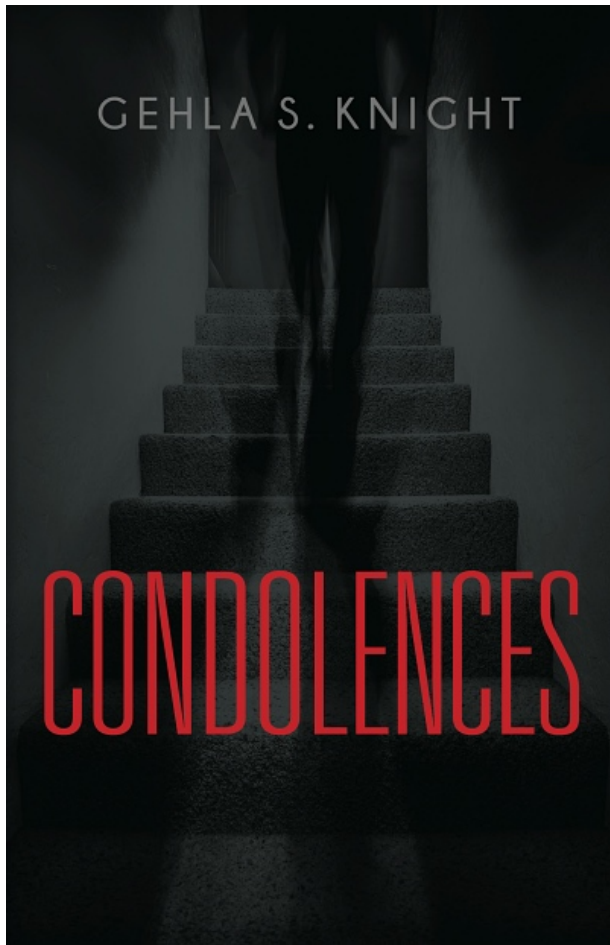
Jack rinsed his hair and turned off the water. As he toweled dry, he tried to put the name on the grave marker. He could see the "M" for sure, or maybe it was an "N". The more he tried to bring it back, the farther it faded from memory.

"Sarah Ann Whateveryournameis..." He tossed the towel in the hamper and straddled the toilet, "too bad you couldn't stick around to see thirty, thirty-five." He watched his urine splash against the

porcelain. “It just keeps getting better and better, Sarah Babe,” he muttered.

He shut his eyes and recalled the fog rising like a gauze curtain over the yew trees in the cemetery, the stone cherub coiled on the stone basin, the scolding bird, the bronze slab that recorded the brief life of an anonymous young woman. Jack was cursing the light on a day that Sarah Ann never had the chance to see. It was time to change his attitude. He remembered a sappy lecture from his ethics professor at undergrad school, something about how the Eastern philosophy was a better guide for modern living than the Puritan work ethic. The professor had reminded his class that in Mandarin Chinese the same word meant both crisis and opportunity. Jack would have to work on adopting a more lenient attitude toward his failures.

He stroked Melodious on his way through the living room and checked his watch as he locked the front door behind him.



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