

The Grateful Damned Chapters 1-3

Michael Blunk

This book is lovingly dedicated to my sister Rhonda.

Introduction

Perhaps it is just me, but I have long suspected readers prefer brief introductory remarks to lengthy, rambling prologues. I understand, and as I hope to score points with book lovers everywhere, let me quickly state this tale is not about the afterlife. True, much of the story takes place in a highly fanciful Hades, the gathering place of the dead, and I certainly believe in the everlasting nature of the human soul, but in no way am I attempting to offer my readers an accurate portrayal of life beyond the grave.

With this said, I am confident you will uncover the motive behind this story in no time at all.

Chapter 1

I found myself shuffling along a broad, well-lit corridor. Around me were hundreds, no, make that thousands of people, a few laughing, some appearing wide-eyed and nubilous, others whispering among themselves, and still others craning their necks toward the many mammoth-sized video screens suspended from the corridor's high ceiling. Loud music, eerie but surprisingly upbeat, and of a genre wholly unfamiliar to me, blared from the overhead loudspeakers. During the occasional breaks in the music, a cultured man's voice announced, "Greetings, new arrivals. You are cordially invited to join us for a free, fun filled as well as informative welcoming seminar at the New Babylon Civic Center located straight ahead." Timed to the rhythm of the music were pulsating bursts of dazzling, near blinding illumination accompanied by a hundred restless, darting beams of laser light. Though unsettling and surreal, the atmosphere was unexpectedly festive.

The numerous overhead screens that hung from the ceiling rafters flashed a series of cryptic messages:

Welcome to Hades!

I'll Be Damned!

Hell—We Love You Just the Way You Are!

Free at Last!

Never Apologize! Never!

Devilishly Good Times Without the Pitchforks!

Congratulations! You're Dead!

Hades—A Place Where the Party Never Ends!

Yes, You Were Right! Damn Right!
Inhibitions? Who Needs Them?
Damn, You're Good!
Dance to the Music of Your DNA!
And to Think You Might Have Missed All This for Heaven!
God Can't Touch You Here!
Live Profanely!
Everyone Here Is Gratefully Dead!
Life Begins When the Heartbeat Ends!
A-Ticket, A-Tasket, You Won't Stay in that Casket!

Unlike the legion of others crowded about me, I had been warned what to expect, yet despite the advantages of having been briefed prior to arrival, my head was swimming in a sea of confusion. So much was happening. Moving forward on unsteady legs, my overwhelmed senses struggled against the rapid-fire bursts of lights set to the frantic beat of music that can only be described as from another world.

I had arrived in this place, this gathering place of the dead, under singular circumstances. Perhaps the woman to my left had been killed when her motorcar had been struck by a tractor trailer. How had the man ahead of me come to this place? Had he lost a protracted battle with cancer? Perhaps his heart had suddenly seized. And what of the person to my right? Old age? A self-inflicted bullet wound to the temple of the head? Among this assembly, whose mortal bodies were being prepared for burial or cremation, I alone had come to this place, not by way of corporeal death,

but by translation, and unlike the others, I would be returning to the topside of earth at the end of my journey.

The events leading to this unlikely sojourn into the underworld began taking shape about a month ago inside, of all places, a twenty-four hour diner that catered to insomniacs and late-night revelers with appetites for the baser variety of foodstuffs. I was one of the insomniacs.

With grim curiosity, I noted how the little pool of coffee standing on the tabletop, left behind, no doubt, by a careless patron who had occupied this seat before me, reflected the eatery's discolored ceiling tiles when viewed at just the right angle, and by tapping the table's surface ever so slightly, the mirrored light from the florescent ceiling lamp danced and shimmered, thus adding to my late night amusement. According to the 7-Up wall clock, it was nearly 3 AM. The Silver Dollar Pancake House was our burg's only all night diner; even so, business appeared rather anemic despite the establishment's lack of competition. A giggly, intoxicated couple huddled in a booth near the door. Parked on a counter stool, a big, brawny fellow garbed in a "Party Naked" tee shirt with the sleeves cut out noisily sipped from a ceramic mug of coffee while aimlessly toying with his phone. And there was me. The waitress, a rather pretty girl in her late twenties, emerged from the kitchen carrying a tray of scrambled eggs, sausage links, waffles, juice, and coffee. Passing my table, she said, "I'll take your order just as soon as I serve the drunk couple their breakfast. Oh, I'll wipe up that puddle of coffee, too. Sorry about the messy table."

Why I was seated inside a disreputable eatery at this hour, I could not say. I mused thinking the late night diner scene was eerily reminiscent of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Perhaps I was there because it was 3 AM and, stricken with loneliness, I wanted to be in the society of others, but now that I was here, the incessant chattering of the inebriated couple annoyed me and the beefy chap's hairy shoulders and loud slurping grated my sensibilities. I missed Abbie. I had lost her nearly a year ago. Perhaps the worst of the grieving process was behind me, but I would be grappling with loneliness and a troublesome pack of seemingly unanswerable questions for a long time.

Swiping the pool of coffee with a heavily stained cloth rag, the young woman said, "My name is Carly, and I'll be your server. Sorry about the messy table. The poor old soul who sat here before you had shaky hands. Can I start you off with coffee? Cream? Sugar? Both? Neither?"

"Black coffee will be fine," I answered. "No need for a menu."

"No appetite, eh?" she asked. "Are you sure? Maybe a jumbo stack of fluffy buttermilk pancakes swimming in maple syrup would cheer you up. Add a few strips of crisp bacon or a couple of smoky sausage links, and you'd be good as new."

"Just coffee, thank you," I answered.

With no shortage of persistence, she asked, "How about a made-to-order omelet? Three large, Grade A eggs and whatever you like—diced green

peppers, mushrooms, bacon bits, cheddar cheese—as my Aunt Edna used to say, ‘Begin the day by lining your stomach with a hearty breakfast, and this gloomy old world will look a whole lot brighter.’”

“It shows, right?”

Brushing a wisp of strawberry blonde hair away from her eyes, she answered, “I wouldn’t wish to pry, mister, but you look like you lost your best friend. Anyway, I hope whatever bad luck is troubling you goes away, and if there’s anything I can do, just ask.” As she spoke, I perceived a welcomed measure of genuine concern in both her voice and in her countenance.

“My wife’s been gone nearly a year, but just as I think I am finally ready to move on with life, another tidal wave of grief blindsides me and, once again, I am overwhelmed by a new round of pain and feelings of emptiness.”

I immediately regretted dumping such a heap of emotional baggage upon a stranger, but she listened to my doleful rhapsody with a sympathetic ear. “I’m so sorry,” the young woman apologized, “Here you are, wrestling with grief, and I’m pushing pancakes and omelets. You must forgive me, but the owner of this restaurant, Mr. Weatherby, says I’m to try suggestive selling with customers who simply order coffee. According to the boss, it doesn’t pay to keep the doors open all night unless customers order from the menu, so I’m to try what he calls ‘suggestive selling’ to boost profits. Sit tight and I’ll bring your coffee.”

According to the FAA's accident report, carburetor ice had caused the airplane's six-cylinder Franklin engine to sputter and die. It was the day after our wedding; my bride and I were on our way to a fly-in when the accident occurred. What was I thinking, I wondered, when suggesting we honeymoon at an antique airshow in Oshkosh? Why not a proper honeymoon? How often had she mentioned a longing to see Paris? Why not Paris? Oshkosh? Really? At the first sign of mechanical trouble, I applied the carburetor heat control, but as the linkage had broken, the formation of menacing ice crystals spelled the engine's doom.

"Don't worry, Abbie," I assured with all the confidence I could muster, "I've practiced engine-out procedures dozens of times. Everything will be fine. This sturdy old bird will glide about nine feet for every foot of altitude we lose, and that pasture up ahead looks like just the place to set her down."

After setting the transponder to 7700 and making a quick Mayday call detailing our location, I advised Abbie to tighten her shoulder harness as I aimed the nose of the aircraft toward the welcoming expanse of pastureland. As the propeller windmilled futilely in the slipstream, the absence of the piston engine's usual roar cast an eerie spell inside the plane's spartan cockpit. Attempting to hide her anxiety, Abbie asked, "We'll be okay, won't we?"

Returning with a smile, a chipped ceramic mug, and a small carafe of coffee, the young server said, "I brewed a fresh pot of java just for you."

“Thanks! Speaking of this employer of yours, is this man Weatherby a tough boss? A tyrant?”

With a demure little sigh, she whispered, “I’m lucky to have this job, such as it is. You see, mister…”

“My friends call me Woody.”

“You see, Woody, I got myself into a spot of trouble a while back and, well, please don’t hold this against me, but I did seventeen months for being really, really stupid and believing my worthless ex-boyfriend’s pack of lies. As a condition of my release, I must remain gainfully employed or I’m in violation. Mr. Weatherby knows this, and he says he’s going to cut me loose and telephone my parole officer if late night sales don’t pick up.”

“A despot with a mercenary heart, right?”

“It’s my own fault,” she said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’d better make my rounds, but I’ll be back to warm up your coffee in a few.”

“Not so fast,” said I. “Please grab your pad and a pen, for I’m suddenly feeling ravenous. Are you ready? I’ll have three, no, make that four eggs over easy, hash brown potatoes, a stack of buckwheat pancakes with butter and real maple syrup—none of that Mrs. Butterworth, thank you, toast, whole wheat with marmalade, three or four sausage links, another three or four strips of bacon, a bowl of oatmeal with real cream and

sweetened with brown sugar, a tall glass of orange juice, and keep the coffee coming.”

“What? No grits?” she asked.

“I thought grits were only served in the south.”

“You want cheese in your grits?”

“Cheddar.”

“You’re a prince,” she said. “I suppose my job is secure for at least another day.”

“I’m no prince—just an insomniac with a hefty appetite.”

Two nights later, I found myself back at the Silver Dollar Pancake House. To be sure, I had not come for the all-night diner’s rubbery sausage links or the greasy-spoon atmosphere that reeked of smoke and old cooking oil; rather, I had hoped to resume my previous conversation with the pretty young server named Carly. It is true that I had found her pleasing to the eye, for I have long harbored a particular weakness for strawberry blondes, but it was not physical attraction—at least, I do not think it was physical attraction—that had caused me to desire her company. I had met someone who was hurting as much as me and, perhaps, this mutual state of unhappiness was drawing me to her. She had shown genuine concern

two nights previous, and, in my present state, kindness was the balm I most needed.

On this night, business was brisk and most of the tables were occupied by impatient diners demanding their pancakes, eggs, and coffee. Carly, the only server on duty, looked haggard and shopworn as she bounced from table to table attempting to placate querulous patrons demanding to know why the kitchen was slow in fulfilling their orders. “How long does it take to whip up a western omelet?” snapped a rather garrulous woman whose facial cosmetics appeared to have been applied during a drinking binge. “I don’t give a damn how backed up your cook is! Tell him I want my western omelet now!”

I had been seated in my booth a full twenty minutes before Carly appeared before me with an order pad. “I am so sorry about the pokey service, sir,” she apologized, “but we’ve been slammed with orders, and the cook is a new hire, and, say, I remember you from a couple of nights ago. It’s Woody, right?”

“You’ve a good memory,” I answered.

“How could I forget? You ordered the mega-breakfast, and, oh, thank you ever so much for the super generous tip. No one has ever slipped me a one hundred dollar bill. At first, I worried that it might be counterfeit, after all, this isn’t the kind of place where servers strike it rich, but the bank teller assured me it was genuine and believe me, your generosity could not have come at a more opportune time. Thank you, again!”

“Business appears good—too good, perhaps. Where did all these people come from?” I asked.

“It has been a madhouse,” she answered wistfully. “Billy T’s Tennessee Outlaws were performing at Bud’s and when the bar closed at 2, their drunken country music fans brought their appetites here.”

“Hey, waitress!” shouted a patron. “How about warming up my coffee!”

“Be right back,” she said. “Don’t go away.”

After tending to the highly vocal demands of a dozen or so inebriated diners, Carly finally returned to my table with another apology. “I am so, so sorry I’ve kept you waiting.” Hastily setting a cup of black coffee before me, she asked, “Ready for another of those mammoth, belly-busting breakfasts? Eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, fried potatoes...the works?”

“Would your Mr. Weatherby object if I just had coffee?”

“Are you kidding? With tonight’s receipts as good as they are,” she answered, “he’ll have no cause to complain. Besides, I’m certain our new cook can use a break in the action, but if you change your mind about eating, I’ll be back to take your order.”

What I most craved was normalcy—a wife, children, holidays spent with family, and a sense of belonging. I never knew my mother and I was raised

by a resident tutor hired by my father, an influential man who lived several hundred miles away. In Abbie, I had hoped to become as one in flesh, bring children into the world, and build a life based on love, unity, and mutual respect. My dreams were modest. Perhaps ambition should be made of sterner stuff, but all I had ever wanted was a wife, kids, and a simple, unpretentious life.

Besides cake, balloons, and gifts, my boyhood birthday celebrations included a yearly video conference with my father's attorney, Lydia Hamilton-Farnsworth. During these video conferences, she encouraged me to refer to her as Aunt Lydia, which I unceremoniously refused to do, for my father, who was a stickler for formality, insisted I address him as Mr. McCormick. As I was neither permitted to call him Dad nor Father, I was certain he would frown upon me greeting Lydia Hamilton-Farnsworth as Aunt Lydia. For the record, these annual birthday teleconferences were intended to keep me current as to any changes in my father's last will and testament.

After settling in front of the computer screen, Ms. Hamilton-Farnsworth would say, "Happy birthday, Woody. My, how you've grown since I last saw you a year ago. How are your studies? Have you made any new friends? How are you and Dr. Felton getting along? Yes, you are shooting up like a weed."

Considering that I was seated rather than standing during these yearly video conferences, I wondered how "Aunt Lydia" could have possibly determined how much I had grown. As to her condescending inquiries

about my school studies, my handful of friends, and my relationship with Dr. Felton, she never gave me an opportunity to answer. As a child, I was keenly aware of the gratuitous insincerity of most adults, but I did not mind, for the sooner the teleconference ended, the sooner I could tuck into my cake and ice cream.

“Very well, then. Let’s get down to business, birthday boy. Upon your father’s death, you will receive an annual income equivalent to three times the yearly salary of the average college educated worker living in California,” she would explain. “If the typical graduate earns, say, \$50,000 annually, you will receive—how much? Can you do the math? I am certain you are fully capable of calculating the sum of three times \$50,000. Your father tells me you are a very bright young fellow. As a safeguard against inflation, your quarterly payments will be adjusted according to the annual cost of living index. I am sure your Dr. Felton will explain this to you later. Do you understand what your Aunt Lydia has told you thus far, Woody?”

After noting the nod of my head, she would continue, “Add this to whatever you earn as a gainfully employed adult, and you are guaranteed a comfortable income for the remainder of your life. Your father does not approve of an ostentatious lifestyle, but he would not have you living in want. Has your Aunt Lydia explained this to your satisfaction?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Referring to a printed list before her, my father’s attorney went on to explain the remaining terms and conditions of his will. “Let’s skip the legal jargon.

To receive this income from your father's estate, you must first complete a four-year degree program from an accredited college or university. You want to go to college, don't you, Woody?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Of course, you do," she agreed. "Your father, who has little faith in American education, believes most post-secondary institutions are fundamentally unsound; therefore, he has prepared a list of seventeen approved schools from which you may choose. Enrollment in any college or university deemed unacceptable will result in a complete and total forfeiture of your inheritance. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Excellent. By the by, the full cost of your education will be paid by your father. What a fortunate young fellow you are."

"Yes, ma'am."

"There are a few other conditions tied to your inheritance. First, if you remain in California, you must never reside in either greater Los Angeles or the San Francisco metropolitan area. If you choose to relocate east, you are not to make your home in New York, Boston, or in either city's outlying suburbs. Finally, if you would choose to take residence in the Midwest, you are strictly prohibited from residing in either Chicago or Minneapolis. Your father believes the inhabitants of these aforesaid mentioned cities are

fundamentally unsound and would not have you contaminated by association. If you were to make your home in any of these cities, the payments from your father's estate will promptly end. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Los Angeles and San Francisco are filthy places," she added.

"Yes, ma'am."

"New York and Boston are equally uninhabitable."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Chicago and Minneapolis are loathsome places—disagreeable people and disagreeable weather."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's right. Let's move on. Once you reach adulthood, you are prohibited from engaging in any career related to the entertainment industry. This includes television, motion pictures, gaming, and the recording industry. Your father believes entertainers are fundamentally unsound and would not have you contaminated by association."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Working in the entertainment field will cause all payments from your father’s estate to cease. You understand, of course.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Payments from your father’s estate will come to an immediate end if you marry or cohabitate with anyone engaged in the entertainment industry. As I said, your father is convinced people involved in the entertainment industry are fundamentally unsound. You would not want to marry an actress or a pop singer, would you, Woody?”

“Yes, ma’am...I mean, no, ma’am.”

“As to career options, your father, who is essentially a lenient man, wants to demonstrate a measure of flexibility as to your career choices, yet there are notable terms and conditions relating to employment by which you must agree. In an effort to prevent you from making a career decision that is fundamentally unsound, he is insisting that you engage in one of eleven possible career choices. I have a comprehensive addendum to your father’s will that details the vocational do’s and don’ts by which you are to abide. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We are nearing the end of our conversation, so please be patient for another moment or two. Say, did Dr. Felton bake his famously delicious chocolate cherry cake for your birthday?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Dr. Felton baked my favorite chocolate cherry cake every birthday.

“Very well, then. All that remains are the instructions regarding your father’s Republic RC-3 Seabee.” The attorney was referring to my father’s single engine amphibious aircraft. Built shortly after World War II, the Seabee is an ungainly looking light plane capable of operating from land or water. Most light aircraft are sleek and graceful, but the Seabee is the ugly duckling of private aviation. Despite its homeliness, my father loved his Seabee dearly and took to the sky as often as his hectic schedule permitted. Because of a heart murmur discovered around his fiftieth year, my father was unable to pass the mandatory flight physical and, as such, saw his license revoked. Not to be undone by the flight surgeon’s verdict, he continued flying his beloved Seabee within the law by hiring a pilot to occupy the right seat. My father handled all the cockpit duties; his copilot was simply onboard should the unthinkable occur.

“Upon your father’s death, you will have three months in which to earn your private pilot license. You will then fly the Seabee a minimum of one hundred hours per year. The costs of storage, maintenance, and operational expenses will be covered by a separate fund from your father’s estate. In other words, the fuel, hangar rental, and upkeep will cost you nothing, but the airplane must be kept in its current meticulous condition, that is, the airframe and powerplant are to remain fundamentally sound. The plane may not be sold during your lifetime. And, again, you must log

no less than one hundred hours annually. Failure to abide by any of these terms and conditions will result in the suspension of your benefits.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Imagine owning your own airplane. What a lucky boy you are.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I was a lucky boy.

Sometime around 4 AM, the diner began to empty. I had hoped to have a word with Carly, but after the customers filed out, she was left with the arduous tasks of clearing tables, wiping spills, and sweeping trash, debris, and clutter from the checkerboard tile floor. From time to time, another patron would stroll in, so it was nearly daybreak when, at long last, Carly was free.

“What a night,” she exclaimed, “My feet hurt, my back aches, my head is throbbing, and before I crawl between the sheets, I’ve an appointment with my parole officer. Say, my shift ends in fifteen minutes. Can I get you anything else before I go? Pancakes? An omelet? More coffee?”

“This is a bit awkward,” I hesitated, “but I was hoping to have a few words with you.” Sensing my approach had caught her off guard, I continued, “My motives are pure—I’m not a predator and you have no reason to be afraid of me—I simply need to be in the company of someone who, like me, has endured loss.”

Fixing her inscrutable eyes on me, she took a long pause while studying my face with an almost unbearable intensity before whispering, “I understand, Woody. I’ll meet you outside the diner as soon as my shift is over.”

Chapter 2

The lettering on the storefront's plate glass window read as follows:

A Sanctuary for Women

Affirmation

Transformation

Empowerment

Healing

Counseling

Abortion Referral Services

Free Contraceptives Available

Queer Friendly

Toxic Masculinity Not Allowed Beyond These Doors

Rev. Nadine W. Crenshaw, M.Div.

Proudly Funded by

St. Basilides Episcopal Church

Marcion Methodist Church

The League of Presbyterian Feminists

The Interfaith Council for Equity and Restorative Justice of California

"This must be the place," said I to myself. Located about two blocks south of the halfway house where Carly was staying, it was my new friend from the Silver Dollar Pancake House who, in a roundabout way, suggested I pay a call to the storefront mission's chaplain for spiritual guidance.

As it happened, Carly had agreed to join me in conversation over breakfast before her scheduled visit with the county probation officer. Feeling the acute pangs of loneliness, I was appreciative of her company. Like me, she had experienced terrible loss. Her life had been shattered into a thousand broken pieces. Because of a marked lack of discernment coupled with misguided trust in an unworthy man she had once loved, all of which she blamed solely on herself, the young woman had suffered the forfeiture of her liberty, her dignity, and her reputation. As far as I could determine, her largely dysfunctional family was either unwilling or incapable of assisting her, so here she was, desperately attempting to rise from the ashes while slinging pancakes and sausages at an all-night diner.

In Carly, I had met someone whose wounds were as deep and terrible as my own. As to familial support, rather than being dysfunctional as was Carly's family, my own people were simply not there. My father had intentionally isolated me from the small handful of aunts, uncles, and cousins who shared a common bloodline. Other than what scant little my father had told me, my mother was an enigma shrouded in a misty haze of legend and a few grainy photographs. Likewise, I knew little about my grandparents beyond an occasional anecdote. Dr. Felton, a reserved, studious man known for his dignified, scholarly demeanor, was, perhaps, closer to me than anyone else, that is, until Abbie came into my life. For once, I belonged to someone and this someone belonged to me. Life took on new meaning. With Abbie, I rediscovered lost pleasures in what I had come to consider mundane and commonplace. I found renewed joy in the laughter of a small child, the radiant glory of a morning sky, and the pulsating flashes of soft light as nocturnal swarms of fireflies signaled

incandescent professions of love to their mates. With Abbie, food tasted better. Sleep was more refreshing. Even the more unruly of my high school students seemed less intolerable and better behaved. Life with Abbie was good. And then she was gone.

As we lingered over breakfast, I showed Carly my wounds and she showed me her wounds. I spoke. She spoke. I listened. She listened. I cried. She cried. I shared in her grief. She shared in my grief. We even experienced a moment or two of laughter and for the first time since Abbie's death, I did not feel so terribly alone. Perhaps she did not feel so terribly alone, too.

I instinctively trusted Carly. She was a good listener. And, equally important, she was there. "I simply cannot make sense of Abbie's death," I explained as my breakfast companion helped herself to another slice of toast. "Thousands of people die every day, but why should anyone have to die the day after their wedding? Could there be some hidden purpose in all this—a justifiable reason behind Abbie's death that I cannot comprehend, or is this transitory life nothing more than a random, meaningless, not-so-funny cosmic farce? As I see it, the universe is a cold, cruel, and uncaring place. Am I wrong?"

"I never went to college," Carly answered, "so maybe I'm not as clever as you, but I don't think the universe is capable of being either good or bad. The universe is just a lot of space with stars and planets and a few comets, and I don't think stars and planets are capable of being, like what you said, cold, cruel, and uncaring. Anyway, that's my thinking."

“Well then, what if there is a God somewhere out there? And what if this God, for reasons known only by him, decreed that my Abbie had to die? If this were the case, I wonder if he would explain Abbie’s death if I prayed for an explanation.”

Carly shrugged her shoulders. “You’re asking the wrong person, Woody. I can’t help you with this. I’m not a religious person, though I’m not anti-religious, either. Anyway, I suppose you could try praying for an answer. If there is a God, he might be willing to tell you what you want to know. I mean, what do you have to lose by trying?”

Still wrangling with my thoughts, I asked, “What if there is a God who is so preoccupied with running the universe, he doesn’t have the time or the inclination to answer prayers or to rescue people trapped in their desperate situations? What if this God is too indifferent or too busy for the likes of you and me?”

“I’ve never given much thought for or against the existence of God, and I suppose God, if he happens to exist, has never given much thought about me, but if you’re looking for spiritual answers, why ask me? What does a lowly waitress with a felony conviction know about religious matters? You need the advice of an expert, so why not take your spiritual questions to a priest or a chaplain?”

“You may be right,” I answered, “but I don’t know anyone in the clergy.”

Popping a bite of omelet into her mouth, Carly triumphantly announced, “Well, I do. There is this Reverend Nadine who stops by the halfway house every week or so. Frankly, I’m not so terribly impressed, but some of the women in the halfway house positively swear by her. Who can say? Perhaps the Reverend Nadine will have some words of wisdom for you.”

This is how I came to be at the storefront mission, but now that I was here, I was having second thoughts about baring my soul to a stranger. Maybe this was not such a good idea. Perhaps it would be better to turn around and walk away. But, then again, I had come this far, and as Carly had reasoned, “You may as well give it a go. After all, what do you have to lose?” Taking a deep breath, I passed through the double doors and was immediately met by a stoutish, grayish, fiftyish woman seated behind a cluttered desk. Garbed in a white clerical collar and silver cross lapel pin, she greeted me with a reserved, “May I help you?”

“You’ll have to pardon me,” I stammered, “but this is all rather new to me and, to be frank, I’m not even sure why I’m here.”

She nodded. “No fear. In my professional capacity, I encounter a lot of squeamish people—particularly insecure men intimidated by strong, confident, self-assured queer women who wield authority. Please have a seat. Everyone calls me Reverend Nadine. How about a cup of organic green tea? My wife Ella whipped up a batch of sesame crisps. Sesame crisps go delightfully well with green tea. May I tempt you?”

“Thank you, no,” I answered. Noting a hint of a drawl as she spoke, I ventured to ask, “By chance, are you from the south?”

“My speech betrays me,” she answered. “I was born in Nashville, educated in Louisville, and pastored in Knoxville and Birmingham before realizing my approach to ministry was more suited for the west coast. Are you sure you wouldn’t like some green tea and sesame crisps?”

“I had a sizable breakfast.”

“As you wish,” she said. “How did you hear about me? What brings you here?”

“I have a friend who currently resides at the halfway house. As I am not familiar with anyone in the clergy, she suggested I speak with you.” This was not exactly in keeping with the truth; Carly had given me this Reverend Nadine’s contact information, but as far as offering any kind of glowing endorsement, Carly had described her as “a braying jackass.”

“Among my duties, I serve as the halfway house’s chaplain.”

Looking about, I confessed, “I had assumed a reverend’s study would appear, well, not at all like this.” It was true. Rather than shelves stocked with thick, somber-looking volumes of various theological works and the solemn religious decorum I had expected, the walls were plastered with posters featuring the quotes and likenesses of Karl Marx, Mao Tso Tung, Che Chavez, Margaret Sanger, Greta Thunberg, John Shelby Spong, and

Fidel Castro. A rainbow Pride flag hung from the ceiling between a Black Lives Matter banner and a Palestinian flag. Of particular interest was a poster that read, "Why Do the Nations Rage? Social Injustice, That's Why, Stupid!"

"Why do the nations rage?" I asked. "What is the meaning behind this poster?"

With a humorless laugh, she said, "The poster you mention makes reference to a rhetorical question posed by David in the second psalm. Unless you are an enlightened student of post-modern humanism or liberation theology, you probably wouldn't understand the humor behind the response, so please don't beg me for an explanation. To understand, you must first understand. Okay, here we are, nice and cozy, so tell me about yourself and why you are here."

"My name is Sherwood McCormick. I am a high school English teacher. About a year ago, my wife and I were involved in a light plane accident. I walked away from the crash with only superficial injuries, but she died shortly after impact."

"Were you piloting the plane?"

"Yes. It was my personal aircraft. The accident occurred the day after our wedding. My bride and I were on our way to an airshow in Oshkosh when the plane's single engine failed."

“How dreadful! I’ve never cared much for light aircraft.”

“Once the engine quit, I told Abbie not to worry, for the terrain was relatively flat and three or four pastures suitable for an emergency landing were within easy gliding distance. Unfortunately, I lost control when the aircraft’s landing gear snagged a low-hanging utility line I had failed to see. The sudden impact rendered me momentarily unconscious, and when I came to, I discovered poor Abbie was already dead.”

“Excuse me for asking,” interrupted Reverend Nadine, “but I am wondering how a high school English teacher can afford an airplane. Surely the costs of purchasing and maintaining an aircraft are prohibitive on a teacher’s income.”

Frankly, I did not consider this matter any of her business, but thinking, perhaps, there might be a logical reason behind her inquiry, I offered an answer. “The airplane was left to me by my father. The title was conveyed to me after his death.”

“Even so,” she protested, “insurance, maintenance, fuel, and storage would take a sizable hunk from a teacher’s earnings. How did you manage? I simply cannot wrap my head around a schoolteacher owning an aircraft.”

Attempting to hide my annoyance with the chaplain’s invasive questioning, I simply answered, “My late father was not without ample means.”

“I can only imagine the adverse impact light planes have on the environment. Your airplane burned a lot of fuel, right?”

“Not really,” I answered. “My plane was powered by a relatively small six-cylinder, air-cooled engine. Say, could we speak of something other than aviation fuel? I came to discuss another issue.”

Casting an unfriendly eye in my direction, she answered, “Very well, then, what is it that you wish to ask me?”

“I’ve never been a religious man,” I explained, “but Abbie’s death has forced me to reconsider matters of life and death in a new light.”

“What would you like to know?”

“To begin with,” I said, “where is Abbie?”

Giving me a look as if I were a not-so-bright child, the chaplain curtly replied, “‘Where is she?’ you ask. What kind of question is that? Two minutes ago, you said your wife was killed in a plane crash. Where is she? She’s dead, of course, and presumably in an urn or beneath six feet of compacted soil.”

“No, no,” I said. “I am keenly aware her body is dead, but where is Abbie? Where is her soul or her spirit or whatever it is you call the inner person?”

“Oh, that? Hmm...” Attempting to look and sound, well, pastoral, she thoughtfully stroked her chin and said, “‘Where is Abbie?’ you ask. Abbie lives in your heart and in your memory. She lives in each cherished thought of your brief time together. Abbie lives in the song of a meadow lark. Abbie lives in the scent of a wild rose. Abbie lives in you and in those who knew and loved her.”

Frustrated by what I considered the glibness of her response, I insisted, “You don’t understand. I’m asking about the afterlife—heaven and hell—life beyond the grave. That’s what I want to know. Where is Abbie? Is she in heaven? Or, God forbid, might she be somewhere else? For my own peace of mind, I want honest answers, and the last thing I need are greeting card platitudes.”

“There is no reason to be sarcastic,” the chaplain answered curtly. “Where is Abbie? Is her spirit somewhere out there in the great beyond? Where is she? Well, I’m sure I don’t know. As to the age-old questions surrounding the great mysteries of life after death, one can only speculate. There is no definitive answer.”

“But you’re a member of the clergy,” I protested. “Surely, your theological training covers life after death matters. What does the Bible say about this?”

“‘What does the Bible say?’ you ask. Aren’t you being a trifle naïve?”

“Naïve? I don’t understand...”

“No, I suppose you don’t understand,” she dryly responded. “To begin with, the Bible is largely a mythological, militaristic, nationalistic, anti-science, homophobic, male-dominated work steeped in superstition, racism, capitalism, Zionism, and misogyny. That’s Hermeneutics 101—and you can thank me for summing up three years of exhaustive seminary education in a nutshell. Even so, I am not saying the Bible is totally void of merit—particularly in the study of ancient literature and history, but let’s not go digging for meaningful answers among this confusing heap of outmoded, two thousand year old, patriarchal thinking.”

“I’ll admit I know very little about the Christian faith, but I assumed believers esteemed the Bible as God’s word. To hear a member of the clergy casting doubt upon the credibility of the scriptures is, well, somewhat unsettling.”

With a knowing smile, she answered, “There are some rightwing fundamentalists who insist the Bible is divinely inspired by God, but in these days of enlightenment, no one takes these reactionaries too seriously.”

“Again, I find your explanations rather surprising. May I ask if you believe in God?”

“That depends,” she answered. “What do you mean by God? If you are speaking of an all-knowing, all-powerful, omni-present male deity accompanied by a Jewish son with nail prints in his feet and hands and a

divine dove who wings his way hither and yonder, the answer, of course, is a resounding no. God is certainly not a manifestation of two men and a bird. If, however, you define God as a divine idea, then my answer would be a qualified yes.”

“You do not believe in the personage of God? You don’t consider him a divine being with volition, emotions, and sentience?”

Setting down her cup of green tea, she icily complained, “Why do you refer to God as a ‘him’? I would think a gender-neutral pronoun would be more appropriate, unless, of course, you wish to perpetuate the societal toxins of male dominance. Surely, you would not seek to bind one half of the world’s population by the patriarchal chains and fetters forged over six thousand years of male dominance. I will assume better of you. Think twice before referring to God as a ‘he.’”

“Okay, forget about pronouns. If God is, as you say, a divine idea rather than a sentient being with feelings and emotions, to whom do you direct your prayers?”

Helping herself to another sesame crisp, she shook her head saying, “You assume I pray which, of course, I do not. I meditate. I contemplate. I deliberate. All that I desire is within me. All that I want is already mine. I am fully capable of meeting my own needs. God is not a cosmic Santa Claus to whom we humbly bring our wish lists. As the Apostle Paul said, ‘When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child,’ but there comes a time when we are to put away childish thinking. A

prayer is no more meaningful than a letter to Santa Claus, and I gave up believing in Santa a long time ago.”

“I don’t know what to make of this,” I confessed. “I thought religious people were people of prayer.”

Giving me another of her incredulous, boy-are-you-stupid looks, she said, “Use your brain, man. Prayer is like speaking into a phone when no one is at the other end. Why would any enlightened individual whine and grovel before a make-believe God when we have the divine spark within us?”

“What do you mean by divine spark?” I asked.

“I am just as much a manifestation of God as Jesus Christ—and if the opaque scales ever drop from your eyes, you’ll discover you, too, are as much a manifestation of God as Jesus Christ.”

“Then you do believe in Jesus Christ?” I asked.

“Not in a strict orthodox sense,” she explained. “I believe Jesus was but one of many divine avatars of enlightenment—a lone messenger among many cosmic messengers of mystical wisdom and universal guidance—unfortunately, her misogynic disciples felt compelled to reinvent Jesus, so to speak, to make her more palatable to the prevailing male-dominated culture. The ancient world was simply not ready for a female messiah.”

Startled by this, I asked, “So you are saying Jesus was, in fact, a woman? On what basis do you make this claim?”

With a mocking laugh, she asked, “Are you intimidated by a female messiah? Be honest. Does a feminine Jesus cause you difficulties? Based on my many years of experience as a chaplain, I have noted the objections raised by men, particularly Christian men, are most often rooted in masculine insecurity.”

“As I am neither insecure nor a Christian,” I answered, “the sex of Jesus makes no difference to me, but I would like to know the basis of your beliefs. Where is your evidence? Where is your proof? How did you arrive at this opinion?”

“As you are not a trained theologian, let’s just say I have my reasons for believing Jesus was a woman. Consider the Sermon on the Mount. No man could have uttered these teachings. The precepts found in the Sermon on the Mount are undoubtedly and undeniably based on ancient feminine wisdom. Ah, yes, I can see by the troubled look on your face that these myth-shattering explanations are rocking your patriarchal world. Come now, can you rightfully say these revelations aren’t threatening your dearly held, preconceived, misogynic notions?”

In my search for any scrap of proficuous knowledge from this frustratingly hostile interview, I asked, “What do you say about heaven and hell?”

“Like any thinking person, I would say we create our own heaven or hell on earth.”

“You do not believe in life beyond the grave?”

“That is not what I said.” After a brief pause, she continued, “I am not totally opposed to the concept of reincarnation. My wife is Buddhist. Recalling memories of a past life, she was once a majestic cedar in ancient Lebanon. What becomes of us after death? Such mysteries are for us to ponder, but I have no use for concrete religious dogma with its ready-made, take it or leave it, right or wrong answers. My truth may be my truth alone, but it is my truth all the same.”

As I could make no sense of this, I pressed the matter further. “Would you mind telling me what you believe?”

“What do I believe?’ you ask. Yours is a reasonable question, I suppose, so mine will be an equally reasonable response. What do I believe? I believe love is love. I believe in science. I believe in tolerance. I believe in diversity, equity, fairness, social justice, activism, and inclusiveness. I believe we must save our planet by an immediate halting of the climate-wrecking production, dependence, and use of fossil fuels. I believe in total reproductive freedom. I believe abortion is healthcare. I believe in the disruption of the nuclear family. I believe in abolishing borders. I believe our criminal justice system reeks with systematic racism and must be entirely dismantled. At heart, I am an anarchist. I believe measured violence is the only language fanatical, right wing fascists understand and

respond to. I believe in the inherent evils of capitalism. I believe Zionism is just another word for racism. As a chaplain for the oppressed and marginalized and downtrodden people of color, my battle hymn is John Lennon's *Imagine* and *The Communist Manifesto* is my Holy Bible. You asked what I believe. This is what I believe."

Rising from my seat, I said, "Thank you for your candor. This conversation has been most, well, unexpected, but I am still left wondering about Abbie. Where is she? Where is my wife?"

"Where is Abbie?' you ask. Let me encourage you to bravely and fearlessly ponder life's thorniest mysteries while knowing some questions may not have pat answers." With a measured pause, Reverend Nadine cleared her throat and continued, "Where is Abbie? Where is Abbie? Perhaps Abbie is everywhere. Perhaps Abbie is nowhere. Perhaps Abbie is everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. The real question is where will the quest for understanding lead you? Though you may never arrive at your desired destination, the journey is nonetheless yours to travel. Travel hopefully."

By now, I was ripe with annoyance from what I perceived to be nothing but muddle-minded doublespeak. "Obviously, you've never heard of the Law of Non-Contradiction," I complained. "How could Abbie be everywhere and nowhere?" Heading toward the door, I said, "In good faith, I came to you with honest questions, but I have concluded you have no real answers for me. Good day."

My rebuke must have struck a nerve, for her eyes grew wide as saucers as she snapped, “No real answers,’ you say? Did I hear you correctly? Mister, I have answers, oh, I have plenty of answers, but I am wondering if you are capable of withstanding my brand of stark honesty. Can you bear hearing the unmitigated truth? If so, please sit down, and I will say what needs to be said.”

Returning to my seat, I said, “You have my attention. Say what you will.”

“First, you reek with white privilege. Your father left you a pile of money, you own an airplane, and you teach English—the vile language of racism, sexism, and colonialism. Your manner of dress screams masculine white privilege.” With the volume of her voice steadily rising, she continued, “You’re accustomed to having everything your own way. You’ve never been forced to live in a housing project. You’ve never foraged for your next meal from the inside of a smelly dumpster. You’ve never been humiliated by a fascist pig cop frisking your precious white male body. You’ve enjoyed a posh, cushy, privileged existence since birth and when, for the first time in your storybook life, something goes wrong, and I’m speaking of your wife’s death, you go about sniveling and complaining as though you are entitled to answers. Have you heard enough, or shall I go on?”

“You have my attention. Please continue.”

“Your airplane was a white heterosexual male privilege status symbol. People of color are forced to huddle on crowded buses and subway cars, but you would know nothing of this. Your white heterosexual male privilege

airplane and its carbon footprint did more than kill your wife. Your white heterosexual male privilege airplane was murdering the good earth and all its inhabitants. Can you bear the truth? Maybe this untimely accident did the rest of us who cherish this reeling planet a great favor. Would you like to hear more?"

"You have the floor."

"'Where is Abbie?' you whine. I don't know where your precious Abbie is, but wherever she is, she's far better off than if she were still living with an entitled white heterosexual male like you. Where is Abbie? She's liberated, dammit. If you had not killed her with your sloppy piloting skills, you would have eventually buried her beneath a mound of cruel white heterosexual male subjugation and dominance."

"Are you finished?" I asked.

Her eyes ablaze with contempt, she continued in her feverish pitch, "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. This incessant boo-hoo-hooing over your wife's death must come to an immediate end. She's gone. Too bad. That's life. Deal with it. If you want to spend the rest of your days grieving over a situation that cannot be undone, that's your business, but maybe it's time to stop licking your wounds while inflicting your misery on everyone else and move on." Reaching into a goldfish bowl containing individually packaged condoms, she said, "Take a few of these, find some insipid little weak-willed woman who enjoys being dominated by men, and blow some steam."

Refusing the condoms, I said, “No, thanks. I’ll be leaving. Good day.”

“Must you leave? I suppose our session has come to an end, but before you go, this ministry depends, in part, on the goodwill and generosity of those who rely upon our indispensable services,” she said in a notably softer tone. “Many of our clients are indigent. They depend upon us and the wide range of life enhancing services we provide, unfortunately, many of those we serve are unable to assist us in meeting our budgetary and operating expenses.” Handing me an offering envelope, she said, “Please take a moment to ask yourself what you can do to ensure that the underserved living in this community can continue relying, without fear or dread of interruption, upon the multi-faceted services we provide. As a 501c3 nonprofit organization recognized by the federal government, your gift of any size to A Sanctuary for Women is tax-deductible.”

Chapter 3

Nearly a week had passed since breakfasting with Carly. As it happened, my former guardian and tutor, Dr. Felton, who had recently moved to Sacramento, was recovering from double hernia surgery. While he convalesced, I made myself useful preparing his meals and attending to light housekeeping duties. It was good seeing my trusted friend and mentor again. In many ways, Dr. Felton was more of a father than my real father, and I suppose I will always be grateful to him.

I slid into a corner booth at the Silver Dollar Pancake House. As only two other patrons were seated in the diner, I had hopes of conversing with Carly without too many interruptions. Setting a cup of black coffee before me, she greeted me with a cheery, “Hi, stranger. How were things in Sacramento?”

“Dr. Felton is on the mend and doing well,” I answered. “He was not impressed by my culinary skills, but my old friend was glad to have the company. How have you been?”

“I’m fine. Nothing new to report.” Brushing an unruly whisp of reddish hair from her eyes, she asked, “Are you hungry? How about an omelet?”

“Only coffee for me, thank you. I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I would pop in and say hello. You’re a good listener. In truth, you’re the best listener I know.”

“I have my moments. Say, how was your encounter with Rev. Nadine?”

I answered, “She was just as you described her.”

“Huh?”

“Your Rev. Nadine has the mien of a braying jackass.”

Carly giggled. “Is that what I said? Maybe I did. So, a couple of nights ago, she led a devotional at the halfway house and the management insisted all the residents attend. It was one of the longest hours of my life.”

“What topic did she choose for her discourse?” I asked.

“Classical music. Did you know Mozart was a racist?”

“This is news to me.”

“According to Rev. Nadine, Mozart was a white supremacist. She had a lot of bad to say about classical music and European colonialism, and after giving Mozart a sound trashing, she went on to condemn Israel as ‘an evil bastion of apartheid that enslaves the Palestinian people.’ Urging us to boycott Israel, as if anyone among us would even know how to or why we should boycott Israel, she then reminded our little group that tolerance is, how did she say this?—the ‘queen mother of virtue.’ I took notes in case you’d like a transcript. By the end of her talk, Rev. Nadine had worked

herself into a lather. She even let loose with a couple of choice profanities. Who would have thought Christianity was such an angry religion?”

After a moment of consideration, I asked, “Do you think all members of the Christian clergy are as angry as Rev. Nadine? Maybe she’s the exception rather than the rule.”

Topping off my cup of coffee, Carly answered, “I couldn’t say. She’s the only reverend I know, and I wish I didn’t know her, and I wish even more that the poor ladies at the halfway house weren’t forced to sit through her ranting. I think we already suffer enough from the lumpy mattresses and bad plumbing. I’ve had to shower in icy cold water twice this week.”

“Perhaps this Rev. Nadine is not a proper representation of Christianity.”

“I’d like to forget her,” said Carly, obviously wishing to change the topic of our conversation. “Do you know what I think, Woody?”

“What do you think?”

“Since seeking the advice of a chaplain proved to be a bust, I think you ought to consider consulting a psychic for spiritual answers. What if a psychic could put you in contact with Abbie?”

“A psychic? Are you suggesting Tarot cards and seances and crystal balls?”

With a toss of her head, she answered, “Why not?”

“Honestly, Carly, there is no way I can see myself consulting anyone named Madam Zora.”

Pressing the point, she continued, “Granted, the majority of these psychics are probably fakes—maybe 99% of them are frauds and phonies, but what if there is that one psychic out of a hundred who happens to be legit? Think about it, Woody. Isn’t it just possible that a few of these fortune tellers may have some kind of mystical gift that allows them to communicate with the dead?”

“No, no, no,” I insisted. “Can you imagine what would happen if my students were to discover I had sought out the services of a crystal ball gazer? I’d lose all credibility with my kids. And there would be no end to the teasing I would face from my teaching colleagues.”

“Who cares what they think, Woody? I wouldn’t be surprised if half of the teachers you work with check their daily horoscopes.”

“Maybe so, but I live and work in this town and I don’t want my friends and neighbors to think I buy into this hocus pocus necromancy nonsense.”

“No one here will be the wiser,” she reasoned.

“What if a colleague happens to spy my car parked in front of a local psychic’s home?”

“You’re not going to find a legit psychic reading tea leaves in this sleepy little village, but there’s LA and San Francisco to consider. Do you know what I think? You should ask a big city police department to recommend a psychic who routinely helps them solve crimes. Think about it. Some of these mystics have been instrumental in busting tough cases wide open, and if you meet with one of these psychics based out of LA or Frisco, who around here will be any the wiser?”

“I don’t know, Carly. This all sounds so flaky.”

“Flaky or not,” she insisted, “what if you were able to communicate with Abbie through a psychic? Wouldn’t you feel better knowing her spirit is somewhere out there in the great beyond? And don’t forget about the peace of mind that would be yours from knowing that, even in death, Abbie is okay.”

“When I regained consciousness after the impact of the crash, Abbie was already gone,” I explained. “I never had a chance to say goodbye. There is so much I would like to tell her. If only I could speak with her one final time...”

Carly nodded. “What if a psychic could help you find closure?”

“What if, indeed,” I reluctantly admitted. “Carly, I am thinking maybe, just maybe, your flaky idea isn’t so, well, flaky after all. I may never know peace

until I know she's resting peacefully. If I could only be assured that Abbie is in a state of eternal bliss, I'm certain I would be ready to move on with life."

"Now you're talking." Just then, a group of five or six entered the diner followed by an elderly couple. "Oops! Looks like I'm about to get busy," said Carly. "It's the 2 AM rush."

"So it seems," I answered as I rose from my seat. Placing a bill in her hand to cover the coffee and a gratuity, I asked, "How about breakfast at the end of your shift?"

"Okay, I think I'd like that, but instead of meeting me back here, will you pick me up at the halfway house?" she asked. "I'd like to freshen up and change out of this hokey uniform before we have breakfast. Are you okay with this?"

"Sure. Does 9 AM work for you?"

"That's fine, Woody. See you then, and thanks bunches for the gratuity. You really are a prince."

Arriving home a short time later, I made another attempt at falling asleep. Until Abbie's death, I had never suffered from insomnia; since her tragic passing, I had spent many restless nights tossing and turning while hoping, for once, the promised joy for which I desperately longed would come in the morning. It did not. My sleep's troubling elusiveness was further exacerbated by a growing frustration over the apparent meaninglessness of

this dreary existence. What is life? For what purpose do we exist? What does all this mean? Why had I survived the crash that had snuffed out Abbie's life? Why did I live, and she die? I would have gladly gone to the grave with her, or in her place; instead, I was the one left behind and this seemingly unexplainable dilemma plagued my thoughts. Joining Abbie in death, I believed, would have been preferable to the agony of living without her.

As I stared at the whirling ceiling fan which, to my dismay, reminded me of an airplane propeller, I gave more thought to Carly's suggestion that I seek the services of a bonafide medium. Admittedly, the idea seemed ludicrously outlandish, but what if there was the one-in-ten thousand psychic practitioner who actually had the rare gift of breaking through the otherwise impenetrable barrier of death by placing me in direct contact with Abbie? Improbable? Of course. Impossible? Maybe not.

On the rare chance that such a necromancer existed, what would I say to Abbie? First, I would like to know if she is happy in her altered state. If I knew with absolute certainty that she was at peace in death, I would be at peace, too. What else would I say to her? I would tell Abbie again and again and again how much I love her and how empty my life is without her. And if such a reunion between the living and the dead were possible, what might Abbie say to me? I would hope she had already forgiven me for the plane crash. A more experienced pilot might have avoided the deadly powerline that caused our aircraft to careen out of control. As the pilot in command, I bear the brunt of the blame for Abbie's demise. Maybe she would sooth my troubled soul by telling me she has no regrets about our

marriage. Maybe she would say our short time together was well worth the exacting price we both paid.

I thought on this until the alarm sounded at 7 AM.

As I walked to my car, I spied a long, ugly gouge in the paint stretching from the front fender to the rear quarter panel. "My new car," I moaned. Surveying the damage, I felt a fountain of anger rising from within. This was the senseless handiwork of a vandal armed, no doubt, with either a screwdriver or an awl. At that moment, a young man, a bit short in stature, with stringy black hair and an oily expression seemed to come out of nowhere. He wore a Lynyrd Skynyrd tee-shirt and grease-stained jeans that had seen better days. With a smirk, he eyed my disfigured automobile and said, "Now isn't that a damn shame? A fellow works hard, saves his pennies, buys a choice looking ride, and then some clown with a screwdriver comes along and does his mischief. What is this world coming to, I ask you?"

Instinctively, I knew the stranger with the phony concern was responsible for the vandalism. Why he had damaged my car, I could not say. "I don't suppose you know who did this?" I asked.

"I wish I could help you," he answered, "but I was busy watching a mother robin building her nest while the joker with the screwdriver did his dirty on your pretty little car." After a brief pause, he continued, "Say, I think I know you. Aren't you the fellow whose been chatting up my bird?"

Struggling to keep a firm grip on the reins of my anger, I said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“My bird, Carly. Don’t be coy, man. I was standing outside the diner looking on while you were making time with my girl. Not that I fault you—she’s a choice little tidbit.” With the disgusting grin plastered across his weasel-like face, the unwelcomed stranger whispered, “Psst! Just between a couple of gentlemen, if you can get her into the sack, she has this funny little squeal...”

“I don’t know who you are,” I demanded, “and I’ve had enough of your big mouth.”

“Whoa! Sorry to offend you, Professor,” came his mocking reply. “No reason to come out swinging. Carly is my girl, but if you fancy her, I’m sure we can work something out.”

In my life, I have never wanted to strike anyone as much as the glib-tongued antagonist who stood before me. “You can go to hell,” said I.

“No doubt, I will,” he answered. “I’m not exactly a model citizen, don’t you know, but the devil will have to catch me first.”

“May I assume you’re the lowlife responsible for Carly’s arrest and conviction?”

“How was I to know the automotive parts hidden in the trunk of her car were stolen? Funny thing is, I had purchased those parts in good faith, but the vendor, unbeknownst to me at the time of our little business arrangement, had a reputation for shady dealings. And to think I had asked beforehand if he belonged to the Better Business Bureau. Because I am such a trusting soul, unscrupulous people are forever taking advantage of my unassuming nature.”

“Is there a point to your story?” I demanded.

“Was I rambling? Sorry. Anyway, the story gets even funnier. After the pig cops busted Carly and me, she was convicted of transporting stolen property and, as I’m sure she’s already told you, pulled a seventeen month jolt in the women’s correctional facility. What about me? A mere slap on the wrist. Isn’t that a hoot? While Carly was eating prison chow and punching out license plates, yours truly walked away from the mishap with a suspended sentence. Don’t you just love our criminal justice system?”

Further angered by his psychopathic behavior, I demanded, “Why did you let Carly take the fall for your crime?”

Stroking his chin as if in deep thought, he answered, “Couldn’t be helped. You see, Carly was represented by a public defender while my sainted mother mortgaged her home so that I could have proper legal counsel. As they say, you get what you pay for, and take it from me, Professor, never scrimp to save a buck when it comes to legal representation.”

“What did a sweet girl like Carly see in the likes of you?”

“I’d be all too happy to show you, Professor, but there are local ordinances to consider, and I don’t care to have an indecent exposure charge added to my already lengthy rap sheet.”

I thought I would explode with anger. “You are as contemptable a worm as I’ve ever met.” Clinching my fists, I challenged, “Why don’t you step closer and take a swing at me? Go ahead. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than seeing you out cold on my driveway.”

“You don’t look like a fighter, Professor,” he calmly replied, “though maybe you are. Anyway, the reason I’ve survived as long as I have is because I don’t fight fair.”

Further enticing him to draw first blood by taking a swing at me, I taunted him saying, “I know your kind. You’re like a rat who comes out of his hole when the lights are out.”

Nodding in agreement, he said, “Honor is hardly among my more notable virtues. I will not deny being an underhanded sleazebag of the worst sort, but as I was not blessed with an abundance in build, stature, or muscle, I have no choice but to depend upon my cunning to level the playing field. I strike back at my enemies when they’re not looking.”

“Have you been making a nuisance of yourself with Carly?” I asked.

“I may have slipped into the diner for a word or two with her,” he said, “though I cannot say she was overjoyed in seeing me after nearly two years. Whoever said absence makes the heart grow fonder was an ignorant bounder.”

“I want you to leave that girl alone. If I hear of you inflicting your filthy self on Carly...”

“What are you planning to do, Professor?” he laughed. “Are you going to keep me after class? Are you threatening me with an F on my report card? You seem to forget that I’m not one of your young scholars, Professor, and it’s going to take a bigger man than you to make me behave.”

“Step in a little closer,” I challenged, “and give me your best shot. I’ll show you how this English teacher handles a classroom clown.”

“Not today, Professor,” he answered. “You might take me in a fair fight, but the odds favor me when the fight is dirty. If we exchange blows, it will be on my terms.”

“You are a disgusting little coward.”

“You are right,” he scoffed. “I am a coward. Maybe I’ll unleash my anger on Carly rather than you. Would I strike a woman? You may add chivalry to the long list of virtues I seem to lack. Say, did she tell you about the time I punched her in the face? That little crook in the bridge of her nose is my doing.”

Only once in my life have I ever wanted to kill another human, and this was the time. A white-hot hatred welled deep in my heart. I wanted to squash him as I would have squashed a verminous little cockroach. Fixing my gaze on his mocking countenance, I strongly considered lunging toward him when, suddenly, I realized his taunts were not to just to make me angry, but to make me act. After a long pause, I finally asked, "What do you want?"

"What do I want?" he asked. "World peace. And end to hunger. A ban on fossil fuel."

Once again, I asked, "What do you want?"

"Maybe I should first ask what it is that *you* want," he replied. "Would you like me to disappear from Carly's life? Would you prefer that I vanish? With yours truly out of the picture, our little strawberry blonde cutie would be all yours."

"How much do you want?" I asked.

"I'm into my bookie for a couple of hundred," he said. "I may be a lowlife who strikes women, but I pay my gambling debts."

"What else?"

“I have a cousin living in Portland who has offered to cut me in on this sweet little financial opportunity, but I haven’t the funds to cover my fare.”

“Would \$500 satisfy your bookie while meeting your traveling expenses?”

“Come on, Professor. You reek with the prosperity of a Republican. Since I’m a humble blue-collar who is into wealth redistribution and taxing the rich, let’s make it an even thousand. Do this and I’ll forever be a minor footnote in Carly’s life.”

“I consider a thousand to be an exorbitant sum for such a petty pilferer as yourself, but I would be willing to go as high as, say, \$750. Do we have a deal?”

With a careless shrugging of his shoulders, he said, “As long as I’m around, Carly will never have an easy moment, and, for that matter, as long as I stay close, your pretty little buggy faces the risks of more paint damage and slashed tires. Aren’t those Michelins? I am told they offer unparalleled traction on slippery roads—assuming they are inflated and unencumbered by punctures in the sidewalls, of course.”

Still hoping he might take a swing at me, I snarled, “For a wee little rat, you talk mighty big.”

“All my life, I’ve been called bad things, and after a while, a fellow grows accustomed to verbal insults.” Looking me straight into the eye, he said, “I

need one thousand dollars to vacate this burg, or I'll hang around and continue making myself a recurring nuisance to all involved."

Knowing he held a better hand, I had no choice but to fold. "For a thousand dollars, you'll leave town once and for all? Is this a promise?"

"This old town is no good for me. This may surprise you, but I can't go anywhere without the pig cops peeping over my shoulder."

"For a thousand dollars, you'll leave and never bother Carly again?"

"Fame and fortune await in Portland."

"I don't carry that much cash on me, but if you'll meet me back here at noon, we'll settle this matter."

"Fork over the green salad of fiscal solvency, and by 1 PM, I'll be making my way along the old Oregon Trail."

As I drove to the halfway house, I debated whether to tell Carly about my run-in with her former boyfriend. On one hand, he was likely an embarrassing chapter from her regrettable past—a past she would just as soon forget. What bright, intelligent woman would want it known that she had once been romantically entangled with such a twisted little weasel of a man? On the other hand, she might welcome the news that her lowlife nemesis had pledged to leave town never to return.

I spied Carly as she stood waiting for me at the curb in front of the halfway house. Wearing jeans and a casual summer top rather than her frumpy work uniform, it took me a moment to recognize her. “I didn’t want you going inside and subjecting yourself to the taunts and the jeers of the residents. Some of these women don’t know how to behave around men and—oh, Woody—look at that scratch! What happened to your beautiful car?”

“Some punk keyed my car,” I answered. “I’ll telephone my insurance agent this afternoon.” As we drove away, I asked, “How was your shift after I left the diner?”

Her face darkened. “Fine,” she answered in a voice that indicated otherwise. “Just another dreary night at the Silver Dollar Pancake House.”

Sensing she was troubled, I decided to bring up the matter of her former boyfriend. “Carly, did you have an unwanted visitor after I left the diner?”

Her face flushed crimson. After a protracted pause, she said, “Why would you ask such a question, Woody?”

“I asked because I had a visitor, too—a weaselly little lowlife of a brute who appears to derive great satisfaction from making you miserable.”

Carly burst into tears. “His name is Jake and he popped into the diner just a moment or so after you left. I hadn’t seen Jake in two years and, Woody, I

could have gladly gone two hundred more years without seeing him again. Let me guess. Jake took a screwdriver to your beautiful car, right? Oh, God, I am so, so sorry about this.”

“Forget about the car,” I said. “A car is nothing but stamped sheet metal and molded plastic. Are you afraid of this Jake?” Carly did not answer, so I continued, “I believe he is a threat to your well-being and now that I’ve tangled with him, I’m in his crosshairs, too, but I don’t want you worrying about him.”

“But I am worried,” she admitted. “You don’t know what Jake is capable of doing.”

“I think I do know what he’s capable of doing, but as I said, you are not to worry.”

“How’s that?” she asked while dabbing her moistened eyes with tissue.

“Like most thugs, Jake has his price.” I explained. “I’ve negotiated his disappearance for a thousand dollars. Once he has the money, he has promised to leave for Portland.”

“But, Woody,” Carly protested, “I don’t have a thousand dollars. I’m not even sure I could scrape together a measly fifty dollars. Between my fine and court costs along with rent at the halfway house, I’m, well, broke. What can I do? I don’t have a thousand to buy off Jake.”

“I do, and this Jake the Snake and I have scheduled our business transaction at noon. I think he’ll split town for a thousand dollars. Don’t you?”

Carly nodded her head. “I think so, too. Woody, it may take me ten years to repay you, but you’ll get every penny back. I promise.”

“Forget it,” I laughed. “I want this detestable little cockroach out of town almost as much as you. If the people of Portland think they have it bad now, just wait until this one man crime wave shows up.”

After a moment or so of silence, Carly gave me a faint smile. “Your Abbie married a good man.”

“Let’s grab breakfast. I’m hungry.”

After returning Carly to the halfway house, I withdrew a sufficient sum of cash to cover the payoff after which I promptly aimed my disfigured automobile for home. Arriving just moments before the noon hour, there was Jake, nervously pacing back and forth, wearing a slightly agitated expression. Near him rested two small suitcases. I considered the pair of suitcases a good omen.

“You’ve kept me waiting,” he snapped.

“We agreed to meet at noon, and it is just now twelve.”

“If I don’t have the cash in my bookie’s hands by a quarter past, he’s threatened to break my kneecaps. That’s him, watching us from across the street.” Jake was not bluffing. A bearded man with an intimidating physique looked on from across the way. “Do you have my money?”

“I do. Are you ready to leave town?”

Looking over his shoulder at the burly man, Jake said, “What do you think? C’mon, Professor, let’s wrap up business so that I can get this gorilla off my back and blow this town for good.”

Slowly and deliberately, I counted ten \$100 bills. “Before handing you this stack of cash, I want you to promise me you’ll never bother Carly again. No visits. No phone calls. No text messages. No emails. Nothing. Nyet. Nada. Do we have an understanding?”

“Agreed. Whatever you say. Now hurry it up, man!” Looking back at the granite-faced bookie, Jake anxiously said, “I’ve seen him maim more than one pony patsy who couldn’t pay the freight. I value my continued good health more than the sexual gratification that comes from some little redheaded slut, so fork over the cash and the title deed to the girl is all yours.”

Greatly desiring to add to his distress, I threatened, “I’ve a good mind to walk away from this deal and let the bookie have a go at you.”

“Dammit, a deal is a deal,” he cried.

“Honor may not be among your virtues,” said I, “but I am committed to being a man of my word. As you say, a deal is a deal.”

As Jake counted the cash, I produced two more \$100 bills from my wallet. “What’s that?” he asked.

“A bonus.”

“A bonus? For doing what?”

“Jake, if you will grant me the privilege of taking one swing at your uglier-than-sin face, I’ll repay the favor with these two bills.” As he fixed his sight on the cash, I continued, “Muhammad Ali I am not. In fact, I’ve never struck anyone in my life, but I’d gladly part with \$200 for one quick jab to your ugly puss. Think about it. \$200 will buy a lot of beer and weed. Do we have a deal?”

With a smirk, Jake answered, “I’ll make you a better deal, Professor.” Pulling a cheap flip phone from his rear pocket, he explained, “One night, I gave Carly a surprisingly potent little cocktail that greatly lowered her inhibitions. Over the course of the evening, she willingly submitted to a variety of provocative and, may I add, compromising poses using an assortment of interesting and imaginative props—all of which are handily stored in the phone’s memory. I’ve strongly considered posting the entire photoshoot on social media, but I would be willing to sell the exclusive rights to you for, say, \$200. Do we have a deal?”

Jake accepted the money, and I took the phone. As he walked away, I heard him say, “If you’re the fool I think you are, you’ll destroy the phone without ever eyeballing the pics.”

Author’s notes: You’ve read three chapters. There are another 37 chapters that tell the rest of the story. Order the book—*please order the book!* My rent is past due, the IRS is breathing down my neck, my cat needs surgery, and my Kia with 227,498 miles is ready for the scrapyard. Okay, my car only has 29,000 miles, I don’t own a cat (though I like cats), and I am not under investigation by the IRS, but I’d like you to buy my book all the same!

Find me at michaelblunk.online or via email: dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com

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