A Smile In Every Season

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Acknowledgments

While some of the places mentioned in this book are real to give it an authentic feel, and while some of what is described in the narrative is based on experiences of the author, or experiences of others as described to him, the novel is fictional, and so are all the characters.

However, a special thanks goes to a friend as close as an alter ego, Paul Sayes, for his assistance and collaboration in creating "*A Smile In Every Season*."

Preface

Smile or laugh or chuckle or grin,
Make a cheery face rule your day.
Scowls and frowns you need to bin,
Dump the negatives out your way.
Be as innocent as a child,
Still bereft of rhyme or reason
Not to countenance a smile,
In each and every season.

When alone as is more often,
Internal smiles will have their place.
Not just your mood, they soften,
But angry lines that scar your face.
So be it hot or cold or mild,
There's simply no valid reason
Not to countenance a smile,
In each and every season.

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Part I – Emma's Summer Day

Today is going to be a long day,
I just know it.
So, for me, before I'm on my way,
I want to blow it.

Today will seem like a very long day.
You can feel it.
But that deal you made before, I say,
You need to seal it.

Today was going to be a long day.
I just knew it.
Still, somehow, before I went away,
I almost blew it.

Today was really a long, long, long day.
You didn't waste it.
Unlike before, I feel I can say,
I think you aced it.

Chapter 1 - Summer - Angie

Angie felt herself floating, drifting soothingly amongst the clouds. She was weightless and free – even of garments.

She felt so peaceful.

But all at once she was moving upwards, barely so at first, but then with a slowly increasing speed.

She wasn't sure whether she was being pulled or pushed, but she was moving, and everything about her was very bright, very white, and simply swirling.

Yet her hair was all in place. She could have been in the cockpit of an airplane as it climbed through clouds that were light and airy but sufficient enough to give her only glimpses of blue sky. Except that there was no airplane and no noise and no wind. It was as if she was being sucked or pushed or was flying forward and upward into an endless void.

A strange feeling began to gnaw at her. She felt as if it were her head, her brain, her mind that were moving. And moving towards an abyss of madness. The sudden fear hit her that she had to get out of the upward swirl, or she might be locked in a mental cage for life. She felt an extraordinarily strong need and desire to open her eyes to escape, but she was struggling with the effort. She started to panic. She pushed and pulled and pushed and pulled herself in the effort to get her mind and body from the swirl. She rocked herself from side to side. She pushed and pulled and pushed and ....

"Ahh." A low gasp came from her lips as she forced her eyes open.

She froze.

She was awake. After all the light that she had been seeing, the darkness of the room was palliative. She felt a bit

out of breath, but she relaxed, slowly, and calmed herself as her terror receded.

"That was one scary nightmare," she thought, as she stretched some on her bed.

Her bed! She tensed up.

She was lying on her back, on top of the covers, in the middle of her queen-size bed, naked, but under what she assumed was one of Jerry's large towels. There was a pillow and a cushion on either side of her, and the room was pretty dark.

"Way darker than it normally was."

She raised herself slightly, looking to her left over the pillow where there was less light than usual.

Jerry was curled up under one of his towels on the massage table, which was between her and the nightlight, blocking much of its glow. He was turned towards her, and while she couldn't see his face clearly, she could tell from his even, rhythmic breathing that he was fast asleep. She smiled to herself.

"Nurse Angie."

She pushed away the pillow and eased back down on her bed as her eyes moved from Jerry to the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was 4:19 am. She groaned.

Jerry had come by her at 9 pm last night, after the repast, and they had agreed beforehand on a 2-hour session. She looked back at Jerry.

"So peaceful." She smiled.

He'd placed her on her bed and slept on the massage table.

"Impossible," she thought. *"A test no man can pass."*

She contemplated for a minute.

"A gentleman, I guess."

She stifled a giggle.

"Among other things."

She stuck her arms back under the towel and, from underneath, pulled it up to her chin.

"Well, I'm still in one piece, so I guess I'm safe."

But as she continued to stare at the silhouetted figure, a different type of weird feeling overtook her. A feeling that slowly morphed into one of apprehension.

Yesterday morning, at the spa, was the first time she had actually spoken to Jerry. She decided to think about that encounter instead.

"Angie!" She admonished herself. *"Not even twenty-four hours."* Her mood changed as a small smile came to her face.

Jerry had been assigned as her personal trainer for the light workout she was having before her spa treatment.

"One fine specimen."

That had been Angie's thought the first time she saw him.

"Like a bald Denzil in the movie 'Malcolm X'," she remembered thinking.

She relaxed on her bed now and smiled to herself. It was a bit risky what she had done, but she tingled a bit thinking of what had put her to sleep.

"You bad girl, Angie," she whispered to herself.

Angelina Remontle was a really beautiful woman. Not that she didn't know.

She had light brown skin, on a tight 5'7" frame, flowing black hair cut just above her shoulders, a cute face with a dainty nose, medium lips, and seductive, brown eyes. Her breasts (34a cup when she chose to wear a bra) and ass (26 over 35 now, versus 25 over 34 when she was 18) seem to fit her proportionally, just perfectly. Combined all that with a vivacious and brash personality and you could see why she was everyone's darling from she was four. As it turned out, even some very young men's.

She laughed to herself.

"Everyone's darling at four and every man's darling by nineteen."

She looked over at Jerry again as she thought of why he was here. Her light mood soured a bit as she remembered certain parts of her Friday.

"Ahh man, how I so needed that sleep," she thought. *"What a day! What a long fucking day!"*

Going into Friday, she knew the day was supposed to be a somewhat sad one, with her sister's remembrance service scheduled for the afternoon. But to her mind, her mourning was over, and her attendance and what she would be doing was all about a celebration of Emma's life.

"That's what Emma would have wanted anyway," she thought.

She and Ettie usually spent Sunday afternoons with Emma at the hospice. However, the Sunday before Emma died, Angie and Ettie went to a fundraising barbecue put on by the church they attended sporadically. They had been pressed to attend by Mrs. Mason, a close friend of the family from back home in Trinidad. Their mother was supposed to attend too but wasn't feeling well.

But while Angie had not gotten to see her in the days before she died, Emma had mailed her a letter.

"Dear Angie,

By the time you get this, I'll be dead. Sorry about that, but this pain is killing me, literally. You see now, Angie, when I consider my life, the way I believe in God allows me to continue believing in God.

Please take care of Tizzie for me. She deserves a little help, given the hand life has dealt her. The documents I'm leaving with Ettie should help a great deal.

I'm ok with a little remembrance or something, but no funeral, please. Remember I told you I didn't want to be caught dead in a church again? I meant it. I want to be cremated and my ashes sprinkled in the ocean somewhere.

One thing I want to say to you, Angie. I heard what you said to Lionel about how you could get Kevin anytime. Grow up, Angie. Leave Ettie's men alone. My wish for you is that you meet your man, the man of the dreams you never let yourself dream.

You take care,
Love always,
Big Sis."

A wry smile came to Angie's face as she remembered the letter.

"The man of the dreams I never let myself dream," she thought. *"Emma doesn't know what she's talking about. I have nightmares about men, not dreams. And she sure read that thing with Kevin wrong."*

She remembered the conversation about Ettie and Kevin that she was having with Lionel at a holiday get-together last February, when Emma and Tizzie walked up.

"I think Ettie likes him, and look how fucking sweet he looks," Lionel was saying.

"I tell you," Angie countered, "he's not the right man for Ettie. I know men. I see the way he looks at me. I could get that man anytime I want."

"What? What you guys talking about?" asked Emma.

"Kevin," said Angie and Lionel in unison.

Emma's response was concise.

"Leave Ettie and her man alone. She'll figure out what's what in time."

Angie reflected on her Friday.

She had gotten up quite early despite being up all of Thursday night and not going to bed until after 2:30 am.

At 7:30 am, she was headed out the door for the 20-minute drive to the spa, where she was going to start preparing herself to celebrate Emma. And it just so happened that Fridays were one of the days Jerry worked at the spa.

"Angie, you wicked thing." She chuckled to herself at the memory of her conniving.

If there was one thing that Angie did in abundance, it was to take care of her appearance. In just two weeks' time she would reach the big "four-oh". She had been dreading that age since she was fourteen. But these days, she was comfortable with it. That's primarily because she felt, and more importantly, she looked at least ten years younger. She smiled to herself.

"Ten years? I mean, I got carded at that casino in New Orleans last year."

For the workout Friday morning, her hair was done up in a bun, and all she was wearing were her light blue Nike leotards over black tights, with white ankle socks and blue and white Skechers sneakers. A couple dabs of her Nicole Miller, her favorite, and she felt just right.

Her stride was confident as she got to the spa. With her nipples like raisins trying to poke through her tights, and her firm ass stretching her leotards outrageously and oh so sumptuously, perhaps the perfect word to describe her would have been delectable. But then, that was how she herself thought Jerry looked when she saw him yesterday morning.

"Edible" was the actual word that came to her mind at the time. *"And I'm a lioness on the prowl."*

Actually, that's how she had been thinking for a week. And, so it was finally, yesterday, at just a couple of minutes before 8 am, that she entered the aerobics room with nothing but ravenous thoughts on her mind.

Jerry's 7 am client was still there - a statuesque young woman in a light-pink Fila outfit that flattered her long legs and perky breasts.

Angie stopped near the door.

"This is not a modeling competition, girlfriend," Angie said to herself.

But she kept silent, watching the two diagonally across on the other side of the room from her. They were talking, and Jerry was looking at a phone that the woman seemed to be fiddling with. Angie stared at Jerry.

He was wearing one of the spa's dark blue tank-tops tucked into grey Nike sweatpants. The muscles in his chest and arms were firm and pronounced without being bulging. She had already guessed him to be about 6'4", 6'5", say 200 lbs. He seemed to sense her looking at him. This time, it was he who looked up such that they made eye contact.

The woman in front of him, tapping his arm, seemed to startle her as much as it did him. He turned and took the phone.

She heard their exchange. She knew that Sharon had the slot right before hers because she had tried to get it.

"Ok then, Sharon. You can call and schedule something. Otherwise, see you next Friday."

"Haha. Don't worry, Jerry. You're definitely hearing from me."

Angie started walking closer as Sharon turned to leave. As they approached each other, Sharon winked at Angie.

"Delicious, ain't he?"

Angie's mouth opened, but then closed without a sound.

"No distractions." She refocused on her target. She continued walking towards Jerry.

"Wow. He's so huge," she thought. She had only seen him from across the room last week. Now, as she got closer, she felt small.

"Hi. Good morning. I'm Jerry," he said while stretching out his right hand.

"Hi, Jerry. I'm Angie." Her hand was lost in his grasp.

"So, am I that mouthwatering?"

"Wha … What?"

"Sorry, was it amazement then? I saw your mouth open just now when you saw me."

Again, Angie's mouth opened, then closed without a sound. She felt…

"Flustered? By a man? On first meeting?"

She collected herself, but Jerry interrupted her train of thought before she could come up with a good comeback line.

"Right. Ahh, sorry. Can you give me just a couple minutes to look over your information before we start? It's your first time with me, and I try to formulate workouts for clients based on the information provided about physical characteristics or medical conditions. Usually, I'm done with time to spare between clients, but Sharon said she felt a little tweak in her shoulder towards the end of the workout and wanted me to massage it a bit."

"That bitch, Sharon," Angie thought. "No problem at all," she said sweetly to Jerry.

Jerry nodded at her, turned, and stepped to a laptop he had on a cabinet against the wall.

"Guess he's gonna know my age from the start."

Angie walked over towards the weights, away from where Jerry was standing, working on his laptop. She turned and stared at him, assessing the situation and formulating her strategy. She was suddenly feeling very horny.

The workout was tantalizing. The first chance she got, Angie surreptitiously peeked at his groin area from up close. She couldn't discern anything much, however. She figured he was wearing jocks. She didn't detect any cologne.

"Just the scent of a freshly washed man."

Up close, everything about him was so packed tight and sexy, Angie couldn't help but flirt.

She made a couple of deliberate moves as he assisted her, one time raising up into his arms as he was bending to position her in a squat, another time turning so her left shoulder brushed solidly against his package as he helped her with some weights.

"Yeah, it was jocks."

He didn't seem phased. In fact, he flirted back, with tender touches to her back and lingering fingers on her arms. She more than noticed when he pulled his tank top out of his sweatpants so they hung down to hide a growing bulge. As they chatted, he told her that he gave massages, including erotic, no-sex massages. She laughed at his description of what that entailed, but she was intrigued. She took his card. After all, she had already done her research.

A week ago, Friday, she was signing for a locker and a towel as she came in for her lunchtime workout when she felt eyes on her. She looked up and made eye contact with Jerry, who had come out of the office and was standing by the exit. It was as if they both froze, staring at each other for a few seconds, until Judy, one of the female trainers, also walked from the office.

"Ready?" Judy asked.

"Ready," Jerry answered, turning his head to look at Judy.

Jerry glanced back at Angie for a second, gave a slight nod of his head, and then he and Judy were out the door. Angie realized she had sort of frozen while holding her spa card over the scanner. She tapped to sign for the towel and the locker.

Her friend Gloria, who was a manager at the spa, told her his name was Jerry and that he had excellent references and was, from all accounts, trustworthy. Gloria said she hadn't heard any mention of a wife, but she knew he had a 14-year-old son. He had been with them for a month and a half now, working only four hours Tuesday and Friday mornings, and they had offered to triple his rate if he could give them ten more hours. The spa didn't take bookings more than thirty

days in advance. And Jerry was fully booked for the next month and appeared would be permanently fully booked since his current clients kept rebooking in such a manner that there was unlikely to be an opening for a new client.

But yesterday morning, as Angie arrived, Gloria greeted her with good news.

"Angie, you lucked out. Jerry's client for 8 o'clock cancelled at the last minute."

Angie looked through the dim light at the sleeping Jerry and smiled now as she remembered smiling then.

"And look where he is now."

What she hadn't told Gloria was that she had asked around after she first saw Jerry and found out that most of the women at the spa knew him, half were trying to seduce him, and he was making money hand over fist from private massages.

"But erotic massages? None of the other girls had mentioned anything about erotic massages."

Everything, in terms of his behavior, had been all professional at those private massages, from what she'd heard, even though, based on some of their stories, some of the women seemed lucky Jerry hadn't pressed attempted rape charges.

From all accounts, however, no one yet had successfully bedded him. But Angie was up for the challenge. Another thing she hadn't told Gloria was that she had given Dorothy $50 to cancel her 8 am appointment that Friday morning.

Angie glanced back now at the clock. It was 4:55 am. The room was still quite shadowy. She listened for a bit to Jerry's breathing. The table he was on wasn't very wide.

"I guess he's one of those people who barely moves in their sleep," she thought.

She had been lying on that table, on her back, satiated, after he'd finished his erotic massage, when she drifted off to sleep.

"Wow," she thought, *"I must have slept for almost 7 hours."*

She couldn't remember when last she'd slept so many hours straight. She stretched under the towel and then snuggled back into her bed.

Another thing she couldn't remember was when she'd last felt this safe with a man.

"Ha. Have I ever felt safe with a man?"

She let her apprehension go. She wished she could see Jerry's face.

"Even his breathing is sexy."

But man, what a day. Such a long and stressful day. She really needed that massage.

"Ahh … that massage."

She didn't really feel sleepy anymore. Still, she didn't feel like getting up even though she wanted to pee. She stretched some more, then seemingly nestled deeper into her bed.

She had known that Friday was going to be a long, busy, and tiring day. And, even though they were calling it a remembrance service, it was really a funeral service of sorts, and those are always draining. Despite her early bravado, she'd had that thought at the back of her mind when she scheduled the massage in the first place.

"And yesterday turned out to be a day that took my stress level to another level."

The Friday that started out so sweetly for her turned out to be not just long and stressful but painful.

"By the end of the day, I really, really needed that massage."

As she left the spa yesterday morning, Angie remembered thinking that it was such a bright, hot, beautiful summer day. It could have been, in a way, an inapt day for anything funeral-like, where somber thoughts of death and the deceased could depress you from enjoying the day. But

she had made up her mind that she was going to look like the day - bright, hot, beautiful, summery.

That was how she looked most times she went out anyway - a knockout. She was one of those women who didn't hate catcalls but instead delighted in the attention. And after the spa, she felt amazingly full of freshness and vigor. She wasn't even thinking much about the service apart from having to get there.

"Jerry was on my mind."

She went by Mabel's in West End to get her hair and nails done. She decided on a style and color (a Sleek Bob tinged with brown) that she felt fit her as good as Mary J. For her nails, she picked out a deep red Gucci gloss, except for the ring and little fingers on her left hand. On those nails, she had Mabel use a shiny black polish, something she always did when going to any sort of funeral or memorial service. She figured she'd give the occasion that tiny concession.

From Mabel's, she stopped at Macy's in the Lenox Square mall to pick up the dress she had bought but left to have the hem taken up an inch. It was a sleek, blue satin thing with thin shoulder straps and six, evenly spaced columns of hushed, multi-colored frills running from the waist to the hem that was now an inch closer to making it a mini-skirt. It was a dress fit for a fancy mid-summer night's party, and that was exactly the plan Angie had for it in another month or so. After all, nobody she'd be seeing that Friday would be at that rooftop party she was planning on going to the weekend after her birthday.

After leaving the mall, she stopped at a gas station for gas and a bag of ice. She had meant to put the ice from the ice maker in a separate bowl in the freezer so the ice maker would fill up again, but she had forgotten.

She was home at her 2-bedroom townhouse, loft-styled apartment in Brookhaven by 12:30 pm, leaving her plenty of time to have a snack and get ready for Emma's remembrance service, which was to begin at 3 pm.

She had to admit she felt gratitude towards Ettie for helping her all Thursday evening into the night, with the setting up and decorating for the repast. They had a nice chat, and the time flew by while they worked. It was close to 2 am, though, when they were finally finished. But with everything done as far as preparing her townhouse, and with the food being catered, she had the morning free to focus on getting herself ready for the service.

However, yesterday, as she dressed and readied herself, and it got closer and closer to 3 pm, Angie felt some of the lightness dissipating from her mood.

She refused to give in.

Jerry had been on her mind all day. On the drive to the funeral home, she called him to see if he was available in the evening.

"Hello!"

"Hi Jerry, this is Angie."

"Hi, Angie. Nice hearing from you. What's up?"

"Well, remember I told you about the remembrance service for my sister and the repast? It's going to be a long, tiring afternoon and evening. Can I get an appointment with you for later?"

There were a couple of seconds of silence. Angie knew, based on gossip at the spa, that Jerry seemed to never schedule appointments after 4 pm on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

"What time were you thinking?"

"9 pm. I'll be done with the repast by then."

Another hesitation. But then ...

"I can do that, no problem."

"Ok, great. Looking forward to seeing you at nine, then Jerry. I'll text you my address."

"Ok, later, Angie."

"Bye."

"Bye."

In the end, Angie got to the funeral home less than ten minutes before the scheduled 3 pm start of the service. Ettie had called her twice, but she had her Razr send a "I'm driving" text.

The small parking area in the courtyard for the handicapped and immediate family was full. However, the funeral home, which was on a corner property, had additional parking spaces in a lot across the street to the left of the building. That was where Angie had to park, then challenge the hot asphalt with her heels.

The funeral home's hall was full without being packed. There were perhaps two dozen people, apart from Ettie, Lionel and Keith, who were in the front row to the left. And behind them, Devin. The air conditioning was on full blast, and Angie felt the chill, but she ignored it. Ettie looked up and saw her as she entered from the side door.

"Over here, Angie. I saved spaces for you and Tizzie."

She nodded curtly at Devin as she passed and went and sat beside Ettie.

"Wow, Angie. That's some outfit," Lionel said.

Angie stared at him and decided to ignore any snideness.

"Thanks," she said, before she turned toward Ettie, who had touched her on the arm.

"Angie, we have to talk. After the service," said Ettie.

"What?"

"Look around. See the camera."

"I thought we decided we weren't going to pay for the extras like a recording?"

"I thought so too," Ettie said wryly.

Just then, Tizzie, Emma's daughter, stepped in from the side door. Tizzie was accompanied by her boyfriend and his mother, and, ignoring Ettie's beckoning, she sat with them on the other side of the aisle, away from and a little behind the rest of the immediate family. During the service, a couple of times when Angie looked around, Tizzie seemed to be staring

in her and Ettie's direction with pure venom. It made Angie a bit anxious.

No one had seen Tizzie since Emma's death.

"No one in the family, that is."

It had been strange and puzzling. She and Ettie were Tizzie's aunts, there for her with her mother now dead. Yet all communication with Tizzie pertaining to the service arrangements had been through her uncle Lionel. And a lot had had to be arranged in just a few days. Emma and Tizzie didn't go to church as such, but the service was being held in a small hall at the funeral home.

Angie sighed as she lay there on her bed in the darkened room. She really was going to miss Emma. She remembered the year when everything changed. That fateful year when all their lives changed forever. The year Emma stopped going to church.

The church, specifically, was the small Baptist church, a mile and a half up the road from where they lived at the time, outside San Fernando, in their native Trinidad. The family, their dad included, if he were home, attended every Sunday. Every Sunday as long as she could remember, that is, until the Sunday after the day their mother found out that Emma was pregnant. She never let Emma *"set foot"* in that church again.

But it seemed from that day on, Emma made a point of not setting foot in any church again. And she kept Tizzie away as well. The closest Angie remembered them being at a church was for their dad's funeral, where Emma and her daughter stayed in the courtyard. Etched in Angie's memory was the recollection of a particular argument between Emma and their mother over Tizzie.

That argument happened after a different funeral. Their mother's brother got drunk or something and fell down an old well at the back of his property. Ettie was still in college in the US, but came back home for the funeral. And after that service, which Emma and Tizzie didn't attend, the women

were gathered in the kitchen late in the day when their mother and Emma started arguing over Tizzie, who was five at the time. What Emma said in that argument, Angie surmised, was why she herself was never much of a churchgoing person once she left Trinidad. But she also figured their mother was a fortune teller with respect to Tizzie.

"Helping Tizzie like Emma asked is not going to be easy."

Tizzie grew up to be as wild and uncontrollable as her grandmother had predicted. She became scarcer and scarcer as she got older and wasn't really friendly with anyone in the family.

Angie remembered talking about that with Emma. It seemed Tizzie felt that the family, and especially her grandmother, had made her mother pay too heavy a price for having her. She became the black sheep of a black sheep.

But while Angie could understand where Tizzie's anger towards her grandmother, Mrs. Remontle, came from, she and Ettie had only been friends with Emma. They were the ones who, through Lionel, had given her money since her mother's death. And they were the ones paying for the remembrance service, which was pricey, although not too, too expensive, since instead of a burial, after the service, Emma's body was going to be cremated.

The repast after the service was Angie's idea. She thought Emma would have liked it, and she was able to convince Ettie. They weren't able to consult with or get any input from Tizzie, who was simply sent an invitation.

The service itself was relatively short and only semi-religious. It was presided over by a man in a suit who may or may not have been a minister and who, Angie assumed, worked for the funeral home. Lionel made a few comments of greetings and thanks on behalf of the family and read a short poem Emma had given him the day before she died.

It had actually been Lionel's first visit to the hospice to see her, but he said he and Emma had spent a couple of hours

chatting, and she gave him the poem that he read at the service, as well as another one that she said she wanted to be remembered by. In retrospect, they figured Emma was signaling something when she said what she said to Lionel, so they ended up putting a couple verses of the second one on the remembrance service program.

Angie and Ettie went up and talked about their "big sis" and the "three musketeers" and how much Emma meant to them.

After that, Tizzie read from *"Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me"* by Maya Angelou. She started sobbing a little. Angie had never seen her cry before. As Tizzie came down from the podium, Angie moved to hug and comfort her, but Tizzie brushed past without saying anything.

Angie sat down, shocked. She and Ettie exchanged glances.

Towards the end of the service, they stood to sing *"Wind Beneath My Wings."* Emma had a decent voice, and before she was banned from their church in "Sando," Angie remembered she used to sing in the choir and do a solo part in that song that gave Angie chills. Her emotions got the better of her, and she teared up a little as she sat after the hymn.

"There goes my eye makeup," she thought as she dabbed with a tissue, and Ettie patted her arm.

While they had been singing, Angie heard a couple of loud bangs in the distance that sounded like a car backfiring. But the looks on many faces in the room suggested that people thought the sounds were gunshots. And sure enough, as the service was concluding, the wails of sirens filled the hall.

A few minutes later, as the gathering exited to the courtyard, Tizzie's boyfriend and his mother came over to Angie to give their condolences. As the two then moved to similarly talk to Ettie, Angie was actually looking around for Tizzie when, above the din, she heard a whisper close to her ear.

"Murderer!"

Angie turned around, startled. Tizzie was displaying the same venomous look she had been wearing all afternoon.

"I know about the weed, you murderer," she hissed.

And then Tizzie stormed off to meet her boyfriend and his mother, who were now walking away from Ettie and towards the side exit of the courtyard to get to the parking lot across the street.

Angie stared at the departing Tizzie, puzzled and in shock. Then she saw Ettie walking towards her, and she lightened her expression.

"Did Tizzie say something to you just now?" Ettie asked.

"Yes, she said something, but I couldn't really understand, and she just walked off."

"We have to do something about her, if only for Emma's sake."

"Yeah, we do. But right now, I have to get home before those people reach with the food for the repast." They were practically shouting because of the noise.

There had been an accident or something just two properties down on the same side of the road as the funeral home. There was a ton of emergency vehicles on the road just outside the entrance, and the whole block was essentially blocked off and closed to traffic.

In fact, police tape stretched across the entrance to the funeral home's courtyard. Those with cars in the parking lot were going to be stuck for a while.

"I guess Emma's lucked out today. She gonna be late for her burning, and it might not even happen 'til tomorrow." Lionel had also walked over to Angie.

Angie didn't smile. She was still thinking about what Tizzie had said. Lionel's joke was more cruel than funny anyway. But they had chosen this funeral home in Martinetta because it was close to the hospice where Emma died, plus it was affiliated with the crematorium handling Emma's remains and gave them a big discount.

"Lionel!" Ettie scolded.

Lionel smiled.

Anyhow, Angie was just glad that she had parked in the funeral home's overflow parking lot on the side street rather than in the compound, as had a few of the people who got to the service early. She had to be home quickly as the food was being delivered at 4:45 pm. Fortunately, for most of the way, she would be driving opposite the heavy evening traffic.

The funeral home advised that it was ok for folks to leave their cars as long as they collected them by 9 pm. It was clear that people for any service after Emma's would all have to park in the overflow lot across the street.

Ettie had come with their mother and her son, Keith, and her car was one of those trapped in the courtyard. So was Lionel's car. Angie offered them all a ride. Keith said he was ok and would wait and ride with his dad, who was also blocked in.

"Come, guys. Let's move," Angie shouted to her passengers.

There was a crowd of onlookers building in the areas around the funeral home, and someone had started to wail loudly. Angie saw the cops directing a police car and the broadcast vehicles of two news crew teams into the parking lot that they were trying to get to. She figured the funeral home was going to have to cancel any afternoon service.

"Let's hurry so we don't get blocked in."

As the group going to Angie's car was about to cross the street, they saw Tizzie and her boyfriend and his mom driving slowly out of the parking lot. Angie made eye contact with the boyfriend, who nodded, but Tizzie didn't look in their direction.

Angie had thought of having a repast because she knew a few people who couldn't make it to the service but would likely be able to come for something after work to pay their respects. Also, Angie figured, with the service being so short,

those of Emma's friends who so desired could use the occasion of the repast to say a few words in tribute.

One was Mrs. Mason, whom Emma had been caring for before being hospitalized, and who knew Emma as a child in Trinidad. In fact, Mrs. Mason was Emma's godmother, and back in Trinidad, oftentimes her home had been a refuge for all three sisters from the wrath of their mother. She was in a wheelchair now, and her "army" son was there assisting her.

At the repast, Angie busied herself making sure everyone was getting food and drink, and that the atmosphere was cheerful, while trying to push away any dire thoughts from entering her mind.

It wasn't a surprise that Tizzie didn't show up for the repast, which had been scheduled from 5 pm to 8 pm. Angie was worried, though. The accusation from Tizzie had rattled her.

"How did Tizzie know about the weed?"

The question came back to bug her now, this morning, as she lay in bed. She sighed some more.

Well, Friday was over, and she really, really was going to miss Emma.

"It's definite now: 'The Three Musketeers' no more."

She also really had to pee. She threw off the towel, pulled away the cushion to her right, and climbed off her bed. She searched for and found her slippers, then moved quietly to the bathroom, closed the door gently, and sat on the toilet.

Angie didn't have much planned for the day. She had some cleaning up to do later when Ettie was to come by to help. She had the option of calling Dorreen from the cleaning service, who came every other Monday and was due this coming Monday. She figured she'd ask Dorreen to do a bit extra and give her a big tip.

She worked weekdays, 7 am to 3 pm, and on the weekends, Angie mostly relaxed at home watching TV, unless she had arranged one of her dates. But her dates never came

to her apartment – it was always a hotel, or with her "regulars," their place.

She wiped herself, got up, and flushed the toilet. It was probably close to six now. She decided to take a nice, warm, relaxing shower. She marveled at the fact that she had basically a strange man sleeping in her bedroom and her in the shower, leaving him unattended.

She caressed her body with a soft washcloth. She used an aromatic African black soap she'd bought at a flea market a couple of weeks before. She liked its aroma and how it felt on her skin. She rubbed her nipples a bit.

"What was it about Jerry that makes me feel so …"

She struggled, not wanting to give voice to her feelings, even in her mind. But she had a sense of what it was. And again, apprehension crept up on her.

Jerry and her feelings had sort of been on her mind all of Friday, although there was no apprehension then.

Then the drama and comments from Tizzie at the memorial service threw her off. With the mental stress that that created, it was no wonder then that, as the day drew to a close, what she had suspected might happen, happened. A weariness started to overcome her. She remembered glancing at her watch and it was saying 6:30 pm.

"I'm feeling tired and drained already, even though I've hardly done anything all day."

That was her thought at the time. She figured it was the stress combined with a carryover from Wednesday when she had done a double shift in an exchange with a co-worker so she could have Friday off.

"Then all that setting up 'til late Thursday night."

She had made the appointment with Jerry for 9 pm. As the evening wore on, she thought more and more of how relaxing a massage would be, and she texted Jerry to confirm that he was coming.

It was close to 8:30 pm when everyone finally left. Ettie and Keith were the last to leave with the Masons. They had

wanted to help with the clean-up, but in the end, it was agreed that Ettie would return Saturday afternoon to help.

But with the place so messy and Jerry coming, after they left, she started putting away a few things. Unfortunately, she then proceeded to hurt her thigh when she walked into the dishwasher door that she had left half open. It was extremely painful.

It was a full minute before she could stand properly on that leg.

"I really needed that massage."

She'd stopped everything she was doing then and went and took a shower. And it was a good thing she did when she did, because Jerry came right on time.

It was almost 9 pm when her doorbell rang, and she hurried to finish wrapping her hair and rushed downstairs to open the front door. It was Lionel.

"Sorry, Angie, but I think I left my phone here."

She opened the screen door, and he came in. He headed straight for the house phone hanging on the wall in her kitchen. Angie could see him dialing and then heard a cell phone ringing. Lionel left the landline phone dangling and danced between the out-of-place furniture to the living room. Angie heard a "Got it," and, another few seconds later, he was back by the door where she was still standing.

"It was stuck in the sofa," he said, holding up the phone. "Sorry again, Angie. But thanks."

Angie closed the door behind Lionel. She walked to the kitchen to get herself a glass of water. She was standing there sipping the water when Jerry called, at precisely 9 pm, to say he was at the door.

Angie stepped out of the shower now, still remembering last night. She finished drying herself off, then removed her shower cap. She fluffed her hair a bit and then slowly folded her head wrap. She grabbed her nightgown from the hook on the bathroom door and draped it over her shoulders. She

turned off the bathroom light and stood for a few seconds to let her eyes adjust to the darkness before opening the door and going back into the bedroom. Jerry was still sleeping.

She took the cushion from her bed and quietly went to fix it back in the chair in front of her dresser. She placed her nightgown over the back of the chair and inched open one of the dresser drawers until she was able to pull out a Victoria's Secret lingerie that she had bought two weeks ago. She slipped on the lingerie and, in the low glow cast by the nightlight on that side of the room, admired her silhouette in her dresser's mirror.

"That shower was exactly what I needed," she thought.

She climbed back into bed, this time under the covers and between the sheets. She felt so relaxed now.

*****

Angie heard the shower running as she woke. She glanced over at the empty massage table. She'd dozed off. She stretched under the sheets. The glow of daylight behind the blinds had lightened the room some. She could see Jerry's clothes folded on his bag, which was on the floor beside his shoes.

She listened to the shower with thoughts of Jerry and the night before coming back to her mind. And with those thoughts, pleasant as they might be, she again felt a twinge of apprehension.

"Yes, I know exactly why."

She loved sex, and she loved her sex life. But she wasn't interested in any relationship. No man was ever going to get the better of her again. She dictated which man she wanted to sleep with, and when and where. She had three "boyfriends" that she saw regularly. They were nice and gave her expensive gifts. Occasionally, she might meet someone she desired, for a one-time thing. Very occasionally, she might hire an escort.

"Just for the different vibe."

Jerry was supposed to be just another notch on her belt.

"But what I'm getting from him is seriously different."

She always met her "boyfriends" at their place or a hotel. The occasional date or escort was always at a hotel. None of them had ever been in her bedroom, much less her bed.

Since she'd figured she might be feeling worn out by day's end, and she had liked the vibes Friday morning, she had thought a nice massage from Jerry would have been the perfect way to get her relaxed in the evening. But though she liked Jerry and found him attractive, she had only discussed a massage with him, and that was what had been her expectation, up to a certain point. The erotic massage, as he described it, was erotic, not sexual.

"Anything past that would be because he couldn't resist my charms."

She wasn't sure yet how far she needed or wanted to go to claim victory over her rivals at the spa. She had let him come to her house with his massage table because she knew that after the repast, she was going to be tired and wouldn't feel like dressing and going out to a hotel. And she let him set up his massage table in her large master bedroom because there was no space in the second bedroom, and the rest of the house was junky after the repast.

She wondered now if, subconsciously, all her actions to get him in her bedroom after hours were by design, partly for bragging rights over the other women and partly because she got so turned on Friday morning.

Anyhow, based on what she knew of him and how she had felt with him yesterday morning at the workout, she had been somewhat confident that he was safe. And after all, she was the one dictating their interaction.

She remembered how business-like he had been when he first came in, just the way the other women had said.

"But," she thought again, *"he hadn't said anything to them about any erotic massage."*

At least nothing that anyone had spoken about. But she was pretty sure no one had seen his dick.

"Everybody was guessing."

Based on how he had described his erotic massages to her, or because she rushed downstairs when Lionel came, then forgot, or perhaps based on her intentions, she met Jerry at the door wearing her slippers, her nightgown, and a headwrap.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she responded. "Right on time, I see. Please forgive the place."

Jerry stepped in. He was wearing a singlet and shorts with, she surmised based on the knowledge she'd gained this morning, a jockstrap keeping his package together.

"That's ok. I understand. A long day for you, no doubt. Where can I set up my table?"

"Right over there," she said, pointing to a space she had cleared in the area between her dining table and her living room.

Jerry walked over to the spot, a folded table in a case in his right hand and a large duffel bag in his left.

"It can't be down here," he said, looking back at Angie. "Too strong a smell of food. Gonna mess with my incense."

She looked at him. He looked at her.

"Don't you have a second bedroom or office? We can go there if you don't feel comfortable going to your bedroom. That's where I usually work."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. But how about your other room?"

"I use it for storage, and it's full."

"Angie, I'm not psychotic, I'm not a rapist. You can trust me in your bedroom."

Angie stared at him.

"Angie, I don't bite."

Angie laughed. She looked at Jerry for a couple more seconds, then turned to lead him upstairs to her bedroom.

"Maybe just nibble."

"What? What was it you just said?"

"Nothing. One of your neighbors. I glimpsed someone I thought I knew in the parking lot."

Jerry set up his table and, on bedroom furniture around it, placed his towels, his candles, and his incense. He had her sniff an aromatherapy oil as she lay on her stomach on the table. He spent a good twenty minutes massaging her neck, shoulders, arms, hands, back, buttocks, thighs, legs, ankles and feet. He kept two towels in place, professionally covering her naked body, exposing only the area he was massaging.

After just a few minutes, she was dozing in and out of sleep, and no longer even thinking about her seduction plans, when he roused her and helped her to roll onto her back. She was expecting him to rub the massage oil on his hands and start massaging from her head down, as he had done while she was on her back. Instead, he pulled the towel down and gently scraped his tongue over first her left nipple, then her right nipple.

Then he ....

She felt soft lips brushing hers now, and she opened her eyes, startled. She had been in deep, lustful thought of a remembered Jerry, but Jerry in the present was here, hovering over her bed, kissing her.

Angie squirmed away. She threw back the sheet and covers and jumped off the other side of her bed. She and Jerry stared at each other across her bed. He had one of his towels wrapped around his waist. He started slowly walking around her bed, and she turned to face him.

"Angie, what's the matter?"

"I don't do massages in my bed."

Jerry pulled her close, then he bent her backwards and leaned and kissed her. She gasped as she lost control of her balance in his arms. She felt his lips on her neck, and his hands along her back that were the only things keeping her

from a reckoning with gravity. She felt him lick and pinch her left ear with his teeth. She twitched, slightly annoyed.

His tongue flicked from her left cheek across her face. As his lips brushed ever so softly across hers, he stared through the dim light deeply into her eyes. She relaxed. His lips moved along her right cheek to her ear, which he licked and nibbled. She twitched nervously.

He was still standing, holding her. Through his towel, she could feel his hard dick along her abdomen. She felt wet. Jerry's lips went from nibbling her ear to nibbling her neck.

"This boy better not be trying to give me no hickey," she thought to herself.

But Jerry's lips were quickly down on her chest between her breasts. The bodice of her lingerie fell to the floor as he slid the lace straps from her shoulders. He slowly, concentrically, gently, moved his tongue up her right breast to the nipple. Jerry proceeded to munch on her nipple, using his lips, with an occasional scrape of his teeth. She moaned.

Jerry moved to her left breast and did the same until he elicited a similar reaction. He let her stand as he stooped and was now licking her tummy and navel. He untied the lace straps on the rest of her lingerie, and that part too fell to the floor. Suddenly, he scooped her up and walked over and placed her gently on the massage table. He kissed her again. He started moving downwards. Every inch of her body felt exposed and accessible to his tongue. But he seemed to be focusing on her pelvic area and inner thighs. She squirmed and grabbed his head with both hands, pushing it.

Ten minutes and five orgasms later, Angie made a decision. She pushed Jerry's head away and climbed off the table. She stood in front of him, staring up into his eyes. They kissed deeply. She rubbed the poking head of his hard dick, which pressed against her body under her left breast. Angie held Jerry's arm and walked him to her bed.

Jerry lifted her onto her bed and then climbed up, hovering above her. They continued to stare into each other's eyes. They kissed. Angie reached down and caressed his dick. They both made weird sounds as she guided him into her. He pushed in halfway, then slowly eased out. He pushed in again, and this time he went past halfway. Angie gasped.

Jerry eased down on top of her and started a slow, rhythmic grind. He had been doing this for almost ten minutes when he slowly began to pick up the pace. Angie's moans grew louder. It felt to her like he was going a milli-fraction of an inch deeper into her with each stroke. She could feel her orgasm building. Her fingertips dug into his back. She thought she was going to break a nail. At that moment, Jerry eased up, separating her arms, which he then grabbed and pressed into the pillow. Her arms trapped, Angie moved her lower body in rhythm with Jerry's. Angie squirmed. The momentum to her orgasm, paused at "high," now resumed its build-up for "higher." The grimace on Jerry's face told Angie he was close as well. A loud "Arrrgggg" came from his mouth as he came. Their bodies clashed violently, and Angie let out a high-pitched shriek as her orgasm crested. They spasmed together for a good minute before Jerry slowly pulled out and rolled beside her. They turned and stared into each other's souls.

A couple of hours later, Angie was still lying dozing on her bed. She had been going in and out of sleep. Jerry had left about half an hour ago as he had a client at 10 am.

Angie felt drained. But so relaxed.

"I can't move a muscle right now."

She felt guilty that she hadn't gotten up to fix Jerry some coffee, but she hadn't even known when he got out of bed, and when she woke as he came out of the shower for the second time that morning, he pointed out that he was late and could get a cup of coffee at the spa.

"Whew!"

She couldn't remember when last, she had had such deeply fulfilling and satisfying sex. She also knew she had never felt this way about a man before. She had been apprehensive about that feeling since last night.

But, with renewed apprehensive thoughts, her mind drifted back to yesterday and her other problems. She sighed.

"Emma must have told Tizzie about the stuff with me and Devin."

She frowned.

"Why the fuck would Emma do that? After all this time?"

Her frown deepened.

"What is Tizzie trying to do? Blackmail me?"

Ettie was to come over at 2 pm. She was going to have all these questions.

"What do I do?"

Her Razr pinged. It was Ettie asking about coming over at 1 pm instead of 2 pm.

Angie sighed some more, then pondered some more.

"But why was Tizzie calling me a murderer? Nobody died. That weed was …"

It suddenly hit her. She bolted upright in her bed.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no," she wailed aloud. She'd remembered that somebody had died.

"Emma. She must have smoked the weed. And told Tizzie."

Angie was suddenly scared.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no."

She got up out of bed, reached for her nightgown, and wrapped it about her.

"Damn. Damn. Damn. Daamnnnn. What the fuck am I going to do?"

She sighed again.

"Well, at least I don't have to worry about Ettie knowing about me and Devin."

Chapter 2 - Summer - Douglas

Douglas stirred and woke.

He squinted at a sudden brightness as he tried to open his eyes. A single ray of sunlight scorched his face. He groaned and moved his head. He sighed.

Wearily, he got up, poked his feet into his slippers, and walked unsteadily to the window. He pushed the out-of-place blind slat with malice, which only served to disturb all the other slats, which of course let in a whole bunch more light.

“Fuck!” He exclaimed.

He was standing, sleep-foolish, in front of the blinds that he’d just made mad. The flood of sunlight blinded him to the point of hurt, even though his eyes were only half-opened to begin with. He squinted for a few seconds until the blinds calmed down and he could open his eyes sufficiently to confirm that all the slats were in place to block the morning light.

He ambled back to the bed and eased himself back under the sheet with a groan. Then he groaned some more as he realized he still had on his slippers.

He raised the sheet, swung his feet off the bed, and freed them of the slippers. He couldn’t bring himself to put his bare feet where the slippers had been on the bed, so he scooted to the other side. The cooler pillow was actually comforting as he resettled himself on the left side of the bed.

“Jeez. Those blinds.”

He hadn’t closed them properly before falling into bed the night before. Now, he wondered if he was going to be able to fall back asleep.

Douglas was one of those people who normally slept on their sides. With him, it was either side. He turned onto his left side now so that his back would be towards the blinds, in case

they decided to continue feuding with him by letting in more light than just a glow.

He twisted to look back at the clock on his nightstand. He couldn't see it. The jilted pillow was blocking his view.

Douglas sighed as he turned around, almost onto his right side, and raised himself on his elbow to see the clock. It was 6:05 am.

He groaned again as he lowered himself back onto the bed, turning onto his left side. He needed his sleep.

He had been up well into the night at a crime scene. A 26-year-old man and his 24-year-old girlfriend had been shot at as they drove into the parking lot of the woman's apartment complex.

According to the boyfriend, he saw the shooter raising the gun, and he tried reversing his Maxima at speed out of the parking lot. He was exiting in reverse through the entrance lane to the complex. His car had crashed into a tree on the sidewalk, which fortunately slowed its motion before it reached the road and bounced into an oncoming car. The stopped Maxima was then struck by a sharp branch of the falling tree, and the driver's side windscreen was shattered.

There were no serious injuries from the collision, but two of the reportedly three shots fired had pierced the Maxima's windscreen, and one bullet had struck the woman, killing her.

Apart from whiplash, the boyfriend's only apparent injury came from four relatively minor cuts across his face and right shoulder, possibly from the broken windscreen or a tree branch that came through the window.

Between the homicide and the collision, it had been a busy crime scene for hours. The entire block was cordoned off for quite a while, a great inconvenience for residents and anybody else in the area, but a situation that simply could not be avoided.

Douglas remembered how chaotic things were when he and Arnold got to the crime scene yesterday.

As the two detectives approached the area, they were directed to a parking lot on a road perpendicular to the block where the shooting and car accident had occurred. After they parked, as they walked past a funeral home at the corner and towards the crime scene, Douglas counted seven police vehicles, four ambulances, and a fire truck along the way. The flashing lights and the cacophony of screaming sirens and shouting and wailing people were overwhelming to the senses. And then there was the blood.

Well, it was just really one woman wailing. As Douglas later found out, she was the passenger in the oncoming car involved in the collision. But the atmosphere brought back to his mind a car bomb scene that had racked him for several months after his stint in Iraq with the National Guard a year and a half ago.

His head did a quick little twist on the pillow as he tried to shake away that revisited memory. He refocused on what he had been thinking about. How, yesterday, as he was walking past the funeral home and saw the parked cars and realized that a service was in progress, he thought:

"Ouch. They might be in there for a while."

He smiled now at the recollection.

"Fate," he thought. *"It had to have been fate for that to have happened."*

But today was Saturday. His regular "stay in bed and relax until noon" day. At least on weekends when Pat wasn't with him.

That's because most Fridays, after work, he would go hang out at a club or bar, drinking and shooting pool until closing time.

In fact, as of late, every Friday, he'd been driving down to Atlanta to go to Bulldogs.

"But I wouldn't have been able to go next Friday." He smiled.

Pat was going to be with him next weekend. The last time he went to Bulldogs on a Friday before she came by, he fell asleep during an airing of "The Poseidon Adventure," a movie she had asked him to take her to see. He couldn't help it.

"*Not only had I been out clubbing into Saturday morning, I'd seen that movie twice already.*"

But since then, that girl had been on his case. She kept saying she was going to start calling him Grandpa. But now, after yesterday, it didn't matter that he couldn't go to Bulldogs next Friday.

Douglas Duncan, being a man of routine, nearly always scheduled a wakeup call for noon on Saturdays. That was just in case he fell back into too deep a sleep while relaxing after he initially woke up.

On those mornings after he'd been out late, he'd naturally wake by at least 10 am. If it was a weekend when his daughter wasn't by him, he liked to lie in bed and relax and meditate, and think about things in his life for an hour before getting up. And sometimes he'd doze off, maybe sleeping again for another half an hour. But he always woke again before noon.

Truly, though, yesterday had been an unusually long and tiring Friday. So, this Saturday morning, more than most, he needed his sleep. He relaxed his body and tried to let his mind drift into nothingness.

It wasn't working. His mind was on that guy again.

"I still can't believe the coincidence of me seeing that dude at the crime scene yesterday afternoon."

He'd been going to Bulldogs every Friday for five weeks now, hoping to see the dude again. And then yesterday, there he was.

He was driving a Kia Sportage, a type of SUV that Douglas had considered buying before settling on his F-150.

"And those plates." He'd seen the "Kia with New York plates" combination recently somewhere before. He prized himself on his memory and recollection of things. It was part of what made him so good at his job.

"An effective detective." He smiled at his play on words.

But he knew it was only a matter of time before he remembered where he'd seen that vehicle. He felt a tinge of excitement. Except that ...

"I really should be sleeping, though."

He opened his eyes to turn to look at the alarm clock again, then decided he didn't really want to know what time it was. Even with the blinds closed, the room was already noticeably lighter as the daylight made itself felt.

Sleep wasn't happening. In fact, now he felt the need to pee.

He rolled off the left side of the bed somewhat angrily and walked around to his slippers, then flip-flopped into the bathroom. He kept a nightlight in there. The toilet seat was already raised.

He peed and, as was his habit, at least when he had a bathroom or stall to himself, used a piece of toilet paper to dry the tip of his dick. He didn't like smelly underwear. And similarly, since he slept naked, he didn't want to feel any dribbles on the sheet.

He flushed the toilet and rinsed his hands while looking through the nightlight's light at his image in the mirror.

He stood 5' 8 ½" high, weighed 160 lbs. with even brown skin on a tight, muscled body, the result of a consistent 4 days per week of gym work. His hair had just a hint of waviness to it (from his East Indian grandmother, he'd surmised), but that rarely showed since he kept it cut so low. He liked the look and shape of his mostly hair-free head.

For the same reason, he had just a faint stubble of a beard and a thin moustache above full lips that flavored his attractive and disarming smile. He had a small scar near the center of his forehead where he'd been struck by a cricket ball

in high school. He had a stock response when people told him of his supposed big resemblance to a certain Mayweather who was a dozen years his junior.

"Naw! He's pretty. I'm handsome."

He chuckled out loud, his mood a little lighter now as he walked back to the bed. He smiled as he remembered to "disengage" his slippers this time before sliding under the sheet that sufficed as his cover.

He kept his apartment warm enough that he didn't need to wear clothes when home and didn't need a blanket in bed.

He remembered something.

He moved and stretched to reach across to his Sanyo cell phone, attached to a charging cord and sitting on the night table on the side of the bed where he normally slept. Beside it was his work pager and a regular, cradle phone that was his landline.

"Maybe I should start rotating which side of the bed to sleep on," he thought to himself.

He called his barber.

"Hey Daryl," he said. "Something came up on the job yesterday, and I couldn't make it. Anyway, can you squeeze me in sometime this evening?"

He listened for a good minute to a lecture from Daryl.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it. I'll make sure I get there early."

He put down his cell phone, but now on the pillow by the night table rather than the night table, so he'd have it near, and sank back into the bed with a sigh.

He'd missed his usual Friday evening touch-up with Daryl yesterday. It really had been a long day.

He and Arnold had arrived at the crime scene at 4:20 pm and were there until 11:55 pm. After another 2 hours at the office dealing with paperwork and logging evidence, he and Arnold went to the apartment of the victim's ex-husband.

Then, on his way home, he detoured back to the crime scene to check on a couple of things that came to his mind on the possible trajectory of one of the bullets.

A key to finding the assailant and determining a possible motive would be to first determine which of the two in the car was the intended target. Reviewing witness statements, checking security cameras, and digging into the backgrounds of the victim and her boyfriend were going to take up a good chunk of his time next week, in between all the other stuff on his plate.

The boyfriend had a drug-dealing arrest record that had been pled down. But then it might be literally an "open and shut" case since the victim had a restraining order out on her supposedly jealous ex-husband, whose apartment was empty and car missing. They didn't yet have enough evidence for an APB, but he was most definitely a person of interest who had to be tracked down in short order.

"Jealous ex-husband? I know no murder is happening with me and Yvonne." A wry smile crossed his mind. He had been very, very upset when he caught his wife, at the time, cheating.

"But murder? No way."

He was pretty much dedicated to his job. As it is, after a late start to the force and still three months shy of his 39th birthday, he had just been promoted to Lieutenant.

He recalled his board interview in June. Except for that one big thing, he had been quite open in detailing what had brought him to this point in his life.

Out of TC High School in Trinidad, he'd gotten a wrestling scholarship to a college in Florida, where he graduated with a degree in criminal justice. Instead of going back home, he enrolled in a training course and started working with a security firm that sponsored him for his green card. He also married his college girlfriend, Yvonne. They would later have a daughter, Patricia, who was now thirteen years old.

He was six years out of college when he obtained his US citizenship, quit his security firm job, and joined the Port Morant police department.

Yvonne once told him that he "had a lot of ambition ahead of him," and he would like to think she was right. When he liked what he was doing, he became passionate about doing it well. And since he liked his job, he put a lot of himself into it. His work was his passion.

Of course, that was detrimental to his married life. Yvonne wasn't wrong in accusing him of being married to his job instead of her.

They ended up divorcing, and he moved to Georgia for a fresh start.

He'd joined the Gwinnett County police department, working out of the office in Martinetta. He'd lived for many years in Vining, but in January he'd moved to Buckhead.

Once a month, his daughter, Pat, would spend a weekend with him, or he'd go to Port Morant and take her out somewhere.

The interview wasn't in any way stressful for Douglas.

"You did well, from what I understand," the Deputy Chief had told him, the day after the review.

On Douglas' mind were the little things he left out of his conversation with the Board members.

"And the really big one."

One thing was that after a few years and a bunch of commendations on the job in Port Morant, he'd felt himself stuck and then being shunted aside for a promotion that he thought should have been his. He wanted to think that it wasn't because of race, but he just could not shake the feeling.

He told the Board that he felt he was at a dead-end as far as getting a promotion in Port Morant and that he and his wife had stopped getting along, which was all true. He even mentioned that he'd caught Yvonne having an affair and how

devastated he'd felt. Essentially, as he put it, he divorced both wife and job and moved to Atlanta.

As for his sexuality, he viewed it as a situation where they didn't ask and he didn't tell. He wasn't volunteering anything. In any case, he himself wasn't sure what exactly he liked.

"That's a lie, Douglas," he told himself. *"You know."*

These days, he knew. As much as he found women attractive, as much as he was running from the admission, as much as the thought scared him, he knew it was males, a man's body, that stirred the deepest sexual desires in him.

He hadn't let on to Yvonne that he, too, had cheated, and he figured there was no need to bring all that up with the review board. And he couldn't help wondering if he would have heard the same congratulatory words from the Deputy if that big secret was out.

As it was, he made Lieutenant. Not that it made much difference in his work schedule in the small town where he worked.

His partner, Arnold, already had five years as a Lieutenant under his belt. But this murder case was Douglas' first with his new badge, and Arnold was letting him take the lead. He wanted to do well. He was itching to dig into the investigation. But he also had something else on his mind.

"That dude."

Douglas, giving in, raised himself and looked around at the alarm clock. It read 7:10. He saw his cell phone on the pillow and realized he could have checked it for the time.

"Ah. I'm used to the clock."

He lay back down and closed his eyes. He figured he might as well let his mind relax and drift.

Usually, he didn't have much trouble sleeping around this time on a Saturday morning. If it wasn't for the case, he would have been out late anyway and then would have gotten in, perhaps a little tipsy. He'd probably shower, have another

drink, be asleep by 3:30, and sleep straight through until 10 am.

So, he wondered for a minute if the lack of alcohol last night was what was keeping him awake now.

"Man," he thought. *"This is getting serious if I have to start drinking myself to sleep."*

He sighed. Admittedly, he had a ton of insecurities, some of which gave him his outsized, egotistic drive, but perhaps a few of which he found himself, more and more of late, trying to escape from in drink.

The bed was queen-sized, and as he sprawled half on his stomach, his right arm cuddling the pillow under his head, he realized he had never slept on this side of the bed before. He sighed again, this time with a different tone of distress.

"Six months here and I still have a bed with one side never used."

But yes, he was the only one to have ever slept in this bed.

"You sorry man," he thought to himself. *"But there is hope."*

He drifted off.

*****

The landline rang and Douglas stirred. It was his wake-up call, serving as a real wake-up call for the first time ever, rather than just a get-out-of-bed call. He crawled across the bed and picked up the phone.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Douglas. Your wake-up call."

"Thank you, James."

"You're welcome, sir."

The wake-up call service was one of the reasons he liked the complex where he lived. He had a neat 1-bedroom unit on the top floor of this brand-new luxury apartment building in Buckhead Village, north of downtown Atlanta. The view of the

city from his apartment was ordinary during the day, but at night it was exquisite.

But a big selling point for him when he was considering the place was that you could schedule a wakeup call with the doorman and get an actual live wakeup call.

"Sort of like when you stay at a hotel."

He just found it different and more to his liking than the alarm clock routine. He disliked the process of setting alarm clocks. He was always screwing it up anyway.

"Not quite ready for every part of the technological age just yet," he smiled to himself.

The bottom line was that all he had to do when coming in after a tiring day or night was to let the doorman know what time he wanted to get up.

He got up out of bed now, put on a singlet and some shorts, and was about to spread a yoga mat for some exercise when it suddenly hit him.

"That's where I saw it. A Kia Sportage with New York plates. In the gym parking lot, two Saturdays ago."

He didn't usually go to the gym on Saturdays. But that Saturday, he was there to pick up his partner as they were going to a small barbecue another detective was hosting. He remembered seeing the New York plate as he sat in his car waiting for Arnold to come out.

He folded up the exercise mat. He had had a new thought.

"Why not go to the gym instead? You never know. Maybe I get lucky and see that dude again."

He decided to take a quick wash off. He was thinking about how he came to see the dude and the Kia yesterday.

He was bent over, peering through the driver's side rear door at the back seat of the crashed Maxima, his eyes searching for any clue, when something hit his leg. He eased out of the car and picked up what appeared to be a program

from the funeral home. It was a 7" by 5" memorial service card with a picture of the deceased dominating one side.

"A message on the wind," he said to himself, smiling a bit at his joke.

He looked up toward the funeral home. The setting sun shone directly on the building and its low wall fencing, and on the cars exiting the parking lot under the direction of two officers.

"Almost picturesque," he thought.

Then he looked back at the bloody mess inside the car. He sighed.

He looked again at the card in his hand was about to crumple it. He hesitated. He didn't really want to toss it here.

"Another doubles, littering at a crime scene." He smiled. He liked to call dual actions, such as in this case, littering and contaminating a crime scene, "doubles."

"Emmelina Remontle," he said, reading from the card. "Wow. Not even quite forty-two."

He read the poem below the dates.

"A witty ditty," he thought. *"I wonder who wrote that. It couldn't have been her, could it?"*

He folded the card, put it in his back pocket, and bent back into the vehicle. He looked again towards the funeral home, this time through a clear part of the shattered windscreen of the car. That's when he saw the dude.

The dude was driving a car exiting the funeral home, not even a hundred yards away. The dude's car was stopped behind another one whose driver was talking to the officer who was directing the vehicles out of the exit. There was another man in the passenger seat beside the dude. The dude seemed to sense the eyes on him because he turned and looked in Douglas' direction. Douglas knew that, because of the sun, he couldn't be seen by anyone looking from that direction into the Maxima. But as he moved to pull his head up from the car, the dude looked to the front again and started

driving. As the dude's car turned out of the lot, an officer in the road directing traffic shielded half the license plate, but Douglas could tell it was New York plates on a Kia.

And just now, it was as he was about to exercise that he remembered where he'd seen that combination before.

*****

As he exited the shower, Douglas stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He slowly toweled himself dry. He flexed his right arm and admired the biceps. He rolled his hand down the six-pack of his stomach and flipped his dick. It was hard, pointing straight out, preventing him from stepping too close to the washbasin.

"Jeez," he thought. *"I'm so horny."*

For a second, he thought about jerking off, then decided he'd wait until he got back. He hung the towel on its rack and stepped onto the bathroom scale. He looked past his dick at the number.

"Yep, 159.5 lbs." He smiled at his handsome mug.

It was a police psychologist who had first brought up with him the issue of his many insecurities. But whatever those might be, his appearance wasn't one of them. He wallowed for a few more seconds in his narcissism, then stepped to the vanity, now smiling, to brush his teeth.

It was ten minutes past one when he finally grabbed his gym bag to leave his apartment. He planned to stop at the dry cleaners. He was emptying the pockets of the pants he had worn the day before and found the program from the memorial service. He started crushing it to throw it in the waste bin when he had a chuckle. He opened it and looked at it again.

"A sad day for you, but thanks for bringing me luck," he said to the woman on the card

He changed his mind about binning the card and walked with it to his bookcase. To flatten the creases, he stuck the card between the pages of a Sports Illustrated magazine that he then placed horizontally on a shelf under three books.

He headed out.

Douglas had this thing with elevators, so he took the stairs the seven flights down to the 1st floor.

"Good exercise," he told himself.

In the lobby, he exchanged pleasantries with the two men sitting on chairs on either side of the doorman station.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Douglas."

"Good afternoon, James," Douglas replied to the middle-aged man who stood as he approached.

"Good afternoon," the young man, still sitting, said to Douglas.

"This is my son Ricky. He works at the gate most days," James clarified.

"Hey man. I'm Douglas."

"Nice to meet you," was the reply from Ricky, as he stood and extended his hand.

In fact, they both said "Nice to meet you" at the same time, and small smiles came to both their faces.

"The mailman left a package for you that couldn't fit in the box. We can hold it for you until …."

"Actually, James, I'll take it right now, thanks. It's a cupholder for my truck."

James walked to the storage room to get the package. Douglas looked towards Ricky. For an inordinately long second, Douglas felt like he was staring and being stared at, and he looked away, a slight uncomfortableness passing quickly as James came back and handed him the package.

"Thank you, James."

"You're welcome, Mr. Douglas."

He nodded at Ricky and, walking briskly, he pushed open the first then second set of glass doors and stepped outside.

The weather was as hot as yesterday, but he was dressed lightly today. He jogged to his truck, got in, and started the 20-minute drive to the gym.

Residents did not have to stop at the security gate for a pass and to get in, so he had not spoken to Ricky before, although he had seen him. Ricky looked about mid-twenties, he looked like he was interested in Douglas, and he was sexy as fuck. Douglas wanted a male and was feeling horny as fuck.

"Seems like a nice combination," he thought. *"But no way I'm gonna start messing with James' son. Just too close to home."*

When he first moved to Atlanta, he actually dated a woman for five months before they drifted apart. They had sex twice, and it was ok. But it wasn't anywhere near as exciting and enjoyable as the sex he'd had the year before with a guy. The gay sex, which was just the second time in his life that he had actual sex with a guy, happened five months before he and Yvonne separated. But that sexual encounter, that was when he knew.

Since those first months in Atlanta, he'd stopped trying to date women. He'd felt himself loosening up a bit in terms of his associations with gay dudes and hanging out at gay clubs like Bulldogs. But he still felt detached from gay culture and not quite comfortable with his attraction to men. His sex life had become just blow-jobs from time to time, and plenty of jerking off to porn.

He was looking for something, but didn't quite know what it was.

Then one Friday night, a couple of weeks before the start of summer, he was at Bulldogs waiting his turn to play pool when he saw this dude moving from the bar towards the dance floor, drink in hand.

Douglas still didn't know why he felt such instant attraction.

The dude was dressed simply - a dark green polo shirt, dark grey jeans, and Nike cross-trainers. Douglas estimated him to be 5' 10", 160 lbs. He seemed in his early thirties, but Douglas figured he was older than he looked. The dude had a Yankee cap on his head that was turned backwards, so at times Douglas could see his face clearly. He was captivated.

Douglas actually thought the dude resembled him a bit. Like him, the dude had a light moustache, medium nose, full lips, and dark brown skin. His beard was small but a little fuller than Douglas', and his face a little narrower and his forehead more pronounced. It looked like he had a fade haircut under the cap.

"Nice," thought Douglas, trying to be nonchalant.

He himself wasn't a regular as such at the club, at least not before that night, but, watching him, he could tell that the dude wasn't a newbie, but had probably been away from Bulldogs for a while. It was the way the dude knew and acknowledged several people, but at the same time didn't seem to know anybody well. And eventually he was standing by himself for a bit in the crowd on one side of the dance floor, sipping his drink and moving to the music.

"Myester," someone called out, interrupting his surveillance. "You're up."

It was Douglas' turn on the pool table, his second turn for the night.

He rushed the game but still won when the other guy scratched on the eight ball. He rushed the second game, lost, and moved toward the dance floor area to see if he could find the dude.

He didn't see him at first, but soon, as he stood in the shadows to the side of the dance floor away from the bar, he suddenly spotted the dude to his left, also against the wall.

The dude's eyes were closed, and he seemed just so absorbed in the music. Douglas found that interesting. For someone apparently single and newly returned, you would expect him to be totally surveying the scene and scrutinizing other guys.

"The way I myself was doing."

However, the dude seemed to be in his own world.

But suddenly the dude's eyes opened and he met Douglas's gaze. They were fifteen feet apart on a loud dance floor, but Douglas felt as if he could hear him breathing.

The dude smiled, it seemed. Douglas smiled back.

Then his pool-playing buddy, Ralph, tapped Douglas on his arm.

"Here," he said, handing Douglas a drink. "Absolut and vodka. The bartender thought I'd ordered two, and I like him, so I kept both. Thought you could use it after I demolished you on the table earlier."

A chuckle escaped Douglas's lips.

"Thanks. But you know you just got lucky."

"I don't need luck to whip your ass, bud," said Ralph.

They laughed and touched glasses and sipped. Douglas was thinking they probably laughed for different reasons.

"Man, when you think gay, the most innocent thing a man says can have a sexual bent."

Douglas looked back towards the dude.

He was now dancing with a tall, sexy-looking guy whom Douglas had seen at the club a few times before. He remembered he'd heard someone call the guy Xavier. Bulldogs seemed to be Xavier's pickup spot - it seemed he invariably left with a different guy every time he came there.

The dude and Xavier danced non-stop for about 20 minutes. Douglas watched fascinated. He liked the way the dude moved and carried himself. It was with the same easy masculinity that he knew he himself possessed. He was finding the dude more and more attractive. He himself stayed towards a corner beside Ralph, nursing his drink, moving

slightly to the music, and observing the scene. Two guys asked him to dance, but each time he politely declined.

These days, he rarely danced with guys at the clubs. Not that he didn't like doing it or couldn't dance. It's just that after a few encounters at another club, he had decided that, as he put it:

"I'll wait until I find someone who I would want to have a next-time dance with as much as he wants to have a next-time dance with me."

He was an attractive man with a large dick who got aroused easily from a guy grinding on his front. His erection came from the rubbing, not necessarily because he was attracted to his dance partner. But then he would have a hard time fending off or disassociating himself from that particular guy for the rest of the night.

"Or whenever we met again, for that matter."

He had somewhat come to the conclusion that dancing might not be what he should do with a guy upon first meeting. He smiled to himself. He had actually never danced with a dude at Bulldogs. He was tired of the drama. He thought it ironic that he had migrated to Bulldogs for anonymity after hanging out a few times at a less notorious and less well-known club.

His general routine was to park at a lot about half a mile away, walk to the club, go in, get a drink, then hang around the pool table and wait his turn for a game. He'd play until he lost (which was most often after the first or second game but occasionally after three or four wins), then get another drink or two and stand in a corner of the dance floor watching guys dance and absorbing the atmosphere until his turn at the pool table came up again or it was time to head home. He'd use the walk to his car to clear his head for driving.

He was a friendly presence, but he left everyone guessing. His nickname on the pool players' chalkboard was Myester, which sounded like meister but sure had nothing to

do with his billiard skills. It was sort of short for Mystery Mister.

He didn't know how this new dude he saw felt about him, but that dude definitely seemed like someone he would like to have a next-time dance with.

Ralph excused himself to head back to the pool table area. Douglas had been absorbed with his thoughts for a minute. He looked around to where the dude had been dancing with Xavier. They weren't there. He went to the restroom, then to one of the bars to get another drink. He wandered about the club for about ten minutes, including checking outside at the back, then returned to his corner on the edge of the dance floor.

He couldn't believe that he, Douglas Duncan, was actually looking for a guy in the club. He couldn't pinpoint exactly how he was feeling. He realized the dude had probably left.

A few minutes later, he saw Xavier dancing with a different dude over on another side of the dance floor. He had no problem defining how he felt then.

"Relief."

He was back at Bulldogs the following several Fridays, but there was no sign of the dude.

Of course, he didn't even know the dude's name. It was just a stranger whom he felt he needed to meet.

"And then yesterday, a hot, summer afternoon, I'm in a blood-soaked car in the middle of the road at a busy crime scene and I look up and see the dude again, barely a hundred yards away."

*****

The closer he got to the gym, the surer Douglas was that he would see the Kia with the New York plates.

And just as he surmised, the car was there, in the second row, towards the left side of the parking area. There were

plenty of open spaces at that time on a Saturday, and he got a spot in the first row, directly facing the Kia.

As he reached for his gym bag, he realized that, with rushing to the gym and the dude on his mind, he had forgotten to stop at the cleaners.

He sucked on his teeth.

"Jeez. The dry cleaners close an hour early on Saturdays."

He wasn't planning to stay too long at the gym, so perhaps he would have time to swing back across to the laundry in Buckhead Village before heading by Daryl's.

He climbed from his car and went quickly to the locker room. He had put on his gym shorts and T-shirt before he left home, so he just shoved his bag and stuff in a locker and started walking around the gym.

It didn't take him long to spot the dude. He was on a treadmill by the windows, on the other side of the equipment floor.

He started walking briskly towards the dude, then slowed, suddenly feeling a little nervous. He'd never actually hit on a guy before.

He stopped and positioned himself behind and to the left of the dude amongst some equipment. He sat there for a minute on a Peloton, feigning pulling weights, while maintaining a covert surveillance of his target.

The dude was wearing a white T-shirt and loose-fitting grey shorts, and low-cut Nikes. With every looping stride he took, the shorts flapped to unmask and define a pair of firm ass cheeks that were like magnets to Douglas' eyes. He felt a stirring in his loins.

He looked away and got serious with the weights for a few minutes to calm and compose himself.

Then he got up and walked slowly towards the dude, having decided that the first bit of strategic positioning necessary for an in-person attack involved him getting on the adjacent treadmill. But just as Douglas was stepping between

the two treadmills, he saw the dude hit the “stop” button on his machine, then do something really unexpected.

Without turning around, the dude stepped off the treadmill the split second it stopped. He literally fell right into Douglas' arms.

They exchanged “excuse mes” and Douglas picked up the dude’s headphones, which had fallen off. That gave him an excuse to say something, so he asked about the music.

“It’s a blend on YouTube that I love to work out to. Take a listen.”

Douglas put the headphones near his right ear and listened for ten seconds before handing them back to the dude.

They exchanged introductions, then stood staring at each other like two teenagers, full of raging hormones and awkwardness.

Then Devin explained that he had to get to a calisthenics class that was about to start. Douglas stared at him as he walked away.

“Well, Devin,” Douglas thought, *“At least now I know your name.”*

Douglas spent twenty minutes on the treadmill, then used a Peloton again for eight minutes, and was waiting near the aerobics room at 2:25 pm when he knew the class would be ending. He wasn't going to let his prey escape again. Anyway, there were enough vibes there that he knew the dude was also attracted to him.

He thought he detected a slight smile on Devin’s face as they approached each other. A broad smile lit his own face, and Devin’s face similarly opened up into an engaging smile.

"What's up, man? You stalking me?"

"Yes," he replied. They both laughed. "I hope I don't scare you by telling you I been trying to catch up with you for six weeks now."

"What?" Devin exclaimed.

"I saw you dancing at Bulldogs one Friday night all those weeks ago. And then I saw you leaving that funeral yesterday. You drive a maroon Kia Sportage with New York plates."

Devin grinned. "You sure you aren't some psycho or something? Maybe I should be calling the cops?"

Douglas laughed and gave him a little salute. "At your service. To protect and serve."

Devin stared at him. "You a cop?"

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you today?" There was a suggestive edge to his words.

It seemed any remaining nervousness in Devin had dissipated. He smiled a little mischievously. They stared at each other.

“Was it family?”

“What?”

“The funeral yesterday.”

“Oh. It wasn’t a funeral. It was a remembrance service. For my sister-in-law. I mean, my ex-sister-in-law.”

“Yeah?”

Devin laughed.

“Not ex because she’s dead. Ex because I’m divorced.”

There was a comfortableness with which they could look into each other’s eyes after only just meeting that had them both feeling a little weird but totally at ease.

"What you doing later?" Douglas asked.

"No plans as such. I'm sorta newly back in Atlanta. I been living in New York for a year and everything, including the people, seems to have changed."

"So, what about Xavier?"

"Who?"

"Xavier. The guy you were dancing with at Bulldogs," Douglas teased.

Kevin grinned sheepishly.

"Man, I didn't even remember that guy’s name."

Douglas smiled.

"Good," he said. "Unlike me, he's not worth remembering."

Devin laughed. "So, it's like that, uh?"

"Yeah," was the quick reply.

“So, what about the guy you were with? I saw him buying you drinks.”

It was Douglas’ turn to laugh.

“So, you did see me.”

“Of course, I saw you. You were staring at me like a psycho from then.”

Douglas laughed some more.

“That was Ralph with the drink. One of the guys I play pool with. The bartender thought he had ordered two drinks instead of one, and he decided to take both and give me one.”

There was a slight pause.

"Talking about drinks. I know a place where we could hang out and have a couple drinks later. Or maybe we could go to Bulldogs. What's your number, man?"

Devin recited his cell number. He stared at Douglas.

"You not gonna put it in your phone?" Devin asked.

Douglas saw Devin glancing at the outline in the left front pocket of Douglas' shorts.

"Oh, this is my pager,” said Douglas, pulling it out. “I left my phone in my gym bag. But don't worry, I'm not about to forget your number."

Douglas smiled and repeated Devin's number.

"Ok, Mr. Officer," said Devin. "And I guess that's your nightstick in the other pocket."

It was a corny joke, but Douglas felt himself blushing.

“It’s not officer, it’s detective,” he said, since he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

"Hey, I’m heading out soon, so later then?” said Devin.

"I'm probably gonna be here for another half an hour, and then I have some errands, but I'll text you later on where we can meet," Douglas said.

He was actually ready to leave as well. He didn't usually come to the gym on weekends. The only reason he was there was because, in a way, he had been hoping to see and meet Devin, and now he'd done that. But he didn't think he wanted to see Devin in the shower just at that moment. Or have Devin see him. Just the thought was threatening to turn his stick into a full-blown baton. He walked back over to the treadmills.

A naked man can't exactly hide his lust. And lust makes you vulnerable. And for all his bravado in approaching Devin, Douglas was feeling very vulnerable. He figured he'd wait about twenty minutes for Devin to exit the shower and clear the locker room, then maybe go get his slippers and use the steam room.

*****

Forty-five minutes later, Douglas walked out of the gym feeling a smidgen of annoyance with himself. He was amazed at how he was behaving towards Devin. He wasn't comfortable with the lack of control. He smiled at that thought. It's not that he wasn't controlling the situation. After all, he was the one pursuing Devin. But he felt a lack of control in terms of his feelings.

He'd never approached a male like that before.

"Fuck, I'm the one who is always fending off dudes chasing me."

Especially at the gym. The occasional furtive hookups with men that he had had, had come about after some dude approached him. He was seriously handsome to the eyes of both men and women. But there was also a casual manliness about him that was seemingly a big turn-on for some gay dudes. He realized that was part of what turned him on about Devin, too.

"A male essence," he smiled to himself.

He glanced at his watch as he got into his truck. If he left for the barber now, he'd be there half an hour before the time

Daryl told him to get there and Daryl wanted him to be there waiting for a bit, so it didn't look like he was bumping someone. That meant he might have quite a long wait. But he really had to get that haircut now, and he didn't want any more grief from Daryl.

Unless he got done within a reasonable time at Daryl's, he was going to miss getting his clothes back until next week. But he wasn't particularly worked up about the situation.

"The laundry could wait if it came to that."

He figured he would eat light today. But all he'd had for the day so far was a muffin and a glass of orange juice before he'd left for the gym. He went through the drive-through at Wendy's for a chicken burger, fries, and a drink that he put away on the drive to the barbershop.

*****

In the end, he did get to the dry cleaners two minutes before its 6 pm closing time. So, it was 6:20 pm when he finally got back to his building. Sam was now at the front desk. Douglas asked him for a 9 pm wake-up call. Then, as was his routine when he didn't have much to carry, he walked up the seven flights to his apartment.

As he took off his clothes, he remembered the encounter with Devin in the steam room. He had an instant hard-on. He intended to take a nap before going out. But he was so horny. And with Devin on his mind, his dick wouldn't go down.

He thought about jerking off. He needed something to move his mind from the gym thoughts, so he started thinking of the investigation ahead of him and what he was going to do as soon as he got to the station on Monday morning. Then he got up and got himself a shot of Jim Beam.

*****

A wake-up call woke him for the second time that day. Drowsily, he picked up the phone, said “Thank you” to Sam downstairs, and barely gave him time to finish saying “You’re welcome” before hanging up.

He climbed out of bed and was headed for the shower but stopped. He reached for his phone and texted Devin.

“Hey Devin, I was just thinking that maybe it doesn’t make sense for both of us to drive. I know I won’t be smoking or drinking much, so I’ll be the designated driver. Just text me your address.”

He saw he had a missed call from Jim and a voicemail message. He listened to it.

“Hey, Bud. Just saying hello. Link me when you can.”

He put down his phone and was heading for the bathroom when it pinged. He went back to look at the phone and saw that Devin had texted back.

“What’s that, detective. Are you insinuating that I smoke and drink, and drive?”

“We won’t have to worry about parking 2 cars.”

“That’s not really a problem if we get there before 11.”

Douglas’ response was emphatic.

“Text me your address.”

As he was jumping in the shower, he heard his phone ping again. He figured he knew what it was.

“Devin texting me his address.”

Douglas made a mental note.

“I’ll call Jim back once I get in the car.”

Chapter 3 - Summer - Ettie

Ettie jerked awake to the sound of a loud explosion. She raised up in alarm, pulling back the blanket, and started to swing her legs off the bed. More explosions sounded, but then their volume quickly decreased.

"Sorry," came a muffled shout.

Ettie sighed. Her mother had been primarily, solely her responsibility for two and a half months now, ever since Emma got ill. She glanced at the alarm clock as she slowly reclined back onto the bed. It showed 6:38 am. Her alarm was usually set to wake her at 6 am on those weekdays when she had to take her mother to the senior care center before going to work. She had been so glad when the summer holidays started. She only had to go in two mornings per week for lectures. For the most part, those were the days she used as well to monitor ongoing experiments. If she had to go in another day or two during the week, it wasn't in the morning.

But she turned off the clock radio alarm on weekends. She looked at the clock again. Now she frowned. Today was Saturday, but this was about the time she usually went downstairs to help her mother with breakfast.

"Ettie! Ettie! I need your help." Her mother was shouting now from the bottom of the stairs.

Ettie sighed some more.

"Yesterday had been such a long day," she thought. *"A long, hot summer day."*

She threw off the blanket, swung her legs off the bed, and, eyes still half closed, let her feet search for her slippers. Thursday, she had spent the whole evening and well into the night with Angie, helping with the setup for the repast, and hadn't gone to bed until well after 2 am. She hadn't realized the setting up would have taken so long. She barely got 3 hours of sleep before heading out for her 10 am Friday

morning lecture. Fortunately, Keith was home yesterday to stay with his grandmother.

She opened her eyes fully to attune them to the darkness of the room, then gave in and let them help her feet find her left slipper.

She got up slowly and walked towards her nightgown on the back of the bedroom door.

"I didn't get back for a nap before Emma's fun ... Emma's remembrance service, like I thought I would."

She didn't make it back home for a nap as she'd thought might have been possible, but she did make it through the day and evening fine, with the aid of a couple cups of coffee.

"But then, that drink."

She put her hand to her head for a second.

"Ettie," she said to herself, *"Next time, please remember you can't handle liquor."*

She wrapped herself in her nightgown and opened the door. She could hear light music coming from Keith's room. She had her hand on the banister to make sure she didn't fall as she started groggily down the stairs. It hit her that she'd left the bedroom door open. She was two steps down.

"I'm coming right back up," she thought.

The topper on yesterday was that just as she got home from the repast, she got a call from Susan, one of her grad students, who was working late on a research project and had an accident at the lab. Ettie went to assist her with the clean-up of the mess, and they tried to salvage as much as possible of the experiment they had been working on. But then, as they were about done, Susan started feeling so unwell, Ettie ended up taking her to General and didn't get home until after 1 am.

"This Saturday of all Saturdays, I deserve to sleep late."

Her mother was sitting at the large table in the kitchen. The TV on the wall across from the table and in front of Mrs. Remontle was showing an old John Wayne western. Last night, Ettie had left the TV off, but the cable box still on, on that

channel, because she knew her mother sometimes watched old westerns all day. The table was bare except for the cable and TV remotes, a food cover and her mother's pill box, which Ettie had laid out for her before going to help Susan. She raised the food cover to reveal a small plate with some breakfast biscuits and an apple Danish, and a small cup with water and a tea bag.

"Ma," she said. "Remember. You have something to eat here, and you were going to press the start button and warm the tea in the microwave for 90 seconds since it would be cold."

Her mother stared at her. "I'm sorry, Ettie. I was trying to change the channel. Can you help me?"

"Yesterday was Emma's remembrance service and repast, remember? And then I had to leave to go to my office. You were going to help yourself with breakfast so I could sleep late." She picked up the cup of tea to put it in the microwave.

"You mean the funeral?"

"We're calling it a remembrance or memorial service, Ma. Emma didn't want a funeral."

"Repasts are for funerals."

Ettie opened her mouth to reply, then thought better of it. The hum of the microwave drowned out the sound of the TV for the next minute and a half. She half expected her mother to complain, but instead her mother used the TV remote to increase the volume.

The microwave beeped, and she moved towards it and retrieved the cup of tea.

"What's the channel with that game show we were watching yesterday?"

"It wasn't yesterday, Ma. It was Thursday evening. And that game show is not on on weekends, or at this time of the morning."

Ettie opened the packet of breakfast biscuits and spread them on the small plate with the Danish.

Her mother picked up one of the biscuits and took a bite. “You know this one is not my favorite, right?”

“This is the one you told me to put out last night before I left to go check on Susan,” Ettie said firmly. “Here’s your green tea. Remember to take your pills once you finish eating. I’m going back to bed for another couple hours. Please don’t wake me unless it’s an emergency.”

“There must be a game show on somewhere?” Her mother held the cable remote towards her.

Ettie took it with a sigh. She picked up the TV remote and lowered the volume. Then she used the cable remote to bring up the channel guide. She started scrolling, trying to find something, and got lucky.

“A Family Feud marathon, Ma. That’s ok?

“Uh?”

Her mother was focused on the TV, so apparently that was ok to keep her occupied. But perhaps too much so.

“*I'd better stay to see her eat at least one of the biscuits and take her pills.”*

*****

It was about ten minutes later that Ettie made a tired walk back up the stairs to the master bedroom, where the door was still open. She entered and closed the door.

Clearly, her mother’s memory was fading somewhat. And the day when she might need round-the-clock supervision, instead of just a round-the-clock monitoring presence, might be fast approaching. But she was pretty sure now that this morning’s “inadvertent” TV wakeup call had been deliberate.

As Ettie was walking away after seeing her mother take her medication, her mother called out:

“Ettie, put it back on the channel with the western.”

“What channel, Ma?”

Ettie wasn't all that surprised when her mother blurted out the correct channel number. That was just the sort of thing the woman who was her mother would do.

"Go ahead and change it then, Ma. When you're ready."

It was then that she had turned and walked from the kitchen.

"Ma wasn't going to care about my sleep if she wanted me to come attend to her."

*****

Ettie slowly opened her eyes. Through the closed bedroom door, she could hear the muffled sound of gunshots. She figured her mother had switched back to the Encore channel that showed only Westerns.

"Didn't need my help for that change, did she?"

She got up, found her slippers, and walked to the bathroom, since she needed to pee.

"What is it with that woman?"

The first eighteen years of her life had been pure torture because of that woman. She was almost forty-one now. She had been in her late twenties when she came to forgive her mother. But it's easy to forgive from afar. She chuckled to herself.

"Emma, now it's you I'm going to have to try to forgive - for dying and leaving me saddled with Ma."

She looked at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands. Smooth, dark brown skin, small nose, full lips, brown eyes. She stood just 5' 6" tall, and with her slender figure and her head wrapped in a scarf, she looked almost child-like. She had always thought of herself as plain-looking in the sense of someone not unattractive, but nowhere near as beautiful as Angie. But as she grew older, she had come to appreciate the features of her youthful-looking face.

So did a lot of men, as she had come to realize, in recent years, even before she and Devin separated. Her face gave

her an innocent, girlish look, but unfortunately, she found that's how men seemed to want to treat her – like a child.

"And no way I'm gonna let that happen."

She had grown up in terms of her interactions with men. She was no longer the Ettie of her teen years. She thought of the three men she had dated in the past year plus. She and Angie had talked about them.

The first she felt was an abuser – they had a little fuss, and he grabbed and twisted her arm. She threatened to chop off his.

"And that was the end of that."

The second was a bossy prick.

"It was always his way or the highway, so I left him in his driveway."

She got out of his car, walked down the block, and called a taxi.

And the third, who lasted the longest, turned out to be an incurably insensitive, self-centered, 45-year-old frat boy. A wry smile crossed her face as she remembered the blanket incident.

She adjusted her head scarf. A chemical scalding caused her to lose hair-growing ability over much of her scalp, and she had been wearing wigs since her high school days. The product she was using on her hair was homemade by the person she bought it from, and he was a vendor with no insurance when she sued. However, she received a decent settlement from the insurer of the company that made and printed the label for the hair cream bottle.

Invoices discovered by her lawyer showed that it was the printing company's owner who had actually purchased the chemicals for the vendor, who was his brother. Her lawyer argued that the printing company had liability as its owner knew that the claims on the label were false and the actual ingredients were potentially dangerous.

She took off her nightgown, now, and crawled wearily back into bed. Tired though she was, she knew she was going to have difficulty falling back asleep. She glanced at the clock.

"Just eight-twenty on my Saturday," she thought. *"But then, Friday had been enough for a day and a half."*

She really was going to miss Emma.

"Gone too soon."

Their father was a merchant mariner and was home infrequently and never for any extended period. So, their mother had them mostly to herself. And with their mother, while Ettie, Emma, and Angie were the "three musketeers" at school, at home it was more like a story of two Cinderellas and one stepsister.

"Ahh. Well, maybe not quite two Cinderellas. I found my prince charming and escaped, but poor Emma never did."

The thing was, though, that when the children were growing up, their mother "pulled favorites."

"She treated Angie like a princess and Lionel like a prince, and me and Emma literally became servants to the court."

As the sisters got older and their sense of self-awareness developed, the unequal treatment at home began to gnaw at the "three musketeers" relationship.

For many years, Emma had been stuck with just doing most of the chores around the house. But then, when Emma was fourteen, Mr. Remontle's mother became an invalid because of diabetes and came to live with them. The additional room that was being added to the house, which was to have been Lionel's room, instead became their grandmother's room.

"And Emma's room."

It became Emma's primary responsibility to take care of their grandmother - cleaning her, feeding her, maintaining her. And all Emma's household chores - cleaning the bathroom, scrubbing the floors, dusting the furniture, washing the dishes - became Ettie's. Lionel, whose bedroom

was a small area sectioned off from what would have been a small dining room, was responsible for taking out the garbage and tending the chickens and goats they raised.

Angie shared a bedroom with Ettie and was supposed to help Ettie with the chores, but was under no pressure to do so and only occasionally did. Because she depended on Emma for protection when she started at prep school, and Emma was the leader of the "three musketeers," Angie did not try to essentially "lord it" over Emma at home. However, when Ettie came to think about it in later times, with respect to her, Angie during that period could sometimes be, to put it mildly, mean.

As it was, after the scarring incident, Ettie's harbored feelings of inferiority with respect to her younger sister spurred her to achieve in other ways, and she did well academically before and after her scholarship to attend college in the US. She bore no ill will towards Angie, however. She remembered what she'd told Angie many years later.

"My thinking is that us four were all just products of the upbringing we received from our mother."

Ettie thought of what their mother did for them about the house when they were growing up. She took care of their clothes – made them, washed them, ironed them. In another life, she would have made an excellent seamstress. They were all always well-dressed and presentable.

Their mother also maintained a large vegetable garden at the back of the house, and she did all the cooking, another thing she was really good at. Their meals were sumptuous, particularly on Sundays. Ettie, Angie, and Lionel were always finicky eaters. But, ironically, over the years that fine cooking contributed heavily to the waistline growth of both Mr. Remontle and Emma, which may have contributed to some of their later health problems.

A rueful look crossed Ettie's face. So strange that her mother never taught her daughters the two things she might have been best at doing - how to cook and how to sew.

"Two things which could have helped make us good wives and mothers."

When she reflected on it, she had had such a rough childhood.

"The amount of verbal abuse I endured from that woman."

Ettie was close in age to her "oh so pretty" younger sister, Angie, and subject to constant comparison, which left her feeling extremely wanting. The frequent putdowns and name-calling over her darker skin and thick hair, by her own mother, were particularly scarring.

That verbal abuse because of her looks probably contributed to her using the Jheri-curl-like product that caused the accident that added physical scars to her mental ones. For many years after she left Trinidad, not many people outside her social circle and immediate family knew that her head was essentially bald, and fewer had seen her badly scarred scalp.

It was as part of the settlement from the scarring incident that she was sponsored with a full scholarship to Peachtree College in Georgia, USA. And that is where she met Devin. By chance, he attended a course there that she took as an elective during her senior year.

"Devin Green." Ettie smiled.

She married a man whom she knew was gay because she liked him, she felt he liked her, the sex was great, and he was a gentleman to her.

"And most of all, it was an escape."

She didn't have to return to Trinidad and her former life after she finished college. Instead, she started teaching and eventually got her PhD in Chemistry. She was now a senior lecturer at Peachtree, assisting with various research projects, and on a fast track to gaining tenure. But now, it was a year and a couple of months since they had separated, and

a full six months since their divorce was finalized, and she was still encumbered by a "Devin" problem.

"I might be free of Devin physically, but my mind isn't yet Devin-free."

He was at the service yesterday. They had exchanged texts a few times the last couple months, but yesterday was the first time she was seeing him since Keith's high school graduation.

"He looked good," Ettie thought. When she first saw Devin, she remembered thinking that she was glad he hadn't brought Stephen. That's because she had also been thinking earlier that she would have liked to have had a man on her arm in front of Devin. She smiled to herself.

"The thought had crossed my mind at the time that maybe I should have waited another week or two before dropping Kevin."

She considered that.

"No. Maybe not."

Kevin's reaction after she told him what he slept through that night they spent in the cabin with the one blanket was enough for her to know she needed to step away immediately. If Kevin couldn't measure up to Devin on that, no way was he going to get Devin out of her head.

*****

Ettie turned and looked at the alarm clock. It showed 10:04 am.

"A nice extra hour, at least, of sleep," she thought.

She rolled over and stretched. She actually felt quite refreshed now. And she didn't have anything to do until about 2 pm when she had promised to go help Angie clean up from the repast. She listened for a few seconds and was comforted on hearing the sound of gunshots on the TV. She smiled.

"The comforting sound of gunshots."

That might not have been the right way to put it.

"But that station is still keeping Ma occupied," she thought.

She turned towards the night table and reached over to grab her BlackBerry. She tried to make sure her phone was in vibrate mode when she was sleeping. Now she saw a couple of text messages, including one from Susan saying thanks and that she was doing ok. Ettie texted back an acknowledgment. She replied *"ok"* in response to one from Keith saying he was headed out and would probably be back late. She noticed a "*Good morning*" greeting from Justin and texted back a greeting and a "*thanks again for the ride home last night*." Then she texted Angie to let her know she could come earlier, perhaps 1 pm. She put her BlackBerry back on the night table beside the clock.

Suddenly, the gunshots from the TV downstairs sounded louder, and with that, some of the events of yesterday came to her mind.

"Ahh. No more Emma."

The service yesterday had been a depressingly sad but hectic blur. Ettie got there early with her mother and Keith. She had been emailed an updated invoice by the funeral home, and it included some items that neither she nor Angie remembered authorizing. So, she arrived early as she needed to get clarification.

The funeral home's computer system was acting up, so she was in their office for a while. It turned out that Tizzie had ordered some extra flowers and requested a recording of the service. It was an extra $150, and she was pissed at the gall of Tizzie in making those arrangements without first talking to her or Angie, but it was too late to cancel.

Angie, dressed to kill as usual, barely got there before the start of the service. Then Tizzie was almost late, and Ettie couldn't figure out why she was acting so weird. She didn't sit with them, and Ettie saw her brush past Angie when Angie moved to comfort her after the reading she gave.

Later, after the service, Tizzie turned and walked away as Ettie approached her. And as Tizzie was leaving, Ettie saw her whisper something to Angie that appeared to startle Angie. That was something Ettie followed up on at the repast, when she had also wanted to talk to Angie about the extra charges Tizzie had incurred. But she got nowhere.

"I just can't shake the feeling that Angie's being evasive about something."

She wondered if Tizzie was upset because she and Angie had arranged the service, even though it was deliberately held at the funeral home rather than at a church.

"That couldn't be it since, after all, she ordered a video of the service." Ettie smiled wryly.

Emma was such a big part of why church wasn't featured much in her post-Trinidad life. She and Devin never really discussed going or not going to church. They just never went on any sort of regular basis.

"Christmas and Easter some years, and a few other special occasions, but otherwise mostly just weddings and funerals." She chuckled to herself.

She remembered discussing with Devin the incident that, perhaps unknowingly, shaped her church-going life. It was at her Uncle Marvin's funeral the summer before her junior year. She made the trip back to Trinidad, and she just missed seeing her dad. He'd been there but had to leave before the funeral to rejoin his ship. Emma had stayed home since Mrs. Remontle had effectively banned her from their church. But the pastor's family visited them after the service, and Tizzie behaved badly. Mrs. Remontle was constantly berating the 5-year-old girl for seemingly flirting with the pastor's son. And after the visitors left, Mrs. Remontle laced into Emma and her lack of parenting skills. Ettie remembered that at one point, Mrs. Remontle was scolding Emma about not sending Tizzie to Sunday school.

"That's a wild animal you growing. She needs to go to Sunday school. Take my word, you don't put some Christian in that child, you coming to regret it."

"Ma, if you are Christian, me and Tizzie can do without that religion," was Emma's growled response.

Ettie smiled. That response did shut up Mrs. Remontle.

"For a minute or two anyway."

But after hearing those words, for Ettie, church was never the same.

*****

Ettie stretched some more and debated whether to get up. It was 10:35 am. The TV was still going downstairs. She figured she had another hour before she had to get up for sure. She relaxed on the bed, and further thoughts of Emma and the events of yesterday came back to her mind.

Everybody liked Emma, and she really was going to be missed. Towards the end of the ceremony at the funeral home, Angie started sniffling some, and Ettie teared up as well as she comforted her. Ettie actually felt a twinge of guilt.

For the last year or so of her marriage, she had developed a tiny bit of resentment towards Emma, who seemed to grow closer to her husband as she and Devin drifted further apart. Emma and Devin would sometimes sit for hours on the patio, smoking weed, chatting, and listening to soft music. She smiled.

"What I really resented was that it seems she had developed a connection with Devin, a different but similar connection to the one I used to have with him."

She thought about her feelings at the time.

"It was probably a little more like a bit of jealousy than resentment."

She knew why.

"It seemed like Emma had supplanted me in the affections of the two adult men I'd most cared for – my father and now my husband."

But she liked and trusted Emma too much for any negative feelings towards her to be major. They remained close.

"And then, Pa died, Devin moved out, and Emma got sick."

Emma's body was going to be cremated, so yesterday, once the service was over, close family and friends migrated to Angie's house for the repast.

"At least they did once they were able to get out of the parking lot of the funeral parlor."

The street in front of the funeral home was closed for some time, with the police investigating a shooting incident a couple of houses up the road.

Ettie remembered how she felt when she heard that someone had died. She thought it so unlucky – dying just outside a funeral home during a service for someone already dead.

"My own bad luck – having my car stuck because of the crime scene – is no comparison."

She and Lionel, and their mother, left with Angie for the repast, while Keith decided to wait and come with his father. She thought about leaving her keys with Keith, but she didn't want him driving her car again just yet. She remembered part of her conversation with him.

"And we can get a ride back for my car later from Mrs. Mason and her son, since they live only a mile or so from the funeral parlor."

At the repast, Ettie wasn't at all surprised that Tizzie and her boyfriend, Tim, didn't show up. In fact, Ettie was actually somewhat relieved. She wasn't that close with Tizzie, who, even outside of something upsetting, such as a memorial

service for her mother, always seemed to have an angry scowl on her face and habitually snapped at people.

"And Angie and I are never going to get back that $150 from her."

At the funeral home, Tizzie seemed to have been deliberately keeping her distance even before she walked away the time Ettie approached her. Ettie had been puzzled by the scornful look Tizzie always seemed to have on her face whenever they made eye contact. In the end, the unfortunate irony of the situation was that, with the daughter of the deceased being absent, the whole atmosphere at the repast just seemed lighter.

Ettie remembered looking around and finding the place almost cheerful.

"A real celebration of Emma's life and a little happiness to end the Friday."

Lionel was in charge of the music and was playing some old school calypso and reggae that Emma liked. There was light chatter and small laughs, and everything seemed fine.

"Except, Emma was gone."

Yesterday, Ettie was helping Angie serve the food, but would stop to answer the door for people as they came in, including those such as Devin and Mrs. Mason, who had been stuck in the funeral home parking lot.

When the initial surge of people had slowed to where Angie could manage the food serving by herself, Ettie walked over to the drinks table and poured herself a glass of ginger ale. She remembered turning around and almost bumping into Devin.

"Ettie, I just want to assure you it wasn't my fault with Angie. And nothing happened."

*****

As she lay there in bed, Ettie remembered the comment distinctly.

"And just like with Angie, Devin was definitely evasive when I tried to follow up."

She wondered if there was something in the letter Mrs. Mason gave her. She had to collect it from her mother when she went downstairs.

"Don't know how I forgot last night."

If there was nothing in the letter, that would be another thing apart from Tizzie that she would have to ask Angie about later.

"She might know, but this is all so weird. Devin and Angie?" Ettie thought.

She didn't think there was anything Angie kept from her. And she didn't think there was anything she couldn't get out of Devin.

But last night, Devin wouldn't give her a straight answer initially, and then the testimonials started, and she got distracted. Later, as she approached him to follow up, he diverted the conversation.

"Devin, what was that about Angie earlier?"

"So where is Paley?"

Ettie frowned. "Devin, don't say that. His name is Kevin. He's Jamaican anyhow."

"Yeah. But he's white. And he's the one who said that's what all his friends call him."

"OK, so you're his friend now?"

"I have to be friends with all my ex-wife's boyfriends. Makes for a better post-divorce relationship."

"Listen, who said I want any post-divorce relationship with you? Next thing you'll be trying to steal my boyfriend."

Devin laughed.

"You know you can't get over me, Ettie. We might be divorced, but it's still 'til death do us part.' And anyway, if Kevin is the type of man you gonna be dating, then don't worry,

definitely no poaching from me. I don't know what you see in him."

Ettie smiled. "Well, you'll be pleased to hear I'm not seeing him anymore."

"Good. You came to your senses in time."

"It was more like irreconcilable differences. Like with you and me."

The smile left Devin's face. "You and I were together for 20 years, Ettie. Half our lives."

They stared at each other. Devin broke eyes, and the ice.

"So, who's that sexy dude over there beside Mrs. Mason?"

Ettie laughed.

"You just behave yourself. That's Justin. He's Mrs. Mason's son. We know them from Trinidad. I didn't know you knew her."

"I met her earlier after the service."

"She's Emma's godmother. And she's one of the women Emma was caring for the last year or so. And Justin, the last time I saw him, he was probably about ten. From what Angie said, he's in the army, so he's probably just visiting to see his mom."

"The army? I guess that's how he got all those muscles."

Ettie sipped her ginger ale. "Yeah, I guess. I have to admit you're right. He's one sexy dude now."

"Sexy dude? Who you talking Miss Ettie?"

Ettie gave a startled gasp. She spilled a little of her drink as she almost choked. Justin had walked over to where she and Devin were standing.

Devin grinned. "Actually, we were talking abou …."

He didn't finish because Ettie bumped into him and spilt a little more of her drink on his arm. She gave him a withering look. He grinned harder.

"Excuse me for a minute," Devin said. "I have to go get a paper towel."

Ettie smiled at Justin. “Just someone my ex-husband and I were talking about. How are you doing? I’m glad you and your mom could make it.”

“I’m fine, Miss Ettie. So sorry to hear about Miss Emma, though. It’s like in Trinidad she was my mom’s goddaughter, but here she became like my mom’s best friend.”

“Just Ettie is fine, Justin. You make me feel so old with the Miss.”

Justin laughed. “Force of habit, I guess. From Trinidad days. But you far from old. You look as young as me.”

Ettie blushed. “Well, thank you, young man.”

“My mom wanted to talk to you. She asked me to come call you.”

Devin was coming back with a paper towel to dry the floor. She gestured to him that she was going over to Justin’s mother.

“Hi, Mrs. Mason. Thanks for coming,” Ettie said as she greeted Justin’s mom.

“Nice to see you, Ettie, unfortunate though the circumstances may be. But I had to come to pay my respects to Emma. But also, she asked me to get this to you if anything happened to her.”

She reached into her purse and handed Ettie a small, white envelope that swelled somewhat from the sheets of paper folded within its limiting confines.

“Thank you, Mrs. Mason.” She stared curiously at the envelope. It was Emma’s handwriting all right, and it was addressed to her.

“Emma actually asked me to stamp and mail it, and I’d have done so, but somehow forgot your letter when I was going to the post office. Then I figured I’d just wait and give it to you at the service.”

“Well, thanks again.”

“Mrs. Davis sends her apologies. She wasn’t feeling well, so we dropped her home.”

"That's ok. Thank you again for coming. In fact, though, I'd like to ask, do you think you would be able to give me and Keith, and my Ma, a ride back to our car at the funeral home?"

"Certainly, my dear," said Mrs. Mason.

"For sure," said Justin.

"Oh, thanks so much," said Ettie.

"Justin, can you get me a plate for Mrs. Davis?"

"Sure, Mom. Let me go get that. And fresh drinks too."

"He's out of the service now, you know," said Mrs. Mason.

"Really?" Ettie was surprised.

"Twelve years he's been in the Air Force. Ever since he came to America. He's working at the airport now and staying with me."

"Air Force? I always thought it was the Army. But it's nice that you have him back home."

"Yes, but I'm really going to miss Miss Emma's company. This new lady that comes in where I go now, I can't take her. All up in my business and everything. I'm going to have to ask the service to assign someone else to me or I go someplace else."

"You just talk to them, Mrs. Mason. I'm sure they'll accommodate you."

"Right, they better do. All that money they getting to take care of us old folk."

Ettie stood listening as Mrs. Mason talked for a while until Justin came back with a covered plate of food in a plastic bag and three drinks on a tray. She didn't refuse when Justin gave her one of the drinks after giving one to his mother. She sipped the drink and listened to Mrs. Mason for a few more minutes until she was able to excuse herself.

The drink was getting to her a bit. She looked at the glass.

"Nothing more for me after this."

Her handbag was upstairs in Angie's bedroom, so she walked over to where her mother was sitting.

"Ma, keep this in your handbag for me, please."

"What is it?"

"Some papers. Just keep them for me until later."

By then, it was well after 7 pm, and people were beginning to leave. A few had been on their way home from work and had just stopped by for a short while to pay their respects. Ettie moved around, thanking folks for coming and taking the occasional sip from the drink still in her hand. One of her favorite melodies, Bob Marley's 'Waiting in Vain,' was on, and she turned towards Lionel, who had been manning the turntable. He was standing behind his equipment, an almost empty glass in hand, staring across the room with a peculiar look on his face. Ettie followed his gaze. He was looking at Devin. She looked back at Lionel.

"The look on his face seemed one of … desire?" Ettie was puzzled.

She looked back at Devin. He suddenly looked up and met her eyes.

He smiled and walked over.

"Wow, Ettie," he chuckled. "That look on your face. You look like you've never seen me before. Does that mean we still have a chance? You seeing me in a new light or something?"

"This is not a joking matter, Devin." She looked over at Lionel. Devin looked too. Lionel was staring at them, a frown on his face now.

Devin turned back towards Ettie. They stared at each other.

"I know," she said. For some reason, she and Devin had never discussed the fact that her brother was gay.

"You know? You know your brother is gay? Everybody knows. It's not as if he's trying to hide it."

"Why is he staring at you like that?"

"He's staring at us. Or at least he was."

"No, earlier he was staring just at you."

"Well, you know he's gay, but I bet you didn't know he once tried to seduce me."

"Seduce you? What do you mean?"

"A long time ago. Almost fifteen years. It was the time I was in Trinidad for your grandmother's funeral. You women left me in the house by myself, and I fell asleep on the bunkbed in Emma's room. Next thing I know, I was suddenly awake and he's on my dick."

"Uh?" Her quizzical look caused Devin to chuckle.

"No. Not that," he said. "He … he wanted to have sex with me."

"Lionel?"

"Yes. Lionel. I had to tell him messing with family is off my books. All you doing is asking for trouble."

"You said that?"

"Yeah. Why you looking at me like that?"

"Well, I thought you would have been saying, 'I'm with someone.' Weren't you seeing, who was it, Tony, at that time?"

Devin stared at her.

"Ouch," he said. "That hurt."

"The pain will do you good."

"Well, that means you were very pleased when I stopped seeing him."

"I knew that would come to nothing. I never had any worries about you until Nigel came along."

They stared at each other.

"And then came Stephen," Devin said softly.

"And then came Stephen," Ettie repeated.

They stared at each other some more.

"Well, you'll be pleased to hear that Stephen and I broke up. From last year, actually."

Ettie laughed.

"What's so funny?" Devin asked with a frown.

"I guess it's my turn to ask, 'whatever did you see in him' but I'm keeping my mouth shut."

"Touché, Mrs. Green."

"It's Ms. Remontle to you now."

They both laughed.

"So, what were you saying before about Angie?"

"It's nothing, Ettie. Just a misunderstanding on my part. But thanks, though, with Charles. He and I are talking again."

Ettie stretched in bed and smiled now as she remembered. She'd done a good deed last Christmas.

"I got Devin and Charles re-connected."

*****

After the repast, Justin and his mom had given her, her mother and Keith a ride back to the funeral home to retrieve her car. They had exchanged numbers because she was to give him some information about the senior care place where she now took her own mother. Justin had made an impression on her.

"Such a gentleman."

She caught herself.

"Devin again."

Devin came into her life at just the right time. Their meeting was so coincidental. It was at the start of her senior year at Peachtree College. Based on a specific, post-graduate ambition, she had decided to take a particular management course as an elective. A chemistry major classmate of hers was taking the same course because her boyfriend was also taking it as part of a certification requirement for his job. As it was, as she and her classmate, Beverly, walked to the first class, they ran into Beverly's boyfriend, Arthur, who was walking with a colleague, Devin.

And so it began. The four of them ended up double-dating a couple times, but soon she and Devin were making it just a two-sum.

Ettie sighed as a couple of the affairs of her early dating life came to her mind. When she got to college, she'd tried not

to let what had happened in high school stunt her. But even now, it pained her to remember that boy's name.

"But at Peachtree College I was in a new school, in a new environment, in a new country."

So, a couple of months into her freshman year, she went for a new boy, too. She actually started dating again. And once again, she was in love.

"Dumb, dumb, me for dating a senior."

David was the new boy's name, and yes, he was a senior.

"But I was so happy for those few months."

Then soon she and David were both occupied with final exams, and he was scarce, and then he went to be a summer camp counselor, and he was scarce, and then he left for Oregon State, and then he never once called.

After that, for the next year, Ettie just concentrated on her college work. She did well. The summer before her junior year, she had interned with Piedvally Chemicals. They brought her back the summer before her senior year and indicated that she could have a job with them after she graduated. They would even sponsor her for her green card. It was almost a certainty that she would get through with them, but she would have to return to Trinidad while her application was pending. And she wasn't quite sure she wanted to work for a chemical company. But then she met Devin, and her life took a completely different and exciting turn.

Ettie turned in bed and looked at the clock. It was 11:30. Her stomach was hinting that it might soon be begging for food. She got up and went to the bathroom to freshen up a bit before going downstairs. As she closed her own bedroom door, she realized there was no sound coming from Keith's room.

"I guess he went out already," she surmised. The room was definitely all his again when he was home.

As she got down the stairs, her BlackBerry pinged. She looked at it and smiled. A message from Justin inviting her out

later. She responded that she was stuck at home with her mother. Angie hadn't responded yet.

The TV was still on, but the door from the kitchen to the guest room where her mother stayed was closed. She had remembered the letter from Emma, and she was thinking again that there might be something in it about what Devin was talking about. As soon as her mother woke again, she'd get the letter from her.

"Just like Ma to go back into her room to rest and leave the TV on in the kitchen."

She switched to the HGTV channel, and an ad was on with a tune that reminded her of Kevin. Ettie missed him a little bit. But only just a little bit. She wondered for a second whether Kevin missed her. But then she realized something.

"I don't care."

Kevin was the first man she had been so intimate with since Devin, and it had been fun while it lasted, which was almost ten months. But it had been over a month now since they broke up, and she knew there was no going back. And she knew why.

"Because I told him a story about love that simply went over his head."

She set some coffee brewing and went about fixing herself a slice of ham, two eggs fried over medium, two slices of toast, and two Eggo waffles. She figured she wouldn't disturb her mother just yet, but she planned to scramble an egg and leave it with a slice of ham and one of the waffles under the plate cover her mother used.

She looked at the heap on her own plate as she sat down. She and Devin used to indulge themselves on weekends when they had more time to prepare and eat breakfast. That's also when she, especially, would sometimes have coffee instead of the usual tea.

"Guess I've kept to the tradition."

It was late morning, and this was brunch to serve her until dinner time, so a little indulging shouldn't be a problem. But

because of having to essentially babysit her mother since Emma's illness, she had not been as active as before in the evenings and on weekends. For instance, she was not going out on Saturdays as regularly as before to play tennis at the park or to do a little hiking. As a result, she'd actually put on a couple of pounds, but they seemed to have cooperatively somehow ended up on her butt. That was fine for now, but she told herself she might soon have to start being more cognizant of what and when she ate.

"Still have to watch this figure," she thought. *"I don't have a new man yet."*

For now, though, she grabbed a fork and attacked the plate. She was hungry.

Another ping came from her BlackBerry, and she saw it was from Angie. She stopped eating to read the message. Angie said she had started early and done some of the cleaning and was going to have her maid service do the rest on Monday. There was no need for Ettie to trek over by her three evenings in a row. They could talk later.

Ettie texted "*Ok, Angie*" and went back to eating. She sighed. She had wanted to talk to Angie in person. She liked the rapport they had had Thursday night while they were setting up for the repast. Angie had told her about her plans for Friday morning, something she had been working on before Emma died.

"That poor guy doesn't have a chance," laughed Ettie after hearing Angie's seduction plan.

"Poor guy?" Angie scoffed. "He'll be all the richer for having experienced me."

"Angie, the stalker! That's what I'm going to start calling you."

"You know, the first time I saw him I …" Angie stopped.

"You what?" asked Ettie.

"I dunno. It was sorta weird."

"Weird how? Weird like scary or weird like a chance of passing your bed test."

"You know no man is passing my bed test."

"Never?"

"Ettie, in the first place, no man is coming in my bedroom unless he's there to fix something. That's like a repairman or something, and that would mean there's no test for him to pass."

"Angie, how can you have a test for a man that no man can pass?"

"Who says I want a man to pass it?"

"But, Angie ..."

"Ettie, between my three rings and my occasional ... hemm ... dalliance, I have all the man I need."

"Dalliance?" They both cracked up.

Ettie smiled now at that memory. But then it made her think of another. She remembered when she had told Angie she was going to break up with Kevin. Angie wasn't surprised.

"You finally see what I've been telling you?" That's what Angie said to her.

"I guess. In the end, he didn't measure up," said Ettie.

"Measure up? I thought you said ..."

"No, not that," Ettie laughed. "He didn't pass my test."

"What do you mean? You have a test too?"

"Well, sort of. I think now I do."

"So, what is it?"

"It's my blanket test."

"Your blanket test?"

"Ok. Let me tell you the full story. Remember the Saturday before Mother's Day? Me and Kevin, we went to a little party one of his friends had up in Stone Mountain. I told you how he got drunk and high and sick, and we ended up sleeping on the couch 'til early the next morning?"

"Yeah. You spent the entire night there."

"Yes. I hadn't driven a stick shift in a while. Even though it was a full moon, I didn't want to risk driving Kevin's Escape

down those narrow, curvy roads on a damp night. But it was a very chilly night up there in those hills."

She told Angie the blanket story, but Angie didn't see any point to it.

"So?" An inquiring look was on Angie's face.

"Well, the Sunday morning, he was all 'bright-eyed and bushy-tailed' and raring to go. I was achy everywhere, felt like I was falling asleep on my feet, and felt stuffy like I was coming down with a cold. He wanted to stay for brunch; I didn't feel like eating. It was Mother's Day, and I just wanted to get home and into my bed. So, he relented and drove me home. I don't usually sleep when driving, but I was very tired and sleepy, then took a Tylenol, and I was knocked out and slept most of the way home, and then drank soup and mostly stayed in bed the whole day. It was three days before I was feeling fully recovered."

"Ok, and …"

"So, in early June, he started talking about going back up there for the July 4th weekend. I told him I didn't want to go because he was sure to get drunk and high again and end up feeling sick, and I didn't want to have to drive and maybe get lost in the dark. He said he wouldn't get so drunk and high that he couldn't drive, and he wouldn't mind if I slept all the way going and coming instead of keeping him company. That pissed me off, so for the first time, I shared with him the full story of that night and how, as a result, I spent Mother's Day in bed. There was no thank you or acknowledgment from him. In fact, you know what he said? He said, "*The temperature at night up there now is in the high seventies - there is no way you could get sick*." I looked at his face to see if he was joking and realized he meant it."

Even now, the memory caused Ettie's eyes to water.

"Angie, in that moment, I knew that man didn't have the love for me that I had for him. And I was not going to fall into the trap again of loving someone who didn't love me back the same way."

Angie put down some napkins she was holding and hugged her.

"I feel you, Ettie," she said.

"So, you see, Angie, my blanket test is a very simple test. It's what a man says when I tell him the blanket story."

As she and Angie embraced, Ettie brushed away the sadness of the moment with a laugh.

"Perhaps if Kevin knew the extreme torture it is for me to sleep with my feet exposed …" Ettie trailed off as Angie smiled and comforted her.

Ettie sipped the last bit of her coffee and got up to pour some more, the wry smile from the memory slowly leaving her face. It was something she shared with Devin. An intense dislike of the cold.

"Ahh, Devin. A man who would have passed my blanket test."

She laughed out loud as a questioning thought crossed her mind.

"I wonder if I got with Kevin because his name was so much like Devin?"

Ettie knew why she took to Devin. For one thing, he rescued her from a terrible place, mentally and physically. But he was also so kind and attentive and considerate and fun to hang with, she actually fell for him. They went to movies and clubs and dances and parties, and a couple of times she slept by his apartment, and a couple times, when he dropped her home very late, she let him stay in her dorm room for the night.

After Carl and David, he made her feel whole again. At least for a semester. And then just like Carl and David, he broke her heart.

Ettie remembered it was close to the end of that senior year's first semester, and the second Saturday night that she ended up sleeping by Devin after they had been out partying late. She told him she didn't want to go in so late and disturb

her roommate, who probably had company anyway. But she really just wanted an excuse to get in bed with him again.

However, as had happened the last couple of occasions where they had ended up in bed together, they cuddled, and kissed, and caressed, and she played with his extremely stiff dick through his underwear, but when she tried to pull it out, he stopped her.

"Dev, don't worry. I have a condom," is what she remembered saying. And he remained still and silent for a while, and then, without looking at her, he told her. He thought he was gay, he didn't want to take their relationship past friendship because he felt like he would be deceiving her, and he knew that for her, having sex would be taking it past friendship.

Ettie remembered how devastated she felt. She got up and dressed, and he did likewise, and he took her back to her dorm without them saying a word to each other. In fact, it would be months later before they spoke again.

"I'm snake-bit when it comes to men," was all that kept going through her mind that lonely December.

Early in the new year, she heard through Beverly that, with the course done, the company Arthur and Devin worked for had sent them to Texas. She didn't really care. But as the season changed and the days grew warmer, she continued feeling extremely depressed. She began to worry some about how she might do on her exams with the stress of a snake-bit love life hanging over her. And she figured she might never date another man in her life. Mid-semester, through student affairs, she signed up for mental health counselling.

But it was during one of the counseling sessions that the counsellor said something that made her stop and reconsider her feelings towards Devin.

After the counsellor wrung from Ettie the issue of how Devin had devastated her by telling her he was gay, the counselor made a strange statement.

"Well, gay or not, he must really, really like you."

"What?" Ettie was puzzled.

"Well, I'm from the West Indies too," said the counsellor. "For a West Indian man to tell you, a West Indian woman, that he's gay, when you know so many of the people he knows, that's a lot of trust. You could really, really ruin his life."

"I'm not going to do that."

"Yes. But you could. You yourself said he said he wanted to be honest with you and not want to, in effect, literally take you under false pretenses. So, he was thinking of you. Of your interests. That means he likes you."

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The brunch had done its job. Ettie felt full. She looked at her empty plate. She smiled as a thought of her mother came to her mind. When they were young, she and her siblings could not leave the table until every morsel of food was off their plates. She and Angie used to stuff food items in a small plastic bag they pinned to the waistband of their panties, like they saw in a show.

She fixed up a plate with the scrambled egg and ham for her mother. Then she went about doing the dishes and tidying the kitchen for a bit. She looked towards the guest bedroom door. She went and knocked.

"Ma!"

She opened the door. Nobody. She stepped into the room and walked to the half bath. Her mother wasn't there. She stood for a couple of seconds. She knew her mother wasn't in the bathroom between the bedroom and the computer room because that door had been open.

"It's rare that Ma goes down to the basement, but that must be where she is."

As she was leaving the bedroom, something caught her eye. An envelope on the dresser table. Emma's letter to her.

As she picked it up, she realized it was no longer sealed. She took out the letter.

"Dear Ettie,

If you are reading this letter, it's because I'm gone. I'm so sorry things had to go this way, and I'm sorry I'm not brave enough to tell you all this face-to-face. I want to ask you, like I'm asking Angie and Devin, please look out for Tizzie for me. I know she's stubborn and difficult, but she doesn't deserve the life she's had, and you know she's not the brightest sometimes. But it's not all her fault, and she's had a rough life like me. But the birth certificate Pa gave me should really help her.

I don't want any funeral. You know how I feel about churches, and that hasn't changed just because I'm dead. (There's a joke there … laugh. I won't mind.)

It will be just you and Angie now. The Three Musketeers no more. I'm hoping you find a man to replace Devin in your life. You two are such nice people, it's a pity it didn't work out. I hope Angie can find a man, too, other than somebody else's man. LOL. That's a joke. You know Angie has a problem with men. She's scornful of them and obsessed with them at the same time. But since I've been in the US, I've noticed a change in her, and she doesn't seem to be the same person she was back home. She seems to have a genuine love for you now. Believe me, she'd kill to protect you.

I'm going to ask Mrs. Mason to give you this letter if I'm gone. That weed you gave me will probably kill me. But there are some serious things about this family that you need to know for your own good.

For one thing, the person you really, really have to be careful about is that woman who is"

Ettie turned the page over, but it was blank.

"That woman," she thought. She knew she shouldn't have asked her mother to hold the letter. She had meant to get it back as soon as the repast was over, but forgot, and then Susan called just as she got home, and she didn't remember until this morning.

As Ettie headed out of the room to check the basement, the front doorbell rang.

Ettie walked to the door and opened it. Standing on the porch on the other side of the screen door were her neighbor, George, and her mother, who was still in her nightgown and slippers.

Ettie's mouth opened in shock.

Chapter 4 - Summer - Devin

Devin woke up slowly.

The summer morning sunlight was trying its hardest to get past the shades. The central air had come on, and he was under just the sheet, and he felt a slight chill. He was naked except for socks and a nightcap that he'd fashioned from one leg of an old pair of nylon long johns. He pulled the blanket across the sheet and snuggled his pillow.

But then, reluctantly, he turned and looked at the alarm clock. It said 7:19 am. He groaned. He really didn't want to get up.

This week, he had been back in New York on a business trip and normally would have stayed the weekend. But he came back Friday morning for Emma's memorial service, so now he was stuck. He smiled.

"Why you thinking stuck?" he thought.

Saturday was regularly his apartment cleaning day, and his place definitely needed some tidying up since he hadn't done it last Saturday. He had left early for his trip so he could attend Stephen's birthday party the Saturday night.

"I'm back here now in my dirty apartment on my apartment cleaning day. No excuse."

His dick was hard. He rubbed his hand along its length, slowly, from the base to the head, a couple of times.

"Guess I'm due for a cum," he thought.

If he went more than four or five days without ejaculating, he would start waking up with a hard-on. And, until he got some release, the slightest sexual thought would make him start getting hard. He stretched and luxuriated on the bed a bit. He thought of jerking off, but then he stopped himself.

"Ahh," he thought, letting go of his dick. *"I do this now, and I'll probably just want to roll over and sleep some more."*

But that was exactly what he felt like doing today.

"Stay in bed, sleep, do nothing."

Yesterday was such a long day.

"And today is my regular 'clean my apartment' day when I always think of Emma."

The hint of a smile showed on his face.

"A double whammy day, this Saturday."

It really wasn't funny.

"Ahh…no more Emma."

He got up.

Devin looked at himself in the dresser mirror. He stood 5' 10" tall, slender of build, with brown eyes, smooth, dark brown skin, fade cut, a thin moustache, and a short, thick stubble of a beard. He was now just past forty-two, but he could easily pass for someone in their late twenties or early thirties. He smiled.

"Not bad. I'd definitely date you," he said to his reflection. *"But a little more gym work for some definition wouldn't hurt."*

A wryness twinged his smile.

"Ahh. Such good looks and poise on the outside but on the inside, nothing but turbulence." He smiled some more.

"Or should I say turmoil. Or torment." He was grinning.

He stretched. He put on the boxers and T-shirt he was wearing after he showered last night. He had decided to fry a couple of eggs and figured he didn't want to get burned in any sensitive area.

"First, let me put these sheets in the washer," he thought.

And, again, his mind returned to Emma.

Once, as they sat smoking on the patio at his and Ettie's place in Norcross, she had told him some about the difficult "upbringing" she had experienced. He marveled when she used that word.

"Upbringing? How can a parent treating a child like a house slave be called upbringing?" He wasn't smiling.

The thought of Emma doing endless household chores always came to Devin's mind whenever he was cleaning his

own place. But this Saturday was not only his chores day, it was also the day after Emma's memorial service.

"No more Emma." He sighed again.

He had taken to her right away. They had smoked together and struck up a rapport when he was in Trinidad for his and Ettie's wedding. The next time they smoked together was late that first night, a Friday, when he was back in Trinidad for the funeral of Mr. Remontle's mother.

He smiled some as he remembered how that night, he definitely needed something to calm his nerves. And when, over the weekend, the problem with Lionel ballooned, that Sunday evening, he went to see Emma and told her everything. He didn't know how she did it, but the problem with the spoiled brat Lionel went away.

"I'm forever grateful, even though Ettie and I aren't married anymore."

He put detergent and softener in the washing machine and got it going, and moved towards the kitchen.

Yesterday had also been a strange day.

"Maybe it was me and my complexes that made it a strange day," he chuckled. *"I'm probably the definition of a complex man."*

He contemplated the thought for a minute.

"My sexuality sure is complex."

He dwelt on that for another few seconds.

"Fuck. My whole life is complex."

He smiled.

"Yeah, no doubt I'm a complex man."

He got two eggs from the fridge and laid them on the counter, then took a medium-sized frying pan from the cupboard and put it on the stove. The tomato he had in the fridge was spoiled, but he had already made up his mind. Instead of frying, he would scramble the eggs with chopped up scallions, onions, and green pepper.

"Plus, my favorite spice mix."

It was a ginger-garlic-pimento mix that he liked.

His thought returned to Emma as he went about gathering some of the items he'd need to start cooking.

"Ahh, Emma."

He used to wonder sometimes whether she was gay.

"For sure, in another life," he thought.

She knew about him, and it didn't faze her.

"Talking about "in another life," I wonder what mine would have been if I weren't gay?"

His mind drifted back in time as he went about chopping up the onion, scallion, and green pepper that he'd need. He decided to add a small piece of chopped-up hot pepper.

Since his early teens, he had found himself attracted to males. He'd often speculated, in the past, on whether it had to do with his upbringing. He was the middle child of three, with one sister just under a year older, and another two and a half years younger. His family moved from the capital, Port of Spain, to Todds Road, a rural part of Trinidad, not long after his younger sister was born.

Their house was a bit isolated, and there were no children in the nearest households. He had playmates at school only, and otherwise, the only male figure in his early life was his father. But, because his parents didn't get along, his father was absent from home a lot as he approached adolescence. There were no uncles, or aunts for that matter: His father's two elder siblings had drowned in a boating accident when they were kids, and his mother's siblings and their families were all in the United States or her homeland of Grenada.

He remembered that one glorious summer, when he was ten years old, that he, his mother, and his sisters, spent at their mother's childhood home. It turned out he had five cousins in Grenada, two of whom were boys ages eleven and twelve. It was two fun-filled weeks of football, swimming, racing on the beach, lazing around, teasing the girls, making mischief, and enjoying themselves.

“Ahh … what a summer!” A happy smile crossed his face at the memory.

He cracked the eggs into a large cup and began beating them with pinches of salt, pepper, and the spice mix that he liked, added.

Back home, in his preteen years, between his mother, his sisters, and his teachers, he was surrounded by women. For so many years, he remembered longing for a brother. So even though the established theory is that "you're born that way," he used to always wonder whether the strong wish to have a brother was what caused him to eventually develop a desire for males in general.

These days, he didn’t dwell on the issue. Perhaps his wish for a brother or male playmate was really more just an early manifestation of his desire for males. But at this stage, it didn’t matter. He was just him, and he was comfortable with himself and being gay. If there was one slight, ever so slight regret he had about being gay, it might be that it made him incapable of making Ettie truly happy. But their parting was for the best. And they were still friends.

He turned on the stove, put a little Olive oil in the frying pan, and started cooking the ingredients as he went about preparing his version of scrambled eggs.

Devin remembered how his feelings of isolation increased after the death of his father, just as he entered his teens. His father died in an office fire that spread and trapped him after some folks ran out of the building, leaving a critical door open. His mother took him and his two sisters to rent from a cousin of hers who owned a large house in Port of Spain. The cousin was an elderly woman whom the children called Aunt Beth and who became like a grandmother to them. Earlier that year, Aunt Beth’s husband had passed away. Then the helper, who had been with Aunt Beth and her

husband for many years, immigrated to the United States after her daughter filed for her. So, Aunt Beth was living by herself and welcomed them to her nice, spacious 4-bedroom house in St Ann, a hilly, upscale suburb of Port of Spain that was still within walking distance of Queens Park Savannah and downtown. Apart from his loneliness and longings, he had a comfortable life.

He left the stove and stood for a minute, peering into a cupboard at his collection of herbal teas, trying to decide which one to drink this Saturday. He settled on ginger mint. He put a tea bag in his favorite cup, poured some water on it, and placed it in the microwave for ninety seconds. He stood there thinking about his first same-sex desires.

"It probably was when my longing for a brother evolved into a longing for just a male friend or companion."

He actually knew well the circumstances and how and when it occurred. He had been a very avid reader from an early age. As he entered his teen years, his interests in historical, science fiction, and fantasy books coagulated into a fascination with the evolution of man on the Earth, and possible past or future space travel from or to distant worlds. As he read certain books, his mind would often drift to vivid pictures of himself as a protagonist or an antagonist in the adventures of the stories. But he always had a true friend. A confidant. A companion to spend time with on long space travels. Someone with whom to share and do things. And then that companion became always the same person - a boy in another class but in his same year at QRC High School in Port of Spain.

He dished the eggs onto a plate and added four slices of whole-wheat bread. He decided against toast. He pulled the cup from the microwave and left the tea to brew for a few minutes. The avocado he'd brought back from his favorite

Korean grocery in Brooklyn was ripe, and he cut a couple of slices that he placed with a fork on the plate. He took a small apple from the fridge, quartered it, and, rather than get a separate bowl, squeezed the wedges onto his plate. He poured a teaspoon of honey into his tea, then walked with the plate and cup to his balcony.

The space was not yet in any direct sunlight, so it was still cool out there. Some gulls fluttered about the open field and the golf course that was behind the trees and shrubbery on the other side of the fence to his apartment complex.

He looked at his plate for a second after he sat down. It seemed like a lot of food.

"Perhaps I should have only had one egg and two slices of bread."

Usually, if he were home, he'd eat light on a Friday and have a big breakfast on the Saturday. But yesterday he'd eaten a fair amount at the repast.

"Another reason why I could do with a workout at the gym today," he thought.

As he sat eating, his mind drifted again to his high school years.

"Powell," he thought. *"Austeen Powell. What a name."* He smiled.

He spent months ogling that guy from afar. But he never did get even the chance to attempt to muster the courage to introduce himself. Austeen Powell didn't return the next school year. Sometime after, Devin heard that Powell and his family had left to live in the U.S. Over the next few years, Devin still dreamed of him. And the dreams turned into fantasies that became more and more carnal – from simply companionship to hugging and kissing and touching and fondling.

From the books he read, he knew what that meant. He figured or hoped he was going through a phase. But as the

feelings became more long-lasting and intense, he resorted to prayer.

In the meantime, he avoided people, places, dress, and situations that might be considered gay. His mother refused to let him go to parties or the movies, but he really didn't mind. He played a lot of sports with classmates – especially football and table tennis – and was often at school until late in the evenings. But he went through high school without ever having a girlfriend. As far as he knew, the male friends he had were all straight, but he never put himself in any situation where that issue might have been put to debate. He was always the one who went straight home after school or sports, or playing in the yards of friends. He never really focused on his classwork but managed to excel in school, to a certain extent, without any full effort. Outside of the books he read (Mary Renault became one of his favorite authors), he avoided any and everything homosexual. And he prayed.

He smiled wryly.

"Those were prayers that definitely weren't answered."

He laughed.

"Unanswered prayers leading to damnation."

But maybe it was divine providence that saw, in his last year of high school, him, his mother, and sisters getting permanent visas to migrate to the U.S. His mother had one brother in the U.S., and he had filed for her and her children soon after her husband's death. After five, going on six years, the applications had been approved.

He decided he'd leave one slice of the bread and some of the egg and have it later. He could see what looked to be a foursome on the 16th hole which was the hole on the golf course that was closest to his apartment. He sipped his tea and reflected some more on his life.

In college at Georgia A&M, he continued his battle with his sexuality. In his sophomore year, he lost his virginity to a

girl called Dianne, whom he met at a birthday party that he was invited to by his roommate. Essentially, she seduced him, and he went along because he figured it was time he had sex. For the next year after that, he went out with girls, had sex with a few of them, and scrupulously avoided any and everything gay.

"Everything gay, except the appetite-wetting books featuring gay love stories that I couldn't stop myself from reading."

Eventually, he had had to face a big fact.

"As much as I find the women I date attractive, and as much as I enjoy the sex, I can't stop the homosexual thoughts and homosexual desires."

There were a couple of the girls he dated who really liked him. But he wasn't letting anything progress past casual sex because he had a sense he was going to eventually give in to those homosexual urges.

"And I was scared about where that would lead me."

Sure enough, in his junior year, he was seduced by a guy he met at a campus party. He gave in and went along because he wanted to find out.

"I found out, alright." His dick stirred at the memory.

But still, for a while, he ran from himself – he went back to dating girls for his last year of college. Then the summer after graduation, he met Mark at a house party, and that led to his first penetrative sexual experience with a man.

"Me and Mark had a thing going for a while."

It was a wry, small smile that creased his face.

"Well, for that whole summer anyway."

They were a thing until he got a letter from Mark's lover. Mark had been playing him, insinuating that he lived with his parents when it was with another man. But strangely, Devin didn't feel heartbroken.

"Perhaps because I wasn't into Mark that much. Perhaps because I'd met Ettie."

To relieve the confinement, he let his dick poke through the front of his boxers. He got up from his balcony, which was beginning to get a bit warm anyway, and took the plate and cup with him to the kitchen. He put some Saran Wrap over the remaining food on the plate, which he then placed in the fridge. His dick had calmed down.

Just as he finished hand-washing the stuff he'd used to prepare and eat his breakfast, he heard the washing machine beeping. He put the sheets in the dryer and then filled the washing machine with colored items, mostly clothes he'd worn on his two back-to-back, out-of-town trips. Once the machine started, he went about with his dusting and wiping, and general tidying up of the apartment.

As he worked, he thought about the service and repast yesterday. He really, really was going to miss Emma. He smiled as he remembered the days when they used to smoke and chat and "philosophize," as they called it, on the patio at the back of the house in Norcross.

"We sure used to talk about some far-out stuff."

They spoke almost every other week for the first few months after the split with Ettie, and he moved out. After a while, it became just occasional texts, but at least once each month. For May, rather than a text, he called to wish her Happy Mother's Day. That's when she told him for the first time about her cancer. He called her again a couple of times and left messages. He heard through Ettie that she was in the hospital, and then a week later, that she was in a hospice.

He visited her a couple of times, but Tizzie was there and they didn't get to really talk. Then it was the Monday morning, not fully two weeks ago, that he got the text message from her that she was back in the hospital and wanted to see him. He was headed to Los Angeles that evening for a two-day meeting, but he left work at lunchtime and stopped at the hospital on the way home. However, Emma was in a medicated sleep, and he had to get home to finish packing

and catch his flight. He texted her to explain the situation, and later she texted back "OK."

He got back to Atlanta from Los Angeles on Thursday, had a hectic Friday, and had planned to see Emma at the hospital last Saturday morning when on his way to catch his flight to New York. He had a four-day conference at his company's New York headquarters this past week, but he left Atlanta last Saturday afternoon to be able to attend Stephen's party. However, as it was, last Saturday, Emma was back in the hospice, in Martinetta, which, for him, was the opposite direction from the airport. And then, as was usual with him, he was running late and had to go straight to the airport to avoid missing his flight. And then Tuesday evening, he got the call from Ettie telling him that Emma had died.

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He was done with the general tidying up of his apartment. Next, he had to vacuum the rugs in the bedroom, the carpet in the living room, the mats in the kitchen, and those at the front and balcony doors. He grabbed the vacuum from the utility closet and started. As he worked, he reflected on his Friday.

He remembered how he had especially gotten to the memorial service early.

"I was always rushing or late or close to being late, and Emma used to tease me so much about that."

He put in that special effort on the day of the service. Just to show Emma that he could be early.

"Plus, I wanted to talk to Ettie about Emma's letter."

He saw Ettie's X3 when he was parking. It was a new model from BMW, and they had gotten it for her a year before they divorced. He rarely drove the X3, but he started liking SUVs. When he moved to New York City, he traded in his Corolla and got a Kia Sportage, a compact SUV that he could

afford. As it was, his Sportage fit perfectly into the last open spot in the courtyard parking lot of the funeral home.

There were perhaps a dozen people in the hall. He saw Keith, who was sitting in the first row with his grandmother and uncle. Keith had been home with Ettie's since his graduation from his academy high school in North Carolina, but this weekend, he was headed to New York for an optional college orientation program. Keith had convinced his parents to finance the trip.

"Hey, Keith. How things?" He greeted his son with a hug.

"Fine, Dad, fine. Nice seeing you. Mom's just back there." Keith pointed towards the office. "I think she went to clear up something with the funeral home people."

Devin greeted Mrs. Remontle, shook hands with Lionel, and went and sat in the second row behind the family trio. He watched as, over the next half an hour, the hall slowly filled with another dozen or so people. He saw that most of them were elderly and realized they probably knew Emma from the part-time work she used to do at a senior care center. There was still no sign of Ettie. Or Angie or Tizzie, for that matter.

Ettie didn't come out until shortly before the service was about to start. It was the first time he had seen her in a couple of months.

"She looked fine," he thought.

He and Ettie greeted each other with a hug and pleasantries, but there was no privacy there to talk or time to go outside.

He remembered he was able to say another brief hello after the service, but there were all sorts of noise and confusion because of a shooting incident on the block. And his car was stuck in the funeral home's courtyard.

So were the cars of everyone who had come early and parked there, and those using the handicap parking. Someone who had spoken to a cop in the street told the group that they probably had about an hour-long wait. The funeral home folks told them their cars were ok as long as they

collected them before the gates were closed at 9 pm. Ettie and her passengers were going with Angie. There was some talk by others of car sharing, but he figured he'd just wait. He smiled.

"It's just Emma getting back at me for showing her up by being early," he remembered thinking.

He cleaned and put away the vacuum and moved to get his mop and bucket. He poured in a small amount of floor cleaner, then took the bucket to the bathroom to half-fill it with water. He mopped the bedroom and the living room, then plopped himself on his sofa to relax for a bit and to check his BlackBerry while the floors dried. He responded to some morning greetings, then sat listening to the slow jams on a music channel on his TV.

Yesterday, in the courtyard, he'd met Mrs. Mason, the person he would later find out was Emma's godmother.

"Hello, Mr. Devin," came a shout.

"Hello," he replied loudly.

They continued their loud talking so as to hear each other above the din.

"I'm Mrs. Mason. Emma used to help take care of me."

"Ah. Mrs. Mason. Yes, I know of you from speaking to Emma. You moved from Alabama to Georgia about 2 years ago. Pleased to meet you in person," he said as he extended his hand. "Sad though the occasion."

"Yes, sad indeed. I'm really going to miss Emma."

"We all are."

"This is my friend Mrs. Davis." Mrs. Mason pointed to the woman pushing her wheelchair.

"Pleased to meet you," Devin said, again extending his hand.

"Nice meeting you," said Mrs. Davis.

"Did you get her letter?" Mrs. Mason was half-shouting.

Devin was startled.

"You know about the letter?"

"Well, Emma asked me to put a stamp on it and mail it for her. If I'd known for sure I'd see you today, I would just have kept it and handed it to you."

"Well, thank you then. I did get it. This morning, when I got home from a business trip."

"That's fine, young man. I'm glad I could help Emma with some of her final wishes. So sad though."

Just then, Keith came up.

"Hey, Dad," Keith said loudly, "Angie's car is packed, so I decided to stay and ride with you."

"Ok. No problem. But why don't your mom leave the keys with you and let you bring her car home?"

Keith laughed.

"I put this tiny dent in her BMW last month, and now she won't let me touch it. She says since it's on the way home, we'll get a ride back here later."

Devin was actually glad that Keith would be with him when he got to Angie's. It would help ease any awkwardness if it were she who opened the door when he got there. He and Angie had a long history.

A few months before Keith was born, his company, very desirous of keeping him, offered him a 15-year interest-free loan so he and Ettie could buy a house. He'd be able to repay the loan through salary deductions. He and Ettie bought this spacious, 2-story, 4-bedroom, 3 ½ bath Colonial, with a semi-finished, half-basement, in a new development in Norcross. At the time, they were planning to give their first child a brother or sister or two, and they figured they needed sufficient bedrooms for that, plus a guest room. Devin smiled wistfully.

"It didn't quite work out that way."

But the guest room, which had a half bath, proved extremely useful. Angie was its permanent occupant for the two years she lived with them when she first came to the US. He remembered when Ettie brought up the idea of Angie

staying with them; his thought in welcoming her was that she would be able to help Ettie with their new baby, Keith. But that wasn't really what happened.

"And she brought enough drama and intrigue with her to fill a book," Devin thought.

*****

Yesterday afternoon, the small group of about ten stood or sat or walked around making chitchat for a good half an hour. There was a lot of speculation about the shooting down the road. They'd heard that someone had been killed. Over the fence, they could see two crashed cars blocking the road in front of the townhouse apartment complex, whose upper floors were visible beyond the two properties in between.

After a long while, there were finally no more sounds of sirens for almost ten minutes, and everyone started getting back in their cars. Devin assisted Mrs. Mason into the rear of her car and put the wheelchair in the trunk for Mrs. Davis, who he assumed was driving, until she went and sat in the passenger seat. As he and Keith got into his car, he saw a young man come walking through the gate shouting that the cops were beckoning them to drive out. The young man got into Mrs. Mason's car.

Devin was about the third car to leave the lot. He was stuck for a bit behind another car whose driver was asking something of one of the cops directing them out of the exit. He got this sense that he was being stared at, but when he looked up, the glare of the setting sun blinded him. He reminded himself that he needed to get to the DMV to get his Georgia plates. He didn't want any problems with the cops, or his auto insurer, for that matter.

The washing machine sounded off, and he got up from the couch. He took the sheets from the dryer and threw them on the bed. Then he transferred the clothes from the washing

machine to the dryer and got it going again. He put the blanket from his bed in the washing machine and started it going. Then he went to mop the kitchen.

The drive to Angie's yesterday allowed him to chat with Keith a bit about college. Keith wouldn't be eighteen until November, but he'd gotten a partial scholarship and would be starting at New York University in September. Devin was extremely proud of him and liked the relationship they had. When Keith turned seventeen, Devin had a big conversation with him and told him about his own sexuality. But as with Emma, Keith didn't seem fazed. Devin was relieved, but just a little bit peeved.

"There I was agonizing about sharing the information with them, only for them to just take the news like it's no big deal."

Devin didn't know whether to be relieved or not that it was Ettie, not Angie, who opened the door when he got to the repast. He scanned her face as he'd done at the funeral home, but there was no sign of anger.

"Nice to see you again, Ettie. Wow, I was telling myself earlier that it looks like you added a couple of pounds in just the right place. Turn around, let me double-check."

Ettie kissed her teeth.

"Just remember, Devin. You had your chance and blew it."

"Ah, Ettie, that was low. Keith, you hear how your mother is talking to me?"

"I gotta go. I'm helping Angie with the food. Help yourself to a drink from the table over there."

"Ok, ok. But I need to talk to you about something."

"No problem. Later."

As Devin moved about the room exchanging greetings, he vividly remembered the last time he'd been here at Angie's place.

"Christmas Day," he thought. "Of all days."

Last Christmas, he was no longer seeing Stephen, who, in any case, was in Puerto Rico for ten days with a group of friends. He had requested a transfer back to Atlanta after completing a full year at his company's headquarters. He hadn't told Ettie yet about his breakup from Stephen or his transfer request. But he had some vacation time to use the last few days of the year, so he decided to visit Atlanta to view some apartments and to spend a little time with Keith, who was home for the holidays. As it was, Angie was hosting a family Christmas dinner, and Ettie pushed him to come.

"Don't worry," she said. "You won't have to see me on Kevin's arm. He's in Jamaica for Christmas with his parents."

Ettie always seemed to have a knack for getting him to do things he didn't want to do. In the end, he persuaded himself he was only going because of Keith.

He told Ettie he was staying no more than two hours, and as 4 pm approached, he saw her moving towards where he was chatting with Keith. He had readied the answer he'd composed since he knew she was going to try and get him to stay longer. Instead, she pulled him to follow her upstairs to Angie's guest bedroom, which, Devin realized, upon seeing it then for the first time, was really a very large walk-in closet.

Devin remembered staring at the clothes and boxes, and shoes on evenly arranged and spaced-out racks and shelves that filled the entire room on either side of a path from the door to the far wall. Then he turned to Ettie.

"What's this about?"

"Angie has a lot of stuff, and she doesn't entertain overnight guests."

"I meant …." Devin paused. "Ok. There I was thinking you bringing me upstairs for a quickie, and you bring me to a bedroom with no bed."

Ettie ignored him.

"Take out your phone."

"What?"

"Take out your BlackBerry and dial this number."

Devin obediently dialed as Ettie called out a phone number.

"Let me have it," said Ettie, reaching with her hand.

Devin handed her his BlackBerry.

"Devin! I can't believe you blocked Charles' number."

Devin looked on sheepishly as Ettie unblocked the number. She held it near her ear, and Devin could hear it ringing.

"Hello?"

"Charles? This is Ettie calling from Devin's phone."

"Devin's phone?"

"Yes, he's right here. Devin, I keep asking you why you and Charles not talking, and you keep saying "he knows." And Charles, I keep asking you, and you say you don't know. One of you has to know. Devin, here's your BlackBerry. Talk to Charles. I'm going back downstairs. Come down when you're done. And don't touch any of Angie's dresses."

But he was back downstairs immediately because Charles said he was busy with a show about to start, but could give Devin a call later or tomorrow. In fact, Devin made it back to the gathering before Ettie, who had stopped to use the bathroom.

Ettie was surprised when she came downstairs and saw him.

"So did you resolve things with Charles as to what he knows and what he doesn't know?"

"His dancers were about to go on stage, so we'll have to talk another time."

Ettie stared at him.

"Can I ask something?" Ettie asked.

"What?" Devin was terse, expecting Ettie to bring up something that would have him staying another hour.

But again, Ettie surprised him.

"Why are you not talking to Charles?"

"Nigel."

“Nigel? What?”
“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Forget it.”
“Devin!”
“Ettie, I’m not talking about it, ok.”

*****

But that was Christmas, a cheerier time than yesterday, at the repast for Emma. Not that the repast wasn’t cheery. It really was a pleasant crowd.

Ten minutes after they arrived, Devin walked, drinks in hand, to a corner of the living room where Keith was standing.

"Here you are, Bacardi and Coke as ordered."
"Thanks, Dad."
"Wait. Before you drink that, how old are you again?"
"Old enough to know what drink I like." Keith laughed.
“To Emma.” Devin smiled as he raised his glass
They clinked glasses and sipped.
“You know I’m really missing her already.”
“Who? Mom or Emma?”
Devin raised his arm as if to punch Keith, then stopped.
“You lucky you holding that drink,” he said with a grin.
Keith laughed.
“You calling this a drink? How much Bacardi did you put in it - half a teaspoon?”
“Listen, I’m not about to let your mom get on my case about trying to turn you into a wino or something.”
“I have a question,” said Keith. “Why wasn’t Emma’s service held at a church? I remember at Grandpa’s funeral when she stayed outside, you said she didn’t like churches. I thought that meant she had a fear of churches. But she’s dead now. This is like her funeral service. Why no church?”
Devin looked at him.
“OK, you are old enough to hear the full story.” He recounted for Keith the incident Ettie had told him when Emma made her statement about her mother and religion.

"Emma just didn't like churches and religion. And you should have noticed, me and your mom aren't too fond of them either. How many Sunday school classes did you go to?"

Keith laughed.

"Ok, so now I see. You guys decided to condemn me to hell from an early age."

Devin smiled.

"Obviously, this boy has his parents' sense of humor."

*****

After finishing in the kitchen, Devin mopped his balcony, wiped the table and chairs there, straightened out the recliner, cleaned the ashtray, and watered his plants. He checked the chair cushions, and they were ok for now. To keep them from getting dirty too quickly, he generally kept them covered when he was away for more than a day or two.

From his balcony, he went back to the bedroom and made up the bed with the newly washed sheets. He then emptied the dryer. The stuff he didn't want wrinkled, he put on hangers right away. Other stuff, like underwear, he left on the bed to fold later. He put the blanket in the dryer, then he put all his whites into the washing machine with detergent and a little bleach and started that running again. Then he started on the bathroom, the last area of his apartment to clean. His mind went back to his chats with Ettie at the repast.

The first chance he got, he had cornered Ettie again to press her on the issue of Emma's letter.

"Ettie, I just want to assure you it wasn't my fault with Angie. And nothing happened."

"What?"

"You know about Angie, right?

"What with Angie?"

"Emma said she told you."

"Told me what?"

Devin stared at her.

"Never mind," he said. "Must be a mix-up or something."

It was Ettie's turn to stare.

"What do you mean, 'never mind?' You know I can tell when you lying."

"I'm not lying. I just thought Emma had told you something and I guess she didn't, so just forget everything."

"Devin, don't do that. What was Emma supposed to have told me?

"Listen. If she didn't tell you, I'm not about to tell you, so let's leave it at that."

"Devin!"

Just then, Angie made an announcement and invited people to come forward to say a few words with respect to Emma. Devin was relieved. It gave him a chance to escape Ettie's grilling. Soon after Mrs. Mason and the others had finished talking, Ettie approached him and he suspected she would try to follow up on her questioning. But Mrs. Mason and her son provided a neat diversion.

Ettie approached him again about the time he was getting ready to leave.

"Devin, I need to ask you something."

"What?" Devin was terse, expecting Ettie to bring up the Angie/Emma issue.

"Keith has to get to the airport Sunday afternoon, but I need to go into the lab to get started on a project that I'll need on Monday. Can you take him?

"Sure," said Devin. "What time?"

"I'd say noon. His flight is at 2:30 pm, but all he has is a backpack and carry-on."

"Ok, fine," said Devin.

One of the guests came up to Ettie to say goodbye, and as they chit-chatted a bit, Devin decided to seize the opportunity and make his escape. He gave quick goodbyes to Mrs. Mason, her son, and a few other people he knew or had met, then to Ettie and Keith. He exchanged acknowledgment nods with Angie.

"It seemed like she and I have been avoiding each other all afternoon and evening."

But then he was out. It had been one Friday he hadn't really been able to say "Happy Friday," and he thought for a minute about stopping at a bar for a drink and whatever. But he was too tired.

*****

He finished cleaning the bathroom and folded and put away the clothes on the bed. He took the blanket from the dryer and hung it across the two chairs on his balcony. He put the whites in the dryer and sat to relax again for a minute.

He remembered something and went and got Emma's letter and re-read the words.

"Dear Devin,

Stop. Go get a joint and smoke as you read this, so we can have one last smoke together.

LOL. Just kidding. Maybe.

Anyway, Devin, by now you will know I'm gone. We can discuss why some other time. But anyway. I just wanted to say I will miss you, and I hope you miss me too. LOL.

You know, I think the reason I like you so much is because you would always get my jokes. Talking about that, I told Ettie one about you and Angie's seduction skills, but I know she won't get it, so you're safe. LOL. Just kidding. Maybe.

On a serious note, keep an eye out for Tizzie for me. She has a little bit of mental problems, maybe because of who her father was, and that's not her fault.

I'm sorry we didn't get to talk in private again because there are a couple of things I'd have liked to have discussed with you, particularly with respect to Angie. That too will have to wait, I guess.

You take care of yourself, and remember, my wish for you is that you find the man of your dreams.

One Love,
Emma."

Devin stared at the piece of paper.

"Emma and her jokes."

But Ettie didn't seem to know anything yesterday.

"Either Emma was kidding with respect to saying anything or Ettie really didn't get it."

He thought about that. He knew Ettie. In fact, he'd spent more years of life with her than Emma had. Something was amiss, unless Emma had been more circumspect with her joke than she was letting on.

"Well, whatever it is, at least it looks like me, and especially Angie, are safe, for now."

He leaned back on the couch, feeling satisfied. He looked at his BlackBerry. It wasn't noon yet, and he'd basically finished his Saturday cleaning and chores. Just the stuff in the dryer, to fold and put away once they were done. A replay of last weekend's World Cup final was on and, in fact, had already started. He went and got his leftover breakfast and put the plate in the microwave for thirty seconds, then put the plate on a tray. He switched from the music channel to the game and sat watching it while eating. He figured once the game was over, he'd take a quick shower and head to the gym.

*****

Six hours later, Devin was back home relaxing on his balcony. He had left the blunt in the ashtray and it was out. He put away the weed and got a piece of damp paper towel and cleaned up the ashtray.

It was a hot, mid-summer evening after a hot mid-summer day. But the sun was now shielded by the building, and the breeze he felt, courtesy of the overhead fan on his balcony, was warm and calming. He listened to light jazz on 107.5 FM while trying to make up his mind about what to do in advance of his date. He figured they'd probably end up at Bulldogs so he was thinking he'd go with something very causal – jeans, sneakers, T-shirt.

The weed was having its effect, and his mood was as mellow as the breeze. He couldn't keep his mind from thoughts of what had happened with him and this guy, Douglas, he'd met earlier that afternoon. It was at the gym, and he smiled wryly to himself as he remembered their meeting and, in particular, their last encounter. His dick swelled. He smiled harder.

The Dione Warwick lullaby was love music in itself, and he stroked his dick lightly. He sighed. He pulled himself from the suggestive rhythm. He didn't want to jerk off now.

"Save it," he thought with an internal smile.

It took one of the strongest bits of self-discipline he had been able to muster in a while, but he roused himself from the recliner. He grabbed his BlackBerry, taking his music with him as he closed his balcony door and headed to the bathroom. He went about preparing himself for his night out while thinking about his afternoon out.

"That is hard."

He laughed to himself at the pun. He could picture Douglas so clearly as he remembered their meeting and chat this afternoon.

"It's been all so coincidental."

*****

He'd been staring at Douglas after feeling Douglas staring at him, at Bulldogs some weeks back. He'd thought about getting closer, but then he saw that Douglas was with someone. But at the gym this afternoon, he was listening to music as he got off a treadmill and practically fell over the man.

Douglas was approaching from behind to get on an adjacent machine. They grabbed each other to stabilize themselves, but the opposite happened. Devin's falling momentum was about to take them both down between the equipment in a way that they might well have injured themselves. But Douglas, with quick reflexes, used his right hand to grab the arm of the adjacent treadmill. So, Douglas' right arm kept them dangling halfway to the ground with his left arm around Devin's waist to hold him up. Devin's arms were wrapped around Douglas' neck and body.

"Classic damsel in distress." Devin was flushed with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry, man," he said to Douglas as they righted themselves and awkwardly but quickly untangled their arms and themselves. They stood up, looking at each other.

Douglas smiled. "No problem, man. No harm, no foul. You ok?"

The smile was disarming and mesmerizing.

"I…I'm ok," Devin stammered.

He was really surprised.

"What a coincidence," he thought. *"The same guy who had been eyeing me at Bulldogs."*

The "same guy" was wearing dark blue Nike shorts with a light T-shirt, and he looked fine as fuck. Based on his own 5'10" height, Devin figured he was about 5' 9". He had a wiry, slender body, defined muscles showing without being what you would say is overly muscular. His almost bald cut meant nothing detracted from the handsomeness of his face - deep brown eyes, a snub nose, nice lips, a slight moustache, and a

wisp of a goatee, medium brown skin with a small scar almost in the center of his forehead.

“Imperfectly perfect.”

And that smile. Devin caught himself.

"I'm ok," he said again. "You?"

"Yeah, man, I'm fine,"

Douglas bent and picked up Devin's wireless headphones that had fallen to the ground.

"What are you listening to?"

Devin stared for a second. He wasn't expecting that.

"A YouTube music workout blend," he replied.

He gestured with his hand, and Douglas put the headphones to his right ear.

Douglas listened for a few seconds.

"Nice," Douglas said as he handed the headphones back to Devin.

"Thanks, man,” Devin said as he put the headphones around his neck.

“Douglas Duncan,” Douglas said, stretching his hand for a shake. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Devin. Devin Green. Nice to meet you, too,” he said. *“Finally,”* he thought.

The handshake lingered.

“Where’re you from?” Douglas asked.

“That obvious, eh?”

“Wi neva really lose wi accent.”

Devin laughed.

“Port of Spain. St. Ann. You?”

“Arima.”

They let go of each other’s hand while continuing to stare at each other for a few more seconds.

In an instant, they both knew what was what. Devin felt his awkwardness melt away to be replaced by something else. His dick twitched. He played it off.

"Hey, I'm headed to this calisthenics class that’s just about to start. See you around, man."

"Definitely," Douglas responded. An intense look remained on his face. He stood there, and Devin had the option of walking on one of the treadmills or saying "Excuse me" and pushing past him.

"Excuse me," he said, and moved to get past Douglas.

Douglas didn't move, and they collided once more. They grabbed each other to steady themselves, and Devin felt flustered again. The physical contact was disconcerting. He felt his dick getting hard, and he knew it would quickly become obvious through the grey shorts he was wearing.

He suspected that Douglas sensed his discomfort.

"See you later," Douglas said. He stepped onto the treadmill he had been heading towards, and Devin moved past with a slight nod.

"Later," Devin replied.

Later took only half an hour. Douglas was waiting for him as he walked out of the aerobics room.

Devin felt annoyed. Not at Douglas for stalking him, but at himself for feeling excited about the attention.

"I didn't want to feel anxious or scared, so I felt annoyed." He smiled to himself now when he thought about that.

But any chagrin he felt at the time lasted but a couple of seconds. Douglas was charming and disarming, and Devin quickly gave in to the feelings of attraction that he sensed were mutual. He didn't think he'd ever before been approached like that by a man. But he couldn't think of any situation in the past where he had gotten a hard-on seemingly just from the proximity of a clothed man that he was meeting for the first time.

Their chitchat ended with them agreeing to meet up later to hang out. Devin was feeling excited. By then, he was done with his workout, but Douglas was staying a little longer.

"Cool, man," he'd said, and he bumped fists with Douglas and headed for the locker room.

He was actually happy that Douglas wasn't leaving right away. Once again, he had felt himself getting a hard-on while standing next to Douglas. The conversation earlier that had led to him looking at the front of Douglas' shorts didn't help. He knew he himself would have been at full attention if he were naked in the presence of an equally naked Douglas.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that shower scene just yet."

For some reason, he felt giddily shy.

He'd stripped and was putting his stuff in his locker when he remembered that one of his reasons for coming to the gym this afternoon was to get a few minutes in the steam room. He liked the way the steam refreshed his skin. He put on some swim trunks.

After about ten minutes in the steam room, he figured it was about time to go. He hadn't been paying much attention to the other bodies visible in spurts through the steam. There was a lot of furtive touching going on, but the semi-hard-on he had was caused by thoughts of Douglas. He got up, figuring he would have to go splash some water on his face and take a leak before going to the shower.

He moved towards the door through a burst of steam and collided with someone coming in. It was Douglas. They both stifled giggles.

"This time, later was twenty minutes later."

They stood facing each other. Someone said, "Excuse me," and Douglas touched his arm, and they moved to the side to give way. Any remaining softness in his dick left in an instant. The confinement of his swim trucks was painful.

He threw his towel around his neck and touched Douglas' arm with his left hand while letting the back of his right hand move down Douglas' chest. All the way to his crotch.

"It was a baton alright." The head was out the top of Douglas' shorts.

They hugged and rubbed for a bit. Between the lust and the lengthy stay in the steam, Devin was beginning to feel

more than a little giddy. Once again, Douglas seemed in tune with his feelings.

"See you later," Douglas whispered in Devin's ear, and pulled away.

Devin went to his locker for a couple of mouthfuls of Gatorade, then to the restroom where he used a stall to take a pee. He showered quickly for the most part, ignoring the naked bodies about him. This was just his third visit to the gym since he joined a couple of weeks before. Normally, he would have been taking surreptitious peeks at some of the dudes, looking at asses and dicks. But today he felt too self-conscious with his own dick, almost semi-hard and, he knew, attracting a decent amount of attention, to the extent he couldn't shield himself.

Back in the locker room area, he didn't look around to see if Douglas might be in another section. They were to meet up later around 10. He didn't want another encounter just now. Anyway, he wanted to check the dude he regularly got weed from, and he wanted to stop and pick up a few toiletries at the pharmacy on his way home. He headed out from the gym.

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He was still in the bathroom when he got a text from Douglas. Douglas wanted to drive all the way up to his place in Chamblee to pick him up. They went back and forth a couple of times until he finally acquiesced. He texted Douglas his address.

On his bed was what he'd picked out to wear - a grey Levi jean that was one of his favorites and a comfortably fitting Calvin Klein polo shirt instead of a T-shirt. He'd bought the shirt just a couple weeks before at Macy's.

"Ahh, Stephen again." Stephen seemed to have a fetish for Calvin Klein stuff. Devin smiled now, however.

He hadn't bought the shirt because it reminded him of Stephen or anything. He bought it because he liked it.

Devin was dressed and ready at 9:45 pm when Douglas called to say he was five minutes away. Devin headed downstairs.

"Well, Detective Duncan. Let's see how this goes."

Part 2 – Tizzie's Blossoming Fall

Leaves, please leave me alone
As everyone else has,
Or I'll kill your master, the wind,
With a withering calmness,
And leave you dead on the ground
'Til you fully atone
For all the tears you caused
When it sure wasn't me who sinned,
So, you must know I'm harmless,
Yet it's poor me that you hound.

Chapter 5 - Fall - Ettie

"Ma! Finish your tea, please! Please don't be making me late today."

Ettie let out a loud sigh. Her mother had two things in front of her – the TV and her breakfast - and she was watching one and ignoring the other.

"The same thing every morning."

It sometimes took her mother a full half an hour to eat her small breakfast.

"By which time she'd complain that her green tea was cold."

She'd been with her mother for the last hour. She'd helped her mother get dressed, and she'd prepared breakfast. Then she finished her own breakfast while watching her mother consume a small portion of the scrambled eggs and three-quarters of one of the two slices of bread on her plate, and take three or four sips of her tea.

At that stage, Ettie got up, put on some gloves, and washed the stuff in the sink. Then she fixed her lunch – the last leftovers from dinner cooked on Wednesday. Next, she interrupted her mother, who, by then, was working on her second slice of bread, and had her take her pills. Then, as her mother resumed eating, Ettie reheated her tea in the microwave. Finally, Ettie packed what she was taking with her to work and turned to check on her mother's progress.

It was clear her mother wasn't going to finish the eggs, but the bread was almost done. All she had left after that was a tangerine that Ettie had peeled for her, and her cup of green tea, which was still more than half full. She knew her mother was not going to want to get up from the table until she finished her tea.

Ettie watched as her mother, eyes still glued to the TV, reached for her cup and slowly raised it to her lips. Ettie

turned and walked back to the stairs and up to her bedroom. She finished making up the bed, then went to brush her teeth and take one last look at her hair in the mirror above the dresser.

She grabbed a pair of scissors to take care of a few unruly strands of the wig. Satisfied, she put down the scissors and walked to the bathroom, where she dropped the strands of hair that she had been holding in her left hand into the waste bin. She moved back into the bedroom and organized and put away her makeup items on the dresser.

The light in the bathroom was a little better, but she'd gotten used to putting on her makeup at the dresser after she showered.

"Because by then Devin would be steaming up the bathroom during his turn to shower."

She reached to get her handbag from where she'd left it at the edge of the dresser and checked to make sure her office keys and pass were in the usual pocket.

Since Emma's illness, she had been having to take her mother to a senior citizens center in Pine Hills each workday morning. They were still *persona non grata* at the nearer place in Brookhaven where Emma and Tizzie used to work. She no longer had the option she used to take advantage of frequently, of driving, parking, and using MARTA on days when she didn't have any material or equipment to take to or from work. The forced, hour-long drive to and from work in heavy traffic each and every workday was driving her crazy.

"Well, it's Friday the thirteenth, but it looks like a beautiful fall day, and it's still Happy Friday - no work and no traffic to deal with tomorrow."

She and Devin always used to celebrate their Fridays as "Happy Friday."

She made sure all the lights were off before going through the bedroom door and toward the stairs. She paused for a minute, then slowly turned back around.

"Ah, Ettie," she groaned to herself. *“Why do you let that man keep coming into your head?"*

Nevertheless, she stepped back to the bedroom door and pulled it closed. It had been one of Devin's pet peeves, her always leaving doors open. This meant, mostly, one of the bedroom doors. But there had been other occasions, even outside their house, where he had brought up the issue with her.

“Always correcting me, that Devin.”

It had been almost a year and a half now since their separation, but it seemed like every time she went out of her bedroom, she automatically thought of him. Especially if she initially forgot and left the door open.

"Ha ha! I'm gonna need a therapist on this for sure."

A smile came to her face at that last thought as she made her way down the stairs.

Her smile faded, however, as she marched through the living and dining room areas to the kitchen and her mother. Her whole being seemed to stiffen and grow more formal, as if she were stepping into a lecture hall at the university.

She had left her mother finishing her breakfast and drinking her tea more than fifteen minutes ago, but she knew that once she got back to the kitchen, it was going to be another ten minutes to fifteen minutes or more to get her mother up and out the door. And she didn't want to be late this morning. She girded herself.

"Ma, we ...." She paused. Her mother wasn't in the kitchen. She knocked and opened the door to the guest bedroom and walked through to its bathroom. Her mother wasn't there either. She panicked for a second but then remembered that the alarm hadn't gone off. Her mother couldn't have gone outside. That’s what she had done some months ago, and scared Ettie.

“The day after Emma’s funer ... Emma’s remembrance service,” she thought.

Mrs. Remontle had wandered out while downstairs by herself that day, and Ettie didn't even know for some time that she wasn't in the house. It was a neighbor, George, who was walking his dog and found her, lost and disoriented, a block over from theirs. Since then, Ettie had been arming the house alarm even when at home.

"Ma!" She called out as she moved back into the kitchen. She put the stuff her mother had used into the sink.

She walked into the foyer off the living room, and relief and shock combined as she saw her mother sitting on the armchair, coat on, handbag on the computer table, staring at a painting of a large cargo ship on the wall.

"Ettie, where have you been? I've been waiting on you. Standing in front of the mirror all morning is not going to make you any prettier."

Ettie's lips tighten.

"Ok, at least she was ready," she told herself as she watched her mother get up.

But it was clear her mother was having one of her "good" days. One of those days, rarer of late, when her mind seemed clear and she was lucid enough to be the mean, cantankerous person Ettie had endured for so many years.

In recent times, probably starting during the last couple of years of her marriage to Devin, Ettie had spent a lot of time thinking about "things." Many "things."

"What could have caused this woman, who was my mother, to be the way she is," was a big one of those "things," and not in terms of her mother's Alzheimer's diagnosis. It was true, however, that Mrs. Remontle had been showing increasing symptoms of Alzheimer's for at least the past two years, and her deterioration in just the last three or four months had been worrying. In fact, Ettie and Angie had begun talking about whether they might have to put her in a home. But on the big issue of why her mother was the way she was, outside of the Alzheimer's, Ettie just couldn't figure out an answer.

“Only some mental issue could make a person so mean and hurtful towards other people, and especially to her own children, while being so oblivious to the harm caused.”

Ettie gazed for some seconds at her mother, who was still gazing at the painting on the wall by the door.

The woman that Emma once described as “evil” looked so calm and innocent.

"It's a ship like that your father used to sail on." Mrs. Remontle woke Ettie from her reverie.

"What?" she asked. She refocused. She had moved to get her coat, but now she put it down on the computer chair where she already had a bag.

Her mother gestured at the picture.

"Your father used to sail on a ship like that. When we first met. In fact, you could say that's how I met..." She cut herself short.

There was a pause. Ettie realized her mother wasn’t going to continue. It was something she was curious about - how her mother met her dad.

She went back into the kitchen to finish clearing the table and to quickly wash the breakfast items that her mother had used.

Ettie had not been able to get an answer from her dad when the topic of how her parents met came up one time. She remembered she had even once asked Emma.

“Emma, did Pa ever tell you about how he and Ma met?”

“Pa said it’s a big secret,” said Emma.

“Yes, I know. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Emma stared at her.

“So why would I know Ma’s big secret?”

That reply made Ettie figure that Emma knew. But Ettie couldn’t get anything from her on the subject. And Angie didn’t know and didn’t care.

Ettie had finished putting on her coat and checking that her mother had her medication with her. She grabbed her "everything" bag, a large, zippered, brown bag that she had "everything" in, including her laptop and her cooked lunch, which she had left earlier on the computer chair in the foyer.

The foyer was really like a small den since they also had the computer and printer there, along with a computer table and a filing cabinet, and a bookcase with storage at the bottom. By design, the panel for the alarm system was in the foyer. Generally, everyone in the house used the side door off the foyer to enter and exit. As it was, the front door was rarely opened except for visitors and deliveries.

She moved to adjust the alarm to the "away" setting since the house was going to be empty for the day. Then she shepherded her mother out the door.

"I have to be feeling grateful for small mercies today."

Most mornings, she had to deal with her mother spinning around searching at the last minute for a book or a pen or her handbag, or something from her handbag, or just something. A few times, the alarm would go off before they exited and would have to be disarmed and reset, and then Ettie would have to deal with the call from HomeSafe checking to make sure all was ok.

She put her bags on the front passenger seat, then guided her mother into the back seat of the X3. She helped her mother fasten her seatbelt, then she got in, started the car, and backed slowly out of the driveway. She drove the quick five minutes to Buford Highway, then sighed as she merged into the heavy, stop-and-go traffic. She glanced at the car clock and turned on the radio for some music to occupy her mind or drown out the possibility of conversation with her passenger.

They were on the way to an Eldercare senior citizens facility in Pine Hills, where she would drop her mother off

before heading to downtown Atlanta to the university. Her first lecture today was at 10 am, but they had gotten out of the house quickly this morning, so the slow pace of the traffic wasn't bothering her as much as it usually did. She liked to have time to sit in her office and review her notes for at least half an hour before any lecture. But many mornings these days, she would barely have fifteen minutes. This morning, she wanted to be extra prepared because of a contentious discussion she had had with one of her students last week.

Vaguely, she could hear her mother talking under her breath, cussing at something or someone at the Eldercare place. Against her better judgment, she decided to interject.

"So, when and where did Pa use to sail to?" She knew the answer, but she just wanted to change the focus of her mother's mood. Or maybe, since this seemed to be one of her mother's more lucid days, see if she could steer the conversation in such a way that she would get some insight into how her mother and dad met.

"Oh, he sailed all over the Caribbean. His ship used to carry stuff from Louisiana to all these different islands. Sometimes I wouldn't see him for weeks. You don't know how rough I had it with you children when he was away. Especially after you and Angie were born."

"Ah," Ettie thought. *"She just had to throw my name in there. As if me and Angie were born at the same time. Angie was ten months later. She was the third mouth to feed. The third child to take care of."*

She didn't say anything, however. She turned up the music a slight notch using the volume control on the steering wheel so as not to make her mother see her doing it. But even above the increased volume, her mother interrupted her thoughts again.

"You better watch out for that ungrateful little sister of yours. A thief she is. Nothing but a thief. All those years I cared for that child and she can't even come visit me one time. You

better not carry any of your men friends near her. A thief she is."

Ettie sighed. She was so tired of listening to her mother disparage people. And these days, everyone was a thief to her mother. She was constantly accusing Ettie of stealing her money. A month ago, she was adamant that Keith had stolen her purse, not realizing that Keith was away at college and hadn't been in the house since the fall semester started. But, as of late, she seemed to have focused in particular on Angie, who was supposed to have stolen some earrings, a watch, and even a dress. Ettie turned up the volume a bit more on the car radio. She was going to have to get on Angie's case about calling their mother once in a while.

"Maybe some attention from Angie will placate her."

Her mother said something about barely being able to hear herself speak over the noise of the radio, but Ettie pretended not to hear.

Cindy Lauper was singing "Time After Time". She hummed along. She liked the song, even though it brought back bittersweet memories. Back in the day, there was this cool FM station that she liked to have provide light background music those evenings when she was reviewing notes before a lecture. And that was the song she remembered was on that night, so many years ago, when, after her argument with Devin, she sat at her desk staring at papers and thinking about her life.

It was earlier that same evening, all those years ago, that she had gotten a fateful call from Angie. It was a couple of days after they had returned to Atlanta from Trinidad after attending their grandmother's funeral. Devin had accompanied her and, in fact, was one of the pallbearers. Another of the pallbearers, Raymond, an 18-year-old cousin of theirs who Ettie always thought resembled Tizzie, told Angie he'd seen Devin kissing a man outside of a house in Bohemia that was well-known as a place that hosted gay house parties.

Ettie didn't tell Angie she knew anything about Devin. In fact, she told Angie it was probably a case of mistaken identity. Angie didn't seem convinced but didn't press. But when Ettie confronted Devin with what she'd been told, she distinctly remembered his answer.

"I'm married to you. I would never disrespect you by kissing a guy in public."

"But obviously not enough respect to stop you from fucking them in private?"

They stared at each other.

"I can't defend that, Ettie. But then, you know me. Do you see me kissing any guy in public like that? Especially in Trinidad?"

"So, you were kissing him inside that house in Bohemia then?"

"Ettie, then Raymond would be a liar from the start based on where he said he saw me kissing some man."

Ettie had learned enough to get her guard up whenever Devin started any sentence with her name.

"So, you were kissing some man inside at the party."

"I can assure you I didn't kiss any man that night inside or outside any house party."

She stared at Devin. She laid a trap.

"So, you telling me Raymond is lying?"

"If that's what he said, yes."

"Well, you and whomever must have been pretty intimate for Raymond to think you guys were kissing."

"Well, your whomever just so happened to be …." Devin paused. "You know what? It doesn't matter."

"So, you and this "whomever", how long?"

"I am telling you, it doesn't matter. He and I won't be seeing each other again."

She stared at him. She sensed he could see the hurt in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ettie." He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away.

They had been married for about five years by then, and during that time, Ettie suspected he was having occasional sex with men. One evening, she had overheard him on the phone arranging to meet someone named Tony. But his having an affair hit a deeper nerve. It brought to the forefront her biggest fear – that a man might well one day replace her in his life as his principal source of affection.

"As much as I really, really like him, if that happens, I'll step aside." She remembered what she told herself at the time.

That thought, along with her mother's abbreviated comment from earlier about meeting Mr. Remontle, reminded her of the conversation she had had with her dad a few months before he passed. It was really part of her effort to try and understand her mother. She'd always figured her dad used his job as an escape from his wife.

"But he had still married her, and stayed with her."

So, one day, she was driving him home after a visit to the doctor, and they were chatting, and mention of her mother came up, and she just blurted it out.

"Pa, how have you put up with her for all these years?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him turn his head and stare at her. He sighed and looked back ahead at the road.

"Well, for one thing, I wasn't around much."

Again, he turned to look at Ettie.

"I'm sorry about that, not being there for you all, but that's the work I did, and I liked sailing and the sea and your mother was ..." He stopped.

"Was what?"

"She wasn't the nicest person. But basically, we stayed together because I put up with her biggest secret and didn't tell anyone, and she put up with my biggest secret and didn't tell anyone.

"What's her biggest secret?"

"Ettie, what's the definition of a secret?"

"Pa! Just a hint?"

"It's about how we met, but I can't tell you."

"How did the two of you meet?"

"I just said I can't tell you."

"Ok, what's yours?" She didn't expect any answer, but he responded.

"I'm not going to tell you that. But I can say that I married her and stayed married because she was ok with not being the number one person in my life."

"The number one person?"

"There was someone else before your mother. She remained my true love, and your mother accepted that."

"Pa, are you telling me you were seeing another woman while married to Ma, and she accepted that?"

Her father smiled.

"In a way, yes," he said.

"Who? Somebody in Louisiana?"

What started out as a laugh by her father ended up in a coughing spell. It was so severe that she stopped the car and held his hand until he was done coughing. His grip on her hand was like a vice. As he calmed down, she used the excuse of getting a tissue for him to have her hand released.

Ettie remembered how puzzled she was by what her dad had said. But her father wouldn't explain further. Her mother might be the only person still alive who knew the answer.

"Unless the 'other' woman was still alive," thought Ettie. *"Pa's number one person."*

She remembered the time, sometime into their marriage, when the topic came up between her and Devin.

"The number one person in your life."

A wry smile crossed her face.

"The 'Front Seat Passenger Theory, ' as Charles called it."

The issue came up when Devin started spending so much time with Charles that she started feeling worried. Devin tried to assure her that Charles was just a friend, not a boyfriend,

but she wasn't convinced. But then she met Charles, and he put her mind at ease.

For one thing, she knew Devin enough to know that Charles wasn't the type of guy he was attracted to sexually. And the way he and Charles interacted made it clear to her they weren't lovers. It wasn't as if they were enemies, but it seemed like everything between them was a competition. Not just logical stuff, such as who could do the most sit-ups, say, or who was going to win at pool next time they played. She ended up being in their company often, and she was constantly the referee or arbitrator between the two. She remembered her comment that ended one dispute, at least temporarily.

"Don't you think it's stupid to be arguing over who's best at something silly like that when neither of you has ever done it before?"

But the second thing was that not long after they had met, Charles clarified his status one day when he and Devin came to pick her up to go to a show. She was already outside when they drove up because she didn't want to hear Devin accusing her of making them late. And as they pulled up, Charles got out of the front passenger seat, held the door open for her, and once she was seated, closed the door.

"Thanks, Charles," said Ettie as he fitted himself on the back seat behind her. She was thanking him for being a gentleman and seating her, and closing the door for her. But Charles responded with unexpected words.

"No problem, dear. I know my place. You are Devin's front-seat passenger. His number one person. I respect that. When you're around, nobody can sit in his front seat without your permission, such as if you lend it to them for a bit. And when you're not around, he'll drop everything to bring that front seat to you, if you call."

"Interesting way of putting it, Charles."

"That's because I've learned the hard way, Ettie, that you're asking for a whole heap of hurt if you keep somebody as your front seat passenger when you're not theirs."

She remembered Devin and her looking at each other. At the time, she felt comforted.

"No wonder Charles and I became friends."

But perhaps it was something they shouldn't have discussed in the way they did.

"Because then Nigel came along."

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Ettie remembered the night she couldn't reach Devin and called Charles to find out if he had heard from him.

"Ettie, I haven't heard from him in a week. And tonight, I called, and I think he's blocked my number, and I don't know or understand why."

"You think he's with Nigel?"

There was a pause.

"You know about Nigel?" Charles asked.

"Yes." Ettie had heard mention of the name, but she was really just guessing.

"Well, I don't know if he's with Nigel or not. I've been trying to reach him to tell him something. And I have some big news. I got an offer to help prepare Debbie's dancers. I have to start rehearsing next week, and then I'll be touring for most of the next year."

"Wow! Congratulations, Charles."

"Thanks, Ettie. It's a big opportunity for me and I'm looking forward to it. Just let Devin know that I'll be away for a while when you talk to him."

"Sure, Charles. Will do. But what in the world happened with you and him?"

"Ettie, I tell you, I just don't know. He just completely shut me off."

"That's real weird. I'll try and find out and let you know."

"Thanks, Ettie."

"Bye then, Charles. And if we don't speak before you leave, congrats again and good luck."

"Thanks, Ettie. Bye."

At 4:00 am, Devin still wasn't home. Since they had been married, he'd had a 3:00 am curfew if he was in town, and for the most part, he'd faithfully stuck to it. Even though she might be asleep, he'd text her if he was cutting it close.

So, especially after speaking with Charles earlier that night, which had become morning, she was a bit worried.

"Come to think of it, he'd been acting a bit strange and staying out real late the past few days." That was her thought at the time.

But until that night, he still had been home by 3 am. She was tired and upset. She shoved both the armchair and computer chair in the foyer against the door there to block it, and, just in case, she hooked the chain on the front door.

She fell asleep on the couch, and it was the noise of furniture scraping the floor, as the door was pushed open, that woke her. She glanced at the glowing arms of the large wall clock in the living room. They indicated the time to be 5:10 am. She got up in a fury, walked from the living room to the foyer, and swung a fist at Devin as he stepped from the door. He raised one arm to block the blow, then basically ducked and covered his head with both hands as she vented her anger.

"Ettie, Ettie, stop," he pleaded.

She finally pulled back.

"You see what time it is? You were supposed to be home by three am. You want me changing the locks on you? That's what I'm doing next time."

"I'm real sorry, Ettie. I wasn't feeling well and didn't want to drive right away, and fell asleep in my car."

"I'm supposed to believe that? I bet you were out galivanting with that Nigel."

Devin stared at her.

"Yes," she said. "I know all about Nigel."

Devin looked at her, then said basically the same thing he had said that fateful evening some ten years earlier.

"Well, you don't have to worry about him 'cause we're no longer seeing each other."

It was at that moment that it really hit home to Ettie that her front seat passenger status, after so many years, was still in peril, and would probably always be in peril as long as she was married to Devin. She really liked him, and she had put up with a lot from him.

"Especially with all the fucking around he did that could put both his and my health at risk."

But as much as she liked him, and she figured he liked her, she had come to the realization that Devin was gay by nature, and at any time, a day could come when a man could replace her in his front seat.

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She pulled up outside the Eldercare facility. Eldercare had hired and trained some boys from the neighborhood to stand outside the building and assist folks from their cars before school each morning. For clients who requested the service and signed a waiver, the boys would also assist those in wheelchairs from their cars and others from their vehicles into courtesy wheelchairs. The boys soon got to know which clients wanted the assistance. Since Ettie always made use of the service for her mother, as soon as she unlocked the car doors, one of the boys opened the right rear one and started assisting Mrs. Remontle from the vehicle.

"Ettie, can you hand the young man my handbag?" Mrs. Remontle asked as she settled into the courtesy wheelchair, and the boy took her cane.

Ettie stretched to reach the handbag on the back seat and handed it, with a dollar tip, to the boy, who then closed

the car door. She watched her mother being wheeled into the building.

She still hadn't gotten over how her mother had opened Emma's letter and lost any page or pages past the first. When Ettie confronted her about the matter later that day, when she had wandered out of the house, it seemed her mother couldn't remember opening the letter, much less what she might have done with a second page. Ettie looked through her handbag and a few other papers about her room, but couldn't find anything. Then the next day, her mother said she might have accidentally shredded it with some other stuff she had shredded that morning after Emma's memorial service. Ettie checked the shredder in the foyer by the computer, and it was almost full.

"No information could be gained from that."

With her mother dropped off, Ettie was headed towards I-85. The traffic was heavy, but there was no need to rush. She was more than early for a change.

The thought of Emma reminded her of one of Emma's poems that Lionel had shown her, and made her think that she had to ask Lionel to try and set up a meeting between her and Tizzie.

"I just can't understand what's happening with Tizzie. The girl doesn't have much family in the world, and here she is with her mother gone and she totally ignoring her two aunts."

And, from what Ettie was hearing, Tizzie was practically destitute. She had broken up with her boyfriend and was staying with a girlfriend in College Park.

When Ettie finally got a chance to grill her, Angie said Tizzie had been upset at the remembrance service because she thought they hadn't helped her mother enough and somehow contributed to her death. Ettie had been planning to quiz Angie further the day after the repast when she was to go assist with the cleanup. But Angie had called to cancel, saying she had started early and got much done by herself,

and the rest would be handled by her cleaning service on Monday. It was days later when they were talking about the extra funeral home charges that Tizzie had saddled them with that Ettie had gotten the explanation. But she had a feeling Angie wasn't telling her the whole story.

"In fact, since the day of the memorial service, Angie just hadn't seemed as interested in or concerned about Tizzie, and Tizzie's well-being, as she had been before."

Lionel hadn't been able to provide Ettie with much information either. But he did share that Tizzie had called him a couple of times to ask for money. Ettie was concerned.

Mr. Remontle died just a few days after Tizzie, Emma and Lionel came up to the US on their permanent visas. Ettie was sure he held out only because he wanted to see Emma. Once Ettie became a citizen, she and Devin filed for her mother and dad. Some five years after Mr. and Mrs. Remontle came to the US, they became citizens and filed for their two children still in Trinidad, Emma and Lionel, as well as Emma's unmarried daughter, Tizzie. It was sad, really, that, as fate would have it, those three came up to the States on their permanent visas just in time to attend Mr. Remontle's funeral.

Through their network of Trinidadian friends, she and Angie got jobs for both Emma and Tizzie at a nursing home where they could also board. At night, Emma's duties consisted of a 4-hour watch and then just being there as an emergency presence. During the day, she had a 4-hour shift at the daycare for seniors that the nursing home operated at the same location. That's where Ettie would leave Mrs. Remontle in the mornings. Early on, Tizzie was fortunate to get a 4-hour shift during the day. While she was allowed to sleep there, she hated sleeping in the same bedroom as her mother, something she had had to do for most of her life. As a result, she was often at her boyfriend's place.

Unfortunately, the family's association with the nursing home came to an abrupt end when, about four months after she had started there, Tizzie got herself arrested for allegedly abusing one of the clients. She got into an argument with a 78-year-old female client of the facility and ended up cussing then supposedly shoving the woman, who fell and sprained her arm. The woman's daughter filed a complaint, and Tizzie and Emma were asked to leave. Tizzie went to live with her new boyfriend and eventually got a part-time job as a waitress. Emma moved in with Ettie and Devin, back to the bedroom beside Keith's that she and Tizzie had shared when they first came up to the US.

With Emma at the house, Ettie could sleep a little later and avoid the hassle of having to take her mother to any senior daycare facility on workday mornings. And Emma was able to make a little money by having three or four other elderly women, such as Mrs. Mason, come stay with her for the day. In the meantime, Emma had gotten her GED, and had been planning to enroll in an associate degree program at a local community college this fall.

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Ettie's mind ran to that chilly February evening earlier in the year when she got home to find her mother sitting at the kitchen table watching TV, and Emma, who she could see through the screen door, standing on the back patio with a joint in her hand. She remembered her surprise that Emma was smoking. She had asked Ettie to help her with a resume that evening. She was going to apply for a clerical job with Good Deeds, a charity organization that had a small Downtown Atlanta office.

"Oh, Ettie, it's you," said Mrs. Remontle, apparently startled by Ettie's appearance in the kitchen. "I'm going to my room. That thieving sister of yours seems not to be aware of

what season it is. She's out there with the door open even though she can see me in here watching TV and freezing."

"Good evening, Ma. Ok."

"You can just call me when dinner's ready."

"Ok, Ma."

She watched her mother walk into her room and close the door. She turned and looked at Emma. She still had on her coat, so she opened the screen door and stepped out onto the patio.

"Evening, Emma. You smoking? I thought we were supposed to be working on ..." Ettie stopped. "Are you crying? What happened?"

Emma wiped her eyes with the back of her left hand, then took a draw from the joint in her right hand and moved to out it in an ashtray on the patio table. In the meantime, she turned her head from Ettie and slowly exhaled. The white smoke was whiffed away by the chilly breeze.

"That woman," said Emma.

"Yeah, our mother," said Ettie. She and Emma had reached a total state of forgiveness with respect to their mother. They would talk about it and wonder sometimes how the two of them could forgive her while Lionel and Angie, the two who suffered the least from her malignant nature, had not been able to do so.

"Come, let's go inside," said Emma. "I know you and the cold don't agree."

Ettie spun around and stepped back inside. In the kitchen, she turned and faced Emma as Emma came in.

"What happened? I thought you were past that - her being able to make you cry?" Ettie asked.

Emma pointed at their mother's room door and cupped an hand to her ear. Then she pointed upstairs.

"Ok, let me set the alarm," said Ettie.

She hung her coat on the rack by the door, set the alarm to "stay" mode, and followed Emma up the stairs to her room,

which was beside Keith's. They went in, and Emma closed the door.

"Ma was chatting all sorts of nonsense about people that I didn't want to hear, so I stepped outside. Plus, I needed to smoke."

"But you were crying. She said something to make you cry?"

"For once, it's bad tidings that I can't blame on her," Emma said with a grimace. "She has nothing to do with this one."

"What?" asked Ettie. "You're scaring me."

Emma looked at her for a few seconds.

"Well, I was feeling some pain, so I finally got around to addressing something they had told me to check up on when I did the permanent visa x-rays. I got confirming news this evening."

Emma paused. Ettie's eyes opened in horror.

"Turns out I not only have breast cancer that has been in a very aggressive mode since when I did the visa x-rays, but ovarian cancer too."

Ettie felt so weak she had to sit down. Fortunately, she was right next to the desk chair. She sat and looked up at Emma.

"Sorry," said Ettie.

"That's ok. I had to sit too when I first heard the news." There was a faint smile on her face.

Ettie tried to smile a little, too, as she wiped the tears from her face. But then she burst into all out sobs.

"Emma, I'm sorry," she said.

Emma stepped over, bent, and hugged Ettie.

"It's ok, Ettie. That's what I was doing when you came home. Crying."

"Emma...." Ettie burst into wails as Emma tried to comfort her.

"It's ok, Ettie," she said calmly.

Emma loosened her embrace, and Ettie stood up slowly. They faced each other.

"This is weird, Emma. I'm the one who is supposed to be comforting you."

Emma smiled.

"It's ok. I had my cry already, and now it's gone," she said.

They embraced and rocked each other.

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The memory made Ettie's eyes watery. She needed to think of something else. She couldn't deal with tears now while driving without ruining her makeup. Ettie put on her indicator and switched lanes. She would be exiting in another mile or so and wanted to be in the right lane early.

"Unlike some last-minute, lane-hopping people I know," she thought as a fresher memory lightened her mood.

Her mind ran to Justin. He had picked her up two weekends ago for a movie and a club date. He had almost missed an exit off I-75 and cut in so late he was fortunate not to get hit by the oncoming car. Ettie had kept needling him about it almost every time they spoke since, which was almost every day, and yesterday he finally suggested that she should pick him up tomorrow for the dinner date they were planning to have at Atlantic Station.

But what had really been on her mind since that last time going out with him was what the evening had felt like and reminded her of.

"Like with Devin. When he and I first started dating."

She considered.

"Could Justin and I be each other's front-seat passenger, the way Devin and I were?"

She smiled.

"The way Devin and I were, if only for a while."

Justin was twenty-eight. Although she didn't look it, she would soon be forty-one. She grinned.

"Maybe not where you would say 'old enough to be his mother,' but close."

Her luck with men being what it had been, after Kevin, she had decided to take a hiatus from dating or even trying to find someone. But she had to admit she was horny. During all those years of her marriage, Devin had been her only sex partner. She had been tempted a few times, especially since she knew Devin was cheating on her with men. But she told herself that the equivalent would be her having sex with a woman, and she had no desire to do that. And until the last couple of years, sex with Devin had been more than satisfying. She smiled.

"He had a nice dick and he knew how to fuck."

But as their relationship deteriorated, they lost a certain connection they had had, and the sex became more and more robotic and less and less satisfying.

"But the tepid sex wasn't why I decided I wanted that divorce."

Ettie exited the highway. It was only just after 9. She was really early.

The night after the repast for Emma, Justin and his mom had given Ettie and Keith a ride back to the funeral home to get Ettie's car. As she was about to get out of the car, Justin asked for her number, so he could call her to get some information about the Eldercare place where Mrs. Remontle spent most days. Since Emma's death, he said he had been trying to get decent and affordable daycare for his mom, who wasn't happy about returning to the place where Emma used to work.

Justin called her the next evening to talk about the Eldercare place, and they ended up chatting for almost a full hour. She gave him the contact info for the place and her favorable opinions; he thanked her and then asked her a

question about what she did; and after she was done talking a bit about her job as a chemistry professor at Peachtree College, he told her about his mechanical engineering job with Delta and what he did; and they got to talking about his time in the Air Force and he mentioned a few months he'd spent in Italy; and she mentioned visiting a few cites there when she and Devin went on a Mediterranean cruise; and they talked a little bit about back home; and then her mother called out to her for help with the TV; and they realized they had been on the phone for close to an hour and they said their goodnights and ended the chat.

Since then, things had gotten increasingly serious between the two of them. Justin made sure she started each day with him on her mind. He sent her a good morning greeting each and every morning. She had to admit she was flattered by the attention. She realized she had fallen into a sort of trap of comparing every new man in her life to the old one, Devin. But as much as she tried not to, it was there. And the worrying thing was that Justin treated her in a way so similar to how Devin used to treat her that the comparison couldn't be avoided. She smiled.

"Maybe I'm just gonna have to accept it and hope that Justin will be a better version of Devin."

She laughed.

"An updated and improved version."

She smiled.

"And most definitely newer."

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It was about fifteen minutes later that Ettie pulled into her parking spot at Peachtree College. She had time to pick up her morning coffee at the cafeteria, get to her office, and spend a few minutes checking her emails. There wasn't anything that couldn't wait until the afternoon. She spent her regular half an hour reviewing her notes and, shortly before 10:00 am, she

started to navigate her way through the several corridors to the lecture hall.

For some reason, she was reminded of her walk to the kitchen earlier that morning. She had been teaching or lecturing in chemistry since her grad school days. But now, after seventeen years, she found herself just not enjoying the job as much anymore. And she felt that somebody not enjoying their job was not conducive to them doing it well.

"But some of these students are so obnoxious and disrespectful at times. I can just feel my blood pressure rising when I have to deal with them."

And to make matters worse, the part of her job she still really enjoyed, working in the lab, was now under financial threat. Although not yet finalized, there were moves afoot to cut the Chemistry department's budget next year. She was concerned about how a cut might affect funding for the various projects she had been working on with her students. She was giving serious thought to a job offer from a private company, Foremost Chemicals, that she had received last week. She had to make up her mind soon. She paused and took a deep breath, then stepped briskly into the lecture room.

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It was about two hours later that Ettie sat by herself in her office, eating her lunch. She had gotten herself all worked up for a discussion on chemical bonding theory with the student who had been so contentious with her last week, and then he didn't show up today. She wasn't sure whether to be upset or relieved. She sighed and smiled ruefully.

"Guess I'll just make sure I'm ready next week as well."

Her mind drifted to another topic. It was her birthday in a month's time and she had to decide if she wanted a party. Keith had brought up the subject last Sunday when they had their regular weekly chat. His birthday was also in November,

but at the beginning of the month. He had suggested the Saturday after Thanksgiving for her party since he was going to be home anyway. But she was leaning against doing anything. She figured the next birthday she should celebrate should be her half-century.

That reminded her that Emma's birthday was next week.

"She would have been forty-two."

Ettie sighed. She definitely was going to call Lionel tonight to set something up with Tizzie.

"And also remind him he has to come babysit his mother tomorrow night so I can go out."

These days, she usually left her mother with their neighbor George if she had to go out briefly during the day, but had to depend on Lionel to come over if she wanted to go out at night.

And she had to remember to call Angie about visiting their mother. Maybe they could all meet up with Tizzie to honor Emma on her birthday.

"Ah, family."

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Her second lecture at 1:00 pm was routine and uneventful. She should have felt grateful, but it was more like a weariness. It had been on her mind that she couldn't continue in this mode much longer before her work and her students were affected. She fielded a few questions and scheduled office visits, then packed up her laptop and headed from the lecture hall to the lab with several students.

As 4:00 pm approached, she and the students started shutting down for the day and the weekend. The day somehow felt more exhausting, even though it wasn't much different from any of her other Friday workdays. She thought again of the private company offer. She had to make a decision by the end of next week

Later, as she made her way back to her office, she pulled her BlackBerry from her bag to check the time. It was 4:20 pm.

She figured she was ok, time-wise, to pick up her mother at 5. They wouldn't mind if she were a little late because of traffic.

As she turned up the volume on her BlackBerry, which she had forgotten had been on silent mode since her last lecture, she saw that there were two voice messages. She played the first as she walked. She was suddenly panicked. She ended the voicemail and started dialing as she rushed the rest of the way to her office.

"Hello. Good afternoon. This is Mrs. Green. You called earlier?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Green. Yes, yes, we were trying to reach you. I'm sorry to advise that your mother had a seizure of sorts and had to be taken by ambulance to the hospital."

"What? Where?"

"She's at Piermont General. We have been calling to check on her, but they won't give us any information. I hope she's ok."

"Ok. Thanks. I'll get over there right away."

"Bye then, Mrs. Green. Hope she's ok. We have her handbag and cane here whenever you get a chance to pick them up. Bye."