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Sequel to *The Medievalist*

CHAPTER 1

The accident

There were two of them ...

Racing.

I saw them, far behind, heading toward me ... two large, white pickup trucks, barreling down the street, weaving in and out of traffic ... A rondel. No. A galliard. A coranto. A volta! An estampie turned tarantella turned danse macabre. No ... a medieval *melée*.

I tried to get out of the way, to pull over so they could, like, pass me. The first truck veered left, into my escape path, forced me to jerk the car to the right, but then I saw the other truck coming down the center line, not paying any attention to traffic from either direction. Several cars ahead of me saw what was coming and swerved like me, but now my own swerving was causing other cars to swerve in opposing directions and the two white trucks ... no, a big car, not one of the trucks, a car bumped into me from the left, sending me to the right, where I scraped against several parked cars. Somehow, one of the white trucks managed to squeeze in between me and ...

An old woman pushing a baby carriage chose this moment to cross the street. I closed my eyes and looked away, then turned back and, like, couldn't take my eyes off her. The impact of the truck's grill against the pram sprayed recycled soda cans and yoghurt containers into the air. The woman screamed, surprised, then, arms waving, yelled curses at the truck as it sped away from her.

The other truck tried to make too sharp a turn and skidded a French curve into a vegetable stand on the corner. A parabola of potassium, folate, and dietary fiber—not to mention vitamins A and C—soared toward the heavens. Outdoor street vendor: the most dangerous job in Hollywood.

One car, trying to avoid the crash jumped the curb and ran through a sidewalk café, scattering half its patrons, and hitting the rest. Another car with the same intent bashed head on into a fire hydrant, transforming the potential energy inside the hydrant to the kinetic energy of a water plume spewing high into the air.

Several cars, attempting to stop, slammed their brakes and turned their steering wheels, screeching and burning perfect, crescent-shaped tire marks onto the asphalt, the doors of each car gently kissing the doors of the next until they lined the street like a row of soldiers standing at attention, only, like, lying down.

A youthful daycare worker in a bright yellow skirt and jumper chose that moment to lead a dozen of her tiny charges across the road. They had the “WALK” signal in their favor, the jaunty figure in the sign above their heads striding, as if leaning into the wind, was lit up a bright white that matched the color in the children’s faces as they screamed, endless tons of metal barreling toward them. Only in the last minute did the disheveled au pair manage to Baskin-Robbins the younglings out of harm’s way.

Passenger doors got ripped off when inattentive drivers opened them. A texting teen was forced to take evasive action when a car suddenly appeared in front of them in the breakdown lane, but they ended up entering the freeway from the wrong direction, sending oncoming traffic careening left and right.

Several cars went all space shuttle Challenger.

A city bus filled with passengers, carrying an explosive device that would detonate if the bus’s speed dropped below fifty, sped through this landscape of destruction without so much as a scratch.

It did, however, send crashing through a construction site where jumped a fence and pirouetted through the air, over the bus, landing in the storefront window of a dress shop.

Then the white trucks returned. Had they circled the block to get back into the mix? Or were these two different trucks? Their driving was no longer a medieval dance. It was the illumination of the mouth of hell in the Winchester Psalter (Cotton MS Nero C IV, fol. 39r). Two enormous dragon maws chomp down on the writhing bodies, the tortured souls within. Kings and queens and monks and Jews, all alike, tormented by smaller demons inside the hellmouth. No one escapes once the archangel Michael locks them in. Variations of this scene appear in dozens of manuscripts and now I found myself living inside of one.

Directly in my path, a fuel truck stalled in the intersection. I stopped just inches before hitting it, but the two white trucks headed full speed toward the tanker from either side. They were the hammer in Alexander the Great's "hammer and anvil" tactic, destined to make Greek fire from the tanker's essential cargo.

And, boom!

The explosion.

Then I was in the air.

I tried to get ... there was a loud pop and I ... I mean my car ... began to spin. Spin, then flip, then roll. Inside, the car became one giant airbag. Outside, I could hear brakes squealing and glass breaking and metal crashing against metal. Inside, silence ... no ... first there was a loud crash and a jolt and then ... my car had stopped. There was no more sound.

I woke to the rhythmic stylings of a heart monitor.

Beep ... beep ... beep ... beep ...

I'd been staring out the window the whole time I spoke, but now turned back and faced my interlocutor.

"Were you unconscious?" Sally asked.

Sally Brockman, MS, LP—"can call me Sally"—was the psychologist my mother found in New Haven, and, like, insisted I see because she thought it would help. For me, the verdict was still out.

"You woke up in the E.R.?" Sally continued. "Is that right?"

I scanned her office again, this time more deliberately than when I first came in.

The walls painted a pastel yellow. The one across from the window had artwork on it, also in pastels—an abstract, lots of horizontal lines, a landscape maybe, but, like non-confrontational, with pink and mauve and taupe. It looked like the kind of painting you'd find in a hotel room.

There was a couch under her office window. When I came in and asked if I had to, like, lie down on it, she said no, but it was okay if I wanted to. I didn't. We sat in two chairs, both covered in pale blue fabric. The chairs swiveled.

A small set of bookshelves stood behind her desk that, like, barely had any books, mostly plants and family photos, I guessed, and her framed diploma from the University of Texas, which might be why mom picked her. I swiveled back and forth in the pale blue chair a few times before I answered.

"Yes," I said. "I woke up in the hospital. E.R.? Some other room? I don't know. Don't remember. Nurses told me that I'd been unconscious for two days."

She made a note in a leatherbound notebook she held in her lap.

"May I just ... I want to be sure I've understood your story."

"It's not a story," I snapped.

"No, no. I understand," Sally said. "I just want to be sure I understand the sequence."

She paused and looked at me with blue eyes that matched the chairs' upholstery, with what I guessed was a gentle expression, like she was waiting for me to confirm that I understood her intentions. I nodded, just to make her happy. She began to narrate back to me what I had just told her.

"So, you were heading home and you saw, in the rearview mirror, two white trucks racing toward you. You said they were weaving and speeding and you tried to get out of the way. But for every evasive move you made, they had a counter move. And they kept coming and eventually set off a chain reaction, with multiple cars and other vehicles hitting and running into each other, and your car was in the middle of it all. Finally, the two white trucks, coming from different directions, both of them, hit a tanker truck next to your car, sending your car spinning then rolling until you smashed into something and stopped. Yes?"

"Yes," I said. "More or less."

"You said you were aware of loud crashing noises all around you. And then everything went quiet and the next thing you knew you were waking up in the emergency room. Is that right?"

"Yes." Sally Brockman was starting to annoy me.

"Okay," she said. "I wonder, if you don't mind, may I read you the accident report, from New Haven P.D.?" She paused and lifted a folder from the small table at her side. I nodded.

"Driver: Molly Isaacson. Female. 27 years old. Single car accident involving 2015 Mini Cooper. Driver sustained minor injuries, possible head trauma, TBI TBD. One parked car, a Honda Fit, sustained a crushed-in front fender. No other vehicle or property damage. 5 eyewitnesses attested to this being a single car/single driver incident."

Sally stopped reading and looked at me with what I guessed was her concerned look, then asked, "What do you think of that?"

"It's not right," I said without hesitation.

“Which part?” she said.

“All of it.”

“All of it?”

“All of it!”

“What about the eyewitnesses?” she asked.

“Eyewitnesses can be wrong,” I said.

“Yes, they can. But there’s also no corroborating evidence. No other cars damaged, except the Honda. No human was hurt, except you, with minor injuries.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No. Absolutely not. I’m just trying to establish what happened.”

“I told you what happened!” I almost shouted.

“Okay. It’s okay,” Sally said.

She looked again at the police report, then at her notebook, though she didn’t write anything down.

“Let’s go back to the E.R.,” she said.

I shifted in my seat, trying a few different positions to get comfortable. I can leave anytime I want, I thought. I told mom I’d try this, and hadn’t I just tried it? This isn’t working for me. I should go.

“You said you woke up in the E.R. So, when you went in you were unconscious. Or somehow sleeping. Yes?”

“Yes. Okay. Yes.”

Sally Brockman set down her notepad and pen and turned her blue swivel chair to look me squarely in the eyes.

“I have an idea,” she said. “I just want you to hear me out and see if this might make any sense.”

I nodded, but not right away.

“What if, maybe, you fell asleep at the wheel. You told me yourself when you first got here that you felt fine, except that you had trouble sleeping. That you haven’t slept well in months.”

“Okay.” As much as I resisted, it was hard to be skeptical.

“What if you fell asleep at the wheel and in those moments between falling asleep and running into the Honda Fit, you dreamt everything else that you’ve described?”

I caught myself rubbing each thumb with a forefinger. I had to look at my hands and will myself to stop.

“Do you think I, like, hallucinated all that? Do you think I’m crazy?”

She leaned in and put her elbows on her knees.

“First of all, we don’t really say ‘crazy’ anymore. It’s not very useful as a clinical term. So, no. I don’t think you’re crazy and I don’t think you were hallucinating. I think, in the seconds that you passed out, you had a very intense, very vivid dream, which included elements from every car crash you’ve ever seen in real life or in the movies. It even included a scene from that movie with Sandra Bullock and what’s-his-name on the bus. So vivid and intense that when you woke up it felt like it had really happened.”

I crossed my arms and pressed my fingers under my armpits.

“A dream ... is that even possible?”

“I think so,” Sally said, then paused again. “Can you tell me about the white trucks?”

All sorts of memories flooded into my brain. The trip to Kalamazoo. White trucks zooming past us and, like, nearly running us off the highway. Confederate flags. The medievalist conference. The neo-Nazi march. Kantorowicz. Chaos. Panic.

“What about the white trucks?” I asked.

White supremacists fighting other white supremacists. All because of a symbol on a T-shirt. Fake FBI agents exchanging fire with real FBI agents. Quint trying to get our prof to safety. More white trucks, racing into the crowd from four corners of the field.

“Do you think they have meaning?” Sally asked.

“What? Like white trucks represent my relationship with my mother or some bullshit?”

Sally smiled.

“It isn’t always about mom,” she said.

“Did my mom tell you to say that?”

Sally chuckled a little.

“No, but it seems like you want to talk about your mom. Do you ... want to talk about your mom?”

“No!”

I turned away from her and stared at the painting. Was this hideous thing her version of, like, a Rorschach test, where you could see anything and everything in its forms and thus figure out how cuckoo you were? I didn’t want her to catch me looking at it for fear that she’d, like, ask me what I thought about it, or how it made me feel.

Suddenly, she shifted the topic.

“Tell me about what happened at Kalamazoo,” she said.

“Did my mother tell you about that?!”

“She started to, but I cut her off. I told her I preferred to hear it from you. On the other hand, it was in the national news for several days.”

She paused, maybe to let the obviousness of that last statement sink in.

“It must have been awful,” she continued. “Sixty people dead, including a professor you cared about. The FBI shooting and killing someone right in front of you. It must have been terrible.”

I shook my head at her.

“You have no idea,” I said.

“No. I don’t.” she said. “So, tell me. That was three years ago. Have you ever talked to anyone about it?”

“It was 64,” I said, my voice cracking a little. “People. 64.”

“Yes. I’m sorry,” she said.

She let me sit there for a while. My eyes became unfocused. I closed them and let my head droop down.

“Tell me about the white trucks.”

Sally Brockman must have sensed my eyes welling up. She passed me a box of tissues, but I didn’t let a single tear escape down my cheek.

“It was more than anything you could possibly imagine,” I said. “More ...”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Sally said. “I really can’t imagine.”

My eyes began to tear up.

“I don’t want ... I can’t ...”

Sally Brockman let me sit there and cry.

I looked out the window at the Dunkin Donuts across the street as tears ran down my cheeks. I could hear the low hum of traffic from I-91, or maybe I imagined that. Trees blocked the view of the highway.

Who knows why, but I flashed on Stark giving the Sterling lecture. Her take against academics getting involved in political causes. That was three years ago, the year I started grad school. According to Stark, you had to choose. It’s either the *vita activa* or the *vita contemplativa*, as the medieval monks used to say. The latter was looking real good to me at that moment.

“I think you have PTSD,” Sally said at last. “I think I can help you if you want to keep coming.”

“Can you help me be invisible?” I said.

“I know what you’re saying,” Sally said. “You need help.”

“No,” I snapped. “I don’t want ...”

Sally pulled back but kept eye contact.

“See me. See someone else. Don’t see anyone,” she said. “But you won’t be healthy until you take charge of this. Getting control of your life means engagement, not withdrawal.”

“Being engaged brought death and destruction,” I said. “I won’t let that happen again.”