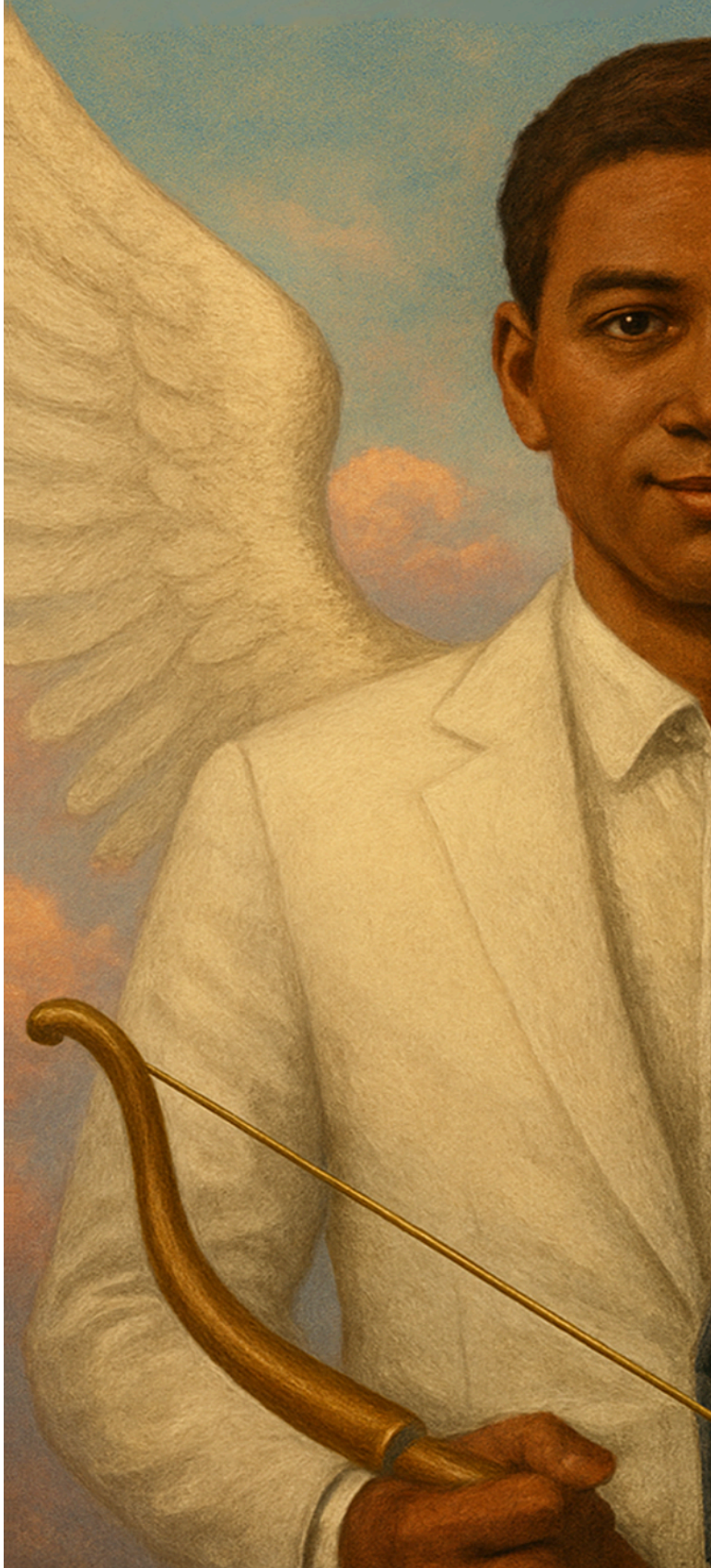


LOVE'S RECKONING



RYAN GRAY

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By Ryan Gray

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ONE LOVE

Half her jaw was missing. The left side of her face drooped and hung past her chin. Cautiously, I approached, the tightening in my stomach gave way to nausea, as the left side of her face eroded away, dripping down the side of her skimpy, black blouse. I swallowed hard and squeezed out a fake smile as the ghoulish figure closed the distance between us. I opened my mouth to say hi, but the melting face turned away from me and blew a kiss towards a voice, calling out the monster's name. Swiveling her head left revealed a gaping hole in the right side of her skull. The missing piece of her dome exposed toxic green ooze, where her brain should have been.

The ghastly figure turned back to me, flipping greasy hair, entangled with globs of dandruff, and winked.

I swallowed my gag reflex, forcing stomach juices back down my esophagus. After taking a measured deep breath, I cocked my head charmingly, "Hello, my love, how are you this evening?"

My fiancé responded with a kiss on my cheek from cold, cracked, rotting lips: "James, my love, I'm so happy you could finally make it."

I smiled at the passive-aggressive hint, "Yes, well, you know...work and traffic."

She leaned in closely, the smell of death invading my nostrils as she hissed into my ear, "I told you, this was a very important event for me, darling. Now, make it up to me by working the room. Do it quickly, so you don't miss anyone before they leave." She leaned back and brushed some lint from my suit coat, leaving behind a noticeable streak of dead skin cells. The ghoul's tone suddenly softened. Gracefully, she smiled and drifted back away from her waiting guests, "Thank you, love."

I watched the corpse turn and walk away, looking the disgusting figure up and down. I chuckled aloud, catching her by surprise.

She turned around and furrowed hairless eyebrows, "What's so funny?"

I allowed a wry smile, "Oh, nothing, my dove." I used a hint of mockery when I spoke the pet name, "It's just that I don't think I've ever seen you looking so...alive."

My fiancé pursed together rotting, dead lips and flipped clumped, stringy hair in a failed attempt to be seductive, "Why, thank you, darling." Then she turned and stomped away atop 6-inch pumps.

I sighed hard, as I thankfully watched the corpse strut away, "How on earth do I get out of this hell?"

TWO LOVE

36 hours earlier, I was the luckiest man alive. I awoke with a start next to my fiancé, Sam, who was wrapped in our satin sheets. I carefully slid out of the charcoal bedspread. Sam snorted at me as she stuffed her face away from me, deeper into her pillow. I crept to the sink in my bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, glancing at myself in the mirror.

I winced at sudden nightmarish images flashing through my mind. A metallic streak through a night sky, a shadowy image rising out of black smoke, followed by a mass of various sizes of human hands grabbing at me, pulling me back into... I shook my head, ridding myself of the occasional, recurring nightmare, splashed more water on my face, and crept into the kitchen in search of coffee.

My condo sat atop a bar and restaurant, with a view of the Malibu beach through a row of palm trees. It was not very big; however, it was freakin' Malibu! We loved it. I glanced up at the life-size digital print of Sam, showing off a thin teddy. Sam's digitally enhanced skin was lightly tanned and smooth, and her hair perfectly drifted down her right shoulder. A finger touching thick, red, pouting lips and dark, soft eyes beckoned the observer closer. This print found its way onto the cover of the biggest fashion magazine in the world. The crowning glory of Sam's modeling career. That's right, the woman I woke up next to every morning, on a beach in Malibu, was the hottest supermodel in the world. Like I said, I was the luckiest man alive.

I had rolled out of bed quietly, so as not to wake the snoring mess of hair next to me. We had a great life together, excluding mornings. Her constant nightlife of "networking" through club openings in New York, LA, and Europe, mixed with photo shoots, meant that when we were home together, mornings were a very touchy time of day and only survivable via post-caffeine.

I snuck into the next room and popped in a coffee cartridge for a quick cup o'joe as I began my morning rituals. Before hopping into the shower, I stopped at my laptop. I had left it on the granite countertop the night before when editing my latest work. I'm a photographer; therefore, I make a living in a dying industry. I am pressured from every side for perfection in my work; work that must be available to my clients immediately, and competitors constantly trying to poach my clients. All that pressure meant twelve hours a day, seven days a week. I wasn't complaining, though. If I hadn't been a photographer, I wouldn't have met Sam, and I would not live by the beach in Malibu.

I flipped open my PC and clicked on my email. The third subject line stole my attention, 'Urgent,' plastered itself repeatedly on email headlines from my biggest client. I scrambled around the kitchen island, hunting for my phone. I found it buried under Sam's discarded cardigan from the night before. I clicked on it, eager to find out what was so urgent. DEAD. "What in the world..." With my cell phone dead, I had missed something important. Any missed opportunity would open the door for competitors to steal a client, and this was my biggest client!

"UGH, NOT GOOD!" I groaned.

"Quiet!" A muffled moan retorted.

"Sorry, my dove!" I winced.

I turned to my laptop and clicked on the email, "We need you at the Clifton Bluffs Hotel, 7 am, please confirm you can make it." Was the first one.

"Sean, it's 6 am. We still need to confirm you got our messages...All 12 of them!"

I looked at the clock in the lower right-hand corner of my laptop... Crap! 7:05..."Phone was dead, just saw your email, be there in 30!" I spoke aloud as I frantically pounded out the email and sent it off.

Fortunately, my clothes from the night before were still in the bathroom, so I rinsed my hair, brushed my teeth, and threw on the pre-worn khakis and a blue button-down shirt. After stuffing my laptop into my camera bag and grabbing my flat phone, I flew out the door, only to pop back in twenty seconds later to snatch up my car keys. The faint sound of my supermodel

girlfriend still moaning at me to be quiet in the back room let me know she had no idea I was rushing out, "Boy, is she a battle-ax in the morning." I mused as I ran back out the door.

I hit the sidewalk. Sunshine beat down on my face. I noticed the aroma of ocean air as I bee-lined for my tenant parking.

"Jimmy? Is that you - Jimmy from Hays?" So shocked to hear my name and the name of the small Kansas town in the same sentence, I forgot I was in a hurry. I paused to look left at a short blonde in blue jeans, a baggy blue shirt, and a navy blue baseball cap. She slowed traffic as she jaywalked across the road. The short ponytail protruding through the back of her baseball cap bounced up and down as she leaped up onto the sidewalk.

"Genie?" It took more than a moment for the sound of her voice to jog up memories not thought of for more than a decade.

Genie stepped up next to me and stared up into my face. Her shirt sported a medical cross logo, and her hat an embroidered 'H for H.' In middle school, we had been the same height; however, when Genie stopped growing, I didn't until I was well over 6 feet.

She shook her head at the sound of her name, her ponytail whipped back and forth, "Most call me Martha or Martha-Genie. However, for Little Jimmy Olson, I'll make an exception."

I rolled my eyes. "Dang, I hated that Jimmy Olson crap, but here I am," I held up my camera bag, "Still running around taking pictures."

"Wow, I am so proud of you, Jimmy!" Genie beamed with pride, "Are you off to shoot pictures of a big news story?"

I sighed and shrugged my shoulders, "I wish. That journalism stuff only lasted a few years. I could never make any real money. Now, I spend most of my time with advertisements and modeling shoots."

Martha-Genie's jaw dropped a bit, "Little Jimmy Olson, the X-Files meets Trek nerd, determined to expose the government UFO conspiracy, is on runways, shooting models?" Martha-Genie took a step back, "I don't believe it!"

"Yeah, I'm actually on my way to a shoot right now..."

"So you are okay working for the machine, run by the global elitist conspiracy?" Genie bellowed out an unashamed chuckle.

My old naive beliefs suddenly thrown in my face elicited a childish response I wasn't proud of, "Yeah, and are you still claiming to be 5 feet?"

"5 '1" you jerk!" She sucker punched me in the lower ribs, as only a Kansas farm girl could.

"Ouch, careful, Genie, I'm a soft city slicker now, with a reliance on my gentle hands to make money." I grinned, "And that was a heck of a right! You take steroids or something?"

She shrugged her shoulders and smirked, "I'll admit to nothing."

"No wonder you never grew."

She sneered back at the comment but then smiled.

I checked my watch, "But hey, I have to run! I am super late for a job, but I live right here. If you are in town for a bit, we can have some coffee, and you can meet my fiancé."

Genie smiled sweetly with wide eyes, "Fiancé? Why, Jimmy Olson, did you steal yourself a Lois Lane when no one was looking?"

I shrugged sheepishly, "No, it's more like I stole Mary-Jane from Spiderman!"

Genie raised an eyebrow and tried to ask another question, but I cut her off. "I'm so sorry, but seriously, I have to go."

She dropped her raised eyebrow and placed a tiny, but surprisingly rough hand on mine, "Go, do your thing, but tomorrow morning, 8 am, meet me over at that coffee shop. "Here," she reached into her pocket, "Take my card, call me if you can make it."

I smiled down at the little woman, "Thanks, Genie."

"Hopefully, I'll see you there!" Genie said.

I waved as I took off at a slight jog down the sidewalk, "Hopefully." I hollered back.

I snapped my fingers, "Phone." The distraction from Genie had made me forget that I needed to get my lifeline back up and running. Still jogging down the sidewalk, I looked down and stuffed my hand into my camera bag, rummaging around for an external battery.

Something slowed me down slightly as I kicked an odd, soft object to the side. I stopped rummaging and slowed my pace while spinning around in confusion. Yellow caution tape wrapped itself around me just as I noticed the large, orange rubber construction cone that I had kicked aside.

"What is this?" I growled at no one in particular as I glanced around.

"Heads up!" I looked up, searching for danger, but it was too late. Something falling from the sky eclipsed the sunshine, and all went black.

THREE LOVE

As I came to, the world was out of focus.

"Hey buddy - Hey buddy, you okay?"

"Someone, call 911."

"Is he breathing?"

"I don't think he is!"

Voices spun around me. I looked back and forth frantically. "Is who breathing? Who's calling 911? You want me to? By the way, I'm in a hurry, so can someone else deal with this? I have to go!"

I tried to join in the conversation around me until I realized that all the voices had encircled me. They spoke at me: talked down at me...no wait...they were talking about me. I was the one not breathing? "Really, I'm not?" I thought to myself, "I don't feel out of breath." I peered at the faces standing over me, gawking down at me, "Hey, I'm here, ok, don't you hear me?" No one responded. "This is crazy!" I stood up in the middle of the crowd and raised my hands in sarcastic triumph, "Tadaa, see, I'm good. Now, everyone just calm down, ok?" Yet the crowd did not disperse nor change their tone. They were still hovering over someone. I looked down at a figure sprawled out on the pavement. Blood was pooling into a growing bean shape above his head.

"Wait a minute, I know that guy!" I mused.

Then it hit me as I stared at the face in disbelief - it was me! I was lifeless and standing in the middle of my body. As in, my feet were somehow buried in my torso.

"AAAAHHHH," I screamed and jumped from my corpse and landed next to an old off-white kitchen sink. The porcelain had a smudge of blood on it and was cracked in half, lying on either side of my head.

"I don't know how he didn't see it, but we had this whole section of sidewalk taped off." A sweaty man with a white hard hat and leather gloves was saying to the spectators, "I got permits for those condo remodels, and I followed all the procedures."

"Yeah, well, you should have done a better job checking below, before dropping a massive sink!" I shouted in his face.

The builder ignored me.

"Hello, I'm talking to you, or are you gonna lawyer up already?"

"He doesn't need a lawyer." A new voice interjected.

"Huh?" I turned suddenly to a newcomer.

"I said, he doesn't need a lawyer." He sipped from a golden coffee mug engraved with a heart shape. He was Afro-American, with a shaved head, a single hoop earring in his left ear, the same shade of gold as his coffee cup. He wore a pure white linen suit, and he wore it well. He looked me over, "Because he was not at fault, you were."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Technically, his boss could sue you, or your insurance company, for the work stoppage. Or so I'd imagine. However, I'm not an expert on such things."

"Who are you?"

He switched his golden mug to his left hand and extended his right paw. "Valentine, Saint Valentine, at your service. However, my friends call me Val."

I took his hand tentatively, "I'm James...James of the Giant Peach." I replied dryly.

He chuckled back at me. "A wise guy, huh? I suppose if I were standing outside my body, confused, scared, and waiting to discover my eternal fate, I'd expect Saint Peter or Gabriel." Val shrugged his shoulders and slurped from his mug, "But they are busy, and you got me, so deal with it."

I sighed, "Um... sorry, I guess. I'm James."

"Jim! Good to meet you. It's always exciting to meet a new client."

"Client? Whoa, buddy," I pulled my hand away. "I haven't hired you. Even if I did, what for?"

"Oh, of course, you did not hire me, son," He slurped from his coffee mug again and laughed, "You couldn't afford my rates. No, you see, your bill has already been paid, so I've been assigned by the Guy who paid for it."

"By whom?" As I asked the question, trepidation warned my guts that I did not want to know the answer.

"God, of course."

I gulped a bit, yet played the answer cool, "The problem with that is that I don't believe in God."

St. Val smirked and winked, and spoke into his coffee while sipping once more from his golden heart mug, "Good news then, He believes in you."

"Religious weirdness aside, I have to go."

"You have been given a gift, Sir James."

"Excuse me?"

"A gift you should not squander."

"I have a meeting to get to and..."

"And you will have this gift for 48 hours."

"Ok, crazy person..."

"Val or Saint Valentine, if you like."

"Look," I glared and pointed an accusatory finger at the delusional dude, "Val, are you some sort of comedy actor hired as a joke by my friends, and all these people ignoring me are a part of the prank?" I shook my head, "It doesn't matter. Either way, I have to go."

"Jim! I like your confidence." He put a hand on my shoulder, "Now, I will be around for the next two days. If you want to talk at any time, please let me know."

Without warning, he pushed me and shouted, "James, get back into your body!" A sudden sucking that felt like a shop vacuum with the power of a 747 jet engine pulled on my back. My hands went numb; I raised them up as particles of flesh and bone disintegrated, sucking my hands, arms, and eventually my entire being toward the sidewalk.

As I melted away, I glanced up at Val with terror. He waved curtly, spun on his heels, and walked away just as the disintegration of my cells reached my neck, "Holy C..."

I snapped awake on the sidewalk, sitting straight up and screaming. "RaaaaaPPPPPP."

The crowd of looky-loos around me leapt a step back in unified shock and awe. I popped up with surprising speed. Like a madman, I snatched up my camera bag off the ground, stuffed it into the crook of my arm, football style, and sprinted down the road, making for my car. "Bad dream, little conk on the head, no problem," I muttered to myself over and over. "Bad dream, just a bad dream."

FOUR LOVE

Twenty minutes later, my crossover sports vehicle skidded to a stop in the Clifton Bluffs Hotel parking lot. I tossed my keys to a valet, stripped my ticket from his hand, and sprinted for the stairs leading down to the bluff. True to its name, the hotel sat atop massive cliffs, overlooking a beautiful bluff on the Pacific Ocean. The deep blue water and aggressive swells crashing against tan rock formations were topped by deep green foliage. With the right equipment and a little know-how, photography was easy.

I flew down the steps, two at a time, my camera bags bouncing against my body. As my feet hit the sand, I spied a setup of blankets and light reflectors positioned on the beach. Two figures descended upon the blankets, repositioning the larger of the metallic shapes. As I approached, the lean, V-shape of one of the figures told me he was the male model. The dude had skinny jeans and sported a plain black t-shirt. The other figure was a super cute redhead. She was a bit shorter than most models, but after she cocked her head back and laughed at a joke that the tall dude made, I immediately saw her appeal. She had a soft, round face, and dimples appeared with her smile, which was highlighted by piercing green eyes.

"Hey, are you the photographer?" The tall, v-shaped model asked me in a husky voice as I approached. He, too, had more than good looks: Charming, beckoning eyes that were quick and did not miss much.

"Yes, sir, that is me. Sorry, I'm late," I said as I unloaded my gear and set up my equipment. "My phone died, so I only got the message about the shoot forty-five minutes ago."

"That's okay, we are a bit behind." The young lady commented as she stood, brushed off the blanket, and checked the large light reflector.

"Well then, let's get going."

They both looked at each other, confused, "But we still have to..."

I cut the lady off, as I was in a hurry, "I'm sure, some know-it-all from the ad company is gonna come and make some 'ground-breaking' suggestions." My voice dripped with sarcasm, "But I know what we can and cannot do on this beach and the bluffs. I've shot here at least twenty times, and I know all the angles. So..." I took the gentleman by the wrist, "I need you over here," I said as I positioned him sitting down on the blanket. Then I motioned for the girl, "And you, Miss..."

"Sherry."

"Sherry, my new leading lady, right here, leaning over him."

"So, you want to do a stand-in..."

I cut her off, "Yep, that looks great, you two look amazing." I ignored the comment and began snapping.

"Ok, now, lean against him, Sherry, and give me a little hair flick." Snap. Snap. Snap. "Lovely. And now, cock your head back and give me a laugh just like you did when I first got here, Sherry, and you, sir..."

"Jack."

"Jack, yeah, a little smirk on your face like you just cracked a little joke...fantastic."

"Ok, let's switch gears, and turn slightly to the right, looking off into the distance..."

"Jim, when did you get here?"

I didn't look up. I recognized the voice of the representative from the ad agency, "Marcy, how are you doing?" I maintained focus on my models, "No, swing left and... why are you standing? We had some good stuff!" I let my camera drop to my chest and stood, "Don't tell me you're tired already?"

"What are you on about, Jim?" Marcy asked, approaching me from the rear.

"Jack and Sherry are doing great," I said, turning to greet Marcy.

"Um, great for stand-ins, not shooting." Marcy chuckled.

Marcy was a middle-aged smoker and always seemed stressed and far too busy, but today she really did not look well. She had sunken cheeks and ashen skin. "Could have fooled me, they are gorgeous, and by the way, Marcy, you are feeling ok?"

"Um, no, they are not gorgeous, and I'm fine - THANKS A LOT." She quipped, "No more hungover and sleep-deprived than usual."

I ignored her pale, thin skin, but stepped closer pressing the issue at hand, "Come on, Sherry may be short, but she more than makes up for it with that charm, son of a gun, she sure can smile!"

Marcy shook her head, "Who are you looking at, Kansas? She's my props wrangler, and Jack is lighting and a grip!"

"Are they aspiring models or actors or something?"

"Sheesh, I hope not...Our models are over there, Blay and Sheyreez," Marcy pointed a thumb over her shoulder.

With their obviously fake, pretentious names, I rolled my eyes and looked in the direction of the two approaching figures, expecting a shirtless male with 4% body fat, rippling abs, and a 6-foot anorexic woman stomping her heels in the sand with every step. Instead, what met my gaze drained most of the blood from my face.

I gawked at the sight as I stumbled backward in the sand, aghast at the two figures. I crawled back onto the beach blanket, crab-walking into Jack's lap with disgust. He wrapped massive arms around me out of instinct, "You okay there, sir?"

"They, they," I pointed at the two figures as they stepped up next to Marcy.

"They are our models for today, Blay and the beautiful Sheyreez." Marcy finished my sentence for me since a sudden gag reflex was keeping my tongue busy.

Blay cocked his head at me and smiled. His first major issue: his smile had no lips. And the left side of his skull was missing, as was his brain. He wore tight, dark shorts and a white linen shirt left open. The white fabric was being pulled behind him by the wind, revealing a protruding gut. Bodybuilders called it a bubble gut, usually caused by the overuse of steroids. But this gut was beyond anything I'd ever seen. It looked as though he'd swallowed a bowling ball! The protrusion had to be a tumor or abnormality worthy of "Ripley's Believe It or Not!"

Sheyreez cocked a seductive smile at me and winked. She was fitted with a thin bikini, the bottom strapped over hips that were so gaunt that veins protruded from her skin. Massive hip joints, jutting from her skin, held up the blue bottoms. Shoulder joints pierced through her tissue to match cheekbones so sharp they had literally punctured through the fake-tanned skin of her face. But the worst of it was the hollowness of her chest. Where her heart should be was nothing but a softball-sized transparent hole. Like viewing through a telescope, I spied a bird pecking in the sand through her chest hole. Again, I gulped to keep from hurling.

"But...what are you....how are you?" I stammered.

"Oh, come on, man, we are not that incredible, I'm sure you've seen better." Blay followed his comment with a cocky grin.

"No," I said as Jack helped me up, "How are you two still standing and alive?" I shook my head. I pointed at Blay as I dropped a hand onto my camera, "You-you and that massive bubble gut scream steroids, and you're missing half your brain, I don't know how you can think straight." I took a step forward and switched my gaze to the female skeleton, "And you, lady, are so anorexic, I can see your joints." She gawked at the comment, raising a shocked hand to her mouth. I stepped closer, "And holy crap, you are literally heartless...you have a massive hole in your chest!"

The slap across my face from Sheyreez surprised me only because I had no idea an emaciated woman could smack so hard! With tears welling in her eyes, she spun in the sand, cocked her head into the air, and stormed off.

"Not cool, man!" Blay blurted with a pathetic, fake French accent before chasing after Sheyreez.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Jim?" Marcy snapped at me.

"I didn't mean anything by it. I just think they should be in the hospital, not taking pictures on the beach."

Marcy shook her head at me and chased after the "models."

Fits of laughter erupted behind me. Sherry and John were on the ground, holding their bellies, bellowing out laughter. "Best dang thing I've seen all year!" Sherry roared.

"Maybe the best thing I've experienced in my life!" Jack corrected between fits of laughter. "You have to understand, James, we deal with these miserable anorexic brats all day, every day. Having them told off to their face like that." He kissed his finger and thumb, smooching the air, and declared, "Pristine!"

FIVE LOVE

Half an hour after everyone was gone, I was still sitting in the sand, trying to figure out what had happened. A sudden thought caught my attention.

"Maybe, just maybe, that crazy bald guy was not a dream?" I mused.

"But wait," I aired my caution aloud, "What if it was a delusion? And by asking for this Val guy, am I giving in to this fantasy?"

Two college-aged girls walked past me, both in bikinis. They turned to check me out, looking me up and down, then smiled. One was missing her top lip, and a ring the size of a frying pan stretched her nose past her chin.

The other was missing half her hair. Adorning her scalp were white and yellow scabs down to her neck.

I squealed and crab-walked away from the two young ladies as they both sneered at my repulsed actions. "Val! Are you there, buddy? Val, help!" I screamed, still escaping from the two disgusting creatures.

The saint appeared standing next to me, in a white linen suit, but barefoot and eating an ice cream cone with a golden wrapper. "What's up, Jim?" He asked between licks.

"What the hell did you do to me?"

"What you meant was: what did Heaven do for you?"

"Don't get cute with me, Val. I'm freaking out here and about to lose my livelihood and my marbles all on the same day!"

"Au contraire, my good man." He plopped down into the sand next to me. "You are being granted extra-dimensional awareness."

"Extra-dimensional what?" I demanded.

"Awareness or perspective, if you prefer."

"How about extra-dimensional exclusion?" I retorted.

Val raised an eyebrow at me,

I continued, "As in, exclude me from your sick LSD doping experiment and leave me the hell alone."

"We've been over this, Jimmy-boy."

"You can call me Jim, not Jimmy-boy." I sneered back.

"Jimmy-boy...this is from Heaven, not hell. And it's a blessing, not a curse. A chance to focus on people from the inside out, to see who they truly are, not what they pretend to be or look like from the outside."

"All rainbows and unicorns in the middle? That sort of nonsense?" I rolled my eyes before continuing my thought. "This is the real world, man. Pretty people get brought to the head of the class, the smartest people invent things and become famous, and big talkers with massive egos become president. That's just the way it is!"

"On earth, in this dimension, that may be." He waved his hand across the horizon. What I can only describe as some sort of rip, slashed through the ozone, giving way to layers upon layers of realities appeared. Multiple winged creatures were suddenly all around me. Some with several sets of wings, others with numerous heads, most with dozens of eyes, flying in the background. "In my dimension, all this perceived power and fame are inconsequential, even laughable." Val brought his hand back to his lap, and the tear in the ozone resealed itself.

The scene stole my breath away. I was in shock. Thoughts faster than I could control raced through my head at a million miles per hour, and words would not form in my arid throat.

A hand gripped my lower jaw and worked it like a puppet, "Geez, Val, then what is consequential across all dimensions?" Val spoke from the side of his mouth, imitating a ventriloquist. The annoyance in a white suit continued, "Well, son, I'll tell you. It's love, real love. And that's the lesson for today, kids."

I pulled my face from his hand, "Knock it off, man!" A thought made me pause, then I asked, "So, what am I seeing now?"

Val sucked on more of his ice cream, then continued, "Your vision has been turned inside out. Instead of seeing what a person is, you are seeing who they are."

"So Jack and Sherry, the grip and props lady..."

"Are beautiful, lovely people, by HIS standards."

"And the rotting corpses I was supposed to shoot? Blay and Shay...whatever her fake name was?"

"Ugh," Val gagged on his ice cream slightly, "They are selfish and bitter; disgusting people down to their core."

I was about to argue with this point when a voice calling my name stole my attention.

"Oh, now you've done it, Kansas!" It was Marcy, and she was storming at me, a cigarette stuffed between thin lips, billowing smoke with every stomp in the sand. "Who told you?"

I looked to my right, but Val was gone. "Told me what?" I asked as I turned back to my left, where Marcy plopped down onto the sand next to me.

"Who told you that Blay was a moron, steroid junkie, and Sheyreez, aka Susan Johnson, was a heartless wench?"

I shrugged and shook my head, "Nobody."

She leaned back on one arm and sucked in a drag of her cancer stick before continuing, "Yeah, that anorexic psycho has a habit of leaving her competition with 'food poisoning' wherever she goes."

"Are you serious?" I winced, "Why does she keep getting hired then?"

Marcy rolled her eyes. "Are you serious? Don't rock the boat and keep the train moving... everyone else is sick and she's good at her job." The handler shrugged, "Plus, it can't be proved, so..."

"So you have a moron fake French kid who is killing himself on whatever junk will pump up his muscles and a serial poisoner who is allowed to assault her competition because it's less convenient and more expensive for the company to investigate?"

"Welcome to the world of 'Fashion and Advertising'," the smoker sneered, "Besides, I didn't peg you for an innocent: Working in the industry as long as you have, especially being engaged to...well," Marcy paused to put her cancer stick out in the sand and sat down as she finished her thought, you know who you're with so..."

I raised an eyebrow at the insinuation, "Oh, I do, do I?" I turned and looked at Marcy's face up and down, "What about MY Sam?" I was very defensive.

"Nothing," she chuckled and stood, "I'm too sly to keep letting my mouth run about any more of this! Besides, your fiancé is why this little incident with Blay and Shay-mer, or whatever she is calling herself now, is getting swept under the carpet." Marcy spoke over her shoulder as she walked off up the beach back to the parking lot.

"Wait, my relationship with my fiancé? What does that mean? Marcy, wait!" I began to stand to chase after her, but a voice behind me made me stop.

"Boy, that was a weird conversation. Almost like everything I've been telling you might be true." I spun around to look at the smug saint. He picked at his fingernails as he continued speaking, "So convenient, it's almost as if it were planned." He stopped playing with his fingernail and looked up at me, grinning. "But that would be impossible." He snapped his fingers as if taken with sudden inspiration. "Unless there was some form of superior and higher power at play." He looked me in the face and smiled, "But we don't believe in that, do we, Jimmy-boy?"

"I'm going mad," I spoke out loud to no one in particular.

"Au contraire, mi amor," Val winked, "The madness has only just begun."

SIX LOVE

I don't remember walking back to my car, starting it, and heading back to Malibu. Partially because I held both hands to the sides of my eyes, acting as horse blinders on either side of my head, and partially because of the shock.

"Am I going insane?" My mind raced, "Is this the road a mentally broken institutionalized patient begins walking? Will I find myself medicated and spending the rest of my days drooling down my shirt and tied up in a straitjacket?" But then a new thought reared its ugly head, "What if I am not going crazy, and people's true inner self was pasted on their outside? What if this is how ugly and disgusting some of the most revered people in the world are? What if I miss the chance to answer some of life's most complex and impossible questions? What if there is some sort of higher power, and He was giving me a chance, unlike any before, to know who people are, not just how they look or seem?"

"Oh, excuse me," I exclaimed and stepped aside. With all my contemplating, I had lost track of my surroundings. I found myself walking down the sidewalk heading away from the parking garage, drifting towards my condo. I almost ran headlong into a young blonde in a 70s style retro-patterned dress, easing herself down the sidewalk with a metal four-point cane. Behind her was an old grandma in a much shorter, tighter dress, designed for someone much younger. The irony was not lost on me, but I chalked the odd couple up to a healthy sense of humor between grandmother and granddaughter.

"That is okay, young man," the younger of the ladies replied, easing herself past me, "Just give me a minute and I'll be past you soon enough."

I grinned, "A beautiful young lady like yourself needn't apologize for escorting your grandma around."

The older-looking woman snapped at me, "Are you, like, hitting on my grandma? Pervo! Eew, weird!"

My mouth hung open as the odd couple shuffled past.

"Oh, he's just being sweet." The handsome lady with the stainless steel walker commented to the haggard, scantily dressed woman.

"Whatever, he's a freak or a con artist." The haggard woman had massively swollen, red eyes, thinning hair, and a slightly bulbous nose. Her droopy eyes glared past her bright red nose at me as she helped her cute blonde grandma down the sidewalk and said, loud enough for the entire sidewalk to hear, "Be careful of losers like that, Grandma!"

I snapped back, "And you should be careful of mixing pills and booze, that'll kill you, lady." The hungover woman's face turned beet red as I continued on my way.

As I stomped down the sidewalk, I overheard the fading voice of the grandma state, "But deary, you promised after rehab you were done with that!"

"Hmph," I grunted, "Maybe some good can come out of this madness."

I slammed my front door shut and dropped all my bags on my sofa before heading over to the kitchen. The condo was empty as my fiancé would be at work, doing a shoot in L.A. or San Diego, and I knew I wouldn't see her until tonight.

The thought of food made me feel ill, but maybe some juice or something else to drink might calm down my nerves. Just as I reached for the fridge, a beeping from my phone stole my attention. I dug my Android from my pocket and clicked on the voicemail text link on the voicemail app.

"You have one new message. First, new message." A robotic female voice read aloud.

I clicked on the speaker option and placed my phone on the kitchen counter so I could resume my perusing through the fridge for a sugary drink, preferably a ginger ale to calm my stomach acid.

"Hello, this is Shayreez." I stood up straight and leaned right until my head was past the refrigerator door, spying my phone warily. The message continued, "I just want to apologize for the misunderstanding we had at the bluffs this morning." Her voice was thick with regret, far too much regret, "I cannot apologize enough for laying a hand on you, and if there is ANYTHING I can do, and I mean - anything," this time, her regret was laced with a touch of seduction, "Please, don't hesitate to give me a call, I am eager to please." The nausea in my stomach, which had finally begun to ease, leapt back up my throat to a gagging status. I gagged suddenly as I lunged for the sink, just in case. I kept my ears focused on the voicemail, trying to make sense of this sudden change of heart. The ending of Shayreez's voicemail gave me a significant clue, and so I crept cautiously to the talking rectangle, still not fully believing what it was saying to me, "By the way, I heard you are recently engaged, and I am looking forward to meeting your fiancé tomorrow night. A mutual friend invited me, I hope you don't mind, and give my congrats to Samantha. I am SUCH A FAN!" She ended with a snobbish: "Tah!" I rolled my eyes as I pressed the phone's red "end" button.

It was clear Shayreez, aka Susan Johnson, was only trying to make up for our altercation because she found out who I was dating and planning to marry. She had poisoned her last few obstacles, so why make nice with me, unless she was that terrified of upsetting my future wife?

I looked over at the life-sized print of my fiancée, crouching on the beach, seducing the camera with all her might. I asked aloud to myself, "Why are people so afraid to get on your bad side, Sam? Who am I about to marry?"

SEVEN LOVE

I could hardly stay on my own two feet as I stumbled at a beige steel door. I forced it open as a violent wind fought to keep it closed. Crumbling into the doorway, I crawled to my feet, trying to catch my breath. A hand helped me up....It was Martha-Gene, "Genie, you gotta help me!"

"Sure, Jimmy, sure," She smiled, yet her eyes darkened as another figure stepped out of the shadows from behind her; it was Sam.

Disorientation and fear shot adrenaline through my veins as I fought their grip, "No, wait, what are you doing here? Why am I here...I have to go... ." It was too late. Dozens of hands reached out from the darkness, grabbing at me, holding me...forcing me deeper and deeper into the room.

I woke up with a start, two beads of sweat dripping down my right temple. I had already gotten up about five times for the bathroom and water. I tried warm milk, then finally a snack. In the end, I managed only ninety minutes of fitful sleep.

The previous day, I had a bathroom sink dropped on my head from two stories up, yet I didn't have the slightest mark on my scalp or even a headache. I met a delusion, or some sort of alien being, who seems to appear only to me when summoned.

According to the self-described king of Valentine's Day, for the next two days, I have been given the most inconvenient and disgusting superpower of all time: seeing humans from the inside out. And by the way, this insanity had been decided on by "Almighty God," of whom I'm not even sure exists.

To top it all off, in eighteen hours, I planned to make my engagement to the world's top supermodel public. A model who seems to strike fear in all other industry insiders, even fashion insiders she's never met.

I glanced at the clock as I plopped down onto the sofa. "Where is Sam, by the way?" I said out loud as I pointed the remote at the TV and pressed a button. She was often out on a work night until 2 or 3 am in the morning, but not till 5 am, not without telling me.

I clicked through the channels aimlessly.

"The Lakers dropped another game, this time to the Kings." CLICK.

"The President is claiming triumph for another accomplishment, and I know..." CLICK.

I muted the sound, but continued clicking through random cable stations. Just as I began to drift off again, I glanced at a very attractive and familiar figure stepping out of an SUV escorted by two huge men in suits.

"Sam? Did they give you a bodyguard?" I turned the volume back up as an explanation got out of the car behind her. "Oh, Sam's with what's his name, that makes sense." As the latest pop icon, Sam regularly clubbed and rubbed shoulders with all types of celebrities, including what's his face Sam was hanging out with as of a couple of hours ago, or whenever this was

filmed. From the outside looking in, clubbing multiple nights a week with the biggest celebs and richest people around looked like a glamorous part of the job, but in truth, it got old very quickly. Sam, being the very focused and savvy businesswoman she was, had plans far beyond posing in front of a camera. So, she did what she must to keep her name in the headlines: at least that's the story she had sold me on, nothing but photo ops - right?

I swallowed hard and gritted my teeth, noticing that this latest "photo-op" had his hands on more of my fiancé's body than I was comfortable with. Just then, the TV angle switched as Sam leaned towards the camera and blew a kiss at the TV audience.

I gritted my teeth, wondering just how tough the pretty-boy movie actor was. "What kind of a guy hangs onto an engaged woman like that in public?" I shook my head, but then stopped. A thought popped into my head as I lifted the remote. I rewound the show, using the T-VO options, and froze the image as the fake starlit couple exited the limo. What I saw shot heat up my spine and into my scalp. Front and center, plain as day, Sam's left hand was clearly visible. Her engagement ring, which took me six months to save for, was nowhere to be seen.

EIGHT LOVE

An hour later, I sat quietly in Stax Coffee. I had been one of three customers waiting outside in the chill of the early morning air as the doors opened. My jeans made tiny little squeaks in the diner's red vinyl booth every time I slightly moved my butt. These squeaks were made worse by my inability to remain calm. However, the image of that overrated pretender, I mean ACTOR, with his hands all over my Sam, made me squirm!

These mulling thoughts forced me to grind my teeth with a growing rage. To stop the grinding, I would breathe out the frustration and calm my nerves, only to feel my right foot begin to tap incessantly. After I put that to a stop, I would clench my left fist so tightly that my knuckles turned white, and when I stopped that, my jaw clenched again, and my teeth ground together with seething fervor. This failed process of staying calm continued for half an hour before a sleepy and disheveled Genie slid into the booth across from me, glaring red, puffy eyes from across the table. Even though she had just gotten out of bed and had no makeup on and was in no mood to see anyone, she was still cute and radiated with a glowing haze.

Genie stared up at me, "What I need is coffee...lots and lots of coffee...don't expect much conversation from me until I'm halfway through the second cup, ok, Jimmy?"

I threw up my hands in surrender and shook my head, answering the questions in my head, rather than acknowledging her need to wake up, "Of course YOU'RE beautiful - inside and out."

That woke Martha-Gene up in a hurry, "You got me out of bed at 5 am to hit on me? I don't do one-night stands, no matter how long I've known you, James!"

Women in my life only call me James to put me on notice.

"No, it's not like that, ok, just wait, let me think."

She growled while shaking another pack of sugar back and forth for her coffee, "Again, you brought me here, at the bum crack of dawn, to watch you think?" Her short, dirty blonde hair shook back and forth with disgust. "Maybe in high school, when I had a crush on you, I might

have put up with this level of weird narcissism, but I haven't seen you in over ten years, Jim. Honestly, I..."

"Wait, shush for a moment!"

"That's it, I'm..."

"I got it!" I think, "No...ugh..." I closed my eyes and banged my head against the back of the booth several times in frustration. This hurt quite a bit more than I thought it would.

"Ouch, that looks painful," Genie commented wryly in between sips of coffee.

With my head still leaning back against the back of the booth, I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. I whined aloud, giving up any self-respect, "I think I'm going crazy and about to lose everything, and I just don't know what to do about it. Okay? Ya happy?"

Martha-Genie exhaled heavily and then took her jacket off. Palming her coffee with both hands, she leaned forward. "Ok, start from the beginning."

So, I did. I detailed everything that had happened since waking up the morning before, running into her on the street, walking underneath a falling sink, and being given a more awkward and strange "gift" than could be conceived. I finished with my doubts about Sam and the mounting evidence against her character.

Genie sat back into the booth, a fresh cup of coffee in her hand - her third. After several thick, awkward moments, she spoke up. "You know, I have lived my life believing that people can change and become better, but..." She paused and shrugged her shoulders, then continued, "You kind of blew that theory out of the water."

I was confused, "Wait, what?"

Martha-Genie sat forward and set her coffee cup down, "When I saw you yesterday, you acted so grown up with a responsible job and being so serious. Now, I just hear that same conspiratorial little teenage nerd trying to talk me into another crazy scheme."

"Are you kidding!" I shot back, "This isn't a conspiracy, this is my life!"

"Remember that time you were convinced that all the new bird houses around town had been mounted with, what did you call them, 'Multidirectional, spy cameras, equipped with heat sensors and night vision?'"

I winced and ducked my head slightly at the memory of my youthful indiscretions. "That was a long time ago." ...*And I was SUCH a nerd!* I added in my head.

"Yeah, well, I had to lie to the cops to give you an alibi after you destroyed seven of those bird houses and found how many cameras?"

"Zero."

"Then we found out that because you wouldn't read the local newspaper 'cause it was controlled by the 'man', you missed the simple fact that there was a new bird species reintroduction effort by a horticultural society and the hardware store: hence..."

"A lot more, bird houses, I get it. But that was a long time ago, Genie."

"What about when I bailed you out of jail for trespassing, cause your folks were gone for the weekend?"

I straightened up and breathed deeply. "What does that have to do with anything?"

She called my bluff, "Where did you get caught trespassing at?"

"The water plant." I tried to reply nonchalantly.

"And why did you need to break into the water plant?" She pried.

"I was fourteen!" I hissed under my breath.

"Why?" Genie demanded

"Fine! 'Cause I needed to ensure alien eggs weren't being fed into our water system. Are you happy?" I started to take a sip of water, but instead added, "And a healthy imagination used to be something encouraged, not maligned, and not used as a weapon to club a friend over the head with."

"The school principal was a clone, our PE coach was a Satanist, and my grandmother's rest home was a weigh station for heroin."

"Hey, I only ever investigated those possibilities, but since they all turned bogus, I let them slide, like any sane person."

"A sane person, who decided my 80-year-old grandma and several Korean War vets were drug traffickers."

I leaned forward, "If anything, knowing how suspicious I am, should only serve to confirm what I'm telling you!"

She sat back, picked up her coffee, sipped it again, and raised a single eyebrow at me.

I added, "And, when have you ever heard me bring up God, or anything religious?"

She dropped the eyebrow and shrugged, "Never."

"See." I spat out far too fast, desperate for any leg to stand on.

My old friend smirked, "Still, it's just a lot to swallow."

I growled in frustration, then I too sat back, until I had a crazy thought. "Fine, if Mohammed won't go to the mountain and all that crap...well, Miss Skeptical, watch closely, I'm about to bring the rain!" I turned in the booth and motioned for our server to come over.

He did so with a coffee pot in hand. "You folks need some refills?"

"Sure, thanks," I read his name tag, "Tim." He smiled and refilled our coffees. "Say, Tim, can you settle a bet for my friend here?"

He looked around for a minute, "If you're quick, our morning rush is about to start."

"Two minutes, that's all I need."

He shrugged his shoulders, placed the coffee pot on the table, and said, "Ok, shoot."

"I'm trying to prove to my friend here that I can read people, but she doesn't believe me."

"Ok," Tim replied cautiously.

"Now, do we know each other?"

Tim shrugged, "I've seen you here a few times with a camera, and a super hot...I mean very attractive woman."

"His fiancée." Genie corrected Tim with a patronising tone.

He stood back, "No kidding, that hot...I mean, that lovely lady is going to marry *you*?"

The fake smile I pasted on my face begged the conversation to move on, "Yes, that's her. Anyways, so we don't know each other, do we?"

"Nope." Tim shook his head.

"So, if I don't know you, how would I know that you have a very big heart. Like enormously helpful, to the point of getting you into trouble."

Tim's eyes went wide. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," I continued, "That you have such a hard time saying no to helping people, you have put your career on hold, which is probably why you are working here."

"Dude! That's freaky accurate!"

Staring at his feet, I added something else, "And you like to use your feet as a way to help others, as a matter of fact," I looked up at him, "You trained for and ran in a race while pushing your grandma in her wheelchair because she once told you she regretted never running a full marathon."

Tim's jaw dropped almost to the floor, but he nodded yes.

A middle-aged bald guy, sitting at the coffee counter, had been listening in, "That's a pretty slick trick there, bud, do me next! I love street magicians."

I looked over at Genie as she stared back at me in disbelief. I couldn't help but give her the slightest of cheeky grins, "Sure, why not?" I stood and strode over to the counter and stood next to the bald gentleman, eying him up and down.

"Umm, you hate your job."

The stranger scoffed, "Please, who doesn't? You can do better than that, I hope!" He scoffed hot coffee breath towards me.

I cocked my head to the side, "But, at one time, you loved your job. However, the industry has become overwhelmed by bureaucrats, leading to sadness because of your clients, maybe?" My eyebrows shot up, "Oh, I see, you're a school teacher - social media, academic standards, and bureaucrats making it next to impossible to teach kids, your true passion."

The bald stranger swallowed hard, and his eyes looked to water just a touch as the truth of my words struck gold, "Wow, you're good!"

I looked around the cafe, "Anyone else?"

Half a dozen hands shot into the air, while the same number of faces hid themselves from me.

I cracked my knuckles and grinned, "Ok then, let's try a lightning round!"

I began on the left and worked my way around the room clockwise, pointing out each person as I did. "You, ma'am, love ballet but are terrified to perform in front of anyone else."

I turned to the right slightly, "You, sir, in the Clippers hat, think you drink too much, but it's the smoking that will kill you." Clippers' hat glared at me, but grunted an assent and nodded in agreement.

Over to the right, "The lady in the pink is a little too obsessed with her dogs, which is why your grandkids have distanced themselves; they think you care more about your animals than them." The elderly woman gasped and covered her mouth as she turned away.

"You, sir, are one of the most generous men around." He grinned. "But you are cheating on your wife." The grin turned to a wince. His reddening face turned, and he reached for his wallet to pay his bill quickly.

I kept going, "You are an acrobat who's overstayed his visa. You left your troop because the community you worked with got into some bad stuff." The shorter Latino man nodded in agreement.

"And last but not least, my young friend in the yellow dress, you are worried about your college major, but you're too scared to tell your parents that you hate your current major. You want a career that helps people, but your parents want you to work a job that's safe and stable." I shrugged, "If it were me, I'd tell them the truth."

Suddenly exhausted, I exhaled and plopped back into my booth as a cheer and applause erupted around the diner.

"You're not quite done," a voice on the other end of the booth said. "It's my turn." Genie grinned.

"Hmmm," I chuckled softly, "You're the easiest of all of them."

"Oh wow, really? I'm just an open book." She chuckled back at me.

I smiled back and sipped some water. "Always."

She was about to retort again, but I cut her off. "You are always stubborn and honest, sometimes too honest and too stubborn. But you use your stubbornness to help those who can't or won't help themselves. You're not afraid. You have tiny little heart-shaped holes in your soul from several parts of the world, most likely guilt from people you couldn't quite help enough."

Gennie swallowed hard and cleared her throat.

"And when you frown, your nose crinkles like an old Shar-pei dog."

She tossed her dirty, balled-up napkin at me, "It does not!" And grabbed at her nose to see if I was telling her the truth.

I laughed aloud, "It's ok, they make Botox for such problems."

Not finding the crack about her nose nearly as cute and amusing as I did, Martha-Gene glared back at me, "If I develop body image issues and in twenty years end up looking like a cross between a comic book villain and a house cat, it will all be your fault!"

I calmed down and looked down at the table, sheepishly. "Sorry, Genie, but you know," I smiled at her, "I kind of meant it like a compliment."

"Whatever," she rolled her eyes, "Can we get back on track, please?"

"Fine, do you believe me?"

"Let's say, more than 50%."

I exhaled heavily, "Fine, I'll take it."

"So, then, what do we do now?"

I shrugged, "The only option I can think of is to introduce you to Val?"

NINE LOVE

Screeching tires and gunshots rang out as my white knuckles fought to control the steering of my Subaru as I navigated the I-10 expressway. I loved driving a sport crossover, something that could go off-road, but was still a nice drive on the freeway. However, the "Best of both worlds" ethos that was my smaller SUV was not ideal - not today!

At that moment, I either needed a turbocharged muscle car, preferably an SRT 'Hellcat.' Alternatively, an Abrams tank would be the best.

A voice screamed at me, "Take the exit to 405 East, there's a police station near the Victory Blvd turn off!" Genie was curled into a little ball, sitting on the floorboard of the passenger seat, guiding me with her smartphone mapping app.

"I've always told you there were advantages to being short," I teased, trying to lighten the mood, just as a bullet blew through the windshield, tearing itself through the passenger seat headrest, where Genie would have been sitting if she weren't hiding.

"Holy crap, that was too close!" I swore under my breath as I accelerated down the right shoulder of the I-10 freeway, swerving around half a dozen cars. Our pursuers followed.

Martha-Gene stared at the bullet hole in the chair she had been sitting in only a few minutes earlier and commented, "You know, there are still roller coasters I'm not tall enough to ride? But, today I think it's worth it." She stuck her head up a bit to see what was happening. "What's going on?"

"Get down," I screamed as I swerved through traffic, while keeping a wary eye on the signs to the 405 East. "There's no need for both of us to stick our heads up."

"I just wanted to know what he's up to," Genie said.

"That's simple. The baby face is out of his gourd, chasing us and trying to shoot me in the head!"

"No, not the crazy psycho in the Lincoln. I mean, Val, what's he up to?"

I glanced through my rearview mirror and glared back at the insufferable saint. "He's slapping his knee and laughing," I growled.

Still adorned in a white linen suit and a solid red, loud tie, the heavenly being was unbuckled in the back seat, sliding back and forth coinciding with every hard turn and swerve. "I haven't had this much fun since I was permitted to sabotage that chariot race back in AD126!"

I ignored the odd comment, "I'd be having more fun if your immortal butt got shot up!" I growled under my breath.

Now, before you get the wrong idea, I have to make one thing clear. It was NOT my fault that we were being chased down the Santa Monica Freeway by lunatics, shooting up my car...well, it wasn't ENTIRELY my fault.

You see...It had been less than an hour since Martha-Gene and I had left Stax Coffee. We hopped into my car and started driving south, down historic Highway 1. After succumbing to Martha's insistence, I agreed to contact Val. Mockingly, I chanted "Valentine, Valentine, Valentine," with my deepest, spooky tone - to my shock, he materialized in a puff of smoke, two inches from my face.

"Boo!"

"Ahhh!" I squealed with a pitch, three octaves higher than my previous mocking tone.

Val backed away, sliding like a phantom from the front seat to the back, then settled onto the middle section of my Sport Crossover bench seat. "If you can mess with me, son, and imply I'm a devilish spirit, I can mess right back with you!"

"You scared me half to death and could have made me crash!"

Genie peered around the vehicle anxiously, "He's here, isn't he? What's he saying?"

I rolled my eyes as I caught Genie up on our conversation. "He's whining cause I teased him about being a troll or imp, like that old Tim Burton '80s movie Michael Keaton was in."

Val crossed his arms, "I'll have you know, young man, that calling my kind an imp is about as rude as you can be. How would you like me to compare you and your work to Andy Warhol?"

"You take that back, right now!" I growled.

"Take what back? What did he say?" Genie demanded.

"He said my work was like Andy Warhol's."

"Hey, some of us like Warhol's stuff!"

Val said, "Tell her that some people also worship little statues; that doesn't make them actual gods!"

I chuckled at the comment.

"Now, what did he say?" She asked.

I indicated a change of lanes as I dodged the question with a new topic, "He just said Whorl's stuff isn't that good - Anyways, Val...the reason I called."

The apparition cut me off with a sigh, "Yes, yes, you want to know what to do next, well, that is quite simple, isn't it!"

I sighed and shook my head, "Let's pretend like I'm a guy who has never had direct interaction with the ghost of Hallmark's holiday past. Let's also assume I have never been privy to a concise description of the current state of every person's soul around me....Therefore, IT IS NOT obvious."

Val rolled his eyes. "Hurtful? A little... But was it original? - Not at all. However, I will dumb your situation down for you, Jimmy, but not because you can't think for yourself, but because you choose to only believe what is convenient."

"What is he saying? What are you supposed to do next?" Genie whacked my arm, "Don't leave me in the dark!"

"Stop, I'm trying to drive, and he's about to tell me, he's just taking forever to do it!"

"Fine, Jim, here it is. It will become much simpler if you treat your present circumstances as a gift, not a curse. If you lean into it, instead of hiding from it."

"He wants me to pretend like this thing I have is a gift, not a curse." I restated for Martha's benefit.

"Ok, how do you do that?" She asked.

"Yeah, how do I do that?" I repeated.

Val chuckled at the question, "You humans use mocking tones and bad attitudes as if that has any relevance to reality. The answer is simple: what do you do with any gift given?"

"I don't know," I noticed Martha, eyeing me, "He's asking what you do with any gift given and thinks I'm an idiot for not answering."

Martha scoffed, "'Cause you are, Jim! It's simple - you use it. If you gave someone a gift, like food, wouldn't you expect them to at least taste it?"

"I guess." I reluctantly replied.

"And if you gave someone concert tickets, wouldn't you expect them to show up to the concert?"

"I suppose." I sighed.

"Hey, look at that, a human with brains! Tell Martha-Gene I've always been a fan."

I took the exit to the Highway 10 turn off as I leaned over and spoke out the side of my mouth, "The love ghost agrees with you and says he's always been a fan of yours, whatever that means."

Genie flashed me a playful, yet smug smile, as the word 'gift' rang through my head. As I contemplated how this insane way of seeing other human beings could be useful, I pulled up to a red light. To the left of my Subaru was a lowered Lincoln Continental. "Gifting? How is it a gift? Who would even think of this as a gift?" I muttered under my breath to myself as I glanced at the passenger of the Lincoln Continental. What I saw made me smile.

"Oh my goodness, you guys, look at that adorable baby, isn't he the cutest little guy you've ever seen?"

Marthe-Gene was confused, "What baby, who the heck are ya talking about?"

"Right there, in the passenger seat of the car next to us," I said as I gave a tiny wave, trying to make the baby laugh.

Genie leaned across me to see what I was seeing and sounded confused, "You mean the tricked-out Lincoln Continental, lowered almost to the pavement with rear tinted windows?"

My wave was not getting a smile, only glares. "Yes, Martha-Gene, are you blind?" Still fighting for a smile from the babe, I switched tactics and tried several of my silliest faces.

Martha swallowed hard and leaned back, "Um, that's not a baby, James - Stop doing that!" She begged, smacking my arm.

"Doing what?" I chuckled, "I'm just messing around...Wait, what kind of a parent gives their baby a neck tattoo?" My confusion turned to terror as the infant snarled at me and flashed a metallic object at me, "Oh crap, the baby's got a ginormous gun!" I stepped on the gas, blowing through the on-ramp's red light. It was a good call because the first shots from the Lincoln rang out.

"Angry baby, angry baby!!! I exclaimed. "Who gives a massive gun to a baby?" I growled as I remembered my "gift."

I spied Val laughing so hard in the back seat that he had to pull the red hankie from his pocket to mop the tears streaking his impossibly smooth cheeks.

"Freakin unbelievable! See, this ain't no gift, it's just one run-in and blow up after another!" At that, two bullets thudded into the car.

So now, I'm driving like a stunt man in an '80s action flick, bobbing and weaving through traffic in a desperate attempt to avoid getting shot, with some sort of delusion/ghost/angel person laughing at me and my ex-girlfriend hiding under the dashboard trying to explain to the cops what was happening to us.

I was not impressed.

"So, Saint Valentine, if you have been hired and paid for by...you know..."

Val slowed his laughter a bit to listen, "Yes, go on...."

"You know... the Boss."

"Yes, I have. So, what's your point?"

"If He's there, why doesn't He help?"

"Oh - you skeptical humans, you want to have free will and always make your own decisions, but as soon as something goes wrong or someone is mean to you, complaints ring out because He 'let's' bad stuff happen."

I opened my mouth to argue, but Val cut me off....

"Besides, you don't believe in the Boss and still think I'm a hallucination from getting bonked on the head. So how can I or a 'mythical' Creator help you?"

"Well," he let me argue this time, "Isn't this a GREAT time for you both to prove your existence to me...you can always use another homosapien on 'team believer'...right?"

Val rolled his eyes, "Yeah, yeah - I'd say I'd check, but I already know what He'll say."

Bang. Bang. Bang, "So! Hurry up before I see Him face-to-face, after getting me and Martha-Gene killed!"

"Do you two mind?" Martha-Gene hissed from her hiding spot, "I'm on the phone."

I eyed Val from the rear mirror, "Well?" I demanded.

"First, you have to ask, and not imply."

"Second?"

"No more excuses."

"What does that mean?"

Val shrugged, "I don't know, Willis, I ain't Him, only the Boss is the Boss. But that's the deal, and that's the message from Him. Ask Him directly and in return, 'No more excuses.'"

"Fine." I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

"Are you nuts!" Val's thick hand smacked my head.

"Take it easy, Casper, that hurt!"

"You don't need to close your eyes to ask Him, just talk like a normal person and keep your eyes on the road."

A sudden jolt from the rear caused my tires to slide. I fought to control my vehicle. The Lincoln was taking a new tactic of ramming us at over 80 mph. "Please, help us!" I screamed as I slid my car onto the shoulder at 85 mph to fly past traffic.

Without warning, a figure, clad in all black, tipped a tan fedora at me from the side of the freeway. His long, black leather trench coat blew in the wind of the flowing traffic. "Who the heck was that, and why is he in the middle of the interstate dressed like an anime character?"

I didn't slow down but spied the stranger from the rearview mirror. He stuffed his left hand into his black trench coat and steadied his old school hat upon his head as he strode swiftly into the oncoming traffic. He stepped directly into the path of the road-raging Lincoln and waited.

The vehicle didn't slow, but sped ahead, seemingly unaware of the stranger standing in its path. At the last second, the stranger reached over his head and into the collar of his long, dark coat, drawing out a massive samurai sword. Spinning, he narrowly pivoted out of the path of the car, which missed everything but his blade. Like a skilsaw, the car ran through the blade, the sound of metal tearing apart and tires exploding filled the air. The Lincoln slowed, eventually coming to a stop and resting its bumper against the freeway cement wall. As soon as the vehicle stopped rolling, three cop cars descended upon its occupants.

"What a showoff," Val chuckled and rolled his eyes as he peered through the rear window, "So much drama for such a little job. That was Zad. He's a big John Woo fan, I'm surprised he didn't arrange for doves."

I found myself questioning if I was more relieved that the chase was over or terrified of the power behind the goofy apparition that had been following me around for the past two days. I swallowed hard. "Who are you people?"

Val flashed me a cheeky grin. "That isn't the right question."

I licked dry lips and cleared my throat nervously, "Then, what is?"

The love ghost shrugged, then looked me in the eyes, "Simple: who are you?"

TEN LOVE

Two hours later, Martha-Gene, Val, and I bounded down grey, lifeless concrete steps. We had just completed hours of interviews, mountains of paperwork, and the same questions over and over at the nearest West LAPD precinct. Modern-day law enforcement loved their paperwork, and the Los Angeles Police Department may love their forms the most.

However, when we first set foot into the LAPD office, we were hailed as accidental heroes. The men in the car, chasing us down the freeway, had more than a dozen warrants for their arrest, including assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder. The police even suspected they were heavily armed because the gang was on their way to a rival's turf to kill someone.

I was taken aback! My gift, as nuts and backwards as it was, had just saved lives and taken some bad guys off the street. Whereas massive metal claws and bulletproof skin were still my ideal superhero powers, I was beginning to understand the power of seeing someone's true nature.

Take the crazed, insane guy who had just chased me down the freeway. On the outside, virtually everyone would be afraid of the thug, covered in tattoos, sneering and glaring at every passerby. Yet, all I saw was the most vulnerable, cutest nine-month-old. Granted, he had a neck tattoo and tried to kill me, but he was still so precious! The "tough" gangster was, in reality, masking his immaturity and vulnerability with hatred and violence. Once his true self was revealed, he freaked, feeling he had nowhere to hide, until the one who knew the truth was destroyed.

But why choose such a backward way of helping people? Why not gift me lasers shooting from my eyes, or telepathy so I can read people's thoughts, or the ability to move objects? Why just dump a parlor trick on me, then call it a gift?

These thoughts swirled in my overwhelmed and confused mind on the way to the car.

"In your weakness, the Boss is made strong."

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," Martha replied.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "It was Val. He said something about being weak..."

The saint grinned as I stood at the door of my crossover vehicle, "I said, in your weakness, the Boss is made strong. In other words: when you can do nothing but ask Him to step in, then He gets to remind you, the bad guys, the cops, and all those paying attention, who has the true power."

I popped open my door and slid into the driver's seat. "What does my being weak have anything to do with it?"

"What has your talent behind a camera gotten you?"

I sighed, "A lot, honestly. I have my place in Malibu, Sam, my fiancé, and I'm top of my field."

"Would you say recognition?"

"Yeah," I agreed as I started up the vehicle.

"A certain amount of satisfaction and pride in your work?"

I checked over at Martha, ensuring that she had gotten in and her seatbelt was on; I was taking no chances after our last trip in my car. "Yeah, 'cause I work hard and honed my craft. I put a lot of time and effort into every picture I present to a client."

"You are making...."

"Art, ok? I am making art, what are you getting at?" I snapped at Val as I shifted into reverse.

"What would you say if I called you a 'piece of art'?"

The thought made me pause a beat before I pulled out of the parking space.

"What'd he say? What did I miss?" Martha-Gene demanded.

"He said, 'What if I...'" I stopped, choking slightly on the words. So, I cleared my throat and tried again. "What if I were a 'work of art'?" But I couldn't hide the emotion the thought revealed.

Val ignored my vulnerability, but continued, "And as a Creator, who enjoys His art, and even the occasional appreciation of His artwork, He finds joy in our recognition that we wouldn't be here or successful without Him and the tools He has gifted to us."

I pulled out of the parking lot as I caught Martha up on Val's lecture. I shifted the car into drive and propelled us towards the street.

"Not only that," the saint continued, "But it's also for our own good to remember that we can't be strong alone, not without the understanding of where we come from, or the help of those the Boss has put into our lives. When we operate out of weakness, showing His strength, everyone benefits, not just you!"

I rolled my eyes, "I'm still not sure I wouldn't just rather have the ability to fly," I snarked back over my shoulder.

"Yes, I'm sure being able to fly would be preferable to having the ear of the all-powerful Being who made every molecule of the entire universe."

"Whatever, figment, but at least if I could fly, I could do something practical with it and it would make sense, not trying to figure out a God I can't even see."

"And if you could see God, then what? Then you'd believe in Him, and He would suddenly become more real? More practical?"

"Yeah, maybe." I retorted with an attitude.

"Let me ask you. Do you believe in wind, genius?"

"Yeah," I rolled my eyes, thinking I knew where he was going with this analogy.

"How about tornadoes? That is when wind gives you a visual and practical demonstration."

"Yeah, but I thought you said God, I mean the Boss, loved His artwork."

"He does, that's why he usually remains gentle and chill. Since His size will eclipse even this universe, He has to be more careful than you could ever imagine to touch this place for fear of killing someone or breaking the planet into pieces. He can be misunderstood as aloof and vague when in reality, He's patient, gentle, and kind."

"Makes sense to me!" Martha suddenly said.

I had been repeating everything Val said for her benefit, and it was freaking exhausting.

"Great, now it's two against one?" I pushed the gas pedal down, shooting my vehicle forward, driving the next forty-five minutes back to Malibu in angry, awkward silence.

ELEVEN LOVE

I glanced over at a Porsche next to us. A Cheshire cat-like smile rested on the driver. He was a balding middle-aged man with thin stubby arms protruding from a slimy, algae-green, chocolate-kiss-shaped body. Next to him sat a young, hot, twenty-something redhead in a tube top and mini skirt. She seemed very normal as she glanced at me, but her smile revealed massive rows of teeth I recognized from a PBS channel documentary I watched about leeches. I smirked at both of them.

"Looks like you both deserve one another."

"That was a bit disturbing," I continued my internal dialogue, "Am I getting used to this madness? Is it because I accept it or because..."

"I am so happy I do not live here!" Genie's comment pulled me from my angry, sulking thoughts.

"What's that?" I asked.

"The traffic is more than enough reason not to live in Southern California."

"Yeah, well, I'll take anything over those ignorant, backward Midwest rednecks," I muttered to myself.

Genie sneered, "What do you mean by that?"

"What do you mean, you were there, you know what those pitchfork and torch-carrying lemmings are like, still stuck in the 19th century!" I scoffed and shook my head in disbelief.

Martha-Gene was taken aback a bit, "Yeah, they're not exactly nominated for a Nobel prize, but they're generally good folks who try to do what they think is right."

"Oh yeah, church on Sunday - and burning anything at the stake they don't understand on Monday!"

"Wait, is that what your hang-up with God is all about? The incident back in high school?"

"What's that?" I feigned ignorance but couldn't quite hide a tightening in my throat and a widening of my eyes.

"I saw that," Genie pointed at me, "That's exactly what it is."

"Nah, that's nothing, just leave it." I swallowed hard. But I should have known better. Martha-Gene was always a well-meaning, nice person, yet she had very little tact. "Does Val know or should I tell him?"

"I... ." I stammered, not sure how to defuse the conversation. Because she wasn't right, was she? It wasn't that big of a deal, stupid really, I just didn't want it brought up again, cause I was past all that.

I felt Val lean forward from the back seat. He had a self-satisfied grin on his face. "I'm all ears," he stated.

Martha simultaneously said, "Oh well, I'll tell him anyway." She cleared her throat, "So, this was, what, the end of junior year? So, we're about 17, and as you probably already know this about Jim - he was the king of nerds! Not only that, but young James was obsessed with conspiracies, from Bigfoot to MK Ultra, the Contras, to mind-altering drugs in the drinking water. But the holy grail of all conspiracies was inspired by his favorite TV show: X-Files. This kid needed to prove that there was life out there, beyond humanity."

I cut in, "Yeah, yeah, I was young and dumb, it was fun for a time, but this is now...I'm over all that..."

"Anyways, one day, towards the end of our junior year, we had a nasty storm. Now, this was the start of tornado season, and since we lived in Kansas, in the middle of Tornado alley, everyone is very cautious when there's a sudden change in temperature and dark, stormy days."

"Can we please just leave this alone?" Traffic was finally moving now.

"So later in the morning, I think it was a Tuesday, the weather turned, and we heard the tornado siren, so everyone went to their designated areas. Some of us were messing around and making jokes about Dorothy and Toto the dog. However, some of the kids had lost houses and even relatives to tornadoes, so they were quiet and somber. Well, ten minutes in, young James comes bursting through the door, claiming he had skipped school, cause the night before he had intercepted a transmission from space.

"I never claimed it was from space."

"And he had tracked the signal to a field out of town. As it turned out, it was the site of a downed flying saucer."

I growled under my breath, "And I never said that either."

Martha ignored me, "Anyways, the storm's getting worse, but he insists that someone goes back to that field with him to get proof before the tornado or men in black show up to 'sanitize' the scene.' Of course, the teachers are saying no, that he's already in trouble for skipping class, but he won't stop. Finally, the football coach and four of his players have to restrain him until the storm passes."

"Mindless meat-heads almost pulled my shoulder out of its socket!" I hissed as the painful memory forced its way back into my brain.

"They were saving your butt from getting torn apart by a twister."

"They didn't need to spend the next year reminding me of it, calling me a freak and alien boy."

"Dumb jocks, that's all they were, Jim..."

"The guys at the hardware store? The post office, or when I worked at the lake the next summer, all the lifeguards?" I finally made our turn off the freeway.

Martha giggled, "Yeah, but come on, James! It was years and years ago. Something to laugh at now..."

I lost it. "They sent me to a psych ward, ok!" A snarl of emotions exploded from between my teeth. "My parents took me to Kansas City, where I sat for three days being evaluated by doctors." Tears dripped down my face. "Every night, I'd hear squeals and screams from cray folks down the hall." I paused, "I barely slept....I still have nightmares..." I started to say, but drifted off.

Well, that shut her up real fast. Genie tried to say something, but I cut her off again.

"But, you know the scariest thing?" I swallowed and wiped the tears from my cheeks. I glared through my windshield, seeing more than the road in front of me, "For that next week, I didn't know if I was crazy or not. I could swear I heard that signal. I tracked it and I found the wreckage. I could barely make out the shape of a figure, dead in the cockpit. I only had my binoculars, and I was riding a bike! So I headed back for a camera when that storm came out of

nowhere!" I shook my head, "I mean, it was blue skies and sunny, but as soon as I started for town, the clouds rolled in and the weather turned."

I pulled over and parked in front of the Stax Coffee shop, back to where our adventure had begun. I turned off the car and looked over at Genie with swollen red eyes, "I thought this was my chance, something I had been put on this earth to do, to discover something bigger than me, than us." I paused. "I had faith, and it led to something unexplainable, and for my trouble, I found out I was insane!"

"I'm so sorry, Jim, I had no idea..."

I held up a finger, "So, I no longer talk about this stuff, or what happened that day. I only trust what I see, feel, and touch - with a verifiable witness." I sighed heavily and nodded back towards Val, "Well, that is until yesterday morning."

"It was another ship." Val blurted.

"What's that?" I demanded.

"The sudden storm came and went, lots of lightning, mostly around your school, no tornado?"

"Yes," I replied cautiously.

"Yeah, that was another ship. It scared you off, so the recon vessel could be picked up."

"What is he saying?"

"A bunch of bull!" I screamed at my back seat.

"It was a long, silver tube-shaped ship, and the figure in the cockpit was probably a grey, sickly colored skin, but the closer you got, the more nauseous you felt?"

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Because we cleaned up that site."

"You what?"

"We had to clean up all that unauthorized tech before you or the Feds showed up!"

I turned on him, "You destroyed my life!" I screamed.

My sudden fury shocked Martha, who cowered from me into the passenger door.

"Really, Jim? Yesterday, you were the most successful photographer in fashion, engaged to the world's hottest supermodel, living by the beach in Malibu. But now, all of a sudden, I ruined your life a decade ago? How do you figure?" Val raised an eyebrow, daring me to answer.

I took the bait, but didn't swallow it whole, "You took....You took." I bit my lower lip, not wanting to admit anything more.

"Took what?" Martha stepped in, "What did they take?"

"My passion...ok? They took my passion." I reached into my middle console, pulled out a spare digital camera, and shook it in the air as a prop, "I never wanted to live behind this, just to show off more pretty people, I wanted to shoot space, to follow science and technology. I wanted to discover the impossible, like Mulder or Captain Kirk." Tears were flowing freely now, and I didn't care. I sniffed and gritted my teeth, "Instead, I learned my lesson, and I learned it well." I paused a beat and glared harder, "Play it safe, stay shallow." I stared into Martha's green eyes. "Cause I will never go back to that-that place!" I had made up my mind, "I'm not doing this, treading against the grain is too painful. Not again." I turned to Martha and growled, "Get out, both of you."

I heard Val sit back and sigh, but I could see Genie needed more convincing. "Get out, NOW! I warned you that I didn't wanna talk about this. It's your fault, so go!"

"Please, James, don't do this?" Her soft eyes pleaded, and a tear gathered in the corner of her eye.

"GET THE HELL OUT OF MY CAR, BOTH OF YOU, NOW - LEAVE!"

TWELVE LOVE

A few hours later, I drifted into my engagement party, apprehensive and distracted. I use the term "my" very loosely. The swanky affair was very well planned, full of glitz and glamor, but void of any personality. Caterers in bowties drifted about the room with silver trays, offering guests cocktails and crabcakes. Most refused any food, which made sense since half the attendees were starving and anorexic. A few models did steal a crab cake, but only to use it as a prop for one of the three, pre-approved reporters drifting through the crowd and taking pictures, conveying a sense of being "normal" to their admirers.

Of course, all I saw were swollen bellies and translucent, empty skulls. I smirked and commented to myself, "Of course, how can you think if you're starving yourself most of the time?"

"What do you say?"

I turned to see the only handsome couple in the room, my new friends from the beach, Shelly and Jack, the grip and lighting assistants. They were holding drinks and half-eaten crab cakes. "Oh, nothing, just an observation. But, it's great to see you both." I motioned to their hands, "And to see someone eating the food and drink I overpaid for."

Jack leaned in, "Hey, bro, it's one of the perks of being one of the only normals in this business, these functions always have to provide food, but no one ever wants to eat it!" He popped the rest of the crab cake in his mouth. "Great for us."

Sherry elbowed him in the ribs, "Jack, this is his engagement party, not a function!"

Jack's face dropped. "Oh, dude, so sorry." He wiped a greasy palm on black denim jeans and stuck it out to shake mine, "Congrats, bro, I'm sure you'll be happy."

"Yeah, congrats, James, I hope you two have many good years together." Sherry agreed.

I shook Jack's hand and pasted a forced smile on my lips. "Yes, well, I think a function may be a better description of this event than a celebration of love and future marriage."

At the comment, Sherry bit her lower lip, and Jack took a deep, awkward drink from his cocktail.

I smiled at their awkward reactions, "Sorry, guys, just thinking out loud a bit too much." I swiped a cocktail from the silver tray of a passing server. "But please have some more food and drink." I rolled my eyes, "Doesn't look like any of these anorexic pill heads will."

"Hey man, thanks again, good luck," Jack said with a solid pat on my shoulder as I turned away.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sherry hissed.

I faintly heard Jack making a statement about me not being happy when Medusa first approached.

To be fair, she didn't have hair made of snakes, nor did she turn me to stone when I saw her face. However, like a fog being lifted from the gleam of sunlight, all my questions and doubts about who this woman truly was answered themselves all at once.

Half her jaw was missing. The left side of her face drooped and hung past her chin. I approached cautiously, the tightening in my stomach giving way to nausea, as the left side of her face eroded away, dripping down the side of her skimpy, black blouse. I swallowed hard and squeezed out a fake smile as the ghoulish figure closed the distance between us. I opened my mouth to say hi, but the melting face turned away from me and blew a kiss towards a voice, calling the monster's name. Swiveling her head left revealed a gaping hole in the right side of her skull. The missing piece of her dome exposed toxic green ooze, where her brain should be.

The ghastly figure turned back to me, flipping greasy hair, entangled with globs of dandruff, and blew a kiss.

I swallowed my gag reflex, forcing stomach juices back down my esophagus. After taking a measured deep breath, I cocked my head charmingly, "Hello, my love, and how are you this evening?"

My fiancé responded with a kiss on my cheek from cold, cracked, rotting lips: "James, my love, I'm so happy you could *finally* make it."

I smiled at the passive-aggressive hint, "Yes, well, you know...work and traffic."

She leaned in closely, the smell of death invading my nostrils as she hissed into my ear, "And I told you, this was a very important event for me, darling. Now, make it up to me by working the room. Do it quickly, so you don't miss anyone before they leave." She leaned back and brushed some lint from my suit coat, leaving behind a noticeable streak of decay. The ghoul's tone suddenly softened. Gracefully, she smiled, "Thank you, love."

I watched the corpse turn and walk away, looking the disgusting figure up and down, I chuckled aloud, catching her by surprise.

She turned around and furrowed hairless eyebrows, "What's so funny?"

I allowed a wry smile, "Oh, nothing, my dove." I used a hint of mockery when I spoke the pet name, "It's just that I don't think I've ever seen you looking so...alive."

My fiancé pursed together rotting, dead lips and flipped clumped, stringy hair in a failed attempt to be seductive, "Why, thank you, darling." Then she turned and stomped away atop 6-inch pumps.

I sighed hard as I watched the corpse strut away, "How on earth do I get out of this hell?"

"This ain't hell. It's just your choice." I sighed and peered to my right. Saint Valentine stood there in a white suit, looking even cleaner and brighter. His red loafers, matching tie, and hankie gleamed with almost a sheen.

I snorted, "I thought I told you to leave."

"I will, I promise," Val stated as he stepped up beside me, sipping his drink. "After I explain one thing, just hear me out." He smiled and held up pleading hands, "Then, you'll never hear from me again, and your special gift will be gone. You will be back to normal, seeing shallow soulless children as pretty and nice, and all the hard-working folks as 'not handsome.'" Val used air quotes to emphasize his point.

I glared at him as he raised an eyebrow, awaiting my answer. "Fine, what?"

"You were never supposed to find that downed UFO."

"So?" I grabbed another cocktail from a passing server. "Of course not."

Val sighed. For the first time, I saw him sound a little frustrated. "You don't get it. There was a sudden tornado in that area when the vehicle went down."

"Yeah, you tried to cover it up."

"Yes, for your safety. How could we know that you would be dumb and lucky enough to make it back there in that weather?"

"Oh, so it's my fault for finding the truth?"

"No, son," He turned to me and put a hand on my shoulder, "It wasn't anyone's fault, it was just dangerous. Do you have any idea what type of forces and ruthless people are involved in multidimensional spacecrafts?"

I swallowed hard, "Well...I ahhh, um... ."

"The men in black and the smoking man chasing Mulder are pussy cats compared to these animals. And what do you think they would do to an idealistic high-schooler on a ten-speed bicycle?"

"I don't know, kill me?"

Val shook his head, "Nah, that would raise too many questions. However, you'd be discovered suddenly 'crazy' or catatonic in a state mental ward for the rest of your life. A lesson for anyone else not on 'their side' who wants to find answers."

I smirked, "So, you're saying I can know the truth, but do nothing about it."

"Not at all, son, I'm saying that you got a little ahead of your skis, but it's still your true calling." He paused and shrugged his shoulders, "The choice is yours, but maybe now, it's time to get back on track and start chasing photographs of things that truly matter."

THIRTEEN LOVE

I smirked at the ridiculous thought, "Easy for you to say, going from fashion to UFO chasing is career suicide." But the apparition was gone, and I was left speaking to myself.

A hand on my shoulder and Jack's voice made me turn around. "Hey, James, we are taking off, but thanks so much for the food and drink." I barely recognized the gruff mountain of a man in front of me. He was easily 6'4" and probably 300 pounds. His hooked nose, receding hairline, and ponytail would mean he'll never walk a runway. However, those genuine eyes and kind smile were the same. I shook his hand eagerly, "Thanks so much for coming. Let's hang out sometime soon, ok?"

He leaned back in surprise, "Yeah, man, that'd be cool."

I watched him follow a short, chubby woman to the front door. Sherry turned, made eye contact, and waved a thank you. I waved back and smiled warmly.

"Now to exorcise the demons from my life." I clenched my teeth, narrowed my eyes, and waded into the sea of tall models and magazine editors. I couldn't decide if it was harder to get through the oblivious crowd or the layered pretense.

I had to circle half the room before I found my target. She was charming all those around her, in a white satin dress that hung from her body perfectly, showing just enough skin in all the right places to ensure that every eye would at least take a look.

I motioned a server carrying drinks over, snatched one off his tray, and removed the olives, but shotgunned the martini down my gullet. I handed the empty glass back to the server with a quick nod of gratitude, then narrowed my eyes towards my quarry. "Let's do this!" I hissed under my breath.

Approaching Sam, my first thoughts were, "This is SO dumb - she is so HOT, I can't believe I am doing this. Don't be an idiot, make this woman happy for the rest of your life, no matter what it takes!" Yet, the closer I got to my fiancé, the more different I felt. The pit of my stomach was dropping, and a queasiness grew in my guts. It was a nausea I recognized, the nausea a dumb 16-year-old kid had felt after stumbling onto a UFO and approaching a dead body in the wreckage, a nausea that said, "This person is pure evil!"

I took Sam's hand and smiled at the half dozen men she was in the middle of charming while I leaned into her ear. "Can I see your engagement ring real fast?"

She furrowed her perfect brow at me, "Why?"

I said nothing but grinned and held out my hand. As my heart raced, I couldn't help but notice every eye in the room began to settle on us. They probably thought I was going to make a speech, and in a way, they weren't disappointed.

After several awkward and silent moments, she forced a charming, flirtatious laugh, "Of course, my darling, here."

The ring was lighter than I remembered, and surprisingly, I was far happier with the white gold and diamond in my hand than on her finger. This sudden realization made me lose focus on what I was doing, so I absent-mindedly turned and began drifting toward the exit.

"James, just where do you think you're going, and why did you need my ring?" The 'hottest woman' in the known world demanded of me.

Shook from my thoughts, I paused my exit, turned, and couldn't help but grin, A LOT. The entire room of "friends" and work colleagues was dead silent, staring at the two of us, "Well..." I flipped the ring into the air as if I were tossing a quarter before a football game, "I noticed that lately you don't like to wear my engagement ring in public," I snatched it from the air, "So, to help you out, I thought I'd just make sure you never have to wear it again." I turned to leave, but stopped short and looked back. I bowed slightly, then blew a kiss with my right index and middle fingers, "Have a nice life...You can keep the condo."

With that, I turned and escaped into the fresh night air.

FOURTEEN LOVE

I sighed and leaned back, looking across the table from my empty coffee cup and half-eaten apple pie à la mode. "The rest of the story you both know...I chased you two down and asked if you wanted dessert."

"I definitely appreciate it, buddy, good times." Jack raised his coffee mug, his mouth full of pie, "And, I gotta say," he swallowed hard, "That is one heck of a story, brother. For real, if even half of it is true - that's nuts!"

Sherry rolled her eyes. "Can't you see James is hurting?"

"Yeah, of course I do. So what?"

Sherry nudged him, "Say something."

"Listen, babe, he's a dude," He motioned with his hands across the table at me, "He knows what he should do. He's just gotta decide if he'll do it or not."

"Wait," I backed up the conversation, "You two together?" I asked.

Sherry smiled and leaned onto the giant of a man, "Sure are, fifteen years next month with this big teddy bear."

"Grizzly!" Jack hissed under his breath as he sipped again from his coffee mug...then winked at me with those fierce eyes.

Sherry reached over and put a hand on my arm. "From an old couple like us, it seems pretty obvious what the issue is."

"Yeah, you just broke up with the hottest"

"Hhhmmmm." Sherry cleared her throat and elbowed her man in the ribs.

"...I mean, a very pretty lady."

"Thank you." The shorter woman approved.

"Now that you have rejected the pretty person, can you find the right person?"

I smirked, "What are you on about, Jack, what right person?"

"Oh, please, we have been sitting here, in Stax, listening to you go on and on for an hour, and the only time you blushed was when you talked about a cute little midget girl from high school."

"He ain't lying," Sherry nodded as she picked at the rest of her husband's dessert.

"Martha-Gene." I waved a dismissive hand, "Please, I don't look at her like that at all."

"That's bull, but whatever," Jack smirked.

"She's the only person in the whole story described as attractive, inside and out."

"Yep," Jack confirmed. "But it's fine," He waved his fork at me as he polished off the rest of his pie, "It's not as if she works on the other side of the globe and you may never see her again, never apologize for leaving things badly or knowing if she felt the same way about you."

Jack's fork made a sickening squeal as he scraped the remaining whipped cream and pie crust off. Sherry said nothing, but just stared at me.

"Oh, balls!" I swore aloud as I popped up and crawled over the table, catching a toe on the booth, spilling me to the ground. I didn't care, but dug out the car keys in my pocket as I clawed my way back to my feet and out the door.

FIFTEEN LOVE

Twenty minutes later, I was flying down Highway 1. The cleaning service at her Airbnb stated that she had left more than an hour earlier, along with all her luggage. My best guess was LAX International Airport, but to not take any chances, I had Jack and Sherry call UNICEF and Habitat to see where her next job might be. "I'm such an idiot, I spent so much time talking about my little make-believe issues, I never even asked where she was going next."

To my shock, an audible voice answered my thoughts from the rear seat, "Probably true, but it's not too late."

I swerved from the shock, "Son of a gun!" I fought to calm my Subaru down, as I looked in my rearview mirror, "Val, what the hell are you doing here?!"

He raised both manicured hands defensively, "I'm here to help."

"What do you care?" I sneered.

The apparition's eyes widened and scoffed, "Hello... Patron Saint of Love over here, they named a holiday after me...I mean, let's be honest, without me, Hallmark would be out of business. Besides, this is my usual job, not the spiritual awakening NDE guide thing, I filled in for...anyway, I just love - Love...and so does my Boss...so do you want help, or will you just drive around the whole of Los Angeles screaming for Martha-Gene like a lost little kid in the forest?"

"OK, fine, just stop appearing and disappearing all the time, it's freaking me out!"

"Fair enough."

"And...."

"And what? Do you have any demands?"

"No...just....thank you, and please thank your Boss, too."

I felt a sudden warmth radiate from my back seat driver, "Trust me, He'd much rather hear that from you, in person..."

"How do I do that?"

He smiled, "We will most definitely talk about that later, but for now...Forget about LAX."

"But that's the only international airport," I argued.

"Your girl is a romantic - try the train station."

"She's not my girl," I rolled my eyes.

"Not with that attitude she won't be, now hurry up or risk being a loser forever."

"Hey, I might have been taking glib and simplistic pictures of mostly half-naked people for all the wrong reasons for the past decade, but there's no need to be mean about it."

"If lighting a fire under your behind gets the job done, then it is necessary. Now, are you going to listen to me or not?"

"Are you sure?" I hadn't even thought of anything but a plane. To be honest, I didn't even know LA still had a train station. "Are you sure, the train?"

"Unless you're talking to yourself, kid, and having a psychotic break."

"That's still a possibility."

Val rolled his eyes, "Ye of little faith - Well, if you decide to listen to me, your favorite delusion, take the I-10 and head for Chinatown."

FINAL LOVE

I came to a screeching halt and parked illegally in the "drop-off" zone. A bald security guard screamed at me about not being able to leave my car next to the curb and getting towed. I ignored him as I dodged around a palm tree and sped towards the entrance. Bursting into the train terminal, I eagerly began my search for Martha-Gene. My lungs spewed fire, once again confirming how out of shape I was. With my hands on my hips and catching my breath, I peered around the room, hoping to catch sight of a short, dirty blonde or a blue baseball cap projecting a ponytail.

I walked through the left side of the terminal, checking down every aisle as I did. It only took me a few minutes, but it still felt like it was too long. After no luck on the west side of the

terminal, I pushed on through to the east side, following the same search pattern, checking aisle after aisle. When I reached the final one, I held my breath....But it was empty, I exhaled.

I chuckled and shook my head at myself, *"I guess I was talking to myself, and a refresher course in the loony bin wouldn't hurt."*

"James, what in the world....how did you find me?" A familiar voice exclaimed from behind me.

I looked up "On the other hand, I think I owe You an apology and a long, long overdue conversation!"

I spun on my heels to find Martha-Gene, as short and pretty as ever. She was wearing her old blue "Habitat" baseball cap and a matching hoodie. She stormed towards me with a look of shock and a hint of irritation. A rolling bag in her left hand, an overstuffed backpack strapped to her shoulder, and her hand outstretched. "Earth to Jimmy, what gives? Why are you here?"

I strode with long legs to meet her.

She continued, "You shouted at me to go away and not come back, but now you track me down..."

As I approached her, I felt I wanted to say so much! Yet a bottleneck of a thousand words lodged itself in my throat, against my sternum, unable to dislodge even a single syllable.

As I reached Martha, she was saying, "...friends don't treat each other like that. It's..."

Still unable to form words, I did the only thing I could think of. I wrapped my long left arm around the back of her neck and shoulder just above her backpack, my right hand pressed against her hip as I tipped her small frame back, and kissed her. After a few seconds, I pulled my face back from hers and grinned, "Who says I even want to be your friend?"

Her left hand flashed across my face, slapping me hard. "Ouch," I chuckled nervously as I absorbed the blow.

I began to pull away when her offending hand rested gently back onto my face, "Next time, ask permission!"

"Yes, Ma'am," I nodded right before she wrapped both arms around my neck and kissed me back.

THE END

