

Novel of murder, kidnapping, and intrigue involving the tobacco industry

Beyond the Pale

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## Chapter 2

For Maggie, the end of each day had taken on a new dimension. Would there be news from Cathy? Walking toward the front door, her pace quickened, as did her heart. The letter was on top. She instantly recognized the handwriting as she pulled the mail from the box. Anxiously tearing it open, she began to read:

**Dearest Friend,**

**Thomas and I are still having a wonderful time. Singapore is unbelievable. The whole city is as clean as Disney Land. Not only is it clean, it's beautiful and modern. The people are warm and friendly—so anxious to make us feel at home.**

**However, they are very strict here. There's a huge penalty for spitting on the street, about a \$500 fine. Can you believe that? Guess what? Not many people spit on the street. And that's just one example. We've heard it's the 'death penalty' for anyone caught with drugs...even a tiny amount.**

**Crime seems to be non-existent. We roam around all over city at all times of the day and night without any concern. Even at midnight, you see little old ladies out and about. What an oasis this place is. Hope you get a chance to see it.**

**I'm starting to slow down a bit—getting some sharp pains in my chest and back. **Piss on it!** They don't last that long. I just pop one of**

*Jim Tuggle*

**Maggie's "magic" pills and keep on moving. Thomas hasn't noticed yet. I don't think I can keep up this pace much longer, but for now we are having a great, great time. My guy is his usual, wonderful super self, except sometimes he seems so very distracted—like he's in another world.**

**Sorry I'm not writing that often—too much to do with too little time. But there's not a day that goes by that I don't think of you. I know you understand.**

**Intimacy is still wonderful. Thank God the cancer hasn't settled in the really important places.**

**Fiji is our next stop. From there, we're on our way through the South Pacific.**

**All our love,**

**Cathy**

The corny little joke brought a smile. 'Hope it comes quickly for her,' she thought. 'What a dynamo! I miss her so.'

Thoughts of good times brought on a bout of melancholy. "Shit," she said aloud, "Shit, shit, shit." A little smile appeared as she thought how amused Cathy would be if she knew how easily her old friend used profanity lately. The cursing killed the blues, so why not blast away.

With the passing weeks, each successive letter grew more despondent. The typical little quips were still there; nevertheless, small hints indicated her remaining days were numbered. Four months to the day that she kissed her friend good-bye, a letter arrived.

**My dearest friend, Maggie,**

**I guess it's time to wrap things up. First and most important, I'm worried about Thomas...something seems to be eating away at him. At times, I've walked in on him completely unnoticed. He just sits there with a blank stare. He clutches the chair arms so tightly I can see the white of his knuckles. And the sicker I get, the more these 'dark moods' occur. They're not toward me, but toward someone or something else. I ask him what's wrong, but he just laughs it off claiming I'm imagining things. But it's real and he refuses to talk about it. I don't know what it is, but he seems to be smoldering inside. This is the only time in all our years together that he hasn't confided in me...and it really scares me.**

**Maggie, as soon as he gets home, please take care of him. This ordeal has been very hard on him.**

**Other than Thomas' moods, this was such a good idea—almost four months of wandering the world with my pal and lover. We've discovered each other all over again...almost like living a second lifetime together. I'm a lucky woman.**

**I'm really having a problem with my conscience. Wish you were here to listen, but you're not, so here goes. Please excuse the rambling. I hope you can get through it. First, let me say that Thomas took great care of me. I failed to mention, but I've been in several hospitals from time to time (sorry I didn't tell you...ha-ha) but as soon as I'd stabilize, I'd be outta' there. As you can imagine by what I've written so far, the disease is really moving fast. Such is life!**

*Jim Tuggle*

**Now, it's time for a confession. I'm sure you've wondered why I haven't called over these past months. Believe me...it's not that I didn't want to...but to hear your voice, to talk, to cry, maybe laugh a little—I don't think I could've stood it, Maggie. It would've broken my heart completely. This way, just writing the letters, made it much easier to keep the emotions in check.**

**We were one hell of a pair, weren't we? A few days ago I started laughing my butt off. Thomas thought I had turned schizoid on him. Remember the day we were searching for driftwood down by the bay-bridge tunnel—yanking our halter-tops down and flashing the truckers as they flew by? What a riot! As I write this, I'm laughing all over again. I love you, girl. Thank you for being the best friend ever. I miss you so much.**

**Back to business—as you have probably guessed, I never planned to return home—a deception for which I am truly sorry. I guess I'm just selfish...but seeing you, my friends...in this condition...what a bummer that would be. I want you to remember me on my terms—that little piss and vinegar, 'in-your-face' fireball.**

Several water smudges and an obvious attempt to wipe them away dotted across the paper.

**Also, I never (sorry about that, I got a little weepy—fuck it!) planned to carry this affliction to term. My 'check-out' time is another thing that's going to be my call. Dying an inch at a time is not my style. Well, the time has come.**

*Beyond the Pale*

**The moral dilemma is I feel like I'm cheating Thomas if I do this. Then again, I feel like I'm cheating him if I allow this madness to continue. Either way, it's a 'no-win' situation.**

**So here's the plan. You are hereby sworn to secrecy. Do not let him read this letter—do you understand me? It's just our little secret, OK?**

**Now, where was I? Oh, yes. There is going to be a car accident. I'm going to be so drunk that I 'accidentally' run into the bank, river, cliff, or something like that. It's probably dumb, but it's the best I can come up with. I have no idea how I'm going to get away from Thomas. He watches me like a hawk. Not really...he is so damned trusting I could get away with murder. Oops, bad example.**

**Give Thomas the enclosed letter when you think he's ready. Take care of my man. He's all yours.**

**I love you more than I could ever say.**

**Good-bye, good friend,**

**Cathy**

**P.S. Don't get any stupid ideas...it's already happened.**

Maggie walked no further than her foyer. She sunk to her knees, buried her head down into the carpet, and wept uncontrollably.

A few minutes had passed. Slowly she rolled to her side, pulling her knees to her chest. Unable to move, she remained in the fetal position, moaning and wailing, knowing in graphic detail the pain her dear friend had endured.

*Jim Tuggle*

After a time, a strange yet peaceful calm reasoned its way through her pain. The awful ordeal was over. Easing to her feet, she mumbled a short prayer as she moved toward the bedroom. "Please Father, find her a special place. And help poor Thomas bear his loss."

Two days later, very early in the morning, the phone rang.

"Hello..." she groaned.

"Maggie...it's me, Thomas."

"What?" Quickly gathering herself, "How are you, Thomas?"

"You know, don't you?"

He sounded so terribly sad. Her heart poured out. "Yes, I know."

"Maggie, is it OK if I come to your house?"

"Of course it is, of course it is...anytime, Thomas, anytime. The door will always be open."

His voice was just above a whisper, "It may be a month or it may be a year. I don't know if I can be any more specific than that."

She strained to hear. "Thomas, there's a bad connection, I can hardly hear you."

Speaking a little louder, "I said I don't know when I'll get there, maybe a month...could be a year."

"No problem. When you get here, you get here. I understand. You don't sound too good. Are you OK?"

"I bought her a beautiful piece of land, high up on a mountain...overlooking Papeete. She'll be happy there. She's facing the setting sun. Cathy's in paradise...watching the sun set every day...the perfect place for an angel, Maggie. I left her in paradise."

*Beyond the Pale*

Concerned and compassionate, “Thomas, are you OK?”

“She suffered so much, Maggie. It was horrible...really bad...really bad. She tried to hide it, but I knew. Her eyes...her eyes told me everything. She felt her pain was killing me...”

“Thomas? Thomas? Are you going to be OK? Do you want me to come to you?”

Barely audible, “Those miserable pricks killed her, Maggie. They killed her for money—blood money. The sons-of-bitches killed my wife for money....”

The pain in his voice turned icily cold, “And they planned it, Maggie. No accident—it was no accident—but a brilliant plan. Just brilliant! It was the same as shooting her right between the eyes. They knew what they were doing. They knew exactly what they were doing. Those heartless fucks, they killed her for money....”

He paused, saying nothing for an uncomfortable moment.

“Thomas? Are you still there?”

The answer came in a mournful wail. “Oh, merciful Christ, I feel so bad.”

“Thomas,” Maggie cried, “can you hear me, Thomas? Please let me know you can hear—”

His dreadful lament cut off her last word, “I couldn’t help her, Maggie. She was terrified, she was hurting, and I couldn’t help her. She never complained one single time. While that monster ate her alive...she never complained, not one single word. What could I do? What could I do? Nothing! I could do nothing...helpless! I could only watch. Her eyes said it all. She didn’t need to speak, her eyes screamed for help. Oh, those beautiful, sad, sad eyes. I could do nothing....”

“Thomas? Are you—?”

“Jesus, Maggie...she died all alone.”



*Jim Tuggle*

“Thomas! For God’s sake, Thomas, answer me,” her shrilled.

“Yes, Maggie...what is it?” Again he spoke in a monotone.

“Can I help you, Thomas? What can I do?”

“I’m fine, Maggie. Thanks for keeping the door open. I’ll be in touch. Bye.”

Maggie heard the click, “Thomas? Thomas? Shit!”

From that early morning heart-wrenching conversation, a little over a year had passed without another word from Thomas Reed. Maggie thought of him often, as well as her wonderful, lost friend. The pain and tears were healing, but the emptiness remained. Working, paying bills, television, and an occasional book had settled in as Maggie’s routine. Barren as it was, so far she had managed.

‘I hope he’s OK.’ Part of her routine started with thoughts of Thomas as she nestled in her recliner. Another part of her routine was her winding-down time. Normally around seven in the evening after her workday was done, she would flop down in her ‘Lazy Boy’ and force her mind to become relaxed and unfocused. It usually wandered wherever it wanted, oftentimes thinking inconsequential thoughts. This particular evening she was thinking about her recliner, ‘Ah, my ‘Lazy Boy’ ...do I ever love my ‘Lazy Boy’! A silly grin started coming on her face. ‘Lazy Girl’! I wonder if there’s ever been a ‘Lazy Girl’. Probably not—a name like that would surely ruffle the feathers of all the feminist groups out there, emitting a silent laugh. Oh my, it feels so good to just sit here and relax.’

Again her mind started rambling, ‘I wonder why good men are so hard to come by? I’m 41 years old, reasonably good-looking, educated, fun-loving, no real hang-ups, financially secure, good figure—still look good in a bikini—enjoy sex, but I’m still single. A divorced woman doesn’t carry the stigma it once did. Hell, I’m a

*Beyond the Pale*

great find, and yet here I sit all alone and no one is beating a path to my door.

‘Wait just a minute, dummy! What am I complaining about? What is a man—he’s nothing more than a big doofus that sleeps indoors. He’s dirty...he’s messy...and he couldn’t pee straight if his life depended on it. Why don’t they just sit on the john if that’s the best they can do? She giggled at the thought of some burly man sitting down to pee.

‘And it seems they’re always farting! Why do men fart so much? Such a disgusting habit, I’ll wager that every time a woman farts, a man farts 5,000 times. And stink? What could they eat to produce such a smell: cabbage, beer, and peanuts—that must be it—and maybe a few Polish sausages just to top it off?

‘Not only do they fart constantly, but they also think it’s funny. What in the world is so funny about a fart? When a woman farts, she goes to great lengths to isolate herself. But when a man farts, the more the merrier is what they want. And they are complimented on the fart’s potency quotient—‘Damn Bob, that was a good one. Look my eyes are watering...probably about a 9.7 on the Colon Cannon Scale.’

Her day was slowly slipping away as the mindless thoughts continued. ‘If I live to be a hundred, I’ll never understand what goes through a man’s mind! And what about the car—what’s so special about farting in the car? And there’s the kids...a fart falls into the ready position every time a man sees a child, ‘Here, kid, pull my finger’.

Then another thought crossed her mind, ‘Why do men want to screw every woman they see? Well...maybe not every woman. I don’t want to sleep with every man I see. But I do fantasize about some men. Boy, I can think of a few that stir my juices. Well, perhaps men and women aren’t that far apart after all. Men desire most women, women desire some men. The difference between ‘most’ and ‘some’ could be 51% verses 49%. Maybe that’s not so

*Jim Tuggle*

different after all. Anyway, who needs a man...who wants one? Want company? Get a cat.' Her last thought faded away as she fell sound asleep.

She awoke startled and confused. 'What's that? Am I asleep? Was it the phone? No, it's the doorbell.' She looked at her watch. It was almost midnight. She staggered to the door, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Checking through the peephole, she just stared. Then there was concern, wondering who in the world it could be? "Oh, no, I don't believe it!" Yanking the door open, "Thomas!" She grabbed him, pulling him inside.

"You look awful. I didn't recognize you at first..." Throwing her arms around him, "I thought I had lost you, too." The embrace held for a long moment, and then pulling him toward the sofa, "Come over and sit down."

"Good to see a familiar face, Maggie."

"Where's your luggage?"

"Gone—lost, stolen, thrown away—who knows?"

"When did you lose it?"

"I don't know...how long since I called you?"

"It's been over a year."

He sighed. "It's been that long?"

She moved closer, taking his hand. "Where were you all this time? I've been worried sick."

He looked at the floor. "Wandering...I guess. I really don't know."

"What? Come on, surely you remember something? The whole year can't be blank."

*Beyond the Pale*

He paused for a moment. “Nothing Maggie, I can’t remember a thing. Probably drunk, who knows? I can barely remember yesterday.”

She cocked her head, giving him a doubtful look. “You’re not giving me a bunch of bull, are you?”

“No, I swear. It’s all real fuzzy.”

She dismissed it with a quick wave. “OK, we’ll drop it for now.” She took his hand. “Let me get you something to eat. You look famished.”

“You have any J&B?”

“Yeah, that’s just what you need. You look like you’ve been drunk for months. And you want me to fuel that fire?”

“A year,” he said flatly.

“What?”

“A year...I’ve been drunk for a year. It really helps pass the time.”

“Let’s get one thing straight right now. It’s in my nature to heal people. And like it or not, that’s what I’m going to do with you; and we’re going to start right now. The booze is going down the drain and the food is going down your gullet...end of discussion.”

“Whatever you say, Nurse Ratchet.”

Shaking her finger at him, “That’s exactly right. You’ll think Nurse Ratchet was Florence Nightingale if you screw with me.”

“That’s what I’m supposed to do, you know.”

“What?”

“Screw with you.”

Still scolding, “We’ll see about that. Right now you couldn’t screw a light bulb, buster.”

*Jim Tuggle*

Maggie and Thomas began their relationship sharing a late night dinner of chicken soup and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She slipped the bowl of soup across the table.

Smiling faintly, he pulled it toward him.

She sat across from him. Her eyes glued to his every move, watching him slowly move the spoon back and forth.

His eyes stayed with the spoon, then the sandwich. He offered no conversation...or even a glance her way. 'What a toll Cathy's death has taken on him,' she thought. 'He must have lost 40 pounds. And look at those sunken eyes, the poor guy!'

Still not believing he had finally come home and not quite sure how to begin, an uncomfortable few minutes passed. Finally she asked, "What's so funny about a fart?"

The soup spoon en route to his mouth stopped. "What?"

She giggled. "You heard me...what's so funny about a fart?"

Finally, a fragile smile appeared, and with a small chuckle, "How did we get to that?"

"What...you don't want to talk about it?"

"Farts?"

"Yeah, man-farts...what's the mystique?"

He chuckled again, "They are kinda' funny."

"Why's that?"

The silly question had done its job. In an instant he looked more relaxed. As he considered the question, a tiny sparkle came into his eyes.

Smiling as she prodded him on, "Well, what do men find so funny about farting? Go ahead, from the male perspective."

"You know something...they are funny, terribly funny, and for the life of me I don't know why." He paused, thinking for a

*Beyond the Pale*

second. “Belching...that’s funny, too. But farting, that’s tops. I’ll bet every fart and belch joke ever told got a laugh...at least from the men.

“When the guys get together, someone will lift their leg way up like a sumo wrestler and rip off a big one. You wouldn’t believe the howls. And the smell...the worse it stinks, the funnier it is. The decibel level...that’s funny, too. A big ‘ole loud, juicy, bubbly fart...it’s hilarious. Why it’s so funny, I have no idea.”

Her face contorted, “Bubbly?”

“Yeah, if the fart is a little wet...you know, juicy...it feels like it’s blowing bubbles on the way out.”

Frowning, “OK, I think I get the picture.”

“I’ll give you an example,” pushing the bowl away, “true story...no exaggeration! And I was a working accountant at the time, not a kid. Three of my friends and I were going somewhere, God knows where! We had just left an Arby’s restaurant. It was wintertime and very, very cold outside. The car was nice and toasty...the heater on high...and the windows rolled up. Well, someone cut a silent fart. I think Clint did it.”

Laughing hard, just by reliving the story, he stopped a second to compose himself. “Talk about rank? Wow, what a stink...so bad that noxious vapor, our eyes watered. I pulled the car over. As soon as we stopped, all four of us bailed out.” Thomas laughed so hard tears had filled his eyes.

Still laughing, he looked at her. “Why do you think I pulled over?”

Giving a disgusting look, “It stunk?”

“Nope, it wasn’t the smell, although it was a great smelling fart. It was the laughter—uncontrollable howling. We laughed so hard that I couldn’t drive. A couple of the guys nearly pissed their pants. We simply had to stop because we were laughing so hard. It was absolute madness...funniest damn thing ever!

*Jim Tuggle*

“And from that day on,” hands held up, fingers mimicking quote signs, and lapsing into a radio announcer’s voice, “a truly great fart, one meeting rigid quality standards...sound, odor, and stuff like that, is called the ‘Arby Fart.’”

“Call any one of those guys today and inquire as to a very smelly, monster fart and they will instantly answer...‘Oh yeah, the ‘Arby Fart’!” Smiling, he sat back. “Now, how do you explain that?”

“I can’t. I’ll never understand,” her mouth twisted.

“You’re right, it’s terribly disgusting...no obvious humor to a female observer. But, consider this...a scientific perspective, if you will. Four random subjects exposed to the same stimuli and 100 percent of the sample population laughed their bloody asses off. Why is that doctor?”

Now she started sniggering, “The population consisted of an evolutionary-challenged species...obviously.”

He grinned. “You’re probably right.” He lifted his finger to make a point, “But let me ask you...don’t you find some bit of humor in that story?”

“The truth?”

“Yes ma’am, the truth.”

A slight grin crossed her face, “A little funny.”

“That’s it...just a little funny?”

Now laughing, “OK, it’s all I could do to keep from bursting out laughing aloud.”

He sat back, crossing his arms. “You’re not a man, are you?”

She roared. “Not by any stretch, you nut! Finish your sandwich...then it’s a hot shower and a good night’s sleep for you.”

So pleased that he had come home, she cheerfully directed him to the shower. As they walked, she insisted his clothes be

*Beyond the Pale*

washed. It mattered not that everything he owned was on his back. “These clothes are almost beyond cleaning.”

She thought, ‘It’s a good thing I’m off tomorrow. I can keep my eye on him and get him started on a wardrobe. I wonder where he’s been sleeping. It must be the streets.

‘Can he be broke? Why else would he be so unkempt? Had he spent all his money in just over a year? No, it’s not possible. Tomorrow, I’ll learn more tomorrow. He must rest now.’ Leaving him in the bathroom, her first chore was to load all the beer and booze into the trunk of her car. That done, she went to check on him.

Maggie knocked loudly on the bathroom. “I’m leaving you a robe to wear, and I’m taking your clothes to throw them in the wash. I’ll dry them in the morning.”

“That’s fine.” Peeping around the curtain, “Oh, Maggie?”

“Yes?”

“No one knows I’m here. I would like to keep it that way.”

“No problem, I won’t tell anyone. Unless you need something else, I’m going to bed.”

“I’m fine. Goodnight, and thanks for everything.”

She said goodnight, picked up his clothes and headed toward the utility room. Going through his tattered clothes, she found ninety-three dollars, his passport, and an envelope addressed:

**In case of death, please notify:**

**Dr. Margaret Wyatt**

**Sacramento, California**

Unable to control her curiosity, Maggie read the contents:

**My name is Thomas Anthony Reed. I have no known living relatives, my mind is sound, and I have written this Last Will and Testament**



*Jim Tuggle*

**completely in my own hand. It is my wish that all my worldly possessions be bequeathed to Margaret Anne Wyatt, M.D. of Sacramento, California whose last known address is 38 Morning Way, 817-555-2334.**

**Signed this 22nd day of February, 1996**

**Thomas Anthony Reed**

Instinctively, she flipped it over. Written on the back:

**Banque Ormundt, Zurich, 01 23-1788**

Maggie returned the Will to its envelope, put it and the other items in a kitchen drawer, locked the front door and went to bed.

He strolled into the kitchen, stretching and yawning, “Good morning...that coffee smells wonderful.”

“My God, a good night’s sleep did miracles for you. I can’t believe my eyes. Last night you looked like death warmed over.”

“A shower, shave, ten hours of sleep, and a red fuzzy robe would do wonders for anybody.” He spun around as if he were modeling. “And that bed, it’s been many a night since I’ve slept in that kind of luxury.”

She asked, “Think you’re up to a big breakfast?”

“Sure, I’m famished.”

“Great, let’s eat. Then we’ll let the day take us where it will.”

They fixed themselves a big breakfast and spent the next hour or so sitting around the kitchen table catching up on each other’s lives.

*Beyond the Pale*

After enough reminiscing to make them comfortable, he said, “Maggie, I’m at peace with myself. So we can talk about anything you want.”

He picked up her hand, pressing it tenderly. “I know you loved Cathy as much as I did...and I realize you’ve suffered, too—maybe more than me in some ways. If you want to talk about it, feel free to ask anything you want. It won’t be a problem. It’s time for me to start over. That was our plan, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

Remembering Cathy’s last letter expressing concern that something was not quite right with Thomas, she looked sternly into his eyes, “First, tell me more about you.” This time, she took his hand, “And don’t try to ‘BS’ me, Thomas. If there’s something churning around in that head of yours, I want to know about it.”

Giving her a puzzled look, “What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. That phone call a year ago...you were in a terrible emotional state...then, not a single word from you in more than a year. You show up looking like you’ve spent the past year in a Tijuana prison. You’ve lost at least forty pounds,” she paused, and gave a wink, “a positive feature, I might add. And speaking of losing things, you’re professing amnesia—don’t know where you’ve been for the last year—and you’re asking me what I’m talking about?”

‘I didn’t think she would buy my amnesia story,’ he thought. ‘What am I going to tell her about this past year? I can’t tell her the truth.’

He shrugged it off. “What can I tell you? I bottomed out...sunk as low as I could go. By the grace of God I made it here. You got some food in me. We talked. We joked like old times. I got a shower...a great night’s sleep and here I am...sober as a judge and feeling pretty good. No bull, I’m not pulling your leg.”

*Jim Tuggle*

He moved closer, fixing his eyes with hers. “I had a wife whom I loved dearly. She was taken from me. I mourned her death. I am here, now, in your kitchen, and more importantly I understand the progression. It’s like a storm—I saw it coming, I lived through it, I put the pieces back together—now the storm is gone and everything is fine. That’s the best I can explain it.”

Nearly convinced, she decided to let him relate those last horrible days. “OK, if you’re sure you are up to it, I would like to know about her last days. It’s important to put this tragedy in the past and get on with my life.”

A small pause, a glance to the table, and then into her eyes, “For the most part, Cathy held up relatively well. The last two or three weeks were hard...really hard.” Taking a long sip of coffee, he began the torturous account.

“One Sunday morning she had lingered in the bathroom a little too long, so I walked in on her unannounced. We had argued several times about her bathroom privacy, but she had made it very clear: when she was in the bathroom, leave her be. I knew she wanted to hide the pain from me. That was what she wanted, so I tried to respect her wishes.

“Anyway, on this particular morning I walked in to find her on her knees leaning over the toilet. Blood was everywhere! She had coughed it up through her nose and mouth. Her hands were over her face...trying desperately to hold it in. She couldn’t catch her breath.

“She turned and looked at me...terror in her eyes. The tears ran into the blood...the blood oozing through her fingers, down along her arms...to her elbows...dripping into her lap...and on to the floor.

“There she sat, in that bright red pool. I felt so bad...so powerless. Just be with her—that was all I could do—just be with her.

*Beyond the Pale*

“I told her, ‘I’ll always be here, Cathy.’ She was so cold, shivering uncontrollably. All her clothes were off...easier to clean up, I guess. I sat down on the floor beside her, wrapped her in several towels and pulled her close.

“When I mentioned the hospital, she shook her head ‘no’, sternly shaking her finger at me. Then I said we’re going home. Again...she shook that finger. She tried to say something, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Hold her tight...that was all I could do.”

His fingers moved to his temples, massaging them slowly. His eyes fluttered then closed—Thomas had momentarily forgotten himself. “You’re not alone, sweetheart, you’re not alone. I’m here...just like always...I’m here...don’t be afraid...I’ll always be with you.”

Bewildered, Maggie watched not knowing what to say or do.

The massaging hands returned to the table as he gradually opened his eyes. The story continued, without him realizing he had momentarily slipped away. “I just kept on telling her the same thing over and over. She pulled so close, relaxing in my arms. We didn’t speak...we both thought her time had come. So we sat there waiting for the end.

“Miraculously, after a while, the coughing and bleeding stopped. Again, I wanted to call an ambulance, but she would not hear of it. I washed her off, put her to bed, and she fell fast asleep.”

Looking at Maggie, her tears were pouring freely as she bit on her lower lip. Obviously her heart was breaking all over again. “Do you want me to go on?”

Unable to speak, she nodded.

“After that Sunday morning incident, she was very weak. I don’t believe she got out of bed for three or four days—anyway, amazingly enough, her condition improved.

*Jim Tuggle*

“We managed to take a few drives around the island, or just sit on the beach. She loved the tropical sunsets. And did we talk. We talked constantly: God, politics, geography, business, history. What a passion for history...it seems she taught me more in those few days than all the other years we were married.”

Emotion began to swell. With every ounce of determination he could gather, he choked it back. Taking a sip of coffee, he continued. “The next incident came about a week later, again in the morning, and in the bathroom, but this time I heard her crying. Again, I went in unannounced. She stood in front of the mirror rubbing her face and neck.”

“Hey, you OK?”

She answered with a strange, melancholy resolve. “I’m yellow, Thomas. Look how yellow I am. My liver is failing. Maggie told me my liver might fail.”

I put my arms around her. “Let’s go to the hospital, please, Cathy. Please, you need—”

She screamed, “No! I’m not going. I’ll slit my throat first. They’ll keep me alive for weeks. I’m not going to vegetate out of this world. No hospital.”

“OK, no hospital. Are you in pain?”

“No, I’m just a little tired. If today is the day, let it happen on the beach.”

There was excitement in her voice. “Do me a favor, Sweetheart?”

“Name it.”

“Remember all those swim wear shops we saw in Papeete?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to pick me out several bikinis. Mine are all too big now. Better buy a size 1. I want them hot—the skimpier the

*Beyond the Pale*

better—a string up the butt and two postage stamps. And for lunch: a picnic basket of cheese, wine, and a big loaf of French bread.”

It finally dawned on him, and he started to grin. “You’re reconstructing our first date—June 3, 1976, Virginia Beach, on the north end of the beach.”

She tweaked his cheek. “That’s right...very good, Thomas. Was I hot that day, or what?”

“So hot, you blocked out the sun.”

Both were still looking in the mirror, him standing behind her with his arms around her waist. She gave him a smile. “Want a little news?”

His brow puckered, “Sure, what?”

“Fifteen minutes after we met, I was madly in love with you. I know I put you through the wringer, leading you on and all. I just wanted to make sure you loved me as much as I loved you. It took you a year and a half to catch what you had already caught in those first fifteen minutes.”

He lifted her hair to kiss her neck, gently pulling her closer.

Gently slapping at his hands to break the grip, “I wish I felt up to a good romp in the hay, but I don’t. So get your ass moving, and don’t come back until you have the hottest bikinis in Tahiti, plenty of cheese, wine, and some of that wonderful French bread. Now, you get,” she barked, pushing him toward the door.

As the story unfolded, Maggie hung onto every word. Smiles and weeping laughter followed Thomas’ dialog...all sounding so typically Cathy—running him in circles as she usually did.

“I finished my errands around one that afternoon. When I got back to our little bungalow, I found her sound asleep in a big hammock out under the palms...contentment written all over her. Frail as she was, I remember thinking how peaceful and beautiful

*Jim Tuggle*

she looked tucked up so neatly under those shady, tropical evergreens.”

“Cathy, wake up. I’m back. Do you still want to go?”

She stirred a little, stretching and yawning. “What...go? Oh, Thomas, you’re back?”

He leaned to her, kissing her cheek. “I found the hottest bikinis in all Papeete—probably the entire South Pacific. Want to take a look?”

“You bet I do.”

Maggie’s chin rested in her palms, her elbows firmly planted on the table savoring every word.

“We packed the chairs, food, CD player and headed off for Point Venus on the north side of the island—the place where the first white man set foot on Tahiti. There’s this breathtaking spot...lots of trees, a cool tropical breeze, and a long white beach...all wrapped in a picturesque cove. We spread our blanket just inside the shade. I placed her chair on one side, the picnic basket on the other...exactly as we did some twenty years before.

“Through the afternoon, the sunset, and beyond, we talked, laughed, sipped wine, and snacked on cheese and French bread. Just as the sun dropped below the vast Pacific, we slipped off our suits and took a skinny dip—another part of the reenactment of our first date.

“That was my first glimpse of that heavenly creature who was to become my wife.” Thomas held up his hand, gesturing a profound truth, “As God is my witness, in those cool Atlantic waters, we kissed, caressed and explored each other’s bodies—what a wildly erotic moment—but we weren’t intimate that day. It wasn’t until six months later that we did it.

“She intended for our last day together to be as our first—that genius that was so clearly Cathy. I realize now she had sent me off on those errands to get me out of her hair so she could write

*Beyond the Pale*

good-bye. Plus, I think she tried to wear me out physically...obviously to prevent me from interfering with her plans for the next morning.”

‘I’ve got to get this finished fast,’ he thought. ‘If not, I will never hold up.’ He averted his eyes to the floor, knowing that if he were to watch Maggie’s pain and suffering, as well as enduring his own, he would surely not be able to get through it.

“Well her plan worked. I was sound asleep the next morning when she slipped out of bed, dressed, and made her way to the car. She drank just a little booze; I’m sure to make me think her accident was ‘accidental’.

“She died before she even started the car...all alone. She was gone...no final words...no goodbyes...no last embrace...no nothing. I know it happened just a minute or two before I found her.”

Without looking up, he squeezed Maggie’s hand hard. “I would have given my soul to be able to spend that last minute with her. Jesus Christ, just one stinking minute...was that so much to ask?”

After a long pause, and then with a heavy sigh, “‘Heart failure’, the medical examiner said.”

“I thought I had done OK up to that point. You see my obsession was to be at her side when death finally took her. I could not bear the thought of her dying alone. And the thing that drove me crazy was I knew she had died without me. That one last look...that one last kiss...that one last touch...just any one little thing to relieve the coldness of her dying alone. I should have been there...I wasn’t...and that’s the part that’s been so hard for me to deal with.”

“Thomas, you can’t blame—”

He cut her off. “Thanks...but let’s go on.”

“For the next several days I was a neurotic basket-case. I never left her side again. I stayed right with her through the whole



*Jim Tuggle*

funeral process. All that crap about taking out the blood, replacing it with formaldehyde...not on your life. I wouldn't let them touch her.

“My neurosis terrified the funeral director. He tried to send her to another funeral home, but I ended that thought pretty damn quick.

“It took them the better part of the day to satisfy me with the way she looked. When we finished, she was absolutely beautiful...radiant...even the beautician cried. I kissed her good-bye and closed the coffin.”

Taking his eyes from the floor, he looked at Maggie. She had slumped over the table, her head resting on her folded arms, sobbing quietly.

He reached for her hand and continued.

“I purchased a little over four acres of paradise high up on the western face of Mount Orohena, a beautiful mountain overlooking Papeete. Her resting place is really quite lovely, done in white and black marble. I don't think Cathy would've liked it, though. ‘Too ostentatious,’ she would say. The inscription reads: ‘Catherine Jane Reed, Beloved wife of Thomas Reed, Taken in the middle of her life, August 7, 1954 - January 22, 1996.’ There's a trust at the local bank to maintain her grave.”

Touching her cheek, “It's a damn sad story. Cry your eyes out, Maggie. I certainly understand.” He stood, bent down and kissed the top of her head.

Fighting back the rage, he stretched, slowly making his way to the patio for a breath of fresh air. He thought about the first time Cathy had told him the news—almost a year and a half ago. ‘At least I was able to get through the events of the final days—didn't know if I could, but I did. Guess that's a good sign,’ he thought.

Returning to the kitchen, she remained as he had left her—slumped over the table, sobbing quietly. He placed his hand on her

*Beyond the Pale*

arm, prompting her to stand. His arms wrapped around her, tenderly guiding her head to his shoulder.

“Let’s have a cup of coffee,” lifting her chin, forcing her to look at him.

“Sure, sounds good. You fix it while I freshen up.” She walked off toward the bathroom.

Returning a few minutes later, she smiled, “I feel much better now.” Slipping her arm around his waist, “Thomas, how did you ever get through it?”

“Intervention...perhaps I was destined to get through it.”

She gave him a quirky look. “What on God’s green earth do you mean by that remark...‘destined’ to get through it?”

“Who knows what’s in store. For a few months we had a great time. I wouldn’t take anything in the world for those wonderful days. Nothing routine—every minute was exciting. But we paid an awful price for those last few weeks, Maggie...so long in duration...so costly in suffering...so unimaginably painful. Looking back, I think I literally lost my mind.

“And then, after we finished the grave site, the real loneliness set in. For weeks I had been busy, my time totally consumed. Then, in an instant, I had nothing to occupy my mind. I spent days drinking, wandering around, feeling sorry for myself. With no place to go or nothing to do brought on these wild mood swings. There were days of unbridled rage—the mere sight of a pack of cigarettes would send me into orbit.

Sipping the coffee, “I guess the phrase, ‘totally out of it,’ explains it best—my moods ranged from fits of madness to extreme melancholy. Suddenly one day, I decided enough was enough! I remember it so well, what a miserable, rotten day—whirling winds, stinging rain, lightning bolts, and thunder claps.

“Drunker than a damn skunk, I managed to get back out to Point Venus—the perfect place to end it all. I climbed out on a

*Jim Tuggle*

particularly menacing ledge rather high above the water. Ready to end it, I inched my way out on this little rock platform. The sea churned beneath me. I opened my arms, offering up my worthless life. Naked as the day I was born, there I stood, in all my glory. What an impressive scene!” He snickered with a crooked smile. “Just as I was preparing myself to jump, a strong gust of wind swept me up and blew me over backwards—blowing in any other direction, I would have been a goner. As it happened, it blew me straight back. I cracked my head on a rock and went out like a light. When I woke up hours later, I had a hangover from hell—my head hurting on the inside and throbbing on the outside. It was colder than a ‘well-digger’s ass’ and I stunk to high heaven from the stale vomit.”

“Want to know what my first thought was?”

Unsure of where he was going, Maggie looked puzzled, “What?”

“What a useless, spineless piece of shit I am.”

“Thomas! How could you ever think that?”

He never answered her question. “I packed my bags the next day and caught a ride on a sailboat going east toward the Marquise Islands.”

He looked her straight in the eye. “God just doesn’t want me yet, because I gave him plenty of opportunities...that’s for sure. So it seems ‘destiny’ has brought me this far.” He shrugged his shoulders.

For what felt like an interminable amount of time, she looked at him.

Thomas broke the silence. “Let’s go shopping. Since I’m going back in the work force, let’s go to the mall and pick me up a whole new wardrobe. I’m going to need a computer to prepare my résumé, introduction letters, and things like that. I think I’ll buy one of those laptop portables—the type you can take anywhere. Luggage...I need some new luggage.”

*Beyond the Pale*

She smiled, shaking off the incredible story just told. “Yes, let’s go shopping. Don’t worry...I’ve got a charge card just screaming for attention.”

He looked at her, smiling, “That’s good, I’ve only got a little over a \$500,000 in the bank and a \$250,000 insurance check to pick up...but I can’t get it until Monday. We’ll make it a loan till then, OK?”

“Oh, what a relief! I know you left here with a lot of money. When I saw you last night...in those clothes...I thought maybe you had lost it all or something.” She smiled, feigning a wipe of her forehead.

“The money is safe...but like I said, I can’t get—”

Interrupting, Maggie said, “Thomas, I read your Will last night. You were going to leave everything to me?” She retrieved the money, his passport, and the Will. Still bewildered, “Why were you going to leave me all that money?”

Nonchalantly, “Who better? You’re all I’ve got.”

“Come on, that’s ridiculous. I can’t let you do that.”

“I’m not dead yet, Maggie. Who knows, I might be broke when I kick off. When I do...I want you to have what’s left. Now let’s forget about it. OK?” His annoyed tone clearly conveyed he wanted to hear nothing more about the subject.

“OK, OK. Just one more question about your finances?”

“One more?”

“Just one.”

“What?”

“You’ve spent close to a million dollars in the last...” starting to count on her fingers, “seventeen months?”

“I guess I did.”

*Jim Tuggle*

“How in the world could you spend that—?”

He interrupted, “Is this a second question?”

“Well...yes.”

Smiling at her, “You said just one question.”

Her face flushed, “Sorry...I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Forget it. I’m just being a little defensive. For the most part, I don’t know where the money went. It didn’t seem important at the time.”

She looked at him with knitted brows, but decided not to press it. Instead she said, “We need to clear up one more piece of unfinished business.”

“OK, shoot.”

“Cathy wrote me the day before she died. There’s a letter for you. I’m supposed to give it to you when you’re up to it. On this one, I want you to make the call. I’ll give it to you when you want it.”

He answered quickly. “I don’t want to read it right now. You hold on to it.”

“Fair enough, that’s what I’ll do.” She grabbed his arm, “Let’s go shopping.”

The rest of the day was spent outfitting Thomas for his new life: four pairs of Johnson & Murphy shoes, eight Hart Marks suits, \$50 ties, \$100 shirts, and all the best accessories. Waiting for the charge card approval, Maggie couldn’t help noticing the rather large quantities of casual and outdoor apparel being purchased also. It seemed Thomas was planning on playing more than working.

At the computer store, he had found a Texas Instruments’ notebook with a cellular wireless modem. With the wireless feature he could send and receive faxes, e-mail, plus surf the Net, all

*Beyond the Pale*

without wires—a necessary feature for the work to come. To carry his new wardrobe, he picked a complete set of the best American Tourister luggage; for Maggie, he bought a gold bracelet and a bottle of Chanel No. 5. The last stop of the day found them at ‘Sorry Jack’s’ for dinner and drinks.

“I love this place.”

“Me, too, Mr. Reed,” said the man as he approached from behind.

“Hi, Jack, can you put us somewhere out of the way?”

“You bet. Hello, Dr. Wyatt...good to see you. Right this way,” as he led them off.

As they neared a familiar corner, Maggie shook her head, “No, not this table. Please, don’t you have another?”

“No problem, Dr. Wyatt...how about this one?”

“Perfect. Thank you,” she smiled.

“Oh, Jack, you haven’t seen us, OK?”

“Haven’t seen either of you for months...the waiter hasn’t either. Bon appétit!” He turned, flagged the steward and whispered in his ear.

“I adore this place,” she said, watching Jack do his magic.

“It’s been a good day.” Picking up her hand, “Thanks for spending it with me.”

“You’ve come a long way since that crazy phone call a year ago. That scared the hell out of me.” She asked, “What were you raving about when you said, ‘They killed her’?”

“That was just some gibberish from a deranged man...nothing more.”

*Jim Tuggle*

With a half-hearted smile, she pressed, "Once deranged? Or still deranged?"

"Once deranged, Maggie...once deranged. I'm OK, really I am. Looking back, I should have insisted we come home a month before she died. Those last weeks were much too much for the two of us to handle."

"Thomas, I care for you a lot. If something is on your mind or if you have a problem, I want you to know that you can share it with me."

He smiled, as if she were being too protective. "Less than twenty four hours have passed since you yanked me through your door. I think I've done really well from then to now, don't you?"

Waving his comment aside, "Something is going on in that head of yours and you're not sharing it with me...that's what I feel. I've always been a straight shooter and I'm not going to stop now. So there I've said it. Now, what's going on way down deep in there?" She reached over, thumping him on the head.

Hesitating, "Maggie, I've told you things over the last day that I thought would never pass my lips. And you're right about me being less than straightforward. But I'm afraid if I started spilling my guts right here, right now, you would run screaming for the door. And I truly don't want to lose you."

He continued to plead his case. "So here's the bottom line. I don't know how reason and rage are going to work things out up here," knocking on this head, "but when it's over you will be the first to know. That's the best I can give you right now. Can you take me on those conditions?"

"Hmmm! Are you going to be worth the gamble?"

"Well, hell yes, I'm worth the gamble," he laughed. "Let's order, I'm starving."

The 'Sorry Jack's' house special of spinach salad, prime rib, twice-baked potato and a bottle of red wine filled them to the brim.

*Beyond the Pale*

The scrumptious home-made pound cake smothered in the decadent Crème Brûlée just about finished them off.

Each enthusiastically complimented Jack on another wonderful evening. In turn, Jack reassured them the quiet evening at Jack's would remain quiet.

The next morning Thomas awoke first. It wasn't long until the aroma of brewing coffee lured her to the kitchen. He poured her a cup and dropped the French toast into the hot grease.

“Good morning. Oh, that smells wonderful!”

“Good morning. My famous French toast is coming up in a jiff...sleep well?”

“Like a rock, best night's sleep in months. How about you?”

“Same with me, I slept really well...” He buttered it lightly, sprinkled on cinnamon sugar, and placed the plate of toast before her. “Enjoy!”

A thin layer of syrup and a bite later, she looked at him. “Ummmm...this is simply delicious! It's just wonderful...so crisp! Mine is usually kinda' soggy...how did you make this?”

“Put a little vanilla, cinnamon, and sugar in the milk and eggs; but the trick is to toast the bread first, tent it, and let it stand. When the toast has cooled, dip it in the batter and then into hot grease. That's it—the old family secret is out.”

She raved. “It's out of this world. I love it. By far, the best I've ever tasted.”

With Maggie served, he started to fry his own. As he prepared his portion, he casually mentioned, “The morning paper has some interesting job listings. When breakfast is over I'm going to start on my résumé.”



*Jim Tuggle*

“Why don’t you buy your CPA practice back? You told me about that wonderful option your employees gave you. There wouldn’t be any hard feelings if you bought it back, would there?”

“That’s something I’ve thought about, but that would mean stepping back into the past. And that’s not what I want to do. Thomas Reed needs a completely new life. What I would really like is to find a traveling job, just for a little while. I think it would be easier on me if I eased back into Sacramento living in small manageable bits.”

She reached for his hand. “Whatever you’re comfortable with. Just remember, you can talk with me anytime...about anything.” She smiled, “You know, it’s been a really long time since a man cooked me breakfast...and a very good breakfast, I might add.”

He smiled, not knowing what to say.

She broke the silence, “Well, when you finish, I’ll clean up the kitchen. You can go in the study with your new computer and type away. I’m going to get dressed and make my hospital rounds. I should be back by around five this afternoon. You’ll have the whole afternoon to yourself.”

He worked through the morning and into the afternoon. As he leaned back to peruse the final product, he couldn’t help but marvel at the advances in computer technology. ‘What I can do with this tool,’ he thought, rubbing the computer as if it were a kitten. ‘Well, the moment is at hand.’ His thoughts turned to Cathy and a lecture she had given him many times. ‘You’re too damned trusting, Thomas. You must see a person for what they are...not for who you want them to be.’

‘Do I have the stomach for it? Am I going to start and then get cold feet?’ For thirty minutes, memories of Cathy flooded his thoughts. The misery she so heroically endured vividly filled his

*Beyond the Pale*

mind. ‘Hell yes, I have the stomach; and hell no, my feet will never be cold.’ He slowly and carefully typed in the e-mail address, **LTalionis@lion.com**, and hit the ‘Send’ key. His résumé was off.

Several days later Thomas received a short and simple e-mail from the Lion Corporation. The message read:

**To: TReed@aol.com**

**From: LTalionis@lion.com**

**Mr. Reed, we received your résumé of 15 February. I will be at the Sacramento downtown Hyatt, Room 907, 3:00 P.M. local time, Friday, 19 February. See you there. No reply necessary.**

**Lex Talionis**

When Maggie came home Thomas showed her the e-mail message.

“Well, I’ve got my first interview, Maggie.”

“Great.” She read the short few lines and turned to Thomas with a quizzical look. “Odd name...very odd name.” Her gaze held him for a few seconds.

“What?”

She continued, “What do you know about him?”

“Nothing...”

She frowned and then turned toward the kitchen. “You better know what you’re getting into.”

Thomas returned home Friday evening around seven. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted the air as Maggie came out of the kitchen.

*Jim Tuggle*

“Hi, Thomas, how did the interview go?”

“I got the job.”

“Well, that’s great. Sit down and tell me all about it.”

“Sounds like a very interesting situation. I met the quintessential mystery man today—peculiar guy, but I liked him very much. Why? I’m not quite sure.” Thomas continued as he described a very eccentric and very private man. His privacy was so important that discussing his employer was forbidden. At Thomas’ insistence, he had requested he be allowed to speak about the position with his good friend, Dr. Maggie Wyatt, explaining that she is a very important person in his life. According to Thomas, he finally acquiesced.

Casting a doubtful look, she said, “Isn’t that interesting?”

“Anyway,” he continued, ignoring her sarcasm, “He says he’s going to liquidate his entire fortune—most of it to be given away. To do that, he needs a coordinator and a banker. I’ll be the coordinator. There is a banker in mind, but he’s not on board yet. I’m to be the front man—help determine a fair price, mitigate tax consequences, schedule payments, stuff like that, and coordinate the instructions to the banker—”

Maggie interrupted, “Why doesn’t he just forward the instructions to the banker.”

“I asked the same question. Two reasons: first, he doesn’t want any ongoing links between himself and the banker. Once he hires him that will be the only contact ever made. Just like me, I’ve met him once, and that’s it. From now on, all instructions will come over the Internet.”

She threw up her hands, indicating she had heard enough, “Do you think Talionis is his real name?”

“Who knows...maybe not...but I do sense goodness in the man, Maggie.”

*Beyond the Pale*

“You sense goodness in everyone, Thomas.”

“Yeah, according to Cathy that’s one of my character flaws.”

“And she was right about that, too.” With a worried look, “Thomas, you look me straight in the eye and tell me you feel good about this arrangement...and this man, Talionis.”

With his hand on his heart, “As God as my witness, I feel Talionis has nothing but goodness and justice in his heart.”

Again she questioned him, “Justice? That seems a strange word to throw in...why did you say ‘justice’?”

Trying to pass it off lightly, “I don’t know; it just came out.”

“OK, OK, what’s the second reason?” She said with an exasperated look.

“The second reason will not be disclosed unless certain conditions come to pass.” He held up his hand, anticipating the questions. “And no, I don’t know what those conditions are.”

The redhead’s temper exploded, “That’s a bunch of crap, Thomas Reed. You can’t lie worth a darn. You know what the second reason is, don’t you? Either you can’t or won’t say. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? Yes what, for crying out loud,” pressing harder.

Reluctantly he answered. “I won’t say.”

With a raised voice, she slowly and deliberately exaggerated each word, “Will...you...be...in...any...kind...of...danger?”

“I don’t think so.”

Maggie walked right up to him grabbing his shirt with both hands. “You don’t think so! What’s that suppose to mean? Just let me tell you something. Right at a time in my life when I’d convinced myself that I didn’t need a man around...you drop in! And

*Jim Tuggle*

I'll tell you something else—I started thinking about you the day Cathy had me over for dinner...you remember that famous 'my best friend and my husband get-together' dinner?"

He nodded.

Her eyes began to water. "And there has not been one single day over the last year that I didn't think that you may be the best thing to ever come along. Not only that...you were hand delivered to my doorstep by my best friend...God rest her beautiful soul. Now you be honest with me, Thomas. I'm getting too old for this crap. Is there a future for us? Tell me straight and tell me now."

Gently he reached, pulling her to him. "Yes, I hope there is a future for us. Don't worry about me." With that said, he kissed her passionately.

Responding for a moment and then pushing away, "OK, OK, OK, that was good...no, that was wonderful!" Grasping his face with both hands, she looked deeply into his eyes, "But don't try to divert my attention. I'm no bimbo, and I didn't just fall off a turnip truck..."

"I never—"

She interrupted. "Let me tell you the impression I have so far."

A little taken back, he released her. "OK."

"Since the moment you walked through that door, things haven't been exactly right. Some of the stuff I've heard is as weak as water. It seems to me, just on general observation, you are drifting into some sort of skullduggery. That's my impression, and I am a little afraid of it."

"No skullduggery and nothing to fear."

"I can't get anymore out of you, can I?"

"No, you can't."

*Beyond the Pale*

“Well, at least tell me how long you plan on working for this guy, Talionis? You can tell me that, can’t you?”

“It’s temporary. Six months, twelve months tops...by the way, he’s paying me \$18,000 a month.”

“Well, I like the idea of you not working for him more than a year...” She absently twirled a lock of her hair around her finger. “Not bad money either,” she added with a half-hearted smile.

“Now, Maggie, can I ask you some things?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“I’ll be on the road almost constantly. Do you want me to find an apartment or do you mind if I stay here?”

“Don’t be silly, stay here. When do you start work?”

“I fly out Sunday morning.”

Surprised, “Oh no, so soon? Where are you going?”

“I can’t say, Maggie.”

He spent the remaining time at Maggie’s house preparing for his first assignment. ‘She’s a little distant,’ he thought. He could certainly understand why. His first attempt at deception had not gone well. ‘She knows I’m being evasive and deceitful. I’ve got to do better than this. Here’s a great woman, and I’m acting like a snake in the grass; but there’s nothing I can do about it now.’

During those last two nights with Maggie, Thomas desperately wanted to slip into her bed to bare his soul and exorcise his demons. But he would not let it happen. It would be a terrible injustice to take this relationship any further, considering the task at hand. Besides, the demons he was after were much more important than his own.

*Jim Tuggle*

Early Sunday morning Thomas and Maggie sat around the kitchen table sipping coffee saying their good-byes. The cab's horn broke their conversation.

"Maggie, if anyone asks, I work for the Lion Corporation. My boss is Lex Talionis, and you understand he is an older, eccentric man with a very private side to his personality. That's all you know, OK?"

"OK. Kiss me good-bye, and for goodness sake, be careful. Call when you get a chance. I'll be waiting."

After a parting kiss, he turned from her to make his way toward the cab.

She called to him. "Thomas? Have you ever had a doctor write you a prescription?"

He turned, "Sure, why?"

"What language was it?"

"Latin?"

"Bingo!" She waved then watched till the cab was out of view.

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