

The Dragon's Covenant

By

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PREFACE

My name is John Armando, I'm known in the underworld as Don Armando. I am vilified as a killer, a crook, a don and maybe I am these things they call me, but every dragon has a heart, the question is, do you even want to touch it. I'd start by telling you about what I have to deal with. My daughter woke up one morning abandons her husband and my three grandchildren and she expects me not to send her back, even if he slaps around one's in a while. I have to collect half a million from a grifter, he is a good man, but if he doesn't have my money, I'd kill his ex-wife, then his girlfriend, then him, after I make him believe I'd kill his teenage daughter. I'm not a barbarian, I don't kill children. I have an assassin who was paid 40 million to have me dead, a truly impressive amount and the fact is, the assassin never misses. So, I have a writer writing my biography, if the assassin kills me, the world will know my story but if I survive the assassin, then I'd have to kill the writer. So that's what's on my mind today and you thought it was easy being me.

Chapter 1

(What's a story without the players?)

His shoes tapped on the marble floor of the Four Seasons. He was aware of the attention that his presence was gathering, but, as the only son of Thomas Clarence, II, multi-millionaire industrialist, he was used to it. He'd been getting it -since he was four-years-old. All he had to do was look at the receptionist with his hazel eyes, well trimmed moustache and her response was instantaneous.

"She's waiting for you in her suite," the uniformed attendant of the five star hotel said, snapping her finger at the bellboy to led him to her room.

As soon as he entered the elevator, the receptionist dialed a number. A female voice answered, "Yes?"

"Candace Brown?"

"Yes."

"He's in the building, on his way to Speaker Schulman's suite," the receptionist heard the other line click silent.

The speaker's aide opened the door to the suite after Thomas' third knock. The suite contained a series of rooms, including a dining room, a conference room and an open living room with floor to ceiling windows. At the round table in the conference room sat men in rumpled suits who were more arguing than discussing. They ignored him as he wasn't pertinent to their discussion. The aide just gave him a curt nod and pointed in the direction of a woman on the phone.

She was sitting, cross-legged at a glass table covered in chinaware. The New York Times was covering her upper body. He halted for a few minutes to study her. She had short white hair, fiery eyes, wrinkles by her cheek and a look that invited both sex and fear. He walked toward her through the sliding door onto the balcony. Thoughts sped through his mind. The last time that they had met, it was the other way around, with her coming toward him and he, seated, watching her approach.

At 52, Jessica Anne Schulman had become the first Republican Female Speaker of the House. Born Jessica Randle in Alabama to a farmer and seamstress, at the age of 10 all that she dreamed of was to get married and spend the rest of her life as a housewife. The years changed her dreams as her independence overrode her childhood fantasies. In high school, she was the best in her class and received a scholarship to Ohio State University to study psychology. At 19, her brains and beauty combined to get her crowned Miss Ohio. She had never wanted the world to perceive her only as a pretty face, but she decided that in order to get where she wanted to go in life, she needed to use what she had. Her triumph at the pageant allowed her to gain some exposure in the public eye and she vowed to use it to influence those with power. At 21, she married a 63-year-old tobacco tycoon. The next year, she bore him a daughter. Much to her displeasure, her husband lived until he was 80. However, when he died, he left everything to her and she took over his business like a tigress. The fact that she was a woman in a man's world only made her work harder. Somewhere along the line, she realized that the key to making deals with men was hookers and beer. Yet, she never used sex to close a deal and managed to forgo having a sexual relationship with any man after her husband's death. It wasn't that she was mourning his death, but, instead, was partially a matter of power and superiority and partially an attraction to women.

After two years of not making any headway in her husband's company, she sold her shares and opened three cosmetic companies in California, Michigan and New York. She also became an investor in a gossip magazine, Trace, because she believed that the woman who owned the magazine, Brisha Ajah, had a lucrative dream and she had a crude attraction to the woman.

Jessica was a heavy donor to charitable causes, although her donations were always 20% compassion and 80% tax reduction. Her aggressive nature made her popular among Ohioans and it wasn't surprising that she ran for Congress as a Republican and won. In her third term as a congresswoman, she received a package containing pictures of a sexual liaison that she had engaged in with her female personal assistant, Margaret Brooks. The pictures and the accompanying blackmail caught her off guard. The note attached let her know that as long as she held her office, the blackmail would continue and, eventually, even the payment wouldn't be enough and the pictures would simply go to the highest bidder. Jessica Schulman was a master of the clandestine and, as such, was certain that it was her own lover blackmailing her. It didn't take long for her to put her revenge plan in motion. First, she confided in her personal assistant about the blackmail and then considered the best way to rid herself of the menace. She briefly considered killing Margaret herself, but she wasn't stupid and realized that the pictures might simply end up in the hands of someone even more sinister. Next, she considered asking Armando, the mafia Don, to kidnap and torture Margaret until she gave up the location of the photos, but she realized that he might simply be the fox to her birdcage and then she would be facing an entirely new problem. Instead, she decided to utilize Thomas Clarence III. He was the envy of every man and the Adonis to women's fantasy. A self-made millionaire with a daddy complex, he was god-like in his beauty, standing six feet two with corn silk colored hair, blue eyes and broad shoulders. He had a commanding presence that could make anyone cower before his Hugo Boss covered frame. Jessica knew that Margaret sexually idolized Thomas and, so, she enlisted him to woo Margaret. Thomas was not one to let his romances get the best of him and always ended them before having to propose matrimony. Jessica circumvented this issue by

offering Thomas anything that he desired in exchange for securing the pictures as nothing was out of Jessica's reach.

Margaret Brooks became somewhat of a celebrity thanks to her relationship with Thomas. He bumped into her at an Italian restaurant and quickly swept her off her feet. She fell in love more with the lifestyle that came from dating him than from his actual presence. She reveled in having her picture taken by reporters. She felt as if she were the queen of the world, finally out from under the shadow of her boss.

It took Thomas three months before he located the pictures. Three months of pure hell. He had never met a woman who had been able to keep his attention for long, six months was the most anyone had every achieved, but Margaret wasn't even worth six minutes of his attention. Having to spend time with her was like having acid poured into his lungs. He had searched her house dozens of times, but was still unable to locate the pictures.

Then, one day, in the middle of an act of sexual passion, he whispered how much lesbians turned him on. In a desperate attempt to impress and ensnare him, Margaret eagerly told him of her penchant for lesbian encounters. He teasingly called her a liar, but she refused to back down. The next morning, she left the house early to retrieve proof of her escapades. He followed her to the post office. He watched her open the mailbox and remove only the pictures, leaving the negatives behind. He swallowed one more night of unfulfilled intercourse, then disappeared with the pictures and the keys to her mailbox, while Margaret slept. That was the day that their relationship ended.

Before giving the congresswoman both the pictures and the negatives, he made his request: 10% of her shares in her cosmetic companies. While Jessica understood that this request was blackmail, it was a blackmail that she had invited upon herself. However, she did find

herself growing to hate the man whom she had considered a Democrat of integrity. His demand was 100 times more expensive than the bitch had been blackmailing her for. She briefly thought of declining his request, but knew that those pictures surfacing would ruin any chance she had of getting reelected. Still, it would be difficult to explain to her daughter why she had decided to give 10% of her inheritance to a perfect stranger simply out of the goodness of her heart. But it would have been even harder to explain that a pure Christian conservative and a vocal opponent against gays in the military, was a lesbian. She chose to hold on to her power in Washington, instead of her power in the cosmetic industry.

That day, she paved her way to becoming the Speaker of the House, but lost her relationship with her daughter. Her daughter took her shares and walked away from the cosmetic companies. They hadn't spoken since.

Now, four years later, Thomas was walking toward her table, asking for her help. She saw his reflection in the china on the table as she sat with the newspaper spread open before her. This was their third appointment in the last three months and she had purposely forgotten to make the other two.

"Jessica, darling, how are you doing?" He sat.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you to ask before taking a seat?" Her tone was cold with just a trace of a southern accent. Her hair was cut short and her pinstripe wool skirt suit showed that her figure was still carved like stone.

"You stood me up twice," he continued.

"Can you smell that?" she asked, turned the page of her newspaper.

"What?" he replied.

“Desperation.” She pulled her glasses away from her face, providing a clear view of her green eyes.

“Talk about going for the jugular.”

“Payback is a bitch.”

“Payback, I thought you were just being your power driven self... No offense,” he responded.

“None taken, I remember when you were a little boy and...”

“Save the speech for the press. You never knew me when I was little.”

“You would be surprised.”

“I think...” he started.

“Your thoughts are unnecessary to me.”

“Really, Jessica,” Thomas stretched out on the balcony, pulled a Marlboro cigarette from a metallic box. He lit it with a Dunhill lighter, inhaled and puffed out a perfect ring of smoke. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“I do,” she reached over, pulled the cigarette from his lips and stubbed it out on the table.

“And I would prefer if you would call me Speaker Schulman.”

“Bad habits, Jessica.”

“I have a story to tell you,” Jessica started.

“Let me guess...,” Thomas interrupted, “Is it about how women should remain in the kitchen?”

She gave him a half smile, “You’re still a little prick.”

He leaned over the table toward her, “You truly underestimate my... range.”

“I doubt that. From what I heard, you have what your daddy had and it was a bit disheartening.” A frown fractured his face. She continued. “Don’t tell me that I hit a weak spot? I thought your mama was the only one who could bring a tear to your eye.”

“I suggest that we get this over with.”

“Why? I was just beginning to have some fun,” she raised her eyebrows, knowing that her prey was cornered and ready to deal to get out of the situation. He crossed his legs nervously and the morning sun glinted off of his polished shoes.

“I heard that when your mother died, she still wanted the Ex-senator by her side... I mean your father. The same man who proudly flashed his mistress to their friends. ”

“Jessica, if this is about your daughter walking out on you just because you gave me 10% of your companies, well, then, I hope the episode gives you a heart attack.”

“Nice...the scorpion can still sting. I was wondering how long your kiss ass routine was going to last. Anyway, Tommy boy, I doubt a heart attack will be what does me in. The way that things are going, this good old southern girl will be sticking around in Washington much longer than the boys expect me to.”

“In your dreams, O’Neill is going to win by landslide. It’s a pity that Ohio is going to go blue.”

“You pig,” she replied.

“I’m sorry...did I, by any chance, make you believe that I thought otherwise?”

“For a man requesting a favor, you certainly do have a sharp tongue,” she said as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Face it, Jessica. I’m not speaking as a Democrat, but as a believer. That man is the real deal. His actions speak much louder than his words.”

“And my past actions are nothing to write home about?” she spit the question at him as anger started to ooze out of her, in her body language and voice.

“You did it okay, but he’ll do better.”

She stared into his eyes and decided to end this game. “No more foreplay. I suggest you start spilling the beans.” She snapped her fingers and her aide, a man in his early 40s, came forward and whispered in her ear.

“Ten minutes,” she said to the aide as he left, closing the door behind him. Then, she turned back to face Thomas, the cover boy of Fortune Magazine three months earlier. “Now, you have nine minutes and thirty seconds. You better start talking.”

“I need your help.”

“Are you actually admitting that you need the help of a woman?”

“You know why I’m here.”

“Yes, but I want to hear it from your dirty lips.”

“The family,” he paused. “They are hindering my ability to get contracts to build submarines for the government.”

“The family?” she inquired.

“That clique of Republican men who think that they are the true owners of this country.”

“You underestimate them. They think that they own the planet.”

She paused, stood and walked behind Thomas. Then, she leaned on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. “This isn’t about the submarines. If you lose that deal, you won’t lose a dollar. This is about the war you’ve been fighting with your father since you were 18.”

He sighed and squinted his eyes before replying, “Seventeen.”

She walked back to her seat and sat down. “That group is very powerful in the House, there are too many of them for me to fight them alone. You know that your father was one of them and many of them still owe him favors. They would fight to prevent you from getting the defense contracts.”

“They are helping him because they don’t have a good reason not to. He’s no longer a senator. You could give them that reason.”

“Can you afford it?” she kept her face expressionless, fighting the evil smile that she wanted to let loose.

“The equity in your industry has gone up over five million units. I would be willing to return your 10% to you.”

“Please! That doesn’t interest me at all. I have something much more important in mind.” Thomas knew at that moment that whatever she wanted was going to cost him much more than he had bargained for.

She lowered her voice and continued. “My chances against Sam O’Neill, as you have so eloquently stated, are bad. I can’t deny that. He’s a self-sacrificing war veteran...but without his foundation, his campaign will flicker and burn out.”

“His foundation?” Thomas asked.

“Of course, his eye-candy, 24-year-old wife.”

“The Asian lady?” He replied.

“You’ve done your homework.”

“I don’t think I’m following you.”

“Sam is head over heels in love with her. Married her in Paris when she was only 17 ignoring his advisors as they told him what it might do to his career. Now, she’s glued to his side. The self-sacrificing pig can’t go anywhere without her.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“I need pictures, preferably video tapes, of you having sex with her.”

“That would give Sam a heart attack.”

”Precisely.”

“Or...he might have already realized that someone as young and vibrant as she is wouldn’t allow herself to be restricted to someone so old.”

“No, I know this lovesick old fool. You take her from his side and he’ll lose any desire to be in this race.”

He chuckled, “Jessica, be serious. She loves everything about that old man, right down to the hair on his head.”

“She is 24 and he’s 56. She was poor and he’s rich. He has power and she was a nobody. Notice a trend?”

“Age is nothing, she might...” Jessica cut him off.

“Might what? I married an older man. I knew what I wanted. She knows what she wants and she’s getting it.”

“And that is?” he asked

“I honestly don’t know and don’t give a shit. Do we have a deal?” She rose from her chair prepared to leave the room.

“How can I be sure that you’ll hold up your end of the bargain?” he asked maintaining eye contact.

“You forget that honor exists among titans like us,” she said as she stretched out her hand. He took it, sealing the agreement. “I should be in Washington by the end of the day. You know how to get a hold of me.”

He turned to stare at the morning sun as she walked away. Turning back to him, she said, “You have three months and I’ll need updates.”

Thomas had only met Sam O’Neill once, but he had seemed like a truly decent man, an endangered sort of politician who really cared about the issues and the people. Now, he was going to be key to O’Neill’s downfall. Then again, he thought, if O’Neill’s wife succumbs to his charges, then he’s really doing O’Neill a favor. He estimated that it would only take about two weeks for that favor to become a reality.

“Men are pigs,” Brisha Ajah uttered from her Lincoln Navigator as her cell phone rang. Her elder sister sat on the passenger seat and her 15-year-old daughter lay on the back seat. “Yeah,” she said as she answered her phone.

“We’ve got something big on our hands. Clarence III met with Speaker Schulman,” Candace Brown responded.

“I’ve told you before Candace. We can’t put her in the magazine,” Brisha spat out.

“Come on, Brisha. News sells, and she is news. Big deal if she’s a shareholder. Her news would make more money for the magazine,” Candace pushed.

“I said no.” Brisha sounded harsher than she meant to. “What about the writer?”

“Kevin Connor?”

“Yes. Have you made contact?”

“He refuses to pick up the damn phone,” Candace replied.

“You’ll have to go to him then...or do you need me to handle it?”

“You know that he’ll never talk to anyone other than me.”

“Are you sure that you guys never had anything going on?” Brisha asked.

“I have a ring in my finger, Brisha. Plus, he’s not my type.”

“Sure,” Brisha cleared her throat.

“Honest.”

“Okay, so when are you going down?”

“I’m on my way now.”

“Don’t make us look desperate.”

“I’m a professional, Brisha.”

“All right. I’m off to the dentist. Toyin has a toothache. Call me when you are finished with him.”

“Sure.” They both hung up.

Brisha bore no resemblance to her elder sister, Regina Hines. Brisha was five-foot-seven, while her sister was six foot. Brisha’s face was oblong, while her sister’s was oval shaped. While Brisha’s build was athletic, Regina’s was a protruding hour glass structure, with well-structured buttocks, hips and breasts. Brisha was simple and trim, while her sister was the epitome of a voluptuous black woman. Brisha was the youngest of three girls. Her father was a reverend in a Baptist church and her mother was the head of the choir.

“Where was I?” the 33-year-old publisher said.

“Men are pigs,” Regina said loudly.

“You’ve got that right. They are good for nothing...maybe only one thing.”

“If only the vibrator could take out the trash,” Regina replied.

“You’re preaching to the choir,” Brisha gave her sister a high five.

“To be married to a man is like having your foot hammered to the ground. You’ve got to sacrifice everything for a self-absorbed piece of shit.”

“You got married to the same man twice,” Toyin Ajah said from the backseat. She resembled her aunt much more than her mother, except that she was slimmer and younger. The only area in which she resembled her mother was in her shapeless legs.

“And I divorced him twice, smart mouth,” her mother replied her, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

“You divorced him...that’s not what daddy told me,” Toyin said.

Her mother turned around, not caring about the road in front of her. “What did he say?”

“Brisha! The road!” Regina screamed. Brisha turned around and pulled the car back into its lane.

“Answer your mother,” Brisha spat at Toyin.

“He just jokingly says that when his girlfriend is around.”

“Girlfriend!” suddenly realizing her proximity to her daughter and sister, she mellowed her tone. “Not that I care. He’s got every right to go out with whoever he wants. It’s not that we still have anything. We’ve been divorced for a year.”

“Three years,” her daughter corrected.

Silence descended upon the car and the temperature inside seemed to rise. The car came to a stop behind a line of cars and a broken down truck.

“Mom, are they gonna fill my tooth or pull it out?” Toyin asked trying to break the silence.

“It’s going to, not gonna,” her mother retorted.

“You say ‘gonna’ all the time.”

“I’m your mother; I can say anything I want.” Brisha bristled. “I gave that son of a bitch the best 12 years of my life and he just can’t wait to dive into the nearest whore that comes along. What does she look like?”

There was a sharp silence in the car before Toyin responded, “Mummy, you’re swearing.”

“Don’t call me mummy! Act like a teenager, and try calling me by my name or mother or mom. What does she look like?”

“Are you talking to me?” Toyin said with a mischievous grin.

“I’m not kidding, Toyin. Is she like an ape or fat? I bet she’s ugly. I bet she’s got beaver teeth or something.”

“Not really, mom. She has this Naomi Campbell look.”

“Ooh! That’s cool...It’s cool, no sweat... Naomi Campbell.”

“Aha!” Brisha said as she realized that she knew her. They had met before. She wasn’t going to let either her daughter or sister see any apprehension. Later, she’d hire a private detective to trail her ex. Her daughter was right, the girl had Naomi Campbell’s body, but her daughter had skillfully not chosen a white model. Her daughter didn’t need glasses, she wasn’t colorblind and the girl was white.

Cars began moving around the broken down truck. Soon, the vehicles behind Brisha were honking at her to move.

“Brisha! Move the car,” her sister commanded.

“Oh sorry!” She stepped on the gas and started mumbling under her breath. “That bastard piece of shit, damn-Uncle Tom, ass-kissing pig.”

Regina kept her face solemn, but inside, she was jubilant, happy at the effect that Brisha's ex-husband was having on her. "Serves you right, you head strong, self-centered, power driven bitch," Regina thought.

"Damn that elevator," Candace Brown thought as she climbed the steps to the top floor of the five-story apartment building. She knew that she was out of her element as she was pale skinned with auburn hair and, as such, she appreciated seeing any non-black or Hispanic individuals during her climb. Between the couples kissing on the stairway and the people smoking marijuana, she wished that she'd brought her husband along. Never once, however, did she think of turning back. Stories were her life and this was an opportunity for the magazine to expand its readership.

She'd first met Brisha at a writer's forum at 42nd Avenue. At that time, Trace Magazine was strictly inclined toward the African-American market, competing with Ebony magazine. She'd been the editor of Gray Tone Books for 12 years and had succeeded in fishing out eight bestselling authors from the company's slush pile. Of course, she was never recognized for her efforts. When she first joined Gray Tone, it was during a time when you could get a job as an editor without having a college degree. Of course, it helped that she agreed to work for free, initially. It didn't matter that she was excellent at her job, she was still never offered the position of senior editor and her work was still routed through men who didn't know anything about the flow of good literary material.

When she met Brisha, they clicked instantly. Two years later, she was out of Gray Tone, working as a partner and the chief editor of Trace. It was her influence that helped change Trace

from an African-American magazine to a multicultural magazine. She then branched the magazine out as an E-Magazine long before it became popular. The magazine covered all of the issues in life, from politics to fashion and celebrities. The reinvention allowed them to market the magazine to all races and nations and made them ten times richer than either had imagined possible. Maybe it was her money, or maybe it was love, but, at the age of 43, a hunk of a man sprang out of nowhere and married her, not caring about her bossy nature or the fact that he was supposed to have the house clean and food ready when she got home. “Who says money can’t buy you love,” she thought.

The proliferation of the magazine required an egregious amount of cash, but she didn’t bother about the finances, that was Brisha’s problem. Candace only concentrated on the words. Now, they wanted to expand into books. She’d always had a hunger to be back within that arena and Kevin Connor was their door into that world.

Kevin was like most writers: an eccentric bohemian headache, but, at times, Candace wondered if he was on the brink of total madness. The year that she left Gray Tone, he’d sent them a superb query for his novel. It was about a man at the height of financial luxury waking up to turn logically mad. She had accepted the novel, but he’d only written six chapters and then stopped because he said that he didn’t have a muse to inspire him to finish. After she left the company, Gray Tone begged him to finish the work, but he simply told them that “the muse was divine, only heaven knew the time.” Two years later, Gray Tone told him to go to hell and walked away from the project. Since then, no literary agent or publisher wanted to touch him or his book.

Nineteen months later, she saw Kevin at Central Park playing in the sand like a toddler. She introduced herself, but he wasn’t interested in talking to her. She was used to that. He looked like the typical white junky. His black curly hair was askew and he wore baggy shorts, a long-

sleeved white shirt that was miraculously clean and a pair of loafers. She was positive that he was surviving on foot stamps. Instead of pressing the matter, she simply dropped her card next to him and left. Three months later, he called and offered to sell her an article for the magazine. The only catch was that he couldn't send it to her, she'd have to come over to his place to pick it up. His arrogance angered her. The magazine received piles of mail from people all over the world who wanted to have their articles published and, yet, this nobody who can't finish a novel felt that he had the right to order her around. She wanted to tell him "no way," but, at that time, she was single and had decoded his invitation as the gateway to a healthy relationship.

That was the first time that she had come to the building and, much to her dismay, she had learned that he just called her over to give her his article. She read the article if only to satisfy herself. The work was undeniably brilliant and focused on what would happen if men were women and vice versa. He called the article "Riders of a Crossed Empire." They published his work and paid him \$2,000. The reviews were astounding and, in no time, the world wanted to hear more from him.

As the true problem child that he was born to be, Kevin said he lacked the inspiration to write another article. They offered him three times his last payment, but he just kept saying, "When the muse shall set, quality would be born." They didn't understand what he meant. At certain points in her life, Candace salivated at the thought of killing him with her bare hands. He was unalterably an egotistical bastard. While she hated him, she had an unending desire to understand him and tap into his talent.

After nine months without any contact, Kevin had called her to inform her that he had another article for her. The second article was accepted on contact and they paid him \$4,000, hoping that the money would become his muse. His second article was entitled "The Dragon's

Covenant” and it was about the Devil’s view of existence, his own side of the story, correlating the rebellion of the Devil and God with the rebellion of man against itself.

Kevin became an overnight cult figure, but insisted that he didn’t want his life to change. In order to ensure his anonymity, Candace was the only one who actually knew what he looked like. After that article, he didn’t write anything for another year. During that year, the Mafia Chieftain of New York, John Armando, called the magazine to tell them that he would like them to publish his exclusive biography. The only catch was that it had to be written by Kevin Connor. Armando had read the article about the Devil and was determine to have the author write his biography. The magazine knew that such a project would take at least a month of solid interviewing and Kevin was a deranged punk. They tried offering Armando another author, but he was adamant. His insistence gave Brisha the push she needed and she agreed to try to get Kevin.

Candace arrived on the fifth floor of the brown stone apartment building on 21st street. From the corridor, she could hear a woman screaming from Kevin’s apartment, “You better have my rent by Thursday.”

“I had a chance to make you immortal. Your character would have been read for centuries to come, the world would have remembered your character.”

“Die hard, Kevin. I want the rent by Thursday,” just then a short, white middle-aged woman with rollers in her hair wearing a nightgown plodded out of the room and brushed past Candace. As she passed, she turned around, “What the hell are you looking at?”

Candace ignored her, and knocked on Kevin’s door. He didn’t answer so she knocked again. After repeated knocking, the door opened slightly. She pushed it open with her foot. The

apartment was covered in clothes and cobwebs hung everywhere. It was void of furniture except for a mat, phone and computer. The walls were sparkling white except for an abstract painting of concentric circles. The refrigerator, in the otherwise empty kitchen, kept vibrating.

Kevin was standing on the window pane dressed only in a white, long-sleeved shirt. He had a .38 revolver in his mouth. She screamed as she ran toward him, “Noooo!” She dove in the air for the gun, grabbed it and pulled, but he held it firmly in his mouth. She hit the ground on her knees still holding on to the gun.

He looked at her with a shocked expression, “What are you trying to do? Kill me?”

“No,” she indignantly replied.

“Are you mentally unstable, Kandize or Candi or whatever the hell your name is?”

She stood up, embarrassed, realizing that he was simply being himself and wasn't about to kill himself. “It's Candace and I thought that you were going to kill yourself.”

“And you wanted to protect me? Please! I know a good psychiatrist at Hudson St. I recommend that you meet him.”

Her hatred returned. “Then why in the world do you have a gun in your mouth?” she asked.

“Inspiration! Humans are so pathetic. Not that you would understand, but, I had to experience the near death syndrome in order to feel the actuality of suicide. Of course, you had to come in and spoil everything.”

“So, the gun's not loaded.”

“Of course it's loaded! Where do you come from? How can you experience suicide with an empty gun?”

“So, you wanted to kill yourself?”

“That’s a harsh way of putting it. I wanted to feel the experience, but, of course, if I didn’t feel it, then I might have had to pull the trigger.”

“You’re insane.”

“No! The world is insane and I, Kevin Connor, am the only sane person on this planet. I am mighty above all men. They know nothing. I’m in control. I see the world through eyes that man is not capable of using. They play with the minds of men and expect everyone to be the fool and follow.”

“Who?”

“The world. Everything is pre-planned. The AIDS virus, for instance, was created by man to kill man, not as a punishment from heaven. The world has been Sodom and Gomorrah ever since the Roman and Egyptian empires, so if God wanted to use the AIDS virus as a punishment, then it would have existed then. Yet, it appeared out of nowhere. It’s a conspiracy by the pharmaceutical companies who want to make money from it. It blossomed from nothing and now has dissipated into the developed countries, wiping out the developing countries. They found a cure that doesn’t actually cure it, instead it just makes you spend more money and become dependent upon expensive drugs.”

“Are you on drugs or something? I didn’t come here to talk about AIDS.”

He started pacing, “You may have a point.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“There really might not be anything like HIV or AIDS, just some manner off wiping the poor civilization and making a killing from antiretroviral drugs. The rich don’t die from AIDS, only the poor. By the way, could you spot me 50 bucks? I’ll give it back to you next week.”

Candace stared at him and wondered if he really was as mad as she thought. In her opinion, he had the kind of face that looked masculine only because of his disinterest. If he put on a dress, he might easily be mistaken for a woman. She reached into her purse and then stopped.

“It doesn’t cost anything to say please,” she said.

“Why?”

“You’re asking for money, the least you could do is say please.”

“Actually, come to think of it, I don’t really need the money. The Nazis already want to cut off my food stamps. Why are you here again?”

This meeting wasn’t going the way that Candace had expected it to. She reached into her purse, rooted out and pulled out the \$50.

“It’s unnecessary to me.”

“Just take it.”

“Why?”

“Suit yourself,” she said as she put the money back in her purse. She had already foreseen how the rest of the meeting would go, so she just cut to the chase. “We’d like you to write someone’s biography.”

“Please, Candace,” he said as he laid flat on the mat on his stomach exposing his bottom. “Trace can get over a hundred writers to do the job, so why me?”

Still standing, she looked around the emptiness of the apartment. Then, she turned to him and asked, “The money that you got paid...what did you do with it?”

“Food, sex and shelter.”

“You have sex? I thought that you were gay,” she said.

“Sex can go both ways. Anyway, I’m straight,” he responded.

“So, couldn’t she help you take care of this place?”

“Who?”

“Your partner.”

“There is no she.”

“But you said there was a she.”

“I never said that.”

“You said that you spent your money on sex.”

“Hookers... high classed hookers.”

Disgusted, she asked, “Are you taking the job?”

“I can’t degrade my artistry for such a cheap goal.” He rose to his feet and walked toward her. His privates dangled at the hem of his shirt. “So, you’re married now?”

“How did you know?” her thick shoulders relaxed when she heard the softness in his tone.

“You have a ring on your finger.”

“Oh!” She looked down at her hand as if it was the first time she had ever seen her ring.

When she looked up again, he was standing right in front of her. “What are you doing?”

“Touching you.” His lower body made contact with her Mugler suit as his fingers stroked her face.

“I’m ma-ma-married now,” she stuttered as she struggled to keep her calm.

“Really?” he said from behind her as his left hand stroked the nape of her neck and his right massaged her hips. “Do you love him?” he whispered in her ear.

“I have to go.” As she took a step away from him, he grabbed her arm, pulled her forcefully to him and stretched his tongue deep into her mouth. Without thinking, her hands gripped his back. She closed her eyes and let herself fall into his arms. As their tongue wrestled, he removed her suit. She didn’t know or care when he stripped her down to her underwear. Her temperature was rising and she wanted to burn. At the height of ecstasy, he engaged and she pulled off her underwear. Suddenly, a wicked grin lit his face and he said, “Why are you taking off your underwear?”

“Sorry,” she said as though the world had ended.

“Put back your clothes.”

Her mouth fell open. She held her bra in her hands and wore only her panties revealing her athletic build. “I... I don’t understand.”

“I’ll give it to you straight. I don’t have any feelings for you. In fact, I think you are one of the ugliest women under 50 in this world. I just wanted to see if you would reject me now that you’re married or if the fact that you belong to another man would make you more appealing to me, but it didn’t.”

Candace wasn’t a patient woman. She jumped on him and flung her hands around his neck squeezing with all her might. Choking, he tried to free himself, but her grip was too strong. He reached for his phone to call 911, but could only graze it with his fingertips. He tried to scream, but could only gasp. With the last ounce of his strength, he stuck his fingers into her eyes. She instantly let go to protect her face. He took that opportunity to elbow her off of him and run to the door. Suddenly, she was behind him, pushing him against the door. She spun him around facing her, the expression clear on her face. She was done taking his crap and was finally

going to show him what she thought of his arrogance. Even if she had to go to jail, it would be worth it. She began punching him in the midsection and he fell to the floor.

She grabbed him by his shirt and ripped it in two. Now naked, he ran to the window and began yelling, "Help! Somebody help me." She came at him from behind, giving him a powerful bear hug that lifted him into the air. He continued screaming, "Help!" as she threw him to the ground. He landed on his elbows and knees.

"Is everything alright in there? This is the police," a voice said from the other side of the door.

As she approached him, he kicked her hard in the face and she arched back. He pulled the phone from the wall and slammed it into her face.

Just then, the police burst through the door and yelled, "Put your hands in the air."

"It's okay, officers," Kevin said through ragged breathes. "I took care of her." He was still holding the bloodstained phone. Candace lay on the ground crying. "Save those crocodile tears, baby. You're going to spend a long, long time in prison."

Shock registered on his face as the police pushed him against the wall and handcuffed him.

"Ma'am, you're lucky we were only three doors down when you screamed," the police officer said.

"You've got to be kidding me, I was the one screaming," Kevin said, turning to Candace, who was still on the floor crying. "Tell them that I was the one screaming."

"Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?" The other police officer asked.

While being forcefully being pushed into the police car, he saw Candace being treated like a fragile egg by the paramedics. Even from a distance, he could read her lips as she said, “He hit me,” tears pouring down her cheeks. He wondered why the cops would take the word of the she-hulk over his. Just then their eyes met and she gave him a quick wink before his car drove off.

Due to the bashing to her face, the female officers assumed that she was the victim and surrounded her to give her comfort. She was annoyed that they thought she was the weak one and, briefly, thought about telling them the truth. However, her desire to be high fived by the feminists was outweighed by her knowledge that if she confessed, Kevin would never drop the charges and she'd spend time in jail. Arrogant men had always annoyed her, which is why she spent half of her life in the gym and didn't regret the beating that she'd given to him. However, she felt it best not to push her luck. Although more shocking than anything else was the rush that she'd gotten when she'd beaten him up. Raised in a typical catholic, wholesome family, she'd never experienced anything kinky, but she'd liked the feelings that she had experienced as she attacked Kevin and knew that she would need to relive that sensation. Unfortunately, that meant that her husband would probably experience the brunt of her new-found desire.

Once loaded into the ambulance, her cell phone rang. Surrounded by the paramedics, she was hesitant before she answered it, “Yes.”

“What's the situation with the guy?” Brisha asked.

Candace looked around and saw that the others didn't like the fact that she was on the phone. She guessed that it made her look not quite shaken up enough for an attack victim. Deciding to make the phone call short, she simply said, “The subject is in the cage” and hung up.

A soft-spoken African man in a cashmere coat entered the bar called Parliament. Julian Ajah was back in this world again, the dancing smoke, cacophonous noises, one-sided conversations, armed men, jazz music pumping through the speakers, easy women whose love ebbed with the money in their partners' hands and men who wore dark shades in the middle of the night.

"Gin and a twist of lime," the bartender said to him.

"You still remember," he responded. Of course, at 35-years-old and six-feet-tall with an oblong black face and a bantam African accent, he was hard to forget. .

"It my business to remember faces. It's only been six years and you weren't that much of an angel...makes you easier to remember," he replied as he made the drink.

"The Parliament seems too reserved, not like in the old days," Julian said as he picked up the drink and sat at the bar.

"You're still wearing the same coat to the bar..." When Julian didn't respond, the bartender continued. "Things have changed, even in the club. Now, there's a little bit of a competition. The big apple is shifting around."

"Outsiders," he responded.

"Yep," the bartender scratched at his thick beard. "Now, everybody lives with their shades on."

"Baronowski."

"Yep, except that he's called Don Baronowski. It's pathetic."

"And the Legame cycle?"

"Playing ignorant."

A man in a navy blue suit, wearing an earring in his left ear tapped Julian on the shoulder and whispered in his ear, “Armando will see you now.”

Julian downed his drink and followed the man down a staircase to the basement. Men were gambling and arguing around a small roundtable. Julian and the man walked past them and passed the men playing billiards in an office to the left. Julian and his escort walked into another office, this one empty except for the floor-to-ceiling bookcase in the left corner, a table and chair in the center of the room and a fan oscillating on the ceiling. The man tapped on one of the shelves and suddenly two books disappeared only to be replaced by an eye. After a few seconds, the bookshelf swung in to reveal a larger room being blocked by a man with ponytail. Behind him, Julian could see a broad flat-topped table, swords and contemporary paintings hanging on off-white walls, leather-covered Barcelona chairs scattered around the room, a chandelier hanging from the ceiling and a floor covered with a wall-to-wall oriental rug. Armando sat in a chair flipping through a stack of papers while the pony-tailed man frisked Julian.

“You may go,” he said with a meeker voice than one would expect based on his looks.

As Julian walked toward the boss, Armando raised his head and their eyes met. Suddenly, the fear returned. He was back again and now had to dance with the devil.

Julian was born to Tunde and Aisha Ajah in Lagos, Nigeria. The eldest of three boys, his brothers were twins. His father died of tuberculosis when Julian was 10, leaving their mother to raise the children. With no skills to speak of, their mother was unable to secure employment and they soon had to move from their home to a hovel. His mother hawked goods during the day. Early in the mornings, he picked through people’s trash, looking for tin cans to sell to manufacturing companies. Then, he would take his six-year-old brothers to their school before

heading to his own, a mile away. After school, he would pick up his brothers, take them home, feed them and then join his mother on the street.

Life continued this way until, at the age of 13, he found a part-time job in a cement factory. He went to work after school each day loading heavy cement bags into trucks. A short time later, he took another part-time job as an apprentice to a shoemaker who was close to death. He hated the idea of his mother walking the streets, selling goods and, as such, worked twice as hard to provide for his family.

His mother was adamantly against him contributing so much to the family at his age, but they needed the money. The twins both attended better schools than he did because his income helped with the cost and, as such, neither he nor his mother felt that they could lower them to the level of doing his chores. He finished his secondary education at 17. He couldn't afford to work and attend university and didn't have the grades to earn a scholarship, so he knew he had to make a choice. If he wanted the twins to have a better life than his, he needed to find other more gainful employment.

Around the time that Julian graduated from high school, the Nigerian currency began to quickly devalue and the people of Nigeria began turning to crime to make a living. The government had lost its ability to govern efficiently, or, for the most part, at all, and, as such, the majority of the population quickly realized that they could break the law without any consequences. Soon, Nigeria began topping the most corrupt list around the world and, as a response, other countries began closing their doors to them.

Julian knew that the only route out of poverty for his family was leaving Nigeria and settling somewhere stable. He decided to go to the only person he knew who had left the country and come back. His cousin, Jerry Obi, had lived with them until Julian's father had died. Then,

he suddenly disappeared, only to return later, wealthy. Upon arriving at Jerry's home, Julian discovered that he was one of many beggars seeking an audience with Jerry. Julian used his familial connection to Jerry to secure a meeting and was soon in the same room with him. He explained the family's situation to Jerry and was offered a monetary handout in return. Julian refused and stated that he wanted to leave the country. Jerry agreed to help him, in return for a favor. After Julian agreed, Jerry secured an American visa and passport for Julian.

Unable to face his mother with the truth, Julian simply told her that he had won the visa lottery. She was skeptical, but did not push the issue. However, when he handed her the large bag of cash given to him by his cousin, she became furious. He maintained his lottery lie and begged her to take the money. She refused, but wished him a safe journey. Before leaving, he paid all of the family's bills and placed the rest of the money beneath his mother's pillow. This lie was the first of many that he would tell his mother.

His favor to Jerry turned out to be wearing a winter jacket into America that contained sachets of cocaine embedded into slightly larger sachets filled with coffee beans, to evade the drug sniffing dogs. Jerry assured Julian that neither the Nigerian customs nor the immigration officials in America would look at his coat; however, as he walked past the United States customs officers, he was stopped. When they asked him a variety of psychological questions, he answered them calmly. That was the first time that he scared himself. The danger didn't faze him.

After successfully completing the interrogation, he left the JFK airport. He sat on the prearranged bench and removed his coat. A short time later, a man walked by, picked up the coat and dropped an envelope into his lap.

That was his first day in America. It wasn't long before he secured a position as a waiter. At the age of 20, he got his green card after marrying Brisha Hines. They had a daughter later that year. Three years later, he officially became a citizen of the United States. Two years after that, he and Brisha got a divorce. The judge decreed that Julian had to pay alimony, but gave him full custody of their daughter while Brisha went to Harvard to get her American Literature degree.

A few years later, the twins graduated high school and he brought them to America to study at the New York Institute of Technology: James studying architecture and John studying Energy Management. To pay for his new life, he and his friend, Spike, became a con artist team. Five years later, he left his life of crime to work full-time making handmade shoes and bags.

Unfortunately, James had become acquainted with Julian's life of crime and when he graduated, he decided to go to work for Jerry. His brother, John, on the other hand, always the more studious of the two, finished school on a scholarship and cut himself off from his family. Julian eventually remarried Brisha and lived with her for another four years until divorcing her again.

After divorcing Brisha, Julian reteamed with Spike and spent another two years in the world of crime. Then, after his mother died, he went back to making shoes fulltime. Spike still did petty crime activities, but mostly sold used cars.

Five days before he showed up at the club, Julian was visited by Jerry. Apparently, James had beaten up Don Armando's nephew because he'd made an explicit pass at his girlfriend. Armando issued an edict calling for James' death. Jerry was to present James' dead body in five days time unless he wanted to start a war. Jerry had no problem fulfilling this edict as James had become a liability, missing appointments, letting his temper control him and getting high on the

product. It was only as a courtesy that Jerry decided to tell Julian of his decision to carry out the edict. Now, Julian had come to the Parliament to see the mafia chieftain.

The smell of Armando's Corona cigar filled the room. His potbelly made a B with the edge of the table. About five-foot-nine, Armando had a puffy face and a dimple in his left cheek.

"Take a seat, Julian," he said with an accent unmistakably Italian.

Julian sat down in the leather seat opposite Armando who kept fiddling with the papers on his table. Julian silently watched him, remembering how Armando had taxed him over 30% of his take from each of his jobs. Armando cleared his throat and raised his eyes to Julian, who didn't flinch. Julian had balls.

"What is a woman?" Armando's voice sounded like the croaking of a frog. "It's funny, but we don't realize how useless we actually are. We live our lives for women; always get our dicks up for tits and ass, but these chicks don't give a shit about us. All they care about is how thick your wallet is, how big your dick is, if its white or black and if you can use it." He stood, walked to the water cooler and poured himself a drink. Downing it in one gulp, he examined the painting on the wall. With his back still to Julian, he said, "Your brother disrespected Sunny, knowing full well that he's my nephew. That's kinda like spitting in my face and..."

"Armando, I..." Julian rose, attempting to cut Armando off.

"Shut up, Julian! I'm still talking." Julian shrunk back into his seat. "I can understand a man being stupidly in love, but insulting my nephew over a piece of white trash like Peggy Lee, whose been stuck by every prick on the street, is beyond me. I've always liked you, Julian, you're the only nigger I don't see a color with, but your brother has crossed the line."

“There has to be a way,” Julian stood again. “I’m begging you, Armando. I’ll put him straight. You can break him, but please spare him and I’ll make sure he disappears.” Julian took several slow steps toward Armando. “I’m begging you, Armando. We’ve done business in the past. You know I’ll be true to my word. ”

Still standing with his back to Julian, Armando said, “Nothing personal, Julian, but he’s a dead man. Goodbye.” He didn’t even bother to turn around as he dismissed Julian.

Julian fell to his knees and grabbed Armando’s trousers. As he began pleading, the ponytailed bodyguard grabbed him by the waist and pulled him off. The other bodyguard opened the door.

“Okay, okay, I’ll walk,” Julian told the guard. He walked toward the door followed closely by the guard. As he reached the guard at the door, he reached down and grabbed the gun out of the guard’s holster. Using his elbow, he smashed into the guard following him, shoved the other guard out the door, slammed it behind him and locked it. He frisked the ponytailed guard, making him to stand with his hands on his head. Armando stood, unfazed, puffing on his cigar as he walked back to his desk, acting as if the entire scenario was a play.

“Get away from the desk,” Julian said to Armando.

Armando calmly raised one of his hands, pulled his chair to the wall and sat, “My doctor said I shouldn’t be standing.”

The banging on the door increased as the guards on the other side tried to break it down.

“So, what’s the big bad wolf going to do now?” Armando asked, still puffing on his cigar as if the banging on the door were a symphony to his ears.

“Kill you,” Julian answered as he pointed the gun at Armando’s throat.

“Don’t be so dramatic, Julian. You’ve never killed anyone. It requires a dead conscience and yours, sadly, lives.” He sucked on his cigar.

With Julian distracted, the ponytailed guard made his move. Grabbing a scimitar from the wall, he swung at Julian. Unfortunately for the guard, Julian was quicker and shot a bullet through his hand. Screaming in pain, the guard fell to the floor frantically trying to apply pressure to the wound.

“Whatever you do, Charlie, don’t get your blood on my rug. It’s worth more than you are,” snarled Armando.

The banging on the other side of the thick mahogany door was now joined by a short burst of gun fire.

“Are you guys crazy!? That’s a parnian door, you tasteless pieces of shit,” Armando screamed.

Julian scratched on his head.

“They’ll break the door down soon,” Armando said, crossing his legs.

“If you die, my brother lives,” was Julian’s only response.

“But, you’ll die along with me.”

“Not a problem,” Julian aimed his gun at Armando’s head.

“Oh, one more thing, Julian, if you and I die, then I’ll make sure that your wife dies, too.”

“Ex-wife.”

“Whatever. She and your concubine will each taste a bullet,” Armando said, a malicious grin on his face.

“Really? And who exactly is going to give that order? Your corpse?”

Armando smirked and pointed his cigar at the ponytailed guard.

“Is this a joke?” Julian asked.

“Maybe you can kill me, but can you kill Charlie, a father of four with a darling wife, just trying to make ends meet and pay the bills? You know, he reminds me of you when you first started.”

The door began to creak.

“I have to do what I have to do,” Julian said softly.

“Really, Julian? If you could kill me, I would have been dead a long time ago.” The door began jolting off its hinges.

“Fifty grand,” Julian said.

“Please don’t degrade your brother. His life can’t be worth so little to you.”

“A hundred.”

“Five.”

“Where am I going to get that kind of cash?”

“That’s your problem, not mine,” Armando stubbed out his cigar.

“I need a year.”

“Does this look like fucking Disneyland to you?” The door began to break. “You have two months to come up with the money and your brother needs to be out of the country in the next 24 hours or you die.”

“I understand,” Julian said as the door swung open. A battalion of armed men broke into the room and converged on Julian, knocking aside his gun and beating him to the floor.

“Should I pop him?” the guard with the earring asked.

Armando walked over to where Julian was crouched on the floor.

“What makes you think that I won’t just kill you now?” Armando squatted to him and asked as he used his cigar cutter to cut off the end of a new cigar.

With his head bowed, Julian answered, “Five hundred thousand is a lot of cash.”

Armando smiled, “I like you.” Standing up, he walked toward the open door. “Let him go. He’s worth half a million.”

The 30-year-old housewife was just finishing putting the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher as her husband, who once again didn’t notice her as he left, and three children ran for the door. Just then, her youngest, a boy of five, ran back, kissed her on the cheek and said “Good morning and goodbye.” Then, he grabbed his packed lunch and ran to the car where his father was honking the horn.

She knew that he only came back to pick up his lunch, but she was happy that at least someone told her good morning. As she cleaned up the house, she did so with a smirk on her face. She hadn’t realize how important those two little words were until someone actually said them to her. She spent the morning scrubbing the toilets and floor, doing the laundry, cleaning the kids’ rooms, shopping at the grocery store and preparing lunch. She was finished just in time for her 11 a.m. soap opera to start.

Marie Coppola had two daughters, ages 11 and 9, and one son. Her other two children had died as miscarriages. In her home growing up, she had been the youngest of five children, the rest boys. Her mother had died when she was three-years-old and her eldest brother had committed suicide. It wasn’t easy being raised the only daughter of John Armando, an old-fashioned Italian mobster. His beliefs about women ran parallel to those of the medieval times. At the age of 18, she was used as a pawn, given as the wife to a member of a rival boss’ family.

Unlike Marie, Jack Coppola was worthless to his father, which is why his father jumped at the chance to use Jack as a pawn to merge the two families. Jack was good-looking, tall, dark and handsome, but that was irrelevant to his father. He lacked guts and all that he could do was attract women, which usually cost the family more than it could ever bring in. While Jack was excited for the wedding, he changed his mind as soon as he saw his bride; she wasn't in the same physical league as his carnal conquests. He changed his tune when his father sweetened the deal; however. Now, Jack received a weekly, juicy paycheck, a house far away from his father and a Porsche to attract his many mistresses.

For the sake of his only daughter, Armando gave Jack a position as the manager of a bank through which the family laundered money. To Armando's surprise, and slight disgust, after 11 years as manager, Jack still didn't know what the family used the bank for.

Although Armando believed that a woman's place was in the kitchen or in bed with her legs spread, he had a soft spot for his daughter and, thus, allowed her to have leverage over him when no one else did. She was the only person who could interrupt him when he talked. He loved her like he had loved his mother. She was the apple of his eye and she loved him with all her heart as well. When he had ordered her to marry Jack Coppola, she replied with a blunt, "No." He tried to strong arm and threaten her into the match, but, in the end, his tactics were useless as she knew he would never use force against her.

Instead, Armando switched tactics and asked Jack to stop by the house for a chat, hoping that it would convince Marie. One look at the handsome, young Italian man with his well-framed physique; dark, glossy hair; tanned skin and firm jaw and the 18-year-old Marie was already shouting "yes" in her head. When he spoke as beautifully as he looked, Marie consented. They were married a few heartbeats later. Marie was big breasted, with brown hair and a round face.

She was a little on the plumb side, but she was neither ugly nor beautiful. Instead, she was often referred to as cute.

The youngest of a family of boys, she naturally grew up as a tomboy. However, no one let her forget her place as a female member of the family and she spent many hours cooking and cleaning for her brothers and family. By the age of 15, she was acting as housewife and maid to the entire household.

While used to doing all of the household chores herself, there was one difference between her married life and her maiden life: her father and brothers always appreciated what she did for them and loved her with a hardness as strong as steel, but, in her new family, she felt more like a maid than a mother and wife. However, she still took pride in what she did. She was the perfect cook and knew every dish in her cookbooks. When she ran across a new dish, she quickly mastered it as well. Her father had spared no expense by training her at the best catering schools as a teenager. While she never went to college, she enjoyed every minute of her culinary educational experience. As such, her favorite times of the day were those when she was in the kitchen. Cooking was her sanctuary.

The downside to being quiet and submissive, fulfilling the role of the perfect, traditional wife was that none of her daughters wanted to spend any time with her. They were not interested in learning the routine of the housewife and often looked for any excuse to avoid spending time with her. Initially, she thought it was just a generational thing and that this happened to all parents and their children, but then, she began noticing how much time the girls were spending with their father. In fact, they often competed for his attention. Her son, on the other hand, was never far from her side, making her laugh with the antics of a five-year-old. Her son had a mature warmth that made her feel protected when he was around.

As she walked down the stairs into the basement to get the laundry, she slipped and tumbled headfirst onto the wooden stairs. She barely had time to register the wood beneath her face as she continued to roll down the rest of the stairs. Her spine felt like it had been crushed into a million pieces by the time she hit the floor. Suddenly, she could see nothing, but total darkness. The silence was torture and she could feel death closing in. She thought about her husband and worried about who would do his laundry, feed him and clean the house. She thought about her daughters and worried about who would help them knit their clothes when they ripped, take them to the mall and pick them up from school. She hoped it would be someone whom they found more appealing. She thought about her son, his smile, his warmth, his independence and knew that he would be fine.

Time passed. She wasn't sure how long. Then, she heard ringing. Constant ringing. She opened her eyes. She was alive! It took a minute for her to pinpoint the source of the noise. She got up, miraculously, without any injuries and walked to the other end of the basement. She picked up the phone.

"Mrs. Coppola?" the voice on the other end asked.

"Yes," she answered, suddenly feeling as though a huge weight had been lifted from her.

"I'm calling from St. Nicholas Hospital. I'm afraid that your husband has been in an accident. He's ok, just some bruises, but your sister..."

"My sister?" Marie cut the woman off. Suddenly, Marie's sense of relief disappeared and she felt a void in her chest.

"Yes, ma'am, your sister fractured her shoulder blade."

"What's your name?" Marie asked.

"Nurse Roberts."

“Thank you. I’m on my way.” Marie hung up the phone. The void was replaced with a sense of ease that she’d never felt before. At that moment, she had unconsciously made a choice and knew that everything was about to change. She walked into the bedroom and looked at herself in the full length mirror. She shook her head in disappointment at the poorly done make-up on her face and the frame carrying almost 200 pounds.

She drove to the hospital in her station wagon and was directed to her husband’s room by an orderly. He was asleep when she arrived and didn’t wake up for another half an hour. He was almost as handsome as when they had first met, but she’d never realized until now how quickly he had aged.

“What time is it?” he winced as a spasm of pain shot through his shoulder.

“Eleven forty-five.”

“Day or night?”

“Day.”

“You mean that I’ve only spent two hours here? It feels like years.”

“I can imagine,” she sat back in her wobbling chair and stared at an old man in the hospital bed on the other side of the room. The man stared back without blinking. Briefly, she wondered if he was dead.

“Marie! God damn it, I’m talking to you.”

Marie shuddered and then turned back to her husband.

“I said, did you call the plumber to have him fix the damn bathtub?”

She shook her head no.

“What the hell have you been doing all day? I swear to God, you’re so useless. All you do is sit on that fat ass of yours doing nothing.”

“I called the bank... I wanted to let them know what happened to you. They said you were on vacation,” she responded.

“What are you talking about?”

“For the last two weeks, every morning you haven’t been going to work. Instead, you’ve been going to see your mistress.”

He didn’t bother to respond.

“I don’t know if I became a fool or was born one.”

“Wait a minute, Marie. If you’re talking about the woman in the car, I was just giving her a lift.”

“Really!? I thought she was my sister.”

“I said that because...”

“Because your secretary is married and you didn’t want her husband knocking on our door after finding out that his wife got into an accident while her head was in your crotch.” She paused briefly before continuing. “I was initially flattered that you called her my sister, in order to prevent me from knowing, it made me feel...important.”

“Bravo, you aren’t that dumb after all,” he replied. Marie smiled. “Wipe that smile of your face. You always knew that I chased tail after we were married. Hell, I barely made it through the honeymoon, so don’t give me any of that waiting to exhale bullshit.”

“Of course, I knew, but I pretended that it wasn’t true and eventually convinced myself that I had to be wrong. I guess you never actually loved me, did you?”

Jack sighed, "You are the drug in my veins. You are the key to my world. I love everything about you, your touch, your words, your...."

"I'm leaving you," she said and rose from her seat.

"You're what?" he spat out, shocked.

"I'm starting over again. I'm going into the world to see it."

"You sit your ass back in that chair," he grabbed hold of her arm.

She sent him an icy glare. "You've made me angry, Jack. By making me angry, you've made the syndicate angry and my father is not a forgiving man."

"I don't give a damn about your father or any crook; you're my wife...my property. Even your father will back me on that."

She touched his hand, which was strongly gripping her arm. "There are over a thousand ways that I could kill you, poison you or cut off your dick and plead insanity. All I would have to do is tell the media that my husband was a wife beater and that I was pressing charges."

Something in her eyes convinced Jack that Marie was no longer the woman he married. He released his grip.

"Think about it, Jack. Now, you don't have to wake up next to my fat ass."

"You're not getting a cent," he spat back at her.

She stood. "I don't want anything from you," she replied calmly as she headed toward the door.

"I'm the best that you'll ever get. Nobody's gonna take a second look at a fat pig like you, so stop this...this 21st century wonder woman bullshit."

She turned. He was surprised to see her smiling. As she spoke, her tone was that of a well-skilled phone sex operator. "So, that's my problem, Jack? I won't get laid, so I shouldn't

leave. Actually, come to think of it, that's not a bad idea being able to try on different cocks for size. Dicks much larger, thicker, fatter and longer than yours, slipping in and out of me as I feel the crush of a man deep inside of me, touching places...."

Without a thought, Jack jumped to his feet and slapped her, a hard thudding slap, right across her face. The slap was so loud that a nurse looked into the room and then sounded an alarm. Marie touched her reddened face with a devilish smirk on her face. Muscular looking male nurses grabbed hold of him as the women in the ward shot venomous looks toward him. Jack continued to struggle against the nurses, trying to finish what he had started, as a police officer walked toward him pulling out his handcuffs.

As the cop slapped the cuffs on Jack's wrists, he said "You'll need to press charges, ma'am."

"No," she said, smiling as she walked to the elevator.

Jack broke free from his stunned restrainers and rushed at her, wearing only his hospital gown and handcuffs. "You aren't going to take the kids. I'm going to let the court know you're an unfit mother."

"Okay," she turned to face him as the nurses caught up with him and began restraining him once again. "They're yours. I'm an unfit mother," she shouted and spread her arms.

"What do you mean?" He asked as she stepped onto the elevator.

"I'm not taking the kids."

"What do you mean you're not taking the kids? They're your children. What kind of mother are you? You want to leave the kids with me?"

"Goodbye, Jack."

The doors closed. Jack stood there, unable to comprehend what was happening. He ignored everyone, including the nurses and cop, still restraining him. Only an old woman on crutches caught his attention.

She spat in his face, “Wife beater. Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

Marie sat on the padded bench in the waiting room of Reddington High. It was stark and cold without a speck of dust to be seen. It looked more like it belonged in a hospital than a high school. Soon, her two daughters, Francesca and Valerie, appeared. Upon seeing them, she stood with a blissful smile on her face.

“Mom, what’re you doing here?!” her oldest daughter, Valerie, exclaimed, looking behind her as though she was being followed.

“I wanted...” Francesca cut her off.

“Mom, I don’t know about Valerie, but I don’t think that you should be coming to school...especially dressed like that.” Francesca eyed her mother’s ankle length polka-dot dress.

“If you have something to say, you should make it snappy. They’ll ring the bell soon and we don’t want the other kids barging in here, seeing you. I mean, seeing us with our mother,” Valerie said. .

“Well?” Francesca asked.

Marie stared at her girls, unmistakably sisters, both tall and dark-skinned like their father, with sharp jaws. Valerie was taller and slightly fatter than her sister. For the first time, Marie wondered who they were, why they had turned out the way that they had. She was raised to care for her family, someone that the other members could rely upon. Her children, on the other hand, were spoiled brats who cared about no one, but themselves. She was tired of them treating her

and everyone else in the world as if they were dirt. She didn't know if it was her meekness or her husband's meanness that had caused her girls to turn out this way, but it was about to change.

Marie's hesitation was enough to send Francesca angrily walking toward the door. "You get your ass back here, young lady!" Marie's voice wasn't loud, but the authority in it was evident.

Francesca turns and stared at her mother in surprise.

"You shouted at me, Marie." Francesca refused to move away from the door as she stared at her mother in shock.

"That's mother or mum to you. Now, come back here and sit down."

"No! And I'm going to tell Daddy that you screamed at me."

"Get out!"

"You have no right to raise your voice to her," Valerie said, defending her sister, her brown eyes glowing.

"You want to walk out, too?" Marie asked.

"The fact that you woke up this morning hating your life doesn't give you the right to come here and embarrass us," Valerie spat, throwing her black hair over her shoulder.

"Embarrass you?" Marie asked.

"Yes. Every day after school, we have to get into your car with you in it." She made a sound that distinctly sounded like "Ugh." "You don't care about how we feel. Do you think we like the way that the other kids make fun of us? Boys look at me and say that I'm going to grow into my mom. Do you know how that makes me feel? And, I have to live with that!" Francesca added.

Marie picked up her bag and walked toward the girls. They moved back, expecting some form of physical attack as if their mother suddenly possessed some form of wickedness that was before unseen. Marie simply walked pass them, ignoring them. In her heart, she knew that she was abandoning her daughters and that they had lost their mother. She tried to console herself by saying that they were simply going through a phase, but she didn't remember herself going through any such phase. She idolized her mother from the age of five on. Their loathing of her existence extended back to their infancy. There wasn't any difference between them at the age of five and today. They both had their father's attitude and their youth was simply no excuse for their behavior.

The waiting room of her son's elementary school was a stark contrast to that of her daughters' high school. It only had two brown couches, the air-conditioning was too high and there were pictures on the white walls drawn by the children. She was examining a picture of an airplane when the door burst open and Stephen ran into the room, diving on her.

“Mummy!”

God was good to her. The only meaning in her life was wrapped around her arms with his legs dangling in the air. His reaction to seeing her brought tears to her eyes. With a child like him in her arms, she decided that if this was hell, she wanted to burn here. She sat down on the sofa and pulled him into her lap.

“Why are you crying, mummy?”

“I'm not crying,” she wiped away the wetness on her cheek. “I must have gotten something in my eye.”

“That's not true,” he said, his face suddenly solemn.

“You’re right. I just missed you so very...very... very much,” she nibbled on his cheek and he laughed.

“Guess what, mom?”

“What!”

“I drew a picture of my favorite girl,” he said, hiding a sheet of paper.

“Oh my goodness!” Marie said, “My Stevie has a girlfriend! Can I see the picture?”

“No,” he mischievously replied.

“Pretty please with peanut butter.”

“You drive a hard bargain, mom,” he said. Then, in his childish gangster voice, he added “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

He held out the folded picture. When she opened it, she saw a woman drawn in crayon with long, brown, curly hair, a long gown and a wide smile. Underneath the picture was written, “Mom.”

The picture made her realize that the only reason that she’d been comfortable in her house had been him. Her misery had been lessened upon his birth. He made everyone that she endured from her husband and daughters bearable.

“Mom!?”

“Sorry, Stephen. I was daydreaming.”

“It’s okay, mom. It’s a little bit early to pick me up, so...,” he added in his gangster voice, “start talking.”

“I wanted to go somewhere, but I’ve changed my mind.”

He let go of her hand, “Go.”

She looked down at him. He had the most beautiful eyes that she had ever seen. He had her husband's charm, but not his heart.

"I would be a fool to take a step away from you."

He stood. "I might be a baby, but I know that you deserve a vacation. Go to Disneyland, go anywhere, but just go. I just want to see you smile again."

"Stephen, I can't. Who would do your laundry? Make you lunch? Pack your breakfast? No one else can fold your napkins the way that you like."

He put his hand on her lips. "It's ok, mom. I will miss you, but you should go."

"I don't even know where I'm going," she said, her eyes reddening.

In his gangster voice, he replied, "I've got a couple of boys in Vegas. They could hook you up."

"I wish I could take you, but I've got no degree, no work experience, no money, no..."

"Goodbye, mummy," he said as he turned to walk toward the door.

"I love you, Stephen, more than anything in this world."

"Not too loud, mummy. You'll make the other kids think I'm a nerd," he said as he ran out of the room. As he dashed away, she realized that he had set her free.

Chapter 2

(The body of reality is in the soul.)

Thomas gave his overcoat to his stiff, tall and aging butler and marched to his study. His 51-year-old personal assistant, Joan Saunders, the only sister to his late mother, followed at his heels. She poured two glasses of bourbon and handed him one as he sat in his brown chesterfield chair and crossed his leg over the polished oak table.

“Well?” she asked.

“She wants revenge,” he replied, rubbing his chin and looking up at his library.

“Is she going to help us?”

“Depends.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound good and your father just donated a half a million to ‘The Family.’”

“A legal bribe?”

“You could say that.” She sipped from her conical glass.

“I need everything that you can get on Sam O’Neill’s wife...where she sleeps, where she eats, what she does, when she had her first kiss, everything.”

“I don’t want to get lost here, Thomas. Is this the Democrat Sam O’Neill who we’re supposed to be backing? The same man who’s looking out for our interests.”

“Yes.”

“I’m listening,” she sat across from him attentive like an owl at night.

“She wants something dirty on O’Neill’s wife, to make the old man drop out of the race.”