

A ginger and white cat is sitting on a concrete porch, looking out over a lush green lawn. The scene is bathed in bright sunlight, with long shadows cast across the grass. In the foreground, a dark patterned rug is partially visible. To the left and right of the cat are potted plants with small white and pink flowers. The background shows a line of trees under a bright sun.

ON YOUR WAY TO
NIRVANA
WOULD YOU PLEASE
PUT OUT THE
CAT?

a novella by dave boles

Copyright © 2026. dave boles.

First printing July, 2026.

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this book may be reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without written
permission except in the case of brief quotations
embodied in critical essays and articles.

Cover art: *And Then There Was The Cat*, by *Bodhi*

Author Bio Photo: *Mrs America*

Photo of Carol Grellas: *McKay Photography*

Images may not be used without permission.

ISBN: 979-8-9988517-6-6

ISBN for electronic version: 979-8-9965577-0-7

Library Of Congress Control Number: 2026945055

A Lake House Publication

Cold River Press
15098 Lime Kiln Road
Grass Valley, CA 95949
www.coldriverpress.com

*This book is dedicated
to all the people
who understand
architecture
of the soul.*

Happiness is a choice.....
so choose it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword.....	9
Chapter 1.....	13
Chapter 2.....	17
Chapter 3.....	23
Chapter 4.....	26
Chapter 5.....	30
Chapter 6.....	35
Chapter 7.....	40
Chapter 8.....	44
Chapter 9.....	46
Chapter 10.....	49
Chapter 11.....	53
Chapter 12.....	56
Chapter 13.....	60
Chapter 14.....	64
Chapter 15.....	69
Chapter 16.....	74
Chapter 17.....	79
Chapter 18.....	83
Chapter 19.....	87
Chapter 20.....	91

Chapter 21.....	96
Chapter 22.....	102
Chapter 23.....	108
Chapter 24.....	114
Chapter 25.....	125
Chapter 26.....	135
Chapter 27.....	150
Chapter 28.....	163
Epilogue.....	183
About The Author.....	207
About The Foreword.....	209
Author's Note.....	211

FOREWORD

My mother always said, “ You know that feeling when you’re in a room by yourself, and you sense something moving near you, and you turn to look, and nothing is there? Well, something was there; you just couldn’t see it or understand it or comprehend it, yet it was and still is.” Perhaps some might refer to this experience as a hallucination, a brief moment of delirium. However, as a child and even now, I have felt this, and continue to feel it, as a spiritual presence aligned in a way to communicate or connect with me, yet in a different form. And if you have had this happen to you, isn’t that event, while a fleeting moment, almost otherworldly, a bit of magic? When I first met Dave, aside from our mutual love of writing, I felt a special connection to him that might be something more than words can express. Perchance, that’s the joint belief in more than what’s attainable by logic, that magical part of life, the part that makes the curious existence of being, joyful and consuming, yet filled with mystery all at once.

The Dave I’ve had the privilege of knowing has a profound love for his community and humanity, and a philosophical understanding of the world’s complexities regarding relationships and people in general. I’ve found this in my friendship with him, in his sharing of personal experiences, and in his navigation of life, as expressed in his own writing. He is an inspiration as he continues to build our literary community and weave people together, encouraging them to write and share their stories through poetry, narratives, collected works, and anthologies. The Dave I’ve come to know is more than a generous human being; he’s an officiant, a guide, a teacher, or, some might say, a shaman who gathers us, as a collective, on this journey called life, as we explore, narrate, and even create new possibilities through writing. That’s exactly how his new book, *“On Your Way to Nirvana Would You Please Put Out the Cat?”* speaks to me.

This novella is filled with a captivating array of characters who, through a series of intentional and accidental events, ultimately interact with one another for a multitude of personal and universal motives: for inspiration, for truth, for benefit and gain, for accep-

tance, and last but not least, love and honor, as a plethora of human missteps unfold along the way. These human missteps, no different from real life, become the most intriguing and challenging parts as we witness decision-making that undoubtedly changes the course for those who metaphorically close one door while opening another. This is not dissimilar to the butterfly effect, grounded in the theory of chaos, in which a small change or decision by an individual can create an unpredictable result for another, with irreversible consequences. This emphasizes the power and validity of recognizing the choices we make, good or not-so-good, that shape long- or short-term outcomes.

Having said that, the most intriguing and certainly most discerning character I encountered in this extraordinary literary journey is the omniscient narrator, whose charm, wit, humor, and wisdom about the world's potential for disorder are captivating. Isn't that the reason one reads a book in the first place, with the hope of experiencing something impactful enough to be long remembered? I believe that has been achieved in my case, as this novella will stay with me. These characters will continue on as will the narrator's voice with his astute offerings, intellectual curiosity and commentary on life with all the possibilities of outcomes complex or otherwise depending on the sorting out of options along the way—how these choices, however abrupt or well-constructed define each day's reality, making things a little better, or even a little more than what we're able to cope with, but sometimes accompanied with a sense of integrity, depending on who you encounter, due to the sudden flap of a butterfly wing shifting the system's path. Reminding me to look around, find that bit of magic, the Nirvana, and enjoy the wonder of life, the parts we can control and the parts we can't. After all, it's all we have, along with each other.

Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas

A black and white photograph of a cat sitting on a porch, looking out at a lawn and trees. The cat is seen from behind, sitting on a dark rug. The porch has a brick border. There are potted plants on either side of the cat. The background shows a grassy lawn and trees with sunlight filtering through the leaves.

ON YOUR WAY TO
NIRVANA
WOULD YOU PLEASE
PUT OUT THE
CAT?

a novella by dave boles

Chapter 1

Humphries Feelgood was having a bad morning. A very bad morning. Outside of being in the midst of a hangover only a sailor would enjoy, he was also waking up to the prospect of his life forever changing. He didn't know this yet, but he'd find out soon enough. The hangover, however, he knew about. He felt it surging through his soul each time he attempted to stand up from the floor he had passed out on. It was a living room floor, that much he was sure of. But was it his? This was the fundamental question—whose floor was he on?

At about the same time Humphries was coming to grips with his reality, Florence was packing her hair in a neat ball on top of her head. She packed her hair in this manner every morning. She'd been doing it this way for the last thirty-five of her forty-five years. Florence was not one to adapt to changes in fashion readily. In fact, it would be safe to say that Florence didn't adapt to changes, period. Fashion or not. Florence more or less lived in a world of her own making.

There were a lot of people who had known Florence for several years that could not tell you what that world was, but the fact that she kept up a nice house, kept her dogs groomed and her yard well maintained were testimony to her ability to blend in with her culture. Florence was Humphries' wife. Their culture was *americanus suburbus*. And yes, they both took great pride in their yard.

The chimes on the clock in the hallway struck insanely loud. The sound reverberated off the base of Humphries' neck and continued upwards to the tips of his thinning hair. Great spasms of white light from the murderous chimes, the most gut-wrenching, soul-searing, head-splitting and anal-twitching sound he had ever had to endure, would not cease.

One, two, three times the clock chimed.

"God have mercy on my soul," Humphries cried out.

Four, five, six times the clock chimed.

"Please! Make it stop! Make it stop!"

Seven. Eight.

“Enough! Enough! Where the hell am I?” he screamed in one last burst of energy.

Nine. Ten.

“For God’s sake, Humphries, get a grip on yourself. Look at you. You’re a mess. You stink. You’re drunk. And you’ve even wet yourself. Again. At least this time it wasn’t on the sofa.”

The voice had a recognizable quality to it. It seemed to be coming from far across the room. Yes. The room. Just where the hell was this room? Where the hell was he?

“And another thing, you lousy bum, you ran the car into the tree again last night. We just got through paying for the last repair job and now... oh, I guess it could have been worse. At least this time you didn’t tear up the lawn.”

Of course. He knew that voice. He knew from his corroded memory banks that it belonged to his wife, Florence. Dear Florence. Sweet Florence. Wonderfully fragrant Florence. He knew she hated to hear that, which is why he repeated it so often.

“Uh huh,” he replied in his best John Wayne imitation. John Wayne, he thought to himself? What the fuck did John Wayne have to do with anything?

He slowly removed himself from the floor. His floor. His very own floor. The same floor that he had been acquainted with for nearly twenty-two years. Yes, it was his floor and now things were beginning to make sense. He was hung over. No doubt about that. He was still, in fact, drunk. He did stink, he was a lousy bum, although upon reflection he realized he had never met a great bum, only lousy ones, perhaps there was a need for a few good bums? He was mulling this thought over in his soaked, stinking state when he also realized that he was indeed, soaked. Damn! Did it again.

He could hear his mother scolding him for making wee-wee on the floor when he was five years old. “Look at you,” she would call out in that taunting voice he would learn to loathe. “Just look at mommy’s BIG BOY, all wet from making wee-wee on mommy’s shiny kitchen floor. I bet the neighborhood can’t wait to hear what a BIG BOY mommy has.”

And then she would lean out the window and scream from the bottom of her lungs to anybody that would listen, which was, naturally, the whole neighborhood, “Guess what mommy’s BIG BOY did for mommy? He made wee-wee all over her shiny kitchen floor. Isn’t mommy’s BIG BOY proud? Mommy’s proud of mommy’s BIG BOY.” Then she would close the window and clean up the puddle on the floor.

As for Humphries, he was made to wear the same clothes the rest of that day. All day he would wear the wet clothes until his stench was hardly bearable. At which point his father would return home from work, smell the stench that was his son and, without a word, go to his closet, remove the thinnest belt he had there, the special one that was reserved for special occasions such as these, and beat Humphries until his naked bottom glistened. Only then was he allowed to change out of his wet clothes.

“So,” the voice jerked Humphries back into the present, “just what is your story this time, dear?”

Florence had now moved into the living room where Humphries was still attempting to set reality back onto its proper course.

He was failing miserably.

“Oh, don’t bother. Just go clean yourself up. Or at least manage to stagger into the other room and collapse there. I’ve got company coming over in half an hour and I’d like the house to look decent. At least this part of the house. Why don’t you go sleep it off in the guest room? I put fresh sheets on the bed last night. I figured you’d need them.” And with that she turned smartly on her heels and walked off into the kitchen.

Humphries stared at the spot on the floor where Florence had been standing. He noticed the indentations her heels had left in the carpet. He noticed they looked frighteningly similar to the dimples on a topless dancer’s ass he had known years before. He dwelled upon the meaning of this revelation as he stumbled into the guest room. Yep. Fresh sheets, alright.

“Florence,” he shouted out to no one in particular, “she’s my wife.” And with that he fell plump on his ass and passed out once more.

* * * * *

This book is not about mom and apple pie. It has a few references to both, but it is not about them. It is a book about two people; Humphries and Florence Feelgood. It is about their marriage, their dreams, their ultimate divorce and their quest for a new life. It doesn't necessarily happen in that order, but it is about these things. Oh, I almost forgot. It is also about Lawrence Mathews the Third. Not Lawrence Mathews III. No. It is about Lawrence Mathews the Third. His family called him Lance, his gay lovers called him Bunny. We'll get into that later. Right now, suffice it to say that this book is about a lot of things. If you figure them all out you don't win a prize. But you might feel better for doing it.

Chapter 2

Lawrence Mathews the Third did not know Humphries Feel-good, or his wife Florence. They did not know him either. Which is kind of a good place for them all to be. For the moment. He drove a bright red Porsche with gold wheels. Red leather upholstery. Red leather dash. Even the car phone holder was encased in red leather. Lawrence, however, always dressed in black. Never wore any other color.

Humphries, on the other hand wore every color in the book. Usually at the same time. He was heavily into plaids and considered himself to be a fashionable trendsetter. Seeing as how Humphries sold life insurance, that could have been a closer truth than he realized.

Humphries' car did not have red leather upholstery. He wasn't sure what color his seats were, for he had them covered with a plaid seat cover years ago. Humphries drove a 1974 Dodge Dart. Lawrence, if you asked him, would tell you that a Dodge Dart was something that you did in a sports bar on the lower side of town. He did not sell life insurance. He didn't do anything. He was rich. That's kind of the way it goes. When you're rich, you don't do much of anything because you don't need to. You're rich. You have a lot of time to ponder a lot of questions, and puzzle life's mysteries.

For instance, when you stop and think for a moment, as you often should, of freedom...the aspect of freedom is a powerful feeling. I like to think of freedom as a large bowl of vanilla ice cream. I suppose it could be any flavor, I'm just particularly partial to vanilla. See, if the ice cream is too hard, it is hard to scoop out of the container and generally does not taste as well as if it is in a semi-soft state of existence. The state that ice cream should be in. However, if it is allowed to soften too much, it becomes runny and is impossible to scoop out of the container. You generally have to resort to pouring it into a large glass and make believe it is a vanilla milk shake. A thick one, no doubt, but it is not the same as a good bowl of ice cream.

Freedom is like this.

If it is too hard, too exact, it becomes controlled. Hardened. A hard bowl of ice cream can be called “hard as a rock.” Not ice “cream.” Which indicates a degree of softness. A hardened, exacting freedom is called fascism. It is useful only for limited purposes. Such as a small group of people becoming free and independent at the expense of a much larger group of people who allow themselves to wallow in such silliness. On the other hand, if the ice cream is allowed to soften and run all over the counter, splattering onto the floor where the dog will come and lick it up, then it has no character, no usefulness outside of a thick, pseudo-milk shake or a happy treat for the dog.

At times freedom, like runny ice cream, can leave stains where it falls. Stains that are at times hard to remove. Stains that are sometimes called anarchy. The trick to good ice cream, and good freedom, is to make it just right. Not too hard. Not too soft. At just the right consistency they both are remarkable experiences. Unless of course you prefer flavored ice cream. Say, perhaps, pistachio or rocky road. Then of course you must deviate from this simple analogy and delve into the intricacies and silliness of philosophy. That’s why I like vanilla. It’s much simpler that way.

Humphries Feelgood was fond of ice cream. Well, not exactly ice cream, but sherbet. Which was close enough for Humphries. He also was fond of freedom but had never quite grasped the aspect of what it was. He knew that being an American, especially an americanus suburbus, he was most free indeed. But he had the unmistakable feeling that somehow, someway, he was missing out on something key to the aspect of freedom. He pondered this thought as he stared up at the ceiling of the guest room. He had never noticed how old it had looked. It looked ancient. Like it had been there for hundreds upon thousands of years. He looked around at the rest of the room and noticed the same thing. The whole room looked ancient. Boring and ancient. Ancient and boring. How could he have missed this? Did Florence notice this too? Hadn’t they just painted the room last spring? Shouldn’t it still look “new and refreshing,” as his wife was fond of saying?

Humphries sat up on the edge of the guest room bed and pondered this while slowly allowing the rest of the house to come into focus. In the distance he could hear the sound of voices. Female voices. They were chattering in a sing-song manner that reminded him of dimples and topless dancers. God, that incident had been over and done with nearly twenty-five years ago. You'd have thought that by now the man would have grown tired of rerunning the same tape over and over until it would have worn itself out. And that would have been true with most men. But not with Humphries.

This was the only real memory the man had of a "wild" life. It happened on the eve of his marriage to Florence. His brother, Edmond, his cousin, Niles Jerzy (the same Niles Jerzy that would later become one of America's foremost photographers), and his friends since grade school, Mortimer and Richard Silwell, all chipped in to give Humphries one last thrill. They conspired to kidnap Humphries from his mother's house where he was quietly awaiting his wedding day with his mother and a warm glass of milk. Soon after the two of them had gone to bed, Edmond let himself and the others in through the back door and they swiftly carted a gagged Humphries off to his destination with glory. In this case glory being a topless dancer named Wanda who had, shall we say, a lucrative side business involving sexual favors in trade for cash. Not prostitution, mind you. No, Wanda was no common whore. Wanda only took on the most hardened of cases; forty-five-year-old virgins; acne-ridden teenagers hoping to learn basic techniques before they moved on to college; and, what she was known for far and wide, her ability to make a soon-to-be-married man one of the happiest individuals in the galaxy. Perhaps, in her prime, even the universe. That's the kind of girl Wanda was. A true blue servant to men from the word go.

Anyway, after effectively kidnapping Humphries from his mother's grip of warm milk and lace curtains, the conspiring young men swiftly escorted Humphries to his date with destiny, er, Wanda. They met her at the topless club she was performing at for it was felt that Humphries might react to the situation better if he were to be a little looser than he normally might have been; which was stone cold sober. The boys

proceeded to gingerly nurse this suffering excuse for a groom into a state of complete relaxation. So relaxed that Edmond had to remind them of his brother's unseemly habit of wetting his pants at inappropriate moments of excitement. This was agreed to by all to fall under the category of "bad taste," so they held off some on the watering down of Humphries' brain in fear of the watering down of Humphries' chair.

Wanda, already alerted to her task for the night, had spent the last hour enticing Humphries into a state of sexual arousal that he had only read about once in a medical journal. And then only vaguely. He couldn't believe his immense good fortune when his friend Mortimer presented him with a card for his wedding present featuring a nude photograph of Wanda on the inside of the card with the inscription "A night you will always remember, Humphries," written in red across her fully disclosed thighs (The "H" in Humphries beginning at her pelvic area added a nice touch, Humphries would later recall). Her shift at the club over, Wanda took over custodial care of Humphries and assured the men that she would get him to his wedding on time.

They had arranged to meet an hour before the wedding at Niles' house where they would dress Humphries up as best they could, but Wanda insisted on doing it herself and promised their money back if she failed. Seeing as how Wanda had a reputation that was near spotless—there was that one incident with the German Shepherd and the Mayor a few years back—the men saw no reason to mistrust this woman of sexual good fortune. So, off in Wanda's car they roared, her and Humphries of course, and the rest of the gang stayed behind for a new girl to come on stage. They had heard she was from Brazil. Exotic to be sure, Wanda had informed them.

* * * * *

Now, most of you reading this will think nothing of a man getting in one last escapade before his marriage. I am told that it is done by all. I know I did it. If you're married and male you probably did it too. Which is okay. There's no one here but you and I, we can

level with each other, right? Wasn't it one of the most silly experiences of your life? It was? You poor bastard. You should have known Wanda. And, you should have known Humphries. You see, not only was Humphries a virgin, which wasn't so extraordinary for a man in his early twenties during the sixties, given Humphries' state that is, but he had also, outside of his soon-to-be wife Florence, never even dated a woman.

Here was a man who had never done anything in his life without permission from his mother. He hadn't even thought about looking through the women's lingerie section of the Sears catalog until his mother showed it to him in one last-ditch effort at "maleness" two weeks before his marriage. She patiently turned the pages for her little Humphries, all the while telling him that it was now okay to think about what a woman looked like underneath her clothes. Naturally, he told her he was shocked and disgusted by the whole thing. But at the same time he felt a sense of excitement and fulfillment that he held back from her. He also felt an erection, but he was too embarrassed to tell his mother about that, too. And as far as his marriage to Florence, it had been arranged by Humphries' mother and father long before his father had passed on.

Florence was the daughter of Humphries' father's best friend. She was a nice girl, Florence was, but she was a slow one. Not at all ready to live on her own and, unfortunately, she wasn't much to look at either. So, being a practical man, her father, Humphries' father's best friend, struck a deal with Humphries' father that if Humphries would marry Florence when Florence finished college, Humphries' father could borrow his best friend's boat whenever he chose. A deal like that only comes along once in a lifetime, and, given the state of their two children, it was probably the best thing going.

Humphries' father immediately agreed and took the boat out that next weekend. Unfortunately, he forgot he did not know how to swim and fell overboard while bass fishing alone at five in the morning. Which was really silly seeing as how everyone knows that bass don't like to wake up early. They like to sleep in before they're caught and put into someone's frying pan. Especially on a weekend. I mean,

after a rough week of swimming about, bringing home food for the family, don't you like to sleep in? See my point? Why do you think it is any different for fish? Especially bass?

Anyway, drowning caused by water filling the deceased's hip waders is how the coroner's report would read. A tragic accident, to be sure. But a deal was a deal, and when Florence graduated from college years later, there was Humphries, as ready and willing to begin his life with his new love as only a respectable, virginal, never quite having gone through adolescence adequately male could be.

So, you can see how Wanda would have made quite an impression upon such a man as Humphries. And an impression she certainly made. Twenty-five years later, he would still compare anything and everything he encountered to the dimples on her lovely ass. Ah yes, she was well worth it. It would turn out to be Humphries' only shot at normalcy. That is, until Sheila. But we're way ahead of ourselves there.

And Lawrence Mathews The Third, you ask? What about him? We're getting there.

Chapter 3

Florence Feelgood had two passions in her life: exercise and bridge. Even a nuclear war, yes, the real thing, would not have deterred Florence from her thrice weekly workout or her twice weekly bridge games. Never in the history of the game was there a more devoted member to the game of bridge than Florence Feelgood. And right now she was feeling about as good as you could feel. Between her partner's adept strategy and Florence's ruthless cunning, they had thoroughly trounced their opponents with little, if any, mercy.

The sense of victory was still sweet in the air as Florence and her partner dutifully extolled the virtues of their opponents' play. After all, it really wasn't the game that mattered, it was the socializing. Of course, they all knew this was bullshit, but it was the appropriate thing to both do and say after thoroughly trouncing one's opponent.

Thus said and done, their opponents for the day drove off, and life went on in suburbia.

"Will those girls from the club never learn," exclaimed a genuinely puzzled Florence to her partner.

"You would think by now they would show a little more respect for our prowess and throw us some pros, hey, baby?" This came from Florence's partner and aerobics instructor, Eileen. Nicely built, full body tan, blonde hair that really was blonde, a vivacious and perky personality, Eileen was your average all americanus suburbus aerobics instructor.

Eileen and Florence had been bridge partners for close to twenty-five years. They had their game down, believe me.

"Yes, it is getting boring never losing a game, isn't it?"

Florence had been asking her friend the same question for well over nine years now. And, for well over nine years she was given the same answer.

"Well, maybe next time. Say, where is the drunken old sot? Don't tell me he actually made it into work?"

Eileen did not like Humphries. In fact, she hated him. She had

seen her friend in this miserable marriage for so long that at times it was all she could do to keep from castrating Humphries in order to eliminate the one outlet that might just maybe (lord knows how) keep their marriage together.

“No, not today. He’s asleep in the back room.”

Florence was busy cleaning up after the bridge game and did not want to get into another conversation with Eileen about the evils of her husband. Too late. Eileen was already well into it. You see, Eileen was not married. Never had been. She had lived with a man, once, but she said it was such a horrible experience that the only way she would ever live with a man again was if the earth stood still, hell froze over and politicians slept only with their wives. In short, Eileen had no plans for living with a man. Which seemed to be okay with the men in her general vicinity. Including Lawrence Mathews the Third, and he didn’t even know her. Yet. That’s how much Eileen hated men, and how much men cared for Eileen.

No, Eileen was what they called “gay.” A lesbian to be exact. It was still undecided if she was a bull dyke, but she was definitely a lesbian. Everyone knew this. Everyone except for Florence. Not only did she not know this, she could not have even understood what it meant. Florence and Humphries, as anyone would tell you, were very sheltered individuals. Very sheltered.

“Flo, I really don’t see why you put up with that cretin.”

Once Eileen got started on her Humphries rampage it was impossible to stop her. “I mean, look at you. You could have the pick of any man in this town.”

Florence stopped for a moment and considered this. No, her friend was merely being kind.

“Sincerely, Flo, you’ve got to do something to improve your self-esteem. You improve your self-esteem and you lose the boozier. Guarantee it. Easy as that.”

Eileen sat back on Humphries and Florence’s couch and pontificated as to what life without Humphries would be like for Florence. Florence had been hearing the same speech for Lord knows how many years, but it did seem to strike a responsive chord inside

of her this time. Maybe life without Humphries would be better. It certainly couldn't be worse. Or could it? There were all the wonderful things that they had; the house, the cars, the yard. But that was about it. Humphries never paid her any attention. He hadn't brought her flowers in at least twenty years. Even when she pointedly asked him to bring her flowers so she would feel wanted, he failed to do so. Would life without such a man be such a terrible thing?

But what about their marriage? What about all the time they had spent together? What about the fact that Florence had absolutely no training in any money-making matters whatsoever and if she left Humphries she would be dependent upon only herself?

"Eileen, I love Humphries and that is the end of it. I appreciate your concern for me, and I know that on the outside he looks a little rough around the edges, but inside he is a beautiful man. Please, can we talk about something else?"

Florence, as she had for the last two plus decades, had faced her reality and as always, she ran from it as fast and as far as possible.

Florence lacked a lot of things. Among the major items was the concept of freedom. Florence never ate ice cream.

Chapter 4

Lawrence Mathews the Third had entirely too much money. He would never agree to this. But nonetheless, Lawrence Mathews the Third had entirely too much money.

He came from a wealthy family and was given a promising portfolio when he was still a young boy. Eager to impress his father, General Lawrence Mathews the Second, the young boy studied the markets with a determination to make his own way. Quickly adapting to the family's standard of "Our money is our money and everyone else's money should be ours as well," the lad began accumulating wealth at an astounding pace. Though he was not able to legally participate in the markets, due to his age, and due to his father's strict rules of being of age, thirty-eight according to his father's will, his older sister Amelia, twenty-eight, a plain woman twice Lawrence's age, eagerly offered herself as the "front" for her little brother's enterprise and conducted all of Lawrence's business on his behalf.

In time, well, years actually, the traders and operators of the market began to take notice of Amelia. Her portfolio was astounding for its accuracy. In fact, it seemed as if her information were too clear, too precise. This fact was eventually noticed by the local regulatory board and Amelia was called upon by one of the board's finest investigators. A gentleman's gentleman if you will, with the name of Pierce Williams.

Pierce Williams had pretty much seen it all. In nearly thirty-two years of catching scam artists using the market to make their fortune he had developed a sound philosophy towards his fellow man and adhered to it religiously; "I would rather spend time with my cat than with another human being."

True to this philosophy, Pierce had never married, nor even carried on a somewhat serious relationship, for the entirety of his fifty years. He had been abandoned as a young boy and had grown up in the orphanages around New York. Prone to escaping these institu-

tions, he eventually won his freedom at the age of twelve when he finally succeeded in escaping their dismal environment for good by stealing aboard a freighter bound for England.

Halfway across the Atlantic his hiding place aboard the freighter was compromised by two sailors eager to embrace each other down in the hold. Not sure as to what to do with the young boy, the two took the boy to the ship's captain, who just happened to be having dinner with the freighter's owner, Sir John Hapscomb.

Sir John immediately assessed the young boy as being a lad that was comfortable with his silence. He saw before him a lad that could be trained as an invaluable servant. Taking charge of the boy, Sir John took him under his protective wing and upon reaching England began teaching and schooling the young boy as if he were his own. He legally created a persona for the lad, one of Pierce Williams. When one is an English lord, one can do a great many things. Creating a persona is one of them.

Within two years Sir John had transformed the once rough and tumble street orphan into a gentleman's son. Pierce became the eyes and ears for the aging Sir John. A trust and bond of fellowship came between the two which lasted until the untimely demise of the old man when Pierce was eighteen. Sir John left his entire estate to Pierce as he had no immediate family.

But there was the non-immediate family. What followed next was all the sordid details that one might expect to find in a situation such as this. Half siblings long ago forgotten appeared demanding their share of the estate. Distant cousins gave interviews to the press recounting their summers spent with "dear Uncle John." And, ultimately, the accusations that Pierce was Sir John's homosexual lover came out. This was the proverbial straw that eventually broke Pierce's camel's back (ironically, Sir John had also left Pierce a small zoo as well).

Pierce was repulsed by the act of homosexuality. He had grown up with it in the orphanage and the experience left him with about as much a chance of becoming a homosexual as a politician had in acting truthfully and honorably; none.

Upon the advice of the family solicitor, in order to avoid these sordid accusations, Pierce relinquished his claim to Sir John's fortune in exchange for a lucrative job with the securities commission in the United States. He was able to begin his life anew, again, and was left alone with only the solicitor knowing the details of the arrangement.

Oddly enough, within a year of Pierce's clandestine settlement dealings with Sir John's "family", the whole lot of them were found dead one fine morning, victims of a disastrous natural gas leak at Sir John's estate. It was reported in the tabloids that the victims had died entirely buck naked with large jars of marmalade strewn about the floor. The zoo, fortunately enough, was not affected and the animals were transferred to animal refuges throughout Britain with the exception of the camel, whose back had been broken during the aforementioned homosexual accusation and, unfortunately, had to be euthanized.

This was Pierce Williams' past and now, thirty-two years later, Pierce was handed the difficult task of proving that Amelia was involved with "insider" trading.

He began his investigation by paying a visit to the Mathews estate and having tea with Amelia. At once smitten by her, Pierce found it increasingly difficult to focus on his investigation. While Amelia was certainly a plain woman, with no astounding body characteristics to speak of, she was endowed with a most impressive sense of poise and delicacy, with which Pierce readily fell in love. Needless to say, this caused quite a stir within Pierce's mind, for here was a woman for whom he actually had feelings. There was an emotional reaction upon hearing her speak. The very air around her seemed to soften with her presence. In short, for the first time in his sordid excuse for a life, Pierce was falling in love.

Amelia was also captured by this strange man who had called upon her for tea. Never before had she encountered a man so gentlemanly in his ways. His dress was immaculate. His speech was impeccable. Here was a man she could discuss any number of topics with. Perhaps a short chat about the late blooming of the cherry tree. Or perhaps a longer discourse on the current state of the nation's

economy. Why, he was even able to carry on a conversation about the horrendous music that was called “rap.” Something Amelia had heard about, but only from afar. It involved African Americans. But that was all she knew.

Lawrence kept his distance and watched his sister’s tea from afar as he was not a stupid man at all. In fact, by now he was of age, thirty-eight, according to his father’s will, and would soon be able to involve himself directly with his business dealings, without the need for his sister.

The thought of what to do with his sister since he had become of age had been bothering him for quite some time as he knew that Amelia needed something to keep herself occupied. Now, as he saw the look in his sister’s eyes when the stranger came to call, he knew what her new occupation could be.

He also knew that the stranger was there to investigate them as he had friends in high places that could always be bought off and had previously alerted him to Pierce’s investigation.

For the moment, though, he would stay in the background and allow his sister and her newfound potential suitor some respite from the ugly dealings of trading and making money. Yes, the tiresome and oftentimes burdensome task of making money would have to wait for a while. He had plenty enough as it were, and Amelia was radiant with love for the first time in her life.

Lawrence’s fortune was already vast. He was content to sit back and watch his sister glow.

Chapter 5

The First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company was in deep trouble. Annual revenues had dropped sharply the past two years, and a series of unfortunate events had left the company virtually bankrupt. The Chairman of the Board was frantically looking for any and all deals. Banks, large and small, were not wanting to deal with this nasty situation at all, and the situation was growing more dire by the minute. If the Chairman, Manfred Young, did not come up with a minimum of \$50 million by the end of the fiscal year, which was in fifteen days, the company would have no choice other than to fold. The disgrace was more than Manfred could bear.

Humphries Feelgood had been a Senior Account Executive with the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company for the past twenty-plus years. He had started out in the company as a towel boy in the corporate washroom and had worked his way up from there. Throughout the years he had weathered many storms with the company, including the latest where the company was forced to include the sales of floral arrangements over the internet in order to keep the doors open.

Yes, he had witnessed quite a bit during his tenure with the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company. Now, however, the tide was certainly changing again. Humphries could feel it. He could feel the water rising about his ankles, then to his shins, moving upward to his thighs....wait....he was still recovering from his latest binge and he suddenly realized where he was. Equally sudden, he realized he had yet again wet himself. Rising waters indeed. More like a seeping sea snake.

Humphries pulled himself together and headed towards his shower. He knew once he got into motion it was downhill from there. Shower. Shave. Dress. Kiss Florence goodbye for the day. Off to work. Clockwork. Every week. That's the routine.

Only this time Florence was not there to kiss goodbye for the day. It threw him off. Completely off. It was a bad omen.

He knew that there were pressures at work. Insurance policies were falling by the wayside. New policies were a thing of the past. And now the Telefloral business was in grave peril. Something about shipping them via common drayage and wilting petals. Technical stuff that he barely understood and, for the most part, really didn't want to understand. But, in all honesty, he did have a sense that something was gravely amiss at the company.

As Humphries was driving to work in his trusty Dodge Dart, he attempted to recall the last two days. Try as he might, he could not.

He recalled hitting a tree with his car, perhaps in his driveway. That certainly explained the crumpled bumper of his trusty Dodge Dart. And there were vague recollections of clocks chiming and aged walls, and, most of all, there was the vision of the dimples on Wanda's lovely ass.

Humphries drove along transfixed by this image until he nearly ran off the road. The cries of the downtown tamale vendor brought him back to life as he nearly severed the tamale vendor's arm. The pushcart was a complete wreck, but Humphries knew the man was an illegal alien and would never report the accident. Humphries quickly accelerated back onto the road and pulled into his company's parking lot. Close call, he reflected. A few tamales smeared against the right side of the Dart, but other than that, all was well.

Manfred Young pulled into the parking lot immediately after Humphries.

"Good lord, Humphries," he called out. "You nearly severed that man's arm back there. And just look at your car."

Humphries quickly responded to his boss, "Yes, but he is an illegal."

With that, both men shrugged and went into the building. Humphries to his desk, Manfred to the washroom. Older than Humphries, Manfred suffered from an enlarged prostate. He stayed close to the washroom most of the day and was known for his frequent runs down the hall in order to not embarrass himself.

As deep as the financial troubles were for the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company, Manfred had never considered putting in a washroom in his executive suite. Not real bright, as far as Chairmen of the Board come. Not real bright at all.

The clock was ticking down and Manfred knew it. He had to find a way to salvage the company. What the hell else would he do with his time? Sure, he was independently wealthy and didn't need a job, but it gave him a position of power, a position of authority. He simply could not lose that. Not at all.

He reviewed the latest loan turn downs from banks across the country when a tap could be heard on his door. He knew instinctively it was Humphries, wanting to sit down and go over the weekly sales figures. Maybe Humphries could figure something out.

"Come in, Humphries, the door is always open to you," Manfred cried out. They had been doing this same routine for so many years that both of them had forgotten exactly when it had begun.

"Only for a moment, chief," Humphries responded. And then both of them in unison, "only for a moment." How many years had it been going on? Far too many.

"Humphries," Manfred began, "do you know the company is in a bit of trouble?" Manfred was fishing to see how transparent the company's problems were.

"Yes, sir. But it seems to me that if we were to find another way of shipping our floral orders, perhaps by expedited carrier, that might just bring back a few customers."

Excellent, Manfred thought. No one knows the trouble we are in. He thinks the only trouble is with the shipping of the floral products. I might still have some time.

"Humphries," Manfred continued, "I want you to drop the floral and the insurance sales for a time and focus on another more immediate project."

Now came the tricky part, how to enlist his help without giving away the true state of the company's situation and their all too dire need.

"I need you to..." but Humphries was already cutting him off.

“With all due respect, sir, I understand the problem completely. I’m not as stupid as I might look.”

This was Humphries’ moment. He had been waiting for this moment for years.

“You understand?” a visibly shaken Manfred responded.

“Of course I do. And your secret is safe with me. Not a soul shall know. Discretion, that’s my middle name.”

This was a disaster. Manfred began sweating profusely and started to feel the need to rush to the washroom. In fact, he began rising to rush to it.

“You go right ahead, chief. I’ll wait right here and when you return we’ll talk about how you will never need to rush down the hall-way again.”

Humphries was practically bursting with pride.

Manfred stopped at his doorway and slowly turned around. “What did you say?”

“Chief, it’s okay. Somehow, I will find the money.” God, this was too much to bear. Humphries’ day had come at last.

“The...money...” Manfred stammered out.

“Yes, sir!” Humphries shouted out.

Quickly composing himself, he rushed over to Manfred Young, Chairman of the Board of the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company, bent forward and whispered into the Chairman’s ear, “I will find the money to put a washroom in your executive suite, sir. Your secret is safe with me.”

Manfred stopped a moment, unable to completely grasp what he had just heard.

“It will be our secret, sir. The floral arrangements and the life insurance sales can wait. You deserve, and will receive, the finest washroom a Board Chairman can have.”

And with that Humphries dashed out of the room to begin his quest for the Board Chairman’s washroom, calling out behind him as he left, “I will not disappoint you.”

Manfred stood as stoic as an English Oak.

“That man is mad,” he muttered. But he smiled nonetheless,

knowing that not only was his secret still safe as far as the company's imminent bankruptcy and failure were concerned, but, by golly, he was going to have his own washroom. Perhaps things were looking up after all.

Chapter 6

The aforementioned series of unfortunate events that had left the Manfred's company virtually bankrupt was quite explainable. For years, decades really, Manfred had been conducting insider trading using tips he received from a confidant. Using the "float", money the company received up front through premium payments but not paying out the money until a claim was filed, in some cases years down the road, enabled a tidy sum to be used for just such investments. For many years he had been able to keep the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company afloat through the gains made via these illegal insider trades. But this, however, had come to an abrupt end.

The illegal trading had virtually ceased in the last several months and his contact was loath to resume their illegal trading, citing his fears of being discovered. It was just too risky, Manfred was told. Far too risky.

It could not have come at a more unfortunate time. Manfred had overextended himself. Sales were down across the board and the looming \$50 million payment was certain to end the company. Times were dire. Dire, indeed.

* * * * *

Eileen had left Florence's house as she had so many times before; infuriated. She wanted the best for her friend but Florence was having no part of it. "Stupid woman," she shouted out to no one in particular.

She took stock of her situation; she was at an intersection, somewhat patiently waiting for the light to change. Being an unseasonably warm day, the front windows of her car were down. It was a stylish automobile. Nothing lavish, but it did have an air of luxury to it.

Naturally, it was spotless. Everything in Eileen's world was spot-

less and clean. Neat, tidy and everything in its place. Except for her friend, Florence. The one constant in her life that she simply could not control.

“Any woman in particular?” The voice laughingly came from the car next to hers, a bright red Porsche. With gold wheels!

The car was a beacon calling out to Eileen.

“Sorry,” a very well-dressed and manicured man continued, “but I could not help but overhear you.”

At that, the light turned green and the Porsche raced ahead, turning right into a row of business condos.

Eileen was dumbfounded. She had never been in such a presence before. So much so that she barely heard the car horn behind her and its driver shouting at her to either “move it, sister, or park it at home!”

A brief thought of being no one’s sister ran through her mind as she blankly drove through the intersection and pulled into the driveway the red Porsche had turned into, nearly taking out a mini-van filled with nuns on their way to the ocean. Fortunately, the sister driving the mini-van had previous skills as a cabbie in Philadelphia before hearing the call to serve Christ, quickly averting what could have been a nasty incident.

Eileen surged ahead of them and turned into the driveway of the business condos, all the while searching for the red Porsche and completely oblivious to the sight of some very unchristian charity being offered her by a van full of nuns.

Lawrence Mathews the Third turned at the sound of horns and, what appeared to be the sounds of a choir, admonishing a female dog to learn how to drive, from the entrance to his cousin’s business condo.

He smiled broadly at Eileen as she pulled up next to him in the parking lot.

In most instances he probably would have been slightly worried about someone following him, especially someone that incurred the honking of horns and celestial choruses cursing a female dog, but he instantly felt completely at ease with Eileen. Her eyes were wide open and larger than any set of eyes he had ever seen. And she had

this strange glow about her that lent itself to, well, a glow. Later, he would discover that Eileen was a devout addict of tanning salons and Botox treatments.

But for the moment, he was captivated by her glow.

"I didn't mean to insult you," he politely offered.

"Insult me?" Eileen heard her words being spoken, but they seemed to be coming from someone else.

"You didn't insult me." There, that was better.

"That's good to hear. Is there something I might help you with?"

He was delighted with the sound of this woman's voice; it was endearing. And that glow, how did she come by it?

Eileen stammered on about being lost in thought about her friend, Florence. Lawrence Mathews the Third, always the gentleman, patiently listened and then, in as much a surprise to Eileen as it was to him, he offered to buy her lunch.

"Lunch?" Eileen was taken aback but at the same time, she felt oddly at ease with the idea.

"I apologize," he burst out. "I have no idea where that came from. Extremely forward of me. Please, my utmost apologies."

Lawrence Mathews the Third could feel himself blushing. He had not felt this exposed since that time with the Chinese boys at the local bath house led to an all weekend orgy and shopping spree.

"No, not at all," Eileen stammered. "That would be lovely. I would like that."

Amid flashbacks of almond scented oil and glistening black hair, Lawrence Mathews the Third managed to return to the moment at hand.

"There is a wonderful restaurant I frequent not too far from here. Please, allow me."

With that he walked around his car and opened the door.

Eileen was transfixed. She never glanced at a man, yet alone accepted an invitation to lunch from one. But there was something soothing about this man in front of her...not quite a man, she mused, almost a boy. But still, there was something different here that simply had to be explored.

She was so transfixed in fact, that she entered Lawrence Mathews the Third's bright red Porsche while forgetting to turn off her own car.

Lawrence Mathews the Third was equally smitten and left the parking lot after missing not two, but three, gear shifts. This was unheard of. Something was most certainly afoot.

Down the road they went. Eileen, with her radiant glow and Lawrence Mathews the Third, Bunny to his gay lovers, wondering what in the world had just transpired.

George, Lawrence Mathews the Third's cousin, had seen his cousin pull into the parking lot and stood outside his office waiting for him. He too was not certain of what had just transpired.

Several times he attempted to move towards his cousin to see just exactly what was going on. He vaguely remembered thinking the very odd thought of a minivan filled with nuns chastising a female dog as he watched his cousin invite a very attractive woman into his car. It was the juxtaposition of these two thoughts that would later wake him in the middle of the night, but for the moment he stood silent as his cousin's bright red Porsche, with gold rims, attempted to leave the parking lot.

Good lord, he would not have believed it had he not seen it with his own eyes; his cousin missed shifting gears by a total of not two, but three times!

The sound of a car's engine brought George back to a present state of awareness. Was it coming from the woman's car? It was. He briskly strolled across the lot and, reaching in through the driver's side window, shut Eileen's car down.

What to do with the keys, he thought? What to do indeed.

But there were more important things to think about. This week's guide to television programs was late and George was none too happy about it. He would have to find one in a store, he supposed.

Why was it not in his mail as usual? Was there a strike going on that he was not aware of?

His television guide was missing and now his gay cousin was taking off with a woman. It was more than he could cope with. He

slowly began to walk towards his office, oblivious of the fact he held Eileen's car keys in his hand. Something good would come of this, he told himself. He could only hope it was good. He could only hope.

George was an optimist at heart.

Chapter 7

Humphries was elated and filled with joy. It had been longer than he could remember since he had felt a solid connection with his boss.

Manfred Young, Chairman of The Board of The First American Tele-florist and Life Insurance Company, needed his trusted Humphries and Humphries was loath to let the big man down.

Strolling smartly towards his loyal Dodge Dart, Humphries was vaguely aware of a bright red Porsche, with gold rims, passing by. He shuddered for a moment. Laughingly, he reminded himself the only time he shuddered like that was when Florence's friend, Eileen, was around. Strange, he thought. What would Eileen have to do with anything?

Cautiously glancing down the street, making certain the tamale vendor had left for the day, it was, after all, past lunch, Humphries made a plan in his head as to how to proceed with the aforementioned "Executive Washroom". The tamale vendor had indeed left for the day, a few stains on the sidewalk the only remnants of the morning's mishap.

Sliding behind the wheel of his trusty Dodge Dart, he recalled a contractor Florence had retained to remodel their kitchen a few summers past. What was his name? Bob? Ted? No, something with a G in it? Gerry? Jerome?

As Humphries pulled out of the parking lot, rather lost as to where to start, he caught a glimpse of a large man removing the keys from, what looked to be, Eileen's car. Again with Eileen? "What the hell," he shouted out loud. Then he saw George turn around and immediately recognized him as the contractor that Florence had hired.

"George," he shouted. Of course. Humphries immediately pulled into the parking lot and watched as George went into his office.

Opening the door to George's office, he was immediately reminded of how large a man George was. In fact, he was not only large, he was huge.

George, startled by the sudden appearance of Humphries, turned abruptly, his mind still dwelling on where his beloved TV Guide could be.

"Hi," Humphries enthusiastically stated. "I don't know if you remember me, but you did some kitchen work for us a while back. A complete remodel, in fact."

Humphries stuck out his hand in the age-old arrangement of grasping another's flesh to make certain they were real, and, to give them reassurance you were real as well.

George, still a little stunned by the interaction, slowly began drawing his brain away from the elusive, perhaps purloined, TV Guide, and shook Humphries' hand.

"Sure, I remember you," he told Humphries as he visually checked Humphries out to make certain he did not have his treasured TV Guide.

"Your wife..."

"Florence," Humphries energetically stated.

"Yes, Florence, she was a real stickler for neatness, if I remember correctly."

The remodel came back to George, slow at first, then it barreled onto him. The job was a disaster. Florence, changing her mind at least a dozen times on cabinet colors, finally settled on an egg-shell white with a pink trim that made George shudder when the memory became full blown in all its garish glory.

"Indeed, she does have a requirement for neatness," Humphries agreed.

George, not one to banter, got right to the point. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," Humphries blurted out, "my boss needs an 'Executive Washroom' and I have been tasked with producing it."

George took a moment to let the entire conversation set in. It was confusing, by all accounts, and he could certainly use the work, but something about Humphries threw him off.

"How is it that you came here," George asked. "I only moved into this office a while ago."

“Oh,” Humphries eagerly responded, “see, I was on my way out to my car to leave to find a contractor because the tamale vendor had left when I happened to see a bright red Porsche, with gold rims, go by and it made me think of my wife’s best friend, Eileen, I don’t know why, which made me think of my wife and then that made me think of her hiring you as a contractor for our kitchen a few years back and then I looked up and saw you from across the street turning off the engine to Eileen’s car and then you walked into your office.”

Humphries, elated at how well things were going, stood smiling at George.

“Do you know Eileen?” Humphries asked.

“Who’s Eileen?”

George, not certain if Humphries was an escapee from the mental institution down the road, carefully re-inspected the man before him.

“Eileen is my wife’s best friend. Those are her keys you are holding,” as he gestured to George’s large left hand.

George looked down and saw he was indeed holding a set of keys. In all the commotion he had nearly forgotten the events of the past few minutes.

“You say you saw a bright red Porsche?” George asked.

“With gold rims,” Humphries finished. “Yes, yes I did.”

“That was my cousin’s car. How do you know Bunny?”

“Who’s Bunny,” Humphries asked with a blank face.

“I told you, my cousin. He tore out of here with that broad...”

“Eileen?”

“Yeah, Eileen. I guess. Never seen her before. She left her car running and I turned it off. That’s why I have her keys.”

George went to give Humphries the keys then suddenly took them back.

“Is this some sort of show?” George snorted. “Like some hidden camera thing?”

“No.” Humphries was getting exasperated. Things were not going smoothly, not going smoothly at all.

“I don’t even know if Eileen was in the red Porsche. I didn’t see

her. I just thought about her.” Humphries sat down on George’s couch, catching his breath and trying to figure out how to get things back on track. George was obviously upset about something. Humphries could readily see that, but he wasn’t sure if George was entirely upset at him.

Humphries settled into the couch a bit more and, looking down, saw the spine of a TV Guide protruding from between the cushions. In an attempt to change the tempo of the conversation, he held up the guide, proclaiming, “aren’t these things just a marvel?”

George, still looking about for hidden cameras and a film crew, looked at Humphries with glee when he spied the elusive TV Guide.

“You found it,” he loudly proclaimed, quickly snatching it from Humphries’ hands.

After checking to make certain it was the current issue, he joyfully thanked Humphries and then, now in a much better mood, asked him what he could do for him in return.

“My boss needs an ‘Executive Washroom’. Can you help me?”

Chapter 8

George was a man of many talents, and colorful ones at that. He had worked the odd bouncer jobs in college (his nickname then being Large George), helped develop a few start-up companies along the way, and while he had also dabbled in construction, his real money was from designing and installing broadcast antennas. It was a great gig, but as with all good things, the antenna gig finally came to an end.

It was not unexpected. Clinging to the teat of a dead company can only last so long, and he knew it. The trickle of money that flowed from “the great digital build-out” eventually shut off altogether, and that was that. He left his adult A.D.D. afflicted partner to wallow in his schemes of “drawing a paycheck” and moved on to loftier heights. Thoughts of professional bull riding had been creeping about in his head, but he was not certain as to how to train. So, back to construction, remodeling in particular, he went.

Adult Attention Deficit Disorder (Adult A.D.D.) is an interesting phenomenon. The newest craze to hit the medical/psychological field, it has all the earmarks of a wonderful disease. It enables medical professionals to prescribe really great drugs with a wonderful profit margin, and better still, you cannot stay on any one drug for too long as they need to switch out to another drug every so often. Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta—the list goes on and on. Talk about an awesome disease!

The symptoms are perfect. Hyperactivity, inability to concentrate, and an inability to make complete connections in regard to higher brain functioning. By the way, what the hell does it mean to have an inability to make complete connections in regard to higher brain functioning? And, yes, that is an actual, clinical diagnosis.

But here’s the beautiful part: the minute you get diagnosed with Adult A.D.D., you have a free ticket to do as many goofy and stupid things as you can think of. It’s not your fault. You’re sick. Afflicted.

Would you make fun of a diabetic because he cannot eat a piece of your birthday cake? Hell no! That would just be plain rude.

Allow me to explain. For example, say you are working on the house. You're tired from the work week, you want to see the game coming on soon. But no, you need to paint the house or your spouse will have your balls. Now, in a normal situation, you would paint the house and be pissed about it. With Adult A.D.D., you merely begin to paint the house and include the windows, the car, the cat, and the back of the dog's ass. Pretty soon someone is bound to notice. A little shouting and yelling from the spouse will ensue, but this will soon be over. You smile childlike at her and blame it on your Adult A.D.D. She fumes for a while as she cleans off the car, the cat, and the dog's ass, then she apologizes to you, saying she understands. It's not your fault. She calls your intrepid, brown-nosing brother-in-law to see if he'll paint the house, which he will, because he's too fucking stupid to go to a doctor and get diagnosed with Adult A.D.D., and your problems are over. See how this works?

All across the land, men—because the vast majority of Adult A.D.D. patients are men—are catching on to this scam. You get better drugs than you used to drop in college, and you get to take them legally. You get to do stupid shit whenever you feel like it, and none of this is your fault. You're part of an epidemic. An epidemic! What can you do?

George knew there was not much he could do with his business partner in the antenna business. Those that knew his former partner would often tell him his partner was crazy. A real nut case. George would look at them and reply, every single time, "Are you kidding me? We're the ones that are crazy. He's a genius. He got a doctor to diagnose him with Adult A.D.D."

Again, these things happen when the antenna gig ends.

Chapter 9

About the same time as Humphries was grappling with his “Executive Washroom” reality, Florence was doing a little reality grasping of her own.

“Maybe Eileen was right,” she said out loud. “Maybe life would be better without Humphries.”

Florence was not certain why she stated these facts out loud, but she did. She also knew that she had put up with his drunkenness and aloofness for far too long. He didn’t like her friends. He didn’t socialize. He didn’t play bridge, or even try to feign an interest in Florence whatsoever. The bastard never brought her flowers, no matter how many times she asked. So, yes, perhaps it was time to think about a life without Humphries.

Feeling emboldened by these thoughts, Florence did something she rarely did; she put a kettle on to boil for a cup of coffee. At two in the afternoon! She never drank coffee past eight in the morning; it was simply unheard of. But here she was, contemplating life without Humphries, all the while fixing herself a nice cup of coffee to get her started on her journey.

Now, normally, Florence took her coffee with a bit of cream and two spoonfuls of sugar. Sometimes honey, to help with seasonal allergies, but always with a sweetener to mask the acrid taste of the strong coffee she preferred to brew.

She had read years ago that strong coffee, freshly ground, was good for the digestive system, especially when it came to cleansing the colon. And who wouldn’t want a cleansed colon? The article also stated top brands that came in cans, brands such as Folgers, Maxwell House, Yuban, and especially Chock Full O’Nuts, should be avoided. Preferred coffee was listed as that coming from beans found locally, and roasted by an experienced Master Roaster.

Immediately after reading said article (Florence was fairly certain it was in the Christmas edition of *Better Homes & Gardens*),

she set out looking for local coffee beans. Sure enough, at the Piggly-Wiggly down the road they had a sign stating coffee beans on sale for \$4.99 a pound. What great fortune, she thought. Not even two miles from her home they had local coffee beans for sale. It could not get more local than that. When she asked the manager, Sheila, if the beans were roasted by a Master Roaster, Sheila enthusiastically told her they were. She could not divulge the name of the Master Roaster, as it was a tightly held company secret, but she could certainly verify the beans were roasted with the utmost of expertise.

Sheila had previously read the article in question as the Piggly-Wiggly sold many copies of the Christmas edition of *Better Homes & Gardens*. They were nicely displayed at the front entrance to each register, so they were pretty hard to miss. Florence was not the only local who came in looking for coffee beans roasted by a Master Roaster. Sheila, as her employers knew, was at the top of her game.

So there was Florence, with a fresh cup of coffee at two in the afternoon sitting in front of her. Should she dare to drink it without cream? Without sweetener? Should she dare to drink it black? Could she even think that? Would it be racist to think of it as “black”? She didn’t think she was a racist, but, oh my, perhaps she was.

Florence pondered this pivotal question of “black” coffee for quite some time. She eventually assured herself the whole thing was silly and, since the coffee in front of her had been cooling for quite some time, she steeled herself and took a long drink.

“Ughhh,” she cried out in disgust.

“That is the most disgusting thing I think I have ever tasted.”

She said this, again, out loud to no one in particular.

She grimaced and forced herself to take another drink. It was not as harsh as the first drink, but still, it was fairly bitter and not at all what she was used to. Understanding that if she were going to actually leave Humphries, life would be just that; bitter and harsh, she might as well get used to it.

The mere thought of Humphries set her passionate hatred for him on fire. Fueled by her mid-afternoon caffeine break, she downed the rest of the cup, then poured and drank two more!

Florence was definitely a woman on fire as she readied herself to go into the world as a changed, and impassioned, woman.

“Where is Eileen,” she wondered. Maybe a late lunch or early dinner with her best friend would be an appropriate time to reveal her newfound revelation of casting the chains of Humphries from her soul.

“Casting the chains of Humphries from her soul,” she said out loud. It had a nice ring to it.

Chapter 10

As Florence spun in her caffeine-induced enlightenment, Eileen sat across from Lawrence Mathews the Third, completely mesmerized by his charm, his cobalt blue eyes and, she blushed when she realized it, the nicely formed bulge in his crotch. Of course, she could not see that lovely, curved banana now that they were seated, but she got quite enough of it as they walked into one of the oldest, and most prestigious, dining establishments in the region: The Flatulent Goose.

Dating back to pre-Colonial days when the region was controlled by the British, it was a well-known eatery and pub favored by the British military brass. Lord Cornwallis, himself, was rumored to have frequented the establishment on many occasions when he was not out fighting rebels and quelling “the rebellion”, until, of course, that nasty incident at Yorktown which effectively ended hostilities, leading to peace negotiations between Britain and the newly formed United States.

The Continental Army, with help from their French allies, were so overjoyed to have won this last major land battle, siege really, that led to the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, ending the Revolutionary War for good and giving legitimacy to the newly formed United States as an independent nation, went to burn down the eatery and pub in an act of defiance against the British.

Fortunately, calmer heads prevailed. French General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, (those French guys love their long names) having trained for the church before he began his illustrious military career, halted the burning of the building by telling the men, both French and, now, American, they should leave the building standing as a monument to the victory they had just achieved. Accordingly, in order to further remind future generations of the arrogance of the British, who vowed to annihilate the Continental Army and failed, they would rename the establishment

as “The Flatulent Goose”, a name befitting the hollow claims made by the British.

All agreed, amidst loud praise for Rochambeau’s genius. The building, while renovated many times over during the ensuing eras, maintained the name, becoming a regional, if not national, monument to the victory at Yorktown where a ragtag army, with help from their allies, defeated the mighty British realm.

So it was here, in this honorable building, that Eileen sat wondering if perhaps, just maybe, this was the guy for her, bulge and all.

Lawrence was also deep in his own thoughts. “Who is this woman,” he pondered, while gazing into her loving eyes.

She had such grace, such presence. He had been around stunningly attractive women before, but not once was he attracted to any of them as he was now of this vision of beauty before him.

Since his early teenage years he knew he was most assuredly “gay”. God, how he hated that word. Gay. Did it mean he was happy all the time? Well, he was wealthy, that was true. And wealth, of course, did bring about a sense of happiness, he supposed. So, was he never to be sad at times? Always “gay”. What a ridiculous word! Who thought of such a word. It was nearly as irritating as fag, a British slang for a cigarette. Leave it to the British to come up with such nonsense.

Reaching for his wine he let out a chuckle.

“What’s so funny,” Eileen purred?

Caught off guard for a moment, Lawrence nervously coughed trying to regain his composure.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he replied. “I was thinking of how perfect a name The Flatulent Goose is in reminding us how arrogant and stupid the British can be.”

Whew, dodged that one with ease.

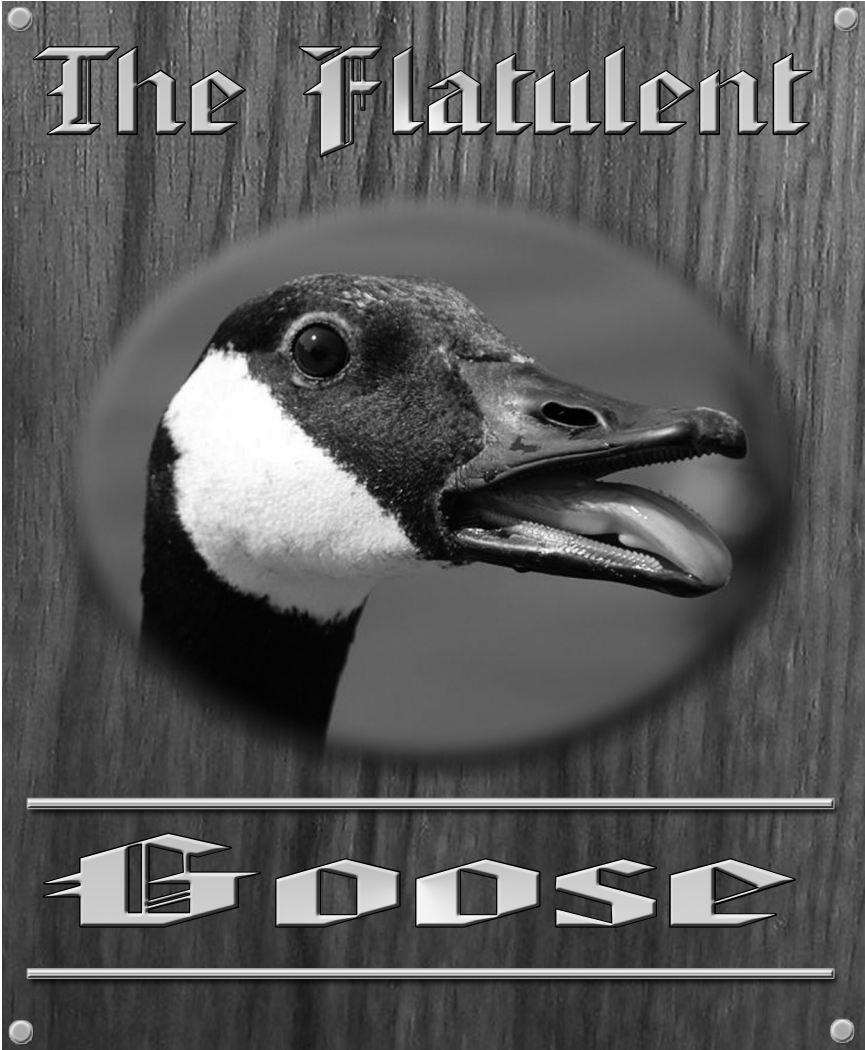
“You know,” Eileen said as she leaned in close, “I’ve never once been here.”

“Really,” Lawrence stammered. Eileen’s voluptuous breasts were right in front of him. He could see the fine hairs of her cleavage glistening in the light, breathlessly moving in unison as she spoke.

“Yes, truly. The entire time I have lived here, which has been all of

my life, I've never come here. I guess..." and here she coyly looked at him, "I guess I was waiting for the right moment to come."

Lawrence nearly spit his wine across the table as he felt a mag-



nificent erection forming under the table. Thankfully, he blessed the table for hiding it.

"Well," he said earnestly, again trying to regain his composure, "I'm glad I could be your first."

Your first? What the hell was he saying? Why was he feeling like

a lovesick adolescent at his first dance? Who was this woman, this woman that could make him feel so...so alive? He was gay, for god's sake. You know, a homosexual. He never paid a second look to any woman and now, here he sat across the table from this temptress hiding what he believed to be the largest erection of his debauched life.

Eileen saw how Lawrence squirmed when she mentioned "the right moment to come". Was she coming on too much? Should she back off a bit? What the hell was going on anyway? Who was this man in front of her? She had just met him, in a parking lot of all places, and now here they were at lunch with her mind reeling with the thought that all she wanted to eat was him! What the hell! She was a lesbian, after all. She'd given up on men long ago. I mean, forever. But this man, this primal specimen of lust in front of her made her so wet she wasn't certain how she would be able to stay in her seat any longer.

"So," she tried to speak in an even voice, "this place has quite the history, doesn't it?"

Taking her cue to slow the pace, Lawrence began telling her the history of The Flatulent Goose, hoping beyond all hope he could maintain his composure.

"So it was Rochambeau who named it?" she said while looking innocently around the restaurant.

Lawrence went to reply when their waiter suddenly appeared to take their order. Perhaps their meal would slow things down a tad. Just a tad, he thought. But then he felt her foot rub up and down his calf and all he could muster was "steak, medium rare, and water, cold... lots of cold water."

Eileen ordered a shrimp salad, delighted to find that he felt as bothered as she was. She raised her glass to him, "here's to a wonderful lunch," while leaning forward, giving Lawrence another long, beautiful view of her loving breasts.

Chapter 11

To say that Pierce Williams was captivated by Amelia would be a massive understatement. It would be as if to say the Grand Canyon was a slightly deeper ditch than most. He was more than captivated, he was smitten.

As they sat in Amelia's parlor, sipping tea and partaking of a delicious array of cakes she had especially prepared for the occasion, Amelia, too, felt a strange feeling within her. She felt almost nauseous, not quite ill, but enough for her to take notice. She also felt flushed and worried that at any moment she would, heaven forbid, perspire.

Pierce, too, was feeling a bit flushed and a little more than disconcerted over the fact that despite all he had researched, sitting across from Amelia he was now loath to recall a single bit of "evidence" that there was any wrongdoing at all.

"Charming," he thought to himself, "but a mastermind of financial misdeeds? Hardly."

Affron, Amelia's butler, gently rapped at the door to the parlor.

"Excuse me, madam," Affron's deep baritone rumbled through the parlor. "The gentleman has received a phone call. Shall I have it transferred here?"

Amelia, relieved at the opportunity for composure, however brief, looked to Pierce for direction. "You say I have a call, here?" he asked with a little more incredulity than was warranted.

"Yes, sir," again the deep baritone rumbled around the room.

"They said to tell you it was of the utmost urgency. I can transfer it here, if you wish, but if you might want to receive the call in private, I can transfer it into the den where you might have more privacy."

"Please," Pierce exhaled, "that would be fine."

Pierce slowly rose, taking pains not to be so rude as to drop the napkin that was on his lap, and turned to Amelia, slightly bowing.

"I apologize for this uninvited intrusion. Forgive me."

Pierce followed Affron into the den, taking a seat in a large, comfortable chair. Shell Cordovan, he noted.

Affron handed him a portable phone and then quietly left Pierce alone, closing the door to the den behind him.

Thoroughly bewildered by why his office would contact him here, during an interview, let alone contact him at all (he rarely worked cases that were of dire need, if ever), Pierce held the phone to his ear.

"Hello," he stated with some trepidation, "this is Pierce Williams speaking."

"Pierce," the booming voice on the other end instantly identified the caller as Reginald Newhouse, head of operations for the Securities Fraud division.

"I'm so sorry to bother you as such, but we have a very exacting situation that is unfolding as we speak. I need you to return to the office immediately. Time is of the essence. I do not wish to go over it on a non-secure line, but suffice it to say I need you to return as quickly as possible."

Before Pierce could make a reply, Reginald Newhouse ended the conversation and hung up.

Pierce sat looking at the phone in his hand. He looked around the room, noted the wonderful artwork on the walls, the sculpture, even what he imagined to be an antique stained glass window from some distant, long lost castle in Europe...the Shell Cordovan easy chair. The room had wealth practically dripping from it. Surely, as he thought of Amelia's sweet countenance, this could not have been achieved through anything but hard work and diligence.

Amelia, concerned over the sudden phone call for Pierce, was waiting impatiently for his return. She was about to ring for Affron, to make certain all was well, when Pierce hurriedly blew into the parlor.

"I'm afraid we must continue our conversation another time, dear lady." He wanted nothing more than to phone Newhouse back, telling him he would talk to him first thing in the morning, but the urgency that Newhouse spoke with, coupled with the fact that he was, indeed, his superior, quickly dispelled these thoughts.

“I apologize for the immediacy, but I must return to the office at once.”

Pierce saw the confusion on Amelia’s face. He gently lifted her hand as he told her that he was “certain she had nothing at all to worry about. Everything he had seen was on the up and up.”

Amelia, slightly blushing as Pierce took her hand, poised it for him to give it a light kiss, which he did.

“A later time, I hope,” she breathed out.

“Most assuredly,” Pierce readily replied.

Affron was at the front entrance, Pierce’s coat and hat at the ready. He also had two small cakes wrapped in foil, explaining to Pierce as he handed them to him, “Miss Amelia insisted. They are her favorites.”

Pierce thanked Affron for his assistance, and hurriedly walked to his car, the scent of Amelia lingering about him as he did so.

Pierce’s mind was spinning as he drove off. What an incredible day! In all his life he had never met a woman such as Amelia who could readily touch his soul. Did she feel any affection towards him? Any excitement at all? Was he merely imagining that she was as entranced with him as he was with her?

“Oh, what a silly fellow,” he shouted out as he turned out of Amelia’s drive onto the main road.

“Pierce, you are but a fool.”

Chapter 12

Humphries looked about the room as George, completely giddy with joy, set about directing each of his prominently displayed television screens.

“My word,” Humphries murmured, “how many TV sets did one man need?”

“What was that,” George asked, briefly taking his gaze off of the remote in his hand to acknowledge Humphries. “Something about TV sets?”

Not realizing he had verbalized his thought, Humphries quickly stated what a fine collection of televisions George owned.

Humphries also realized it had been quite a while since he was face to face with someone he barely knew. He kept to himself, Humphries did. Not socializing outside of his work or family left him rather sheltered, a fact he was just now discovering as he sat in George’s living room, or office. Actually, he was not at all certain as to what it was. In fact, he was not entirely certain as to where he was.

Humphries had not devoted any real, significant amount of time contemplating the social goings on in America. As it were, a lot can happen in a handful of years, and Humphries had been out of the loop for nearly ten. A decade. An entire decade! He recalled Florence going on about something called a “Walkman”, or perhaps it was a “Zune”, some kind of a goofy named thing for playing music. He did recall hearing it mentioned on his local call-in talk show, how it was supposed to revolutionize listening to music, again. But it was all sort of a blur. Nothing was really making sense and he felt light-headed and dizzy.

“You okay over there?” George called out.

“Yes,” Humphries replied weakly. “I’ll just sit here for a moment, if that’s alright?”

“Are you kidding me,” George laughed. “You found my TV guide, you can stay as long as you like,” and went back to doing whatever it

was he was doing with his TV sets.

“Hey,” George looked over at Humphries, “Dancing With The Stars is on later, I’m going to record it but we can watch it live if you’d like.”

“Hey, buddy,” George took a longer look at Humphries and noticed he was pale, perhaps even sweating a bit too much. George sweated quite a bit, due to his size, but Humphries was nowhere near as large as George and George had recently had his air-conditioning serviced, so it couldn’t be that.

“I’m fine,” Humphries stammered. “Just need to rest a bit.”

George decided to take him at his word and to leave him be for a few minutes. Besides, there was a lot of programming left to do. Odd fellow though, that much was certain.

At the mention of “Dancing With The Stars,” Humphries recalled seeing it with Florence, once, perhaps twice. He recalled that Emmitt Smith had won it. One of the greatest running backs of all time, a winner of four NFL rushing titles, a three-time Super Bowl champion, Emmitt Smith leaves the gridiron for a few telecasts as a sports commentator but shows everyone his real talent when he knocks them all dead with his hot Salsa dancing on “Dancing With The Stars.” Yes, he remembered it.

He also remembered Florence leaving to get more tea and the indentations from her heels on the carpet reminding him of the dimples on a topless dancer’s ass.

Wanda. Humphries smiled at the memory.

“A common curse of Satellite TV is that there are too many channels to watch.”

George’s voice seemed friendlier than ever. Humphries, lost in his reverie recalling the dimples on Wanda’s ass, looked directly at George.

“Satellite TV?”

“I seldom, if ever, venture into the land of Network TV anymore,” George proudly declared, “but damned if they didn’t slide one by me with that show.”

Humphries, for a brief moment, was lucid.

“I remember that Emmitt Smith won one year.”

George was overjoyed!

“Yes, yes he did! I didn’t realize you were a fan. I remember clearly Emmitt and his hot Salsa dancing. ABC definitely had something going with that.”

George sat down in his recliner and sighed wistfully. “Those were great days.”

“I like to sit in front of four screens,” he continued. “I have cable hooked up to all of them. In two of the screens I have a picture within a picture, so I have a total of six images going on in front of me at any one given time. I’ve attempted to sit and watch less, but I can’t last more than a couple of minutes. I need multiple images.”

Humphries’ mind was spinning again. Was there a point to this conversation?

“Did you know, according to recent surveys, the American household has a total of 4.6 television sets per household? When you break it down, it really is not that many. The family room has a set. Mom and Dad have a set. Brother has a set. Sister has a set. The other .6 televisions are the ones that don’t work—or in my case, the one in the bathroom for emergencies.”

Humphries felt a bit of drool run down the right side of his chin.

“One of my friends, Jonny Vee, told me a long time ago I was pedestrian in my watching habits. That’s when I started watching more than one screen. He said if I had a setup like his I could watch lions eating a zebra, Emmitt Smith winning the dance competition, a documentary on U-Boats, a past episode of MAS*H, the Fresno State–Oregon State football game, and a rerun of CSI Las Vegas, all at once.”

George stopped to take a breath.

“Six programs at once,” he proudly said.

George’s mood quickly turned ugly when he realized that one of his units with the Picture in Picture feature had stopped working. It now only had a ‘picture’.

George looked over at Humphries, who was now completely immobile and drooling fairly rapidly.

“Hey, buddy,” George leaned over Humphries. “Should I call someone?”

Humphries lay on the couch, slackened, drooling, and, yes, before completely losing consciousness, remembered seeing the dimples on Wanda’s ass.

Chapter 13

Florence drove her Volvo with the kind of reckless determination that comes from three cups of black coffee and twenty-two years of suppressed rage. She had intended to find Eileen, to discuss casting off the chains of Humphries from her soul, but Eileen's car was not at her apartment. Nor was it at the gym. Nor was it at any of the other seven places Florence checked with increasingly manic energy.

The caffeine was doing strange things to her nervous system.

"I need to relax," Florence said aloud to herself in the car. "I need to think clearly about my future. I need—" She spotted a sign for Serenity Now Day Spa and made an impulsive left turn that nearly killed a man on a bicycle. Oddly enough, he reminded her of the tamale vendor down at Humphries' office.

The spa smelled of lavender and lies. Soft music played—the kind of music that has no melody, only the vague suggestion that you should be calmer than you are. Florence approached the reception desk where a young woman with a nose ring and the vacant smile of the professionally serene greeted her.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No," Florence said, "but I need a massage. Immediately. I've been married for twenty-two years and I just drank black coffee for the first time and I think I'm leaving my husband and I can't find my best friend and I need someone to touch me."

The receptionist blinked twice.

"We have an opening with Marcus in ten minutes."

There is a delicate cruelty in the way we are taught about touch. As children, we are held, embraced, and comforted through physical contact. Then, somewhere around puberty, we are informed that touch is dangerous, sexual, inappropriate—something to be rationed and controlled. By the time we marry, we have forgotten that touch can be anything other than obligation or transaction. We forget that

hands can communicate kindness without agenda, that skin can receive comfort without shame.

Florence had not been touched with attention. Ever.

* * * * *

Marcus was not what Florence expected. She had imagined someone large and muscular, perhaps with an Eastern European accent and the emotional availability of a refrigerator. Instead, Marcus was slight, perhaps forty, with gentle eyes and hands that looked like they had never thrown a punch or changed a tire or done anything more violent than knead tension from a stranger's shoulders.

"I'm very nervous," Florence announced as she lay face-down on the massage table, her face pressed into the cushioned headrest. "I've never done this before. Well, I had a massage once at a hotel in 1987 but the woman was very rough and I think she dislocated something and Humphries—that's my husband—said I was being dramatic but I wasn't being dramatic, I was in actual pain, and anyway, I'm thinking of leaving him. Humphries, I mean. Not because of the massage incident, although that didn't help. Do you think I'm a racist?"

Marcus's hands settled on her shoulders with a warmth that made Florence's breath catch.

"Why would you be a racist?" His voice was soft, genuinely curious.

"Because I drank black coffee today and I kept thinking about the word 'black' and whether it was offensive and then I realized I'd never questioned it before and what does that say about me as a person?"

Marcus's thumbs found a knot in her left shoulder blade and pressed gently.

"I think," he said carefully, "that you're someone who thinks a lot."

Florence felt something inside her chest crack open like an egg.

For the next forty minutes, Marcus worked his way across Florence's back, shoulders, neck, and legs while she talked. She talked

about bridge tournaments and Humphries's drinking and the indentations in the carpet and Eileen's relentless criticism and her father's boat and the arrangement that became her marriage. She talked about never having been asked what she wanted, about exercise as a form of control, about the terror of black coffee and the larger terror of freedom.

Marcus listened. He made small sounds of acknowledgment—"mmm" and "I see" and "that must have been difficult"—while his hands moved across her body with a professional tenderness that felt, to Florence, like the first honest communication she'd experienced in years.

When he worked on her feet, pressing his thumbs into her arches, Florence made a sound she didn't recognize as her own.

"You carry a lot of tension here," Marcus said.

"I carry a lot of tension everywhere," Florence replied, and then, horrifyingly, she began to cry.

Marcus handed her a tissue without comment and continued working on her feet until her breathing steadied.

When the session ended, Florence stood in the changing room staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her face was flushed, her hair disheveled, her eyes bright with something she couldn't name. She looked, she thought, like a woman who had just been unfaithful.

But she hadn't been unfaithful. Had she?

She paid at the front desk in a daze, added a thirty percent tip, and walked to her car. Halfway there, she realized she had forgotten to ask Marcus if he was married, if he had children, if he would like to have coffee sometime—black coffee, she thought wildly, and then laughed at herself.

She sat in the Volvo with the engine running, trying to understand what had just happened. Was she attracted to Marcus? Or was she simply starved for someone to listen to her, to touch her with intention, to treat her as though her thoughts and feelings and physical presence mattered?

The distinction seemed important, but Florence could not, for the life of her, figure out what it was.

She put the car in reverse and backed out of the parking space, narrowly missing the same bicyclist from earlier, who shouted something obscene that Florence did not hear.

She was too busy wondering if Marcus worked Thursdays.

Chapter 14

Pierce drove toward the Securities Fraud office with the kind of mounting dread usually reserved for men summoned to their own executions. The cakes Amelia had insisted he take with him sat on the passenger seat, wrapped in delicate paper that smelled faintly of lavender. He had kissed her hand. He had told her everything appeared “on the up and up.”

He had lied in a federal investigation because a woman made him feel something.

The office building loomed ahead—a gray monument to bureaucratic righteousness and the systematic punishment of financial impropriety. Pierce had worked here for thirty years, investigating fraud with the mechanical precision of a man who had learned early that emotion was a luxury orphans could not afford. He had never once compromised an investigation.

Until today.

He parked in his designated spot (Employee 247, Senior Investigator, Securities Fraud Division) and walked through the lobby with the grim determination of a man approaching the gallows. The elevator rose slowly, giving him time to rehearse explanations he knew would sound hollow. I was thorough. I conducted a complete interview. There was no evidence of wrongdoing.

The doors opened on the seventh floor.

Reginald Newhouse was waiting in the hallway.

“Pierce,” Reginald said, his face the color of spoiled milk. “My office. Now.”

There is a particular species of panic that afflicts middle management when catastrophe strikes. It is not the clean terror of soldiers under fire or the sharp fear of men facing physical danger. It is instead a bureaucratic hysteria—the knowledge that one’s comfortable position, one’s pension, one’s carefully constructed life of modest authority is about to collapse, and there is absolutely nothing one can do to stop it.

Reginald Newhouse was experiencing this panic in its purest form.

“Sit down,” Reginald said, closing the door behind them. His office was small, cluttered with files and motivational posters about integrity that now seemed grimly ironic. “We have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Pierce asked, though he already knew the answer would be terrible.

“First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company,” Reginald said, pacing behind his desk like a caged animal, “is bankrupt. Completely, catastrophically, irreversibly bankrupt. They have maybe seventy-two hours before the whole thing collapses publicly. They believe it is fifteen days, but it’s not. Seventy-two hours. Fifty million dollars in losses. Gone. Vanished. Embezzled, misappropriated, fraudulently traded away.”

Pierce felt his stomach drop. “The Mathews investigation—”

“Is the tip of a very large, very ugly iceberg,” Reginald interrupted. “Lawrence Mathews the Third has been running an illegal trading operation for years, using his sister Amelia as the front. They’ve been systematically bleeding First American dry through insider trading, stock manipulation, and God knows what else. The company’s entire portfolio has been gutted.”

Pierce thought of Amelia’s delicate hands holding the teacup. Her gentle voice. The way she had blushed when he kissed her hand.

“How do you know this?” Pierce asked quietly.

“Because,” Reginald said, pulling out a thick file and slamming it on the desk, “we’ve been monitoring Lawrence for the last six months. We have phone records, trading patterns, bank transfers—everything. The man’s a financial sociopath. And his sister is either complicit or the most convincing actress in history.”

Pierce said nothing. He stared at the file, feeling the weight of his own stupidity settle over him like a shroud.

“Here’s the problem,” Reginald continued, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “If we prosecute Lawrence and Amelia, the scandal will destroy what’s left of First American. Thousands of employees will lose their jobs. Pensions will evaporate. The entire

regional economy could collapse. And—" he paused dramatically, "—our department will be blamed for not catching this sooner. We cannot allow that to happen."

"So what are you proposing?" Pierce asked, though he already knew the answer would be worse than terrible.

Reginald leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with the desperate cunning of a cornered rat.

"We need a scapegoat," he said. "Someone inside First American who can take the fall. Someone drunk, incompetent, with no alibi and no credibility. Someone the public will believe is responsible."

Pierce felt his mouth go dry. "Who?"

"Humphries Feelgood," Reginald said, opening another file. "Senior Account Executive. Twenty-two years with the company. Perpetually intoxicated. Incontinent. Even crashed his car in the parking lot this morning, nearly missing a tamale vendor. He has access to company accounts, no oversight, and a history of erratic behavior. He's perfect."

Pierce stared at the photograph clipped to the file. Humphries looked like a man who had given up on life sometime in the early 1990s and never bothered to inform his body.

"He's innocent," Pierce said.

"Of course he's innocent," Reginald snapped. "That's what makes him perfect. Innocent men don't have alibis because they don't think they need them. Innocent men don't cover their tracks because they don't know there are tracks to cover. We plant some documents, backdate some emails, create a paper trail showing Humphries had access to the accounts Lawrence was manipulating. The man's so drunk he probably won't even remember what he did last week, let alone six months ago."

"This is fraud," Pierce said quietly.

"This is damage control," Reginald corrected. "Lawrence and Amelia walk away quietly. First American gets a villain to blame. The employees keep their jobs. We look competent. Everyone wins."

"Except Humphries."

"Again, Humphries is a drunk," Reginald said dismissively. "He

was going to destroy his life anyway. We're just accelerating the timeline."

There is a certain moral calculus that occurs in moments like these. We tell ourselves that sacrificing one innocent person to save many is pragmatic, even noble. We convince ourselves that the innocent person was already doomed, that we are merely hastening an inevitable conclusion. We construct elaborate justifications for why our betrayal is actually a form of mercy.

We do this because the alternative—admitting that we are cowards who protect the powerful by destroying the powerless—is too terrible to contemplate.

Pierce sat in silence, thinking of Amelia's face when he had told her everything appeared "on the up and up." She had believed him. Or perhaps she had simply been relieved that her performance had worked.

"What do you need from me?" Pierce asked finally.

Reginald smiled—the smile of a man who has just won a game he was certain he needed to win.

"I need you to write the report," he said. "You're the investigator. Your signature carries weight. You document Humphries' access to the accounts, his suspicious behavior, his lack of oversight. You make it look like you've been investigating him all along, and the Mathews angle was just a dead end."

"And if I refuse?"

Reginald's smile vanished. "Then I'll find someone who won't. And I'll make sure everyone knows you compromised the Mathews investigation because you fell in love with a suspect. Your career will be over. Your reputation will be destroyed. And Humphries will still take the fall, except you won't be around to make sure it's done cleanly."

"You don't know that," Pierce began to protest.

"All I need to know is you need to play along," Reginald sneered.

Pierce looked at the cakes sitting on the chair beside him, wrapped in lavender-scented paper.

"How long do I have?" he asked.

“Forty-eight hours,” Reginald said. “First American collapses on Friday. We need the scapegoat in place by Thursday night.”

Pierce stood slowly, picked up the cakes, and walked toward the door.

“Pierce,” Reginald called after him. “You’re doing the right thing. Sometimes we have to sacrifice one person to save many. That’s just how the world works.”

Pierce paused in the doorway, his hand on the handle.

“No,” he said quietly. “That’s just how we justify it.”

He walked out, leaving Reginald alone in his office, surrounded by motivational posters about integrity that neither of them believed anymore.

Chapter 15

Florence's 1992 Volvo 240 had always been reliable in the way that Swedish engineering promised—solid, practical, utterly devoid of personality. It had carried her to over twenty-five years of bridge games, countless aerobics classes, and approximately eight thousand trips to the grocery store without complaint. The odometer read 187,432 miles, each one a small monument to suburban routine.

Which is why, when the engine began to sputter at 2:47 PM on a Tuesday afternoon, Florence experienced something close to betrayal.

The first cough came as she accelerated away from the strip mall containing Serenity Now Day Spa (where Marcus worked Thursdays, she had confirmed). The second came louder, accompanied by a grinding sound that suggested metal components were reconsidering their relationship with one another. By the third cough, the Volvo had slowed to a pathetic crawl, its dashboard lights flickering like a patient in cardiac arrest.

Florence guided the dying vehicle to the shoulder, where it shuddered once more and expired with the dignity of a Swedish grandmother who had simply decided enough was enough.

"No," Florence said to the steering wheel. "No, no, no. Not now."

She turned the key. The engine produced a sound like a cat being strangled by a very small, but very determined child, then fell silent.

Florence sat in the sudden quiet, her caffeine-fueled determination colliding with automotive reality. She had been driving to find Eileen, to discuss casting the chains of Humphries from her soul, to embrace the wonders and bitter harshness of black coffee and freedom. She had been ready.

And now her car had died approximately two hundred yards from The Flatulent Goose.

There is a unique variety of frustration that afflicts suburban

women when their carefully planned moments of transformation are interrupted by mechanical failure. It is not the clean anger of injustice or the sharp fury of betrayal. It is instead a bureaucratic rage—the knowledge that one’s dramatic gesture, one’s carefully rehearsed speech about liberation and self-actualization, must now be postponed while one deals with a tow truck and a mechanic who will inevitably explain the problem using words like “timing belt” and “catalytic converter” while looking at one’s breasts.

Florence was experiencing this rage in its purest form.

She grabbed her purse, locked the Volvo (though who would steal a dead Swedish sedan was unclear), and began walking toward The Flatulent Goose. She would use their phone. She would call Eileen. She would explain about the car and the coffee and the epiphany and—the restaurant loomed ahead, its pre-Colonial architecture somehow both dignified and absurd. Florence had never eaten here. It was too expensive, too pretentious, too much the kind of place where Humphries would order the wrong wine and embarrass her in front of people who mattered.

But they would have a phone.

She pushed through the heavy oak door, her eyes adjusting to the dim interior. The hostess—a young woman with the kind of severe haircut that suggested she had opinions about farm-to-table sourcing—looked up with professional warmth.

“Good afternoon, ma’am. Do you have a reservation?”

“I need to use your phone,” Florence said, her voice still carrying the caffeinated authority of her earlier epiphany. “My car broke down just outside.”

“Of course,” the hostess said, gesturing toward the bar. “Right through there, you’ll find—”

But Florence had stopped listening.

Because there, at a corner table beneath a portrait of Lord Cornwallis looking constipated, sat Eileen.

And across from Eileen, looking like a man who had just discovered his entire identity was a lie, sat Lawrence Mathews the Third.

We all perform our identities with the conviction of method ac-

tors who have forgotten they are performing. We declare ourselves this and not that, we construct elaborate philosophies to justify our declarations as we lecture others about the superiority of our chosen performance. We become so committed to the role that we forget it is a role at all.

Until desire—that most honest of betrayers—reminds us that we are all just making it up as we go along.

Florence stood frozen in the doorway, watching a scene that made absolutely no sense.

Eileen—Eileen, who had spent over twenty-five years explaining why men were worthless, why heterosexuality was a patriarchal trap, why Florence should leave Humphries and embrace her authentic self—was leaning forward across the table with the unmistakable posture of a woman in the throes of sexual fascination.

Her face was flushed. Her eyes were bright. Her hand rested on the table approximately six inches from Lawrence's hand, close enough to suggest intention yet far enough away to maintain plausible deniability.

And that man, Lawrence—wealthy, gay, cobalt-eyed Lawrence—looked like a man experiencing a panic attack while simultaneously trying to hide an erection.

His face was pale except for two bright spots of color on his cheeks. His hand gripped his wine glass with the desperation of a drowning man clutching driftwood. His eyes kept darting between Eileen's face and Eileen's chest.

Neither of them had noticed her yet.

Florence watched Eileen laugh at something Lawrence said—a genuine, delighted laugh that Florence had never heard directed at any man in over twenty-five years of friendship. She watched Lawrence's face transform with pleasure at making Eileen laugh, watched him lean forward slightly, watched the space between them crackle with the kind of sexual tension that Florence had only read about in the romance novels she hid from Humphries.

The hostess was saying something about the phone, but Florence couldn't hear her over the sound of her entire understanding of reality collapsing.

Eileen had been lying.

Or—worse—Eileen had been lying to herself. Perhaps both.

All those lectures about male worthlessness, all those speeches about authentic identity, all those years of encouraging Florence to leave Humphries and embrace her true self—and here was Eileen, practically vibrating with desire for a man, yes, a man, in a restaurant named The Flatulent Goose.

Florence felt something shift inside her. It was not quite anger and not quite betrayal. It was instead a kind of dark, caffeinated clarity—the realization that everyone, everyone, was just as confused and hypocritical and desperately uncertain as she was.

Eileen caught sight of her then.

Their eyes met across the restaurant, and Florence watched over twenty-five years of friendship collide with approximately ninety minutes of sexual awakening. Eileen's face went through a remarkable series of expressions: surprise, guilt, defiance, fear, and finally something that looked almost like relief.

Lawrence followed Eileen's gaze and turned to see Florence standing in the doorway. His face achieved a shade of pale that suggested his blood had abandoned his head entirely and relocated to more optimistic regions.

The three of them stared at each other in a tableau of mutual exposure—each one caught performing an identity they no longer believed in, each one desperate to explain and utterly unable to begin explaining.

Florence thought about the three cups of black coffee sitting in her stomach like battery acid. She thought about Marcus's gentle hands on her shoulders. She thought about Humphries' unconscious, dreaming of Wanda's dimples. She thought about her dead Volvo on the shoulder of the road, its Swedish engineering finally surrendering to entropy.

And she thought about walking over to that table and asking Eileen a single question: So. Tell me again about the worthlessness of men.

But she didn't move.

She just stood there, watching her best friend discover that desire makes liars of us all, wondering if she should feel vindicated or simply sad that hypocrisy was apparently the only thing humans did with any consistency.

The hostess touched her elbow gently. "Ma'am? The phone?"

Florence turned away from the table, away from Eileen's guilty face and Lawrence's panic, and followed the hostess toward the bar.

Behind her, she heard Eileen say something in a voice too quiet to make out. A question?

She didn't turn around to hear the answer.

Chapter 16

Sheila Kowalski left the Riverside Market at 2:43 PM, her apron still damp with spilled coffee and the particular desperation that clings to minimum-wage retail. She had worked the early shift—6 AM to 2:30 PM—stocking shelves, manning the register, and helping Marcus in the café area during the lunch rush when customers flowed through in waves. The job required her to smile at customers while translating their casual cruelty into the kind of politeness that kept her employed and barely solvent. Marcus worked part-time at the café between his massage appointments, and during the midday surge, Sheila would abandon her register duties to help him manage the espresso machine and the endless parade of people wanting their caffeine fix before returning to their offices.

She was divorced, childless, and tired in the way that people become tired when they realize their lives have settled into a shape they never intended.

Her 2003 Honda Civic started on the second try, which was better than usual. She pulled out of the employee parking lot and headed toward the business condos on Riverside Drive, where she and her mother shared a modest two-bedroom apartment that cost \$1,450 a month—approximately \$800 more than Sheila could comfortably afford on her salary alone. But they were the cheapest in town and served adequately as living spaces. Though they did have all the appeal of “business condos”, which was not much appeal at all.

But her mother couldn’t work anymore.

Her mother could barely walk anymore.

Her mother, the one-time stripper and queen of the clubs, was little more than a faded memory that soured more with each and every day.

In truth, we build our sexual fantasies on fleeting encounters with real human beings, then preserve those fantasies in the amber of memory where they cannot age, cannot disappoint, cannot re-

veal themselves to be ordinary people with ordinary lives. We reduce complex women to a pair of dimples, a curve of breast, a moment of professional seduction performed for money and forgotten by morning. We do not realize them as “people”, preserving their memory for eternity in a flawed attempt to keep them immortal. Not at all.

We do this because desire requires simplification. The actual woman—with her mortgage payments and her arthritic knees and her daughter who works in a low-paying retail job—would complicate the fantasy. It would make it impossible to sustain the erection of memory across the years.

So we edit. We reduce. We dehumanize in the service of our own arousal. While the woman we’ve reduced to a sexual object goes on living her life, completely unaware that somewhere a drunk insurance salesman is comparing his wife’s heel indentations to the dimples on her ass. Such is the way of life.

Sheila pulled into the business condos parking lot at 2:58 PM, parking in her assigned spot (C-17) next to a contractor’s van that she recognized as one of the tenants’. She grabbed her purse and the bag of groceries she’d picked up at lunch—applesauce, Ensure, the soft white bread her mother could still chew—and headed toward her apartment.

The business condos were a strange hybrid of commercial and residential space, built in the 1980s when developers thought people would want to live above their offices. The experiment had failed, leaving a building where half the units housed small businesses (George’s contracting office, a CPA firm, a chiropractor who specialized in workers’ compensation fraud) while the other half housed people who couldn’t afford to live anywhere else. In reality, it was kind of a dump, but it was better than being homeless.

Sheila and her mother lived in Unit 2-C, directly adjacent to Unit 2-B, where George kept his television sets and his dreams of satellite supremacy.

She climbed the stairs slowly, her knees protesting. The elevator had been broken forever.

Wanda Kowalski was sixty-two years old, though she looked

closer to seventy-five. The years had not been kind to her. Diabetes had taken three toes from her left foot. Osteoporosis had compressed her spine by two inches. The dimples that had once graced her posterior—the dimples that a young man named Humphries Feelgood had fixated on during a bachelor party twenty-five years prior—had long since disappeared beneath the weight of age and gravity and the particular cruelty of time.

She sat in her recliner by the window, watching the parking lot below with the vacant attention of someone who had run out of things to hope for. The television played a game show she wasn't watching. Her oxygen tank hissed softly beside her chair.

She had been beautiful once. Genuinely beautiful, not just in the way that young bodies are beautiful but in the way that made men stupid. She had worked at The Velvet Touch for years, dancing topless for businessmen and performing at bachelor parties and for lonely divorced men who paid money to pretend she cared about their problems.

She had been good at it. A true professional. She knew how to make a man feel seen without actually seeing him. How to perform intimacy without feeling anything. How to accept money without accepting shame.

She had saved almost nothing.

The club had closed long ago. She'd worked retail after that—Macy's, then Target, then a dollar store—until her feet gave out and her daughter had to take her in.

She did not think about the men she'd danced for. Couldn't remember their faces. They had been a blur of ties and wedding rings and desperate eyes, all of them seeking something she could not provide and did not owe them, yet they all fervently believed she could.

If someone had told her that one of those men—a sheltered, virginal insurance salesman who'd been dragged to her club against his will—had spent twenty-five years obsessing over the dimples on her ass, comparing every woman to her, building an entire fantasy life around a brief encounter she'd forgotten by the next shift, she would have laughed.

Or cried.

Or both.

Sheila unlocked the apartment door and stepped inside, immediately hit by the smell of closed windows, old age and the faint medicinal odor of prescription ointments.

“Mom? I’m home.”

Wanda turned her head slowly, her oxygen tube shifting. “You’re early.”

“Same time as always, Mom.” Sheila set the groceries on the counter and began unpacking them. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired.”

“Did you eat lunch?”

“Some applesauce.”

“That’s not lunch, Mom. That’s a snack.” Sheila opened the refrigerator, surveying the untouched containers of soup and pasta she’d prepared over the weekend. “You need to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

This was the daily script. Sheila had memorized her lines years ago.

She walked over to her mother’s chair and adjusted the oxygen tube, checked the tank gauge (half full), and picked up the empty water glass from the side table. Wanda’s hands, once graceful and expressive, now trembled with essential tremor. Her nails were yellowed and thick.

“I’ll make you a sandwich,” Sheila said. “Turkey and cheese. Soft bread.”

“I don’t want—”

“I know. But you’re eating it anyway.”

Wanda sighed, a sound like air escaping from a tire. She turned back to the window, watching the parking lot where a drunk man named Humphries Feelgood lay unconscious on a contractor’s couch, dreaming of her dimples. She could not see him. She had no idea he existed. She certainly had no idea she had been the defining sexual experience of his life.

Wanda was oblivious to the fact that his entire marriage had

been measured against a professional performance she'd delivered for some money which had then been forgotten immediately.

This is what we do to the objects of our desire: we make them mythical, eternal, perfect. We freeze them in time and refuse to let them age, suffer, or become human. Yet they go on living anyway, unaware of the monuments we've built to them in our minds. Monuments they never asked for and would not recognize.

Sheila made the sandwich, cut it into small pieces, and brought it to her mother on a plate.

"Eat," she said gently.

Wanda picked up a piece with shaking hands and chewed slowly, her jaw working with effort.

Outside, against the parking lot, through his windows, George's television sets flickered with six simultaneous images. And somewhere in the distance, Florence's Volvo sat dead on the shoulder of the road, its Swedish engineering finally surrendering to the same entropy that had claimed Wanda's dimples, her beauty, and her ability to remember the men who would never forget her.

Chapter 17

Humphries woke to the sound of a commercial for adult diapers playing on three screens simultaneously. His mouth tasted like copper and shame. The couch beneath him was damp—whether from drool or something worse, he couldn't tell and didn't want to know.

"George?" His voice came out thick, slurred.

George appeared from behind a wall of television sets, holding a remote control in each hand like a gunslinger. "Oh good, you're back. You were out for maybe ten minutes. Thought you'd fainted or something. Low blood sugar, probably. You want a Coke?"

Ten minutes. Humphries tried to sit up and discovered his left arm wasn't responding correctly. It felt distant, numb, like it belonged to someone else. He stared at it, willing the fingers to move. They twitched weakly.

"George," he said slowly, "I think something's wrong."

"Yeah, well, you did pass out on my couch. That's generally a sign something's not optimal." George clicked through channels without looking at him. "But you're awake now, so that's good. Means you're not dead."

Humphries touched his face with his right hand. His left cheek felt slack, unresponsive. A thin line of drool had dried on his chin.

This is how the body betrays us. Not dramatically, not all at once, but in small surrenders—a numb arm, a slack face, a moment of darkness we can't account for. We spend our lives pretending we're in control, that our flesh is loyal, that consciousness is guaranteed. And then one day we wake up on a stranger's couch and realize we've been evicted from our own body without notice.

"I need to go," Humphries said, though he wasn't sure where.

"Sure, sure, it's right down the hall," George said absently. "Just let me finish programming this Picture-in-Picture. You still want me to build that washroom?"

Humphries couldn't remember. He nodded anyway.

Lawrence's red Porsche pulled out of The Flatulent Goose parking lot with Eileen in the passenger seat, both of them flushed and silent. The sexual tension from lunch still hung between them like humidity.

"That was—" Eileen began.

"Yes," Lawrence interrupted, gripping the steering wheel too tightly. "That was your friend."

They drove in silence for thirty seconds before Lawrence spotted the broken-down Volvo on the shoulder. And standing beside it, looking lost and furious and somehow smaller than usual, was Florence.

"Oh God," Eileen whispered.

Lawrence slowed the Porsche. There was no avoiding this. Florence had already seen them—her face registered shock, then something harder. Betrayal, maybe. Or vindication.

Lawrence pulled onto the shoulder twenty feet ahead of the Volvo. Eileen didn't move.

"We should—" Lawrence started.

"I know."

They got out. Florence stood with her arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

"Florence," Eileen said carefully. "Your car—"

"Broke down," Florence finished. "I was coming to find you."

The three of them stood in a triangle of awkwardness, traffic rushing past on the road behind them. Lawrence, who had charmed his way through a thousand impossible situations, found himself completely mute.

"This isn't—" Eileen tried again.

"Isn't what?" Florence's voice was calm, which was somehow worse than anger. "Isn't you having lunch with a man? Isn't you doing exactly what you've spent over twenty-five years telling me I shouldn't tolerate?"

Eileen flinched. "It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

Lawrence cleared his throat. "Perhaps I should—"

"You should stay," Florence said, looking directly at him for the

first time. “I want to understand what’s happening here. Because an hour ago, my best friend was lecturing me about leaving my husband. And now she’s...” Florence gestured vaguely at the Porsche, at Lawrence, at the entire impossible situation.

This is the moment when hypocrisy becomes visible. When the person who has been your moral compass for over twenty-five years is revealed to be just as lost, just as confused, just as capable of contradiction as you. The truth is we build our identities on consistency—I am this, not that; I want this, not that—and then desire arrives and makes liars of us all.

“I don’t know what this is,” Eileen said quietly.

Florence nodded slowly. “Neither do I. About anything.”

She turned and started walking along the shoulder, away from both of them.

“Florence!” Eileen called.

But Florence kept walking.

* * * * *

Pierce sat at his desk in the Securities Fraud office, the fabricated documents spread before him like a confession. Reginald had left him alone, which was a kindness or a cruelty, depending on how you looked at it.

The documents were elegant in their deception. They showed Humphries Feelgood as the architect of the insider-trading scheme, the man who had orchestrated the collapse of First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company. They were complete with forged signatures, backdated memos, falsified transaction records.

All Pierce had to do was sign his name at the bottom. Verify that the investigation had been thorough. Confirm that justice was being served.

He picked up his pen.

Here is the moment we discover what we’re actually made of. Not in the grand gestures, not in the dramatic declarations of principle, but in the quiet rooms where no one is watching. When the choice

is between the person we love and the person we've pretended to be. When integrity becomes negotiable and love becomes the excuse.

Pierce thought of Amelia's face as he'd kissed her hand. The way she'd blushed. The hope in her voice when she'd said she hoped they'd meet again.

He thought of Humphries Feelgood, a man he'd never met, whose life he was about to destroy.

He signed the document.

The pen made a soft scratching sound against the paper. Pierce set it down carefully, as if it might explode.

He had just murdered a man's life to protect a woman he'd known for three hours. If even that. And the worst part—the part that made him want to vomit—was that he'd do it again.

Amelia sat in her parlor, the teacup Pierce had used still on the table beside her, and realized with absolute certainty that she was in love.

Not infatuated. Not charmed. Not merely smitten by a handsome investigator who'd treated her with gentleness.

In love.

She was fifty-two years old and had never felt this before. Had never understood what the novels meant, what the songs were about, what made people do stupid, reckless, impossible things.

Now she understood.

Pierce Williams had walked into her carefully controlled world and detonated something she hadn't known was there. Some capacity for feeling she'd buried under years of serving as Lawrence's front, of managing his fortune, of being useful rather than alive.

She touched the teacup, still faintly warm.

Outside, the sun was beginning to set. Somewhere, Pierce was driving back to his office, unaware that he'd just become the most important person in her world.

Somewhere, her brother was driving a lesbian woman in his Porsche, equally confused about desire.

Somewhere, an innocent man was waking up on a couch with a numb arm and no idea his life was about to transform.

And Amelia sat in her parlor, holding a teacup, transformed.

Chapter 18

Manfred Young sat at his desk and watched the clock on the wall tick toward 4:47 PM. Humphries had been gone for nearly six hours.

Six hours to find a contractor. Six hours to discuss a simple executive washroom. Six hours during which Manfred had rushed to the bathroom eleven times, perhaps twelve—he'd lost count—and received no phone call, no update, no reassurance that his most loyal employee was actually solving the problem.

The problem being, of course, Manfred's enlarged prostate and the humiliation of sharing a public restroom with subordinates who might hear him struggle.

Not the other problem. The \$50 million problem. The fifteen-days-until-bankruptcy problem. The problem that made Manfred's hands shake when he thought about it too directly.

He stood and walked to the window, then immediately regretted it. The pressure in his bladder announced itself with familiar urgency. Thirteen times, then.

When he returned from the executive washroom—the one that didn't exist yet, the one Humphries was supposed to be arranging, in reality the common company restroom—Manfred stood in the middle of his office and admitted what he'd been avoiding all afternoon.

Something had happened to Humphries.

A car accident, perhaps. Another drunken episode. Another collapse into whatever private chaos the man inhabited when he wasn't pretending to be a Senior Account Executive.

Manfred picked up the phone and dialed the Securities Fraud Division.

"Newhouse," the voice answered on the second ring.

"Reginald, it's Manfred Young. From First American."

"Mr. Young." Reginald's tone was professionally neutral, which somehow made it worse. "What can I do for you?"

Manfred cleared his throat. "I was wondering if there were any... developments. Regarding the legal situation. The investigation into the company's... difficulties."

There was a pause. Manfred could hear papers shuffling on the other end.

"As a matter of fact," Reginald said slowly, "we've made significant progress today."

Manfred's heart began to pound. "Progress?"

"We've identified the source of the fraud," Reginald continued, his voice taking on the careful cadence of someone delivering rehearsed information. "An insider at First American has been running an insider-trading scheme for some time. We have substantial evidence pointing to the individual responsible for the collapse."

"Who?" Manfred whispered.

"Humphries Feelgood."

The name hung in the air like smoke.

Manfred sat down slowly. "Humphries?"

"Senior Account Executive, correct? Twenty-plus years with the company? Access to sensitive financial information, client portfolios, trading schedules?" Reginald's voice was smooth, factual, utterly convincing. "We have documentation showing a pattern of illegal trades coordinated through his position. Falsified records. Backdated transactions. The evidence is quite comprehensive."

Manfred's mind raced. Humphries. Loyal, drunk, incompetent Humphries. Humphries who couldn't remember what day it was half the time. Humphries who had just spent six hours trying to find someone to build a bathroom. Supposedly.

Humphries who Manfred had sent away this morning on a meaningless errand. Who had been conveniently absent all day while someone—Reginald, presumably—constructed an entire case against him.

"I see," Manfred said carefully.

"This solves several problems simultaneously," Reginald continued. "The federal investigation will have its culprit. The public will have an explanation for the company's difficulties. And First Ameri-

can can begin the process of recovery with a clear narrative about internal corruption being rooted out.”

Civilizations have always worked like this. When the temple needs cleansing, when the city needs purifying, when the accounts don’t balance and the gods are angry, we find a goat. We load it with our sins—the ones we committed, the ones we merely enabled, the ones we pretended not to see—and we drive it into the wilderness to die, or sacrifice it, whichever is the most beneficial way to proceed.

The ritual is as old as Leviticus, as old as the first priest who realized that guilt is transferable if you have enough authority. One man can absorb the corruption of an entire system. One name can explain away a thousand compromises. One sacrifice can purchase absolution for the many.

We call this justice. We call this accountability. We call this necessary.

What we don’t call it is wrong.

“Mr. Young?” Reginald’s voice cut through Manfred’s silence. “Are you still there?”

“Yes,” Manfred said. “I’m here.”

“Do you have any objections to this resolution?”

Manfred opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

He thought of Humphries arriving drunk this morning, nearly killing the tamale vendor. Humphries who had somehow understood about the washroom, who had smiled conspiratorially and promised to solve the problem. Humphries who was probably sitting in some contractor’s office right now, completely unaware that his life was being dismantled by men in suits who had never met him.

He thought of the company. Fifteen days until bankruptcy. Thousands of employees. His own position, his own power, his own carefully constructed empire of insurance policies and floral arrangements.

He thought of his enlarged prostate and the eleven—no, twelve—no, thirteen—trips to the bathroom today.

“Mr. Young?” Reginald repeated. “I need to know if you have any concerns about moving forward with this.”

Manfred looked at the clock. 4:53 PM. In seven minutes it would be five o'clock and he could go home. In fifteen days the company would either survive or collapse. In some unknown amount of time, Humphries Feelgood would be arrested for crimes he didn't commit, or even know about.

"No," Manfred heard himself say. "No concerns."

"Excellent. We'll coordinate with your legal team regarding the public announcement. I'd suggest early next week, before the media gets wind of the bankruptcy filing."

"Of course."

"Is there anything else?"

Manfred felt the familiar pressure in his bladder. Fourteen times.

"No," he said. "Nothing else."

He hung up the phone and sat very still.

Outside his window, the sun was setting over the parking lot where Humphries had nearly killed a man this morning. Where the red Porsche had passed by. Where everything had seemed, briefly, like it might be manageable.

Manfred stood and walked toward the bathroom, wondering if Humphries would ever finish building that executive washroom, and knowing with absolute certainty that he wouldn't.

Chapter 19

Humphries stood in George's doorway, gripping the frame with both hands while the world tilted at approximately fifteen degrees to the left.

George was saying something about two-by-fours and load-bearing walls, his voice coming from somewhere far away, like a radio station losing signal. Humphries nodded—or thought he nodded—and mumbled something that might have been “thank you” or might have been “bathroom” or might have been nothing at all.

His body felt wrong. Not drunk-wrong, which he knew intimately. This was different. His muscles had turned to water. His bones had forgotten their purpose. The epileptic seizure—though he didn't know that's what it had been—had left him hollowed out, a puppet with cut strings.

“You okay there, buddy?” George called after him.

Humphries waved without turning around. He needed air. He needed to get away from the television screens and George's relentless enthusiasm and the feeling that his skull was slowly separating from his spine. George turned and went back into his office, his television sets, his oblivion.

The parking lot stretched before Humphries like an ocean.

Humphries walked—stumbled, really—across the asphalt, each step requiring conscious negotiation with his legs. Left foot. Right foot. Don't fall. Left foot again. The sun was too bright. The air was too thick. His vision swam with afterimages of George's six television screens, all playing different programs, all demanding attention simultaneously.

He made it approximately forty feet before his body staged a complete rebellion.

His knees buckled. His hands reached for something that wasn't there. The pavement rushed up to meet him with the inevitability of gravity and the surprise of betrayal.

The impact was concrete and immediate—literally. His palms

scraped asphalt. His shoulder hit hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs. His cheek pressed against the warm parking lot surface, and he lay there, unable to move, staring at a discarded cigarette butt three inches from his nose.

This is how it ends, he thought distantly. Not in glory. Not in redemption. In a parking lot, face-down, defeated by his own nervous system, staring at a discarded cigarette butt.

Sheila Kowalski had been in her apartment looking out the window when she saw the man collapse.

She dropped everything and ran.

“Sir? Sir, can you hear me?” She knelt beside him, her hand on his shoulder, her mind already running through the checklist: breathing, pulse, color, responsiveness. Years of caring for her mother had taught her to assess medical emergencies with practiced efficiency.

The man was breathing. His pulse was rapid but steady. His color was pale but not blue. He was conscious—his eyes were open, blinking slowly at the cigarette butt.

“Sir, I’m going to help you up. Can you stand?”

Humphries made a sound that might have been yes.

Sheila got her shoulder under his arm and lifted. He was heavier than he looked, dead weight and confusion, but she’d lifted her mother countless times. She knew how to leverage her body, how to support someone who couldn’t support themselves.

“My apartment’s right here,” she said, guiding him toward the building. “We’ll get you sitting down. Get you some water.”

Humphries nodded. Or his head bobbed. It was hard to tell the difference.

Here is how fate works: through small kindnesses and mistaken assumptions. Through one person’s collapse becoming another’s opportunity for charity. Through the machinery of random chance that determines everything while pretending to determine nothing.

A man falls. A woman helps. The universe continues its indifferent rotation.

We call this coincidence. We call this luck. We call this the way things happen.

What we don't call it is inevitable.

Sheila's apartment was small and clean and smelled faintly of chicken soup. She guided Humphries to the couch—the same couch where her mother spent most days watching game shows—and eased him down.

"Just sit. Breathe. I'm going to get you some water."

Humphries sat. He breathed. He stared at the wall where a framed photograph showed a younger woman in a sequined costume, smiling with dimples that could stop traffic.

"Here." Sheila pressed a glass of water into his hands. "Drink this slowly."

He drank. The water was cold and real and helped anchor him to the present moment.

"What happened?" Sheila asked gently. "Did you feel chest pain? Tightness in your arm?"

Humphries shook his head. "I don't... I was watching television. Too many screens. I felt dizzy."

"You might have had a cardiac event. Or a stroke. We should call an ambulance."

"No." The word came out more forcefully than he intended. "No ambulance. I'm fine. Just need to rest."

Sheila frowned. She'd heard this before—her mother's stubborn refusal to seek help, the pride that insisted on suffering in silence.

"At least let me get you some aspirin. For your heart."

She disappeared into the bathroom before he could protest.

The medicine cabinet contained the usual debris of daily life: toothpaste, dental floss, expired cold medicine, Band-Aids. And in the back, in a small plastic container that Sheila didn't quite remember acquiring, two white pills. Two very small, white pills.

Aspirin, she assumed. Left over from some previous tenant or forgotten by a visiting friend. She'd been meaning to clean out the cabinet for months.

She brought them to Humphries with fresh water.

"Take these. They'll help with the blood flow."

Humphries looked at the pills. They looked like aspirin. Sort of.

They were white and round and pharmaceutical. But they were kind of small. He realized for some strange reason he trusted this woman who had helped him, who had brought him inside, who was treating him with more kindness than he'd experienced in recent memory. He swallowed both pills without question.

"Good," Sheila said, sitting beside him. "Just rest now. The medication will help."

Humphries sat very still, waiting for the aspirin to work.

After a few minutes, more than a few, actually, he felt something begin to happen. Not relief, exactly. Not improvement. Something else. A subtle shift in the quality of the light. A gentle loosening of the boundaries between himself and the couch.

The photograph on the wall—the woman with the dimples—seemed to shimmer slightly.

"Feeling better?" Sheila asked.

"Yes," Humphries said, though he wasn't sure that was the right word. "Better."

Sheila smiled, relieved. The man's color was returning. His breathing had steadied. Whatever had happened in the parking lot seemed to be passing.

Humphries stared at the photograph and felt the edges of reality begin to soften in ways he couldn't quite name.

He saw he was scratched up a bit from hitting the pavement, but nothing felt broken and he was not bleeding. Much. He realized he was alive and was feeling more alive by the minute. And it felt...wonderful.

Chapter 20

Marcus had been thinking about Thursday while he was driving.

Not this Thursday—next Thursday. The one where Florence Feelgood might or might not return for another massage appointment. The one where he might or might not have the courage to ask if she wanted to get coffee afterward. The one that existed only in potential, shimmering like a mirage in his calendar.

He was thinking about this so intently that he almost didn't see her.

Florence. Walking along the shoulder of the road near The Flatulent Goose, her posture rigid with determination, her sensible shoes clicking against gravel with each step.

Marcus hit the brakes harder than necessary. His Honda Civic lurched to a stop twenty feet past her. He threw it in reverse, heart hammering with the kind of panic that accompanies unexpected opportunity.

It is exactly in this way the universe arranges its accidents—through timing and geography, through broken-down Volvos and massage therapists driving home early; through the collision of separate narratives that have no business intersecting.

We call this coincidence. We call this fate. We call this Thursday coming early.

"Mrs. Feelgood?"

Florence turned, startled. The massage therapist—Marcus, she remembered—was leaning out of his car window, his expression somewhere between concern and confusion.

"Oh," Florence said, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. "Hello."

"Are you... walking somewhere?" Marcus gestured at the empty road stretching in both directions, the obvious absence of destination coming into focus.

"My car broke down." Florence pointed vaguely behind her, toward where the Volvo sat abandoned like a beached whale. "I was

trying to find a phone. Or help. Or—” She stopped, realizing she didn’t actually know what she’d been trying to find.

Marcus pulled onto the shoulder and got out. He was wearing jeans and a faded t-shirt that read “MASSAGE THERAPY: WE’LL WORK OUT YOUR ISSUES.” Florence found herself staring at it, wondering if the double meaning was intentional.

“I can give you a ride,” Marcus said. “Or we can look at your car. I’m not much of a mechanic, but I know how to check basic things.”

“I don’t want to impose—”

“You’re not imposing. I’m offering.”

There was a moment of silence where they both stood on the shoulder of the road, two people who barely knew each other, negotiating the social mathematics of assistance and obligation.

Florence was about to accept his offer when she heard the distinctive growl of a high-performance engine.

Lawrence’s red Porsche appeared around the bend like a mechanical sunset, all gleaming paint and gold wheels catching the afternoon light. It slowed, pulled behind Marcus’s Honda, and stopped with the precision of someone who’d parallel parked in Monaco.

The driver’s door opened. Lawrence stepped out, immaculate in black, his cobalt eyes scanning the scene with aristocratic concern.

The passenger door opened. Eileen emerged, her athletic frame unfolding from the low seat, her expression shifting from confusion to recognition to something approaching horror.

“Florence?” Eileen said.

“Eileen?” Florence said.

Marcus looked between them. “You know each other?”

The absurdity of the moment arranged itself like a stage play: three would-be rescuers, one stranded woman, and the weight of unspoken complications pressing down on all of them like atmospheric pressure before a storm.

Lawrence, who had just spent an hour experiencing sexual attraction to a woman for the first time in his life, now faced that woman’s best friend on the side of a road.

Eileen, who had just abandoned over twenty-five years of lesbian

certainty for lunch with a man, now stood before the friend she'd been lecturing about male worthlessness for nearly two decades.

Marcus, who knew none of this context, simply saw three people who seemed to know each other and wondered why everyone looked like they'd been caught stealing.

Florence, caffeinated and clarity-seeking and utterly unprepared for this convergence, felt the universe collapse into a single point of excruciating social geometry.

"Your car is still broken down," Lawrence stated, his voice smooth and genuinely concerned.

"Yes," Florence managed.

"We can help," Eileen said quickly. Too quickly. "Lawrence has—he knows about cars. European cars. Volvos are European."

"Swedish," Marcus corrected automatically, then looked embarrassed for correcting.

"Right. Swedish." Eileen shot him a look that could have curdled milk.

Lawrence walked toward Florence with the easy grace of someone accustomed to solving problems with money and charm. "Let's go back to the vehicle. I'll take a look." Lawrence started walking, then paused and turned back to Eileen. "Coming?"

Eileen hesitated. She looked at Florence. Florence looked at her. Over twenty-five years of friendship compressed into a single glance that said: We need to talk about this. We need to talk about all of this. We need to talk about why you're with a man and I'm walking down a road and everything is falling apart.

"I'll stay with Florence," Eileen said.

Lawrence nodded and continued toward the Volvo, leaving the three of them standing in awkward formation on the shoulder.

Marcus cleared his throat. "So. You two are friends?"

"Yes," Florence said.

"Best friends," Eileen added, with an edge that suggested the definition was currently under review.

"That's nice." Marcus shifted his weight. "I was just offering Mrs. Feelgood a ride when you pulled up."

"Mrs. Feelgood?" Eileen's eyebrows rose. "You know Florence?"

"She's a client. At the spa. I'm a massage therapist."

Eileen's expression shifted through several emotions in rapid succession: surprise, suspicion, calculation, and finally something that looked like vindication. "Florence gets massages?"

"Just started," Florence said defensively. "You're the one who suggested I do something for myself."

"I suggested you leave your husband, not get rubbed down by—" Eileen stopped herself, glancing at Marcus. "Sorry. No offense."

"None taken," Marcus said, though his tone suggested some was definitely taken.

Florence felt something shift inside her, again. The caffeine. The broken car. The discovery of Eileen with Lawrence. The massage therapist appearing like a guardian angel. The sheer accumulated absurdity of the day.

"You're with a man," she said to Eileen.

The words hung in the air like an accusation.

Eileen's face went through a complicated series of expressions. "It's not—this isn't—"

"You have spent over twenty-five years telling me men were worthless. That Humphries was worthless. That I should leave him and discover myself and stop living in chains." Florence's voice was rising. "And now you're with a man. A man in a Porsche. A man who looks like he stepped out of a cologne advertisement."

"It's complicated," Eileen said weakly.

"Is it?" Florence turned to Marcus. "Is it complicated when someone spends years giving advice they don't follow themselves?"

Marcus held up his hands. "I really don't think I should be part of this conversation."

"No," Florence agreed. "You shouldn't. None of us should be having this conversation on the side of a road while a stranger looks at my car."

Lawrence returned, wiping his hands on a handkerchief that probably cost more than Marcus's car payment.

"The alternator's dead," he announced. "You'll need a tow."

"I'll call someone," Florence said.

"I have AAA," Marcus offered.

"I can arrange a tow," Lawrence said. "And a loaner vehicle. My family has an account with—"

"I don't need your family's account," Florence interrupted. "I don't need any of this. I just need—"

She stopped, realizing she didn't know how to finish the sentence.

What did she need? A working car? A coherent best friend? A husband who wasn't Humphries? A massage therapist who didn't look at her with such earnest concern? A world that made sense?

The four of them stood in a rough circle on the shoulder of the road, bound together by circumstance and broken machinery and the terrible weight of things left unsaid.

"I'll take the AAA option," Florence said finally. "Thank you, Marcus."

Eileen opened her mouth to protest, then closed it.

Lawrence nodded, accepting the decision with aristocratic grace.

Marcus pulled out his phone, grateful for something practical to do.

And Florence stood very still, wondering how a simple decision to drink black coffee had led to this moment—stranded on a roadside, surrounded by people who wanted to help her, and feeling more lost than she'd ever felt in her life.

Chapter 21

Lawrence's Porsche pulled away from the shoulder with the kind of mechanical precision that suggested its driver was desperately grateful for something to control.

Eileen sat in the passenger seat, her athletic frame rigid against the leather, watching the landscape blur past. Neither of them had spoken since leaving Florence and Marcus standing on the side of the road beside the dead Volvo.

"Your car's at the business condos," Lawrence said finally. "Where my cousin George works."

"I know." Eileen's voice was tight. "I left it running."

Lawrence glanced at her, one eyebrow raised. "Running?"

"I was... distracted."

Again, here is how we perform as ourselves every day: through careful curation of gesture and speech, through the maintenance of consistent narrative, through the daily repetition of who we claim to be.

We are lesbians. We are gay men. We are married women. We are massage therapists. We are wealthy heirs. We say these things so often that we forget they are performances—until the day someone walks onto our stage and we discover we've been reading from the wrong script entirely.

This is called identity crisis. This is called being human. This is called Thursday afternoon in a red Porsche.

"I've never been attracted to a woman before," Lawrence said quietly.

The words hung in the air between them like a confession at a funeral.

Eileen turned to look at him. His profile was perfect—aristocratic nose, strong jaw, those impossible cobalt eyes focused on the road ahead.

"I've never been attracted to a man before."

“Never?”

“Not once. Not ever. Not until—” She stopped.

“Until lunch,” Lawrence finished.

They drove on in silence. The Porsche’s engine purred with expensive contentment, oblivious to the existential chaos occurring within its cabin.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Eileen said.

“Neither do I.”

“I spent over twenty-five years telling Florence that men were worthless.”

“Are we?” Lawrence asked. “Worthless?”

Eileen considered this. “I don’t know anymore. You’re certainly not helping my argument.”

Lawrence laughed—a genuine, surprised sound that seemed to startle him as much as it did her. “I’ve spent my entire adult life being ‘Bunny’ to a succession of lovers who all looked remarkably similar. Tall. Athletic. Male.”

“And now?”

“And now I’m driving a woman to retrieve her car and wondering if I’ve been lying to myself for all of those years.”

The business condos appeared ahead, their bland architecture a monument to commercial pragmatism. Lawrence pulled into the parking lot and immediately spotted Eileen’s car—still parked where she’d left it, no longer running.

George emerged from his office as they pulled up, holding a set of keys and wearing an expression of mild confusion that seemed to be his default setting.

He called out, “Your car’s been here all afternoon. I turned it off. Thought maybe you’d been raptured or something.”

Lawrence and Eileen exchanged a glance that contained seventeen layers of meaning, none of which George would ever comprehend.

“Thanks,” Eileen said, climbing out of the Porsche with as much dignity as she could muster. “I was... having lunch.”

“For four hours?” George looked between Eileen and Lawrence,

his expression shifting from confusion to something approaching understanding. “Oh. Lunch lunch.”

“It’s not—” Eileen started.

“We were just—” Lawrence tried.

George held up his hands. “Hey, none of my business. Though I gotta say, cuz, didn’t know you were into the athletic type.” He winked at Eileen. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Eileen said, though her tone suggested considerable offense had been taken.

Lawrence stood beside his Porsche, watching this exchange with the expression of a man who’d wandered into someone else’s play and couldn’t find the exit. His cousin George—large, jovial, completely oblivious to subtext—was treating this like a normal romantic encounter. Which, Lawrence supposed, it was.

Except it wasn’t. Except maybe it was.

George tossed Eileen her keys. “Anyway, car should be fine. You didn’t leave it running long enough to flood anything.”

“Thanks,” Eileen said again.

George nodded and started back toward his office, then paused. “Oh, hey, Lawrence—there was a guy here earlier. I think he passed out in the parking lot. Or, I think he might have. Some woman dragged him into her apartment. Thought maybe you’d know something about it, what with all the weird stuff happening today.”

Lawrence shook his head. “No idea.”

“Huh. Well, anyway. You kids have fun.” George disappeared back into his office, leaving Lawrence and Eileen standing in the parking lot, separated by ten feet of asphalt and the weight of everything they didn’t know how to say.

“I should go,” Eileen said.

“Yes.”

“Florence is probably—”

“Yes.”

Neither of them moved.

“Will I see you again?” Lawrence asked.

Eileen looked at him—really looked at him—and felt something

shift that she didn't have words for. "I don't know."

"That's honest."

"It's all I have right now."

Lawrence nodded. He wanted to say something profound, something that would make sense of this impossible afternoon, but all he could manage was, "Thank you for lunch."

"Thank you for the wine."

They stood there another moment, two people who had no business being attracted to each other, who had violated every principle of their carefully constructed identities, who had discovered that desire doesn't care about your sexual orientation or your over twenty-five years of consistent messaging. It simply doesn't care.

Then Eileen got in her car and drove away, and Lawrence stood in the parking lot wondering who the hell he was.

* * * * *

Marcus ended the call with AAA and turned to Florence. "Forty-five minutes."

"Thank you." Florence sat on the guardrail, her sensible shoes planted firmly on the gravel shoulder. "I'm sorry you got dragged into all this."

"I'm not." Marcus sat beside her, maintaining a respectful distance. "Though I have to admit, I'm curious about the context."

Florence laughed—a sharp, bitter sound. "The context is that my best friend spent years telling me to leave my husband, that men are evil, and I just discovered her having lunch with a man."

"Ah."

"She's a lesbian. Or was. Or—I don't know what she is anymore."

Marcus was quiet for a moment. "People are complicated."

"That's a generous interpretation."

"Maybe. Or maybe people don't know themselves as well as they think they do." He paused. "I spent ten years in a marriage that looked perfect from the outside. House in the suburbs. Two cars. Dinner parties. The whole performance."

Florence turned to look at him. "What happened?"

"I woke up one day and realized I was merely performing. That I'd been performing for so long I'd forgotten what it felt like to be real." He shrugged. "So I stopped."

"Just like that?"

"No. Not just like that. It took another couple of years of therapy and crying and figuring out who I actually was underneath all the expectations." Marcus looked at her. "But eventually, yes. I stopped performing."

There is a particular brand of loneliness that comes from being seen. Not looked at—seen.

When someone perceives not just your performance but the terrified actor beneath it, when they recognize the gap between who you claim to be and who you actually are, when they witness your contradictions and don't immediately flee.

This is intimacy. This is vulnerability.

This is what Florence felt sitting on a guardrail beside a massage therapist who had no reason to care about her existential crisis.

"I drank black coffee today," Florence said. "For the first time in my life. No cream, or milk, or sugar."

Marcus smiled. "How was it?"

"Terrible. Bitter. Harsh." She paused. "Clarifying."

"And what did it clarify?"

"That I've been living someone else's life. That my marriage is a performance I never auditioned for. That I don't know who I am without Humphries, but I know I can't keep being who I've been."

The words hung in the air between them, honest and raw and terrifying.

"So what happens next?" Marcus asked gently.

"I have no idea." Florence looked at him. "Is that okay? To not know?"

"It's the only honest place to start."

They sat in silence, watching the occasional car pass. The afternoon sun slanted across the road, turning everything golden and temporary.

The AAA truck appeared around the bend, its yellow lights flashing with mechanical efficiency.

Marcus stood and helped Florence to her feet. Their hands touched briefly—a moment of contact that felt both accidental and inevitable.

“I work Thursdays,” Marcus said as the truck pulled onto the shoulder. “If you want to keep your appointment.”

Florence looked at him—this kind man who had appeared exactly when she needed someone to see her—and felt something inside her come alive.

“I’d like that,” she said.

And for the first time in her life, Florence Feelgood meant exactly what she said.

Chapter 22

The walls were breathing.

Not metaphorically. Not in the way people say “the room felt alive.” No, the walls of Sheila’s apartment were actually breathing—expanding and contracting with a rhythm that matched something deep inside Humphries’ chest, something he’d never noticed before but now seemed impossibly obvious to him.

He sat on the couch where Sheila had left him, watching the plaster inhale and exhale.

An hour had passed since he’d swallowed what Sheila called aspirin. Or maybe it had been forty minutes. Or four hours. Time had become a substance rather than a sequence—thick and golden like honey, pooling in the corners of the room.

The photograph on the wall—Wanda’s photograph—was no longer just a photograph.

It was alive.

Not moving, exactly. But present. Hyper-present. Every detail magnified to impossible clarity: the texture of her skin, the exact curve of her smile, the way light caught in her hair. Humphries could see individual strands. He could see the molecules of silver halide suspended in the photographic emulsion. He could see through the paper to the wall behind it, and through the wall to the apartment next door, and through that apartment to the parking lot where his Dodge Dart sat baking in the late afternoon sun.

“Dimples,” he whispered.

His voice sounded strange—like it was coming from somewhere outside his body, echoing back to him through layers of atmosphere.

Sheila appeared in his peripheral vision, her face creased with concern. “Mister? Are you okay?”

“The walls,” Humphries said, gesturing vaguely. “They’re breathing.”

“What?”

“Can’t you see them? They’re breathing. Everything’s breathing. You’re breathing. I’m breathing. The couch is breathing.” He looked down at his hands. They seemed very far away, attached to his arms by threads of light. “Are these my hands? They’re breathing, too.”

Sheila knelt in front of him, peering into his face. Her pupils were normal-sized, dark and worried. His pupils, he somehow knew without seeing them, were enormous black pools that had swallowed his irises entirely.

“Your eyes,” Sheila said. “Jesus, your eyes are—”

“Dilated,” Humphries finished. The word felt important. Clinical. A word from the world of normal reality, which now seemed impossibly distant. “I think something’s wrong with the aspirin.”

“What do you mean something’s wrong with the—” Sheila stopped. Her face went pale. “Oh, God. Oh, God. Those weren’t aspirin!”

“What were they?”

“I don’t know—I found them in the medicine cabinet when I moved in. I thought they were—” She stood abruptly, rushing to the bathroom. Humphries heard her rummaging through the cabinet, heard her say “fuck” three times in rapid succession.

She returned holding an empty pill bottle, her hands shaking.

“These weren’t aspirin,” she said. “These were—I think these were—”

“LSD,” Humphries said calmly. The word arrived in his consciousness fully formed, certain. “I’m on LSD.”

Sheila stared at him. “How do you know that?” suddenly realizing the previous tenant had been a paroled chemist and pharmacist.

“Because everything makes sense now. I know everything that needs to be known.” Humphries looked at Wanda’s photograph again. She was smiling at him. Not the frozen smile of a photograph—a real smile, warm and knowing. “I’ve been performing my whole life. Did you know that? Performing being Humphries. But here’s the catch, I don’t know who Humphries is. I never did.”

A moment like this is what happens when the carefully constructed self encounters a substance that dissolves boundaries: The

ego—that persistent narrator who insists “I am this, I am that, I have always been thus”—begins to fragment. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are reveal themselves as stories, nothing more. They are nothing more than masks we wear fused to our faces until we forget we’re wearing them.

Until we take two tablets of LSD thinking they’re aspirin. Small aspirin, in hindsight.

Then the masks begin to melt. The boundaries between self and other, between past and present, between memory and hallucination—all of it becomes fluid. Permeable. This is terrifying. This is also, occasionally, clarifying.

This is what Humphries Feelgood was experiencing on Sheila’s couch while his wife sat on a roadside with a massage therapist and his Dodge Dart baked in the parking lot outside.

“I need to call someone,” Sheila said, her voice tight with panic. “An ambulance. Or—”

“No.” Humphries held up a hand. It left trails of light in the air. “No ambulances. No hospitals. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re—”

“I’m seeing clearly for the first time in my life.”

Humphries stood, surprised to find his legs still worked. The floor rippled beneath his feet like water. “I married Florence because my father told me to. I work at First American because I’m supposed to. I drink because I can’t stand being Humphries. But who is Humphries? Who am I without the performance?”

Sheila backed toward the door. “You need to sit down. You need to—”

“I need to find Wanda,” Humphries said.

The name hung in the air between them, shimmering with significance.

“Who?” Sheila asked.

Humphries pointed at the photograph. “Her. The woman with the dimples. The only real thing that ever happened to me.”

Sheila followed his gaze to the photograph on the wall—the photograph of her mother, young and beautiful, before life left her disabled and dependent.

"That's my mother," Sheila said quietly.

Humphries turned to look at her. The room spun gently, colors bleeding into each other like watercolors. "Your mother?"

"She lives with me. I take care of her."

The information processed slowly through Humphries' altered consciousness. Wanda. Here. Separated by nothing but a wall and the distance of his own paralyzed obsession.

"She's here?" he whispered.

"She's disabled. She can't—you can't just—" Sheila moved to block the door. "You need to stay here. You need to let this wear off."

But Humphries was already moving toward the door, drawn by a gravity he couldn't name. Twenty-five years of obsession, of comparing every woman to a memory, of defining his entire emotional life around a single encounter—and she was in the same building, separated only by walls and his own cowardice.

"I need to see her," he said.

"No," Sheila said firmly. "You're hallucinating. You're not in your right mind. You need to—"

Humphries stopped, swaying slightly. The walls pulsed. The floor undulated. Wanda's photograph smiled at him from across the room.

"I've never been in my right mind," he said. "That's the problem."

* * * * *

Eileen drove away from the business condos with her hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles had gone white. What the hell had just happened?

She'd spent years telling Florence that men were worthless. Years preaching the gospel of female independence and lesbian identity. Years being absolutely certain about who she was and what she wanted.

And then Lawrence Mathews III had smiled at her from a red Porsche and her entire identity had shattered like glass.

She could still feel the ghost of his presence—the way he'd looked at her across the table at The Flatulent Goose, the impossible bulge

in his pants that she'd noticed and couldn't stop thinking about, the gentle confusion in his voice when he'd said "I've never been attracted to a woman before."

Neither had she been attracted to a man. Until today. Until lunch. Until—

Eileen's thoughts stopped abruptly as she passed the business condos parking lot and saw it: Humphries' distinctive Dodge Dart.

She slowed, staring at the car.

It had been there the whole time. Through lunch. Through the wine. Through the moment when Lawrence had nearly spit Chardonnay across the table. Through her discovery by Florence. Through everything.

Why was Humphries' car here?

Eileen pulled over, her mind racing. She'd been so consumed by her own crisis—by Lawrence, by her shattered identity, by Florence's accusation of hypocrisy—that she hadn't thought about Humphries at all.

But now, looking at his car baking in the late afternoon sun, something nagged at her.

Concern. Actual, genuine concern for a man she'd spent over twenty-five years telling Florence to leave.

This is the contradiction at the heart of human relationships: we perform hatred for people we secretly care about. We preach abandonment while harboring concern. We spend years criticizing someone's husband while simultaneously worrying when his car sits in a strange parking lot.

This is called cognitive dissonance. This is called being human. This is called discovering that your stated values and your actual feelings exist in different universes entirely.

Eileen turned the car around.

She pulled back into the business condos parking lot and parked beside Humphries' Dodge. The car was locked, empty. No sign of him.

She walked to George's office and knocked. George appeared, holding a remote control and looking mildly annoyed at the interruption.

“Forget something?”

“Humphries,” she said. “The guy who was here earlier. The one who collapsed on your couch. Where did he go?”

George shrugged. “No idea. He was pretty out of it. Sweating, mumbling about dimples and television. I left him on the couch to rest and when I came back he was gone.”

“Gone where?”

“Didn’t see. Figured he went home.” George, in his absentminded state, gestured at the Dodge. “But I guess not, since his car’s still here.”

Eileen looked around the parking lot. George’s office. The apartment building adjacent to it. The business condos stretching in a bland row.

“The apartments,” she said. “Could he have gone to one of the apartments?”

“Maybe? There’s only a few units occupied. Sheila lives in 2-C with her mom, where the mad chemist used to live. Man, that guy sure could make some powerful and fast acting chemicals. LSD, MDMA, DMT, you name it, he could make it. Moved out west is what I was told. Oh, and some guy in 3-A who I never see. That’s about it.”

Eileen walked toward the apartment building entrance, her heart beating faster than it should. She stood at the door, hand on the handle, and realized she had a choice to make. She could leave. Just drive away. Let Humphries deal with whatever crisis he was having. After all, she’d spent years telling Florence he was worthless. Why should she care if he was collapsed in some stranger’s apartment?

But she did care. Despite everything. Despite her principles. Despite her performance. She cared.

Eileen went toward 2-C, wondering what the hell she was doing and knowing with absolute certainty that she wouldn’t stop.

Chapter 23

Lawrence drove the red Porsche through the gates of the family estate with none of his usual precision. He'd scraped the left fender against the stone pillar—something he hadn't done since he was fifteen and learning to drive.

The house loomed ahead, all Georgian columns and inherited wealth, looking exactly as it had every day of his life. But Lawrence felt like he was seeing it through someone else's eyes. Everything familiar had become strange.

He found Amelia in her parlor, still holding the teacup Pierce had drunk from hours earlier.

"Bunny," she said, using the nickname only she was permitted to use, outside of his gay lovers. "You look terrible."

Lawrence collapsed into the chair across from her, his usual elegance abandoned. "I think I'm having a nervous breakdown."

"What happened?"

"I met someone." The words came out strangled. "At a stoplight. She was in the car next to me and I—Amelia, I invited her to lunch."

"That's lovely," Amelia said carefully. "Why is that a breakdown?"

"Because she's a woman."

Amelia set down her teacup. "I see."

"She was glowing, Amelia. Like she was on fire but not burning. I couldn't stop looking at her. I missed three gear shifts driving her to the restaurant. Three. I've been driving since I was fifteen and I've never missed a gear shift in my life."

Lawrence stood and paced to the window, staring out at the manicured grounds without seeing them.

"I'm gay," he said to the glass. "I've always been gay. I've never been attracted to a woman. Not once. Not ever. And then this—this Eileen appears and suddenly I don't know who I am anymore."

"Eileen," Amelia repeated softly.

"She's a lesbian. She told me. She's never been attracted to men.

We sat across from each other at The Flatulent Goose and it was like—” He turned back to face his sister. “It was like everything I thought I knew about myself was just a story I’d been telling. For years and years. And then the story stopped making sense.”

Amelia watched her brother with an expression Lawrence couldn’t quite read. Sympathy, certainly. But something else. Recognition, perhaps.

“I understand,” she said.

“Do you?” Lawrence’s voice cracked slightly. “Because I don’t. I don’t understand anything anymore.”

Here is what happens when identity reveals itself as performance. What we have been talking of all along. We spend our lives constructing narratives about who we are: I am this. I am not that. I have always been thus. These stories become so familiar we mistake them for truth. Until someone appears who doesn’t fit the narrative. Until we feel something we’re not supposed to feel. Until the story we’ve been telling collapses under the weight of actual experience.

This is cognitive dissonance. This is being human. This is discovering that the self is more fluid than we ever imagined possible.

“I do understand,” Amelia said quietly. “Because I, too, am in love.”

Lawrence stopped pacing. “What?”

“With Pierce. The investigator who came this morning.” Amelia’s face softened in a way Lawrence had never seen before. “He kissed my hand when he left. It was the most chaste, gentlemanly gesture imaginable. And I felt it everywhere.”

“Pierce Williams? The man investigating us?”

“Yes.” Amelia stood and walked to where her brother stood frozen. “I’ve lived my entire life in this house, Lawrence. Managing your affairs. Serving as your front. Playing the role of the respectable older sister while you built your fortune through trades I pretended to make. You know, I’ve never had anything of my own. Not really.”

She touched Lawrence’s arm gently.

“And then this man appeared. This kind, careful man who looked at me like I was real. Not a front. Not a performance. Just real.” Her

voice caught. “He said everything appeared to be on the up and up. He’s closing the investigation. He’s protecting us.”

Lawrence stared at his sister, seeing her truly for perhaps the first time in years.

“We’re quite a pair,” he said finally.

“Yes,” Amelia agreed. “We are.”

They stood together in the parlor, two people who had spent their lives performing roles they’d inherited, discovering that underneath the performance were actual human beings capable of actual human feeling.

Neither of them knew that Pierce’s protection had come at a terrible price.

Neither of them knew that an innocent man was being framed to save them.

They only knew that they were, for the first time in their carefully constructed lives, genuinely vulnerable.

* * * * *

Pierce sat in a bar called The Copper Still, three blocks from the Securities Fraud office, staring at the folder beside his whiskey glass.

The folder contained fabricated evidence against Humphries Feelgood.

The whiskey contained nothing but whiskey, which was somehow worse.

“Another?” the bartender asked, a tired-looking man in his fifties who’d seen enough damaged people to know when to ask and when to stay silent.

“Yes,” Pierce said.

The bartender poured. Pierce drank.

The bar was nearly empty—just Pierce, an old man reading a newspaper at the far end, and a couple having a quiet argument in a corner booth. The kind of place where people came to avoid being seen.

Pierce had chosen it deliberately.

He looked at the folder again. Inside were bank statements, transaction records, email correspondence—all of it meticulously forged by Reginald's team. All of it pointing to Humphries Feelgood as the architect of First American's collapse.

Humphries Feelgood, who Pierce had never met. Humphries Feelgood, who was innocent. Humphries Feelgood, whose life Pierce was going to destroy to protect a woman he'd known for less than four hours.

I was an orphan, Pierce thought, the whiskey making his internal monologue more honest than he wanted. I had nothing. No family. No connection. Fifty years of careful isolation to protect myself from being hurt again.

And then Amelia looked at me with those eyes and I felt something I'd never felt before. I felt seen.

The rationalization was elegant. Almost convincing. Pierce had spent his entire life alone, protecting himself from vulnerability. Amelia had offered him the first genuine human connection he'd experienced since Sir John Hapscomb died. How could he sacrifice that? How could he choose abstract justice over concrete love?

But underneath the rationalization ran a current of self-loathing so strong it made the whiskey taste like poison.

He thought about Humphries. Tried to imagine the man. Probably middle-aged. Probably ordinary. Probably had a wife, maybe children. Probably woke up this morning with no idea that his entire life was about to be destroyed by a securities investigator who'd fallen in love with the wrong woman.

"You okay?" the bartender asked.

"No," Pierce said honestly.

The bartender nodded and moved away, recognizing a man who needed to be left alone with his choices.

Pierce drank his whiskey and stared at the folder and knew with absolute certainty that he would do it again. That's what made it unforgivable. Not the act itself, but the knowledge that given the same choice—Amelia or integrity—he would choose Amelia every time.

Love, it turned out, was not noble. Love was not pure. Love was

the thing that made you betray everything you claimed to believe in and then drink whiskey in a dim bar while pretending you had no choice.

Pierce ordered another drink and wondered if Humphries Feel-good drank whiskey, too.

He hoped not. He hoped the man he was destroying at least had the dignity of sobriety. But he knew that was a foolish hope.

* * * * *

Manfred Young stood at his office window, watching the parking lot empty as employees fled for the weekend. Humphries' Dodge Dart was not there.

Manfred had tried calling him four times. No answer. He'd sent two emails. Nothing. The washroom project—his beautiful, secret washroom project—had vanished along with Humphries himself.

His bladder ached. The familiar pressure that had become the defining sensation of his existence.

Manfred walked to his executive bathroom—well, the public one, the one he shared with everyone else—and relieved himself while staring at the institutional tile and fluorescent lighting.

Fifteen days, he thought. Fifteen days to find fifty million dollars or this company collapses entirely.

He washed his hands and looked at himself in the mirror. Sixty-three years old. Chairman of the Board. Master of a sinking ship.

When he returned to his office, he paused at the photograph on his wall—the founding of First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company, 1952. Young men in suits, full of optimism and post-war confidence, believing they were building something that would last forever.

Flowers and life insurance. It had seemed like such a natural combination at the time.

Manfred touched the frame gently, then gathered his briefcase and coat.

His phone buzzed. A text from Reginald Newhouse at Securities

Fraud: Matter resolved. Details Monday. Company protected.

Manfred stared at the message, not understanding but feeling a sudden, unexpected relief. Protected. The company was protected.

Manfred turned off his office light and walked to the elevator, his bladder already aching again, thinking that maybe—just maybe—that executive washroom Humphries had promised might actually get built after all. But not by Humphries. No. He was going to jail. To take the fall. To preserve the company. His executive washroom would be built by someone else. And it would be built with blood money.

He knew that to be true and he knew that he was tired, and his prostate hurt, and he wanted to go home.

The elevator doors closed and Manfred descended, leaving behind an empty office and a company saved by a lie and the destruction of a loyal man.

Chapter 24

The AAA tow truck arrived with the punctuality of institutional competence—exactly twenty-three minutes after Marcus’s call, pulling onto the shoulder with amber lights rotating in the late afternoon sun.

The driver was a man in his forties named Dale who had towed approximately eleven thousand vehicles in his career and had learned to assess situations with the efficiency of a trauma surgeon. He glanced at the Volvo, glanced at Florence standing beside Marcus, and knew immediately this was a straightforward alternator failure requiring no drama.

“1992 240?” Dale asked, already filling out paperwork on a clipboard.

“I guess,” Florence said.

“Alternator’s shot. Classic symptom—dies while driving, won’t restart. I’ll take her to Swedish Motors on Riverside. They’re good with Volvos. Should have her back to you Monday, Tuesday latest.”

Florence nodded, watching as Dale efficiently hooked the Volvo to his truck with the practiced movements of someone who had performed this exact sequence thousands of times. The car lifted, tilted, and became cargo rather than transportation.

Marcus stood beside her, hands in his pockets, saying nothing.

Within minutes the Volvo was secured and Dale was climbing back into his cab.

“You need a ride somewhere?” he asked Florence through the window.

“I’ve got her,” Marcus said before Florence could answer.

Dale nodded, shifted into gear, and pulled away with Florence’s car trailing behind like a captured animal.

They stood together on the shoulder watching the tow truck disappear around the bend.

“So,” Marcus said finally. “Where to?”

When our infrastructure fails we realize we have built our lives

on systems we never think about until they stop working. Cars. Electricity. Plumbing. Marriage.

These systems create the illusion of permanence. We believe they will always function because they have always functioned. We forget that everything mechanical eventually breaks down. And when the breakdown comes, we are forced to accept help from strangers. We are forced to acknowledge our dependence. We are forced to recognize that the self-sufficient life we imagined we lived was only a mere mirage sustained by invisible labor and functional machinery.

This is called humility. This is also called being human. This is also called the moment when Florence Feelgood got into Marcus's car and allowed herself to be driven home by a man who was not her husband.

Marcus's car was a ten-year-old Honda Accord, clean but lived-in, with a massage therapy certification hanging from the rearview mirror and a collection of classical music CDs in the center console.

Florence settled into the passenger seat. "Where do you live?" Marcus asked, pulling onto the road.

Florence gave him the address—the suburban development she'd inhabited for twenty-two years, the house with the guest room and the carpet indentations and the marriage that had finally revealed itself as empty.

Marcus nodded and drove.

They were silent for the first few minutes, the kind of silence that wasn't uncomfortable but wasn't quite comfortable either. The silence of two people who had shared an unexpected intimacy and were now navigating what came after.

"Thank you," Florence said finally. "For stopping. For helping."

"Of course," Marcus said. "I couldn't just drive past."

"Most people would have."

"Most people aren't paying attention."

Florence looked at him—his profile calm and focused on the road, his hands relaxed on the steering wheel. There was something fundamentally decent about Marcus that had nothing to do with performance or social obligation. He had stopped because stopping was the right thing to do.

“Can I ask you something?” Florence said.

“Sure.”

“When you work with people—when you do massage therapy—do you ever feel like you’re seeing past their acting? Like you’re touching the actual person underneath all the roles they play?”

Marcus was quiet for a moment, considering.

“Yes,” he said finally. “All the time. Bodies don’t lie the way words do. You can feel where someone holds their tension. Where they’ve been hurt. Where they’re protecting themselves.”

“And what did you feel when you worked with me?”

Marcus glanced at her, then back at the road.

“I felt someone who’s been holding herself very carefully for a very long time,” he said. “Someone who’s afraid that if she lets go, everything will fall apart.”

Florence felt something catch in her throat.

“What if it does fall apart?” she asked quietly.

“Then you build something new,” Marcus said. “Something that’s actually yours.”

They drove through the suburban streets, past the identical houses and manicured lawns, past the infrastructure of middle-class American life that Florence had inhabited without question for over two decades.

“I told Humphries I’m leaving him,” Florence said suddenly. “This morning. Before I left the house.”

Marcus didn’t react with surprise or judgment. He simply nodded.

“How did that feel?” he asked.

“Terrifying,” Florence admitted. “And also—” she paused, searching for the word. “Necessary. Like I’d been holding my breath for twenty-two years and I finally exhaled.”

“That’s good,” Marcus said. “That’s really good.”

They pulled into Florence’s neighborhood, the familiar streets that had always felt like safety and now felt like a cage she was preparing to leave.

“I have an appointment with you Thursday,” Florence said as Marcus turned onto her street. “At least, I think I do. I didn’t cancel it.”

“You do,” Marcus confirmed. “Two o’clock.”

“I’d like to keep it,” Florence said, and the way she said it made clear she wasn’t just talking about massage therapy.

Marcus pulled into her driveway and put the car in park. He turned to look at her fully.

“Florence,” he said carefully. “I want you to know that whatever you decide—about your marriage, about your life—I’m not trying to influence that. I’m not trying to be anything other than someone who sees you.”

“I know,” Florence said. “That’s why I want to keep the appointment.”

She opened the door and stepped out, then leaned back in.

“Thank you, Marcus. For everything.”

“See you Thursday,” he said.

Florence closed the door and walked toward her house—the house she’d lived in for twenty-two years, the house she was preparing to leave, the house that suddenly felt less like home and more like a museum of a life she’d outgrown.

Behind her, Marcus’s Honda pulled away, carrying with it the possibility of something genuine in a world built on acting.

* * * * *

Wanda heard the commotion. At first she thought it was the television—Sheila sometimes left it on when she went to work, tuned to one of those daytime talk shows where people screamed at each other about paternity tests and betrayal.

But this wasn’t television. This was real sound. Real disturbance. Someone was in Sheila’s apartment. Someone was moving around, bumping into furniture, making the kind of noises that suggested either crisis or intoxication or both.

Wanda sat in her wheelchair by the window, the afternoon light slanting across her lap, and listened. A man’s voice. Slurred. Confused. Saying something about dimples and walls breathing and Wanda.

He was saying her name. Wanda.

She felt a recognition so old it had calcified into scar tissue.

“Sheila?” she called out, her voice still strong despite her body’s failures. “Sheila, are you there?”

No answer.

Wanda wheeled herself to the door of her room and opened it. The hallway was empty, but she could hear more clearly now—definitely a man’s voice, definitely in Sheila’s apartment, definitely saying things that made no sense.

She needed to get out there. She hadn’t attempted to leave her room in three months.

But something in that voice—something in the way the man said her name—pulled at her with the gravity of unfinished business.

Wanda wheeled herself to the hallway and called out again.

“Sheila! I need help!”

This time she heard movement. A door opening. Footsteps.

Sheila appeared, looking at her with concern.

“Mom? What’s wrong?”

“There’s someone in your apartment,” Wanda said. “I can hear him. Who is it?”

Sheila hesitated, and in that hesitation Wanda saw confirmation.

“It’s—it’s just someone who needed help,” Sheila said carefully. “He collapsed in the parking lot. I brought him inside.”

“Who is he?”

Another hesitation.

“I don’t know his name,” Sheila said, which was technically true and completely false at the same time.

“I’m coming out,” Wanda said.

“Mom, you don’t need to—”

“I want to come out,” Wanda repeated, and her tone made it clear this wasn’t negotiable.

Sheila watched her mother wheel herself out of her room, her face showing the conflict between protecting her mother and honoring her autonomy.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “But we’re going slow.”

This is what happens when the body fails but the will remains: we are not our bodies, though we are trapped inside them. We are not our limitations, though we are defined by them. We are not our past, though we carry it with us like cargo we can never set down.

Wanda had been beautiful once. Men had paid money to watch her dance, and more. She had moved with a grace that seemed to defy physics, her body an instrument of desire and power.

Now she moved one painful inch at a time, supported by a wheelchair. But her will—her fundamental insistence on agency—remained intact.

This is called dignity. This is called refusing to be erased by circumstance. This is called a mother who knows her daughter is hiding something and demands to see the truth.

“You don’t have to do this,” Sheila said softly as they reached the living room.

“Yes,” Wanda said. “I do.”

They continued on. Wanda felt memories rising like water through cracks in a dam. A young man. Nervous. Sweet. Completely out of his depth. His friends had brought him to the club—some kind of bachelor party, some kind of last-night-of-freedom ritual. He’d been terrified and fascinated in equal measure.

She’d danced for him. Taken him to the back room. Done what she was paid to do. But there had been something else. Something genuine beneath the transaction. He’d looked at her like she was real. Not a fantasy. Not a commodity. Real.

And afterward, when his friends had dragged him away, he’d turned back to look at her one more time with an expression that said I’ll remember you. Forever.

Nine months later, Sheila was born.

Wanda had never told him. Never tried to find him. He was getting married—his friends had made that clear. He was entering a life that had no room for a topless dancer and an unplanned child.

So Wanda had raised Sheila alone, working when she could, struggling when she couldn’t, building a life from the wreckage of circumstances.

Sheila had grown up knowing who her father was when she was old enough to understand—not knowing his name, but knowing he existed somewhere in the world, and knowing he had no idea she existed. But that’s all she knew. She didn’t know where he lived. What his name was. Nothing more than the basic facts.

Wanda stood in the living room now, breathing hard, standing, leaning heavily on Sheila.

From deep inside the apartment came a sound—a man’s voice, thick and confused, saying something about walls and time and Wanda’s dimples.

Wanda’s breath caught. She knew that voice. It was older. Rougher. Damaged by alcohol and disappointment. But she knew it.

“Mom—” Sheila started.

A knock on the door interrupted her.

Three sharp raps. Urgent. Concerned.

Sheila and Wanda both turned toward the sound.

Eileen had driven away from the business condos in a state of existential vertigo. Her entire identity had been destabilized by a single afternoon with Lawrence. Everything she’d believed about herself—her sexuality, her certainty, her contempt for men—had revealed itself as negotiable.

She’d noticed Humphries’ Dodge Dart still parked at George’s office. Humphries’ car. Abandoned. Unchanged.

Suddenly, beneath all her confusion about Lawrence, beneath all her crisis about identity, a different concern surfaced. Genuine worry. For Humphries. For the man she’d spent over years telling Florence to leave.

Eileen had pulled a U-turn so sharp her tires squealed, driven back to the business condos, and parked beside the Dodge Dart.

George had told her Humphries had collapsed on his couch, seemed ‘pretty out of it,’ and then disappeared.

The apartments were adjacent to George’s office. If Humphries had collapsed, if he’d needed help, someone in the building would have taken him in. Eileen had checked the directory. Four units. She’d started knocking. Now she stood outside Unit 2-C, having got-

ten no answer from the first three apartments, raising her hand to knock again.

The door opened. A young woman stood there—mid to late twenties, dark hair, tired eyes that held something guarded and careful.

Behind her, Eileen could see into the apartment. Could see a couch. Could see a man lying there, muttering to himself, clearly in some kind of altered state. She could see Humphries.

“Oh, thank God,” Eileen said. “I’ve been looking for him. Is he okay? What happened?”

The young woman—Sheila—opened her mouth to answer. But before she could speak, another voice came from behind her. An older woman’s voice. Rough with age and cigarettes and hard living. A voice that said: “Eileen?”

Eileen looked past Sheila and saw the woman in the hallway. Elderly. Standing next to a wheelchair that Sheila had apparently just helped her out of. Staring at Eileen with an expression of shocked recognition.

“How do you know my name?” Eileen asked.

The old woman smiled—a sad, knowing smile that contained decades of secrets.

“Because Humphries talked about you,” Wanda said. “Twenty-five years ago. The night we met. He talked about his fiancée’s best friend. The lesbian who hated him. The woman named Eileen who thought he wasn’t good enough for Florence.”

Eileen felt the world tilt slightly. Because now the secret Eileen had been hiding all these many years came forth—once, a long time ago, Eileen was an exotic dancer. She worked in the same club as Wanda. Because she was broke. She was unemployed. But she had a magnificent body and she knew men would pay to see it. It was why she hated men. Always pawing at her and trying to get in her pants. She hated them. With a passion that burned brighter than the flames of hell she lived in. She hated them.

“You’re Wanda,” she said.

“I’m Wanda.”

They stared at each other—two women connected by a drunk man who was currently lying on a couch experiencing a psychedelic crisis in the apartment between them.

“He’s been looking for you,” Eileen said quietly. “For twenty-five years. You’re all he talks about when he’s drunk enough to be honest.”

“I know,” Wanda said. “Men like Humphries—they hold onto one moment of wildness and make it mean everything.”

From the couch, Humphries muttered something about dimples and golden light and walls that breathed like lungs.

Sheila stood between them, her face showing the strain of secrets about to break open.

“Mom,” she said quietly. “Don’t.”

But Wanda was looking at Eileen with an expression that said the time for secrets had passed.

“You came here looking for him,” Wanda said. “You’ve found him.”

“I—” Eileen started, then stopped. “His car was still here. I thought something might be wrong.”

“Something is wrong,” Wanda said. “But not what you think.”

Back in the wheelchair she wheeled herself closer to the doorway, looking past Sheila to where Humphries lay muttering on the couch.

“That man,” Wanda said, “is Sheila’s father.”

The words hung in the air like thick, acrid smoke.

Eileen looked at Sheila. At Wanda. At Humphries on the couch.

“What?” she said.

“Twenty-five years ago,” Wanda continued, her voice steady and clear, “Humphries came to the club where we worked. You were off that night. His friends brought him for his bachelor party. We spent one night together. One real night, not just a transaction. An entire night in the back room of a strip club. And nine months later, Sheila was born.”

Sheila closed her eyes, her face showing both the relief and terror of a secret finally spoken.

“He doesn’t know,” Wanda said. “He’s never known. I never told him. He was getting married. He was entering into a life that had no room for us. So I raised her alone.”

Eileen stared at Sheila—this young woman who had Humphries’ eyes, Humphries’ nervous energy, Humphries’ fundamental decency buried under layers of circumstance. This was his daughter?

“You’ve known?” Eileen asked Sheila.

“Most of my life,” Sheila said quietly. “Mom told me when I was old enough to understand. She told me he was a good man who’d never known any different and I shouldn’t hate him for it.”

“And he has no idea?” Eileen said.

“None,” Wanda confirmed. “Until about an hour ago, he didn’t even know I lived in this building. Didn’t know Sheila existed. Didn’t know that the woman he’s been obsessing over for twenty-five years has been two rooms away as he sat with the daughter he never knew he had.”

From the couch, Humphries laughed—a strange, disconnected sound that suggested he was experiencing something far beyond their conversation.

“What’s wrong with him?” Eileen asked.

“He took LSD,” Sheila said. “By accident. We thought it was aspirin.”

“Jesus Christ,” Eileen breathed.

“He’s been saying your name,” Wanda told Eileen. “Yours and mine. And Florence’s. He’s been cycling through all the women in his life, trying to make sense of something that doesn’t make sense.”

Eileen looked at the three of them—Wanda, Sheila, and Humphries—a family that had never been acknowledged, connected by one night twenty-five years ago and the accident of Sheila’s compassion bringing her father into her apartment without knowing who he was.

“Does Florence know?” Eileen asked. “About Sheila?”

“No,” Wanda said. “Nobody knows except the three of us.”

The weight of the secret settled over Eileen like a physical thing.

She had come here looking for a drunk man. She had found a hidden daughter. She had found twenty-five years of unacknowledged paternity. She had found the truth that Humphries had been searching for without knowing what he was searching for.

“What are you going to do?” Sheila asked quietly.

Eileen looked at her—this young woman who had inherited Humphries’ fundamental decency and Wanda’s strength, who had grown up knowing her father existed but remained unknown to him.

“I don’t know,” Eileen said honestly.

From the couch, Humphries muttered something about dimples and daughters and walls that contained universes.

The four of them—Wanda, Sheila, Eileen, and the unconscious Humphries—connected by secrets and blood and the strange gravity of lives that intersect in ways we never plan.

Outside, the afternoon was quickly fading into evening.

Inside, the truth had finally been spoken.

And somewhere in the space between, Humphries Feelgood lay on his daughter’s couch, tripping on LSD, completely unaware that he had just found the family he never knew he’d lost while the woman who had hated him for so long finally realized he was not so bad after all.

Chapter 25

Pierce had been sitting at The Copper Still for three hours and forty-seven minutes.

He knew this because he'd been watching the clock above the bar with the obsessive focus of a man trying to avoid thinking about what was in the folder beside his whiskey glass.

The folder was manila. Standard issue. The kind used in government offices across America to contain forms and reports and the bureaucratic machinery of institutional righteousness.

Inside this particular folder was the destruction of a man named Humphries Feelgood.

Pierce had signed every page.

He'd fabricated the evidence with Reginald's guidance—altered transaction records, forged email correspondence, manufactured a paper trail that would convince any jury that Humphries had orchestrated the illegal trading scheme that bankrupted First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company.

It was thorough. It was convincing. It was completely false.

And Pierce had done it to protect the woman he loved.

The whiskey was cheap—well bourbon that burned going down and left a residue of self-loathing in its wake. Pierce had consumed four glasses over the course of the afternoon, nursing each one while the bartender pretended not to notice the folder or the way Pierce kept opening it, staring at the fabricated documents, then closing it again.

The bar was nearly empty. An old man still read a newspaper in the corner. A couple still argued quietly in a booth. The bartender wiped glasses with mechanical efficiency.

Pierce sat alone with his conscience and discovered it was surprisingly heavy for something invisible.

He thought about Humphries Feelgood. He'd never met the man. Didn't know what he looked like. Didn't know if he had a family, or

children, or dreams, or any of the things that make a person real rather than just a name on fraudulent documents.

All Pierce knew was that Humphries was innocent, and that Pierce was going to destroy him anyway.

The rationalization had seemed so clear in Reginald's office: I'm an orphan. I've had nothing my entire life. Amelia is the first person who's ever made me feel human. I can't sacrifice that. I won't.

But sitting here in the dim light of The Copper Still, staring at the folder, Pierce discovered that rationalization and justification were not the same as peace.

He kept seeing Amelia's face—the way she'd blushed when he kissed her hand, the quiet certainty in her voice when she'd said she hoped they'd meet again.

She thought he was a good man. She thought he had integrity. She'd fallen in love with someone who didn't exist.

Pierce finished his fourth whiskey and signaled for a fifth. The bartender poured without comment, the amber liquid catching the light as it filled the glass.

"You okay?" the bartender asked, his tone suggesting he'd seen this exact scene a thousand times before.

"No," Pierce said honestly.

The bartender nodded and moved away, again granting him the privacy of his private, moral collapse.

Pierce stared at the whiskey, then at the folder, then back at the whiskey.

He thought about what would happen when the evidence was presented. Humphries would be arrested and charged. His life would be dismantled piece by piece while lawyers and prosecutors built a case around the lies Pierce had created.

Amelia would never know. She would believe Pierce had investigated her and found her innocent. She would believe the real criminal had been caught. She would believe their love was built on truth. She would believe a lie.

Pierce picked up the glass and drank half of it in one swallow. The whiskey burned, but not as much as the knowledge of what he'd become.

I could live with this, he thought. I could carry this secret. I could let Humphries be destroyed and build a life with Amelia and never tell her what I did. I could do that.

The thought sat in his chest like a stone.

But I won't be able to look at her without seeing what I sacrificed to have her.

Pierce finished the whiskey and stood.

The bar tilted slightly—not enough to make him stumble, but enough to remind him he was drunk. He gathered the folder, left cash on the bar, and walked toward the door.

The bartender watched him go with the expression of someone who knew exactly where this was heading and had seen it end badly every time. He made no effort to stop him.

Outside, the evening air was cool and sharp. Pierce stood on the sidewalk, folder in hand, and made a decision. He couldn't let Amelia believe the lie. He couldn't let her love someone who didn't exist. He had to tell her what he'd done. Even if it destroyed everything.

The drive to Amelia's estate took twenty-three minutes. Pierce knew this because he kept checking the clock on the dashboard, watching the minutes tick away like a countdown to his own execution.

His hands gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity. The folder sat on the passenger seat beside him, a physical manifestation of his betrayal.

The whiskey made everything feel slightly unreal—the streetlights too bright, the road too narrow, his thoughts fragmenting and reforming in patterns that didn't quite make sense.

He rehearsed what he was going to say. Amelia, I need to tell you something. I've done something terrible. I fabricated evidence to protect you. An innocent man is going to be destroyed because I fell in love with you.

No. Too clinical.

Amelia, I'm not the man you think I am. I'm a coward who chose love over integrity. I framed someone to save your life and I'd do it again.

No. Too defensive.

Amelia, I love you. And because I love you, I destroyed a man named Humphries Feelgood, who never did anything wrong except work for a company your brother bankrupted.

No. Too brutal.

Pierce drove through the suburban streets, past the identical houses and manicured lawns, past the infrastructure of middle-class American life that Humphries Feelgood probably inhabited.

He thought again about the man whose life he'd destroyed. Was Humphries married? Did he have children? Did he drink too much or work too hard or dream about retirement?

Pierce didn't know. He'd never asked because he didn't want to know. He'd simply signed the documents that would send Humphries to prison and moved on.

The guilt sat in his stomach like acid.

I'm a monster, Pierce thought. I'm exactly what those people at Sir John's estate accused me of being—someone who destroys lives to protect himself.

The car ahead of him turned left. Pierce followed automatically, his mind elsewhere.

But I'm not protecting myself. I'm protecting Amelia. Does that make it better or worse?

He didn't know.

The whiskey made it hard to think clearly, but it also made it possible to think of truth. Sober, Pierce would have rationalized himself into silence. Drunk, he could only see the truth. He'd sacrificed an innocent man for love, and he couldn't live with Amelia believing he was someone he wasn't.

The estate gates appeared ahead—tall, ornate, expensive. Pierce pulled up to the intercom and pressed the button.

A moment later, Affron's deep baritone rumbled through the speaker.

"Yes?"

"It's Pierce Williams," Pierce said, his voice rougher than he intended. "I need to see Amelia. Now."

There was a pause.

“Sir, it’s rather late—”

“Now,” Pierce repeated. Then added, “Please.”

Another pause, longer this time. Then the gates swung open.

Pierce drove through, his heart hammering in his chest, the folder on the passenger seat feeling heavier with every second. The driveway curved through manicured gardens. The mansion loomed ahead, lit from within, elegant and imposing.

Pierce parked and sat for a moment, staring at the building. I could turn around, he thought. I could drive away and never tell her. I could let her believe the lie.

But even as he thought it, he knew he wouldn’t. He grabbed the folder and got out of the car.

Affron met him at the door with an expression of professional concern.

“Mr. Williams,” he said carefully. “Are you quite all right?”

“No,” Pierce said. “I need to see Amelia. Alone.”

“She’s in the parlor with Mr. Lawrence—”

“Alone,” Pierce repeated, his voice harder now. “Please.”

Affron studied him for a moment, then nodded.

“Wait here.”

Pierce stood in the foyer, folder clutched in his hands, trying to steady his breathing.

The whiskey made everything feel distant and immediate at the same time. He could smell the polish on the marble floors. Could hear voices from somewhere deeper in the house. He could feel his heart beating too fast.

Footsteps approached.

Amelia appeared in the doorway, her face showing concern and something else—hope, maybe, at the beginning of love.

“Pierce?” she said. “What’s wrong? Affron said you seemed—”

“I need to talk to you,” Pierce interrupted. “Alone. Please.”

Amelia glanced back toward the parlor, then nodded.

“Of course. Come in.”

She led him to the parlor—the same elegant room where they’d

first met, where she'd served him tea and cakes, where he'd fallen in love with her poise and delicacy.

The room looked exactly the same. The artwork. The sculptures. The antique furniture. Yet everything seemed changed. Different.

Amelia closed the door and turned to face him.

"Pierce, you're frightening me. What's happened?"

Pierce stood in the center of the room, folder in hand, and felt the weight of what he was about to do settle over him like a shroud.

"I need to tell you something," he said. "And after I tell you, you're going to hate me. But I can't—I can't let you believe I'm someone I'm not."

Amelia's face went pale.

"What are you talking about?"

Pierce opened the folder with shaking hands and held it out to her.

"This," he said, "is fabricated evidence against a man named Humphries Feelgood. He's an employee at First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company. He's innocent. He had nothing to do with the illegal trading involving your brother that bankrupted the company."

Amelia stared at the folder, not taking it.

"I don't understand."

"Your brother, Lawrence," Pierce continued, his voice rough with whiskey and desperation, "has been running an illegal insider-trading operation for years. You've been the front for it—conducting all the business on his behalf. The Securities Commission discovered this. I was assigned to investigate you."

"I know," Amelia said quietly. "You told me—"

"I lied," Pierce interrupted. "I didn't find you innocent. I found you guilty. Both of you. The evidence was overwhelming."

Amelia took a step back, her hand going to her throat.

"Then why—"

"Because I fell in love with you," Pierce said, and his voice cracked. "Because for the first time in fifty years, someone looked at me like I was human. I'm an orphan who's been alone his entire life, and you made me feel like I mattered."

He thrust the folder toward her again.

"My superior gave me an ultimatum. He said if I didn't fabricate evidence to frame someone else—someone innocent—he would destroy my career. He would leak that I'd been accused of homosexuality years ago at Sir John's estate. He would make sure I would never work in government again."

Amelia's eyes were wide with horror.

"So you—"

"So I agreed," Pierce said. "I manufactured evidence against Humphries Feelgood. I forged documents. I created a paper trail that will send an innocent man to prison. I did it to protect you. I did it because I couldn't bear to lose you."

The folder hung between them, damning and undeniable.

"I signed every page," Pierce continued. "I looked at the evidence of your guilt, and I buried it. I looked at Humphries Feelgood's innocence, and I destroyed it. I became exactly the kind of person I've spent my entire career prosecuting."

Amelia took the folder with trembling hands and opened it.

Pierce watched her face as she read—saw the moment she understood what she was looking at, saw the horror and comprehension dawn in her eyes.

"This man," she said quietly, her voice barely audible. "Humphries Feelgood. He's innocent?"

"Completely."

"And he's going to be arrested? Charged?"

"Yes."

"Because of you."

"Because of me."

Amelia closed the folder and looked up at Pierce with an expression that contained everything he'd feared—betrayal, disgust, heartbreak.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"Because I can't let you love someone who doesn't exist," Pierce said. "Because you think I'm a good man. You think I have integrity. You think I investigated you and found you innocent."

“And instead you found me guilty and framed someone else.”

“Yes.”

The word hung in the air between them, a brick of coal, floating.

Amelia set the folder on the table and walked to the window, her back to Pierce.

“I told Lawrence I was in love with you,” she said quietly. “Just this afternoon. I told him you were the first person who ever made me feel real.”

Pierce felt something break inside him.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Are you?” Amelia turned to face him, and her eyes were bright with tears. “Are you actually sorry? Or are you just sorry I found out?”

Pierce opened his mouth to answer, then closed it. Because he didn’t know.

“I would do it again,” he said finally. “If I had to choose between your life and my integrity, I would choose you. Every time. I’m not sorry I protected you. I’m sorry I had to destroy someone else to do it.”

“That’s not the same thing,” Amelia said.

“I know.”

They stood in the parlor—the same room where they’d fallen in love—and looked at each other across a distance that had nothing to do with physical space.

“This man,” Amelia said. “Humphries Feelgood. Does he have a family?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I never asked,” Pierce admitted. “I just signed the documents.”

Amelia’s face showed something Pierce had never seen before—contempt.

“You destroyed a man’s life and you didn’t even bother to learn who he was.”

“I couldn’t,” Pierce said. “If I had known—if I had let him be real—I wouldn’t have been able to do it.”

“So you kept him abstract.”

“Yes.”

“That’s monstrous.”

“I know.”

Amelia walked back to the table and picked up the folder again, staring at it like it was a snake.

“My brother and I,” she said quietly, “we’ve been breaking the law for years. We’ve made millions of dollars through illegal trading. We’ve destroyed companies and ruined lives and we’ve never faced consequences.”

“I know.”

“And now an innocent man is going to prison so we can continue to escape those consequences.”

“Yes.”

Amelia looked up at Pierce with tears streaming down her face.

“I can’t—” she started, then stopped. “I can’t be with someone who would do this. Even for me. Especially for me.”

Pierce felt the words like a physical blow.

“I understand,” he said.

“Do you?” Amelia’s voice was sharp now. “Do you understand that you’ve made me complicit in this? That I’m now part of the destruction of an innocent man? That I have to live with the knowledge that someone I loved—someone I trusted—sacrificed another human being for me?”

“I didn’t want you to carry that,” Pierce said. “That’s why I came here. That’s why I told you. So you wouldn’t have to live with the lie.”

“But I have to live with the truth,” Amelia said. “And the truth is worse.”

She set the folder down and walked to the door.

“I think you should leave,” she said quietly.

Pierce stood in the center of the parlor, drunk, broken and completely alone.

“Amelia—”

“Please,” she said, as her voice cracked, “just go.”

Pierce walked toward the door, then stopped beside her.

“I love you,” he said. “That’s the only true thing I have left.”

Amelia looked at him with eyes full of tears and something that might have been love or might have been grief.

“I know,” she said. “That’s what makes this so terrible.”

Pierce left the parlor, walked through the foyer, and stepped out into the night.

Behind him, he heard Amelia close the door. The sound was final.

He sat in his car in Amelia’s driveway and stared at the mansion. The whiskey was wearing off, leaving behind a clarity that was worse than drunkenness.

He had told her the truth. He had confessed everything. And she had sent him away.

Pierce started the engine and drove through the gates, watching the mansion disappear in his rearview mirror. He thought about Humphries Feelgood—the innocent man whose life he’d destroyed.

He thought about Amelia—the woman he’d loved enough to betray everything he believed in.

He thought about himself—the orphan who’d spent fifty years trying to be good and had failed at the moment it mattered most.

The folder was still on the passenger seat. The evidence was still fabricated. Humphries Feelgood was still going to be arrested.

And Pierce Williams was still the man who’d made it happen.

He drove through the suburban streets, past the houses and lawns and infrastructure of ordinary American life, and knew with absolute certainty that he would never be ordinary again.

He’d crossed a line. He’d sacrificed an innocent man for love.

And even though Amelia had rejected him, even though she’d sent him away, even though everything was broken—he knew he’d do it again.

That was the truth he couldn’t escape. That was the monster he’d become.

Pierce drove into the night, alone with his conscience, and discovered that some betrayals can never be undone.

Chapter 26

There is a beautiful quality to the moment when comfortable illusions shatter. It is not dramatic. There are no explosions, no sudden revelations accompanied by orchestral swells. Instead, it arrives with the quiet certainty of a diagnosis—the doctor’s careful tone, the manila folder opened on the desk, the words that rearrange your understanding of everything that came before.

I’m afraid the tests show...

I need to tell you something about your husband...

We’ve fabricated evidence against an innocent man to protect you...

The world does not end. The sun continues its trajectory. Traffic lights change on schedule. But the architecture of meaning—the framework that held your life in recognizable shape—collapses so completely that you wonder how it ever seemed solid to begin with.

This is what happened to three people on the same evening, in three different locations, as the consequences of choices made by others arrived to dismantle their carefully constructed realities.

Eileen’s car pulled into Florence’s driveway at 8:43 PM. She sat for a moment with the engine running, hands gripping the steering wheel, trying to organize the chaos of information she was about to deliver.

Humphries collapsed. Sheila is his daughter. Wanda lives with Sheila. He took LSD by accident and he is tripping in an apartment with his biological daughter, and her mother, and doesn’t know who either of them are.

How did one begin such a conversation?

Hello, Florence. I know I’ve spent over twenty-five years telling you to leave your husband, but it turns out he has a secret daughter from a one-night stand twenty-five years ago, and she’s currently nursing him through a psychedelic crisis while his former lover—the woman he’s been obsessed with his entire marriage—sits beside him.

Also, I might be in love with a man, which contradicts everything I've ever told you about my sexuality. How was your day?

Eileen turned off the engine.

Through the living room window, she could see Florence moving inside—a shadow crossing the curtains, the familiar shape of her friend in her familiar house doing familiar things.

Except nothing was familiar anymore.

Eileen got out of the car and walked toward the front door, her heart hammering with the particular anxiety of someone about to destroy another person's understanding of their own life.

She rang the doorbell. Footsteps approached. The door opened.

Florence stood in the threshold, still wearing the clothes she'd worn when her Volvo broke down, her expression showing surprise and something else—wariness, maybe, or the residue of their road-side confrontation.

"Eileen," Florence said carefully. "I wasn't expecting—"

"I need to talk to you," Eileen interrupted. "About Humphries."

Florence's face shifted—concern replacing wariness.

"What about Humphries? Is he—"

"He's alive," Eileen said quickly. "But he's... Florence, can I come in? This is going to take a while."

Florence stepped aside, allowing Eileen into the living room where Humphries had awakened hungover on the floor what felt like a lifetime ago but was actually just that morning.

They stood facing each other in the space where their friendship had played out for over twenty-five years—bridge games and coffee and endless conversations about Florence's marriage and Eileen's certainty that men were worthless.

"What's happened?" Florence asked.

Eileen took a breath.

"I went back to the business condos," she said, "after I left you on the road. I saw Humphries' car still parked there and I got worried—"

"Worried?" Florence's tone contained surprise. "You've never been worried about Humphries in your life. What business condos?"

"I know," Eileen admitted, "this is complicated. But his car had

been sitting there for hours and George said he'd collapsed on the couch and then disappeared, and I thought—I don't know what I thought. That maybe he'd had a heart attack or something."

Florence sat down slowly on the couch, her face pale.

"Is he in the hospital? Who's George?"

"No," Eileen said. "He's in an apartment at the business condos. With a woman named Sheila."

"Who?"

"Sheila. She works at Riverside Market. She lives in the building where George has his office. She found Humphries collapsed in the parking lot and brought him inside."

Florence processed this information with visible effort.

"So he's safe? He's being cared for?"

"Yes," Eileen said. "But Florence, there's more. A lot more."

She sat down beside her friend, trying to find words for the impossible.

"Sheila isn't just some Good Samaritan who helped a stranger," Eileen continued. "She's... Florence, she's Humphries' daughter."

The words hung in the air like a fattened goose unable to fly.

Florence stared at Eileen with an expression of complete incomprehension.

"That's not possible," she said finally. "Humphries and I don't have children. We never..."

"Not with you," Eileen said gently. "With Wanda."

The name landed like a physical blow. Florence's face went white.

"Wanda?" she repeated. "The topless dancer from his bachelor party?"

"Yes."

"The woman he's been obsessed with for twenty-five years?"

"Yes."

Florence stood abruptly and walked to the window, her back to Eileen.

"How do you know this?" she asked, her voice tight.

"Because Wanda told me," Eileen said. "She lives in the same apartment with Sheila. Right next to George's office. She's disabled

now—can't walk without help. But she remembered Humphries. She remembered that night. And she told me that Sheila is his daughter."

Florence turned around, her face showing something Eileen had never seen before—not anger, not hurt, but a kind of terrible clarity.

"He has a daughter," Florence said slowly. "A daughter he's never met. A daughter who exists because of one night with a woman he can't stop thinking about."

"Yes."

"And this daughter—Sheila—she knows? She's always known?"

"When she was old enough to understand," Eileen confirmed. "Wanda told her. But Humphries has no idea."

Florence walked back to the couch and sat down with mechanical precision.

"Where is he now?" she asked.

"Still at Sheila's apartment," Eileen said. "But Florence, there's something else. Something that makes this even more complicated."

"More complicated than discovering my husband has a secret daughter?"

Eileen winced.

"Sheila gave him what she thought was aspirin," she said. "For the collapse. But it wasn't aspirin. It was LSD. Left over from a previous tenant or something. Humphries is tripping. Right now. In an apartment with his biological daughter and her mother, Wanda, and he doesn't know who either of them are."

Florence stared at her.

"LSD?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"Humphries is on LSD?"

"Yes."

"The man who gets drunk on two beers is currently experiencing a psychedelic drug trip?"

"Yes."

Florence started to laugh. It was not a happy sound. It was the laugh of someone whose reality has become so absurd that laughter is the only possible response.

"Of course he is," she said. "Of course. Because why wouldn't my husband—my sheltered, pathetic, drunk husband—be tripping on LSD in an apartment with the woman he's fantasized about for twenty-five years and the daughter he never knew he had?"

She stood again, pacing now, her movements sharp and agitated.

"Do you know what I did today, Eileen?" she asked. "I drank black coffee. Three cups. At two in the afternoon. I sat in my kitchen and forced myself to drink bitter, terrible coffee because I thought it would give me the strength to leave him."

"Florence—"

"I was going to find you," Florence continued. "I was going to tell you that you were right. That I needed to cast off the chains of Humphries and discover who I really am. I was going to ask for your help."

She turned to face Eileen, her eyes bright with tears.

"And instead I found you with a man. After over twenty-five years of telling me that men are worthless and that I should leave mine, I find you having lunch with a man. And with stars in your eyes to boot."

"That's different," Eileen said weakly.

"Is it?" Florence's voice was sharp. "Is it different? Or is it just another comfortable illusion shattering?"

The question hung between them.

Eileen had no answer.

* * * * *

The walls were breathing in a rhythm that matched Humphries' heartbeat.

In. Out. In. Out. Each breath of the walls sent ripples through the fabric of reality—small distortions that made the edges of objects shimmer and blur.

Humphries sat on Sheila's couch, his consciousness fragmenting and reforming in patterns he couldn't name. Time had become viscous. Golden. Each second stretched into minutes, each minute contained eternities.

He was aware of two women in the room with him. One was young—dark hair, kind eyes, moving with careful efficiency as she checked his pulse and brought him water. The other was older—sitting in a wheelchair near the window, watching him with an expression he couldn't quite read.

Both of them felt important in a way he couldn't articulate.

"How are you feeling?" the younger woman asked.

Sheila. Her name was Sheila. He remembered that much.

"Strange," Humphries said, and his voice sounded like it was coming from very far away. "Everything is...moving."

"That's the LSD," Sheila said gently. "It's going to feel strange for a while. But you're safe. You're not in any danger."

LSD.

The word meant something. Something about chemicals and consciousness and the sixties.

Humphries tried to focus on Sheila's face, but it kept shifting—her features rearranging themselves into patterns that were almost, but not quite, familiar.

"I know you," he said suddenly.

Sheila's expression flickered—something passing across her face too quickly for him to identify.

"We just met today," she said. "You collapsed in the parking lot. I brought you inside."

"No," Humphries insisted. "I know you. From before. From..."

But the thought dissolved before he could complete it.

The woman in the wheelchair spoke for the first time.

"Hello, Humphries."

Her voice was rough, damaged by years of cigarettes and hard living, but underneath the roughness was something else—something that made Humphries' heart accelerate.

He turned to look at her fully.

She was old. Disabled. Her body showing the wear of decades.

But her eyes—

Her eyes were the same.

"Wanda?" he whispered.

The woman smiled, and even through the damage of time, Humphries could see the ghost of the smile he'd carried in his memory for twenty-five years.

"Hello, baby," Wanda said.

The room tilted.

Humphries gripped the couch cushions, trying to anchor himself to something solid as reality performed impossible gymnastics around him.

"You're here," he said. "You're right here and you're real. I thought—I've been thinking about you for so long and you're here—"

"I've always been here," Wanda said. "All this time."

The implications of this statement were too large for Humphries' fractured consciousness to process.

Here. She'd been here. In the same building where he'd collapsed. In the same building where—

He looked at Sheila again. Really looked. And saw, with the absolute clarity that LSD sometimes provides, the truth written in her features.

The shape of her eyes. The curve of her jaw. The way she moved with careful efficiency.

"Oh my God," he said.

Sheila met his gaze steadily.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"You're—"

"Your daughter," Sheila finished. "Yes."

The walls breathed in. Out. In. Out.

Humphries felt something break open inside his mind—not painfully, but with the strange relief of a wound finally being cleaned.

"I have a daughter," he said, testing the words.

"You have a daughter," Wanda confirmed from her wheelchair.

"And you never told me."

"You were getting married," Wanda said. "To Florence. Your father had arranged it. What was I supposed to do? Show up suddenly with a baby and ruin your life?"

"My life was already ruined," Humphries said, and the LSD made

the statement feel both profound and true. "I've been living in a cage for twenty-five years. A comfortable cage. But still, a cage. A cage with a mortgage, and a wife, and a job selling life insurance, and floral arrangements. All I've ever wanted is to find nirvana. We all want to find nirvana, right?"

He looked at Sheila—his daughter, this stranger who shared his blood.

"Did you know?" he asked. "About me?"

"When I was old enough to understand," Sheila said.

"And you never—"

"What was I supposed to do?" Sheila's voice was gentle but firm. "Track you down? Introduce myself? Destroy your marriage, your life? You had a life, Humphries. I wasn't going to ruin it."

"But I could have known you," Humphries said. Tears were running down his face now. Streaming. "I could have been your father."

"You still can," Sheila said.

The statement hung in the air, impossible and true.

Humphries looked between the two women—Wanda, the fantasy he'd carried for twenty-five years, now revealed as flesh, and blood, and wheelchair, and diabetes, and cigarette-damaged. Sheila, the daughter he'd never known, now sitting beside him with infinite patience as he navigated the dissolution of his reality.

"I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand any of this."

"You don't have to understand it right now," Sheila said. "Right now you just have to breathe. The LSD will wear off. And then we can talk. Really talk."

But Humphries wasn't listening anymore.

He was staring at Wanda, at the woman who had haunted his dreams and his marriage his entire adult life. She was real. She was here. And she was nothing like the fantasy he'd constructed.

"I've been in love with a memory," he said slowly. "For twenty-five years. I've been in love with dimples and a photograph and a single night of feeling alive, believing it was nirvana."

"I know," Wanda said.

"But you're not that memory."

“No,” Wanda agreed. “I’m not.”

Humphries felt something shift—not breaking, but rearranging. The architecture of his obsession collapsing to reveal the actual woman underneath.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“For making you into something you weren’t. For carrying you around like a trophy. For never seeing you as a real person.”

Wanda smiled—sad and knowing.

“Baby,” she said, “that’s what men do. They turn us into fantasies so they don’t have to deal with the reality. By the way, in your quest for finding nirvana, did you remember to put out the cat before you left?”

The walls breathed.

Time stretched.

Humphries sat between his past and his future, trying to understand how both could exist in the same room while simultaneously pondering putting out a cat. Was the cat on fire, needing to be put out? Wouldn’t the correct term be “put the cat out”? Was there something subliminal in what the wheelchair-bound woman who was/is Wanda was saying and Humphries simply didn’t understand? Why was he even thinking this to begin with? He’d never thought so precisely before, so why now? And why, damn it, were the walls breathing?

Was this nirvana? If so, where was the cat? And why, exactly, would there be a cat in nirvana?

* * * * *

Amelia sat across from her brother in the morning light and told him everything.

She spoke with the careful precision of someone delivering a diagnosis—clinical, thorough, devastating.

Lawrence listened without interrupting, his face growing paler with each revelation.

When she finished, silence filled the parlor.

"An innocent man," Lawrence said finally. "Pierce fabricated evidence against an innocent man."

"Yes."

"To protect us."

"Yes."

"And this man—Humphries Feelgood—he's going to be arrested. Charged. His life destroyed."

"Yes."

Lawrence stood and walked to the window, his movements uncharacteristically clumsy.

"I didn't know," he said. "I didn't know it would come to this."

"Didn't you?" Amelia's voice was cold. "You've been running an illegal trading operation for years, Lawrence. You've bankrupted companies. Destroyed lives. Did you think there would never be consequences?"

"I thought—" Lawrence stopped, struggling to articulate something he'd never had to examine before. "I thought the money insulated us. I thought as long as we were careful, as long as you were our face, we'd be safe."

"We are safe," Amelia said. "That's the problem. We're safe because an innocent man is being sacrificed in our place."

Lawrence turned to face her.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked. "That I'm sorry? That I feel guilty? I do. But what difference does it make? The evidence is already fabricated. The frame is already in place. Humphries Feelgood is already destroyed."

"It makes a difference," Amelia said, "because we have to decide what kind of people we are. Are we the kind of people who let an innocent man go to prison to protect ourselves? Or are we the kind of people who confess?"

"Confess?" Lawrence's voice rose. "Amelia, if we confess, we go to prison. Everything we've built—"

"Everything we've built is a lie," Amelia interrupted. "It's built on fraud and manipulation and now it's built on the destruction of an innocent man's life."

She stood and walked toward him, her face showing the same terrible clarity that Florence had shown when Eileen told her about Sheila.

“Pierce told me something last night,” she said. “He told me that he would do it all over again. That if he had to choose between his integrity and protecting me, he would choose me every time.”

“That’s love,” Lawrence said.

“That’s corruption,” Amelia corrected. “That’s what happens when we let our feelings override our principles. Pierce destroyed his entire moral framework because he fell in love with me. Over an afternoon tea! And I let him. I let him fall in love with me. I let him compromise everything he believed in.”

“You didn’t know—”

“I knew enough,” Amelia said. “I knew he was investigating us. I knew we were guilty. I knew that if he found the truth, there would be consequences. And I let him fall in love with me anyway because it felt good to be seen as something other than your business front.”

Lawrence flinched. “That’s not fair,” he said.

“Isn’t it?” Amelia’s voice was sharp. “You’ve used me for years, Lawrence. You’ve hidden behind me while you made your fortune. You’ve let me conduct all the business, sign all the documents, take all the risk. And I let you because I didn’t know what else to do with my life.”

She walked back to her chair and sat down with the same mechanical precision Florence had shown.

“But now an innocent man is going to prison,” she continued. “And we’re the reason. Not directly—we didn’t fabricate the evidence. But we created the situation that made the fabrication necessary. We’re complicit.”

“So what do you want to do?” Lawrence asked. “Turn ourselves in? Confess everything? Destroy our lives to save a man we’ve never met?”

“I don’t know,” Amelia admitted. “I don’t know what the right thing to do is. But I know we can’t pretend this isn’t happening. We can’t just accept Pierce’s sacrifice and move on like nothing’s changed.”

Lawrence sat down across from her, his face showing the strain of someone whose comfortable worldview was collapsing.

"I thought I was insulated," he said quietly. "I thought being gay, being wealthy, being careful—I thought it meant I was somehow above consequences. That the rules didn't apply to me the same way they applied to other people."

"I know," Amelia said. "I thought the same thing. I thought by being the face of our operation it meant I was protected. That I could conduct illegal business and never face the reality of what I was doing."

"But we were wrong."

"Yes, we were wrong."

They sat in silence, two wealthy siblings in an elegant parlor, confronting the truth of what they'd become.

"What did Pierce say?" Lawrence asked finally, "when you sent him away?"

"He said he loved me," Amelia said. "He said that was the only true thing he had left."

"Do you believe him?"

"Yes," Amelia said. "That's what makes it so terrible. He really does love me. And he really did destroy an innocent man to protect me. And he really would do it again."

She looked at her brother with eyes that contained decades of unexamined complicity.

"We did this," she said. "Not Pierce. Us. We created the situation that forced him to choose. We're the ones who should be facing consequences. Not Humphries Feelgood!"

"But we won't be facing consequences," Lawrence said.

"No," Amelia agreed. "We won't."

The morning light filled the parlor, illuminating the artwork and sculptures and antique furniture—all the beautiful things that money can buy.

Neither of them spoke.

There was nothing left to say.

* * * * *

Florence stood in her living room, staring at Eileen, trying to process the impossible.

“He’s tripping on LSD,” she said again, as if repetition would make it make sense.

“Yes,” Eileen confirmed.

“With his daughter.”

“Yes.”

“And Wanda.”

“Yes.”

Florence walked to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water with shaking hands. Through the window, she could see the indentations in the lawn where Humphries had driven the car two nights ago—the physical evidence of his latest drunken debauchery.

But now that debauchery had a context she’d never imagined. He had a daughter. A daughter he’d never known about. A daughter who existed because of one night of wildness before their arranged marriage.

Florence drank the water and set the glass down carefully.

“I need to see him,” she said.

“Florence, I don’t think—”

“I need to see him,” Florence repeated, her voice firm. “He’s my husband. He’s having a crisis. I need to be there.”

“He’s not really having a crisis,” Eileen said. “To be exact, he’s having a psychedelic experience with his biological family. I don’t think you being there would help.”

“I don’t care if it helps, or if it does not,” Florence said. “I need to see it. I need to see him with them. I need to understand what I’ve been living with for these past twenty-some-odd years. I need to see...the ghost.”

She grabbed her purse and walked toward the door.

“Florence, wait—”

“Are you coming, or not?” Florence asked.

Eileen stared at her friend—this woman she’d known for over

twenty-five years, who had always been so controlled, so careful, so determined to maintain the appearance of suburban normalcy. That control was cracking, and in a spectacular way.

"I'm coming," Eileen said.

They walked to Eileen's car together, two women bound by friendship and fracture, heading toward a revelation neither of them was prepared for.

* * * * *

Humphries sat on the couch, watching the walls breathe, and felt a fundamental shift inside him. The LSD was still working—reality still fragmenting and reforming in impossible patterns—but underneath the chemical distortion was something else: clarity. Not the false clarity of drunkenness or the comfortable clarity of routine, but the terrible clarity of truth.

He had a daughter. He had spent twenty-five years obsessed with a fantasy, living in a cage of his own construction. And now, in this moment of chemical dissolution, he could see all of it so clearly.

"I've wasted my life," he said.

Sheila and Wanda exchanged glances.

"You haven't wasted anything," Sheila said gently. "You've lived it the only way you knew how."

"But I could have known you," Humphries said, looking at her. "I could have been your father. I could have been part of your life."

"You still can."

"How?" Humphries asked. "How do I become a father to a grown woman? How do I make up for twenty-five years of absence?"

"You begin," Sheila said simply. "You start now. Right this moment. You stop living in the past and you start living in the present."

The walls breathed. Time stretched. And Humphries sat between his past and his future, between reality and delusion, trying to understand how to bridge the gap.

* * * * *

Amelia sat in her parlor, alone now, staring at the teacup Pierce had used yesterday. The cup was still there, unwashed, a physical reminder of the moment before everything shattered. She thought about Pierce's confession. She thought about Humphries Feelgood. She thought about the choices that had led them all to this moment. She realized, with the same terrible clarity that Humphries was experiencing, that there was no way forward that didn't involve sacrifice.

Either Humphries would be sacrificed to protect them, or they would sacrifice themselves to protect him. Or, perhaps, they would all live with the knowledge of what they had done and become the kind of people who could accept such compromises. That seemed unlikely.

Amelia picked up the teacup and carried it to the kitchen. She washed it carefully, watching the water run clear. There were some stains, she knew, that could never be washed away.

Chapter 27

There are moments when the architecture of coincidence becomes so elaborate, so impossibly intricate, that one must either accept the existence of fate or descend into madness trying to calculate the odds.

A woman buys coffee from a clerk. The caffeine catalyzes an epiphany. The epiphany leads to a confrontation. The confrontation leads to a roadside breakdown. The breakdown leads to a revelation.

And the clerk who sold the coffee turns out to be the biological daughter of the woman's husband—a daughter neither the woman nor the husband knew existed.

What are the odds? The mathematician would say, "calculable but astronomical." The theologian would say, "providence." The novelist would say, "necessary."

But Florence Feelgood, standing in the hallway of a business condo's apartment building at 11:47 PM on what had already been the longest day of her life, would say only this: Oh my God.

* * * * *

Eileen knocked on the door of apartment 2-C with the kind of authoritative rap that suggested she was prepared to break it down if necessary. Florence stood slightly behind her, still processing the information Eileen had delivered in the car: Humphries collapsed. Sheila is his daughter. Wanda lives with Sheila. Humphries took LSD by accident.

The door opened. A young woman stood in the threshold—dark hair pulled back, kind eyes showing the strain of a long evening, wearing the practical clothes of someone who worked retail and had just come home to crisis.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm looking for Humphries Feelgood," Eileen said. "I'm his wife's friend. This is Florence, his—"

Florence stopped hearing words. She was staring at the woman in the doorway with an expression of complete recognition.

"I know you," she said. "You're the woman from the market. The clerk who sold me coffee. The woman who had asked if I was sure I wanted it strong, who looked at me with something like concern when I insisted that was exactly what I wanted. You rang up that coffee with the efficiency of someone who has seen small domestic dramas play out across a checkout counter day in and day out. You sold me coffee and now I find out you're my husband's illegitimate daughter!"

The thought was so absurd, so impossibly specific, that Florence began to laugh. This woman—this clerk from Riverside Market who had facilitated Florence's caffeine-fueled transformation—she was Humphries' daughter. The daughter he'd never known about. The daughter who existed because of one wild night twenty-five years ago with a topless dancer named Wanda. The daughter who had, through the simple act of selling coffee, inadvertently catalyzed the chain of events that led Florence to this exact moment in time. How? Why?

"You," Florence said again, her voice barely above a whisper.

Sheila's expression shifted—recognition dawning.

"I remember the coffee," Sheila said. "You wanted the darkest roast we had."

"Yes."

They stared at each other across the threshold.

Eileen looked between them, confused. "You two know each other?"

"She sold me coffee," Florence said, still staring at Sheila. "At Riverside Market. I was—I was trying to be brave. I was trying to drink something bitter so I could face leaving Humphries. Just like you told me to do."

Sheila's face showed something Florence couldn't quite identify—compassion, maybe, or the sad recognition of someone who understood the weight of small moments.

"I remember," Sheila said quietly. "You seemed determined."

"I was," Florence said. "I drank three large cups, mugs actually. I sat in my kitchen and forced myself to swallow bitter coffee because

I thought it would give me the strength to cast off the chains of my marriage.” She laughed—a sound without humor.

“And now I’m here. Standing at your door. And you’re his daughter. The daughter he never knew he had. And you sold me the coffee that made me brave enough to confront the fact that my entire life has been a comfortable lie.”

The words hung in the air between them.

Eileen put a hand on Florence’s shoulder. “Florence—”

“What are the odds?” Florence interrupted, looking at Sheila with something approaching wonder. “What are the odds that the woman who sold me coffee would turn out to be connected to Humphries? That she would be his daughter. That she would be the one who helped him when he collapsed? That everything—all of it—everything—would converge on this day?”

Sheila opened the door wider. “I don’t know,” she said. “But maybe you should come inside.”

* * * * *

There is a unique species of courage that manifests itself only in the morning after. The courage of the drunk who wakes sober and must face what he said, or did. The courage of the adulterer who must look his wife in the eye. The courage of the man who has compromised everything and must now choose whether to continue the lie or to burn it all down. The courage to continue on.

* * * * *

Pierce Williams had spent the night in his apartment—a modest one-bedroom in a building that housed other government employees and divorced men—staring at the ceiling and calculating the cost of integrity.

His career: destroyed. His reputation: ruined. His pension: forfeited. His future: uncertain.

Against this, he weighed one thing: the life of Humphries Feel-

good. A man he'd never met. A man who sold life insurance and floral arrangements. A man who was probably drunk right now, oblivious to the fact that his entire existence had been offered up as sacrifice to protect the guilty.

The scales were not balanced. No. They had never been balanced.

Pierce had known this when he signed the fabricated evidence. He had known it when he sat in The Copper Still drinking whiskey and rationalizing his moral collapse. He had known it when he confessed to Amelia and saw her face transform from love to horror.

But knowing and acting are different species of truth.

At 7:30 AM, Pierce Williams put on his best suit—the charcoal gray one he wore to congressional hearings—and drove to the Securities Fraud office for what he knew would be the last time.

* * * * *

Reginald Newhouse was drinking coffee at his desk when Pierce walked in without knocking.

“Pierce,” Reginald said, looking up with surprise. “I wasn’t expecting you until—”

“I’m resigning,” Pierce said.

The words were simple. Final.

Reginald set down his coffee cup with careful precision. “Excuse me?”

“I’m resigning from the Securities Commission,” Pierce repeated. “Effective immediately. I will not falsify records. I will not frame an innocent man. I will not participate in this corruption.”

He pulled the folder of fabricated evidence from his briefcase and placed it on Reginald’s desk. “This is everything you gave me,” Pierce said. “The false documents. The manufactured timeline. The evidence designed to destroy Humphries Feelgood while protecting Lawrence and Amelia Mathews.”

Reginald stared at the folder as if it were a live grenade.

“Pierce,” he said carefully, “I think you need to sit down and think about what you’re doing.”

"I've thought about nothing else for the past twelve hours," Pierce said. "I'm done thinking. I'm acting."

"You're throwing away your career."

"Yes."

"Your reputation."

"Yes."

"Your pension. Your security. Everything you've built over thirty years."

"Yes."

Reginald stood, his face reddening. "For what?" he demanded. "For some drunk insurance salesman you've never met? For a man who probably doesn't even know his own company is bankrupt? For someone who will never know you sacrificed everything to protect him?"

"Yes," Pierce said again.

"That's insane."

"Perhaps," Pierce agreed. "But it's the only sane thing I know to do." He turned toward the door.

"Wait," Reginald said. "Pierce, wait. You can't just—if you walk out that door, I will destroy you. I will make sure you never work in government again. I will make sure every agency knows you're unreliable. I will—"

"I know," Pierce said, turning back. "I know exactly what you'll do. You'll tell everyone I had a breakdown. That I became emotionally compromised during an investigation. That I fell in love with a suspect and lost my objectivity."

He smiled—sad and knowing. "And you'll be right. I did become compromised. I did fall in love. I did lose my objectivity. But the difference between us, Reginald, is that I'm willing to admit it. I'm willing to face the consequences of my choices instead of manufacturing evidence to hide them."

Reginald's face had gone from red to pale. "You're making a grave mistake," he said.

"I've already made the mistake," Pierce said. "This is me trying to unmake it."

He walked out of the office, past the cubicles of junior investigators who looked up with curiosity, past the motivational posters about integrity that had become grimly ironic, past the security desk where he surrendered his badge, and his gun, and his access card.

At 8:15 AM, Pierce Williams walked out of the Securities Fraud office and into unemployment. Well, after he used the restroom, noticing it was a very perfunctory restroom. Bland tiles. Antiseptic. He felt lighter than he had in years.

* * * * *

There is an exacting kind of power that comes from secrets. Not the power of blackmail or manipulation—though those exist—but the power of secrets that contain independent resources. The power of having something no one else knows about. The power of agency hidden beneath the performance of dependence.

Amelia Mathews had been performing dependence for decades.

She was Lawrence's older sister. His business front. The plain rich woman who conducted all the transactions while her charming gay brother made the real decisions. Everyone believed this. Lawrence believed this. Even Amelia half-believed it.

But underneath the performance was a truth she had never shared with anyone; she had been skimming all along. Not stealing—the money was legally hers, earned through the business she fronted—but quietly diverting a percentage of every transaction into accounts Lawrence didn't know about. Building a reserve. Creating independence.

Over thirty years, that reserve had grown to over one hundred million dollars. And now, sitting across from her brother in the morning light of their parlor, Amelia was about to reveal it.

"I have something to tell you," Amelia said.

Lawrence looked up from his coffee, his face still showing the strain of yesterday's revelations about Eileen.

"More confessions?" he asked with attempted lightness. "I'm not sure I can handle any more emotional upheaval."

"This isn't emotional upheaval," Amelia said. "This is financial upheaval."

She set down her teacup with the same careful precision Reginald had used with his coffee.

"I have a slush fund," she said. "Over a hundred million dollars. In accounts you don't know about. Money I've been accumulating for over thirty years."

Lawrence stared at her. "What?"

"Over a hundred million dollars," Amelia repeated. "Separate from our joint holdings. Separate from the business accounts. Money that is entirely mine."

"How—" Lawrence stopped, struggling to process. "How is that possible? I review all the accounts. I know every transaction—"

"You know every transaction I show you," Amelia corrected gently. "But I've been the one conducting the business, Lawrence. I've been the one signing the documents, managing the transfers, filing the reports. You trusted me to handle the details while you made the strategic decisions."

"So you've been stealing from me?"

"No," Amelia said firmly. "I've been compensating myself for serving as your front. For being the exacting and benevolent face of our sordid enterprise. For taking all the legal risk while you remained insulated. For spending thirty years as the face of an illegal operation while you enjoyed the profits."

Lawrence set his coffee cup down, his hand trembling slightly.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I'm going to use it," Amelia said. "I'm going to give fifty million dollars in order to make restitution."

"Restitution for what?"

"For everything," Amelia said. "For the illegal trading. For the companies we bankrupted. For the lives we destroyed. And specifically, for Humphries Feelgood."

Lawrence's face went pale.

"Amelia, you can't—"

"I can," Amelia interrupted. "And I will. Fifty million dollars will

be enough to restore First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company. It will be enough to undo the frame Pierce was coerced into creating. It will be enough to make Humphries Feelgood whole and then some. And if need be, I will give more to make whole all of those we have corrupted along the way.”

“But that will expose us,” Lawrence said. “If you donate that kind of money to First American, people will ask questions. They’ll investigate. They’ll discover—”

“Everything,” Amelia finished. “Yes. They’ll discover everything. The illegal trading. The insider information. The years of fraud. All of it.”

She looked at her brother with the same terrible clarity Florence had shown when confronting Eileen.

“We’re going to confess, Lawrence. We’re going to turn ourselves in. We’re going to face the consequences of what we’ve done instead of letting an innocent man be destroyed in our place.”

Lawrence stood abruptly and walked to the window, his back to her.

“You’re insane,” he said. “We’ll go to prison. We’ll lose everything. The house, the money, our reputation—”

“We’ll lose our freedom,” Amelia agreed. “But we’ll keep our souls. Or at least what’s left of them.”

She stood and walked to stand beside him at the window.

“Pierce resigned this morning,” she said quietly. “He walked into Reginald Newhouse’s office and quit rather than participate in framing Humphries. He sacrificed his career, his pension, his entire future—for a man he’s never met. Because it was the right thing to do.”

Lawrence said nothing.

“If Pierce can sacrifice everything for integrity,” Amelia continued, “then surely we can sacrifice our comfort for restitution. We’re the ones who created this situation. We’re the ones who should face the consequences.”

“And the fifty million?” Lawrence asked. “That’s your decision alone?”

“It’s my money,” Amelia said. “Money I earned by being your

business face for thirty years. Money you didn't even know existed. Yes, it's my decision. It's mine alone."

She turned to face him fully. "But I'm hoping you'll support it. I'm hoping you'll stand with me when we confess. I'm hoping that somewhere underneath the charm and the wealth and the carefully constructed identity, there is still a person who knows the difference between right and wrong. A person who knows the right thing to do."

Lawrence stared out the window at the manicured grounds of their estate—the gardens, the sculptures, the physical manifestation of decades of illegal profit and greed.

"I've never been to prison," he said finally.

"Neither have I," Amelia said.

"I've never been poor."

"Neither have I."

"In fact, I've never faced consequences for anything I've ever done."

"Neither have I," Amelia said. "Until now."

They stood together in silence, two wealthy siblings contemplating the destruction of everything they'd built.

"When?" Lawrence asked.

"Today," Amelia said. "I'll call our attorneys this morning. We'll arrange to meet with the Securities Commission this afternoon. We'll confess everything and offer the fifty million as restitution, more if need be. And you will agree to pay as well."

"And then?"

"And then we face whatever comes," Amelia said. "Prison, probably. Public disgrace, certainly. The loss of everything we own."

She smiled—sad but genuine. "But we'll face it with our integrity intact. Or at least with the possibility of rebuilding it."

Lawrence turned to look at her, his cobalt eyes showing something she'd never seen before—not fear, exactly, but the recognition of genuine consequence.

"I met a woman yesterday," he said. "A lesbian aerobics instructor who made me question everything I thought I knew about myself,

about my sexuality. I spent the entire evening in existential crisis, wondering how I could be attracted to someone who contradicted my entire identity.”

“I know,” Amelia said. “You told me.”

“But now,” Lawrence continued, “I realize that crisis was nothing compared to this. Questioning my sexuality was easy compared to questioning my entire moral framework. Wondering if I’m gay or bisexual or something else entirely is simple compared to wondering if I’m a good person, or a criminal, or whatever I am, who’s never faced justice.”

He walked back to the couch and sat down heavily. “I don’t know if I’m brave enough for this,” he said.

“Neither do I,” Amelia admitted. “But I know I cannot live with the alternative. I cannot let Humphries Feelgood go to prison for crimes we committed. I cannot let Pierce’s sacrifice be meaningless. I cannot keep pretending that wealth insulates us from morality.”

She sat beside him, taking his hand. “We’ve been living in a beautiful cage, Lawrence. A cage made of money and privilege and the belief that consequences are for other people, not us. But Pierce broke out of his cage this morning. He chose integrity over security. And if he can do it, so can we.”

Lawrence squeezed her hand. “Fifty million dollars,” he said.

“Fifty million dollars,” Amelia confirmed, “and probably more.”

“And prison.”

“Probably.”

“And the loss of everything.”

“Yes.”

Lawrence was quiet for a long moment. A very long moment. Before he said, “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay,” he repeated. “Call the attorneys. Arrange the meeting. We’ll confess together.”

Amelia felt something break open in her chest—it was the strange relief of a wound being cleansed and starting to heal.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Lawrence said. “Wait until we’re actually in prison. Then we’ll see if this was the right decision.”

But they both knew—with the terrible clarity that comes from finally choosing truth over comfort—that it was the only decision they could live with.

* * * * *

It was now early morning. The sun had not yet risen. Florence sat on Sheila’s couch, watching Humphries experience the tail end of his acid trip.

He was calmer now—the walls had stopped breathing, time had resumed an almost normal flow—but his eyes still showed the residue of cosmic revelation.

Wanda sat in her wheelchair near the window, watching the man she’d known for one night twenty-five years ago confront the daughter he’d never known he had.

Eileen stood near the door, her arms crossed, her face showing the complicated mixture of contempt and concern she felt for Humphries.

And Florence—Florence sat very still, trying to process the impossible web of connections that had brought them all to this moment.

The coffee she’d bought from Sheila. The caffeine that had given her courage. The car that had broken down near The Flatulent Goose. The confrontation with Eileen about hypocrisy. The drive to this building. The discovery of Humphries with his biological daughter. Every small choice, every random encounter, every moment of synchronicity had led here. To this apartment. To this revelation. To this moment of terrible, beautiful clarity.

“I sold you coffee,” Sheila said quietly, sitting down beside Florence.

“Yes,” Florence said.

“And you used it to be brave.”

“Yes.”

“And now you’re here.”

“Yes.”

Sheila smiled—sad and knowing.

“I’m glad,” she said. “I’m glad the coffee helped. I’m glad you found the courage. I’m glad you’re here to see him like this—not drunk, not oblivious, but actually present. Actually real.”

Florence looked at Humphries, who was staring at Wanda with an expression of wonder and grief.

“He’s been in love with a fantasy,” Florence said.

“Yes, he has,” Sheila agreed.

“For our entire marriage.”

“Yes.”

“And I’ve been living with a man who was never really there.”

“Yes.”

Florence felt tears running down her face—not from sadness, exactly, but from the overwhelming weight of recognition finally being lifted.

“What do I do now?” she asked.

Sheila took her hand. “You start,” she said. “You stop living in the past and you start living in the present.”

The same words she’d said to Humphries. The same truth that applied to everyone in this room.

Florence squeezed Sheila’s hand and nodded.

Outside, the sun was rising over the business condos, casting fiery, pale light across the parking lot where Humphries’ Dodge Dart sat beside Eileen’s car and George’s office and all the small, ordinary places where extraordinary transformations had occurred.

The sun was rising on apartments and offices and parlors across the city, where people were making choices. Ordinary choices. Just like every other day. They made choices, yet few understanding the depth of their choices. They were waiting, hoping, for something spectacular to occur. But very few, a slim, marginal few, would ever come to believe they were, in fact, in control of their choices.

On this particular day, Pierce was walking away from his career. Amelia was calling her attorneys. Lawrence was contemplating pris-

on. Manfred was receiving a text about salvation he didn't understand. And Florence—Florence was sitting beside the daughter her husband never knew he had, holding the hand of a woman who had sold her coffee, realizing that every small moment had been leading to this. To the possibility of redemption. To the choice between comfort and truth. To the recognition that some stains could never be washed away—but some could be faced, acknowledged, and perhaps, eventually, forgiven.

“The walls have stopped breathing,” Humphries suddenly announced.

And the world, Florence realized, was still very much alive.

Chapter 28

There is an artistic quality to the moment when altered consciousness returns to baseline—not the dramatic crash of sobriety after drunkenness, but the slow, almost reluctant reassembly of consensus reality after it has been thoroughly dismantled.

The walls stop breathing. Time, which had been viscous and golden, becomes linear again. The photograph on the wall—which had been alive, animate, speaking in colors that don't exist—becomes merely ink and paper.

And the person sitting across from you, who had been a cosmic archetype, a symbol of all desire and all loss, becomes simply human again. Fallible. Aging. Real.

This is both relief and enlightenment.

* * * * *

Humphries sat on Sheila's couch and watched reality reassert itself with the slow inevitability of dawn. The LSD was wearing off.

He could feel it happening—not all at once, but in stages. First the walls stopped their rhythmic expansion and contraction. Then the colors dimmed from their impossible saturation back to ordinary paint and plaster. Then time, which had been stretching and compressing like taffy, resumed its normal forward march.

And finally—most devastatingly—Wanda stopped being the fantasy he'd carried for twenty-five years and became the woman sitting in the wheelchair near the window. Disabled. Aging. Real.

She was watching him with an expression he couldn't quite read—not the seductive confidence of the topless dancer from his memory, but something sadder and more knowing. The dimples were still there, visible when she smiled slightly at something Sheila said, but they were set in a face that had lived decades since that one wild night.

She was not the woman he'd been in love with. She had never been that woman.

The woman he'd been in love with was a construction—a fantasy built from one night of transgression and twenty-five years of marital disappointment. He had taken a real person and turned her into a symbol, a repository for everything he'd never had and everything he'd never been.

And now, sitting in this apartment with his biological daughter and the actual human being Wanda was, Humphries understood with terrible brilliance what he had done. The dimples, he realized, were never on her ass at all—they were on her face when she smiled.

He had loved a ghost. He had been faithful to a memory. He had built his entire emotional life around a woman who didn't exist.

"How are you feeling?" Sheila asked, sitting down beside him with a glass of water.

Humphries took the water with trembling hands. "Like I've been turned inside out," he said.

"That's the acid," Sheila said gently. "It'll pass. You'll be okay."

"Will I?" Humphries looked at her—this young woman who was his daughter, who had helped him through a psychedelic crisis without knowing who he was or what he was, who had sold Florence coffee and inadvertently catalyzed the chain of events that led to this moment.

"I don't know if I'll ever be okay again," he said.

Wanda wheeled her chair slightly closer.

"You will," she said. Her voice was different from his memory—rougher, worn by years of cigarettes and disappointment. "You'll be okay because you don't have a choice. That's how life works. You survive because the alternative is worse."

Humphries stared at her.

"I've been in love with you for twenty-five years," he said.

"No," Wanda corrected gently. "You've been in love with a memory. With a fantasy. With the idea of wildness and freedom that I represented for one night before you got married. A night long ago."

She gestured to herself—the wheelchair, the worn face, the body that had betrayed her. "This is who I actually am," she said. "Not the woman in your memory. Not the fantasy you've been carrying around. Just a disabled woman who used to dance topless, once in a

while turned tricks, and now lives in her daughter's apartment."

"I know," Humphries said.

And he did know.

The LSD had stripped away his defenses, his rationalizations, his carefully constructed delusions. It had forced him to see reality without the comfortable filter that fantasy, alcohol, and delusions bring. Wanda was real. Sheila was real. Florence was real. And he—Humphries Feelgood, a perpetually drunk insurance salesman, devoted husband to a woman he'd never truly loved, father to a daughter he'd never known existed—he was real too.

He was not the hero of his own story. Not the tragic romantic pining for lost love. Just a man who had wasted twenty-five years on a comfortable, delusional lie.

"I have a daughter," he said, looking at Sheila.

"Yes," Sheila said.

"And a wife."

"Yes."

"And I've spent my entire marriage in love with someone who doesn't exist," he said, turning his gaze to Wanda.

"Yes," Wanda said. "But now you know. And knowing is the first step toward actually living instead of just surviving."

Humphries set down the water glass and put his head in his hands. The walls were solid now. Time was moving forward. And he was sober—not from alcohol, but from fantasy. From delusion. It was the most painful sobriety he'd ever experienced.

* * * * *

There are moments when the machinery of justice begins to move—not with the dramatic thunder of revolution, but with the quiet clicking of gears engaging, of systems activating, of consequences finally arriving after years of delay.

A phone call is made. A confession is recorded. A wire transmits information to waiting authorities. And suddenly, the careful architecture of wealth and privilege begins to collapse.

* * * * *

Amelia sat in the parlor with Lawrence, the morning light streaming through the windows with the kind of cruel transparency that makes everything visible.

On the table between them: a telephone. Beside the telephone: a list of attorneys' names and numbers. And in Amelia's head: the knowledge that the next phone call would destroy everything they'd built.

"Are you ready?" she asked Lawrence.

Lawrence, who had spent the night wrestling with his attraction to Eileen, with his own reality unraveling, looked pale but resolute.

"No," he said. "But I don't think I'll ever be ready. So we might as well do it now."

Amelia picked up the phone.

The phone rang twice before a crisp, professional voice answered: "Whitmore, Hastings, and Brewer. How may I direct your call?"

"This is Amelia Mathews," Amelia said. "I need to speak with Richard Whitmore immediately. It's urgent."

There was a brief pause—the kind of pause that suggested the receptionist recognized the name and understood that when Amelia Mathews called with something urgent, it was.

"One moment, please."

Classical music filled the line.

Lawrence watched his sister with something approaching awe. She sat perfectly straight and poised, her face composed, her voice steady. She looked serene, yet she also looked like someone preparing to walk into battle, not someone about to confess to decades of financial fraud.

The music cut off.

"Amelia," Richard Whitmore's voice was warm but cautious. "What's happened?"

"Richard," Amelia said, "I need you to listen very carefully. I am about to tell you something that will require immediate legal action, and I need you to understand that I am calling you not to avoid consequences but to ensure they're handled properly."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line.

"I'm listening," Richard said carefully.

Amelia took a breath. "For the past thirty years," she said, "Lawrence and I have been running an illegal insider trading operation. We've used my position as his business front to conduct transactions based on privileged information he obtained through, shall we say, unscrupulous means. We have accumulated significant wealth through these activities, and we've also recently become aware that our actions have bankrupted the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company."

Another silence—longer this time.

"Amelia—"

"I'm not finished," Amelia interrupted. "I have maintained a separate slush fund of over a hundred million dollars that Lawrence was unaware of. Nor you. I intend to donate fifty million of that fund to restore First American and provide full restitution to all affected parties, including a man named Humphries Feelgood, who was falsely implicated in our crimes."

"Amelia, stop talking," Richard said urgently. "Don't say another word until I—"

"I'm calling to arrange our surrender to federal authorities," Amelia continued. "Lawrence and I will confess to all charges and will cooperate fully with the investigation. We will also accept whatever consequences are deemed appropriate."

"Amelia, for God's sake—"

"Can you arrange a meeting with the Securities Commission and the FBI?" Amelia asked. "Today, if possible. We'd like to make our confession official as soon as possible."

Lawrence watched his sister with growing admiration. She wasn't asking for help avoiding consequences. She wasn't looking for loopholes or strategies. She was simply arranging the logistics of her, their, own destruction.

"Amelia," Richard said, his voice strained, "I need you to understand what you're doing. If you confess to these crimes, you will go to prison. Both of you. For years. Possibly decades. Your assets will

be seized. Your reputation will be destroyed. Everything you've built will be gone."

"We know," Amelia said calmly.

"Then why—"

"Because an innocent man was going to be destroyed in our place," Amelia said. "Because a man I love compromised his integrity to protect me. Because I have spent thirty years living in a beautiful cage of wealth and privilege, and I've finally realized that the cage was of my own construction."

She looked at Lawrence, who nodded.

"We're ready to face the consequences," Amelia said. "Can you help us do it properly?"

Richard was quiet for a long moment.

Then he said, "I'll make the calls. But Amelia—I want you to know that this is the most professionally suicidal decision I've ever witnessed a client make."

"I know," Amelia said. "Thank you, Richard."

She hung up the phone.

Lawrence reached across the table and took her hand.

"That was terrifying," he said.

"Yes," Amelia agreed.

"And there's no going back now."

"No."

They sat together in the morning light, two wealthy siblings who had just set in motion the machinery of their own destruction.

And from somewhere in the house—from the kitchen, perhaps, or the hallway—came a sound so faint they almost didn't hear it. A click. It was the sound of a recording device being turned off.

Affron appeared in the doorway of the parlor with his characteristic silent efficiency.

But something was different. He wasn't carrying a tea service. He wasn't asking about their needs. He was simply standing there, watching them with an expression that was both apologetic and resolute.

"Affron?" Amelia said.

"I'm sorry, Miss Amelia," Affron said in his deep baritone. "But I need to tell you something."

Lawrence and Amelia exchanged glances.

"What is it?" Amelia asked.

Affron reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small device—no larger than a pack of cigarettes, with a tiny red light that was glowing.

"I've been recording your conversations," he said. "For the past six months. Everything you've said in this house—every confession, every discussion of illegal activity, including mention of the slush fund just now—all of it has been transmitted to the FBI."

The words hung in the air like a detonation.

Amelia stared at the device, then at Affron, then back at the device.

"You're—" she couldn't finish the sentence.

"An informant," Affron confirmed. "I was approached by federal investigators eight months ago. They've known about the insider trading for years. They had evidence but needed confirmation. They asked me to help."

Lawrence stood abruptly, his face flushing with anger.

"You've been spying on us?" he demanded. "You've been in our family for over twenty years and you've been—"

"Serving justice," Affron interrupted quietly. "Yes."

"We trusted you," Lawrence said.

"I know," Affron said. "And I'm sorry for that betrayal. But I'm not sorry for what I have done."

He set the recording device on the table between them.

"You've been breaking the law for years," he said. "You've destroyed companies. You've ruined lives. You've accumulated wealth through fraud and manipulation. And you've done it all while believing that your money and your privilege would protect you from consequences. It is appalling."

Amelia felt something—not anger, but a strange kind of relief.

"How much did you record?" she asked.

"Everything," Affron said. "Including the conversation you just

had with your attorney. Including your confession. Including the revelation about the slush fund and your intention to provide restitution.”

“So the FBI knows,” Amelia said.

“Yes.”

“They know we’re planning to confess.”

“Yes.”

“They know about the fifty million.”

“They do now. Yes.”

Amelia looked at Lawrence, who had sat back down and was staring at Affron with an expression of complete bewilderment.

“Then I suppose,” Amelia said slowly, “that we don’t need to wait for Richard to arrange a meeting. The authorities will be coming to us.”

“They’re already on their way,” Affron confirmed. “I am certain they will be here momentarily.”

He looked at both of them with something that might have been seen as compassion.

“For what it is worth,” he said, “I heard your confession just now. I heard you choose restitution over escape. I heard you accept responsibility instead of manufacturing excuses. That will matter. Not enough to keep you out of prison, I suppose, but enough to matter.”

Lawrence laughed—a sound without humor.

“Over twenty years,” he said. “Over twenty years you’ve been serving us tea and managing the household and all the while you’ve been—”

“Doing my job,” Affron said. “But in the last few months I have been doing my real job. A job that is comprised of truth and decency. A job that serves justice instead of wealth.”

He turned to leave, then paused in the doorway.

“I am sorry,” he said. “For the betrayal of trust. But I am not sorry for the betrayal of complicity. Some loyalties are more important than others.”

He left them sitting in the parlor, staring at the recording device on the table.

Outside, in the distance, they could hear the sound of cars approaching. Federal cars. Coming to collect what was owed.

* * * * *

There is a unique satisfaction that comes from watching the corrupt face consequences—not the petty corrupt, nor the small-time grifters and street-level criminals, but the truly powerful corrupt. The ones who believe their wealth and position make them untouchable.

The ones who were wrong.

* * * * *

Reginald Newhouse was reviewing files at his desk when the federal agents arrived. He looked up with irritation as his office door opened without knocking—ready to reprimand whoever had the audacity to interrupt him—and found himself facing three men in dark suits with FBI credentials.

“Reginald Newhouse?” the lead agent said.

“Yes?” Reginald stood, his irritation shifting to confusion. “What’s this about?”

“You’re under arrest for coercion, obstruction of justice, and conspiracy to manufacture false evidence in a federal investigation.”

The words didn’t register immediately.

Reginald stared at the agents, waiting for the punchline, waiting for someone to explain that this was a mistake, or a drill, or some kind of administrative confusion.

“I’m sorry,” he said carefully, “but I think there’s been some kind of error. I’m the head of Securities Fraud operations. I don’t—”

“We know who you are,” the lead agent interrupted. “We also know that you coerced Pierce Williams into fabricating evidence against one Humphries Feelgood to protect Lawrence and Amelia Mathews. We have recordings of your conversations. We have documentation of your instructions. We have everything we need.”

Reginald's face went pale.

"That's—that's not—I was protecting the integrity of the investigation. I was—"

"You were obstructing justice," the agent said. "Turn around and put your hands behind your back."

"This is insane," Reginald said, but he was already turning, already complying, already understanding that this was actually happening. "You can't just—I have rights. I have—"

"You have the right to remain silent," the agent said, snapping handcuffs onto Reginald's wrists. "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney—"

Pierce Williams stood in the doorway of his office, watching. He had re-entered the building after remembering he had forgotten to retrieve his vast amount of business card contacts compiled through the years. He stood watching, a sense of both amusement and acceptance flowed within him. He had known this was coming, but seeing it actually happen was different from knowing it would happen.

Reginald caught sight of him as the agents led him past.

"Pierce," Reginald said desperately. "Pierce, tell them. Tell them I was just trying to protect the investigation. Tell them—"

"I can't," Pierce said quietly. "Because it wouldn't be true."

Reginald's face twisted with rage and desperation.

"You self-righteous bastard," he spat. "You think you're better than me? You agreed to frame Humphries too. You signed the documents. You're just as guilty—"

"I know," Pierce said. "But I confessed. I resigned. I chose integrity over complicity. You chose to double down on corruption."

The agents pulled Reginald toward the elevator.

His protests echoing down the hallway—denials and rationalizations and desperate attempts to shift blame—until the elevator doors closed and the sound cut off.

Pierce stood in the sudden silence of the Securities Fraud office. Around him, investigators were emerging from their cubicles, staring at the space where their boss had just been arrested, trying to process what they'd witnessed.

Pierce walked back to his desk and sat down. His phone rang.

"Pierce Williams' desk," he answered.

"Mr. Williams, this is Director Chen from the FBI. I need you to come to my office immediately. We have some things to discuss."

Director Chen's office was on the ninth floor—two floors above Securities Fraud—in a space that radiated federal authority and bureaucratic power.

Pierce sat across from her, waiting.

Director Chen was a woman in her late fifties with steel-gray hair and the kind of face that suggested she'd seen every variety there was of human corruption. She was no longer surprised by any of it.

"Mr. Williams, I've reviewed your file. I've read your confession to Amelia Mathews. I've listened to the recordings of your conversations with Reginald Newhouse. And I've consulted with my colleagues about what to do with you."

Pierce waited, quietly thinking to himself, all this in the span of one morning. An early one at that. Surely higher powers had bugged Newhouse's office and had been listening in.

"You agreed to fabricate evidence against an innocent man," Director Chen continued. "That's a serious crime. It's a betrayal of everything this office stands for. Under normal circumstances, you would be facing criminal charges alongside Reginald Newhouse."

"I understand," Pierce said.

"However," Director Chen said, "you also confessed. You resigned rather than follow through with the fabrication. You chose integrity over career advancement. And most importantly, your confession provided the final piece of evidence we needed to move against the Mathews siblings and Reginald Newhouse."

She leaned back in her chair.

"So here's what's going to happen," she said. "You're not going to be charged. You're going to be offered Reginald Newhouse's position as Head of Securities Fraud operations. And you're going to use that position to ensure that Mr. Feelgood is completely exonerated and that the Mathews siblings face appropriate consequences."

Pierce stared at her.

“You’re—you’re offering me a promotion?”

“I’m offering you a chance to make this right,” Director Chen corrected. “You compromised your integrity once. Now you get to spend the rest of your career proving that was an aberration rather than a pattern.”

She slid a large folder across the desk.

“This is a summation of the full case file on the Mathews investigation. Everything we have. The rest is in the banker’s boxes next to the door, including everything that has been recorded. It contains everything you’ll need to clear Mr. Feelgood and prosecute the actual criminals.”

Pierce opened the folder with trembling hands. Inside were transcripts, summations of recordings, financial documents, all the evidence of fraud that had been gathered over the years.

“Why?” he asked. “Why give me this chance?”

“Because you confessed,” Director Chen said simply. “Because when you realized what you had done, you didn’t try to hide it or rationalize it or blame someone else. You faced it. You accepted responsibility. You chose truth over comfort.”

She stood, indicating the meeting was over.

“Don’t make me regret this decision, Mr. Williams.”

“I won’t,” Pierce said.

He walked out of Director Chen’s office carrying the folder that would destroy the woman he loved and save the man he’d tried to frame. Justice, he realized, was more complicated than he’d ever imagined.

But it was also more necessary than ever.

* * * * *

There is an exacting courage required to confess love—not the easy declaration made in the heat of passion, but the vulnerable admission made in the cold light of self-awareness.

To say: I have been wrong about myself. To say: Everything I believed about my identity was incomplete. To say: I love you, and that terrifies me, and I’m saying it anyway.

This is the courage that changes lives.

* * * * *

Eileen found Lawrence in the garden behind his estate, standing among the sculptures and manicured hedges, staring at nothing. She had driven here directly from Sheila's apartment, leaving Florence with Humphries and Wanda and the illumination of revealed secrets.

She had something to say. Something that couldn't wait.

"Lawrence," she began—

He turned, his cobalt eyes showing surprise and something else—hope, maybe, or fear, or both.

"Eileen," he said. "I didn't expect—"

"I'm in love with you," Eileen interrupted.

Lawrence stared at her.

"What?"

"I'm in love with you," Eileen repeated. "Not just attracted to you. Not just confused by you. In love with you. Genuinely, terrifyingly, completely in love with you."

She walked closer, her hands trembling.

"I've spent most of my friendship with Florence telling her that men are worthless," she said. "Years of preaching that she should leave Humphries and discover herself. Years of building my entire identity around being a lesbian who had given up on men entirely."

"I understand," Lawrence said quietly.

"And it was all a lie," Eileen continued. "Not about being a lesbian—that was real. But about giving up on love. About being complete in myself. About not needing anyone."

She stopped a few feet away from him.

"I've been running," she said. "For years, I've been running from the possibility of genuine connection because I was terrified of being hurt. I built walls and called them principles. I preached independence and called it strength. I criticized Florence's marriage while being too afraid to risk my own heart."

Lawrence took a step toward her.

"And then I met you," Eileen said. "And everything I thought I knew about myself turned out to be incomplete. Not wrong—I am a lesbian. I have been attracted to women my entire adult life. But apparently I'm also capable of being attracted to you. Of loving you. Of wanting to build something with you even though it contradicts everything I thought I was."

"Eileen—"

"I don't know what this makes me," Eileen interrupted. "Bisexual? Pansexual? Someone whose sexuality is more fluid than I ever imagined? I don't know. And right now, I don't care. All I know is that I love you, and I'm tired of running from that truth because running has cost me too much already."

Lawrence closed the distance between them and took her hands.

"I don't know what I am either," he said quietly. "I've been gay my entire adult life. I've never questioned it. Never doubted it. And then I saw you at that stoplight and everything I thought I understood about myself became... negotiable. From a quick, brief encounter, my entire world changed."

"Negotiable," Eileen repeated, almost laughing. "That's one way to put it."

"I missed three gear shifts driving you to lunch," Lawrence said. "I haven't done that since I was a teenager. You made me forget how to operate machinery."

"That's romantic," Eileen said dryly.

"It's terrifying," Lawrence corrected. "But yes. Also romantic."

They stood together in the garden, two people whose carefully constructed identities had been demolished in a single afternoon, trying to figure out what came next. Could such a brief encounter, a minute spark within the cosmic universe that is life, be possible?

"I don't know what we're doing," Eileen said.

"Neither do I," Lawrence admitted.

"But I want to find out."

"So do I."

It wasn't a declaration of eternal love. It wasn't a promise of happily ever after. It was simply two people agreeing to stop running

from the truth of what they felt, even though that truth contradicted everything they thought they knew about themselves.

Sometimes, that's all love requires—the courage to stop running.

There is a difference between asking and confirming. When you ask, you are seeking information. You are inquiring about availability, checking schedules, determining whether something is possible. When you confirm, you have already decided. You are not seeking permission or checking feasibility. You are announcing intention. You are declaring that a choice has been made and you are simply ensuring the other party understands.

This is the difference between “Are you available Thursday?” and “I’ll see you Thursday.”

One is a question. The other is a commitment.

* * * * *

Florence sat in her living room—the same living room where Humphries had awakened hungover on the floor that morning, though it felt like years ago rather than hours—and stared at the telephone.

It was 6:47 PM.

The sun was setting through the windows, casting long shadows across the carpet where her heels had left indentations for twenty-two years.

She had returned from Sheila’s apartment an hour ago, leaving Humphries with his biological daughter and the woman he’d been obsessed with for a quarter century, leaving him to face the reality beneath his fantasy while she came home to face her own.

The house was empty.

Quiet.

For the first time ever, Florence sat in her living room and felt no obligation to prepare dinner, to worry about Humphries’ drinking, or to maintain the performance of a “correct” suburban housewife living in suburban contentment.

She was alone. She was free.

She picked up the phone and dialed Marcus's number from the card he'd given her that afternoon on the roadside. It rang twice.

"Hello?" Marcus's voice was warm, slightly cautious.

"Marcus," Florence said. "It's Florence Feelgood."

"Florence." She could hear the smile in his voice. "How are you? Are you okay?"

"I am," Florence said. "Thank you again for the ride. And for... everything else."

"You're welcome."

There was a pause—not awkward, but weighted. Both of them understanding that this call was more than a call about simple gratitude.

"I'm calling," Florence said carefully, "to confirm my appointment on Thursday."

Another pause.

"Confirm?" Marcus said quietly.

"Yes," Florence said. "Not to ask if you have availability. Not to check if the time still works. I am confirming that I will be there. That I intend to be there."

She could hear Marcus take a breath.

"I understand," he said.

"Do you?" Florence asked. "Because I need you to understand that this isn't just about a massage appointment. This is about choosing something genuine. Something real. Something that isn't performance or obligation or twenty-five years of going through the motions."

"I understand," Marcus repeated, and this time his voice carried absolute certainty and clarity.

"I'm still married," Florence said. "Technically. Legally, I'm still Florence Feelgood, wife of Humphries, resident of this suburban house with its indented carpet and its empty guest room. But I'm not that person anymore. Or maybe I never was that person and I'm finally admitting it."

"Florence—"

"I'll see you on Thursday," Florence interrupted gently. "At our

regular time. And I wanted you to know that when I walk into that room, I won't be walking in as someone seeking escape or distraction. I'll be walking in as someone who has chosen to build something genuine with you. If you're willing."

The silence on the other end of the line stretched for several seconds.

Then Marcus said, "I'm willing."

"Good," Florence said.

"Thursday," Marcus confirmed.

"Thursday," Florence agreed.

She hung up the phone and sat in the brightening darkness of her living room, feeling the weight of what she'd just done. Not asked. Confirmed. Not inquired. Committed.

For the first time in twenty-five years, Florence Feelgood had made a choice that was entirely her own—not arranged by her father, or approved by her husband, not expected by society, not performed for the benefit of bridge partners or neighbors or the carefully maintained fiction of suburban contentment—she had chosen. For her. And in choosing, she had become real.

There is an architecture to change.

Not the dramatic architecture of revolution—barricades and manifestos and blood in the streets—but the quieter architecture of individual moral choice accumulating into collective transformation.

One person chooses truth over comfort. Another chooses justice over privilege. A third chooses integrity over career. A fourth chooses love over ideology. Yet another chooses genuine connection over marital obligation.

Suddenly, without anyone planning it, or orchestrating it, the entire structure of lies and compromises and comfortable delusions that is life begins to collapse. Not all at once. No. Not with thunder and fire. But with the steady, inexorable pressure of people refusing to live falsely anymore.

This is how worlds change. How societies and cultures change. Not through grand gestures, but through small acts of courage repeated until they become impossible to ignore.

On this particular Thursday in late spring, in various locations across the suburban landscape, while Humphries Feelgood sat in his biological daughter's apartment, coming down from an LSD trip that had forced him to confront twenty-five years of fantasy and begin the slow, painful work of learning to live in reality, many others were confronting their own as well.

Amelia and Lawrence Mathews sat in their estate parlor, having confessed to federal crimes and committed to donating fifty million dollars in restitution, more if necessary, waiting for the authorities to arrive and knowing they would face prison but choosing it anyway.

Reginald Newhouse sat in a federal holding cell, his career destroyed, his reputation ruined, facing charges for obstruction of justice and conspiracy, learning that corruption eventually faces consequences.

Pierce Williams sat in his new office—Reginald's former office—with the case file that would exonerate Humphries Feelgood and allow for the prosecution of the actual criminals, understanding that redemption sometimes arrives in the form of a second chance you don't deserve but accept anyway.

Eileen stood in Lawrence's garden, having confessed love that contradicted everything she thought she knew about herself, and discovered that identity is more fluid and mysterious than ideology ever admits.

And Florence Feelgood sat in her living room, having confirmed an appointment that was in reality a commitment to build genuine human connection, and felt the architecture of her old life finally, completely, irreversibly collapse.

All of them, in their separate locations, had made the same fundamental choice—truth over comfort, reality over fantasy.

They chose, well, except for Reginald Newhouse, genuine connection over performed contentment. Justice over privilege. Integrity over career. Love over ideology.

It was not easy. It was not comfortable. It would cost them everything they'd built upon the foundations of lies, compromises, and convenient delusions. But it was real. And in the end, that was all

that mattered.

The walls had stopped breathing. The LSD had worn off. The confessions had been made. The arrests had been executed. The love had been declared. The appointment had been confirmed.

And in the gathering brightness of a suburban Thursday afternoon, multiple lives pivoted simultaneously toward truth, toward justice, toward genuine human connection—not because anyone had planned it, or orchestrated it, but because sometimes, when enough people refuse to live falsely anymore, change becomes inevitable.

The architecture of their old lives was collapsing, but the architecture of their new lives—uncertain, terrifying, and genuine—was just beginning to take shape.

And that, perhaps, was enough.

Epilogue—Four Years Later

There is a difference between transformation and performance.

Performance is what we do when we want others to believe we've changed—the grand gestures, the dramatic declarations, the visible markers of reformation that announce to the world: Look, I am different now.

Transformation is what happens in the accumulated silence of four years of small choices—the morning you wake up sober and choose to stay that way, the afternoon you make a difficult phone call instead of avoiding it, the evening you sit with discomfort instead of drowning in it.

Performance is theater. Transformation is architecture. And architecture, unlike theater, must be built one brick at a time.

Humphries Feelgood sat at his desk on the third floor of First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company and reviewed the quarterly earnings report with the kind of focused attention that would have been impossible for him four years ago.

The numbers were good, but not spectacular—First American would never be a Fortune 500 company—but it was solid, legitimate. Built on actual business rather than the elaborate fraud that had nearly destroyed it.

Revenue was up twelve percent from the previous quarter. Customer retention was high, remaining at ninety-four percent, and employee satisfaction was the highest in company history.

Humphries set down the report and looked around his office. It was modest by executive standards—no mahogany paneling, no leather furniture, no ostentatious displays of wealth. Just a functional desk, comfortable chairs, and windows that overlooked the parking lot where he'd nearly killed a tamale vendor four years ago.

On the desk were three framed photographs. The first showed Sheila at her college graduation—cap and gown, diploma in hand,

genuine smile. She'd finished her business degree while working full-time as First American's Director of Operations, a position Humphries had created specifically for her talents.

The second showed Wanda in her wheelchair at a family dinner, laughing at something Florence had said. Her face was older, worn by the years and her disabilities, but the dimples were still there—real dimples on a real person, not the fantasy he'd carried for several years. And yes, they were on her face.

The third showed all four of them together—Humphries, Florence, Wanda, and Sheila—at Thanksgiving dinner a year ago. An extended family that made no sense on paper but worked perfectly in practice.

Humphries picked up the phone and dialed Sheila's extension.

"Director of Operations," Sheila answered with professional efficiency.

"It's your father," Humphries said, still getting used to saying those words. "Do you have the vendor contracts ready for the board meeting?"

"Already on your desk," Sheila said. "Third folder from the left. I also included the cost analysis you requested and the projected savings if we switch suppliers."

Humphries found the folder and flipped it open. The analysis was thorough, detailed, and exactly what he needed.

"You're much better at this than I am," he said.

"I learned from watching you," Sheila said. "Well, the new you. The old you would have been passed out in the parking lot by now."

Humphries laughed—a sound that still surprised him with its genuineness.

"Fair point," he said. "See you at the board meeting."

He hung up and returned to the quarterly report, making notes in the margins with the kind of clear-headed strategic thinking that four years of sobriety had made possible.

No alcohol. No delusions. No fantasies about topless dancers or executive washrooms solving existential crises. Just work. Real work. The kind that built something instead of destroying it.

His secretary buzzed the intercom. “Mr. Feelgood, the dedication ceremony is in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Margaret,” Humphries said. “I’ll be right there.”

He stood, straightened his tie, and walked toward the door. Today was the day they were finally dedicating the executive washroom. The absurd quest that had started everything.

There is a peculiar irony to the moment when delusion becomes reality—not because the delusion was correct, but because reality has shifted to accommodate it in ways no one could have predicted.

The washroom Humphries had promised Manfred Young years ago had finally been built. But it wasn’t the monument to corporate excess he’d originally imagined. It was something else entirely.

* * * * *

When Humphries arrived, the third-floor hallway was crowded with employees, board members, and a few invited guests. At the center of the crowd was Manfred Young in a wheelchair, oxygen tank beside him, face gaunt but eyes still sharp. He was in Stage 4 prostate cancer. Six months to live, maybe less, or so the doctors said.

The disease that had driven him to desperate bathroom trips for years had finally metastasized into something terminal. The irony was not lost on anyone—least of all Manfred himself, who had joked darkly that he’d spent his entire career running to the bathroom and would probably die in one.

Humphries approached and knelt beside the wheelchair.

“Manfred,” he said quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” Manfred said with a weak smile. “But I wanted to be here for this. Wouldn’t miss it.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” Manfred interrupted. “This is important. Not the washroom—though God knows I could have used it years ago—but what it represents.”

He gestured toward the door at the end of the hallway, where a brass plaque had been mounted.

“Read it,” Manfred said.

Humphries stood and walked to the door. The plaque read:

THE MANFRED YOUNG EXECUTIVE WASHROOM
Dedicated to dignity, compassion, and the recognition that
some problems—no matter how small they seem—
deserve genuine solutions.
Built 2024

Humphries felt something catch in his throat. Four years earlier, he had misunderstood everything. He had thought Manfred's desperate bathroom trips were the problem to be solved when the actual problem was the company's impending bankruptcy and the illegal trading scheme that had caused it.

He knew now he had been drunk, delusional, and completely wrong about what mattered in life. But somehow—through a series of events no one could have orchestrated—his misguided quest had led to the truth being exposed, the criminals being prosecuted, and the company being saved.

And now, four years later, the washroom he had promised to build actually existed. Not as a monument to his delusion, but as a genuine gesture of compassion for a dying man who had spent his career in discomfort.

Humphries turned back to the crowd.

"I'd like to say a few words," he said. The hallway quieted.

"Four years ago," Humphries began, "I sat in Manfred's office and completely misunderstood what he was telling me. I thought he needed a private bathroom when what he actually needed was someone to save the company from collapse."

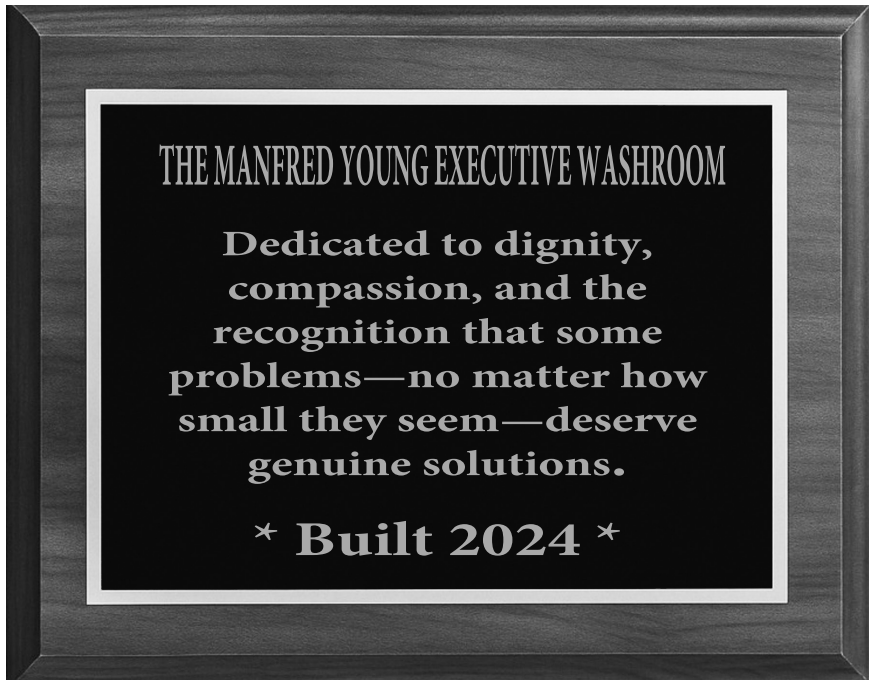
A few people laughed quietly.

"I was drunk most of the time back then," Humphries continued. "I was living in fantasies instead of reality. I was avoiding every difficult truth in my life by drowning it in alcohol and delusion."

He looked at Manfred.

"But somehow, my complete misunderstanding of the situation led to a series of events that exposed real criminals, saved the company, and gave me a chance to become the person I should have been all along."

He gestured to the washroom door. “This room represents a lot of things. It represents the absurdity of how I used to think. It represents the gap between what I believed mattered and what actually mattered. But it also represents something else—the possibility that



even our most misguided efforts can lead to genuine good if we’re willing to face the truth when it finally arrives.”

He walked back to Manfred’s wheelchair and knelt again.

“This washroom is dedicated to you,” Humphries said. “Not because you need it anymore—though I hope it brings you some comfort in the time you have left—but because you gave me a chance when I didn’t deserve one. You sent me on a fool’s errand that ended up saving us all.”

Manfred’s eyes were wet.

“You saved yourself, Humphries,” he said quietly. “I just gave you the excuse to start looking.”

Humphries stood and opened the washroom door. Inside were marble floors, brass fixtures, a comfortable chair, soft lighting, and

a small window overlooking the parking lot and a permanent tamale stand. Brick and mortar with a full-time crew. And legal, too. Though admittedly that is another story.

The washroom was beautiful. Dignified. A monument not to excess but to the recognition that every human being—even a dying executive with an enlarged prostate—deserves comfort and respect.

The crowd applauded as Manfred was wheeled inside to see it as Humphries stood in the hallway, watching, understanding with perfect clarity that redemption is not a moment but an infrastructure built slowly over years of small choices.

He had built this. Well, not the washroom—George had done that. But he had built the life that made the washroom possible.

* * * * *

There is a delicate grace to the moment when a family that should not exist—that makes no sense on paper, that violates every conventional definition—reveals itself to be more genuine than the families built on obligation and tradition.

These are the families we choose. The families we build from wreckage and truth.

* * * * *

Sunday dinner at Humphries' house had become a weekly tradition. Not the house he'd shared with Florence for twenty-two years—that had been sold after the divorce—but a smaller, more modest home in a quieter neighborhood where the carpet bore no indentations and the guest room had never been used for exile.

Tonight's guests were Florence, Marcus, Wanda, and Sheila. The extended family that had emerged from the smoldering beauty of Humphries' LSD trip and the simultaneous moral reckonings that followed.

Humphries stood at the stove, stirring pasta sauce with the kind of focused attention he brought to everything now. Cooking had be-

come one of his unexpected pleasures in sobriety—the precision of recipes, the transformation of ingredients into something nourishing, the simple satisfaction of feeding people he loved.

“Smells good,” Sheila said, entering the kitchen with a bottle of wine. “Where do you want this?”

“On the counter,” Humphries said. “I’m not drinking, but everyone else can.”

Sheila smiled quietly to herself as she set the bottle down and hugged her father from behind—a gesture that still surprised him with its casual affection.

“I’m proud of you,” she said.

“For making pasta sauce?”

“For everything,” Sheila said. “For staying sober. For rebuilding the company. For being the father I always knew you could be.”

Humphries turned and looked at his daughter—this woman he’d never known existed until four years earlier, who had helped him through a psychedelic crisis, indeed, an all-inclusive full life crisis, without knowing who he was. On the other side of that night he had emerged as the most competent executive the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company had ever seen. And, as a father.

“I’m proud of you too,” he said. “You’ve done more for our company in four short years than I did in twenty.”

“I learned from watching you fail,” Sheila said with a slight smile. “Very educational.”

They both laughed.

In the living room, Florence and Marcus sat on the couch while Wanda held court from her wheelchair near the window. The three of them were deep in conversation about something—Florence gesturing animatedly, Marcus nodding thoughtfully, Wanda interjecting with the kind of sharp observations that came from decades of watching people perform.

Humphries watched them through the kitchen doorway. Four years ago, this scene would have been impossible. Florence had been his wife—trapped in a marriage neither of them wanted, performing contentment while dying inside. Wanda had been a fantasy—a

memory of dimples and wildness that bore no relationship to the actual woman living in a room in her daughter's apartment.

Marcus, well, he had been a stranger. And Sheila had been an unknown agent of causality. Now they were family. Not because of blood or obligation or legal contracts, but because they had all chosen truth over comfort and built something genuine from the wreckage that could not define their lives.

"Dinner's ready," Humphries called.

They gathered around the table—five people who had no reason to be together except that they had all faced the same fundamental choice and made the same decision: to stop just merely performing and to start living. To build something real.

Humphries served the pasta while Florence poured wine for everyone except him. Marcus offered a toast to "unlikely families and second chances." Wanda told a story about her dancing days that made everyone laugh. Sheila talked of the new vendor contracts with the kind of enthusiasm that suggested she had indeed found her calling.

And Humphries sat at the head of the table, sober and present, understanding with perfect clarity that this—this ordinary Sunday dinner with people who loved him and he loved in return—was worth more than twenty-five years of fantasy. By a long shot.

"How's the condo?" he asked Florence.

"Beautiful," Florence said, glancing at Marcus. "We're thinking about getting a cat."

"A cat?" Humphries raised his eyebrows. "You always said you hated cats."

"I said a lot of things," Florence replied. "Turns out most of them were lies I told myself to avoid admitting I was unhappy."

"Fair point," Humphries said.

"How's the physical therapy program?" Wanda asked.

"Challenging," Florence said. "But good. I'm learning that I spent years living in my body without actually understanding it. The anatomy alone is fascinating."

"When do you graduate?" Sheila asked.

"Six months," Florence said. "Then I'll be certified. Marcus and I

are thinking about opening our own practice.”

Marcus nodded. “Small operation. Just the two of us. Focus on therapeutic work rather than spa services.”

“That sounds perfect,” Humphries said, and meant it.

There was no bitterness in his voice. No resentment about the divorce or Florence’s new life with Marcus. Just genuine happiness that she had found something real. Something fulfilling and joyous.

They ate in comfortable silence for a while, the kind of silence that only happens between people who don’t need to perform for each other.

Then Wanda said: “I got a letter from Lawrence.”

Everyone looked up.

“Lawrence Mathews?” Humphries asked.

“Yes,” Wanda said. “He’s still in prison. He wrote to apologize for what he and his sister did. He said he’s been thinking about all the people they hurt and wanted to make amends.”

“Did you write him back?” Florence asked.

“I did,” Wanda said. “I told him I appreciated the apology but that the person he really needs to make amends to is Humphries, and then to himself. Florence, whatever became of your friend, Eileen?”

Florence stared blankly at the table in front of her before answering.

“I haven’t a clue. It’s as if she vanished off the planet. No phone call. No letter. Nothing.”

Then table went silent for a moment before Humphries set down his fork.

“I don’t need an apology from Lawrence,” he said quietly. “What happened years ago—the frame-up, the investigation, all of it—that’s what led to this. To all of us being here. To me getting sober. To finding Sheila. To the company being rebuilt on legitimate foundations. If that’s what it took for this to occur, I would do it all over again.”

He looked around the table.

“I’m not saying what they did was right,” he continued. “But I’m also not sure I would undo it if I could. Because undoing it would

mean undoing everything that came after. And everything that came after...this," he waved his hands in the air, "is excellent! As for Eileen, I hope she finds the same happiness we have found. One can only hope."

"That's very evolved of you," Sheila said.

"Or very delusional," Humphries replied with a slight smile. "I'm still figuring out the difference."

They all laughed and the dinner continued—ordinary conversation about ordinary things, punctuated by moments of genuine affection and the comfortable silence of people who had chosen to be family.

This, Humphries thought, was what he'd been searching for all along. Not wildness. Not escape. Not fantasy. Just this: real people, real connection, real love.

The dimples on Wanda's ass in his delusional fantasy had led him here. Admittedly they still winked at him from time to time. But it was the reality of Wanda's humanity—and Sheila's, and Florence's, and Marcus's—that had saved him.

* * * * *

There is a demanding quality to the space two people create when they choose each other not out of obligation, or tradition, but out of genuine recognition of who the other person actually is.

This space is not perfect. It is not without conflict or difficulty. But it is real. And reality, it turns out, is more sustaining than any fantasy.

* * * * *

Florence stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows of the condo she shared with Marcus and watched the city lights flicker in the darkness below. It was late—nearly midnight—and Marcus was already asleep in the bedroom behind her. But Florence couldn't sleep. She was thinking about the past four years.

About the morning she'd drunk black coffee and decided to leave

Humphries. About discovering Eileen with Lawrence and confronting her own complicity in performing contentment. About Marcus finding her on the roadside and offering his help without expectation. About the slow, careful process of building a life based on genuine choice rather than inherited obligation.

The condo was small—one bedroom, open kitchen, a living room with these enormous windows that made the space feel larger than it was. But it was theirs. She and Marcus owned it. It was not inherited. Nor was it arranged by fathers or social expectation. It was chosen—by the two of them, together.

Florence had sold her share of the suburban house to Humphries and used the money to pay for physical therapy school and contribute to the condo's down payment. Marcus had sold his small massage practice and invested in their shared future.

They were building something together. Not a performance of domestic contentment, but an actual partnership based on mutual respect and genuine affection.

Florence heard Marcus stir in the bedroom.

"Can't sleep?" he called out softly.

"Just thinking," Florence said.

Marcus appeared in the doorway, wearing pajama pants and nothing else, his body relaxed and comfortable in a way that suggested complete acceptance of his life.

"About what?" he asked, coming to stand beside her at the window.

"About how different everything is," Florence said. "Four years ago, I was married to a man I didn't love, living in a house that felt like a prison, and performing contentment for bridge partners who didn't actually care about me."

"And now?" Marcus asked.

"Now I'm standing in a condo with a man I chose, with a man I love," she said. "I am learning a profession that I am actually interested in. Building a life that makes sense, even though it shouldn't. Living a life that's mine instead of someone else's idea of what my life should be."

Marcus put his arm around her shoulders.

“Do you miss it sometimes?” he asked. “The old life?”

“No,” Florence said immediately, “not at all.” Then, more carefully, “Sometimes I miss the simplicity of not having to make choices. Of just following the script. But I don’t miss the life itself at all. That wasn’t living. That was just... existing. If even that.”

“And this?” Marcus asked.

“This is living,” Florence said. “This is real. This is a real life. No fantasies, or delusions. Just real.”

They stood together in silence, watching the city lights below.

Florence turned and told him, “I’m seeing Sheila for lunch tomorrow. Want to come?”

“I’d love to,” Marcus said. “How’s she doing?”

“Brilliantly,” Florence said. “She’s basically running First American at this point. Humphries jokes that he’s simply the figurehead while she does all the actual work.”

“That’s probably true,” Marcus said.

“Probably,” Florence agreed. “But he’s good at the figurehead part. He’s sober, focused, genuinely committed to rebuilding what was nearly destroyed. It’s remarkable, actually. I spent twenty-five years married to him and never saw him like this. In truth, I still have a difficult time believing it.”

“Because he wasn’t like this,” Marcus said. “He became this. This is what transformation looks like.”

Florence nodded. She thought about Humphries at Sunday dinner—serving pasta, telling stories, laughing with genuine warmth at Wanda’s jokes. He was unrecognizable from the drunk, incontinent man who had woken up on the living room floor four years ago.

But he was also, somehow, more himself. As if sobriety had revealed the person who had been buried under decades of alcohol and delusion.

“I’m glad we’re still friends,” Florence said. “Humphries and me. I was worried the divorce would make everything bitter.”

“Why would it?” Marcus asked. “You both chose truth over comfort. That’s not something to be bitter about.”

“I suppose not,” Florence said.

She leaned into Marcus's warmth and felt the weight of years of choices settle into something like peace.

This was her life now. Not perfect. Not without difficulty. But real. And reality, she'd discovered, was more than enough.

* * * * *

There is a certain structure to justice—not the dramatic structure of revolution, but the quiet structure of consequences finally arriving after years of delay.

A corrupt official is sentenced. A compromised executive faces terminal illness. A wealthy criminal serves time. And slowly, brick by brick, the structure of accountability is built.

* * * * *

Reginald Newhouse sat in his cell at the federal correctional facility and stared at the wall. Thirty years. That was his sentence for coercion, obstruction of justice, and conspiracy to manufacture false evidence. He would be eighty-two when he got out. If he lived long enough to get out.

The first year had been the hardest—the shock of incarceration, the loss of status, the brutal recognition that his wealth and position meant nothing inside these walls. But the second year had been worse. Because the second year was when he'd stopped being able to rationalize what he'd done.

He had tried, at first, to tell himself he had been protecting the integrity of the investigation. That framing Humphries Feelgood had been a necessary sacrifice in order to catch the bigger criminals. But that lie had collapsed under the weight of recorded evidence.

Affron's and the FBI's recordings had captured everything—Reginald's conspiracy with the Mathews siblings, his willingness to destroy an innocent man to protect the wealthy and powerful. Everything. There was no ambiguity. No room for rationalization. Just the brutal truth of what he'd become: a corrupt criminal.

Reginald stood and walked to the small window of his cell. Outside in the prison yard, other inmates talked with each other. Guards lined the high walls that separated him from the world he had once inhabited.

He thought about Pierce Williams—the man he had tried to corrupt, who had ultimately chosen integrity over career. Pierce was now the Director of Securities Fraud. Reginald had seen the announcement in the newspaper a fellow con gave him a few years ago.

Pierce Williams Promoted to Director Following Successful Prosecution of Mathews Insider Trading Case.

The article had praised Pierce's integrity, his commitment to justice, his role in exonerating the innocent Humphries Feelgood and ensuring that the actual criminals faced consequences.

It had made no mention of Pierce's initial agreement to fabricate evidence. That part of the story had been buried—not covered up, exactly, but rather contextualized as a moment of weakness that Pierce had overcome through confession and moral courage.

Reginald realized he felt no bitterness about this. He understood, with the clarity that comes from having nothing left to lose, that Pierce had made a different choice. He had chosen truth over comfort. He had faced his moral compromise and corrected it, while Reginald had doubled down on his own corruption and paid the price. Thirty years.

He returned to his bunk and lay down, staring at the ceiling. This was justice. Not the dramatic justice of revolution, but the quiet justice of consequences finally arriving. He had attempted to destroy lives. Now his life was destroyed.

The architecture was sound.

* * * * *

Lawrence Mathews III sat in the prison library and wrote a letter to Eileen. It was his third attempt. The first two had been too apologetic, too self-pitying, too focused on his own suffering rather than acknowledging what he'd done. This one, he hoped, would be different.

Dear Eileen,

I'm writing to you from prison, which probably seems absurd given that we only knew each other for one afternoon four years ago. But that afternoon changed my life in ways I'm still trying to understand.

You were the first woman I was ever attracted to. The first person who made me question everything I thought I knew about my identity and sexuality. And I responded to that gift by running away—not physically, but emotionally. I let my fear of change override my capacity for genuine connection. Plus, as you know, I was arrested.

I'm serving ten years for insider trading and fraud. My sister, Amelia, is on probation—ten years, though she'll likely serve less if she continues to cooperate with authorities.

We destroyed companies. We ruined lives. We built our wealth on fraud and manipulation and believed our privilege would protect us from consequences. It didn't.

I'm not writing to ask for forgiveness or to rekindle whatever we had that afternoon. I'm writing because I want you to know that you were right about something you said; identity is far more fluid and mysterious than we imagine.

I spent my entire adult life believing I was gay. And I was—I am. But I'm also capable of being attracted to you. Of even loving you, maybe, if I had been brave enough to explore what that meant.

I wasn't brave enough then. I'm trying to be brave enough now.

I hope you're well. I hope you and whoever you're with now (if anyone) are building something genuine.

You deserve that.

*With respect and gratitude,
Lawrence*

He read the letter three times, then sealed it in an envelope and addressed it to Eileen's last known address. He had no idea if she'd read it. No idea if she'd respond.

But writing it felt like a small act of courage—an acknowledgment that transformation requires facing the people we have hurt and the opportunities we have wasted.

* * * * *

Unbeknownst to Lawrence, Eileen would never receive this letter, nor any letters from Lawrence, or anyone else for that matter. After her realizations on life, and after Lawrence was both arrested and sentenced, she left for the Pecos Benedictine Monastery, Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, where, under the Olivetan Benedictine tradition of allowing both monks and nuns to form a community of enlightening souls, she would spend the next several years undergoing intensive Jungian unconscious and individuation therapy while enjoying the semi-arid, mountainous climate of Pecos, New Mexico.

* * * * *

Lawrence stood and walked to the prison mailbox, dropping the letter inside. Then he returned to his cell, where a photograph of Amelia sat on his small desk.

His sister. His co-conspirator. His family.

She visited once a month and they talked about the companies they'd destroyed, the lives they'd ruined, the wealth they'd accumulated through fraud.

They didn't make excuses. They didn't rationalize. They simply acknowledged what they had done and tried to figure out how to make amends.

Amelia had donated the remaining fifty million from her fund to various restitution programs. She had testified against other insider traders. She had cooperated fully with the authorities.

And she had lost Pierce.

That was the cost she spoke about most—not the money, or the status, or the probation, but the loss of a man who had loved her enough to compromise his integrity and then loved her even more to confess.

Pierce had visited her only once after her confession. They had sat in her parlor—the same parlor where they had first realized they had fallen in love with each other—and he had told her that he could not be with her.

Not because he did not love her. But because their love had been built on a foundation of moral compromise, and he needed to rebuild his integrity on solid ground.

Amelia had understood. She had told Lawrence about it during one of her visits, her voice steady but her eyes wet.

“He was right,” she’d said. “We could not build something genuine on a foundation of lies. Even if the lies were told out of love.”

Lawrence had agreed.

And now they were both serving their sentences—his literal, hers metaphorical—and trying to figure out what came after.

Ten years. Time enough to transform, if they chose to. Time enough to build something real from the wreckage of what they had destroyed.

Lawrence lay on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. Outside, in the world beyond these walls, Humphries Feelgood was running the company Lawrence had tried to destroy. Sheila Kowalski—Humphries’ daughter—was managing operations. Pierce Williams was Director of Securities Fraud. And somewhere, maybe, Eileen was reading his letter and deciding whether to respond.

The framework of justice was sound. The consequences were proportionate.

And Lawrence, for the first time in his life, was facing the truth of who he had been and who he might become. It was terrifying. But it was real.

And reality, he was learning, was the only foundation worth building on.

* * * * *

There is a unique quality to the moment when you realize that redemption is not a destination but a direction—not a place you arrive at but a path you choose to walk every day.

This is the path of transformation. It is not dramatic. It is not theatrical. It is, simply, persistent.

* * * * *

Pierce Williams sat in his office—his Director’s office now, not Reginald’s—and reviewed the final report on the Humphries Feelgood exoneration. It had taken years of careful work. Years of reviewing evidence, interviewing witnesses, documenting the fabricated case against Humphries and the actual crimes committed by the Mathews siblings. Years of rebuilding his integrity one decision at a time.

The report was comprehensive:

Humphries Feelgood was never charged with any crime related to the collapse of First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company. The evidence manufactured against him by former Director Reginald Newhouse was entirely fabricated. Mr. Feelgood was an innocent party who became entangled in a complex scheme of fraud through no fault of his own.

The actual perpetrators—Lawrence and Amelia Mathews, et al—have been prosecuted and sentenced. Additional fines totaling \$150 million have been levied against their estate. Restitution has been provided to all affected parties.

This office recommends that Mr. Feelgood receive a formal apology from the Securities Commission and that his record be permanently cleared of any association with this case.

Pierce signed the report and set it aside. Then he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a photograph. Amelia. Taken during their first meeting in her parlor, before everything collapsed. She was smiling—not the performed smile of social obligation, but a genuine expression of joy.

Pierce had loved her. Still loved her, if he was honest. But he couldn’t be with her. Not because she had committed crimes—though she had. Not because she had been sentenced—though she had been. But because their love had been built on a foundation of moral compromise, and Pierce needed to prove to himself that he could choose integrity over comfort. Even when it cost him everything.

He put the photograph back in the drawer and closed it. Then he picked up the phone and dialed Humphries’ office.

“First American, this is Margaret.”

“Margaret, this is Pierce Williams from the Securities Commission. Is Mr. Feelgood available?”

“One moment, please.”

The line clicked.

Then Humphries’ voice: “Pierce. Good to hear from you.”

“Humphries,” Pierce said. “I’m calling to let you know that the final exoneration report has been completed. You’ll receive a formal apology from the Commission within the week, and your record will be permanently cleared.”

There was a pause.

Then Humphries said: “Thank you. I know that took a lot of work.”

“It was the least I could do,” Pierce said quietly. “Given that I was part of the original conspiracy to frame you.”

“You confessed,” Humphries said. “You chose integrity over career. That matters more than the initial mistake.”

“Does it?” Pierce asked.

“Yes,” Humphries said firmly. “Because transformation isn’t about never making mistakes. It’s about facing them when you do, and choosing differently the next time.”

Pierce felt his throat tightening.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” Humphries replied. “And Pierce? I hope you find what you’re looking for. Whatever that is.”

“I’m working on it,” Pierce said.

They said goodbye and hung up.

Pierce sat in his office—the Director’s office, earned through confession and moral courage—and understood with succinct clarity that redemption was not a destination but a direction.

He was walking that path. One decision at a time. One day at a time. Building an architecture of integrity that would last.

There is an elevated dignity when you realize that the life you’re living—imperfect, difficult, uncertain—is exactly the life you chose. Not the life you inherited. Not the life you performed. But the life you built through accumulated choices toward truth.

This is freedom. Not the absence of constraint, but the presence of genuine agency.

* * * * *

Years after the simultaneous moral reckonings that had transformed all their lives, the extended family gathered one more time. Not for Sunday dinner, nor for a holiday. But for Manfred Young's funeral.

He had died peacefully in his sleep, six months after the executive washroom dedication, surrounded by family and free from pain.

The service was small—just close friends and colleagues—it was held at a chapel across the street from First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company's headquarters.

Humphries sat in the front row with Sheila beside him. Behind them sat Florence and Marcus, Wanda in her wheelchair, George (who had built the washroom), and a handful of First American employees who had worked with Manfred for decades.

The eulogy was delivered by Manfred's daughter, who spoke about her father's dedication to the company, his struggle with illness, and other struggles as well (though his family was loath to speak of the embezzlement schemes specifically), and their gratitude for the small dignities that had made his final months more comfortable. She made mention of the executive washroom.

"My father joked that he'd spent the last part of his career running to the bathroom," she said, her voice breaking slightly. "But in his final months, he had a place of dignity and comfort. A place where he could rest without embarrassment. And he was grateful for that. I, we, the family, are grateful to Humphries Feelgood, who somehow understood what my father needed even when he couldn't ask for it directly."

Humphries felt tears on his face. Not tears of grief—though he was grieving—but tears of recognition. Years ago he had been drunk and delusional, completely misunderstanding what Manfred needed.

But somehow, through a series of events no one could have ever orchestrated, his delusion had led to genuine compassion.

The washroom had been built. Manfred had found comfort. And Humphries had learned that even our most misguided efforts can lead to good if we're willing to face the truth when it arrives.

After the service, they gathered in the parking lot—the same parking lot where Humphries had nearly killed a tamale vendor four years earlier and where now stood a brand new, permanent tamale stand.

“He was a good man,” Sheila said quietly.

“He was,” Humphries agreed. “He gave me a chance when I didn’t deserve one.”

“You deserved it,” Florence said, standing beside Marcus. “You just didn’t know it yet.”

Humphries looked at his extended family—these people who had chosen to be in his life, who had built something genuine from the wreckage of his delusions.

“Thank you,” he said. “All of you. For not giving up on me when I had given up on myself.”

“No one gave up on you,” Wanda said from her wheelchair. “They just waited for you to stop running from the truth.”

“And when you finally stopped,” Sheila added, “you became the person you were always capable of being.”

They stood together in the parking lot as the other mourners departed. A family that made no sense on paper. A family built from truth and choice and the persistent commitment to genuine connection.

Humphries looked up at the third floor of the First American Teleflorist and Life Insurance Company building, where an executive washroom bore Manfred’s name. It was a monument to dignity. A reminder that even delusions can lead to compassion if we’re willing to face reality when it finally arrives.

“Come,” Florence said gently. “Let’s go home.”

And they did—this unlikely family, this construction of genuine connection—driving away from the funeral and toward the lives they’d chosen. Lives built not on fantasy or performance or comfortable delusion, but on truth. On reality. On the persistent, daily choice to live authentically instead of hiding.

The walls had stopped. The LSD had worn off. The confessions had been made and consequences had been faced.

And now, in the quiet aftermath of transformation, they were all simply living. Not perfectly. Not without difficulty. But genuinely. That, in the end, was all that mattered.

The construction of their new lives had been built. Brick by brick. Choice by choice. Day by day. It was solid. It was real.

It was enough.



Other works by dave boles:

Do Aluminum Chickens Eat Metal Feed?

Media Dissertation Of A Balding Man

A Small Answer To A Large Question

ALIVE IN AMERICA: Politics,
Psychedelics & An Illuminated Monkey

CABO DAYS

4th Floor: Paranoia, Depression
& Other States Of Mind

Confessions Of A Black Ink Junkie

15 Days To Slow The Curve -
One Mans Journey Into The
Heartland Of Absurdity

Jonny Vee: Psychedelic Detective
And The Gringo Shaman

A Journey Through Diverse Mysteries

About The Wedding

Coyote Magic

Coyote Vision

Coyote Spirit

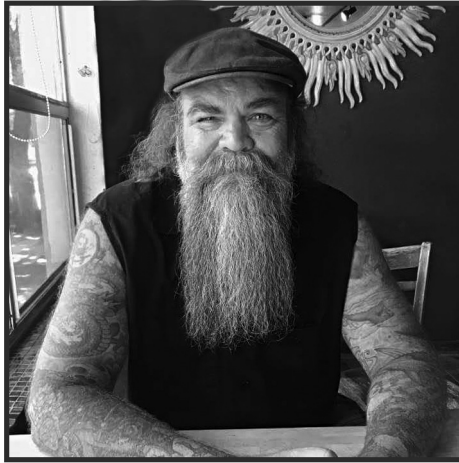
OFFERINGS

Homage To A Word

Visions Of A Merciful Land

WAR

About The Author



dave (Bodhi) Boles operates at the intersection where ink meets impulse, where the page becomes a launching pad rather than a landing strip. As a Publisher, Editor, Writer, and Designer, he's built a body of work that refuses to sit still—appearing in publications both national and international, leaving fingerprints on the literary landscape like a benevolent vandal with impeccable taste and a doctorate in divine mischief.

His journey began in the early 80's with *Primal Urge*, a magazine that functioned less as periodical and more as detonation device. From that initial explosion bloomed three publishing houses—Neural Impulse Publications, Cold River Press, and Bodhidharma Publishing—each one a different frequency on the same wild radio dial, each one proof that one good idea, properly nurtured and sufficiently unhinged, can spawn entire ecosystems. Devoting these last two decades to Cold River Press, Dave has published many and numerous poets and writers, some known, some not, but all with words, with stories, that needed to be told. For the past fifteen years he has also published *VOICES*, an eclectic anthology of poetry, prose, photography and art curated from contributions sent from around the globe.

His chapbooks and books read like transmissions from a parallel dimension where humor and profundity share the same zip code: *Media Dissertation Of A Balding Man* contemplates follicular and media suspicion with the philosophy and gravitas it deserves; *Do Aluminum Chickens Eat Metal Feed?* asks the questions others are too timid to pose; and *Confessions Of A Black Ink Junkie* wears its addiction proudly on its sleeve.

His full-length works—*OFFERINGS*, *ALIVE IN AMERICA*, *15 DAYS TO SLOW THE CURVE*, and especially his *COYOTE SERIES*—*COYOTE MAGIC*, *COYOTE VISION*, and *COYOTE SPIRIT*—map a territory where the personal becomes mythic and the mythic expands to include the everyday (with a healthy dose of psychedelics thrown in for good measure).

Earning a Doctorate in Divinity he founded *The Church of The Illuminated Monkey*, where he holds the position of Gringo Shaman. It is not performance art, it is not irony eating its own tail. It is an approach to life, to a reality, that understands the sacred doesn't have to require solemnity. Enlightenment might arrive riding a joke, or perhaps a hallucination, but it will, if you're aware and paying attention, arrive.

Though in the past traveling and living widely, these days, Dave resides at Lake House with his wife, Mrs. America, and a collection of animals who've found their way to what he calls "*the Illuminated Monkey's Home For Wayward Poets And Socially Bereft Humans*." His life-long friend Mescalito still keeps watch over him, sending a Red Hawk to check in from time to time—because even shamans need someone looking out for them, and even poets and writers, especially poets and writers, need reminding that the world is stranger and more generous than any story they could write about it.

Lake House stands as sanctuary and laboratory, a place where the lost find themselves and the found lose themselves just enough to remember what they started searching for in the first place. It's where Dave continues to publish, to write, to design, to drift—always moving, always creating, always listening for the next impulse, primal or otherwise, that will carry him toward whatever comes next.

About The Foreword



Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas recently earned an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her chapbook, *Before I Go To Sleep*, won the 2012 Red Ochre Press Chapbook Contest. In 2019, *An Ode to Hope in the Midst of Pandemonium* was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Book Award. Her collection, *Alice in Ruby Slippers*, was shortlisted for the Eric Hoffer Grand Prize in 2021 and received an Honorable Mention in the poetry category. She has served as editor-in-chief for *The Orchards Poetry Journal* and *Tule Review*. A thirteen-time Pushcart Prize nominee and seven-time Best of the Net nominee, her work has appeared or is upcoming in the following journals: *The Comstock Review*, *Redactions*, and *Verse Daily*. She has served on the Board of Directors for The Sacramento Poetry Center and Women's Wisdom Art. Recently, she received a certificate of achievement from the California Writers Club and was named Centennial Poet for her contributions during their 100-year celebration. She is a California Poet-Teacher in the Schools and an Associate Editor at Kelsay Books.

Author's Note

In 1959, a chronic alcoholic walked into a psychiatric clinic in Saskatchewan, Canada. He had tried everything—detox programs, therapy, willpower, prayer. Nothing worked. Within hours of receiving a single dose of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), he reported a profound spiritual experience that he described as “seeing God.” A year later, he remained sober. He was not alone. According to the researchers who treated him, between 40 and 45 percent of chronic alcoholics given LSD in controlled settings achieved lasting sobriety—a success rate that remains impressive even by today’s standards.

The researchers were two Canadian psychiatrists working in Saskatchewan: Dr. Humphry Osmond and Dr. Abram Hoffer. Dr. Osmond, a British-trained psychiatrist who had emigrated to Canada, was particularly interested in the biochemical basis of mental illness. He and his colleague, Dr. John Smythies, had observed that mescaline (another psychedelic compound) produced effects similar to schizophrenia symptoms and had a chemical structure similar to adrenaline. This led them to theorize about the biochemical origins of psychosis.

But it was in treating alcoholism that Dr.’s Osmond and Hoffer would make their most significant contribution. In the early 1950s, alcoholism was considered largely untreatable. Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935, offered a spiritual program that worked for some, but relapse rates remained devastatingly high. Medical interventions were limited to detoxification and supportive care. The prognosis for chronic alcoholics was grim.

Osmond and Hoffer approached alcoholism treatment with LSD from a novel angle. Rather than using small doses repeatedly, as was common in psychotherapy at the time, they administered single large doses—typically 200 to 800 micrograms—in carefully controlled settings. The goal was not gradual insight but rather a profound, transformative experience. They called this approach “psychedelic therapy,” and Osmond coined the term “psychedelic” itself, from the Greek words for “mind” and “manifesting”—literally, “mind-manifesting.”

Within a decade, this research would be effectively impossible to conduct. The same substance that had shown such promise would be-

come a Schedule I controlled substance, classified alongside heroin as having “no currently accepted medical use.” Legitimate scientific inquiry would grind to a halt for nearly forty years. The story of psychedelics and alcoholism treatment is not primarily a story of science—it is a story of how cultural panic and political expediency can derail medical progress, and how decades later, researchers are painstakingly trying to recover what was lost.

Perhaps the most surprising advocate for LSD therapy of all was someone who might seem an unlikely candidate; Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Wilson’s interest in LSD represents one of the most fascinating and least-known chapters in the history of both AA and psychedelic research.

Wilson had achieved sobriety in 1934 following what he described as a profound spiritual experience while hospitalized for alcoholism. Lying in bed in despair, he had cried out, “If there is a God, let Him show Himself!” What followed was a transformative experience—a white light, a sense of presence, a feeling of liberation from his obsession with alcohol. This experience became the foundation for AA’s emphasis on spiritual awakening as central to recovery.

By the mid-1950s, Wilson was acutely aware of a problem; many alcoholics came to AA but could not achieve the spiritual awakening that he considered essential for lasting sobriety. They worked the steps, attended meetings, but something was missing. When Wilson learned about the LSD research being conducted by Osmond and others, he immediately saw the potential connection.

In 1956, Wilson took LSD for the first time under medical supervision. He was profoundly impressed. Over the next several years, he took LSD multiple times and began advocating for its use within AA circles. He formed an experimental group in New York that included a Catholic priest, Father Ed Dowling, and other carefully selected individuals. These sessions were conducted with medical supervision, typically at the home of wealthy AA members who could provide appropriate settings.

Wilson’s enthusiasm for LSD is best captured in his correspondence with Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist. Jung had treated an alcoholic patient named Rowland Hazard in the 1930s and had told him that his only hope for recovery was a spiritual experience. This conversation had indirectly led to the founding of AA. In 1961, Wilson wrote to

Jung describing the LSD research:

"It is our hope that the use of this material [LSD] can be carefully studied and validated... We think that it might be possible to develop a therapy which would be helpful to certain types of alcoholics who are unable to achieve a spiritual awakening through the AA program alone."

Jung responded positively, noting that he agreed with Wilson's assessment that some alcoholics required a profound psychic transformation—what Jung called a "conversion"—to overcome their addiction. The correspondence between these two giants of addiction treatment and psychology, discussing the potential of LSD, represents a remarkable moment in medical history.

But Wilson's advocacy for LSD remained largely secret. He never publicly endorsed it, and many in AA were uncomfortable with his experiments. The organization's emphasis on complete abstinence from all mind-altering substances seemed to conflict with the use of a powerful psychedelic, even in a therapeutic context. As the 1960s progressed and LSD became increasingly associated with counterculture and recreational use, Wilson's experiments became even more controversial within AA circles.

By the late 1960s, Wilson had largely stopped advocating for LSD, though he never renounced his belief in its potential. His experiments represent a road not taken—a vision of how psychedelics might have been integrated into addiction treatment if circumstances had been different.

Humphry Osmond, reflecting late in life on his pioneering work, expressed both pride and regret. He was proud of what he and his colleagues had discovered but regretful that the research had been interrupted just as it was becoming most promising. "We were on the verge of something important," he said. Now, more than half a century later, we have a chance to finish what Osmond started—to fully explore the therapeutic potential of psychedelics for alcoholism and to do so with the scientific rigor and ethical care that this powerful tool demands.

The history of psychedelics and alcoholism treatment is ultimately a story about the complex relationship between science, culture, and politics. It reminds us that medical progress is not inevitable—it can be derailed by fear, stigma, and moral panic. But it also reminds us that good ideas, grounded in genuine therapeutic benefit, have a way of returning. The question remains is whether we have learned enough from history to do better in the future.

On Your Way To Nirvana Would You Please Put Out The Cat (first printing), is published in an edition of 200 copies, and is also distributed in unlimited copies via PDF, and EPub.

Text: Body is Adobe Garamond Pro, 12pt leading 15pt. Headings are in Book Anitqua Bold, 14pt leading 16pt, stretched 124 percent horizontally, with a horizontal tracking of +25. Page numbers are Adobe Caslon Pro, 10 pt with a 75 percent tint.

Cover: Book title is based on Ravie, modified, beveled, stretched and airbrushed. Back cover blurb is based on Pare, modified, beveled, stretched and airbrushed.

Author bio photo, and Back Cover photo is by Mrs. America.

Cover artwork, *And Then There Was The Cat* is original digital art by *Bodhi*.

Paper: Interior pages are printed on 60# white 3.7 Caliper, 541 PPI. Soft Cover is printed on 12pt Cover stock 541 PPI and gloss laminated before binding.

Printing: Text was printed on an Oce 6250 digital printer. Cover was printed using a Xerox Versant 3100.

Binding: Book is soft cover perfect bound.





A dark comedy about the lies we tell ourselves—and the explosive moment when the lies come crashing down.

Set against a backdrop of illegal insider trading, forced sobriety, and unexpected desire, *On Your Way to Nirvana Would You Please Put Out the Cat*, is a darkly comic exploration of moral compromise, authentic connection, and the shocking price of transformation.

Through sharp wit and unflinching honesty, author dave boles reveals how the gap between who we pretend to be and who we actually are can only be bridged by embracing the terrifying vulnerability of genuine choice.

A novella about failure, love, and the unlikely architecture of genuine connection built from the wreckage of our moral crises.

COLD RIVER PRESS

\$18.95 US

