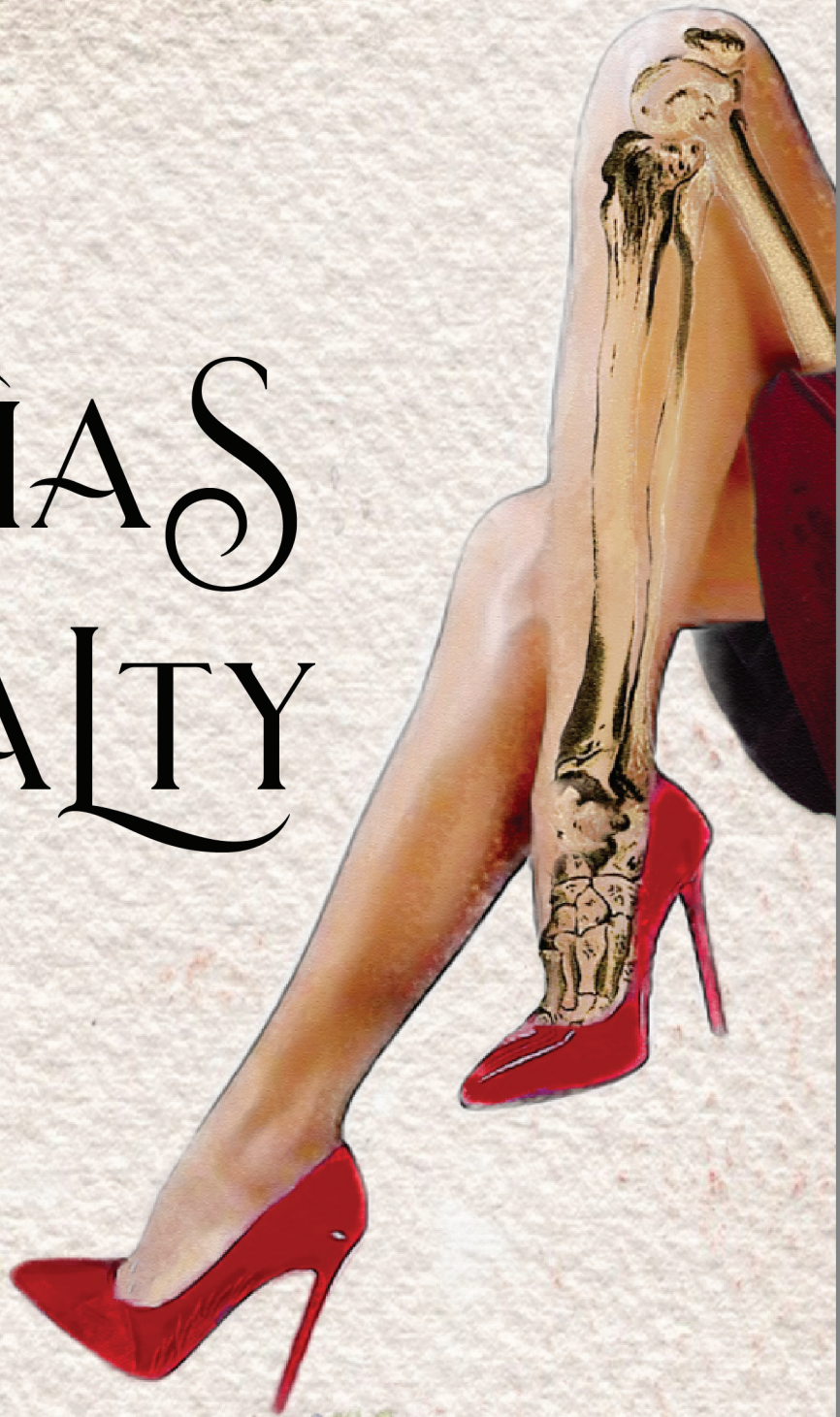


A
CHRISTMAS
CASUALTY

RYAN GRAY



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By Ryan Gray

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A CHRISTMAS CASUALTY

My stilettos clicked loudly with every strut down the wet 5th Avenue pavement. The remnants of last night's snow littered the edges of the sidewalk. The New York air was crisp, cold, and full of metallic sounds and smog, a lot of disgusting smog. Angry cab drivers fought to deliver their fares as quickly as possible by beeping their horns and screaming at one another.

The upscale restaurants and clothing shops had all hung matching red festive eaves announcing the Holiday season. Some marketing guru, a moron, had decided this year would be a good year to wrap an entire building in green and gold as if it were a present. This idiot's job is marketing, and he didn't stop to ask if anything ever goes with green and gold. I rolled my eyes at the eyesore as I headed further downtown. I'd soon have eyes on the Trump Tower, "Gag me now," I mused to myself. "Talk about gold and clashing!"

As I stomped my Vuitton heels down the street, all eyes were on me. The men wanted me, the women wanted to be me, or they hated me. My sleek body and pronounced curves drew more attention than I could ever need. Yet, my pulled back hair, Gucci briefcase, and three thousand dollar coat let every ogle know, "You'll never be good enough."

I was in total control of my environment. Manhattan had been my home for six years. It took me two years to adjust to the big city and only one more to make it mine. I came from a small town in Ohio; don't worry about which one. You don't know the little nothing town, and I never plan on returning.

I looked across 5th Ave. Mostly yellow cabs and a few town cars zoomed past. I saw a break in the traffic, but I would be too late by the time I reached the crosswalk. "Fine," I thought, "Rules are made to be broken." I slipped between two old, ugly cars and hopped off the sidewalk and over an icy puddle.

I paused to look down the street. "All clear," I thought, " I don't want a creepy foreigner running me over in a cab!" As I stepped off the curb, an approaching feeling of doom struck me, as did a silver sedan. The idiot driver took out my legs, tossing me head over heels.

Spinning like a top, I flew through the air and thought, "This isn't right...I have to get to the courthouse!"

Wait - stop! Before I go on, I should go back just a little further.

MAN EATER

This annoying trek began when I woke up at Mark's house. He's one of my many male companions. He's a bit of a 'bottom of the basement' choice, but has a great body, and smells good enough; however, he's a horrible kisser. He was currently my third choice. But, he also happened to be at the office Christmas party, hosted by one of my clients the night before. I didn't feel like going home alone that night.

(No. It wasn't because I was lonely. Don't be pathetic.)

After my third "spiced" eggnog, I loosened up and subtly let Mark know that tonight was his lucky night. I'd be exchanging 'gifts' with him. Of course, he was ecstatic. I mean, who wouldn't be? Just look at me! Even half sauced, I was still incredible.

Poor little Marky wanted some attention that morning, but I made it clear that I had been more than generous the night before, and I was incredibly hungover. The truth was, I was only partially hungover but I didn't need to see or hear from this guy for another month. With a half-hearted and overdramatic yawn, I promised to call, ran downstairs, and hopped into a cab. Thankfully I was at my condo building less than ten minutes later.

"Good morning, Miss Penny." Terry, my doorman, tipped a festive hat, sporting a bright red bow. He smiled warmly as he opened the big lobby door for me.

I was busy texting on my phone, so I didn't think to look up, "Whatever, old man," I muttered under my breath absentmindedly. I veered left and headed to the elevator. As I pressed the 'up' button, the hair on the back of my neck stood up; Mrs. Stanton! How does she always seem to trap me just as I enter my elevator? Does she wait all day and night, hoping I'd show up?

The scent of stale potpourri and cheap bar soap offended my nostrils. "Why does old lady perfume always make my eyes burn?" I smacked the elevator button, again and again, attempting an escape. I moaned to myself, the old bat would have to share my car up to the 30th floor.

"Penny, how are you, darling?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes; however, I was polite. She was rich, and you never knew who an old rich lady might know in Manhattan. "Mrs. Stanton, nice to see you."

Mrs. Stanton stroked an old bolognese. The little fluffy white dog was tucked into the nook of her arm, "Oh, Serge and I have just had a lovely walk in the park, but I am worried about his arthritis, as we are both not as young as we once were."

"Oh, sounds wonderful," I feigned interest in her conversation, but I moaned inwardly and thought to myself, "Ugh, she's so old and tiring."

"No matter," She continued as if we were the best of friends, "We just absolutely love all the holiday and Christmas decorations set out, and lights on the buildings, don't you dear?"

I smiled weakly but spoke as highbrow and politely as possible, "Oh yes, dear, absolutely." Umm, that might have been too sarcastic.

"Serge and I must have you over for some cider or hot cocoa this week."

"Oh my, so desperate, I'm never getting old!" I thought, "I must not have been sarcastic enough."

I turned to the door, anticipating the freedom I'd feel as soon as the sliding barriers released me onto my floor. I responded, "Oh, yes, that does sound wonderful."

The sliding doors thankfully opened. Mrs. Stanton, always the upper-class snob, touched my arm gently, "Have a wonderful day, my dear."

I grinned and exited the lift but muttered under my breath in the sweetest tone I could muster, "Don't die alone and get eaten by that ugly mutt of yours."

"What's that dear, what did you say?"

I turned back to the elevator door and with my hand to my ear leaned in towards her with an inquisitive look on my face, and asked, “Huh? What’s that?” Just as the door was closing. I giggled to myself, “Nice one! I timed that perfectly.”

I breezed into my barely used Manhattan apartment. I had flirted with the idea of a Christmas tree, however, with the exception of my business newsletter and Instagram, the green shrub was useless. So, I usually used a colleague’s tree or just photoshopped one in as needed. My condo remained completely free of all holiday decorations.

I peeled off my soiled clothing and dropped them into the hamper on my way to the shower. I said Mark didn’t smell bad, but he didn’t smell that good, yuck!

A half-hour later and briefcase in hand, I strutted into my all-glass highrise office building.

“Good morning, Miss Jones.” Mary-Lou Hanson, a middle-aged fatty with three kids, smiled at me as I entered. At least I assumed she was smiling. I didn’t look up. “A receptionist at her age? What a loser.” Since she was a ‘nobody,’ I didn’t waste my time pretending that I cared.

My firm’s lobby had one of those massive twenty-foot Christmas trees, generically decorated and surrounded by dozens of empty boxes wrapped with gift paper. I thought it was a waste of money, but most of the partners felt it was necessary for clients to feel cheerful as they entered our building. Who knows, maybe it would help them forget about the \$1,000 an hour billing.

Through the lobby, I caught a ride in an empty elevator up to my office suite. I was relieved; I’d feigned enough niceties for one day. As the door opened, I stepped out of the elevator and straight into a mop bucket. I knocked it hard enough with my Jimmy Choo stilettos that it tipped dirty water all over the tiled floor just as my heel snapped.

“What the hell? Which moron...” Now, usually, my language would be a lot more colorful. However, last year I had an altercation with an employee who, as it turned out, had the constitution of a hummingbird. Settling out of court, I had to dish out \$50,000. My insurance company made it clear that anymore vulgar language or abusive behavior and my policy would be revoked, making it next to impossible to carry any insurance.

“Sorry there, Miss Jones, are you ok?” Ugh, it was that sleazy janitor John, Jack, whoever. Who cared. I had already made it clear that I never wanted to see him, only that he did his job.

“Why are you here...?” I almost called him a sleaze, but a “lawsuit” sign flashed a warning in my brain, “...Joh-ames?” I guessed horribly, but who cares? He’s just a dirty cleaner.

“It’s Jim, ma’am. I’m sorry, I was called in ‘cause there’s a leak in the ceiling. I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

I glared at the dirty janitor but masked my disgust with a grin as I looked him over. He sported a thick beard, wore blue jeans, and a dirty rotary club tee-shirt. A belt full of keys dangled from a worn-out brown leather belt, and what looked like a tool strapped to his waistband. (Ok, fine! I admit it; it’s a Leatherman. I know what a Leatherman is. Don’t forget, I was raised in a small midwestern town, but don’t tell ANYONE!) The worst part: his boots. They had oil stains and dried paint speckled on them. I mean, boots can be stylish, clean boots, but old blue jeans and a rotary t-shirt? And all those keys dangling from his belt loop: definition of creepy.

“Well, thank you for handling that, John.” I glared daggers at him but shot a Cheshire grin, which could not be disproven in any court of law. I scooped up my broken heel, turned, and limped towards my office.

“It’s Jim, Ma’am.” The dirtball called after me.

“I know,” I replied over my shoulder with a fake sweet voice.

When I reached my office, I slammed the door open and shouted at my assistant, “Get in here, now! And, my word, Cheri, what are you wearing?”

Cheri, a cute little law graduate from NYU, popped up from her swiveling office chair, took off a Santa’s hat, and stuffed it into her desk. She ran around her desk to catch up with me. By the time I sat down, she had a pen and paper ready to transcribe my orders. Now, when I say cute, that’s what I mean. Cheri is like a fun little puppy. The Santa’s hat was a sweet little touch bordering her round face and rosy cheeks, but Christmas is so tired. I don’t want to see it on anyone.

Of course, Cheri’s nowhere in my league. When I looked for my assistant, I knew I couldn’t hire a moron nor someone hotter than I. However, most of the smart girls who applied for the job were ugo’s: ugly, that is. I first tried a hot little law student, barely a man, but so cute! He left after two weeks. I still take pride in being compared to the devil. Finally, I settled with Cheri. She’s smart enough, not too ambitious, easy to control, and not ugly. Most importantly, the little assistant possessed no challenge to my claim as the building’s queen bee.

I opened up on Cheri, exploding all my morning frustrations at her, “That annoying, disgusting thing is out there again...this time, his bucket was in my way and made me break the heel off my new shoes.” I picked up the two pieces of my broken Choo’s and threw them at her head. (I get angry, and it’s just your fault for standing too close to a tiger when she’s pissed!) Cheri barely managed to catch it. “Careful, clumsy. Now get that shoe to someone who can fix it, and do it fast.”

“Yes, Miss Jones.” Cheri scribbled her orders on to her pad.

“Here,” I threw the other shoe at her, “Closet!” I barked and then stuck my feet up onto my desk. “Hurry! I don’t have all day, klutzy.”

“Oh, yeah, of course, Miss Jones.” Finally, the slow girl got it. Cheri dug my spare shoes out of my office closet. They were last year’s Vuitton’s; hopefully, no one noticed, or I might just take someone’s head off.

Clumsy stuffed my aching feet into the slightly undersized shoes; my feet always ached. I refused to accept that I would ever - ever wear a size 8! “Now, as soon as you finish with that, call down to management, and tell them I want that sleazy cleaner gone.”

“Jim?”

“Whoever he is, I don’t want to see his face around this building again, or it’s going to be your oversized butt, ok?” I got away with a little too much when ordering Cheri around. When I hired her, I might have implied a bit more advancement opportunities in the company than was practical, which was all made up, of course. But, it got me what I wanted. Only the strong survive, right?

“Ok, Miss Jones, but you do know it’s Christmas tomorrow, and...”

“He called me Ma’am!” I hated being called ma’am, so antiquated and lame. That made me hate the sleazy janitor all the more.

“Okay and Miss Jones...”

“What!” I snapped.

“Um, sorry, but Miss Bernard needs you to call her. She’s being held at the 19th precinct, again.”

“Stupid, drunken cow.” I moaned. “Ok, fine, get her on the line and transfer her in here, then shut up and let me work. Make it quick, before the entire city shuts down for this waste of time, holiday.”

“Yes, Miss Jones.”

If you haven’t figured it out by now, I am a lawyer. Technically, that was one reason I moved to the Big Apple. I had two dreams, being a famous attorney, and making a buttload of money. I graduated from Harvard Law near the top of my class, I’ve always been good at school, and I’m beautiful. The combination of the three allowed me to pick from several prestigious Manhattan firms. I chose the most ruthless, which also happened to offer me the most money. Honestly, I think half the board just wanted to sleep with me. Back then, I didn’t notice things like that; I was too naive.

I spent two years fighting for my clients, doing the best job I could. I won most and lost a few. By all accounts, I was well on my way to a healthy, successful career. However, it also became clear that I would only pay off my student loans by year ten. After year fifteen, I’d finally have money in the bank. That was not what I signed up for. I began to scheme a better way to win cases.

Many of my law professors thought I was a genius, but really I was just driven. I prepared for everything. I outworked everyone and everything around me. If I needed to flirt to get a prime internship, I would, but then I would make sure everyone knew that I was the best because no one worked harder. When it came time for exams, I would pop any pill that would give me the edge and allow me extra hours of study. I even tried steroids once, but they only served to piss me off.

In court, while battling other attorneys, I discovered some had twenty years of experience and rapport with judges, cops, and courthouse staff. I figured out it would be years before I could catch up. Outworking them was useless. Flirting got you nowhere. I had to find a different way to change the game. One day it hit me. If I couldn’t beat these men and women in the courtroom straight on, I need to come at them sideways.

The first strategy was to hire a geek to make me a database, possibly unlike any other in the world. Instead of looking for case numbers, or names of defendants, it gave me the option to look for loopholes. I could find so many precedents to object to that prosecutors could barely breathe! However, this tactic didn’t always work out, but it did wear judges down.

Have you ever seen basketball players arguing with the referee because of a foul the official called? I noticed this one day while on a disaster of a date with an oaf at a sports bar. So,

I called up an acquaintance who worked with the local basketball team, the Kicks or whatever they are called, and asked him why. He told me that the referee couldn't change his call even if he wanted to. But the players argued all the time, especially star players, because, if the player keeps pushing, eventually he can pressure that referee into making a few calls in his direction. These calls would come at the end of the game when they count the most. Lobbying the ref is not a secret; most people see it happen every basketball game. However, to be effective, players have to be persistent and have little concern for their reputations.

After implementing this strategy, I tracked all my successful objections. My winning percentages of cases went up by 20%. But that still wasn't enough. So, with a psychoanalyst and fashion expert's help, I also tailored my clothes, altered my voice, and the makeup I wore. I even changed my walk to suit specific judges or juries. In one such case, I arrived in jeans and boots for closing arguments. It took them 45 minutes to find my "alleged" drug-trafficking client innocent.

Then there's the third and final punch for the knockout. In discovery, the prosecutor has to hand over a copy of all evidence they plan on presenting in court to the defendant's attorney. In contrast, most would first focus on significant damning evidence, but not me. I go straight to the most boring, irrelevant pieces of information available. With an overworked and understaffed prosecutor's office, you can always find something wrong. The weak spot was usually in the "minor" details. I typically find about 10-15 errors, mostly non-consequential. Then, it's just a matter of sprinkling in these irrelevant mistakes into my defense. That way, every twenty minutes or so, the judge is throwing out another piece of evidence as the jury of our peers look on. All I am doing is creating an illusion of momentum, making the court agree with me more than they agree with the prosecutor. That way, during closing arguments, when I've finished with a reminder of all the "evidence" I had managed to get thrown out, the jury often votes not guilty. I haven't won a legal case, mind you. I simply employed some manipulation and a smidgin of brainwashing to get me over the hump.

(I know what you're thinking. "But that's illegal, right?" Of course not, stupid! Unethical? Yes. But in law, it's not about what you do, but what you can prove.)

The light on my desk phone buzzed several times, letting me know that my call was ready. I popped on my Bluetooth headset and pressed the flashing button while I sighed aloud to myself, "This drunken little fetus is just lucky her daddy is loaded."

"Penny, Penny, is that you?"

"Yes, Gwen, I'm here, and we are going to get out of this together, ok, sweetie?" Ugh, who names their child Gwen anyway? Sounds like a secret love child from 1993 - No doubt!

"Thank you so much. Penny, I just have no idea what I'd do without you. You know, it wasn't my fault this time. Some idiot stepped off the curb, and I was just trying to miss him," Gwen paused as the sound of cheap tissue wiped at something, probably her fake nose. The 90's love child continued. "And somehow," sniffle, sniffle, "I ended up through the front window of a restaurant with some grandma stretched over the hood of my brand new Porsche!" My head was hurting from the involuntary eye-rolls and wincing. Yet, just as I was about to begin my recommendation to this idiot, the hair-brained love child continued talking!

“Now, they have me in an orange jumpsuit - orange! I mean, come on! I have no makeup, and I kid you not, Penny, there is NO UPGRADE! Like I can’t just pay someone for a private bathroom. Are you kidding me? I totally thought this was America, not like Geneva or something.” And almost on cue, the princess fell apart over the phone, most likely sobbing in front of a dozen hardened criminals, all on the lookout for a sucker to manipulate.

I was thankful for one thing, though. The wailing, squishing saliva, tears, and mucus helped me decide a tough issue momentarily weighing heavily on my mind. “Yep, that settles it; I am overcharging her father on this one, double!” I mused to myself as I yawned and checked my phone for messages. The longer I was on this call, the more billables I can suck from daddy.

Don’t get me wrong; I could lose it on this irresponsible imbecile. Screaming at her until I felt her life force melt through the phone was a tempting proposition. However, I knew this little drunk was a cash cow. Her family would be forking over enormous billable hours as long as her liver hangs on and the state of New York is dumb enough to continue allowing her to drive.

“Listen, Gwen,” I shuddered a bit at saying the awful name aloud, “I will be down in court as soon as possible. I will make sure you do not spend another night in that awful jail; just allow me to speak to your father, ok, honey?”

She took a deep breath and calmed rather quickly for someone who was supposedly in dire straits. “Ok, Penny, I’ll do it for you.”

I again rolled my eyes but took a deep breath and played along, “You just hang in there, Gwen (yuck-name). You are such a trooper.”

The contempt in my tone was pretty thick, and almost anyone else would have heard it, but this little freak didn’t seem to notice. “Thanks, girlfriend!”

I hung up the phone. I’d need some rest before I could react to a “girlfriend” from a nineteen-year-old infant with a drinking problem.

I grabbed my briefcase and coat then headed out the door. “Cheri, I’m heading to the courthouse; call Mr. Benard, and transfer that call to my cell immediately.”

“Ok, Miss Jones, but...”

“Oh, does clumsy not quite understand?” I mocked her, as was my daily joy, but I also hurried on as I was on the clock. A \$1000 an hour clock, but it was still a clock!

“It’s just that...with your shoes? What do you want me to...” Cheri held up my broken shoe.

I snatched them away from her, “Since I’m the only one around here capable of walking and chewing gum at the same time, I’ll do it.”

Cheri just stared back.

I snapped at her, “It means I can do two things at once. It’s a midwest thing, ok?” And I stormed off.

I slid out of the elevator on the bottom floor and past the reception desk. As I did, Mary-Lou’s high pitch, cheerful voice spat out, “Have a lovely day, Miss Jones.” I ignored the fatty and slid out of the building’s rotating doors.

As I made my way down the sidewalk, one of those annoying Santa Claus ‘army’ guys practically assaulted me with a nasty little silver bell he rang in my direction. The fake bearded

creep said Merry Christmas to me, the nerve! I know what he meant, “If you’re a good person, you’ll give me your hard-earned money for the poor.” Well, I don’t play that game. I stuffed my nose into the air and marched on.

Turning left, I headed for the crosswalk but saw a break in the traffic, so I quickly jay-walked between cars. I was about ten feet from reaching the crosswalk from a 45-degree angle. I looked right to make sure a foreign cab driver didn’t run me over; I should have looked a little better.

GORGEOUS GIANTS

In actuality, I didn’t feel a thing. Not that I remember. I do remember spinning. Around and up and down. If a person being hit by a sedan driving 35mph, finds themselves spinning upside down like an Olympic gymnast, you might think that person’s concern would be pain. Surprisingly, no. My first thought was, “I don’t have time for this! I’m supposed to be at the courthouse.”

The 1.75 seconds it took for me to be struck by the car, thrown into the air, and smacked into the pavement felt like slow motion. Wait! On second thought, everything was definitely in slow motion. For a moment, I thought I was caught in an 80’s cinemascope. Thankfully, the spinning and falling seemed to be coming to an end as the ground was getting closer and closer. I wanted to brace for the impact, but my arms just wouldn’t work. I was going to faceplant. “Great,” I thought, “a ton of plastic surgery after this,” but on second thought, I reasoned that I always wanted a little more upper lip and a little less nose. This way, I’d make the changes in secret. “Haha, bring it on asphalt!”

As I finally smacked the pavement, it was far softer than I expected. Like a ginormous down pillow, I squished into the black asphalt. Like a very deep pillow, an endless pillow that would not stop! “Uh-oh!” I was freaking out. The pavement swallowed my entire body whole, like the old B movie, “The Blob.” Instead of being digested, I emerged from the other side of the pavement safely and standing. I stood in the middle of the street again, but I was facing the wrong way.

I turned around as a cab barreled down on me. “Not again!” I screamed and tried to jump out of the way. I was too late. Yet, it didn’t matter. The car flew right through me, or I passed through the vehicle; honestly, I couldn’t tell, but it was insane! Other than a fuzzy sensation in my guts, I was unscathed. I looked my hands over and then my last year’s shoes, which I was mercilessly forced to wear. I ran my hands down my body: still there - still gorgeous. Impulsively, I brushed my hands over my coat to dust the fuzzy feeling off me like I was dusting off bugs as I danced over to the sidewalk. “Eww, ugh...what the hell?”

“No, you’re not there yet.” Someone responded from behind me.

I spun around, looking for the owner of that voice. Keep in mind; I was in the middle of Manhattan. Hundreds of passing cars and people swept by in two different directions. However, no one was looking at me. I could not find one person paying me any mind. My incredible looks alone should make ignoring me impossible.

“Penny Jones, over here.” I turned, and as if he appeared in a cloud of smoke, I saw him. He was the most gorgeous man I had ever seen. His skin was a perfect mocha blend. He was clean-shaven, had incredibly high cheekbones, a strong square jawline, dark semi-long flowing hair, and piercing blue eyes. His shoulders were massive, bulging through his jacket. Lastly, he was tall, extremely tall, well over seven feet. But unlike very tall men I’d known and even dated, he was not long, but proportionately perfect. He wore a white turtleneck, brown leather coat, and dark jeans. His feet were clad in heavy black leather boots with understated silver buckles strapped towards the outside of the foot.

“You’re gorgeous,” I stammered in awe as I looked him up and down.

He rolled his eyes at me, “Oh, that’s right, you’re one of those, aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry, what’s that?” I defensively snapped back, “One of what? Watch your words; I can end your life in this town if you’re not careful.”

The handsome giant stared down at me, blankly, “Ironic choice of words, Penny Jones.”

“How do you know my name? And, that’s the second time you’ve called me ‘Penny Jones.’”

He shrugged his shoulders at me, “So?”

“People don’t refer to someone by their first and last name. It’s weird.”

He sighed, “Who says, I’m people.”

“So who are you then? I mean, I just got hit by a car. Are you the driver’s attorney or fix-it man? If so...” Suddenly, all semblance of normality felt shattered. Not in reality, at first, but in my guts. I lost my breath, and a feeling of mirky damp invaded my lungs. I couldn’t speak and could barely breathe.

“What in heavens are you doing here, Gabe?” A sarcastic voice squealed behind me. I turned to see a similar character approach. He, too, was impossibly gorgeous, but this guy’s vibe was different. I often ran into these types, as defendants I was representing. Usually, they were suspected in a drug trafficking case or possibly to beat a murder wrap. The newcomer wore a white tailored suit with a black shirt and black wingtip shoes. A red jewel cinched up a bowling tie around his neck, and he carried a silver cane with a skull’s head decorating the top. His hair was blond, thick, and flowing. Again, this guy had impossible cheekbones, but his eyes were dark and unsettling, like a lapping lake of tar. He, too, was very tall, but not quite as big as the first giant beauty. One thing was for sure; this second guy creeped me out.

“Synth, you look as ugly as always. But, to answer your question, for now, the Boss says she’s with me.” Gabe pulled me behind him for protection.

Synth stepped up into his face. “You know the rules, boy scout. She chose long ago, so the new fish belongs to us.” The white giant used his cane to move Gabe just enough to peer around him and look me over. He grinned at me and licked his lips. His leer felt more like a wolf searching for a meal than a creep looking for a date. “Those are the rules the ‘boss’ set up.” Synth used air quotes sarcastically mocking whoever the “boss” was.

Gabe was having none of it. He swatted the walking stick away, “Get that thing out of my face before I beat you to death with it.”

“Big words from a man out of his territory.” Synth taunted.

“Everything I set foot on is the Boss’s territory, so unless you wanna throw down, I suggest you move along until you are called for, bug.”

For a second, I thought I was about to see an epic fight. Synth tensed, and for a split second, I thought I saw him flash into something different, like a ghoul or monster of some type, but it must have been the stress of being confused and hit by a freaking car.

After a few moments of eyeballing one another, Synth backed down. I didn’t blame him. There’s not a sane man on earth that would tangle with Gabe.

Synth shot out a mocking laugh and pointed at me, “It’s ok, this fish will be with us, sooner rather than later.” He dropped his hand, then saluted with the hilt of his cane to his forehead, “Penny Jones, I’ll be seeing you soon, sweetie.” He blew me a kiss, spun, and headed back down the sidewalk against traffic. Synth slid between an oncoming couple, each carrying an armload of wrapped Christmas presents, he tapped them both on their shoulders. As he did, Synth looked back at Gabe and winked. Almost immediately, the couple’s demeanor changed, and a heated argument erupted. Synth cocked his head back and released an evil cackle as he danced his way up 5th Ave.

I turned to Gabe, “Did he, just...make those people...” I stammered as I didn’t know how to describe what I was thinking, but I was very disturbed.

Glaring in Synth’s direction, Gabe responded to me. “Yes, he did. It is what he does and who he is.” Then Gabe turned on me and looked down into my eyes. I felt magical daggers permeate my soul from piercing blue eyes. I didn’t know if it was his pupils’ sharp color or the intensity in his look, but whatever it was, it was too much. I turned away. I faked a yawn, trying to play it cool.

“Penny Jones, look at me.” Gabe grabbed my arm and forced me to face him, “You have been given an incredible privilege only a very few on this earth receive. If you don’t take it seriously, there is nothing to do but leave you to your fate. You will have to go with that bug and his...” the huge beautiful man paused and glared with hatred, yet restrained his words, “...his associates.”

With my one free hand, I patted Gabe on the chest and gave him my patented pouty lips. “Umm...well, thank you for handling the creepy supermodel over there, big guy, but I have a job to do. So, I’ll be on my way.”

But, the big man was impenetrable. Gabe closed his eyes, sighed, and ranted at himself, “I can’t believe Mike sold me on this, as a ‘break.’ One quick, easy, simple day’s work my eye! I’d much rather be at war than dealing with this malarkey.”

“Malarkey? What are you a hundred?” I chided.

He smirked down at me, “Are you crazy? I’m not a child. Now, come with me; I have to show you something.”

I was still dealing with the wacko’s statement implying that being a hundred equals being a child when the giant, still clutching my wrist, turned and headed back into the intersection. As he did, he began to explain something; however, I was only half-listening. There was nothing I hated more than anyone pulling me around by the arm, especially a man! “Get off me, help, call the police, I’m being kidnapped!” I screamed, but no one seemed to mind or even notice.

My screams did not slow down or bother Gabe at all. He continued across the intersection, with me in tow, all the while ranting about something to do with quantum physics and the possibility of existing in a sixth dimension. I hated science.

We came to a hard stop in front of an ambulance, only a hundred feet from the sidewalk. I hadn't noticed it before, which was to be expected. This was New York City; EMTs and cops are everywhere. I glared with intense annoyance until I noticed the stretcher. A body covered by a thick grey blanket was being loaded into the blue and white emergency transport. They set the raised front wheels into the vehicle and retracted the longer set of stretcher wheels to slide the rolling bed into the van. At that moment, Gabe snapped his fingers, and a gust of wind blew in from nowhere, peeling the blanket back. Staring back at me was a face, half mangled, lifeless, empty - gone. The face belonged to me!

DEATH BECOMES ME

To be honest, I just stood there, staring. One of the EMTs noticed my mangled, lifeless face revealed for all the world to see. So, she pulled the blanket back over my glazed dead eyes. "Nope, uh, nope, I'm far too successful, far too...too..."

"Pretty?" Gabe asked.

I snapped my fingers and pointed, "Yes! Exactly, I'm successful, beautiful, amazing, and now you have this...this..." I pointed at the shell of a woman and shook my head, "Nope, uhuh, nope!"

Gabe rolled his eyes. "I don't have time for you to go through denial. Listen, you have a choice to make, and until you accept what happened, I cannot help you."

I turned and absent-mindedly walked back to the sidewalk, and at the risk of coming off crass, I totally lost my crap. "I knew it! It was that coffee. SHE slipped a hallucinogen into my coffee, that evil little witch on the 5th floor. Her jealousy pushed her over the edge, she snapped! She only had to distract or pay off Cheri. You know, Cheri's just dumb and weak enough to let it happen."

Gabe threw his hands up in the air, "I have an army to run, preparations to make for eternity...and Mike to kill for talking me into this...I do NOT have time for your denial!"

Gabe caught up to me on the sidewalk. He turned me around while I was still ranting about my conspiracy theory of being drugged explaining why none of this was real. Oddly, the huge man decided he was a street performer; he mimed tapping on a doorbell three times in the air. Everything stopped, and everyone froze. I looked right, a drop of water from an icicle stood suspended next to my head, stuck mid-air. I looked left, a woman on her phone was in the middle of spilling her coffee into her briefcase, which I'd typically find hilarious. However, when I say the middle, I mean - the liquid was suspended in midair!

"I'm just high, I'm just high, I'm just high..."

Gabe ignored my muttering. Instead, he managed to bring up a touch screen menu out

of thin air. Scrolling through it, he searched for something as he spoke, “Penny Jones, what you must understand, is that since you have crossed over into an extra dimension, remember what I said about the 6th dimension earlier? Well, that means we can supersede time.” He paused for a second and thought, “Or maybe just ignore it. Either way, I can do this.”

Gabe reached up high, to the left, and swiped his hand right. Everything undid itself, like in rewind. Starting with the ice drop next to my head, sucking itself back onto the icicle. To my left, the woman’s spilled mocha coffee climbed back up her files, to the edge of her briefcase, and sucked itself into her disposable mug. Everything, except for us, reversed in motion. My eyes almost bulged out my skull. Gabe pressed play when he spotted the former me. I strode backward past us. He hit play just in time for me to step off the sidewalk, jay-walking.

“I smiled and nodded,” Dang, I look good!

But as I picked my way through traffic, the memory of what happened next flashed through my mind. “Wait, Penny, don’t!” I screamed at myself, but it was too late.

The car clobbered me again. As I cringed, I mused, “I really did go flying.” My legs were cut out from under me, and I somersaulted head over heels, twisting like an ice-skater attempting a triple axel. Instead of a smooth landing, I found the pavement headfirst. In unison, Gabe and I, as well as about thirty onlookers, all winced and moaned in disgust. The cracking of my skull sounded like a crushing coke can.

“Nope, uh, no ways! I’m high; it still doesn’t matter,” I claimed again, but this time, I was only about 70% convinced.

Gabe rolled his eyes, brought up his touch screen, hit a couple of buttons, and then the “play” button again. The scene reset to me stepping off the curb, getting hit and smacking pavement, then looped back to me stepping off the curb, being hit by the cab, and smacking the pavement. It then looped back again and again and again.

Gabe leaned into me, “Well, at least you went out one last time, as you liked to live. The center of attention.”

I glared at the colossal ape, whom I was finding less and less attractive by the minute. Gabe did not betray the slightest smirk or smile. Finally, I asked, “Can I throw up, or is that not allowed anymore?”

He shrugged. “You can gag, but nothing will come out. The best thing you can do is, scream, yell, cry, and whatever else you need. Just get it done; we are on the clock.”

Annoyed, I glared, still not convinced.

“Ironically, making yourself throw up for the past five years is one reason you could never have survived that accident.” He pressed ‘stop’ on the horror show being looped over and over and brought up a different menu to his right side, and tapped a button showing the silhouette of a familiar female form. He pressed on the human figure, and it brought up a list of data. “According to this, the skull fracture actually could have been survivable, and the impact from the Mercedes would have only broken both legs. However, with your malnutrition, leading to incredibly low bone density and insufficient fat and muscle content, mostly from throwing up any substantial meals over the past five years, you also sustained a fracture to your neck and spine. Then there

are your organs.” He looked at me and raised an eyebrow, “You badly compromised your liver, your kidneys, and your poor lungs look like swiss cheese and...”

“Ok, I get it, you cold-hearted monster!” I snapped, “That ugly car killed me, but a little vanity on my part didn’t help.”

“A little vanity?” He chuckled, “Excuse me; I apologize for laughing.”

Finally, the ape showed a tiny bit of personality, and it was at my expense. What a jerk!

Gabe was not done salting my wounds, “Also, don’t forget that you died as a result of breaking the law. A law designed to keep you safe. Being an attorney, you of all people should understand that.”

“Ok fine, I admit it, I made a mistake. So what?” I put my hands on my hips and rolled my eyes, “What do you want me to do about it, apologize? Fine, I’m sorry. Can I go now?”

Gabe took a step back, shaking his head, muttering to himself again, but this time, he looked like his mind had lost all stability. He started talking to himself. “This is going to take way too long; she is too far gone.”

“Hello, big fella. I’m over here.” I threw up a hand in frustration and checked my watch, but there was no point. It was frozen, as was the entirety of New York City around me.

Gabe responded with an unemphatic finger in the air, demanding I wait. He put a hand on his ear, apparently listening to someone.

“Oh, earbuds, I get it.”

He ignored me but continued some type of argument akin to, she doesn’t deserve something and is a lost cause, blah, blah, blah. After a few minutes of back and forth, whoever was on the phone made the final decision. “Ok, I will show her, but I do not think it will make a... yes, Sir. Ok, Sir. Yes, Boss. Copy that.”

The giant looked at me and grinned, “Hold onto your pumps; we are going for a ride.”

He closed the other menus on the floating touch screen and brought up a separate touch screen. This one was different; a prominent, ominous red button flashed in the middle of the console. It was the red flash that made me very nervous.

“Wait a minute. I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” I said just as Gabe pressed the ominous button.

How do I describe this next part? Imagine the entire world disassembling into tiny blocks, and one by one, folding into themselves until the planet disappeared. (And yes, for your information, I did scream like a little girl. Totally natural, right? Hey! You weren’t there, so don’t judge!)

I found myself standing on nothing but white light. All that remained was Gabe, his horrible touch screen menu, and I. Then, as fast as I was whooshed into the empty existence of white light, those terrifying tiny little blocks reappeared, building a new scene. Within a matter of moments, I was staring at a clear blue sky; one lone cloud drifted past us. I looked down, and there were green oak-hickory trees swaying in a soft breeze next to a small creek winding its way around a broken-down fence. Next to the fence, a Jersey cow lazily grazed on a tuft of grass.

I only realized that I was holding my breath when I began swaying, so I let out an enormous

exhale and turned around to see where I was. Only twenty feet away stood my worst nightmare.

“Custard! Son of a - someone’s gonna die.” I growled under my breath. Now I was pissed! This heartless monster had taken me to the one place on earth I swore I’d never go back to. In front of me sat a yellow, double-wide trailer and a rusty, broken-down Ford pickup sprawled in the front yard. He had taken me home.

THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

“What the hell is your problem, Lurch? You brought me back to this hellhole?” I smacked Gabe’s arm in frustration.

He raised an eyebrow and looked at me sideways. “First, this is necessary for the process. Second, this is not your childhood home, Penny Jones. This scene is a simulation, a recreation. If you want to get technical,” a gleam of excitement flashed in his eyes, “It is a basic hologram program, similar to the system used to maintain the connection of the eternal soul and mortal body that...” (What a nerd!)

Yeah, I’m sure all that meant something to someone on some other planet, but I did not care, nor was I in the mood. So I cut him off, “Why’d you bring me here, Lurch?”

He glared at me but then raised his finger and turned away from me. He tapped his ear. “Enquiry...Yes, yes, ok.” He tapped his ear and turned back to me. “I have just learned that I am allowed to tell you why.”

“You don’t do this often, do you?”

“No, Penny Jones.” He curled his upper lip slightly and grunted out, “I do not. It was a favor to a FORMER friend Michael...Whom I’m sure is enjoying observing my incredible discomfort.”

“Are you usually a cop? You act like a cop.”

The giant shrugged his shoulders, “That would be a fairly accurate facsimile, yet it is not entirely true.”

“Yeah, how so?”

“I do not take prisoners.”

“What about that psycho, Synth? He walked away.”

Gabe scoffed at the name, “That pipsqueak would be goo on my boot heel if he had not backed down. He has been making the same idle threats for 1,500 years.”

“Wait. What? How old are you?” He stared at me for a second, then shrugged his shoulders and answered begrudgingly.

“Technically, I have no age.”

“Well then...”

Gabe cut me off, “We do not have time for your curiosity, Penny Jones; I am not the focus. You are. Do you wish to know why we have recreated your childhood home or not?”

“Ok, fine. Why?”

Gabe turned to his hellish control system and pressed a button. The scene shifted under

my feet, sliding us twenty feet forward until we were standing in the middle of the double-wide. No, I mean, literally, we were in the middle of the cheap home. Only my head stuck out of the floor. My body was melded or covered by the machined sheet metal, compromising the manufactured home flooring. I glared at Gabe. He stood chest-high inside the flooring.

The tan cheeks of the mocha giant glowed red with embarrassment. “Sorry. I’ll fix it. Give me a minute.”

“Hey, I thought all you afterlife beings didn’t mess up.”

Gabe laughed at me as he fiddled with his menu, searching for the right command. “HaHaHa! No errors? Of course, we make errors. Only the Boss does not ‘mess-up.’ As a matter of fact, a century ago, back in London, Mike, whom I just mentioned a minute ago, was tracking this crazy murderer. His name was Jack, something or other. Anyways, Mike was only supposed to make sure he got caught, but he accidentally made him, well...” Gabe grinned and chuckled a bit but stopped, unsure if he should continue.

“Well, what? You can’t stop a story there!”

“He made him disappear, ok?”

“Like, he killed him?”

“No, it’s something we can do that is more deconstruction of your cells at a molecular level. As it turns out, the Boss was ok with it, cause...”

“Wait, so you’re saying you can just make me disappear completely?”

“Not completely, just from the earth. Since your soul is eternal, it cannot be deconstructed. All of that is already uploaded.”

“Uploaded where?”

Gabe pointed up and smirked, “To the cloud. Isn’t it obvious? Did you not consider that you think we might have thought of something like a global wireless storage center long before humans?”

“Hey, Gigantor, I didn’t know this side of the universe existed until about thirty minutes ago, so give me a break, ok? And get me out of this floor!”

“Got it.”

The flooring around me sank until it adjusted around my old Vuitton pumps. The shifting landscape stole my balance for a few moments, so I had to steady myself on Gabe’s arm. He looked over at me, “What? Are we now friends?”

“Oh, grow up, Gigantor!” I snapped back but then noticed where I was. In front of me sat a haggard woman, a scarf wrapped around her head, sunken cheeks but much younger eyes than her face portrayed. She was in a simple blue dress and old maroon slippers. The sickly woman rocked back and forth in an old rocking chair with a big black Bible draped across her lap.

“Momma!” My voice broke with a redneck twang I hadn’t heard escape my throat in over a decade. My mom did not notice me but gently rocked back and forth, humming to herself and reading that silly old book of hers. She looked down, and a soft glow filled her face as she smiled.

Next to her sat a little blonde toddler on a big beach towel, brushing a doll’s hair. The dolly’s left arm was missing, and the right porcelain eye did not stay open. The little towhead

toddler didn't seem to mind. She brushed the doll's hair then sat it down. After propping the one-armed toy against fake wood paneling, she ordered an imaginary cup of tea. The blondie loved her one little broken doll as much as any mom would love a child.

"Shut the bell up, man!" I exclaimed. "That's me!" I knelt next to the child and looked into my face. "Look at my skin? If I had that skin today, I'd never touch an ounce of makeup." But, then I noticed my hair and winced, "But I would spend more time at the salon. Boy, what I would not give for a brush, pick, spray bottle of water and conditioner to start teaching this little...me, I guess, the connection between pain and beauty!"

"No, Penny Jones, that is not you, only a holographic image of your younger self. Besides, why must everything be external with you?"

I wrung my hands in the air, mockingly, "Eew...Excuse me, Mr. Perfect, I'm merely remembering..."

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and a wiry, grease-covered man stumbled through the door. Oil stains spotted his overalls. He wore a blood splotted grey t-shirt, which actually might have been white at one time. He took a slug from a Colt 45 bottle stuffed in his right fist, then bellowed, "Honey, I'm home," laughing at his own, tired joke.

A flood of memories suddenly pushed their way up from my soul. That was my father. It had been a long time since I thought of any of this, especially him. I had completely lost touch as to how many emotions I had pushed aside over the years. Let's just say it was quite a bit more than I had estimated. I jumped in front of my younger self and screamed at the intruder, "Get out, you drunk! Leave!" But, he ignored me. Momma did not seem to notice but remained rocking back and forth, humming to herself. The angry drunk stepped up to her. Hovering over mom, he took another swig then spewed out, "Look, at what we got here, the perfect little angel. Too good to party anymore, too good to be with her man, just cause he has a little fun."

"Bob, you know why I can't be with you when you get like this."

"You watch your mouth, Martha!" He screamed as he stuffed a finger in her face.

"I'll always love you." She smiled up at him.

He raised his bottle in rage, and I tried to intercede, tried to grab his arm, but my hand only passed through him. The scene wasn't real; it was just a recording. What happened - happened. Yet, something unexpected did happen. My father could not bring his arm down. Try as he might, he just couldn't swing the bottle or move at all. It was almost as if something or someone was holding him.

I turned to Gabe, "Did one of your guys...?"

Gabe pressed pause on the simulation and looked at me. He shrugged his shoulders, turned to his touch screen, and tapped a button. And there, standing between my abusive father and sickly mother, materialized the handsome giant, Gabe. He held back my father from attacking my mom in a blind drunken rage. I gasped and covered my mouth in shock as Gabe continued the playback. All the color drained from my father's face. Going nowhere fast, he dropped the bottle and backed off to the front door. "Doesn't matter - doesn't matter." He pointed at mom, "I'll see you in hell, either way."

Martha smiled, still rocking in her chair as if nothing exciting had happened. She replied calmly, “No, you won’t, Bob, no, you won’t.”

As Bob slammed his door on the way out, I waved my hand at Gabe, “Turn it off.”

“Well, I still have to show you...”

“Turn it off!” I screamed.

“Penny Jones...”

I cut him off again and screamed at Gabe with all my might, pounding on his chest with fists, decades of ignored emotions screaming to the surface, “Turn it off, turn it off, turn it off!”

For being such an enormous man, Gabe’s touch was unnaturally gentle. He wrapped massive arms around me and pulled me into his chest. I released everything onto his brown leather coat. Heavy tears streamed down my cheeks, and liquid dripped from my nose. He didn’t seem to mind but patiently waited for me to be done. Remembering myself, I pushed away from the big man but then screamed at him, “Why didn’t you save her? Why didn’t your all-powerful boss do something? Huh? You saved her from a beating, but then let cancer win? If your boss cared, why would he let her die that way?”

Gabe tried to sound compassionate, but he was still very robotic in his answers. “The Boss did not decide. Unfortunately, this world is not perfect and is full of mistakes, leading to disease and violence.”

“Oh, what? You saying leukemia was my mom’s fault?”

He looked shocked, “No, Penny Jones.”

“Then, whose?”

He shrugged, “It is your fault. It is Adam, the first man’s fault; it is your mom’s fault in a small way. The responsibility lies with every person who has ever lived. Everyone who has done something wrong, making what was once perfect, imperfect.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Confucius.” I mocked, with a counterpoint, “If the ‘boss’ is all-powerful Oz, then why not just make sure we were perfect and don’t do anything wrong?”

“Simple, Penny Jones. You cannot love without the choice to hate.”

I was all ready for my next counterpunch, but I did not expect this argument. I sniffed away leftover tears and wiped them from my eyes with my sleeve. “Wait, hold on. You are saying that I hate so that I can love? That’s the dumbest thing ever!” My argument was full of holes, but I would give it a try anyway.

“No, you are given a choice to hate so that you can love. You can do anything you like in this life, as long as you are willing to live with the consequences. This life is full of choices and choice comes with liability: the creation of wars, violence, injustice, and disease. However, without the option of errors, you do not have the real choice to love.”

I gritted my teeth, his logic was sound, and that teed me off.

Gabe turned back to his touch screen as I tried another tactic, “So the only reason you brought me here was to show me my dad was a monster and my mom died when I was a child only ‘cause life sucks, so get over it? Well, if you haven’t noticed, I have gotten over it, Lurch. I am fine. I’m a freaking rock star, and no one will ever take that away from me.”

“No,” Gabe stated over his shoulder.

“No,” I repeated mockingly.

Of course, he would not give me the satisfaction of getting under his skin, even if that ridiculous buttery goodness actually was skin. (I had never been jealous of a man’s skin before, which made me think Gabe was something different from a man or woman.)

Gabe stayed on track, a complete professional, “We recreated this time in your life to show you this.”

He clicked the play button, and the scene skipped to my mom, on her knees, next to me. I was tucked up in a blanket, asleep on the sofa. Pillows and blankets lay on the ground to catch me in case I fell. “Please, watch over my little angel after I am gone? No matter what, I only ask one thing. Make sure she finds you, so she can be with me after this life?”

“Huh,” I mused to myself, “I forgot she was so religious.” Then I turned to Gabe. “So the whole point is to,” I threw up air quotes, “take me to heaven, is it?”

“No, Penny Jones, you don’t get it. If you don’t know the Boss before you die, then it’s too late. He is the only one who can bring humans up. Otherwise, you go down.”

“Like...?” I pointed down, “All the way down?”

“Yes, Penny Jones.”

I shook my head, “Wait a minute! So this all-loving, all-powerful boss of yours is just playing mind games with me?”

Gabe sighed and shrugged his shoulders, “To be honest, Penny Jones, I do not know what his play might be. It might be Dickens, or it might be Shakespeare.” This was the first time I saw a question mark across Gabe’s face. “The laws of the universe say you go to the ground after death, decaying until the final audit of your life. At that time, you are measured and would be sent down. The point of this exercise is completely unknown to me.”

“So, you don’t know everything?”

Gabe cocked his head back and laughed, “Do I look like I have the capacity to know everything? I am not that big! Besides, I was constructed, just like you. If I have also been created, how could I possibly know everything - think before you speak, Penny Jones.”

“Whatever,” I snarked back. I hated being corrected. Any notion that I was not the smartest person around was intolerable.

Gabe fiddled with some buttons on his touch screen, “It’s time we move on.”

“Wait,” I turned back to the image of my mom, still kneeling by my side. “Just one more minute.”

“One minute,” Gabe agreed.

I stared at her face, haggard, gaunt, eaten away by cancer. But her eyes, her face, it was glowing, happy, and sure. Mom carried an expression I had never felt. She looked peaceful. “I miss you, mamma.” It was all I could choke out. I turned and nodded to Gabe.

The giant pressed a button, and again we were off. Blocks deconstructed and reconstructed, fading into a lively scene of teenage kids scurrying around us like rats.

“Yuck, teenagers! Where are we?” I practically squealed. I had defended teens twice in my career; both times ended with me almost sabotaging the case to ensure those monsters found

themselves behind bars. Not for their crimes, mind you, but for annoying me half to death!

“You do not recognize your old high school, Penny Jones?”

My jaw dropped, and my face went white, “Oh no...bell no, you little sadistic...”

A familiar laugh behind me cut me off. A young fake blonde in a cheerleader’s uniform was leaning against a locker entertaining three jocks. “Ah, you gotta be kidding me!” I exclaimed. “Look at that hair, disgusting. It looks like a 12-year old spray painted it!”

Gabe raised an eyebrow, “Is your hair all that you remember during this time of life?”

I scoffed, “Yeah!” But then snapped my fingers, “That, and cheap underwear.”

Gabe rolled his eyes at me and went back to his floating touch screen.

“What? You don’t understand. My butt and armpits were itchy all the time!”

Gabe ignored my “T.M.I.” comment and hit play then directed my attention back to...well, back to me.

A small, albeit a cute kid with glasses and leather man-purse slung over one shoulder appeared around the corner. He approached the three boys surrounding my younger cheerleading self, unsure as to what was going on.

I suddenly recalled the scene and turned to Gabe, “Oh, no, let’s not watch this, big fella, shall we?” Gabe did not even look at me but said, “I believe the expression is ‘flat chance.’”

I went back to the sadism that was my previous life, growling under my breath, “It’s ‘fat chance,’ idio...” I was cut off by my younger self, suddenly and very clumsily, grabbing at the biggest of the jocks and stuffing her tongue down his throat. As to not be misunderstood, the young little hussy, apparently forgetting her brain at home that day, shot a look at the shocked and bewildered cute boy with glasses. The shocked young man promptly and awkwardly turned and headed back in the direction he came.

I cringed, “Wow, so awkward.” It was all I could do not to slap myself on the forehead, remembering this glaring mistake.

Gabe stepped up next to me, “I believe that was your first love that you unceremoniously discarded.”

“Ok, fine, I was 15, I suddenly had...you know.”

“Breasts?” Gabe offered.

“Yes, ok, so I had some curves, and suddenly I was hot. That kid, I can’t remember his name, just wasn’t what I was looking for.”

“Ok,” Gabe stated.

“Hey, Lurch, I paid for that crap, ok! I mean, I found out later that pig slept with almost every one of my friends on the cheer squad. The first time I had to get tested for - whatever - the point is, I paid for that, but I learned a valuable lesson! Men are pigs!”

“But women who ‘trade up’ when it suits them are not pigs?”

“Hey, I’m the victim here!”

“If you truly believe that, Penny Jones, you would not have begged me not to replay this scenario from your life.”

I brushed the comment off with a wave of my hand, “Piss-posh. It had to do with that awful

hair-dye job.”

“Hmmm.” Gabe growled, “Fine, let’s move on.”

“Yes, please. All this high school and lack of self-respect are making me sick.”

“And by lack of self-respect, you mean...” Gabe prodded with a slight glimmer of hope in his voice.

“I mean horrible hair and cheap make up, that made me look worse than if I’d just had on nothing at all. Why? What did you think I meant?”

The giant rolled his piercing blue eyes and sighed. “Never mind.”

I nudged him in the ribs, “You know, you’re kinda cute when you’re annoyed.”

He turned back to his touch screen menu and shot me an arid response. “Then you must be getting more attracted to me by the second.” He slammed a button, and again, we were off.

A moment later, I surveyed the new scene and growled at Gabe, “I said, no more teens!”

Gabe snapped back, “And, I do not answer to you.”

“Stupid, lame sons of guns, monkey knuckle...” I balked at the words coming out of my mouth.

Gabe noticed that I was falling over my words and informed me, “In case you have not noticed by now, since you are in my realm of extra dimensions, your language has a filter.”

“What! You mean I’m censored?”

Gabe shook his head, “No, more like dubbed. You can say what you like, but the Boss has a few words he refuses to allow in this dimension.

“So if I say shed, I...wait? Shed, shed, oh shed! Wow, that’s funky!”

Gabe sighed, “Yes, fascinating...”, then muttered under his breath, “made in His image with endless potential for greatness, and yet she is fascinated with the audio editing program.”

I got the big man’s attention back on me, “Anyways, Lurch, we can move on. There is nothing significant about this day, at all.” Before me was a sea of shiny green hats, covering 18-year-old heads. Some kids were smiling and paying attention; some took pictures or looked back into the crowd behind them and waved to friends and family. I sneered as I mused aloud, “My high school graduation.”

“Penny Jones, Salutatorian!” My teachers and the principals all smiled with pride and applauded wildly. I pumped the air in triumph and bowed with a slight curtsy, blew a kiss to the crowd, and spun off the stage.

“That nerdy Indian kid beat me for valedictorian. Wasn’t fair; he had a photographic memory.”

“Eidetic.”

“What?”

“It’s called eidetic memory. Technically, all humans have a photographic memory; it’s just he could remember details much better than most.” Gabe corrected me as he set back to work on his touch screen.

“Whatever, he should have been disqualified with that advantage.” I snapped back.

Gabe slid the scene forward, resulting in all the speeches zooming by. It was 70 or 80

minutes in real-time, but this way, it only took about 45 seconds. “Wow, I wish I could have had this machine during the first round of these pompous old people, dawdling on about...”

Cheers drowned me out as my graduating class threw their hats into the air in celebration. Gabe found my younger self in the crowd and zoomed both of us right next to me. (When I say zoomed, it’s like he moved the scene to where we stood. Weird, I know.)

“Penny, Penny!” A tall young man with short-cropped hair and a familiar leather satchel around his neck was chasing me down.

My younger self raised an eyebrow in amusement, “Oh hey, what’s up?”

I nudged Gabe, “Dang! I forgot about this kid. He sure did blossom into a man! He’s hot.”

The good looking kid pushed his glasses against his face nervously. “I just wanted to say congratulations and good luck.”

I rolled my eyes, “Thanks.”

The young man shook his head and laughed, “Ok, whatever, Penny,” and turned to walk away but stopped. He turned back around. “Penny, I’ve known you since we were freshmen, and you’re way better than you think you are.”

In unison, both my jaw dropped as did my younger self’s jaw. We exclaimed in unison, “And what is that supposed to mean?”

But hottie glasses boy wasn’t done. He stepped up into my face, “I’m the only one who cared about you, not what you could do for me. Those ape-faced jocks only wanted your body and the status of dating the prettiest girl in school, and the teachers only wanted to take credit for your accomplishments.”

“First off! Thanks for calling me the prettiest girl in school,” I winked at him but then got mean, “Second, what do you know about it? I didn’t need you anymore, ok? Besides, you wanted me too. You’re just mad cause you never got out of the ‘friend-zone.’”

Glasses leaned back on his heels, “Oh, I see, that’s what we were, just friends. Cool. Well, I’m ok with that, since I used to be the only real friend you had in this place.” He shook his head, turned to leave, and shouted over his shoulder at me, “Have a nice life,” took a step but then stopped. Hanging his head, the young man sighed, “also, good luck, Penny.”

I noticed Gabe observing me as I was about to mimic my younger self, again, by crossing my arms. “What!” I snapped and turned back to watch the drama play out.

My mini-me paused, so I screamed at her, “Oh my gosh! Stop milking it, you immature drama queen!” As if begrudgingly responding to my demand, she finally said, “Yeah, good luck to you too.”

Gabe hit pause. “Why did you never tell him, Penny Jones?”

I shook my head from side to side brushing his comment away with a wave from my hand, “What are you talking about?”

He hit a button, and we zoomed so close to my face that every freckle and pore was visible, “Ok, big man, that’s just inappropriate and uncalled for!”

“That?” He pointed at the tear forming in the corner of my eye.

“Ah, nothing, just a little something in my eye.”

“Denying the truth will get you nowhere, Penny Jones.”

“Just stop. Fine, maybe I did have a little thing for him, and maybe I just didn’t want to....”

“What? Why not be with a boy you actually liked?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Why choose meatheads that you knew would only get drunk and cheat on you?”

I shrugged again.

“Why choose men who only resemble your father?”

How this happened, I don’t know, because I don’t remember doing it. I turned sharply and backhanded Gabe in the face. I only know this because he snatched up my coat lapel with one hand and hefted me into the air like a rag doll. Yet, I continued to swing for a while, unable to reach his face, until my arms got tired. Gabe asked, “Are you done?”

I nodded.

“Answer my question.”

“Put me down!” I demanded.

“Answer my question.” He demanded again as he jostled me while I hovered over his head. My younger self in the background was posing for pictures, charming anyone she could get her paws on, sporting that gorgeous, fake smile.

“Careful man, shed! You’re gonna kill me!”

Gabe rolled his eyes, “I barely shook you. Besides, you are already dead. Now answer me.” The mean giant demanded again.

“Cause I didn’t want to get hurt!” I blurted out.

He slowly lowered me to the ground but did not fully release me, “Go on.”

“If I dated a good guy, and something happened, I could get hurt. If I dated morons who I knew would cheat or just get drunk,” I shrugged as my eyes swelled up, “it didn’t matter; I never had to let them in.”

Gabe let me go and turned back to his touch screen, “Most humans think that their major sin is being mean or selfish when in reality, their cruelty is almost always because they are scared.” He peered over his shoulder at me, “Penny Jones, your cruelty is not the problem; it is your fear.”

Then he struck another button, and away we went.

LATE FOR MY OWN FUNERAL

“Oh, you gotta be kidding me!” Gabe and I both found ourselves wandering around one of those lame commercial funeral homes. You know, the place where the guy in the boring suit tells you that your best option for burying your dead relative in the dirt is a fancy pine box that sets you back as much as a new car. “I’m going to my own generic funeral?”

“Did you leave a will? If not, then without family, your company’s insurance company was tasked with paying for arrangements.” Gabe explained as we poked our heads through various rooms, looking for a familiar face.

“There must be a dozen little chapel rooms. It’s like Cosco for funerals, so embarrassing! To answer your question, no! I am in my thirties, come on, I’m not lame!”

“You’re an attorney and think leaving a will is lame? Interesting.”

“If I were in my 50’s maybe, but how should I know I’d die?”

“Your mom died in her 30’s.”

“That’s different, and you know it.”

“Did she think she would get cancer?”

I was about to strike back when I spotted Mark. “Oh, Gabe, here we go, this way.” We both followed Mark into one of the smallest chapels. He stopped short and looked around for a place to sit. And unfortunately, there were plenty of choices in seating. I stepped into the room and was not impressed. “Spam it!” I looked up at Gabe, “Really, even spam is dubbed?”

“Cursing someone to hell is technically the worst. So, yes, it is also dubbed.”

I rolled my eyes and went on, “Where the hell is everyone? Spam it!” This language thing was beginning to annoy me.

Mark found a seat next to that witch from the 5th floor. “What is that hook nose troll doing here?”

Mark said something to her, and she giggled, but then stopped herself short with a hand clapped over her mouth. Mark looked around with pride, grinning.

“Oh, my Goose! Is that Basset Hound hitting on the 5th-floor witch at my frolicking funeral?” I pointed at her, “Gabe, kill!”

The giant rolled his eyes at me, “No. Besides, this isn’t real, remember?”

“Fine, then fake kill him...actually them both! It will make me feel better.”

“Turn around,” I whipped around to face Gabe. He had brought up his big computer toy, again. This time he handed me what looked like a big salad bowl with wires attached to it. “What, do I finally get some food?”

“No. Put it on your head.”

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t, you will melt into cosmic wave radiation, drifting through the solar system as unseen matter until the end of the age.”

Honestly, I couldn’t tell if he was serious or not. His humor made the British look like Jim Carrey.

Gabe rolled his eyes, “This is a funeral; no one talks, so this device will allow you to read their thoughts. Please, trust me, ok?”

“But how do you...”

He pointed up, “The cloud, remember? Now, just put it on your head and look at the person you want to hear from.”

“Fine...ok,” I put it on and stared at Mark.

“Ugh, how much longer do I have to pretend like I care?”

I tore the helmet off and tossed it to Gabe, marched down the aisle to his row, and punched him in the face. To be more accurate, I tried to punch him in the face. My fist only passed through

his head. (He was a hologram, remember?)

“Can we get back to work, please?” Gabe shook the helmet in his hand and motioned me back.

“Fine!” I stormed back and put the ugly hat back on and stared at that pig, Mark, again.

“This chick isn’t too bad, not nearly as hot as Penny.”

I grinned and mused, “Ok, maybe he’s not all that bad. Why, thank you.”

“But this one probably won’t have to control me like some weird robot overlord.”

“That dirty...”

Gabe put a hand on my shoulder, “Try someone else, Penny, and calm down.”

I looked at the hag from the 5th floor sitting next to him, “Wow, this guy smells good.”

“Haha, no, he doesn’t.”

“Wonder how I smell? Did I remember deodorant? Wait! What if I forgot, and I smell like B.O.” She shifted in her seat a bit, “my butt itches.”

“Haha, what a loser,” I exclaimed. I then shifted my gaze until I spotted a crying young lady at the front of the venue, nearest a large printout of my face set on an easel. “Oh no, not dumb bass, it’s her fault I died!” I blurted out as I pointed to my spoiled brat of a client, Gwen. She was playing the part of a mourning friend in the front row.

Gabe leaned closer to me, “No, it’s your fault for jay-walking.”

I rolled my eyes, “Partially my fault, but...”

Gabe glared daggers at me, so I went back to my observations. I stared into the head of Gwen, the poorly named drunk, not expecting to get much from a hollow skull like hers. “Wow, I am so drunk right now. Keep crying, and no one will know. Hahaha, so funny. I’m about to drive drunk away from some lady’s funeral who died because she got hit by a car. It would be crazy if I hit someone! L.O.L.”

“That’s disturbing.”

“What?” Gabe asked.

“That little twit down there actually spells out L.O.L. in a conversation with herself. Wow, even dumber than I thought.”

Gabe rolled his eyes, “Ok, who else?”

“Well, how about... wait a minute!” A thickly bearded man in a cheap suit walked past us and sat behind Gwen, in the second row. “What the ham! Why is that sleaze here?” It was the janitor, the dirty annoyance who broke my heel. “He’s to blame too. If I hadn’t broken my heel...”

“Jay-walking.” Gabe reminded me.

“Shut up, Lurch! Not the point.”

“What is?”

I tore the helmet off again and pointed at the sleazy janitor. “Why is he here? That’s the point!”

“Put the device back on your head, and you can find out.”

“Fine, but I’m telling you, I’m going to be teed off when I find out what this bearded freak is up to in his freaky head.” I fixed my hair, then set the helmet back on my skull, “Probably a stalker

of some kind.”

Suddenly it was night. Sand whipped around my ankles, and stars shimmered overhead. I tore the helmet off and looked over at Gabe, “What the hockey sticks, man?”

He grinned, “Sorry, I should have warned you, but that was too fun.”

“Warn me about what?” I demanded.

“With Jim, your janitor friend there.”

“Jim, that’s right, why can’t I remember that name? Not like it’s something annoying, like ‘Gabe.’”

“Hilarious, child.” He raised an eyebrow, “As I was saying. You will be going deeper into Jim’s mind. He’s the main point of this scenario in your life.”

I rolled my eyes. “What? Did he push me in front of that car?” I quipped as I put the helmet back on.

I was back in the sand. Moonlight peaked out from a lone cloud in the night sky, giving me enough light to see below. I was in a desert. I stood atop a shallow sand dune with several more to my right and left. I was peering down onto a single lane tar road. It was dead quiet, except for two oncoming headlights making their way closer from a distance. The sound of clanging metal broke the silence, as did a shushing command. After a few more seconds, my pupils adjusted to the dark. I peered around, then froze out of fear; men were lying on the ground all around me, men with guns, waiting in ambush.

“It’s not real, it’s not real,” I reminded myself.

As headlights approached, a dozen rifles loaded a bullet into their chambers. The vehicle was only 100 feet away. The dozen or so riflemen raised to one knee. The one who looked to be the leader held an old cell phone in one hand, reading it with his palm and thumb.

The vehicle was a Humvee, a military vehicle of some kind. “Oh shizzle, I’m in Iraq!”

“BOOM!” The blast would have lifted me off my feet (but it was holographic, remember? Try to keep up). The attackers around me had braced for the impact. Waited out the initial shock wave, then stood and charged the vehicle. The Humvee overturned, and smoke poured out of the engine as three bodies managed to scamper out through the transport’s top hatch. A hail of gunfire met the escaping men. One soldier finished helping his buddy out of the vehicle, swung his rifle around to face the enemy, and returned fire. The other two, although injured, leaned against the smoking vehicle, firing from behind cover.

The one unscathed soldier yelled something to his guys; the others agreed. He shouted an order and lobbed a baseball.” Wait! A baseball? That can’t be right?” The scene froze.

“Gabe, I see a baseball in the middle of a war scenario.”

“Sorry, user error. How about now?”

The white ball transformed in mid-air into a tan pineapple shape.

“All good, thanks, big guy.”

“You are welcome, Penny Jones.”

I took the helmet off just enough to get a peek of Gabe’s face. He was grinning. “What? Why are you smiling?”

“That is the first time you said thank you. It makes me feel that maybe, you and I still have hope.” He turned his back to me, continuing his work, and muttered, “Hope for your soul.”

I put my helmet back on and swore but stopped short when my swear word was dubbed too, “Baa-Humbug.”

“Hey, Gigantor; baa-humbug doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s an inside joke.” He grinned. “If Penny Jones does not like it, Penny Jones does not have to swear.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” I whined a bit like a teenager and put the helmet back on.

The hand grenade only hurt the first of the 12 attackers. But from my vantage point, I could see that the soldier was only looking for a distraction. After the explosion, he ran left, then circled back to the side of the enemy while his injured comrades continued firing. (Yes, I know this is a flanking maneuver; I have a law degree from Harvard. I have read a history book before. It’s just a bit too nerdy for me to say. Ok?)

The lone soldier snuck up on the enemy’s right side, with night vision goggles clipped over the brim of his helmet. He crept closer and closer, but he did not shoot. 70 feet, 50 feet, 40 feet! I was amazed by his bravery, I could hardly breathe waiting to see what would happen, but this soldier did not back down nor slow down. He didn’t even look to be sweating. 30 feet, 20 feet. “Ah, come on, these guys have to see him by now; this is crazy,” I squealed inwardly.

10 feet. One of the attackers looked up and tried to scream. “Pop! Pop! Pop!” The soldier went to work, scoring five out of six targets. One of the enemies grabbed the lone soldier’s rifle barrel, pushed it up, and knocked him back. The soldier gave up the rifle with his right hand but drew his sidearm and fired from his hip twice as he fell backward. He didn’t wait but rolled right, just as a bullet struck the sand where he just was. He fired three times from a prone position, hitting two more men. As he tried to stand, he was tackled to the ground by another two men. His pistol shot through the stomach of one but then responded with a dry click at the other. The soldier had no option but to survive using only his fists. The two men clawed, punched, and strangled one another for what felt like an eternity. The fight was brutal, and quite frankly, made me sick to my stomach.

Finally, covered in blood, his own and that of his enemies, the lone soldier stood up, victorious. He wavered, took two steps, dropped to a knee, and threw up. He stumbled back down the hill to his comrades, but they were silent. Both men lay on the desert floor, still, not breathing, blood pooling around them both. The lone surviving soldier salvaged one of their rifles, checked the action, knelt, and waited.

I walked down the hill to get a better look at this guy. As I did, the sound of a helicopter approached. I was ten feet away when I noticed that the brave, victorious soldier had streaks of tears mixing with blood splattered on his cheeks. When the helicopter touched down and his reinforcements arrived, the soldier dropped his rifle into the sand, lowered his face into his lap, and wept. After what felt like an eternity, he put a hand on each of the deceased’s chests as they were lifted by medical personnel. Another medic began checking the surviving soldier over and cleaning his face; as he did, it finally dawned on me. This lone surviving soldier was the janitor!

I knelt down and sat only two feet from him. It was Jim, the janitor, alright. Several years younger, no beard, but for sure it was him. Without the beard, it took me a while to recognize him. “Man, you have been through some shed!” I said aloud to myself.

Another soldier approached and returned Jim’s helmet. He nodded a thank you, but as he handed it over, I spied a picture stuffed in the lining of the tan camo helmet. So, I circled Jim and looked over his shoulder. Stuffed in the lining of this soldier’s helmet was a photo of a fake blonde in a cheerleader’s uniform. It was a highschool photo of me.

I circled around and glared into the face of the soldier. Not satisfied, I tore the helmet off my head, bringing me back to my funeral; I marched down the aisle of the fake chapel and stood next to the janitor and got into his face studying his eyes. As I did, Jim reached into his shirt pocket and slid on a pair of glasses.

I leaned back on my heels and covered my mouth with both hands in shock, “James?”

THE DEATH OF FASHION

I sat and stared at nothing. The simulation was off. The pew I had been sitting on was gone. I was floating on white. It must have been comfortable because I didn’t notice or care.

“Where are your thoughts, Penny Jones?” Gabe asked while moving his fingers across his touch screen from hell, apparently readying the program for the next segment of my life’s “greatest hits” compilation.

“Nah, nowhere.” I lied.

“I may not be able to read your mind, but staring into nothing for the past 47 minutes and 36 seconds tells me one thing.”

“What?” I whined the question at him with the force of a toddler kicking and screaming his way from broccoli.

“You are lying, and I do not tolerate lies. Answer the question.”

“Fine, Lurch. I just, well, you know?”

“No, Penny Jones, I do not. That is why I am asking you.”

“Infuriating, Giant Jiminy Cricket imposing psychotic, thingy! I don’t want to talk about it.” I turned my back on him.

“Well, at least you are being honest about not wanting to speak.”

I tried to hide a snuffle, but my tears streaked my face. I looked at my hand as I wiped the salty fluid from my cheeks. “Incredible.” I mused with a quivering voice.

“What is?” Gabe inquired.

“My mascara is not running!”

“Stop playing tough. Tell me why you are sad?” Gabe tried knocking me back on track.

“No!” I screamed in my mind, “Seeing James, a man I knew as just a skinny little fifteen year old, so scared, his friends dying around him was terrible.”

Gabe stepped forward and pointed at my chest. “That might be true for an average human.

But, you, Penny Jones, have never been bothered by any other person's pain."

"Ok, fine, you want the truth. The kid had to go through that, that stupid excuse for war, and I..."

"You what...tell me?" He demanded.

"I don't know. Never mind." I crossed my arms and turned my back to him. A feeling of all those long-held, buried emotions suddenly felt as though they had managed to find their way three or four levels closer to the surface. This sudden ball of charged feelings was so uncomfortable and terrifying; I could hardly keep from shaking.

I stood, turned around, then snapped at Gabe, "Hey, why don't you leave me the hell alone, you and your stupid, G-rated dubbing system. I know you see me as a terrible person. Sure, I've made some mistakes, but I haven't been to jail; I don't break the law, major laws, anyway. I am staying in my space, doing my own thing." I began pacing with my hands clasped behind my back, formulating the strongest argument my Harvard mind could imagine. However, in retrospect, I was really just arguing with myself.

"How could I, only one equally insignificant person, affect another's life at all? Why should I even feel guilty about it? I don't." I paused to look Gabe in the eye as I pasted on my well-practiced liar's face...I mean, lawyer's face. "Isn't your boss that says we all have free will? So, if I'm rude or a bit mean to James or my assistant, or that hag on the 5th floor, they don't have to be around me! My behavior towards them shouldn't change that much of the world around me!"

Gabe scoffed at me, "Ok, if that's how you prefer to proceed." He brought up two separate menus. One had my name at the top, and the other a holographic menu labeled: Repercussions. He tapped and held one massive finger on the menu with my name as the header, dragged it onto the other, and dropped it into "Repercussions."

"I'm not an idiot, Lurch. We went to my past, then to my present, or at least what was left of my present. Now, even though I'm dead, this next part has to do with my future? Am I being scrooged or something? Are you just ripping off the storyline from one of the most cliché works of Christmas fiction?"

Gabe shrugged his shoulders. "Who says the story was fiction?" He paused to flash a coy smile at me, then continued, "And to answer your first question, Penny Jones, this does have to do with your future, the future you helped create." Then Gabe pressed a flashing red button and pointed over my shoulder.

A door appeared. A very ominous door. It was black with white trim, a gleaming silver doorknob, and I could not be sure, but I thought I heard moaning echoing from behind it. "Oh, hell, no Gabe, you psycho giant. I'm not going in there, that's for damn sure! There has to be another way."

Gabe grinned. "This, my dear Penny Jones, I am afraid, is where you and I will part ways."

"What? I'm done?" I thought that was too easy. Gabe didn't take no for an answer. The other dead give away was his grinning; it was very mischievous.

"Yes, Penny, you will be done as soon as you face your repercussions. A retrospective in the future of consequences your life choices have aided in creating."

“Hey, you said my first name like a normal person; I’m so proud of you!” I was only half sarcastic.

The handsome giant did not care about my snide remark. Instead, he gave me a little wave and hit the flashing red button. “Good-bye, Penny Jones.”

“Wait a minute...repercussions, retrospective? What do I have to...” It was too late. The ominous door behind me flew open, and I discovered where that eerie moan was coming from. It was from a black hole!

In a blink of an eye, I was sucked through the door and flying into nothingness: black nothingness. It was much more disturbing than the white void. I imagined this was what spacewalking felt like; however, I’ve never heard of an astronaut in a \$3000 coat, business suit, and last year’s Louis Vuitton’s pumps. I tried to talk, but no sound would resound from my throat.

The first thing to show up looked like a comet. Then I thought I might be flying towards a star. I finally realized I was not moving, but a little ball of light flew straight at me. I tried to swim and push myself away, but that was useless. “Well, since I’m dead, guess a little pain won’t mean anything,” I thought to myself and waited to see what this object was. After a few more moments, I realized that the approaching light was not alone. It was the first of a long string of lights sliding their way towards me, and they were not balls but squares. The squares only got larger and larger as they approached.

Hovering overhead and 200 to 300 feet wide and 100 feet tall, the first wide square slowed to a stop. A massive click echoed throughout the space about me, and the enormous square responded, with electronic white snow. It was a television! “If someone tries to make me watch Princess Bride again, I’m gonna be ticked!” I groaned inwardly.

The static snow switched to a count down screen from 5 to 1. “What? Can’t afford to switch to digital?” I snarked to the empty space.

When the screen went to one, whoever had filmed this, had exquisite taste. My gorgeous mug was front and center. As the picture zoomed out, it painted a fantastic illustration of me, in my element, winning one of my most significant cases. This scene was well ingrained into my mind. I had taken on a hopeless case. It was a client accused of insider trading and embezzlement, but I crushed the prosecution. In the partner’s wildest dreams, they hoped for a plea deal down to 5 years. I took it several steps further. After winning the trial, my countersuit forced the government to pay all legal expenses. I won the case through manipulation and getting key evidence thrown out due to some mostly irrelevant errors in paperwork. But hey, a win is a win!

I returned to the office, a hero. “Ah, good memories.” I mused to myself.

But then the scene switched. It switched to a face I recognized but could not place. He was a stocky African American man with grey hair and kind eyes wearing a Santa’s hat. He was serving chicken soup and talking to someone in another room. “Wish I could hear what they are saying.” No sooner had I thought about listening in, the cinema size TV screen turned the mute off.

The older gent picked up a tray with the soup, bread, and a single yellow flower in a small

vase, all nicely placed on a tray. “Here comes your feast, incredible woman of my dreams.”

Coughing and giggling responded to the old man’s flirtations. The laughter came from a woman wrapped up in several blankets in an old apartment bed. She wore only a nightgown, had an IV in one arm, and a scarf wrapped around her head. “Oh, you old smoothie. Oh wow, and a flower? Baby, you are the best man ever made!” She motioned for her man to kiss her, but her coughing beat him to it. So, he settled for a peck on her head, setting the food down on a side table next to the bed.

After a few assisted bites, She asked, “Are you gonna tell me?”

“What’s that, sweetie?” He wiped the corner of her mouth but avoided eye contact.

“Will we get any back?”

He stopped what he was doing and sighed, looking down, “Nah, they found him innocent.”

“But how? That man was crooked as a coat hanger; why did they let that guy walk?”

“From what I saw, that lady lawyer of his I told you about was sharp, real sharp. Either way, money’s gone now.”

“But, baby, that’s everything. All our pension, gone. This leukemia may take me, but I need to know you’ll be ok after I’m gone.”

The old smoothie forced a smile on his face and patted his wife’s arm, “Don’t worry about me, I have a job lined up for next week, and it can go to fulltime whenever I need.”

It was the forced smile that I recognized. Finally, the man’s name clicked in my mind. It was Terry, my doorman! “Terry, how come you never told me?” I couldn’t believe his wife had the same cancer my mom died from, nor would I have thought that my getting that client off on his insider trading charges would have meant this much to anyone. I shook my head, “Nah, too much.”

Again, as if obeying my every thought, the screen shut off and continued its journey, making room for the next one. As before, this one planted itself in front of me, clicked on static snow, switched to counting down to one, and away we went, onto another imaginary adventure of how “Penny Jones is to blame for the world’s woes.”

This time the scene opened to an apartment that looked a lot like mine. I rolled my eyes, “Mrs. Stanton, the bore.” I moaned aloud.

She was bustling around her kitchen, but strangely, her little white bolognese dog was not in tow. After setting an envelope onto the kitchen counter, she turned to the stove; I assumed to make some food. Instead, she turned on all four knobs, lighting the entirety of the stovetop. Then the old snob bent over and blew out each flame. As stately and refined as ever, Mrs. Stanton turned around and sat down on a chair just outside the kitchen, closed her eyes, and waited.

As you may have deduced by now, I am not the warmest person in the world. Fine, I am often just a cold-hearted monster, but this was tough to watch, even for me.

“What,” I screamed to the darkness, without a sound coming from my mouth, “you think I’m to blame? I was just joking when I made that crack about her dog eating her lonely corpse. How was I supposed to know she was that depressed?”

An annoying thought popped into my head, a thought of guilt and compassion that I had not had since I was a little girl. I was beginning to think that someone was putting them there.

“Ok, fine, I could have been nicer.” I still felt terrible, “Fine. I should have been nicer!”

Mrs. Stanton’s breathing was labored, and she looked woozy.

“I’m sorry, alright, I was a witch...ok? An evil witch!” I shouted to whoever was watching as I floated in this endless abyss. “Please turn it off? Please? I’m begging you. I can’t see this, please?” But it was too late. Mrs. Stanton’s head dropped, and her body slumped as she lost consciousness, losing hope for the final time.

Tears trickled down my face in shock as I muttered over and over, “Please stop? Please stop? Please stop? I don’t want to see another one.”

But whoever was at the controls of this horror-fest didn’t care. Another screen flew in, white static snow flipped on, the count down ensued again as “how Penny Jones ruined lives” continued on with its marathon.

I had a feeling where this next one was going, and to be honest, of everyone I didn’t want to show up on one of these giant torcher screens, James was the first. But, whether I liked it or not, there he was, my first high school boyfriend, on-screen, literally larger than life.

The scene began with him sleeping in his bed, only half covered by one multi-colored quilt. “Oh my...” I gasped, “Is that real?” A polished gold medal grasped by a thick blue ribbon hung above his head on the wall. It was the congressional medal of honor! Next to it was a picture of James in his olive green army dress uniform, receiving it from the president! But hanging below the most famous of all military commendations, leaning against an old coffee mug filled with pens and pencils, was that same haggard cheerleader photo James had stuffed into his combat helmet back in Iraq. A picture of me.

It was maybe ten years into the future. James’ beard was longer and unkempt, and if I were to guess, I’d say he had not showered in several days, maybe weeks. Whoever was controlling the view zoomed into his face. The old soldier expelled mustache hair away from his face with heavy and labored breaths. Then every third or fourth breath, he would jerk, hard left, then right. The screen zoomed out to show his entire bedroom. James violently pushed himself up from his bed and raised his fist, ready to defend himself from an enemy he had left dead in a desert half a world away.

The veteran swiveled his head back and forth, looking for a fight. After a few moments of flailing, he reminded himself where he was and crashed back into his bed, eyes staring wide with frustration and fright. After a few moments of silence, the vet sat up, reached under the mattress, and pulled out a handgun. It was the squarish type, not the old-looking round ones (Ok, fine, it was a Smith & Wesson 9mm semi-automatic. Country girl, remember? Besides, it said Smith & Wesson on the side.)

Wait, not another one. “No, not again, I can’t take this.” Thankfully, James was not interested in taking his life. Instead, he got up and drugged himself to his closet. Searching desperately for something, the vet tossed clothes and nicknacks aside. After a minute or two, his face lit up, and he yanked out a red-capped vodka bottle, half empty.

Still not completely satisfied that he was safe, the old soldier backed his way against the corner of his room, gun in one hand, bottle in the other. He took a slug from the booze then slid

down the wall until his bum hit the ground. Slugging another shot from the bottle, he set it to one side. James violently slammed his fist against his forehead over and over again. He muttered to himself as he mindlessly pulled apart his weapon, laying it on the carpet in front of him with precision.

“Medal of honor, hero? Sure, right! You’re just a lucky loser. Take the medal and shove it! Couldn’t keep ‘em alive, not one of my squad, not one, where’s their medal? I’m a hero? Ya, right. Loser..” Tears trickled into his thick beard as he took a break from stripping his weapon to swig again from the vodka bottle once more. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He sobbed.

I AM POISON

I don’t know how long I stared at James. He was the only man I had ever known that cared about me, only for me. He was probably the only person since my mom who loved me more than I loved myself. That’s why I couldn’t just dump him but had to kick him hard. No one loves me that much; I’m not worth that much. “Where in the hell are these thoughts coming from?” I glared around me. And, again, I screamed into the nothingness, “I don’t think like that, ok?”

“Well, maybe, I should.”

“Dang it, stop being in my head. Who are you?”

“Turn around and find out.”

I looked left, I looked right, but no one was there. “I don’t see anyone,” I thought aloud, looked forward and squealed a muted cry of fright. I was staring at myself.

Granted, this was my eight-year-old self, with terribly dull braided brown hair, Ohio State Buckeyes tee-shirt, and overalls, ugh...overalls. But still, I knew I was looking at myself.

The little rugrat looked me over, so I looked her over. I reached out a finger and poked at her to determine if she was real. My younger self scowled and smacked my hand away.

“Don’t poke me; you know we hate that!”

“Wait, how are you in my head? Why can I hear your thoughts?”

Younger me rolled her eyes, “You’re too old to have an imagination and child-like wonder, but not old enough to let go and be wise.”

“Wait, I’ve heard that from somewhere before.”

“Of course you have, genius, I’m you. That’s why we can hear one another’s thoughts. The reason you know that saying is because Mom used to say it.”

“Are you sure? It must be Aristotle or Niche, someone else.”

“No, moron. You remember when we turned eight, mom went into the hospital and never came out. You made a decision; at that point, you would be someone untouchable. Someone different. You would bend the world to your will, so never again could it crush you. Your genius brain didn’t realize that you would have to walk away from everything when you walked away from who you were. Including everything mom taught you, the love she put into you, and...”

“And what?”

“Me.”

“Hey, psycho funky me. You just said we are the same, remember? How could I have lost you if you are me?”

“Where have I been for over twenty years? When’s the last time you had fun just for fun’s sake? You’re so pathetic. You even pretend like you don’t want a baby.” “That’s not true,” I snapped, “I’ve never wanted a baby.”

Little me stepped back and looked me up and down, “Maybe Gabe, that creep Synth... James, everybody was right.”

“Shut up!”

“Maybe you are just a complete and total write off. A lost cause.” “Shut up!” I screamed. “I couldn’t have you around. I couldn’t be you anymore! I couldn’t feel that pain again. I couldn’t do it. And if I’m not going to feel that pain again, I sure as shed won’t put a baby into this world to feel that pain!” I wiped tears from my eyes and took a breath. “You don’t know how much pain I protected you from - protected us from!”

The rugrat scoffed, “You don’t know how much pain you made us swallow and hold onto for so long that it turned toxic. It poisoned everything we touched. Do you think these three scenarios were the only ones?” Little me reached in her front pocket and dug out a tiny remote. She pointed it behind her at the giant screen and clicked the button.

Another giant screen zoomed into place and turned on. A vaguely familiar gentleman in a dark navy suit with speckled grey hair gathered things around his desk as I walked in.

“Remember this, Penny?” The rugrat was angry and accusatory.

I thought about playing it off with a dismissive denial, but that was pointless. Firstly, this kid was in my head. Secondly, as I walked into the office, I kind of made sure this guy, Johnson, that’s right, C. Johnson something...anyways, let’s just say, I made sure he knew my intentions.

“Look, kid, you might not understand this, but when grown-ups have certain feelings...”

Little me cut me off, “Look, old lady, your ‘feelings’ ended with this guy’s family ruined. That’s three married men’s lives and families you ruined because of your ‘feelings.’” Behind her, the scene skipped forward.

I tried to fight back, but the little brat was too fast. “Moving on.” She clicked her hellish device again.

Cheri, my assistant, filled the next screen. She was riding in an elevator, and the girl had filled out! Even I had to admit; she was gorgeous. For some reason, Cheri decided to dress just like me! The lift doors opened, and out strutted the new boss. Wait a minute, that was my office!

“She’s the new me?” At first, I didn’t know if I liked that. I am the only me. But then, I thought, if someone did take over that cold-hearted firm as the queen bee, it might as well be my prodigy. (Not that I mentored or helped her. I only abused her, but that makes this a happy accident. Right?)

She slammed open her door, threw her coat at a redhead behind her former desk, and shouted, “Latte, now.” The boss lady slid behind my desk, set down her bag, and readied herself to work. But, then she paused. Cheri looked down at her desk. She pursed her lips tightly together

and swayed her head back and forth, fighting with a decision. Shrugging her shoulders, Cheri pulled her right drawer open, reached deep into the back, and pulled out something she kept well out of view. She bent her head into the drawer and made a very distinct sniffing sound, twice.

I rolled my eyes, “What? So, the little NYU pixie has a drug problem, and it’s my fault? I always did my drugs legally or not at all, and you know that.” I beamed with pride.

But my younger self did not argue; she only spoke truths. “You knew Cheri wasn’t as strong or smart as you, but you bullied her and used her for your career.”

“She was there to help me succeed; that was her job.”

“Does that include calling her a fat cow for accidentally bringing you coffee with whole milk?”

I balked at the statement, “I...well....um. Cheri can get over a couple of my bad moods.”

My younger self didn’t wait for my made-up answers but fast-forwarded through Cheri’s life with her stupid tiny remote. “And you didn’t think that since Cheri also wanted to be an attorney that she would not learn any habits from you?”

Again, I stammered but came up with nothing. So I growled out, “This bucks.”

The rugrat spoke over her shoulder at me, “If you spent time looking at yourself in the mirror, rather than looking after yourself through the mirror, most of this would be unnecessary.”

“Wait a minute, that’s far too grown-up for an eight-year-old. Who are you?”

“Who says I’m eight? I only look this young because of how long ago you’ve locked me away.” She stopped the giant TV, “Ok, here.”

Again, we were looking at Cheri, but now, she was running through the office. Her heels were off, eyes wet from tears and wild with fear. I was about to ask what the heck was going on when the view swiveled behind her. Two men in suits were chasing her, “I said, police, stop!” The chase continued to the stairwell, and even in her skirt, the two middle-aged cops couldn’t close the gap. “Dang, Cheri is fast!”

My younger self rolled her eyes and hit fast forward again. Play resumed as the cops had Cheri cornered on the roof of the New York skyscraper. She looked around wild-eyed, hoping for an escape, but there was none. Instead, she stepped up onto the ledge.

“Ma’am, it’s not worth it,” one of the cops begged, “Look at me. Step down from the ledge.” “You don’t understand. I never meant to be like this; I didn’t know this was how it was. I only ever went to defend and help people. I didn’t want this!” Gushing tears dripped off her rosy red cheeks.

“Let’s step down, and we can talk more about it. Ok, sweetie?” The older of the two cops took a careful step forward.

Cheri shook her head, “Please tell my mom, I’m sorry,” she opened her arms, leaned back away from the building, and disappeared.

I jumped back into the darkness, shocked. “Shed! Ham it! What the...” I composed myself after a minute and swallowed hard then asked, “Really, you think it’s all my fault that Cheri broke the law, got caught, couldn’t face up to it, and then... that?” I motioned at the screen.

Little me turned on me sharply and smacked me across the face, “Ouch!” What was the

for?”

“For more than 20 years of that bull!” Younger me stuffed a finger in my face.

“Wait, we can say bull? Why didn’t I think of that?” I snarked back.

“For 20 years, you’ve used that excuse. Of course, you’re not completely responsible for someone else’s actions. But that doesn’t mean you are not five or ten percent responsible. You selfish, anemic cow.”

“Hey!” I recoiled in shock, “We are supposed to be on the same side here.”

“We haven’t been the same since third grade.”

“Mom was dead, Dad, an abusive drunk. Or can’t you remember simple little details like what it’s like to be alone or get smacked around?”

“Sure, life wasn’t easy for us back then, but should that give anyone the right to live like a selfish monster?”

“Well...no, I don’t live just for me.”

“Ha!” Mini-me scoffed as she clicked her remote again, “Sarah Collins, A.P. labs, two points ahead of you in the class, so you “helped her” with final’s prep. She missed three questions because you changed the answers on her study notes.”

“Hey, I’m not sure if we remember that correctly, ok, um...” I stammered for an excuse.

“Sammy Wright, junior prom? His mom was a prominent lawyer. After she helped you get the summer internship you wanted, you never even called poor Sammy to break up. You just ignored him. Like an eight-year-old!” The rug rat sneered at me, again. “Who’s the child now?”

“I dunno?” I crossed my arms and scowled.

“Ming Lou, Almala Khatri, Jenny Smith, all attractive and smart young lawyers you somehow had a hand in getting rid of from your firm, resulting in careers halted and one almost being disbarred.”

I opened my mouth to refute the charges, but things were getting a little fuzzy. I was losing control of all those emotional seals holding myself together. Those repressed feelings were on the first floor of my heart and banging on all the exits demanding to be let loose on the world.

My younger self was gaining complete control, and she was seething! She crept closer and closer to me with every accusation, crowding my space. The angry little hick child pressed her remote faster and faster, surrounding me with one scene after another of pain. All were events created, at least in some small part, by my devious path to success. She no longer described what happened. Instead, the rug rat let loose one name after another, after another name, until the angry, tiny me only repeated my true nature, my habits; how I had really succeeded and survived.

“Lies, deception, manipulation, seduction...all wrapped up with a blood-red bow of fear.”

I tried to back away from the younger me. The massive TV screens were coming in so fast that hundreds of scenes from my life passed through eyes invading my exploding brain.

My younger self stopped inches from my face and glared into my eyes.

“I’m sorry, ok, I’m sorry,” I begged, “I didn’t know.”

“Yes, you did.” My younger self retorted.

“Give me another chance.”

“You don’t deserve a second chance.”

The horror scenes and the consequences of my life flashed faster and faster. My head felt as though it would pop!

“Please stop!!! There has to be something I can do, right?”

“You had one life to live, and you chose to live it entirely for yourself because you were too afraid to share it.”

Flashes of scenes only sped up. Wives crying, my doorman, Terry, broke, alone, dying in a dank cold apartment. James in rehab, for the third time. The cow from the 5th floor, making the board of senior partners at my firm. The victims of my clients staring in disbelief as the guilty go free. Gwen hauled off to jail after a fatal car accident killed a mother of three. “Stop, Stop, Stop Stop, NO!!!!!!”

All scenes of my life flashed through my eyes, every choice, every achievement, every failure, all the exams, all the funerals, all the love, hatred, regret, fear, shame, pride, and arrogance. Like pulses of electricity, they ripped through me. Every wave striking me harder, giving me fewer and fewer chances to breathe.

“Stop, stop...I’m sorry, just kill me, just kill me...”

Finally, I gave up. Finally, I knew they were right. I was so scared, so angry that no one near me was safe. I am poison. I always said I’d take the bull by the horns to prove myself to the world. The fact was that I took the bull by the horns because I was too terrified to let go, in case the bull might turn and gore me to death.

“I’m sorry, so sorry, momma. I’m so sorry...I’m so sorry.” I whimpered through the pain of the pulsing emotions shooting through my body until all was silent, and I was gone....

CHEESEBURGER, SIZE 8’S, AND JOY

Something was different, “Hello, hello?” I could hear myself speak again, and I was lying down on my back. I could feel gravity again! “Wait. Am I naked?” I mused aloud. “Um, Gabe, angry little girl, anyone?” I sat up as a motion sensor light clicked on. The room around me was made up of white tile and stainless steel. Indeed I was naked and on a cold steel table with a cheap stiff blue sheet covering my body.

I swung my legs around and down to stand but stopped short. Something was stuck to my left arm. I reached around and peeled a post-it note from my skin. As I looked it over, a magical glint danced around the edges with a fantastic rainbow hue of colors. I focused my eyes and read, “Favor 4 ur mom, don’t screw it up - Boss.” I clutched the note to my chest, “I’m alive, I’m alive! AHHHHH!!!” I screamed, cried, and hugged myself. But then I paused for a moment as my fingers played against protruding ribs, “Gabe’s right, I am disgustingly skinny...” Then a momentous thought occurred to me. “Cheeseburger! No, wait, bacon cheeseburger!” I began looking around for some clothes, still not fully conscious of where I was or how I got there when a door to my left swung open.

A brunette in her 30's stood in blue scrubs with a clipboard and ID badge clipped to her chest. I glimpsed the sign stamped on the swinging door just before it closed. It read "Morgue."

"Oh." I grinned awkwardly and raised a cautious hand to the coroner, "This is awkward, but..."

Those four were the only words I got out before she dropped her clipboard, burst through the doorway, and ran down the hall screaming every bit as loud as her lungs could manage.

"Oops," I winced. But, instead of waiting around and going through the next week or more of testing and psych interviews, I thought the best thing I could do was to get out before anyone else saw me. I found some fresh scrubs in one of the cupboards and another drawer labeled "Personal Effects." Fortunately, my purse and phone were both there, so I snatched them up and peeked out the door, no one in sight. I ran down the hall in the opposite direction of the screamer and booked it to the nearest exit.

Thirty minutes later, I was dancing down the street with a double bacon cheeseburger, a bag of fries, and a milkshake. "Oh, my Go-" I really had to start watching my language, "-Goodness, this is so, so, so good." I spotted a middle-aged homeless man squatting on a cardboard box next to the sidewalk. I ran over and plopped myself down next to him, "When's the last time you've had a milkshake?" Perplexed, the homeless man leaned back defensively. "You want some? Try it?"

After several awkward moments and stares, he finally asked, "Are you high, young lady? That stuff will rot your teeth out and then kill you!"

"What's your name?"

"Sam."

"Sam, I am high! High on life, baby." I leaned over, wrapped my arms around him, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Can someone call the police?" Sam called out to passers-by as I hung on to his neck.

"Don't worry, Sam, I'm leaving, just know, someone out there loves you...that someone is me!" He tried to maintain his 100% defenses, But I saw it, he smiled, just a little bit. But, sadly, my new love, Sam, responded to my love with more pragmatism than passion, "If I may suggest, you should get some proper clothes on before you freeze to death."

"Oh my, you are right, I really should. Do you know where I can buy some clothes around here? I usually only shop uptown or online, so..."

Sam nodded, finally understanding, "Yep, crazy folks are usually from uptown." He threw his thumb over his shoulder, "Two blocks that way is a Salvation Army, can't miss it."

"Ohhh, wow, thrift store shopping; so exciting!" I spun around and headed in that direction.

My phone blared. I had turned it on to find a burger joint and forgot about it as soon as I took my first glorious bite of good food in over ten years. "Yello....Merry Christmas, this is Penny!"

"Miss Jones? Is this my attorney, Miss Jones?"

"Yes, of course, this is Penny. Now, who is this, Stewart? You old rascal, is that you?"

"No, this is Mr. Bernard, Gwen's father. She is still locked up in the 19th precinct. My daughter will be sent to the county jail in two hours if you don't do your job and fix this."

I giggled, "Oh, but Mister Bernard, I am doing my job and protecting you from further

liability. By keeping your spoiled, drunk daughter in jail and off the streets, we can all rest assured that an ignorant, privileged, debutant doesn't accidentally take out a family over Christmas while they're on their way to grandma's."

"How dare you speak to me in this way..."

I cut him off, "Oh, you would rather me to speak to you as your attorney? Ok then. As your attorney, I must advise you to cut all financial ties, as well as any legal responsibility with your daughter unless she consents to intensive rehab and family counseling; family counseling with your entire family."

"You, you..." The seething Benard couldn't quite figure out which part of my legal advice to react to, so I continued.

"I was the one who barely got her out of her last DUI, and this one is much worse. Since I'm no longer your "gal," it's best that Gwen stays put in jail. That way, the booze seeps out of her system, making room for some brain cells." Eww, this was fun! Shooting my mouth off for a good cause was way more enjoyable than doing it for money. Speaking of, "Needless to say, sir, I will be leaving the firm and starting my own office. My new beginning is specifically to avoid irresponsible and criminally negligent clients such as yourself! Good day and Merry Christmas!" I almost hung up, but instead took a moment to barked into the cell, "HOHOHO," then hung up and headed towards my next grand adventure: The Salvation Army Thrift Store!

Forty-three minutes later, I emerged with a new wardrobe and two extra bags filled with fabulous finds. As I skipped out the door, I almost ran headlong into a group of three ladies. "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry! Are you ok?"

"Wait, Penny, is that you?"

"Susan, what a wonderful surprise." It was my old rival from the 5th floor.

"Wait, Penny," She leaned back on her Jimmy Choo pumps, the same ones I had broken earlier that morning. Susan looked me up and down and laughed, "Did you just go shopping at the..." She shook her head, "I can't even say it or hope this to be true. It's too juicy, but am I actually seeing you shop at a thrift store?" She and her two friends laughed with glee over their slight.

Frankly, I just didn't care, "I sure did, and this place is amazing. I can't believe I've spent thousands on shoes when I can score a nice outfit for twenty or thirty bucks from this place, amazing!" I leaned in close, "I'm wearing size eight shoes and jeans that actually fit! I haven't been this comfortable in public since I was eight years old, amazing!"

Susan sneered, "What's wrong with you? Are you high?"

"Wow, everyone keeps asking that, but no. Now, listen, Suzy," I stepped to her side and put a friendly arm around her, "Can I call you, Suzy?"

"No, I.."

"Perfect, so Sue, the fact is, I'm out. I'm sorry for being such a, well, you know, 'B-word' to you. I was jealous, but not anymore. I'm done working for boring old men obsessed with more and more money. I'm starting my own firm. There are only two rules: first, we represent good people; second, we always have fun! What do you say?"

“I say, I think we might need to call for medical help.”

“Such a comedian. I’ll contact you after the New Year, and if you wanna stay with the old guys, I’ll make sure they give you my office.” I grinned and squeezed her close, “You know you’ve always wanted it, consider it a Christmas gift.”

Susan threw my arm off her shoulder, “What’s your game? Where’s your angle?”

I grinned, “My only angle is that I’m done with that life and moving on to the one I’m meant to live,” I cocked my head back and screamed, “I’m free, baby, free!” I held my arms out and spun around.

Susan grabbed her friends by the arms, and they made a break for it.

After I was satisfied they were gone, I calmed down, picked up my bags, and headed for home, “Hmm, that was definitely worth it!”

The next morning I popped up from bed, sober and pill-free. I even decided to forgo my early coffee. I was far too excited. It was Christmas!!!

I popped open my window, stuck my head into the crisp New York air, and screamed, “Merry Christmas, world! I love you!”

Today would be tight, but I thought I could do it.

First, I needed my ace in the hole. The best P.A. the world had ever known, Cheri.

An hour later, she arrived at my place, scared out of her mind. As she stepped into my three million dollar condo, I could tell she would prefer hovering over the carpet so as not to touch anything. I forced her to sit down and explained everything, well, everything I could without freaking her out. After thirty minutes of my apologizing, and many, many tears, we hugged, then got to work!

Seven hours later, a party raged at my place. We had bought the last turkey in Manhattan, three hams, and about 20 lbs of roast beef, mash potatoes, ten pies, and a ton of champagne! Our guest of honor was my new ‘love’ from the streets, Sam and his friends: seven homeless men and six homeless ladies.

Ted, my building manager, tried to shut us down, but with my new found love of people and still very sharp legal skills, I convinced him his only choice was to join us, which Ted did, as did most of the building staff. Oh, and did I mention, we even had an honorary mother for the evening?

After arriving, Mrs. Stanton and Serge, both observed the situation and determined it would be best if they took charge. The regal lady and stately dog beamed with a Christmas glow and an extra hop to their steps.

Oh, and Mary-Lou was there, the receptionist from my former firm. When she showed up for dinner with her three kids, she was timid, wondering why I had insisted she come over and bring her children. Mary-Lou had assumed a stately office party, but with more than a dozen homeless folks, building staff, and an old bolognese running around the halls of my condo, her three kiddos fit right in. Of course, the fact that I had bought them an Xbox and about 50 games to choose from didn’t hurt. After Mary Lou settled into my sofa, I brought us both a couple of flutes half-filled with Dom Perigon. If anyone deserved a lavish drink, it was a hardworking single mom.

As I handed her the glass of bubbly, I took a sip and leaned back on the sofa, and casually stated, “I might be looking for an incredible administrator for my new legal company. I’ll be launching it after the holidays. You would be the perfect fit.”

Mary-Lous lit up, “Wow! Well, I didn’t expect this,” She took a sip and leaned in, “I’m in! If I have to work for those old stuffed shirts for another year, I might just explode!” She patted me on the arm, “You may be a mean cuss at times, Miss Jones, but at least you have some personality!”

I tipped my flute, “I’ll drink to that! I think this might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship!”

PENELOPE THE LOVED

With all the excitement and fun, there was still one particular guest who hadn’t shown up, and with such a fantastic party and so much fun, I could not get him out of my mind.

At about nine p.m., however, I received a text from the private investigator I had often used for cases. The information I needed had come through.

I let Cheri know I would be back, grabbed my coat, and shuffled through the crowd just as they began an off-key rendition of “Come all ye faithful.” I made my way to the lobby and stopped short at the front door. It wasn’t opening. No matter. I figured opening my own lobby door for once wouldn’t hurt me. As I gripped the massive sliver lobby door handle, a voice caught my ear, from around the corner. It was Terry, the doorman.

I crept over on my tippy-toes to listen in on what he was saying. Hunching over his cell phone Terry hid behind a marble column. His blue uniform cap in hand and tears streamed down his face as he stared down in disbelief at a large manila envelope. He sobbed tears of joy to whoever was on the other end of the phone, “I don’t know, honey. The note just said, ‘This belongs to you, go home and be with your wife,’ yes, baby, I’m coming home for good.”

A coy smile grew on my face as I crept back to the big lobby door and slipped outside into the crisp New York air.

I hurried down the steps, approached an icy curb, and began the famous New York dance: hailing a cab. But just as I began the waltz of the needy traveler, a familiar voice called from behind me.

“It was my last day, working for that place.”

I turned, “Excuse me?”

A figure with hands stuffed deep into coat pockets drifted towards me through the shadows of the icy sidewalk. I turned and stepped forward, meeting him in the glowing lights flooding my building’s front steps.

“My last day was yesterday. There was no need to get me fired.” James stopped a few feet in front of me. He wore a workman’s tan canvas jacket with the name Carhartt embroidered into its chest, blue jeans, and a fresh set of stylish brown boots. His beard was trimmed back to stubble, and his sandy blonde hair swayed in a slight breeze.

I could see him now. The boy I had loved all those years ago. The boy I had stabbed in the heart so many times.

“J...J...” I stammered. Words could not make their way to my mouth. I was tongue-tied. But, I was Penny Jones. I’m never tongue-tied!

James wasn’t tongue-tied at all. He continued speaking with a tone of derision and a lot of irritation, “I don’t know why you invited me here, some sick prank? I had thought maybe you had figured out that I was someone else...” He stopped and looked down, then back into my eyes. “Well, you don’t have to worry about seeing me again, ok. But, whatever this weird sick game you have going on up in your fancy condo up there, it’s not for me.” He turned and drifted back into the shadows of the sidewalk.

I watched him leave, still, tongue-tied. I was scared, too scared to move, too afraid to talk.

“Will, you just watch him leave or do something about it, Penny Jones?” I looked over to my left. It was Gabe!

I wrapped my arms around his giant frame. “Thank the boss. You’re here!”

“I would be careful about hugging me in public. No one else can see me, so you look insane right now.”

“I don’t care,” I looked up into his magical blue eyes. This time, I didn’t look away. “Thank you, Gabe.”

He stared down at me, “Don’t thank me yet, Penny Jones. Conquering your fear and learning to love is a battle you must fight every day. But, never forget, the rewards are eternal, for you and those you love.” He looked past me towards James, “And it begins with him.”

I released the handsome giant and followed his gaze. “I don’t know if I can. Even if he’ll talk to me, how can I help someone who’s been through so much? So much that I can never hope to understand.”

Gabe laughed. “It’s not your job to fix him. But you can journey with him. You can help one another. You say you don’t know what he has been through. But, you, Penny, have spent your entire life dealing with loss. Don’t get me wrong. It would be more work than either of you can imagine. However, if you conquer your fears together, the rewards will be a thousand times greater than any pain your past lives can muster.”

I swallowed hard as I watched James walk further and further out of my life.

“It’s now or never, Penny Jones.”

“Wait! James, Wait.” I ran, leaving Gabe behind. My coat flapped in the wind as I pushed my pace faster and harder than I ever remember running. “Wait,” I screamed again.

James turned quickly, thinking something might be wrong. I leaned back to slow down... but I couldn’t! I had chosen a patch of thick layered ice to stop on. I was still skating forward! I swung my arms backward in a wheeling motion: a desperate attempt to keep my balance and stop. It was a spectacular failure. Always the gentleman, James tried to catch me, but I took him down with me. We hit the ice and skidded down the sidewalk, sliding down icy cement with me sprawled atop his body, using the poor guy as a toboggan.

When we finally skidded to a stop, his arms were wrapped tightly around my ribs and

shoulders, protecting me from the ground, my head nestled into his chest. Neither of us moved or said anything for several moments in shocked stillness. Even within the thick fog of awkward silence, I felt the warmth of finally being home.

“You’ve always been trying to protect me, even since we were kids.” I put my hand on his chest and lifted my head to look into his eyes, “I just wanted to find out if you still would.” I teased with an embarrassed chuckle.

A faint smile grew on his face, “When did you figure it out?”

“I think I kinda knew, for a while, but I...I,” I stammered as tears filled my eyes. Words choked their way through my throat, “I’m so sorry, James, I’m so sorry, about high school, about the way I’ve treated you at the office, about everything...” I clasped a hand over my mouth as I stifled my sobbing.

James looked at me and smiled, “It’s ok, it’s ok...but I can’t...”

“I understand,” I turned my face away from him and wiped the tears from my eyes and tried to catch my breath, “I don’t expect you to forgive me; I’ll just go and...”

“No, no, would you please just stop talking for a moment, Penelope!”

That stopped me cold. I had forgotten that James was the only person alive who knew my legal name.

“I can’t keep talking like this because I’m in so much pain. You’re on my keys!”

I sat up slowly as James rolled over and pried his keys from his front jeans pocket, “Ahhh, that’s better.”

The old soldier slowly stood, then offered his hand to help me do the same, “Of course, I forgive you.” He shrugged, “I’ve always forgiven you. But, Penny, I’ve gotta say...”

“Penelope.” I corrected him.

James stopped and betrayed a quick smile, “Wait, you hate that name.”

“Not when you say it. I’ve always liked you calling me Penelope.”

James sighed but grinned, then grasped my hand deeper into his. “To be honest, I’m a mess. I don’t know where I’m going or how I’ll get there.”

I laughed, “That makes two of us.”

We walked in silence until we reached the steps leading to the lobby of my building. James asked, “Where do we go from here?”

“Well,” I suggested with a nod up the steps, “There’s some stale coffee in the lobby of my condo building if you don’t mind the smell of rich people on Christmas?”

“Sounds awful,” he chuckled. Then he stopped and looked into my eyes and flashed that handsome boyish grin, “But, I can’t imagine a better end to Christmas.”

We drifted slowly up the steps as I hung onto his arm; James asked, “So what happened to you, Penny? You’re like a different person.” I looked towards my building’s entrance, Gabe stood at my lobby door. Leaning against the big man with arms crossed and a massive grin on her face was my younger self. Gabe nodded in approval, and my mini-me winked as we passed by. I blushed as I replied to James’ question, “Let’s just say a couple of long-forgotten friends saved me from becoming a cliched Christmas casualty.”

A CHRISTMAS CASUALTY

RYAN GRAY

A
Christmas
Casualty

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