

Imaginative short tales of fantasy in a "Twilight Zone" fashion that lead the reader down one path, then take an unexpected twist toward an unpredictable ending. They include horror, fiction, irony, a bit of love and a touch of humor.

NEXT STOP - UNKNOWN

By Rick Pascal

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NEXT STOP- UNKNOWN

Short Tales
of mayhem, mystery, macabre irony
and disjointed fantasy

You never know what's around the bend



RICK PASCAL

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958878-95-8

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-445-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Pascal, Rick

NEXT STOP – UNKNOWN by Rick Pascal

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023900624

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2023

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A Viking Saga

Erik Berggren sat in his favorite chair in the Viking Lounge of the exclusive Harald Men's Club, fixing his gaze on the sparks from the crackling fire as they swirled and danced up the chimney of the flagstone fireplace. He reflected on his life, his achievements – or lack of them – and his plans as he sipped his 18-year-old Chivas Regal Scotch whisky.

At the age of twenty-nine he already had more money than he could ever spend in his lifetime; the vast majority of which was inherited from his father, who died two years earlier. Erik succeeded him as president of Berggren Enterprises, one of the largest privately held corporations in America, solely on the basis of his father's influence. What he lacked in leadership skills, he compensated for in manipulation and chicanery.

The Harald Men's Club was restricted to wealthy and influential gentlemen of Nordic heritage. Many were athletic as well as hunting enthusiasts, unlike Erik who never participated in any of these endeavors. In order to fit in, he fabricated prowess in areas where he had none. He concocted tales about the safaris and hunting expeditions he participated in with his father in Africa. He bragged about affairs he had with women. He manufactured stories about how he had been part of his father's sailing crew that won races at the Domino Yacht Club on Long Island Sound. Some were impressed; others were skeptical because, like Eric, they also exaggerated their own heroic exploits.

The walls of the Viking Lounge were lined with trophy animal heads of bison, mountain goats and sheep, stags sporting magnificent antlers, even a tiger displaying a menacing growl. Paintings of yacht races, airplane stunt flyers, mountain climbers, wild animals on the

African Savanna decorated them as well. Erik used these paintings as inspiration for his spurious adventures.

The hand-carved oakwood grandfather clock tolled its tenth chime. Erik was startled by Arne Hanson's sudden appearance. Arne was president of the Harald Club and was often the last member to leave. "Are you still here, Erik? I believe everyone else has already left. Do you plan to stay long? It's already past ten o'clock. Hector is going to begin cleaning in a few minutes."

"Oh, hello Arne. I didn't see you there. Yes, I'll be leaving shortly."

"Well, good night then, Erik. Have a good weekend." He turned abruptly and went to the coat room. Joan, the coat-check girl had already gone home. He took his coat and disappeared out the front door, leaving Erik's coat alone among the empty hangers.

Erik continued gazing, as if hypnotized, at the glowing orange embers in the fireplace. "Yes, you too, Arne," he replied to an empty room, unaware that Arne was no longer there.

An attendant approached, wearing a beige cotton jacket with the name *Hector* embroidered on the breast pocket. He was accompanied by a younger man wheeling a vacuum cleaner.

"Good evening, Mr. Berggren. I'm going to start cleaning now," Hector Diaz said. "This is my son, Jason. I'm teaching him what I do so he can help me from time to time." Hector plugged the vacuum cleaner into the socket along the fireplace wall. "Jason," he instructed his son, "one of your duties will be to wind that grandfather clock standing in the corner. The key is inside the glass casing. It is an old and delicate clock, so you must be very careful not to overwind it. It has to be wound every week. I do it on Friday evening. Come with me, Jason, I will show you how it is done. You can do it next week."

Erik downed the last of his Scotch and placed the Waterford crystal glass on the side table. “Go ahead with your cleaning, Hector. I was just getting ready to leave.” He retrieved his orphaned coat, wrapped his Italian silk scarf around his neck and donned his black fedora. He tugged more tightly on his coat as he waited for the valet to bring his car, while he shivered in the cold crisp January night air.

“You’re the last member to leave,” the valet said. “Have a good evening.”

“You, too, James. Sorry to keep you so late.” Erik eased behind the wheel of his black Mercedes-Benz. He drove to his family’s estate in Chappaqua where he spent his weekends; he stayed at his apartment on the Upper West Side during the week.

After an uneventful day of work on Monday (most of Erik’s work was uneventful), he dined at the Harald Club, then adjourned to his favorite chair in the Viking Lounge with a glass of Port wine and a cigar. Monday evenings were quiet. The other members usually dined at home with their families.

The old grandfather clock in the corner chimed eight times. He puffed on his cigar, while daydreams of exciting adventures he only wished he had but never experienced whirled about in his imagination like a tornado, consuming all in its path. *What would it feel like to hunt big game in Africa? Or sail the seven seas? Or go mountain climbing in the Alps?* He approached the paintings on the far wall and was captivated by the three-masted sailing ship, *The HMS Francis Drake*, fighting waves in a boiling sea. He blew a smoke ring, gazing proudly at its shape, then drank the remainder of his wine. As he watched the smoke ring fade, a sudden and unsettling feeling caused him to shudder. *Perhaps too much to drink.* The room began to spin.

He felt faint, accompanied by a sense of dread. The glass fell from his hand and crashed to the floor as he blacked out.

“What’s our plan, Captain?” the First Mate said, prodding Erik’s sleeve as he sat at the officer’s mess table. A startled Erik looked up, quizzically. “There’s a galleon approaching our stern bearing the Jolly Roger,” the First Mate continued. “What are your orders, sir?”

Erik gazed about the cabin; his muscles tensing. The flag of Great Britain, the *Union Jack*, was draped on the bulkhead. Three gold stripes adorned the cuffs of his navy-blue captain’s uniform. The men standing beside him were dressed in blousy shirts and pantaloons; apparel worn by many eighteenth-century merchant sailors. He tried not to panic. *I’m aboard a British merchant vessel*, he realized. *And I’m the Captain! Oh, my God, I’m in the painting on the wall in the Viking Lounge. How could this have happened?* His First Mate pleaded again. “Sir, please, give us your orders. They’re gaining on us, closing fast.

Eric remained frozen in his chair. *I must have fallen asleep. Yes, that’s it. I’m dreaming. But it all seems so real!*

“Sir, if you’re not well, shall I take command?” the First Mate implored.

“No, I’m all right,” he finally responded, awakening from his stupor, suddenly assuming an air of authority. He sprinted through the cabin doorway and up the ladder as if he had rehearsed the scene in his mind. “Hand me the spyglass,” he commanded. “How far behind are they?” He felt the rush of adrenaline as he took control.

“They’re about 1,000 yards to our stern, Captain. When we first spotted them, they were 1,500 yards away. They’re faster than we are, sir. They’ll overtake us in less than a half-hour.”

“Looks like we’re going to have a fight on our hands. Assemble all hands on deck immediately,” Erik ordered. He was amazed that he was able to take charge so forcefully and fearlessly. He experienced something new: the confidence of a leader.

The crew of the HMS Francis Drake stood at attention; all eyes on their captain. “Men,” Erik exclaimed, “I know you are all brave lads who have risked your lives to be part of this amazing ship’s company. We are going to be under attack by pirates very shortly and your bravery will be tested. We cannot outrun them and we shall have to fight, not only for our own lives, but for the glory of Britain and the Crown. I know I can count on all of you to demonstrate your courage and fortitude in the coming battle. Arm yourselves and steel your souls to conquer the evil that is approaching. God bless you all. And God save the King.”

Erik was in his glory. He could hardly believe how forcefully he had taken control of the situation. A deafening roar arose from the men as they raised their arms, cheering and preparing for battle. They grabbed their billy clubs, knives, and pistols. Several crewmen rushed to man the few cannons on board. Although they knew they would not be sufficient to overcome the volleys of their attackers, they approached their destiny bravely. Erik stood tall at the ship’s stern; his shoulders firm, his hand clutching the hilt of his sword on his waistband. He was ready for the fight, feeling a sense of honor like never before. Dream or no dream, He was going to ride this fantasy to its conclusion proudly.

The pirate ship launched several cannon shots in advance of their broadside attack, splitting one of the masts and toppling it onto the deck killing two crew members. Their next volley damaged the hull. The crew of the HMS Francis Drake responded with their own

canons, but to little avail. The pirates flung their grappling hooks onto the Drake's deck and began to board. As they closed in, another cannon volley hit the Drake's stern. The intensity of the impact knocked Erik off the deck and hurled him into the raging sea. The waves engulfed him, causing him to panic; he had never learned to swim. *I'm going to die!* he thought, as water filled his mouth and rose up into his nose. He struggled and flailed his arms attempting to grasp anything that would prevent him from going under for the last time. The fear of drowning was overwhelming as he sank beneath the surface. Then all went dark.

Erik awoke on the floor of the Viking Lounge underneath the painting of the HMS Francis Drake, semi-conscious in a pool of water, coughing and gasping for air. He heard the ten o'clock chimes of the grandfather clock echo in his ears. He sat up, shook his head and rubbed his eyes. Two hours had passed since he blacked out, but it felt like an entire day had gone by. As he regained his senses, he realized that he was on the floor, dressed in his business suit, soaking wet.

He remained dazed but managed to stand. *What just happened?* His eyes scanned the room to see if anyone had been watching. *Thank God I'm alone. How could I ever explain this?* He dashed into the locker room, grabbed a towel and rushed back to the Viking Lounge to wipe up the puddle that he had been sitting in. The freakish notion that he had been mysteriously pulled into the painting seemed impossible. *But it must have happened,* he deduced. *I know I wasn't dreaming... or was I? No, dammit, it was real! I was gone for nearly two hours. How else could I have become drenched if I hadn't been thrown overboard? And how did the floor get wet, if not for me? No one else was here.*

Still baffled, he returned to the locker room and showered. He put on in the spare suit that he kept in his locker. He placed his wet clothing in a laundry bag then took a taxicab to his apartment. Shaken by the evening's traumatic experience, he found comfort only with the help of sleeping pills. The following morning, he brought his soiled suit to the dry cleaners. Normally, his personal assistant, Jocelyn, attended to his laundry. However, this time he felt it prudent to handle it himself. No need to address any questions she might raise.

“You're awfully quiet,” Henrik Stensrud remarked at dinner Tuesday evening. Erik had planned on dining alone, still baffled by the prior evening's incomprehensible adventure. He was surprised, however, when Stensrud, Jan Berglund and Stig Helberg converged at his table simultaneously. The three men usually ate together at the club, often mocking Erik behind his back. This evening they confronted him together.

“No adventures over the weekend?” Berglund inquired.

“Well, if you must know,” Erik began, “I'm going to do something special next weekend.”

“Let us in on it,” Helberg implored.

“You'd like that, wouldn't you,” he responded smugly. “No, my friends, it's a secret. I don't want to say anything about my trip before all my plans are finalized. I'll give you the details next week. But for now, you'll just have to be patient.”

The four men continued their dinner quietly, except for an occasional brief discussion about business and investments. Erik remained silent. They adjourned to the Viking Lounge for their usual after-dinner wine and cigars. Erik had wanted to be by himself and was disappointed that his favorite chair near the fireplace was already occupied.

“Over there,” Stig exclaimed, leading the way to the seating area at the far end of the room. They continued their dinner discussions for another half-hour until the grandfather clock tolled its eight o’clock chimes. “Time for me get moving,” Jan Berglund said.

“I think I’ll call it a day, too,” Stensrud added.

“Good night, all,” said Helberg.

“Goodnight gentlemen,” Erik remarked. “I’m going to stay a while longer.”

“Don’t forget to let us know about that special trip of yours,” Berglund grinned.

The three friends waited together in the vestibule for the valet to bring their cars. “Do you think he’s ever done the things he claimed?” Berglund asked the others.

“Are you joking,” Helberg replied. “Erik? No way.”

“He’s one of the biggest blowhards in the club,” said Stensrud. “How can you believe anything he says?”

“In addition to that,” Helberg said, “I’ve heard that he manipulates his accounting books to cheat on his taxes. He’s constantly under audit from the government.”

“Honestly,” Stensrud remarked, “I think one day the IRS will catch up with him and he’ll be in big trouble.”

“Meanwhile,” Berglund asserted, “he persists with his outlandish tales of adventure and success, despite the fact that everyone knows he’s a liar. I don’t think he would have amounted to much without his father’s influence and money. Well, here comes my car. Good night gentlemen.” Erik remained in the lounge for another half-hour before leaving, contemplating his next amazing adventure for the coming weekend.

The following morning Erik sat at his desk twiddling his pen. *I have to come up with something unique that I can impress them with.* He remained idle for most of the day, neglecting work, obsessed with

devising a new plan to impress his antagonists at the Harald Club. The memory of Monday night's inexplicable events came pouring back just like the waves crashing onto the deck of the Francis Drake in the painting. *If it happened once, perhaps it could happen again. But maybe I might be able to control it this time.* His late father's antique gold clock on the corner of his desk indicated four-thirty. He pressed the intercom button.

"Jocelyn, I'm leaving early. Just take messages for me."

"Of course, Mr. Berggren. Where can I reach you?"

"I'll be at the Harald Club, but don't call me unless it's extremely urgent. I'll catch up with you in the morning."

"Yes, Mr. B."

There was nothing urgent that afternoon that required Erik's attention. Rarely, in fact, was there anything urgent for which he needed to be called. His subordinates knew his management limitations and handled most all of those matters directly, without ever bothering to notify him.

"You're here early today, Mr. Berggren," the bartender remarked.

"Let me have the usual, Steve," Erik responded indifferently.

Erik took his glass of Chivas into the Viking Lounge where he perused the artwork once again. He stared at *The Francis Drake* before moving on to *Hiking in The Grand Canyon*, *Skiing in Vail*, *Grand Prix Racing*, and *African Safari*. He stopped in front of the painting of the downhill skiers, racing through the slalom gates. *That's it. I'm going skiing this weekend!*

He looked around the room to determine whether anyone was watching. *Good, I'm alone.* He placed his glass on the mantle of the flagstone fireplace and returned to stand in front of the painting he selected for his adventure. Nothing happened. He concentrated on

being in the painting, skiing downhill. Still nothing. *Wait a moment*, he thought. *When I was at the painting of The Francis Drake, I had just finished my Port wine and was smoking a cigar. It was just after eight o'clock. It's only six now. Maybe I need to duplicate that same scenario.*

The grandfather clock chimed six times. Erik ordered another Scotch from the bar and headed for his favorite chair beside the fireplace. "Good evening, Mr. Berggren," said Hector Alvarez.

"Good evening to you, too, Hector. Please inform the Maître D that I'll be dining at six-thirty."

After dinner he ordered a glass of Port wine and returned to the Viking Lounge. He sat in his favorite chair, lit a cigar and contemplated a trip through the painting on the gallery wall. The clock chimed its eighth bell. He finished his wine and approached the painting of skiers racing downhill. He blew a smoke ring, watching it rise and dissipate in the warm air current. To his chagrin nothing happened. He blew another smoke ring. Still nothing. He lowered his eyes in disappointment, when suddenly the room began to spin and he was embraced by a feeling of euphoria. Then blackness.

Erik opened his eyes to find himself seated in a chair lift ascending to the top of the ski run. He noticed the skis that were attached to his boots, and that he was wearing a windbreaker outfit. His mitten-clad hands were holding ski poles on his lap. Although he had never skied, he felt confident that he would know just what to do. As he continued up the slope, the cold mountain air was exhilarating. The sky was cloudless and bright blue. The sun shone high above. His heart pounded with excitement. *I'm really doing this. It's not a dream. I'm going to ski!*

The vista from the top of the Polar Challenge trail was overwhelming. He could see other mountain peaks miles away. He could smell the aroma of pine trees. He heard the call of an eagle as it soared overhead. He reached inside his jacket for his camera phone. *How did I know that I'd have a phone in my jacket? Well, it's my adventure and I need the camera to photograph this view for those pains in the ass at the club.* He snapped several shots of the ski slope as well as a selfie in front of the nearby sign that read "*Skiing is Better in Vail.*" He put the camera safely back in his pocket, zipped it tightly and started his run down the slope. Zigging and zagging at breakneck speed, he experienced the adrenaline rush he imagined that was felt by Bode Miller and Jean-Claude Killy. The *whoosh* of cold air as it whizzed past his ears was now all he could hear. It was his first time on skis, but he felt as though he had been skiing for years.

In his excitement, he failed to notice the sign that read "DANGER: EXPERIENCED SKIERS ONLY – TWENTY FOOT DROP AHEAD." Panic set in as he was unable to stop or divert his path in time to avoid the treacherous drop. He lurched forward as he tumbled over the precipice falling uncontrollably. The ground below was rising quickly. His final thought was, *Oh my God, I'm going to die.* Overcome with fear, he closed his eyes and blacked out just before crashing into the snow bank below.

The chimes from the grandfather clock in the Viking Lounge spared Erik from another disaster. He awoke startled, seated in the wing chair near the fireplace. It was ten pm. What seemed to be a full day of skiing transpired in only two hours.

"Are you all right, Mr. Berggren?" Jason Alvarez inquired. "You were in such a deep sleep and not moving. Your ears and fingers were

red and cold, and your hands were clutching the arms of the chair. I thought that you might be dead.”

“No... no, I’m fine, really,” Erik responded, pulling himself up in the chair. “I was tired and must have fallen asleep. You’re Hector’s boy, aren’t you?”

“Yes sir, my name is Jason. I’m filling in for my father. He had to leave earlier.”

“Get me a cup of coffee, would you?” Erik said.

“Right away, sir,” the boy responded, darting off to the dining room.

Erik felt a chill in his feet. Glancing at his shoes, he noticed that the soles were wet. He felt something wet and cold inside his trouser pocket and discovered, to his astonishment, a small clump of packed snow, which he quickly tossed into the fireplace. *How is this even possible?* he asked himself, unable to arrive at any logical explanation.

Jason returned a with a mug of coffee. “I brought a couple of cookies for you from the kitchen, too. I thought you might like to have them with your coffee.”

“Thank you, Jason. Just leave them on the table. All I wanted was the coffee.”

He reached inside his jacket pocket for his phone. His eyes sparkled like a child who had just opened a Christmas present. He marveled at the photographs he had taken from the top of the Polar Challenge ski slope. The radiant blue-white snow, the clear sky, the panoramic view of the mountains and the selfie were astonishing. Not only had he traveled miraculously through the painting to Vail, he could brag about his expertise on the most challenging ski slope. And he could prove it with these pictures.

Erik stepped out of the taxicab in front of his apartment building. The concierge opened the door. “Good evening, Mr. Berggren. I hope you had a pleasant day.” Erik smiled and nodded without answering.

He rode his private elevator to the penthouse. After pouring a glass of Scotch, he outlined his next exciting adventure, compliments of the paintings in the Viking Lounge. *It was a bit risky to have gone into the painting in the middle of the week*, he thought. *I was fortunate that no one spotted me. I should only try this on Monday when the Viking Lounge is usually empty.* Satisfied with his plan, he showered and went to bed, this time without requiring the aid of sleeping pills.

“Jocelyn, would you get me the weather report for Vail, Colorado for Saturday?” Erik said into his intercom Thursday morning. The intercom rang back two minutes later.

“The National Weather Service is predicting cold and clear weather for the entire weekend. Are you planning to go skiing?” she said sarcastically, knowing that Erik didn’t ski.

“No, Joce, I was just curious.”

“Anything else, Mr. B.?”

“That’s it for now, Jocelyn.” He leaned back and put his feet on the desk. *I have my plan for the weekend.* He pressed the intercom button again. “One more thing, Joce. Call the Harald Club and make a six-thirty dinner reservation for four. Also call Jan Berglund, Stig Helberg and Henrik Stensrud and ask them to join me.”

After fifteen minutes, Erik’s intercom buzzed. “They’ll all be there, Mr. B.”

“Make a note, Jocelyn,” he said as he left for the day, “I’m taking tomorrow off.”

“Order up, gentlemen, drinks are on me tonight,” Erik declared.

“To what do we owe this magnanimous gift of yours, Erik,” Stensrud asked.

The waiter brought their drinks. Erik continued, “I’d like to propose a toast. My friends, let us drink to adventure.”

“Come on, Erik, what kind of adventure are you going to share with us now?” Berglund asked, contemptuously.

“I’m leaving tomorrow morning for a weekend of skiing in Colorado,” Erik replied, smugly.

“Oh, really!” exclaimed Berglund. “I didn’t know you skied.”

“Be careful you don’t break your leg,” Stensrud snickered.

“Or your neck, for that matter,” Helberg added.

“Well, I haven’t skied in a while,” Erik said, “but I want to get back to it. I used to be pretty good some years back, you know.”

“You’ll tell us all about it on Monday, then, won’t you?” Stensrud asked, smiling sardonically.

“You can be sure of it,” Erik said. “Let’s eat.”

The men engaged in small talk, Erik being more animated than usual, adding to the conversation at every opportunity. “Shall we adjourn to the lounge for drinks?” His guests each politely declined in favor of making it an early evening. “All right, then,” Erik said. “See you next time.” He ordered a glass of Port wine and went into the Viking Lounge after the others left.

As they waited in the vestibule for their cars, Helberg began, “Erik was in rare form this evening. What do you think he’s got up his sleeve?”

“Strange man,” said Stensrud. “Skiing? Come on... Erik? Really?”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” added Berglund.

Erik sat in the wing chair and gazed into the fireplace. He avoided going near the paintings on the far wall. Hector Alvarez approached

him. “Mr. Berggren, your chauffer is here. He’s waiting for you out front.”

“Thank you, Hector. Good night.”

In an unusual gesture, Erik gave the coat check girl a \$5 bill. “Here, Joan. This is for you.”

“Gee, thanks, Mr. Berggren. That’s awfully nice of you.”

He spent all day Friday and the weekend secluded at his home in Chappaqua.

At ten am Monday Erik’s intercom buzzed. Jocelyn’s cheerful voice announced, “Mr. B., Mr. Helberg’s on Line One.”

“Good morning, Stig,” Erik greeted his friend.

“So, Erik, how was your weekend? I hope you didn’t hurt yourself skiing.”

“On the contrary, Stig, it was wonderful. I even have some great photos to share with you and the boys.”

“Let’s all get together for dinner at the club this evening, say six-thirty? I’d love to see those pictures you took.” Helberg said.

“Sure. I’ll see you all there. Have good day,” Erik gloated. His eyes glistened as he reviewed his Vail photos. *I can hardly wait to show these to those idiots and watch their eyes pop out of their heads!*

Erik’s comrades were speechless during dinner. “You sure as hell fooled me,” Berglund said.

“So, you really can ski,” Helberg added. “I’m impressed.”

“You look pretty good in that ski outfit,” said Stensrud.

“Told you,” Erik bragged, his arrogance running at top speed.

“What’re you going to do next?” Berglund inquired.

“Not sure. But I’ll let you know soon enough.” He spent the rest of the week basking in the praise bestowed on him by his dinner mates.

Helberg, Stensrud and Berglund compared notes the following morning in a three-way phone call.

“Do you honestly believe those photos are real?” Helberg asked.

“I’m not so sure,” said Stensrud. “I don’t see how he was able to get all that ski equipment so quickly.”

“Haven’t you heard of Photoshop?” said Berglund. “Erik Berggren skiing?? I don’t buy it. He has only two areas of expertise: bragging and bullshitting. He had those pictures made up, or at least doctored in some way. I don’t believe he ever skied in his life.”

“Well,” Stensrud said, “Let’s see what his next cockamamie escapade will be.”

After dining alone at the club on Friday evening, Erik adjourned once again to the Viking Lounge to plan the next adventure that he believed would raise his status in the eyes of his antagonists. Glancing at the paintings, his eyes became riveted on the one titled “African Safari.” *I’ll show those smartasses how good I am.* He spent the weekend in Chappaqua contemplating the excitement of hunting wild game in Africa.

At precisely eight pm Monday, Erik placed his empty wine glass on the table alongside the wing chair in the Viking Lounge, lit a cigar and approached the painting of wild animals in the Serengeti. Once he was comfortable knowing that he was alone in the room, he stood in front of the painting and blew a smoke ring. He began to feel woozy, as expected, and closed his eyes. He felt as if he were falling, but immediately rose to find himself seated in the back of an open Range Rover as it bounced along on a dirt road. The sky was clear but for a

few puffy clouds; acacia trees studded the landscape here and there. It was quiet except for the rough hum of the motor.

“Clive Wadsworth,” said the mustachioed man sitting alongside him, offering his hand.

“Erik Berggren,” he responded. “You’re British, aren’t you?”

“Indeed. Been on many safaris, old chap?”

“My first,” Erik said.

“Not to worry, lad,” Wadsworth continued. “I’ve been on quite a few. Just don’t get too close to the lions. They spook easily. Especially the females. Killers, the lot of them.” Erik was amused by Wadsworth’s accent. *He sounds like one of those characters in “Bridge on the River Kwai.”*

He took several photographs of giraffes, zebras and wildebeests that were grazing peacefully. *These will make some impressive shots for those jackasses back at the club,* he mused. The Range Rover continued its trek jostling along the dirt road for several more minutes while Erik continued to photograph more animals.

“I think it’s safe to dismount here,” Chester, the driver said, looking through his binoculars. “There’s a pride of lions about two hundred yards ahead lying in the brush over there to our right beneath that fig tree. We mustn’t disturb them. They’re quiet now, but they might be preparing for a hunt soon, which means they’ll be on edge and extremely dangerous.”

“Wonderful chap, our guide,” said Wadsworth. “The man knows his lions.”

Rifles ready, the two safari hunters followed their guide cautiously inching through the brush, creeping closer to the lions, trying not to arouse them. “There are two huge males along with the females,” Chester warned. “I can see some cubs with them also. They’ll be very protective of them. Let’s be extra careful and not go too far from the Rover.”

“Do you think we’re safe, here?” asked a nervous Erik.

“What, with Chester here?” Clive admonished. “No problem, old man.”

One of the male lions stood, suddenly aware of the hunters’ presence. He stared at them and growled a warning, displaying his nearly three-inch canines. The females perked up their ears, rose and snarled.

“We’d better head back to the Rover,” warned Chester. “I don’t think it’s safe out here anymore.”

The three men backed up slowly for a few yards, then did a quick about face and began to run. In his haste, Erik tripped and became tangled in the brush. He lay on the ground while Chester and Clive raced to the Range Rover. “Help me, please,” he cried.

“Get up and run as fast as you can,” Chester called back to him.

Clive turned, raised his rifle and fired two shots at the three lions that were racing toward them. One of the two males stopped and fell, dead. Clive yelled to Erik, “Come on, man, run.” Erik extricated himself from the brush and ran toward the Range Rover while the other male lion continued charging only a few yards behind. The expression on Erik’s face was the epitome of pure and total panic.

Hector Alvarez plugged in the vacuum cleaner and began his evening chores in the Viking Lounge. He noticed that the time on the grandfather clock was incorrect. *That’s unusual. It’s nearly eleven o’clock. Why does the clock say only eight-thirty? It must have stopped. Oh, that boy of mine! Jason must have forgotten to wind it Friday night.* Hector turned off the vacuum cleaner, reset the hands on the clock to the correct time and wound it properly. Eleven chimes sounded five minutes later. *Back on schedule*, he noted. He removed

the feather duster from his cleaning cart and began to dust the paintings on the wall opposite the fireplace.

The cheerful tune he was humming ceased abruptly when he became horrified at what he saw in the painting of the African Safari. A man was being chased by a huge lion leaping on him from behind. He was mortified by the look of terror that contorted the man's face. It appeared as if the man were trying to escape out of the painting, but became frozen just inside the canvas. "Aieee, Dios mio!" he exclaimed. *That man looks just like Mr. Erik Berggren. How is that possible?*

He dropped his feather duster and dashed to Arne Hanson's office. Arne was still at his desk, studying the club's financial reports. "Mr. Hanson, Mr. Hanson, come quickly," Hector pleaded.

"What is it Hector? It's late and I'm tired. What's the emergency?"

"Well, Mr. Hanson, it's not a real emergency, but I think you should see this."

"It better be good, Hector. I've had a long day and I'm ready to go home."

"Something strange in the Viking Lounge," Hector replied.

He pointed at the painting, averting his eyes to avoid witnessing the horror he saw earlier. "There, Mr. Hanson. Do you see who that is?"

Arne Hanson examined the painting without evoking any reaction. "Have you been drinking Hector? Is this a joke?"

"No Mr. Hanson, it is no joke." He turned back toward the painting reluctantly. "Oh my God, he's gone. I am so sorry, Mr. Hanson. It appears normal now. Maybe it was my imagination. Again, sir, I am so sorry to have disturbed you. I just thought for a moment that I saw..."

“Maybe you’re just tired, too,” Arne said, patting Hector on the back. “Go get a cup of coffee. Then you can finish cleaning. I’m going home now. Good night.”

Hector sat in the kitchen drinking his coffee. *What is wrong with my eyes? How could Mr. Berggren be in the painting? It must have been my imagination. Maybe I am tired.* He completed his evening’s duties, locked the front door of the Harald Club and went home. He tried to forget about the painting as he got into bed, kissed his wife, turned off the lamp and fell asleep.

Arne Hanson and Hector Alvarez both failed to notice something in the painting that wasn’t there earlier. In the background, a lion was dragging a man into the bush to serve as dinner for the pride. The following morning, the painting reverted to its original form, exactly as it had been the day before.

Arne Hanson approached the three gentlemen dining together Friday evening. “Has anyone seen or heard from Erik Berggren? He hasn’t been here all week.”

“Maybe he’s on one of his grand adventures,” said Jan Berglund.

“I haven’t seen him, have you, Henrik?” Stig Helberg added.


“Not a whisker. Have you called his office, Arne?”

“I did, this morning,” Arne replied. “His secretary hasn’t heard anything from him either. He seems to have vanished.”

“I guess he’ll turn up sooner or later, bragging about one thing or another,” Berglund surmised.

The following Monday, Jocelyn called the police and filed a missing persons report. They conducted a search, but to this day, Erik Berggren’s whereabouts remain unknown.

The Girl in the Ice Cream Shop

Celaine was a sweet young girl who wore frilly outfits and loved to snuggle in bed with her dolls. Her bedroom walls were pink with matching lace window curtains, bedspread, sheets, and pillow cases. Her younger brother, Stefan, loved baseball. Posters of his favorite team decorated his bedroom walls. Derek Jeter's was the largest, along with those of Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Yogi Berra, and Joe DiMaggio. The Yankees  logo adorned his bed covers.

Celaine was eleven years old and Stefan was nine when their parents died tragically in an automobile accident on their way home from a concert. A drunk driver hit them head-on only one mile from their home in Deal, NJ. The children's aunt and uncle became their legal guardians.

Margaret was their mother's sister. She and her husband, William, managed a small ice cream shop on the boardwalk in nearby Asbury Park. After the accident, they moved out of their small apartment above the shop and into the children's home in Deal. They felt it would be in the children's best interest for them to remain in familiar surroundings.

William began molesting Celaine within a month after moving in. He told her that he just wanted to tuck her into bed each night and offer words of comfort. Shortly afterwards, his kisses on her forehead progressed further into inappropriate touching and caressing. Naïve and frightened, Celaine remained passive and compliant. She knew that she was a victim of her uncle's incest, but could not convince him to stop. She also felt that if she told her aunt, she would be blamed for encouraging him into her bed. After a year of William's nighttime

incursions, Celaine began her own weekly visits to her brother's bedroom to offer him the same kind of "comfort" she received from her uncle. William's visits to Celaine's bed continued unabated for several years, as did her visits to Stefan.

One week after Celaine's sixteenth birthday early in July, William persuaded her to accompany him to the ice cream shop to help him run the counter. Although Celaine agreed, her aunt expressed concern. "Don't worry, dear," William assured her. "I'll pay her and she'll be fine. We'll be home before midnight. I'll take good care of her." "Make sure you do," Margaret insisted. "I don't want her out so late. She's still a child."

It was unusually cool and quiet for July. By 10 pm most of the crowd were gone. "Wipe down the counter, Celaine," William instructed. "I'm going to close the shop early tonight." She hung up her apron and waited for her uncle to lock the door. "Come with me, sweetheart," he said. "I want to show you something interesting." He led his niece down the wooden stairway alongside the shop and underneath the boardwalk. "Your Aunt Margaret and I used to sit here on the sand when we were younger."

Oh, God, not again. Not here. I can't take any more of this, Celaine thought.

"Why don't you just lie down for a few moments," he coaxed, "and relax."

"No!" Celaine insisted. "I've had enough of this. I don't want you to touch me anymore."

"Come now, dear," William urged. "Just stay calm. You know you enjoy this." He grabbed hold of her shoulders and shoved her down to the sand. "Just lie down here. The sand is nice and cool."

"Stop it!" she screamed. "Stop it! Don't touch me."

William covered her mouth with his massive hand. “Be quiet Celaine, someone will hear you,” he grunted as he lay on top of her. “Lie there nicely like I asked you to.”

Celaine twisted her shoulders, freeing herself from his grip. She bared her teeth and hissed, like an angry animal. Then, to her uncle’s horror, she emitted a fierce growl. Her breathing became labored as her eyes widened in anger and her dilated pupils turned bright yellow. Huge canine teeth protruded from her over-extended jaws that gushed saliva. William recoiled and froze in horror as the wolf-like creature lunged at him, tearing and gnawing at his throat, ripping it apart. Blood splattered in all directions. William’s failed attempts to scream were smothered as the creature severed his vocal cords. His lifeless body collapsed onto the blood-stained sand. The creature stared at its victim then raised its head and howled; a long shrill howl that echoed under the wooden slats of the boardwalk and was heard as far as a mile away. It then turned and fled on all fours into the blackness of night.

Stefan felt the warmth of his sister’s naked body awakening him in the middle of the night. “Do you want to do this now?” he asked.

“No. I just need to be near you tonight. Go back to sleep.” She eased her arm around her brother’s shoulder, snuggling alongside him, and fell into a deep sleep.

Celaine awoke to warm sunshine peering through the shades, and returned to her own bed just before her aunt knocked on her door. “Do you know where your Uncle William is?”

“No, Aunt Margaret, I don’t. Isn’t he with you?”

“He didn’t come home last night, and it’s already seven o’clock. I’m worried.”

“After he drove me home, he said that he left something at the shop and had to go back for it. I don’t know what it was, and I didn’t think to ask. Did you call him there?”

“That’s a good idea, sweetheart. I’ll do that now. But I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Don’t worry, Aunt Margaret, maybe he was tired and fell asleep there.”

After the fifth ring, Margaret was visibly shaken. She let the phone ring another five times. The front doorbell rang just as she hung it up.

“Sorry to bother you ma’am,” the uniformed police officer stated. “Is this the home of William Hornsby?”

“Yes, it is. I’m his wife, Margaret,” she answered with trepidation.

“Ma’am, I’m afraid I have some bad news. We discovered your husband’s body under the boardwalk early this morning. It seems he was the victim of an attack.”

Margaret’s face reflected the horror at the news of her husband’s death. “What...? Who...?” she trembled. “Why would anyone kill William?”

“Actually, Mrs. Hornsby,” the officer continued, “we’re not certain that it is a homicide, although we are checking into it. The coroner thinks it’s possible that he might have been attacked by an animal.”

“An animal???” she gulped.

“That’s what he said, ma’am,” the officer continued. “Perhaps you might come with me; to identify the body, I mean.”

Margaret stood in the doorway, beginning to swoon. The officer reached out to steady her. “Are you all right, ma’am? Can I help you?”

“I’ll be okay. Let me tell the children and I’ll be right with you.”

Margaret went to inform Celaine, who was lying on her bed. “There’s a police officer downstairs who just told me that your Uncle William has been killed, or murdered, or maybe even attacked by a wild animal. I’m going with him to identify the body.” Margaret said, weeping. “You and your brother stay here until I return. Will you be all right?”

“Sure, Aunt Margaret. I’ll tell Stefan. How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed, wiping her tears with her fingers.

Celaine approached her aunt and hugged her. She grabbed a tissue from her nightstand and proceeded to dab her aunt’s tears. “You’ll be all right. We’ll all be all right.”

“Thank you so much, dear,” Margaret murmured. “You’re so sweet, so loving.” She went downstairs and accompanied the police officer to the station house.

Stefan was still sleeping as Celaine approached. “Wake up, sweet brother, Uncle William’s dead,” she announced. “Aunt Margaret just left with the police to identify his body.”

“No shit,” Stefan responded. “What happened?”

“They found him under the boardwalk, all bloodied.”

“Who did it?”

“They said he might have been attacked by an animal.”

“Wow,” Stefan exclaimed.

“Yeah, wow. Aunt Margaret will be gone for a while. Move over.” She removed her nightclothes and slid alongside him as he lay in bed. “Take off your pajamas,” she whispered. Stefan smiled and obeyed his sister.

The Asbury Park police canvassed the neighborhoods near the ice cream shop for several weeks but came up empty handed. They thought perhaps a large dog might have been the culprit, but every dog owner was able to account for their pet on the night of the attack. No one had seen or reported a wild animal anywhere in the vicinity. William's death remained unsolved, but the case remained open.

Margaret re-opened the shop one week after her husband's funeral, having to rely on the income it provided. She hung a photograph of William on the wall, framed with a black ribbon. Being in the shop was not easy. The realization that William had been brutally and viciously killed just below the boardwalk added to her anxiety. Fearful that the killer, or whatever animal that attacked her husband, was still at large, she purchased a gun to keep in the shop and a second handgun to keep in the nightstand drawer beside her bed.

Celaine and Stefan helped in the shop, making sodas, serving ice cream and tidying up. Boys continued to gawk at Celaine, who always smiled and flirted back. Young girls flocked to the handsome Stefan, intoxicated by his smile. By the end of the summer, the shop experienced its greatest profits. Margaret attributed their success to two things: pity for William's tragic demise, and the attraction of her beautiful niece and handsome nephew.

Margaret took care of the huge home in Deal and managed to find part-time jobs during the winter and spring while Celaine and Stefan attended school. The following summer, the three of them ran the ice cream shop on the boardwalk. As usual, the boys were entranced by Celaine's beauty; the young girls swooned over Stefan, who continued to welcome his sister's visits into his bedroom. There were no incidents of animal attacks that year.

When Celaine turned eighteen, she petitioned the court for legal guardianship of her brother and full control over her parent's estate, which was considerable. She felt an obligation to her Aunt Margaret and allowed her to remain in her home for as long as she wanted. Margaret was content with the arrangement as she continued to operate the shop in Asbury Park with Stefan's help. Celaine had other plans. With her beauty and poise, she obtained modeling jobs with a New York City modeling agency. Between jobs, she helped her aunt in the ice cream shop as often as time permitted. News of Celaine's modeling career spread swiftly throughout the local communities at the Jersey Shore. Margaret hung posters of her niece's swimsuit posters and perfume ads near the counter of the shop. Some of the younger boys were thrilled that Celaine agreed to autograph their T-shirts. The older boys, as well as many of the men, continued to ask her for a date, which she declined.

During the two years following William's untimely and horrific death, no one saw or heard of the wild animal thought to be responsible for his death. All seemed back to normal. Until one Saturday evening in August. Celaine finally gave in and succumbed to the persistent advances of Edmund ("Eddie the Playboy") Curtin. Eddie was a charmer with golden hair and sparkling blue eyes. Standing over six-feet tall, bronzed by the summer sun and blessed with the body of an Olympic swimmer, women were easily infatuated and drawn to him. He knew this and played to their desires, flirting and teasing them at every turn. They were easily seduced, but soon after his conquests he found excuses for avoiding them.

It was different with Celaine; she exuded the kind of confidence and self-assurance that Eddie found missing in most of the other women that ogled him. She had avoided him, uncomfortable with

their age difference; Eddie being sixteen years older. He continued to visit the ice cream shop every day for several weeks, buying ice cream and sodas, flirting, and pleading with Celaine to go on just one date. *Despite his age, she thought, he's still quite a hunk. It might be fun.*

Margaret was not pleased that Celaine wouldn't be working at the ice cream shop that Saturday night. "You know, Celaine," she said, "Saturday nights are our busiest times. I really could use your help."

"Eddie's going to pick me up at nine o'clock, so it won't be so bad. Stefan will help you. Besides, Aunt Margaret," she added, "I've got my own life to lead."

At 8:45 pm Celaine removed her apron and went to the private room at the rear of the ice cream shop to prepare for her date with Eddie. She put on her sexy leather skirt, high heels and skimpy blouse. Eddie arrived promptly at nine. He wore white cotton slacks, a black silk designer T-shirt and a powder blue linen sport jacket, "Wow, you certainly look spiffy," Celaine commented with a smile. "Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to the Paradise Club for drinks and dancing," he replied enthusiastically.

"You do know that I'm under the legal drinking age," Celaine remarked, sarcastically.

"I didn't think of that," he grunted.

"Don't worry, silly," Celaine quipped. "I have a fake ID that I use in New York all the time."

She watched Eddie's face change from disappointment to relief. "Let's go," she said, grabbing her purse. Turning to her aunt, she added, "Don't wait up for me Aunt Margaret. I'll be home late."

"Have a good time, dear," Margaret responded while continuing to prepare an ice cream soda. "But don't be too late."

"Have fun, sis. Be good," Stefan added.

“Hiya, Eddie,” the bouncer exclaimed. “Good to see you again.”

“You, too, Mike,” Eddie replied, strutting into the club with Celaine on his arm, self-satisfied as all the men turned to ogle his gorgeous companion. He slipped the maître D’ a \$20 bill and was escorted to a table in the rear.

“What are you drinking?” the waitress asked.

“Bottle of Champagne,” Eddie exclaimed.

“Is this a special occasion?” Celaine giggled.

“You’re my special occasion. I’m celebrating the fact that you finally said ‘Yes.’”

Celaine smiled and crossed her legs, exposing her shapely calves for all to see. Eddie beamed, aware that the other men were envious that he, Eddie Curtin, was with the most beautiful woman in the club.

Celaine and Eddie danced, drank and laughed for the next three hours. He ordered a second bottle of Champagne, which they had no difficulty emptying. “Will you look at the time!” Celaine remarked. “It’s almost one o’clock. Where did the time go?”

“You tired already?”

“A bit. I worked all day today. I think I’m about ready to go home,” she said, wearily.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay and dance some more?”

“We should leave,” she said, to which Eddie reluctantly agreed.

The night was clear with a warm breeze. Celaine hadn’t realized how much alcohol she had consumed and was feeling woozy. Eddie supported her as she stumbled to his car and helped her into the front seat of his convertible. The fresh air didn’t help as she remained groggy. He drove to a secluded section in the park alongside Deal Lake, a spot he had frequented with many of his previous dates. He

helped her out of the car and laid her down on the grass beneath a willow tree; his favorite seduction spot. “What are we doing here?” she asked, not feeling quite herself.

“We’re just here to rest a while. The fresh air will do you good.” He leaned in closer and kissed her. Celaine did not resist, but neither did she respond with the kind of passion that Eddie hoped for. He continued kissing her mouth, her neck, and her ears while at the same time, attempting to unbutton her blouse. Aware of the unexpected coolness of the grass on her bare skin, she immediately sat up and realized that she was being undressed.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she screamed.

“Shhh, be quiet sweetie,” he assured her. “It’s all right. Just lie back down for me.”

“No, damn it,” she shouted, pushing him away. “It’s not all right!”

“Let’s not play games, Celaine. What did you expect?”

“Certainly not this,” she retorted, sobering up quickly.

Eddie grabbed her shoulders and pinned her down on the cold grass. “Don’t fight it. You’re gonna enjoy this.” The last words he uttered, “Trust me,” were stifled as the wolf-like creature snarled and forced him onto his back before ripping at his throat, spraying blood in all directions. The creature continued to tear into his face, leaving him virtually unrecognizable. It then backed up slowly and leaned against the willow tree and howled. Slowly, the beast morphed back into the beautiful woman it had been moments earlier.

Celaine walked to the edge of the lake and washed off Eddie’s spattered blood then walked the two miles to her home. She showered and, although she felt the need to be comforted by her brother, her energy was drained. She went directly to her own room and slept by herself.

“How was your date last evening?” asked Margaret at breakfast. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Eddie dropped me off a little after one o’clock. He said it was early for him and that he was going to return to the club. We kissed at the front door, and I came up and went to bed.”

“So, you have a new boyfriend, huh?” exclaimed Stefan.

“I wouldn’t say that exactly,” Celaine responded, as she sipped her coffee slowly, smiling at her brother and aunt.

“Will you both help me later at the shop? It’s a beautiful beach day and I think we’ll be able to sell a lot of ice cream today.”

“Sure, Aunt Margaret, I’d love to,” Celaine replied.

She reached under the breakfast table and caressed Stefan’s thigh. Stefan placed his hand on top of hers, stared into her eyes and smiled. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

At three o’clock that afternoon, Detective Zelhof from the Monmouth County Police Department arrived at the ice cream shop. “Is there a...” he stopped and glanced at his note pad. “Is there a Celaine Lupescu here?”

“I’m Celaine,” the young woman answered. “What can I do for you? Want some ice cream?”

“Maybe later,” Zelhof responded. “Did you know a man by the name of Edmund Curtin?”

“Why? Has anything happened to him? Is he all right?”

“Mr. Curtin’s body was found early this morning near Deal Lake. His body was pretty badly mutilated, possibly mauled by a wild animal. We heard that you were seen with him last night at the Paradise Club. Is that correct?”

“Oh my God, that’s horrible,” Celaine gasped, dropping her ice cream scoop and raising both hands to her mouth. “I just saw him last

night. Yes, we were together at the Paradise Club. We danced and had a couple of drinks. Oops,” she said, “I suppose I shouldn’t have said anything about drinking.”

“That’s not what I care about, ma’am,” the detective stated. “I’m more concerned about what you did after you left the club. What time did you leave the club?”

“I remember looking at my watch at about a quarter to one. I told him that I was tired. He said, ‘Fine,’ and agreed to take me right home. He dropped me off at around one o’clock. We kissed good-night and then he left. He said he was going back to the club. As I said, I was very tired and went right to bed. You can ask my Aunt Margaret.”

“That’s right, Detective,” Margaret concurred. “Celaine came home just about one in the morning and went right to bed.”

Turning back to Celaine, Zelhof reiterated, “And you don’t know what he did after he dropped you off?”

“Like I told you, detective, Eddie said he was going directly back to the club. He wasn’t as tired as I was and said he wanted to do some more dancing, or whatever. It was only our first date, so I didn’t really care that much about what he was going to do for the rest of the night. I just wanted to go to bed.”

“Fair enough. But I may have to come back and ask you some more questions later on.” He gave her his business card. “If you think of anything else, please give me a call.”

“Of course, Detective.”

Margaret, Celaine and Stefan spent the evening at home. Margaret went to bed early. Celaine and Stefan watched TV until eleven and went to their rooms. Fifteen minutes later, Celaine was already snuggled next to her brother; her nightclothes lying on the floor beside the bed.

The Monday editions of the *Asbury Park Press*, *The Star Ledger*, and local community newspapers all headlined the mysterious, mangled death of Edmund Curtin. They noted the similarity to the mysterious and unsolved death of William Hornsby two years earlier. What they didn't investigate, however, was Celaine's direct connection to the two mutilated men. Nor was she questioned any further by the police. Based on the medical examiner's reports on both deaths, police believed that they were the result of a wild animal attack.

Detective Zelhof was not satisfied that the incidents were relegating to Animal Control. He was like the famed TV detective, Columbo; relentless and persistent. He sensed a connection with both deaths to Celaine. He felt that speaking to her aunt might open some doors into his investigation. He telephoned her the next afternoon.

"Hello, Mrs. Hornsby? This is Detective Zelhof. Would you mind if I came over this evening to ask a few more questions about Eddie Curtin's death?"

"I don't see what more there is to say, Detective. But I suppose it will be all right."

Zelhof arrived at 7 pm. "How can I help, Detective?" Margaret asked as she led him into the living room.

"Is your niece at home?"

"No, she's out for the evening," Margaret replied. "I don't expect her back home for a while yet. You know these young, popular girls, I'm sure. Please, Detective, have a seat. Do you have children?"

"I'm divorced, but I have daughter, too. I know what you mean." He sat on the sofa and took out a notepad and pen from his inside jacket pocket. Margaret sat opposite him.

"What would you like to know, Detective?"

"This is quite a lovely home you have here, Mrs. Hornsby," he began.

"Yes, we love it here. But it's not really mine, you know."

“Oh?”

“No. It belongs to Celaine and her brother, Stefan. Their parents were killed in a car accident nearly ten years ago. My husband, William and I became their guardians – Celaine’s mother and I were sisters. We moved in here soon after the accident. Celaine allowed me to live here permanently after William was... well, after his death. She’s such a sweetheart. She and Stefan help me from time to time at the ice cream shop.” She paused, then smiled at him. “Would you like a cup of coffee, Detective? I just brewed a fresh pot.”

“That would be nice.”

“Let’s sit in the kitchen,” she suggested, feeling comfortable in the detective’s presence.

“Good coffee,” Zelhof commented.

Margaret smiled. “Why, thank you.”

“Tell me more about your husband, Mrs. Hornsby, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” she responded, placing her cup into the saucer. “I met him when we were teenagers, at the beach in Asbury Park. My sister, Adrianna – Celaine’s mother – and I had recently arrived in America from Romania. We lived with our parents and our grandmother in the Cozia Forest. Adrianna was terrified of the wild animals there and wanted to leave. One of them bit her while she was gathering berries with our older brother. Thank God he had his gun. He shot at it and it ran away. Not long afterwards, we heard stories of people being mauled by some of them. We both decided to save up and come to America. We saw pictures of the lovely beaches in New Jersey and settled here at the shore. While we were lying on the sand on day, a young man came over and sat near us. It was William. He noticed me first. He was so handsome, and I was flattered when he asked me out. The rest, as they say, is history. He didn’t have much money, but we

fell in love anyway. Adrianna had other plans. She wanted to marry a rich man, which she did. It was so sad when they died.”

“How did your husband treat the children?”

“William was quite fond of the children. We never had any of our own, you see. He was especially protective of Celaine, being so young and impressionable. He was very close with her. I was a bit partial to Stefan. You know, to balance things out.”

Zelhof nodded and took notes. “Yes, I understand. Please, Mrs. Hornsby, tell me what you know about Celaine’s relationship with Eddie Curtin.”

“Oh, you mean the boy that was killed recently.”

“He was not a boy, Mrs. Hornsby. He was thirty-four years old.”

“Well, detective, all I know is that he lingered around the ice cream shop, constantly pestering Celaine for a date. If you must know, I was not too happy when she agreed to go out with him. Because of the difference in their ages, you understand. I was afraid that he might take advantage of her, being only eighteen.”

“And did he take advantage of her?”

“I can’t say for sure. He brought her home at around one in the morning and then he went back to the club. At least that’s what Celaine told me.”

Zelhof put his notebook away and prepared to leave. “Thank you, Mrs. Hornsby. You’ve been helpful.”

“Goodbye, Detective. Let me know if there’s anything else I can do,” Margaret said as she escorted him to the door. “Feel free to call me any time.”

The mystery of the two men whose bodies had been mangled remained unsolved. Celaine continued her successful modeling career; Stefan enrolled at Rutgers University. Margaret managed the

ice cream shop from spring through early fall. Celaine dated occasionally without experiencing any ill-mannered men, but with no one special in her life. She continued to visit Stefan's bedroom each time he came home from school.

In his junior year, Stefan met and fell in love with Rachelle Gardner, his biology lab partner. Soon afterwards, his weekend visits home to Deal became less frequent, while he remained on campus with Rachelle. On those occasions when he did return to Deal, he was less interested in his sister's nighttime visits. "I'm really not much in the mood, tonight," he told Celaine.

"What's the matter?" she replied with a coy grin. "Don't you love me? Or are you so in love with your new girlfriend that you don't want me anymore."

Stefan glared at his sister. "I just want to go to sleep." Dejected, Celaine put on her nightclothes and skulked back to her own bedroom.

Stefan surprised his sister and aunt one weekend by bringing Rachelle with him. "Well, we finally get to meet the young woman who's captured my nephew's heart," Margaret beamed.

"Nice to meet you," Celaine said, extending her hand. Rachelle reached in and hugged her.

"Stefan has told me so much about you, Celaine. And you, too, Aunt Margaret. I'm so happy to be here."

"I'll prepare a wonderful dinner for us tonight," Margaret said. "We'll eat in the formal dining room."

When all were seated, Stefan surprised everyone with a toast. "Please raise your glasses; I have an announcement to make."

Margaret smiled; Celaine remained disinterested.

“To the future Mrs. Stefan Lupescu! Rachelle and I are getting married.”

“How wonderful and exciting, Stefan. Congratulations to you and Rachelle,” Margaret exclaimed.

“Yes,” Celaine said, the word barely leaking through a half-hearted smile. Immediately following Stefan’s toast, Rachelle rose and planted a big kiss on his cheek. He responded by wrapping his arms around her and kissing her passionately.

“All right, lovers,” Margaret blurted. “Enough of that. We’re still at dinner. Save it for later.” Celaine made every attempt to hide her scowl with another dispassionate smile.

After dinner, they adjourned to the living room. Margaret asked Rachelle about her studies, her family, their background; even probing into her plans for children. Celaine sat quietly. Finally, she blurted, “I don’t think we should be asking about Rachelle’s plans for children. That’s too personal, don’t you think?”

“Well, Stefan and I do want children, but we hope to wait until we’re established in our careers. But I don’t mind the question. I mean, we’ll all be family, right?”

They continued to chat for another hour. “We’re going up to bed now,” Stefan announced. “Rachelle is going to stay in my room.”

“You don’t need my permission,” Margaret said. “You’re both adults, and you’re engaged. I’m sure you’ve been together already at school.”

“Don’t look at me,” Celaine snarled. “Do what you want.”

Stefan and Rachelle returned to Deal at the end of their school year to spend the summer at the beach. Rachelle was eager to help at the ice cream shop, to Margaret’s delight. Celaine spent most of her time sunning herself on the sand, surrounded by her many admirers.

Margaret kept the shop open late to accommodate the huge crowds during the scorching July 4th weekend. That evening, Margaret turned to Celaine. “We could have used a bit more of your help today.”

“Rachelle was here, wasn’t she?” Celaine snapped. “I’m sure you did okay.”

“Well, Celaine, there’s no need for that attitude.”

Celaine looked away. “I’m just tired, that’s all. I’m going up to bed.”

Stefan and Rachelle helped Margaret clear the table, then they, too, went to bed. All was quiet until Stefan’s bedroom door flung open. Celaine burst into the room, interrupting the young couple in bed. Startled, they sat up and faced the interloper. Terrified, Rachelle cowered behind her lover, clutching the covers to her chest. “What the f...” Stefan yelled. Get the hell out of here, Celaine.”

“I’ve had enough of this, little brother,” Celaine bellowed. “You’re mine and I won’t let her or anyone else take you away from me!”

Margaret, first hearing the commotion and then hearing Rachelle’s screams, grabbed her pistol from the nightstand drawer and ran into Stefan’s room to witness Celaine’s growl as she was completing her transformation, “If I can’t have you, no one will. Say goodbye to her, brother!”

Stefan threw his body on top of Rachelle to protect her from the wolf-creature that was ready to leap upon them. Shots rang out; two, three, then four... Margaret continued firing until all that was heard was the click, click, click of the empty chamber. She dropped the gun and collapsed on the floor, sobbing. Stefan shoved the creature off the bed, where it hit the floor with a heavy thud. He turned back to comfort Rachelle, who was in shock, shaking uncontrollably. “It’s all

right, my love,” he said, holding her as tightly as he could. “It’s over. You’re safe here with me now.”

“What just happened?” Rachele trembled. “What was that thing that attacked us?”

“We’re all safe now,” Margaret said, getting up from the floor and sitting on the edge of the bed. “It’s over.” The three of them stared at the creature lying on the floor, watching it slowly morph from the wolf-creature back into the beautiful Celaine. Blood oozed from the six bullet wounds scattered over her body. “I have to call the police now,” she added, tearfully.

Rachele hugged and kissed Stefan. “You’re hurt,” she sobbed, noticing the scratch marks on his arm and back.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Don’t worry about me. Are you all right?”

“Yes, thanks to you and Aunt Margaret. I love you both.”

Detective Zelhof arrived at midnight, accompanied by a CSI team and the medical examiner.

Margaret greeted them. “She’s upstairs, in Stefan’s bedroom.” The CSI team took photographs and the medical examiner took samples of Celaine’s blood, skin and hair, then removed her body.

“Let’s talk,” Zelhof said.

“I always thought that it might have been Celaine who killed my husband and that Curtin fellow,” Margaret admitted. “She had this... condition. Under certain kinds of stress, she turned into a...”

“Werewolf?” Zelhof interjected.

“Yes. That’s what it was,” Margaret sobbed. “Her mother had it also. She killed two men who attacked her in Romania. That’s why we ran away from home when we were young, to come to America. After my sister married, she was happy and never... transformed

again. She must have passed it on to Celaine somehow. I don't know anything more about it, but at least it's over with."

"I've done some research into lycanthropy," Detective Zelhof said. "Most people believe it's only a legend, but I found numerous accounts both in Eastern Europe and even here, in America. We'll have to examine Celaine's remains and see what the M.E. has to say. I'll get back to you when we learn what we've been dealing with."

Two days later, Margaret received a call from Detective Zelhof. "Very strange results, Mrs. Hornsby. They found that her DNA was a combination of human and animal, the latter canine. I believe it's not just a legend."

"I hate to say this, Detective, but I was worried that my husband had been abusing Celaine. I was afraid to say anything about it. That's probably what happened the night she transformed into that horrible creature and killed him under the boardwalk. I'm now quite certain that Eddie Curtin suffered the same fate at her hands, for the same reason. It's behind us now, isn't it?"

"I hope so, Mrs. Hornsby. I think we can close the case now. By the way, how are Stefan and his fiancée?"

"They're fine, Detective. Stefan is still very upset about losing his sister. They were very close, but I believe he'll get over it in time. Rachelle is fine. They're getting married in the fall."

"Congratulations are in order, then. All the best to you all."

Rachelle's and Stefan's wedding was celebrated with a mixture of happiness and sadness. When deciding where to spend their honeymoon, Rachelle said, "Anywhere except Romania." They chose Hawaii. With a recommendation from Detective Zelhof, Stefan joined the Monmouth County Police Department. Rachelle became a biology

teacher in Asbury Park High School. Stefan decided to sell the home in Deal. “I can’t live here, with these memories.”

They purchased a smaller home in a neighboring town, one that would truly be their own. Rachelle insisted that Aunt Margaret continue living with them, which she did for two more years before passing away quietly, in her sleep.

Fortune blessed the couple with a beautiful baby girl. They named her Mikaela, after Aunt Margaret, meaning one with a quiet and loving nature. Mikaela was an unusually beautiful baby with an angelic face, platinum blond hair and deep blue eyes. She loved to be cuddled and had a smile that could melt your heart. The only concern Stefan and Rachelle had was that Mikaela’s crying sounded more like a growl, and when that happened her eyes changed from deep blue to piercing yellow. The doctors said that she’d grow out of it.

Time and Again

The old man struggled to breathe. As he lay on his deathbed, his only daughter, her husband and their son, Randolph, offered comfort in his final hours. “Please don’t strain yourself, father,” his daughter implored through tears. She gripped his hand tightly, as if her grasp could prevent – or at least delay – the inevitable.

His voice was strained. “I’ve had a good life. My time has come and I have no regrets. You will inherit my entire estate, but there is one thing I leave my dear Randolph, and to him alone. My darling daughter,” he continued, struggling as he pointed to the drawer in his nightstand, “please bring me the gold pocket watch.”

His daughter fumbled through the contents of the drawer, finding it hidden among his other old possessions. The exterior of the 24-karat gold case was engraved with three hourglasses; the middle one of which lay horizontally. She pressed a small button near the winding stem at the top that sprung open the case. “I’ve never seen anything like this before, father,” she declared.

“No matter, dear,” the old man wheezed. “I’ve kept it a secret all these years. It was given to me by my grandfather, and to him by his grandfather, and his before that. It is now my duty to pass it along.”

“But the face has only one hand,” his daughter exclaimed. “And the numbers read from one to twenty-four instead of one to twelve. And what’s this?” she continued. “There’s a little window that shows the day of the week... today.” She held the watch to her ear. “It’s still ticking.”

“Give it to me. Quickly,” the old man insisted, realizing how little time remained. A rasping cough issued from his frail, quivering frame. He placed the object into the palm of his grandson’s hand and folded his fingers around it. “Randolph, my boy, this is yours now. It

possesses a special ability; the chance to give you another day. Use it wisely and with caution. If you do, you will appreciate all it can do for you. Treat it with care and respect.”

The old man closed his eyes for the last time and exhaled his final breath. Randolph looked up at his mother, who was sobbing loudly, the handkerchief wrapped around her fingers catching her tears. He realized that his grandfather’s hand was still clutching his own, which held the mysterious gift bequeathed him. Slowly, he loosened his grandfather’s grip and drew his hand away. Then he leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. His mother and father also kissed the old man and said their goodbyes.

“I’ll call the doctor,” Randolph’s father said.

“Yes, please,” his mother acknowledged. “Then we must make the funeral arrangements.”

Randolph and his parents waited in the kitchen for the doctor to arrive to prepare the death certificate. His mother pulled her sweater tightly around her shoulders. “It’s cold in here.” The house was always chilly in winter. “I’ll make a pot of tea, dear,” she said to her husband, “I think there may be some cookies or something in the closet.”

They sat in quiet reflection at the table. Randolph turned to his mother who was blowing across the top of her cup to cool her tea. “Did you know anything about grandfather’s pocket watch?”

“I do recall my father mentioning a special heirloom which had been in his family for generations, but he never gave me any details about it. He said something about it having magic powers. Does that make any sense?”

“Magic power?” her husband exclaimed sarcastically. “Really?”

“Give it here,” his mother said. “I want to see it again, Randolph.” He handed the watch to her. She clicked a button near the top stem

and examined the strange face with its peculiar numbering system. She heard it ticking, but the hand did not move. The small window reflected the correct day. “Father kept it a secret. I thought I heard him say something about it ‘changing time’ but I’m not sure what he meant. But he did tell me that one day my son will know what it is. It’s yours now to find out, Randolph. Please be careful with it.” She shut the case and returned it to her son. He opened it again and held it to his ear. “It’s still working,” he remarked. “I can hear it ticking.” Then he noticed the engraved inscription inside the cover. “Did either of you notice this?”

24 hours will change your life

“What do you think this means, Mom?”

“Let me see it again,” his father said, staring at the inscription. “Hmm, I don’t know. What do you think, hon?”

“It might have something to do with that special power my father mentioned. I can’t say.”

Randolph held out his hand. “Let me have it, Mother.” He shrugged his shoulders. “What do we know about the engraving on the outside cover? I mean, what’s the significance of the three hourglasses? The one in the middle is turned on its side.”

His father studied it again. “Did you notice arrangement of the sand in the two vertical hourglasses? The sand in one of them is on the top; in the other, it’s at the bottom.”

“I’ll figure it out sooner or later,” Randolph responded, putting the watch in his pocket.

The doctor filled out the death certificate and prepared to leave. “You’ll receive the official copy from the county in a couple of days.”

Randolph's father called the funeral home and made the final burial arrangements.

After the funeral, Randolph wrapped his grandfather's pocket watch in a handkerchief and placed it in his top dresser drawer. "I don't want to take it with me when I return to college. I'll examine it again when I come home after graduation in May."

"That's a good idea," his mother agreed. "I'll make sure it stays safe."

Randolph returned home disheartened that he had not yet received a job offer following his on-campus interviews. The temperature remained in the low sixties, not quite warm enough to turn on the air conditioning. He opened the window to let in some fresh air, sat at his desk in his room and searched the classifieds for any possible entry-level job openings. Finding nothing suited to him, he continued his search online but this, too, failed to provide anything positive. As he thought about his career and his future, his mind drifted to the mysterious gold pocket watch that had been in his family for generations. Swaddled in a handkerchief, the watch remained undisturbed in the back of his dresser drawer. He removed the handkerchief and studied the intricate markings on the cover. *These three hourglasses must be a clue to the mystery of the watch.*

He returned to his computer and typed "stopping time" in the search bar. A few links appeared that dealt with optical illusions, fictional books about time travel and other references that did not satisfy his curiosity. Then he typed "horizontal hourglass" and found several pictures of hourglasses lying on their sides. Farther down the page he spied a small sketch identical to the engraving on the case of his watch: an hourglass lying on its side with two others standing on either end. He moved his mouse to the highlighted reference and, with

trepidation, clicked to open the page titled: ***Voyages in Time – How 24 Hours Will Change Your Life***. He opened the watch again to read the inscription inside the cover. Quivering with excitement and anticipation, his mind was in a frenzy. *Oh my God*, he thought, *this is the exact inscription inside the watch cover!*

The article described various theories of time travel and how, with the right kind of mechanism, one might be able to sidestep Einstein's time travel paradox. Notations in the article referred to esoteric commentaries and cross-references, the latter depicting more sketches identical to those on the watch. Randolph was stunned. *Can this be real?* His mind whirled. His mouth felt as if he had been sucking on cotton balls. He dashed into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "What's going on?" his mother asked.

"Nothing... nothing really, Mom. I'm just thirsty." He finished the bottle in one swallow, then another.

His mother watched him tear out of the kitchen. "Are you all right?"

"No problem, Mom. I'm fine." He felt the rush of adrenaline as he raced up the stairs and into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. He returned to his computer and the drawings which began to unlock the mystery of his watch.

The sketches reminded him of Leonardo da Vinci's ideas and inventions. The watch was displayed with arrows emanating from different parts pointing to detailed explanations of their function. The hourglasses on the case referred to time itself. The twenty-four hours depicted on the face referred to the hours in one day. The single hour hand was an indicator of the number of hours that remained in the time allotted for time travel episodes. The day of the week was the only other movable part of the face, which showed the day toward which the time travel episode was directed. Turning the stem activated the day, either forward or backward, to which the travel

would lead. The watch allowed for only one day in either direction of travel, and for a maximum visit of eight hours. There were two kinds of watches: one that allowed travel backward in time; one that allowed travel forward. Depressing the stem immediately after turning it activated the system. Depressing it twice returned the time traveler to his original time and place.

Randolph scrutinized the intricacies of each function. The only thing that was not apparent was whether his watch accommodated forward or backward travel in time. He shut the case, put the watch back in his drawer, turned off his computer and lay on his bed. *How am I going to take advantage of this? I'll first have to determine whether I can go forward or backward. Then what can I do once I get to wherever I go? When should I do it? Should I tell anyone about it? I'll have to sleep on it before I try.*

“Find anything worthwhile in the classifieds today, Randolph?” his father asked at dinner that evening.

“Or online?” his mother added.

“Nothing yet. But I have a feeling that something will turn up soon.”

His excitement after discovering the potential that the pocket watch offered made it difficult to fall asleep. The idea of moving ahead or back in time was overwhelming. *What could I do if I were able to see tomorrow? Or relive yesterday?* After tossing and turning for three hours while contemplating multiple scenarios, he succumbed to exhaustion and slept.

“Wake up sleepy head,” his mother said, shaking his shoulder. “It’s already after 9 am. Are you going to sleep all day or are you going to look for a job?”

Randolph rubbed his eyes. “Okay mom, I’m getting up.”

“Don’t dilly-dally. Breakfast will be ready in fifteen minutes. I want to see you busy finding work today, mister college graduate without a job.”

“Mom, I need to talk to you,” Randolph said after downing his scrambled eggs and putting down his coffee cup.

“Just a moment, dear,” his mother said. “Did you hear someone at the front door?”

“Mom, please sit back down. There’s no one at the front door.”

“All right, then. I just thought...” She paused, then continued clearing the breakfast dishes.

“What is it that you wanted to talk about, Randolph?”

“I need to tell you what I found out about grandfather’s watch. You’re not going to believe it, but please hear me out.”

He described the online search he conducted the previous evening. “Come with me,” he urged. His mother sat on the edge of his bed while he retrieved the watch from the dresser drawer. “We’re going to find out together how this thing works.”

His mother placed her hand on top her son’s, the one cradling the watch. “Are you sure you’re doing this correctly? I mean are you quite certain there’s no danger involved?”

“I don’t really know for sure, Mom, but let’s just see, okay?” The small window on the watch face indicated *TUE*. “Well, that’s correct,” he said, “it is Tuesday.” He turned the stem in a clockwise direction. “Please be careful,” his mother cautioned. The day in the window moved to *WED*, but turned back to *TUE*. He turned the stem to *WED* once more, but it again quickly popped back to *TUE*.

“I guess this is not a forward watch,” he surmised. “I’m now going to turn it back one day and see what happens.” He turned the stem in the opposite direction until the window read *MON*. It did not

turn back as it had previously. He looked at his mother, who conveyed an expression of dread. "Here goes, Mom." He depressed the top of the stem.

Randolph felt a sudden jolt surge throughout his entire body, as if he had stuck his finger into a lightbulb socket. The shock lasted only a fraction of a second, but when he recovered, he realized that he was sitting on his bed - alone. His mother was nowhere in sight. "Mom?" he called. Then he called again, this time louder, "MOM? WHERE ARE YOU?"

"What is it, Randolph?" his mother called up from the kitchen. "Is everything all right?"

He was about to respond, when he heard another voice emanating from the bathroom. "Everything's fine, Mom. What's the matter?"

He suddenly realized that the voice in the bathroom was his own; that there were two of him. *Oh my God!* he thought. *I'm now in... yesterday... my own past! That's yesterday's me in the bathroom. I've gotta hide quickly before anyone sees me.*

"I thought I heard you call me," his mother yelled.

"No, I didn't."

"All right then, breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

Now I remember, he thought again. *After breakfast, the other me is going to come back up here, open the window, check the classifieds, and then do an online search about the markings on the watch. That's what I did yesterday. Meanwhile, I've got to get away from here for now before they know I'm here.* He heard someone coming out of the bathroom. *That's me coming!* He dashed under the bed, virtually holding his breath, until his yesterday self got dressed and went downstairs to breakfast. When he felt it was safe, he pulled himself out from under the bed, tip-toed down the stairs, carefully avoided the kitchen, went through the living room and escaped out the front door.

As he left, he heard his mother's voice coming from the kitchen. "Did you hear someone at the front door?"

Then he heard his own voice saying, "Mom, please sit back down. There's no one at the front door."

Randolph walked to Beaver Dam Park, around the corner from his house. It was a school day and the play area was empty. He walked to the far end and sat on the bench near the swings. He gazed at his wristwatch; 10 am. *I've been here just about one hour. What do I do now?* The watch opened with a 'pop' as he pressed the button adjacent to the stem. The day read *MON*. He also noticed that the single hour hand had moved slightly towards the numeral '1.' *If I remember correctly, I can stay here for up to eight hours.*

He sat on the bench in the park for another fifteen minutes, then walked over to Benny's Luncheonette. "Hi Randy," said the waitress. "Coffee?"

He sat in a booth at the rear, trying not to be seen. *Should I even be here, talking to anyone? Well, too late now. I'll just have a cup of coffee and get out of here.* He glanced at his wristwatch again; eleven o'clock; two hours had been spent in the past. The hour hand on the pocket watch had now moved a quarter of the way toward the '1.' He bought a newspaper and returned to the park. Fortunately, no one else entered. Another two hours passed. His wristwatch read 1 pm. It had been four hours since he jumped backward in time. He opened the pocket watch and noticed that the hour hand had now half-way toward the '1.' *That should do it for now,* he decided, and depressed the watch stem twice. The tingling sensation he experienced earlier spread throughout his chest, into his arms and down his legs. He felt pins and needles in his fingers and toes. Then came the jolt.

“What just happened, Randolph?” his mother asked. “You looked like you froze up there for a few seconds.”

He sat stunned for another moment. “I don’t know. What did you see?”

“As soon as you pressed the stem on the watch, you seemed to shudder for a second, as if you were in a daze. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Mom, what time is it? And what day is it?”

“Why it’s nine-thirty, Tuesday morning.” What happened?”

“You’re not gonna believe this, Mom, but I went back in time. I spent four hours... in yesterday!”

“But how? I didn’t even see you leave.”

“But I did. Grandfather’s watch took me back to Monday. I was there... for four whole hours. And then it brought me right back to the moment I left. It happened, Mother. The watch really is magical.”

His mother stared at him, wide-eyed. “Do you think... do you think I can try it?”

“From what I read about it online, it will only work for the person to whom it was given. That’s me. I’m pretty sure it won’t work for you. You can try it if you want, though.”

“No. I’d better not. I’ll take your word for it, dear. Who knows what might happen if the wrong person tries? What are you going to do now?”

He kissed his mother and went to his computer. “I’m going to do some more research on this thing. I’ll let you know what I come up with.”

“Please be careful,” his mother implored.

He spent the remainder of the day researching and studying his amazing treasure. He learned that the pocket watch was one of only a small number of mystical trinkets created during the Sixteenth Century in Eastern Europe that were brought into the New World.

Others had been destroyed or had mysteriously disappeared. Its power could only be achieved by its rightful owner, one to whom it was given by one's ancestor, and only by skipping a generation. The time travel could be accessed only once every seven days. Its power ceased after twenty-four attempts by the current owner. Only when it was bequeathed to a rightful heir could its power be regenerated. *I've used it once, Randolph realized. I've got twenty-three more chances to see what it can do for me. And I'll have to wait at least until next week to have another go at it.*

Randolph and his parents could not stop fantasizing about the powers of the watch during dinner that evening. "You must think very carefully about this, Randolph," his father advised. "As your research indicated, it can be used for good or for evil. It's up to you do decide how to handle it."

"Your father and I have tried our best to instill a sense of good values in you, son," his mother added. "I'm sure you will use your grandfather's watch wisely."

"One more thing," said his father. "We must agree to keep this a family secret."

After a moment's pause, Randolph spoke. "Mom, Dad... grandpa had a lot of money, didn't he?"

"Yes," his mother replied, "he did. But he worked hard for his money."

"I don't doubt that, Mom, But I also think he may have had a little help from his watch. I'm guessing that when he went back a day in time, he learned what investments were going to increase for the next day. Doesn't that make sense?"

"Hard work is the best way to make money, son," his father said.

“I don’t know exactly how my father earned all his money,” his mother added. “It may be as you say, but you have to do what is right.”

Randolph was offered a position in a Wall Street brokerage firm as an assistant to one of the day traders. The following week he opened a private online account for his personal investments. Performing a careful study of which stocks rose the most in one day, he used his pocket watch to go back to the previous day and invest as much as he could in that stock before returning to the present. After five trips, he amassed more than \$500,000. *No need to be greedy*, he thought. *I have enough money for a while. I’ll save the remaining trips for something else.* He wrapped the pocket watch and carefully tucked it away in his dresser drawer.

He honed his trading skills quickly and was soon promoted to Senior Trader. He succeeded rapidly on his own merit, earning significant profits for the company as well as high commissions for himself. He was happy. As he entered his office one Monday morning, he noticed a group of coworkers engrossed in the morning newspaper. “It’s terrible, just terrible,” one of them sighed. “So young,” lamented another.

“What’s going on?” Randolph asked as he approached his colleagues.

“Didn’t you hear?” one of them responded. She read the article aloud: “Six-year-old Kenny Blackley tumbled into an open shaft at the county fair yesterday, falling fifteen feet to his death. Apparently, a repairman failed to replace the lid properly after working in the shaft and the innocent child...” Overcome with emotion, she was unable to finish reading the story, sobbing into her handkerchief. Randolph put his arm around her and escorted her to a chair,

consoling her. Several other employees were also unable to hold back their tears. When the commotion died down, Randolph read the article carefully. He noticed with interest that the tragedy occurred at three o'clock in the afternoon. He returned to his desk and reflected on the incident. *I think I can save that boy's life.* "I need to run a quick errand," he told his supervisor. "I'll be back in an hour."

He sped home and retrieved his pocket watch from home and returned to the office. At noon, when most of the staff took their lunch break, Randolph entered a stall in the men's room. He opened the watch, turned the date back a day to *SUN*, depressed the stem and braced himself against the walls of the stall. After recovering from the electrifying jolt, he exited the men's room to an empty office... he realized it was now Sunday. He glanced at his wristwatch. *It's just a few minutes after twelve. That should give me plenty of time to get to the fairground.* There were fewer taxicabs in the business district on weekends, and it took nearly twenty minutes before he was able to hail one. He arrived at the fairground at one o'clock, still enough time to scour the area in search of the open shaft. The fairground was larger than he imagined, and by two-thirty he still hadn't located the dislodged manhole cover. *Mustn't panic.* His brain went into overdrive. He approached one of the amusement ride operators. "Is there a children's ride area at the fair?"

"Sure mister," he responded, pointing to the far side of the fairground. Randolph jogged to the area that the operator pointed to, just in time to hear a woman's voice near the ice cream stand admonishing her son. "Kenny, you stay near me and don't go off by yourself." The woman was rummaging through her purse for her wallet, oblivious to the fact that her son had already wandered away.

Thank God I'm not too late, he thought. He followed the voice and saw little Kenny Blackley chasing a butterfly, meandering further away from his mother. He approached the child just as he was

teetering on the edge of the manhole plate that was only partially covering the top of the shaft. He lunged for the child and grabbed him just as the boy lost his balance and was about to fall into the shaft. "Gotcha!" he exclaimed, falling alongside the shaft with the child in his arms.

"Kenny, Kenny, where are you?" his mother screamed, her words reverberating in panic, alerting the crowd. They quickly surrounded Randolph and the boy. "Mister," you saved the kid's life!" a bystander yelled. "He coulda been killed down there!" Randolph rolled onto his back on the grass, pulling the boy further away from the hole. Kenny's mother ran to them, picked up her son and clutched him to her chest. A man extended his hand to Randolph and helped him to his feet as the rest of the crowd cheered. *I've got to get out of here as quickly as possible before someone can identify me*, he thought as he brushed himself off and rushed away. Kenny's mother called after him, "Young man, wait. Who are you?" Another man tried to grab Randolph's arm as he fled. "What's your name mister?"

He pulled away and managed to escape the crowd and sought refuge in Roger's Tavern two blocks from the fairground. He ordered a beer and found a seat in a dark corner of the room. *I'll just calm my nerves and then get back to my own time*, he decided.

"You were amazing," the young woman said. "May I join you?"

Randolph looked up to see a beautiful woman standing at his booth. "Well, I, er..."

"I saw you leave the crowd in such a hurry, I just figured I had to follow you and find out who you are. That was such a brave thing you did, saving that child."

He stared at the smiling face that was praising him. "My name's Vivian, Vivian Sterling," she said, offering her hand.

"Randolph," he said, taking her hand, uncomfortably.

"No last name?"

“Sorry, I’ve gotta leave.”

“Don’t go just yet,” she urged.

“Are you a reporter?”

“Just an admirer,” Vivian said, coyly. She sat in the booth facing him.

Although anxious to return to Monday, Randolph was mesmerized by her sparkling blue eyes and the bright flaxen hair that framed her face. He was torn between his need to escape and his desire to learn more about her. Suddenly he noticed the gold locket on a sparkling chain around her neck. Drawn to its brilliance, he was astonished to discover the engraving on the cover. It contained three hourglasses, one of which, the one in the center, was lying on its side. He struggled to get his words out. “Where did you get that locket?”

Vivian grasped the locket, concealing it tightly with her fist. “Oh this. It’s a... it’s a family heirloom,” she uttered nervously.

As she rose to leave, Randolph reached for her arm. “Vivian, wait. Please don’t go yet. I want to show you something.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew his pocket watch. “Look,” he stammered, “it has the identical engraving as yours.”

Vivian and Randolph sat quietly, staring at each other in amazement while the clock on the wall above their booth ticked. “I can’t believe this is actually happening,” Randolph said.

They spent the next two hours attempting to understand the amazing coincidence of what appeared to be a chance meeting. Vivian’s watch turned out to be the Yin to Randolph’s Yang. Her watch allowed her to move one day forward, whereas his transported him one day back. She would return to Saturday when he returned to Monday. They were two days apart from each other.

“Was it purely by chance, or was it something else?” Vivian speculated.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, maybe we were meant to meet.”

“Well, whether or not we were destined to meet, or whether it was merely a strange coincidence, we’ll never really know, will we?”

“But we did meet, didn’t we?” she uttered.

“I’d like to see you again, Vivian.”

“Me too.”

“But we can only use our watches once a week,” he lamented.

“Let’s meet again next Sunday and spend the day together,” she suggested. “That’ll be exactly one week from now.”

“Agreed. How about nine o’clock, right here, in front of this tavern?”

“You’re on.” Vivian looked at her watch, which indicated that she had two hours remaining before she would be whisked back to Saturday.

“I’ve got four hours left,” Randolph noted. “Let’s just walk around for the next two hours and then we’ll both click ourselves back, at the same time.” Two hours later, Vivian looked longingly at Randolph. “See you in a week.” Their jolts came simultaneously, as they vanished together.

Recovering quickly from the jolt, Randolph came to in the stall in the men’s room. His wristwatch read 12:06 pm. It was Monday, less than a minute after he left to travel back in time to Sunday. As he returned to his office, he noticed the morning newspaper’s front page on the receptionist’s desk: *Mystery Man Saves Six-Year-Old Boy from Certain Death*. He strolled back to his desk with a grin, pleased with

himself. *Not only did I save the kid, his mind sang, I also met someone special.*

He plunged into serious stock trading all week, trying to avoid thinking about Vivian Sterling. “I like the way you’ve been at it this week,” his supervisor said. “Keep it up and you’ll be on the fast track to management in no time at all.”

By Friday evening, Randolph was exhausted and elated at the same time. He spent the weekend trying to keep himself busy, helping around the house with chores and errands that his mother requested. “What’s gotten into you?” she asked. Finding it difficult to contain his excitement about his recent sojourn back in time, he was compelled to share it with his parents.

“Do you remember last week’s headline about a six-year-old boy being saved from falling into a deep shaft at the county fair last Sunday?”

“I think I do,” his father recalled. “I do, too,” his mother added. “They said he was saved by an unidentified stranger.”

“Mom, Dad... It was me! I was that unidentified stranger.”

His father stared, puzzled. “We were all here, together last Sunday, watching the ball game. When... that is, how did you go to the fair?”

“You went back, didn’t you?” his mother asserted.

“Yes, I did. I read about the boy falling into the shaft Monday morning at work and I went back to Sunday to save him.”

“Oh my God. You used your grandfather’s watch! I’m so proud of you,” his mother beamed. “Wow!” was all his father was able to utter.

“That’s not all,” Randolph exclaimed. “I met a girl right afterwards. I couldn’t allow myself to be identified at the fair, so I sneaked off as quickly as possible and went to a tavern a few blocks away. Apparently, this girl – Vivian – saw the whole thing and followed me. I couldn’t avoid her and she sat down in my booth

telling me what a fantastic thing I had done. I was afraid about being discovered, you know, because I was not in my real time. She seemed anxious to leave also. Then I noticed that she was wearing a locket that had an engraving of the identical three hourglasses that were on grandfather's watch. She was a time traveler too! Her watch moved her forward just like mine moved me back. We spent the next couple of hours together and we're going to meet again this Sunday. It'll be Saturday for her and Monday for me. She's two days in my past, so we arranged to meet in the middle, with the help of our watches."

"Be careful with that watch," his father warned. "It may have some powers that you don't know about; that you haven't discovered yet." His mother's expression changed to one of apprehension. "Your father may be right, dear. You don't know anything about this girl."

"I'll be careful with it, but right now I'm too excited. I don't think there's really anything to worry about, Mom. I can't wait to see Vivian again."

Time moved at a turtle's pace for Randolph over the weekend. He tried to occupy himself with anything and everything that might make the time pass more quickly. He had difficulty falling asleep Sunday night in anticipation of the time trip he would make the next morning. Even after a restless night, he jumped out of bed when his alarm rang at seven o'clock. He showered, bolted down a quick breakfast and made a beeline for the office, arriving at eight-thirty. He surveyed his daily planner, set up his computer and arranged his desk for maximum efficiency: calendar on one side, paper pad and pencil holder adjacent to the phone on the other, computer in the center turned on and ready for use. He went into the men's room, locked himself inside a stall, set his watch for Sunday, braced himself for the jolt, and depressed the stem. *ZAP* – it was one day earlier.

He hailed a taxi within two minutes. “Please take me to Roger’s Tavern, near the fairgrounds,” he instructed the driver. “As soon as possible.” It was almost nine o’clock.

“No problem, buddy, I know where it is. We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Vivian was already waiting when Randolph’s cab arrived. “You had me worrying for a few moments. I wasn’t sure whether you were going to show up.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Sorry I’m late.”

“Only by two minutes,” she chuckled.

Randolph took her hand. “We have the next eight hours to spend together. What would you like to do?”

“Whatever. It’s early, not much is open yet. Let’s just walk and get to know each other.”

Randolph and Vivian continued to meet every Sunday at Roger’s Tavern for several more weeks. Even though their time together was limited, it did not take long for them to fall in love. Through some unknown twist of fate, “Destiny,” Vivian called it, they were meant to be together. But why in this odd manner? They did not exist in the same time dimension, and only by using the magic of their watches could they meet for only eight short hours, once every week.

“I have an idea,” Vivian suggested. “What if you were to come to the tavern by yourself, without using your watch, I mean?” You could stay there for two days until I caught up with you.”

“I thought of that myself, Viv, but that won’t work. My time won’t stand still. I’ll keep moving forward. It’s as if we’re in alternate universes. By the time two days pass for you, it would do the same for me. I’d still be two days ahead of you. No, I don’t believe that would

solve our problem. Think of it this way; you know the overlapping circles logo on a Mastercard?”

“Yes, I think I know what it looks like.”

“Well,” Randolph continued, “consider that our separate universes overlap just a smidge, like that Mastercard logo. I think that our special watches allow us to come together only in that common area. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

Vivian pouted. “You may be right, Randolph. And if that is the case, then Destiny is playing a cruel trick on us.” She leaned toward him, caressed his cheek, and kissed him. Randolph welcomed the warmth of her lips and returned her kiss, feeling the excitement of her passion.

“Hey you kids,” the bartender called. “Get a room.”

They sat back, feeling but not caring about the other patrons in the tavern staring at them. Vivian leaned forward once more, this time with her face buried in her hands. Her shoulders trembled slightly as she tried unsuccessfully to hide her grief. Her sobs were noticeable as she could no longer contain them. Randolph felt the pain as well as he, too, began to cry. “We’ll figure it out, Viv. I know we will. We’ll have to.”

“Will, we, Randolph?” she continued, her cheeks soaked with tears

“I love you, Viv. We’re going to find a way to stay together.”

“Oh, Randolph, I love you so much.”

Randolph removed his handkerchief and wiped Viv’s tears, then his own. They sat back and laughed lightly. “Really, Randolph, what are we going to do?” she said.

“Okay, Viv, let’s look at this logically, even though we’re in a totally illogical situation. My watch indicates that I have only two more trips. What does yours say?”

“Mine says four,” she sobbed.

“I’ll do some research and figure it out. Don’t worry.”

“I am,” she lamented. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lose you.”

“I won’t let that happen,” he replied, disguising his doubts but trying to reassure her.

Time ran out as the ill-fated lovers were whisked back to their respective time dimensions. They met twice again until Randolph’s time travel opportunities were depleted, his limit reached. After declaring their love for each other on their final meeting, Randolph once again asserted that he would find a solution for their seemingly hopeless and mysterious dilemma.

For the next several weeks, he researched the Internet and visited bookstores that specialized in the occult to try to find more details about the watch bequeathed to him by his grandfather, but to no avail. Dejected and depressed, he sat in his bedroom staring at his magnificently crafted stopwatch, running his fingers over the exquisitely engraved carvings of the three hourglasses. He opened it and read the inscription one more time.

“24 hours will change your life.”

Change my life, indeed, he lamented. *Yes, it did. But what good did it do? Made me happy for a while, then it stole it from me. Curse this damned thing!* He snapped the case shut, and with all his might, threw it against the wall, sobbing as it crashed and fell to the floor. As rage overtook him, he stomped on it, shattering whatever pieces of glass and metal remained intact. He sat on his bed, frustrated and angry, staring at the debris, when a sudden jolt surged throughout his body. The surge in his chest and the pins and needles in his fingers and toes

were more pronounced than any he had felt during a previous time jump; it was as if he were being electrocuted. He blacked out.

As the shock subsided, Randolph awoke to find himself sitting in the back booth of Roger's Tavern. Within a few moments, he felt another surge, lighter than before, as waves from the aura opposite him appeared and then subsided. The jolt was replaced by the shock of seeing Vivian seated across from him. "What the hell just happened?" he blurted.

"I was just about to say the same thing," she replied. "I was so upset at losing you, that I smashed the one thing that brought us together. I smashed my watch on the floor and it broke into a million pieces. Then I felt a strong jolt, blacked out and suddenly woke up here."

"Oh, my God," Randolph realized. "I think... no, I *believe*, that we're both here in real time. Do you have your watch with you?"

Vivian reached for her locket which was no longer on the chain around her neck. "It's gone!" she exclaimed. Randolph emptied his pockets. "So is mine."

They glanced at the calendar on the wall behind the bar. It was Sunday.

"I think I know what just happened," he said.

"Tell me, tell me," Vivian begged. "What's going on?"

"I believe that when we smashed our watches our two overlapping universes merged. And now we're here, together, in the same universe."

The two lovers gazed at each other, stupefied. Vivian smiled. "I love you."

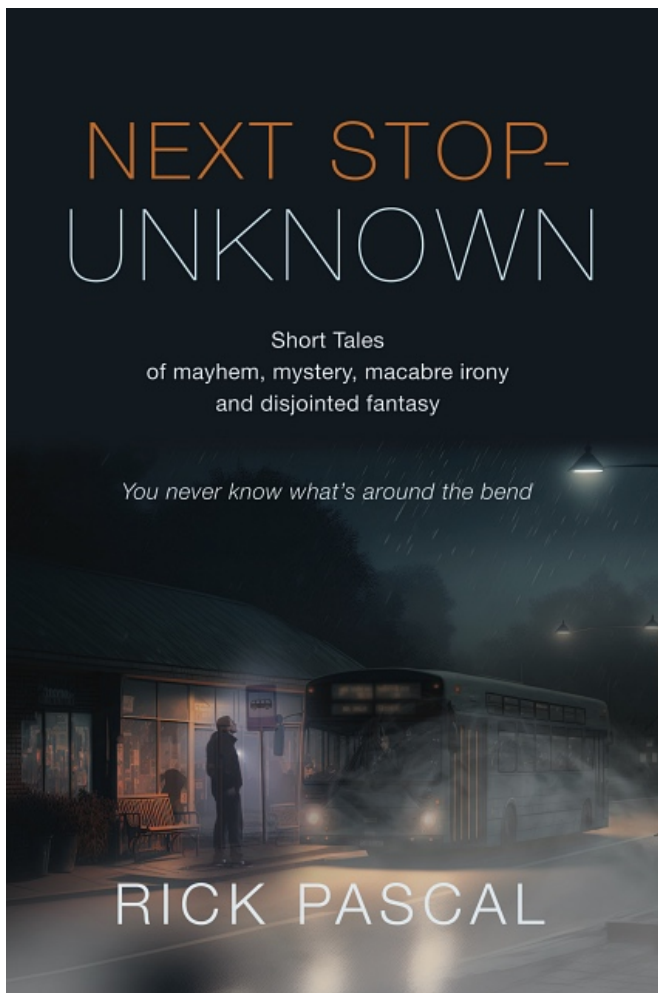
"And I love you," Randolph gushed.

"I don't think we're going to need those watches anymore," she laughed. She reached across the table and kissed him passionately.

No one knows how many times during the past centuries sad lovers or other frustrated owners had destroyed each watch. The energy possessed by both Vivian's and Randolph's watches restored them to their original form. They were destined by fate to continue their magic forever, and to be handed down to a deserving child every other generation.

Randolph's mother had just finished folding the laundry, one of her Sunday morning chores. As she was putting clean socks in his dresser drawer, she felt something wrapped in a handkerchief in the back. *I'm glad my son had the good sense to keep his grandfather's pocket watch safe*, she thought. *I wouldn't want anything to happen to it.*

Vivian's younger sister loved to wander into her older sibling's bedroom on occasion and play with her jewelry. Her mother followed her in to find her touching the jewelry stand on Vivian's dresser. "You shouldn't be touching your sister's locket, dear," she warned. "It's a very rare and valuable family heirloom. That watch was given to Vivi by Grandma. Better come downstairs now. Vivian will be bringing her new boyfriend, Randolph, to meet us this afternoon. She says that he's very special and I want you to be on your best behavior."



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