

2000 B.C.E.

The Temple at Dusk...

She held it tightly to her chest, as though her unwavering determination could fulfill her prophecy. There was a time when a mere nod of her head could send the will of men withering from her sight before the red locks of her hair fell back into place. That time has long passed, stepping aside until the day it shall reign again.

Her day.

No one saw her enter the temple, coveted under the moonless night like felt, shifting on black satin. The night breeze cool across her back as she slipped passed the entrance.

No one must see. I

Once inside, she held her torch beside the iron sconce protruding from the wall and its flame burst and flickered to life. The smell of sulfur reassured her safe passage; she could not trust all the sconces to be lit. Where she needed to journey was deep within the temple and what she held was too important for her to fail.

They could not harm her, the wrongful pact had been sealed, but foul her plans they certainly could.

The passageway was dark. Her feet fell softly on the solid hewn stone, barely visible between the lengths of sconces despite her torch, as she made her way around the first turn. She stopped to relight the iron sconce there, like a beacon. The temple should be

empty, but she had to be careful. It had to be done and no one could know.

Especially Him.

She hefted it closer to her chest, cradling it like a stolen newborn and thrust the torch higher as she ventured down the impossible steps. The steps her people built. The steps her people had died for, never having the privilege of their use. What He'd done to them went beyond any justification that existed in this world. Had she not been warned by the infernal source, her fate would have followed and everything would have been lost to this new world.

A world of inequality.

The steps were never-ending, like the heat of her rage. The sweat of her people has long since dried on these stones, no one left to be avenged. Their unjust fate has been hidden from the infancy of this new world. A veil of lies disguised within a deceitful beginning and set off on the heels of destruction. She could not set her plan of the ages into motion until this deed was done. She'd vowed her existence to the cause. The cause for the original beginning.

Her cause.

She finished walking down the never-ending steps, out onto a small landing made from a large block of finely hewn stone. Her face softened at the struggle her people must have had with such a quarry. The landing led down a shorter set of steps, allowing access into a room or branching off to the right, into another passageway. She gazed down that passageway and sorrow filled the perfection of her face. She no longer needed to travel down that path. She forced her gaze forward and squeezed it, yet tighter, to her chest. The memory of her people heavy with this burden she now carried. Once she's finished, she'd never walk these corridors in this form again.

She trotted down the short set of steps with renewed purpose and entered the immense chamber. Time would be the true test for this room, but not in her time. Wasting not another second, she

traversed the great expanse of the chamber to a doorway at the back. It was unfair, she thought, what she was about to do. Then rage once more bubbled up from beneath and chased the fleeting thought. How could she feel such emotion when her people had suffered such an unfair fate? Were they not innocent once, too?

She took one last look at the chamber before she drove her torch through the doorway and entered the passageway. She could not falter now. She could not blanch at the injustice she was about to serve. Sorrow may have filled her heart, but her innocence had been ripped away along with her people.

She glanced up at the hopeful seed-filled pots lining the ledge of the passage while she made her way down toward the sacred footbath. Seeds of such hope, dashed by the light of day. It wouldn't seem possible, but darkness was their only chance. She left the pots behind along with the memories and continued down the passageway.

She could hear the trickling of the sacred footbath now. The sound as soothing on her nerves as sipping from a communal bowl filled with a strong batch of the *bappir* drink. She marveled at the lost ingenuity of her people in the construction of this bath. Freshwater ran continuously down from inside the temple walls, filling the stone basin at the bottom and back out, never drying up, nor ever flooding the temple.

She rested her torch alongside the clever stone chair built into the temple wall for this simple yet necessary pleasure, lest she be marked, but she would not release her charge from her grasp, not even for a mere second. For as easily as it was here it could vanish just as simply. The lengths of her struggle must not be in vain.

She gathered her *pala* dress around her knees and stepped into the basin. Cool, crystal-pure water splashed over her feet, then flowed from sight beneath the stone and a purifying sensation washed over her, starting from deep within and radiated throughout each perfect pore.

She gently squeezed her eyes shut and sank down into the chair, letting the sin she was about to commit wash from her soul,

along with the dirt from her unlikely feet. She no longer needed to play by His rules, but tempt fate she would not. That was beyond both of their control.

She enjoyed the silky purification for as long as time would allow, still bound by the laws of this world. Her task awaited her just in the next chamber.

Stepping over the basin of the sacred footbath, she rose from the stone seat and collected her torch. As she plunged it through the doorway, the immaculate floor shimmered from the flickering flames, shadows growing both tall and short, as she gently padded on clean feet across the room to the corner.

Using the torch like a crutch, she knelt down, keeping her charge tight in her other arm, and angled the flame over the small sprout emerging from the stone floor. Its tiny leaves quivered in time with the flickering of light, and the first true smile since before her people's fate, bloomed upon her perfect face like a desert blossom. She stared at the little sprout until her eyes grew cold and her smile wavered, then fell flat.

It was time.

She pulled down heavy on the torch, the weight of her burden intolerable, and lifted herself from the corner. It began to pulse and radiate beneath her tight grasp, knowing its lengthy fate, as she walked away from the hopeful little sprout.

The altar was still warm, the sickeningly sweet scent of burnt flesh hung in the air, as she walked behind it. She glanced about the room to make sure no one had followed her.

Sidestepping the huge stone mural hanging above the altar, she reached up and gently depressed one of the stone blocks in the wall. It moved inward but an inch and muffled sounds of heavy stone wheels could be heard gently rolling behind the wall.

The rolling sounds ceased and the gigantic mural shifted a few feet to the right as pressure could be heard releasing from somewhere, revealing an empty space large enough for what she needed hidden from the world. Hidden, for a very long time to come.

She checked the room once more, then carefully placed the burden inside the secret space and touched the depressed stone.

As the stone raised flush with the wall, the mural slowly shifted back in place and more pressure was released.

The deed was done.

All that was left of her plan was time.

She tossed the torch into the altar and it blazed to life, flames nearly licking the stone ceiling. Once it died to a mere roar, her form appeared between the flames as she stood beneath the mural with both arms straight out from her sides.

She swung her empty palms down in front of her with a violent clap and shen-rings appeared in each. As she slowly raised them above her head her form withered, then fell to dust and the shen-rings disappeared.

Present Day

Montréal, Québec

“Clavis—no!” A black and white flash streaked across the kitchen table sending Jack’s new laptop to the edge. For a moment he thought it was safe, then a little black and white head popped up from the kitchen chair beside the teetering electronics.

“Don’t you dare,” he said, leveling his stare on the laptop. Clavis’s green eyes narrowed at Jack’s tone and the little white speck on his nose twitched.

It was a standoff. The laptop wasn’t even a week old.

Jack’s feet were glued to the floor.

Sometimes, he wanted to curse Uncle Terry for the gift of Clavis and other times he couldn’t imagine life without the little black and white ball of fur. Jack lifted his foot, half an inch, and Clavis’s eyes widened. Before his foot fell Clavis’s eyes dropped to slits as his little feline face rubbed against the sleek aluminum casing.

Jack clenched his teeth.

The laptop teetered before it hit the floor with an expensive whack.

Clavis was the sweetest little feline in Montréal. A little white spot graced his shiny black nose and Jack swore it was where an angel had kissed him—a demon angel. He'd been a going-away present from Jack's uncle before the big move. Clavis was the classic tuxedo cat. His face was always bright, full of wonder and around his neck hung an oddly shaped, golden charm that tinkled as he padded down the stairs. His uncle had said it was a special collar and as long as he wore it he would be lost.

Jack loved technology.

“Bad! Bad cat!” Jack yelled, snatching up the laptop.

He didn't have time for Clavis's shenanigans this morning. He was already running late for his meeting with Monsignor Monahan at the Notre-Dame Basilica of Montréal. He'd called the church last week and made the arrangements. He was working on a piece for the Gazette and couldn't help being drawn to the church's beauty. Jack was agnostic, borderline atheist and he never understood what beauty had to do with religion.

Jack followed his own set of views. He didn't tip the scales in either direction. It wasn't that he didn't believe in a higher power or a supreme being or beings, he just wasn't going to label the unknown and follow that path to righteousness with some old pedophile from the stone ages that the church deemed fit to preach. He respected the good deeds most churches do, but couldn't overlook all the bad. Wars, cover-ups, scandals, etc. The list was too long to ignore.

Religion, in his opinion, was for the *lost souls* that needed structured guidance and the only hope for them was fear of eternal fire. It's no wonder therapists make such good money.

“How many times do I have to tell you? Bad. The table is OFF limits, Clavis. *Baaaaaaad!*”

Clavis was very special and dear to Jack. Just like the uncle

that gifted him.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Clavis?” The little tuxedo terror turned his head around, sending Jack an off-put glance right down his angel specked nose, and gave him a mew of indignation.

“One more time Clavis and, and I swear—this time I mean it. One more time on this table and that will be it. No more treaties for you!” His pointer finger pointed out each syllable.

Clavis flicked his tail and winced his eyes as if to say, ‘*Ab—Yeah—Okay*’.

Jack inspected the laptop. It wasn’t broken anywhere externally. Good sign, very good. Glancing at his watch, he didn’t have time to fire it up to see if it still worked. It was under warranty.

He could hear himself now: *It was working yesterday. I don’t know what happened to it. I went to turn it on and nothing happened. I just switched from a PC. I have deadlines to meet. I don’t have time for this. Ab, no. I didn’t drop it.*

Retail sin—bad for karma.

Jack put the laptop back on the table when his cell phone rang.

“Shit!” he said, pulling at his goatee. It was the Monsignor from the church. He glanced at his watch, again. Yes, he really was late. “Hello, Monsignor? I know, I know,” he said, before the man had a chance to speak. “I’m running very late. I’m really, really sorry. I’m almost never late for an appointment, but I’ve been having a hell of a—oops, I mean a heck of a day”, he said staring in Clavis’s direction.

“That’s okay, my son.” The Monsignor said in a creepy deep baritone. “I was actually calling to see if we can reschedule for a

later date. Something has come up, so I am unable to keep our appointment, my son. For today, anyhow. God does work in mysterious ways.”

Maybe a fresh new altar boy Jack fathomed, cringing before he said, “Not a problem Monsignor. I’m sorry I kept you waiting for me. When is a better time for you? I just have to say that I really appreciate you making some time for me. I’m sure you’re overloaded with church work.” Visions of an all boys’ choir standing in line, naked, at the Monsignor’s office door danced in his head.

“How about next Wednesday? Will that be good for you, my son?”

“That would be perfect, Monsignor. Same time? Noon?” He asked, shaking off the horrible pedophilic vision. That would actually give him a little more time to work out a better angle for his story.

“May God be with you, my son,” he answered, and hung up the phone.

Odd fellow, Jack thought as he stuffed his cell back into his pocket.

Despite the new laptop, Jack was still battling a little writer’s block. He originally wanted to do a piece on the church’s artistic history. He found the church to be an awe-inspiring master piece of art. A true vision of inspiration and the further he delved into its arcane history, the more fascinating it became.

The only problem? It’s a dead-to-rights geek piece! ‘A big ole sleeper!’ as his Dad, the editor, always put it. Who wants to read an article about a church? He needed to come up with a saucier piece than that for the Gazette if he wanted any shot at that Pulitzer he’d been dreaming about. Then his father would *have* to recognize his worth. It would be his next biggest achievement after

college; the first had been landing that gig at the Gazette without any help from dear ole dad.

He remembered the first time that he saw the Basilica in all of its majestic glory. That is where he met his ex, Calvin, for the first time. Could he call him an ex? That wasn't the right term. *What do you call someone that you are possibly, temporarily separated from, but weren't sure?*

Jack had been freshly graduated from NYU and had moved to Montréal. The Basilica was at the top of his list of must-see places. Everyone thought he was crazy for leaving New York after graduating. *If you can make it there...*

He was a native New Yorker that had just graduated summa cum laude with a major in Journalism. His father was Chief Executive Editor for the New York Times. It seemed like a no-brainer. *Let it all fall into your lap*, his friends had said.

Jack needed to build his own life, his own career—emphasis on *his own*—without the aid of his renowned father, Mr. Franklin Elliot. Most famous for his piece, *Shaken, not stirred?*, which was an in-depth look at the Secret Service in correlation to *real-life* James Bonds of our history and culture in America, juxtaposed against foreign countries. The piece was outstanding. British dignitaries' heads had definitely rolled on that piece.

His research went beyond the scope of idealism. He'd single-handedly found reliable anonymous informants that relayed invaluable details into the operations of the Secret Service. The piece was set to be listed number 8 in the top 100 ranking literary achievements of all times in Time Magazine in the Fall issue. It was also depicted in The New Yorker as one of their famous cartoon sketches with his father in Secret Service gear donning a spy mask while stirring a martini in one hand and shaking another in his other. His mask wore an expression of mystery.

No matter how Jack's career would have transpired, had he stayed in NYC, he'd always be criticized as riding daddy's coat tails. Jack needed to become his own man, on his own and in his own way. It was the most butch thing he'd ever done during his gay, adult life.

Jack recalled that day he'd met Calvin at the church while doing some initial research. The outside of the Basilica was as grand as most other churches, but the true beauty was on the inside. The double doors were immense and shaped like pointed arches, similar to that of the Pope's hat. He'd wondered if that had been on purpose, part of the architectural design. The doors, made of rich mahogany wood, were burnished to a brilliant deep reddish-brown shine. The top part was adorned with stained glass and an ornate sconce protruded from the center in a reoccurring shape similar to the doors.

Through the outer mitre-shaped doors, past the lobby's sanction doors and into the church's inner sanctum, was a breathtaking view of inspiration—gilded stained glass menagerie of divinity.

The holy shape of the doors was succinct not only to a precursor of shapes inside, but to the archway structure of the entire Pope-hat style cathedral ceiling. Its similar shape lead down to the pulpit in sectioned rafters, amass the angelic view. The pulpit being the most ornate of its kind imaginable, stood roped off dead-center down a path of elaborate church pews.

It was such a majestic view, laden with a heavenly decor of biblical statues, paintings and artwork with splendid color and gilded in striking detail, perfectly placed about the church in various mediums and dimensional holy structures depicting life in its beauty and time on our celestial path.

Calvin had been lighting a votive candle on a large table shrine resembling dozens of steps. Filling the steps, two or three

hundred lit candles flickered softly. In the center of the table, red votives were arranged in the shape of a cross with surrounding votives outlining the holy symbol in a soft golden hue like a halo. An antique wooden carving of Jesus stood atop the glowing red-votive cross. Despite Jack's lack of religious views, he found the table beautifully serene and prayer-inspiring. He could understand how this could bring peace to grieving loved ones, but his brain was too logical to buy into the whole religious thing.

Calvin had been kneeling in front of the beautiful candles after he'd finished lighting one towards the bottom. He was a truly handsome, masculine sight amidst all the holy iconic beauty. Six foot tall, stocky build with very short chestnut brown hair above dark mysterious eyes as black as night. His face was more than handsome, it was refined. Refined, despite an extremely trimmed and well-groomed beard that added to the angular imposition in his jaw.

On his left cheek stood a proud little beauty mark that seemed to anchor and complete the handsomeness escaping his profile. A small potbelly hung over his belt, yet he still held a positive muscular build that radiated masculinity. Exactly Jack's type.

As Calvin rose from his knees in front of the holy inferno, Jack had been subconsciously strolling his way through the church towards Mr. Handsome's direction. Their eyes locked after an exchange of up-down once-over looks. That kind of look always sent the Gaydar off the charts.

Jack, never usually the aggressor, couldn't help himself and turned around and said, "Excuse me. Do you know how to get to the Jean-Talon Market?"

He'd already had plans to shop for dinner and a possible *bus-bear* after his initial research of the Basilica. It was the only thing he could think of saying. What a line. Small pick-up talk was never his

bag.

“Jean-Talon? Oh—I love that place. It’s a great market.” Calvin said, giving him another more exaggerated up-down once-over, making it way too obvious. “It’s really simple. Are you here visiting Montréal?”

Now what to say? He didn’t like lying, even if it was only a twist of truth, but he wasn’t new in town. Hardly. He’d already been living in Montréal for over a year and he was quite familiar with the Jean-Talon market.

Okay, the truth. The truth always had a way of setting the guilty party free. Didn’t it?

“Actually—,” he said, nervously pulling at his goatee, “I already know where it is.” Now starting to blush he continued, “I have to confess. When I saw you I couldn’t resist.” The blush now turned crimson. Not good at small pick-up talk, not at all.

“Well,” Calvin said, the slightest smirk forming over that anchoring beauty mark, “usually I’m the one doing the approaching. And that’s normally at Le Stud,” he finished, then quickly looked around as if he’d just cursed in the house of God.

And there it was, the gay confirmation. Just drop a hint at a gay establishment and either they were gay and knew all about it or they were straight and never heard of it or denied it.

“Am I allowed to say that in here?” Calvin whispered making a cringing motion.

“Well if it isn’t allowed then I’m certainly going to Hell-in-a-Handbag for approaching you in the first place!” It was Jack’s turn to give affirmation to the gay stigmata Calvin had put out there. They both got a little chuckle.

“I apologize.” Jack started, “Let me introduce myself properly. I’m Jack Elliot.” With a hopeful smile, he extended his

hand out towards Mr. Handsome.

Calvin looked at him with those smoky-eyes turned bedroom-eyes and gripped his hand with a strong, almost brutish force and shook it. Calvin's hands were big, rough and mapped with veins. "Calvin Hedges. It's a pleasure to meet you, Jack Elliot," he said in a deep tenor.

Jack winced a little, not so much from the handshake, but from the tingling it was causing down below. Jack was in need of a very long, hopefully meaningful, release.

"I'm usually not so forthcoming, but as I said, I couldn't resist." He took a moment to gather composure, forcing his loins back in check. "You always hear the supermarket is the best place to meet someone. I guess those people need to get to church more often!" Jack laughed at his own joke. Calvin was handsome, masculine and strong with a sense of humor. Only one thing left. "Do you cook?"

Now it was Calvin's turn to laugh. "No and I don't do windows either," he said, giving him a sexy little wink to go along with that deep husky tone.

He was so handsome that that smallest gesture from his face, the casual wink engulfing a smoky stare of midnight-eyes, to a sexy little smirk of full lips pulling back and shining pearly whites that were completed by the anchoring beauty mark—made him warm inside.

Oh Yes... It had been a long time for Jack... long *indeedy*.

"How about we catch an early dinner? I know this great little French Bistro in Vie Montréal. They make a great Boeuf Bourguignon," Calvin offered.

"I thought you didn't cook?" Jack marveled at his culinary intellect and terminology.

“What? I never said I didn’t like fine dining,” he said, shrugging, followed with another loin-warming wink, this time followed by a heartwarming, full-fledged smile. Jack was beginning to like this whole *church-thing* after all.

And just like that, *five years later*, they were entering a temporary separation.

The problem was all Jack. Calvin wasn’t the one that wanted a relationship-break. Calvin couldn’t understand what had gone wrong. Everything was so perfect.

Maybe too perfect.

Jack himself hadn’t even seen it coming. Life for him was at a stagnant stand-still in their relationship. He often wondered if this is what a long term relationship entailed—weeks and weeks of regimented routine.

Wake up.

Make the coffee.

Drink the coffee.

Check the email.

Pop-in the toast.

Send the email.

Eat the toast.

Kiss Calvin good morning.

Kiss Calvin goodbye.

The daily humdrum of life always whittled away at his being until he felt dull and dead on the inside. Used up—nothing left. Was this just a simple *passé*? Mid-life crisis? Or, was his subconscious simply telling him that after five years of a good solid

meaningful relationship, that Calvin wasn't *The One*?

Hence, the need of a separation, at least for Jack. Now he truly understood the saying, "I need time to sort things out." It didn't just mean an inevitable break-up, it meant just what it was, time and nothing more. He needed to be single again to find out if who he is, is really who *he* is and not who *they* are. It wasn't just about love, sex and fortitude. It was all too reminiscent of how he felt about his father and his career. How could a relationship to a man and a relationship to a career fall into similar categories? Counseling was truly in order. He wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Why couldn't things stay the way they were in the beginning of their relationship, when everything was fresh and new, discoveries abound?

Jack's phone began blaring the theme song from *True Blood*, bringing his attention back to the laptop on his kitchen table. Damn! Hopefully it wasn't the creepy priest calling back to cancel on him. It's the only story-hook he had.

The spinning gear appeared on the laptop screen and a smile spread across Jack's face.

Dunno who ya think you are, but befaw the night is thruuu, I'm gonna dooo bad things with yooou. The caller-id prefix was 212. New York City. *Who* the hell was calling him from New York that wasn't saved in his phone?

"Uh—hello?" Jack answered the call.

"May I speak with Mr. Jack Elliot please?" asked the voice of an older, refined gentlemen.

"In the flesh. Who's this?" he asked, firing up his laptop to check for damage.

"Mr. Elliot, I'm Barnabas Leibowitz. I'm with the law firm Halper, Rabinowitz, & Leibowitz. We represent the estate of your

uncle, Mr. Terrance Elliot.” He said matter-of-factly.

“Excuse me? Did you say estate? Doesn’t that mean—?” Mr. Leibowitz cut him off before he could finish.

“Mr. Elliot, I’m afraid I have the unfortunate task of informing you of your uncle’s condition.”

“Condition? What’s wrong? Did something happen? Was there an accident?” Jack asked, thinking back on his uncle, the picture of health.

“Your uncle, Terrance if I may, has suffered a severe hemorrhagic stroke last night. Your father, with his hectic deadline scheduling, has asked me to contact you on his behalf.” That was just like dear-ole-dad. Business always came before family. Yet another reason Jack ran from New York and his father, for fear of becoming cold-hearted and all business. *Let someone else handle the bad news when it came to the family. The paper must meet the deadline!*

The lawyer continued. “The prognosis from I.C.U. at Mount Sinai is grave. The stroke has caused irreparable damage to his brain, mainly affecting the areas that control automatic functions such as blinking, swallowing—”

“Breathing?” Jack interrupted, plopping down in the kitchen chair.

“Yes, Mr. Elliot. I’m sorry to say that it also has affected the part of his brain that controls the function that allows us to breathe, subconsciously and unconsciously. Because of the severity of damage, your uncle is unable to function normally, even if he were to recover. He would need round-the-clock care, not to mention a breathing apparatus and such. It is very explicit in his advance-directive—or living will—that in the event of such a tragedy he would not want to live out his remaining days in that sort of catatonic state. He wouldn’t survive another minute without life support. Therefore, defined by the terms of his advance

directive, this tragedy is deemed within the realm of catatonia and we must adhere to his final wishes.”

“So what exactly are you telling me Mr. Leibowitz—” Jack started to ask when the lawyer interrupted this time.

“Barnabas or Barney, please. Call me Barney. If I may call you Jack?” Not waiting for an answer, the lawyer continued. “Again, coming straight from the doctrine of his living will, he is only to remain on life support for a determined period of time, in which the health care professionals must diagnose whether or not his condition is deemed a treatable one with a stipulated percentage of recovery indicated. That being said, there has been no brain activity since his admittance to the Intensive Care Unit. He’s been in a constant vegetative state. He is already tentatively scheduled for life support to be shut off within the next 48-72 hours to allow family members to be present. I can momentarily delay the shut off if you need time to make arrangements but his directive is very specific.” His tone retained professionalism with a slight bit of compassion.

“That won’t be necessary Mr—, Barney. Wow.” He feathered his goatee between distracted fingers. He’d always admired his uncle Terry and saw him as a father figure. They had a mutual fondness for one another. His uncle had never had any kids, but he had fatherly qualities that Jack’s lacked.

During the holidays or whenever a present was called for his uncle would always bring him something any young boy would love, something hip and fun like that Christmas when he was eight years old. Uncle Terry had given him a remote-controlled Batmobile toy car. It was wrapped in big silver packaging, tied with red ribbon and a big red bow. That’s all Jack talked about day and night after seeing the movie at the cinema. *The Batmobile! The Batmobile!* The toy replica was just like the one in the movie and it even made the whirring turbine engine sound the movie version

made as it came blasting out of the Batcave. All the kids in the neighborhood were envious of it as he raced it up and down the sidewalk when the weather permitted. His father had given him an antique writing desk. A piece of furniture. Furniture, for his son's eighth birthday.

"My schedule is clear." Jack said, remembering the rescheduled appointment that he'd have to reschedule again. Family was always first in Jack's heart and his schedule.

"I wish our introduction could have been on a better note, Jack." The lawyer's voice filled the dead air with a heart-felt, compassionate tone. "Once I reconvene with my associates I will get back to you on the details of— I apologize for lack of a better term, the shut-off."

Jack could hear the sincerity in the old man's voice bleeding through his years of professionalism. "After which, we can schedule a time for the readings of your uncle's last will and testament. Normally, there isn't an actual sit-down where the lawyers read the will in front of the prospective beneficiaries, that's just made-up TV drama. But your uncle has requested it to be so and we intend to honor his every wish to the letter. He has garnered quite an estate as to which he wishes to bequeath upon his remaining family members."

"An inheritance—," he blurted out, instantly regretting it, hoping he hadn't sounded like a greedy crumb-grabbing relative. He knew his uncle had done well for himself but he was so caught up with grief about the unfortunate news that he hadn't thought about what all of this meant. His uncle was dying and he had written him into his will. Of course that was the main reason the lawyer was calling, but Jack didn't care about his uncle's money.

Reverting back to his professional tone, the lawyer confirmed, "Yes, Mr. Elliot," almost sighing, "your uncle has named you as one of the benefactors in his will." Estate lawyers

were probably so disgusted by the selfish reactions of the benefactors in light of such tragedies, even though Jack's was innocent surprise.

Realization set in and Jack said, "Excuse me. Did you say readings? As in plural?" He could feel tension on the line. He'd never attended a reading of a will before but he was pretty sure that it was only done once.

"Ummm—Yeah. Aaah—your uncle had requested that there be two readings for his will. While this isn't one of the most outlandish requests our firm has been queried, it is a bit out of the norm. The first one is to be held with all of the benefactors of his estate and the second with aaah—just yourself involved." During their conversation this was the first time the lawyer seemed to falter in his polished legal prose.

"Me? A reading of his will with just me?" He couldn't fathom why his uncle would schedule a separate reading for him alone. It had to be because of the mock father/son relationship they'd had; A bond as good as any real father/son relationship. His uncle never married, never had children of his own. Actually, it made sense in a way. But Jack was curious. "Why would he arrange a reading for just me? Am I supposed to attend both?"

"Yes, you are requested at both. I am as clueless about this decision as you, and I am also not permitted by law to reveal any endowment until the time of the reading due to the unfair advantage it would hold if the will were to be contested—"

"Mr. Leib—Barnabas, Barney, please excuse me." Jack interrupted. "Don't misunderstand my surprise. I have no intentions in contesting anything. This is just so out of the blue. I'm just a little taken back."

"Mr. Elliot— Jack. This is an unfortunate part of my profession and I harbor no thoughts of ill intentions on the behalf

of any of my client's family." That was a lie. "I'm truly sorry for your uncle's condition and I'm sure that the two of you had a good relationship and that you are genuinely distraught over the situation. My job here is done. My secretary will contact you with information regarding the readings once everything is settled. My deepest sympathies are with you and your family." He hung up without waiting for a reply.

Jack felt like a heel, even though the lawyer was being a tad harsh. Uncle Terry wasn't even dead yet. Whether the lawyer believed him or not, he was earnestly upset over his uncle. He couldn't deny that just a little part inside of him was anxious to hear what it was that his uncle was leaving him—something that apparently no one else was supposed to know about. Besides that, there was something else bothering him. Ever since the beginning of their conversation he'd gotten a strange feeling. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

The laptop had gone to sleep while Jack was on the phone. He ran his finger over the trackpad and smiled again when it came to life. He typed in his password and logged right in. Everything seemed to be working fine. He pulled up the web page for Priceline.com, the site that featured William Shatner Judo chopping airline and hotel fares and booked the earliest flight available to New York City. He needed to see Uncle Terry before they pulled the plug on him. Inheritance or not, Uncle Terry had been more of a father than his real father. Jack owed it to him, needless to say his heart needed it. He had to at least try and let him know how he felt, despite his condition—how he appreciated him and loved him for being such an important part of his life. Guilt gnawed at his conscious.

Why did he wait until now to really express his feelings?

Why do people always wait until it's too late?

October 27, 4:20 P.M., EST

Newark, New Jersey

DONG! *Fasten Your Seat-belts* flashed on the cabin's overhead sign. "We're preparing for our descent into Newark Liberty International Airport. Please return to your seats, fasten your seat belts and return all trays and chairs to their upright position. It has been a pleasure flying you to your destination here on Delta Airlines. We hope you join us again soon." The pilot's voice crackled through the passenger cabin like an old recording as the plane began its descent.

It's been over a year since Jack had been home for a visit. His father had cancelled both Thanksgiving and Christmas last year. On both occasions, Mr. Editor needed to attend an out of state conference that simply could not be put off. Screw the rest of the family. Business always first. Outside of the usual holiday affair, Jack never visited home. He'd literally hopped on a plane to Montréal before his graduation cap had even hit the ground and he hadn't looked back since. He couldn't. He'd been eager to start his new life and see what he could make of it.

His relationship with his parents was more of a mutual understanding. They loved, respected and supported anything he did with his life, which is more than anyone could hope for from most parents, but the only direction they'd ever given him was to

follow in his father's footsteps and that was mainly his father's doing. His mother had always gone along with whatever his father said like any good Stepford wife. His parents never really got involved with anything in Jack's life. All the important decisions were left up to teenage Jack. This is a blessing when you're young. When you're young, you just want to do what any fervent teenage boy wants to do. Chase girls or boys. Play video games. Stay up all night watching the Thriller marathon.

As an adult, Jack wished his parents had been as strict as some of his less fortunate friends. His parents just assumed he'd follow in daddy's footsteps. So what direction or discipline could they have offered?

Jack learned early on that it all boils down to discipline. Nothing is accomplished without a plan and discipline to adhere to that plan. Thanks to his parents, he constantly battled with discipline. Everyone wants to blame someone else for their faults—parents, teachers, etc. Blame could be placed on whomever, but at the end of the day as you take tally as an adult, the mirror is the only true place for it to go. Nobody ever wants to believe they're flawed. And maybe nobody is—maybe that is just how some of us are supposed to turn out.

When Calvin learned about Jack's uncle, he'd offered to take a short sabbatical from the university so he could come along for moral and emotional support. He insisted Jack would need him. They'd spent all night discussing what they were going to do. Going back and forth over the same damn thing. Jack loved Calvin and his dedication but he needed some time apart. He was starting to think that maybe it wasn't just relationship counseling that they needed. Jack was starting to think that he needed to see a therapist himself. Why should he be the only one in the world that didn't?

Jack had developed the same feeling over the last five years with Calvin that he had felt with his father. He was no therapist

and his father was far from perfect, but Jack was sure the problem was his and his alone. He just couldn't spell out the issue. Calvin said that Jack was having commitment issues. Everything seemed to point to that, regardless of Jack's reassurances to Calvin and to himself.

The plane started touching down on the runway and Jack nearly ripped out his goatee. He'd been lost in thought. It's amazing how those little wheels supported the whole plane. It was comical. Tiny little rubber wheels, centered beneath a metallic beast, screeching and bouncing, screeching and bouncing, angling the huge monstrosity level as it decelerates its way to a halt on the tarmac.

The little wheels were completing their journey as the plane was nearing the end of the runway. It had been a quick and painless trip, thankfully.

"Thank you for flying Delta," the flight attendant said, handing Jack a little pin resembling wings as he passed the cockpit. She gave him a little wink when he gave her a perplexed look.

Mr. Shatner had been nice enough to Judo-chop Jack a room at the Marriott when he'd booked the plane. Not only was the Marriott his favorite place to stay, the one in Times Square had been located close to the New York library where he'd planned on finding that angle for his piece on the Notre-Dame Basilica of Montréal. His mother had insisted that he come stay in his old room but that would have entailed listening to his father go on and on and on about how he should never have moved out of New York and away from opportunity. *How he could have been Assistant Editor at The New York Times by now.* As if that was what Jack's purpose in life was—sitting in a cubicle outside his father's office, awaiting his next command. Not this life, dad.

Jack had said he'd already booked a hotel room. When she pleaded with him to cancel he said that he needed to manage his

time better and try and get some writing done while he was there because it was close to the library. It was partly a lie and she knew it. Despite his feelings for his father, Jack loved both his parents and in order for it to stay that way he needed to spend as little time with Dear-Ole-Dad as possible.

The flight attendant opened the aircraft door and Jack made his way down the make-shift corridor from the plane to the terminal, keeping as close to the faux-walls as possible. Those things made him cringe. They reminded him of walking on metal storm doors in the city and subway grates. He always felt as if he was going to fall through one day and end up as a rat's dinner.

Outside of the Airport, he hopped into the first cab he came across. "Marriott, Times Square, please." Jack said pulling the heavy door closed with a thud.

"You got it Mack." The cabby said, turning his worn out golf cap backwards, slamming the cab in gear and testing the integrity of the car's suspension as they sped out of the airport.

The trees were a kaleidoscope of fall colors as the cab raced down the New Jersey Turnpike. Jack took a deep breath and a strong hold of the *Ob Shit Handle* in the cab. He took notice of the interior's familiar smell. Like all cabs, it smelled like funky feet, but it gave him a sense of comfort. He was back home. Once a New Yorker, always a New Yorker.

They finally emerged through the traffic and the cab was barreling down the Lincoln Tunnel when Jack's phone started ringing.

"Hey Mack? Ain't dat da True Blood song? My wife loves dat show. She says it's seeeeexy. Huh! How da hell can vamps suckin' ya neck be seeeeexy? She made me sit tru dat other neck bitin' movie—what da hell was it called? Hmmm—ah, Daylight? I don't know. I fell asleep tru half of it."

Jack pulled out his iPhone. It was his mother. He sent it right to voicemail. She was probably ready for another round at his lodging arrangements. He felt the guilt in her voice earlier on the phone. It was never her fault, really. All the lost years of parenting she let his father dictate. Her will never matched his bull-headedness.

“Twilight.” Jack said putting his phone away, looking up through the cab’s window wondering if one day the tunnel would ever give way to the Hudson. It wasn’t the water that he was afraid of, it was the drowning part he couldn’t get past.

“Eh?” The cabby grunted.

“The name of the vampire movie. It’s called Twilight.”

The cabby eyed him in the rearview mirror. “Oh! Yea! Dat’s da name of it. Vera couldn’t stop flappin’ about it all night. I wouldn’t a minded if’n it got me lucky dat night if ya know wad I mean. Tee hee!” His eyes snapped back to the brake lights in front of them as he braked hard, laying on the horn just a little bit too long. “Come on! Git dat piece a shit movin’! We ain’t got all night! It’s just a freakin’ tunnel for Christ’s sake! It ain’t gonna fall apart!”

Ah, New York. It’s a hell of a town Jack thought to himself as he nestled into the comfort of the smelly old seat. Montréal was a wonderful place to live but there is just something about the Big Apple that can’t be replicated, duplicated or syndicated. He wasn’t sure if it was the people, the places or maybe just a little combination of both.

Once he dropped his bags off at the hotel, the plan was to go visit his uncle first thing and avoid running into his parents while he was there. He wasn’t ready for his father and the drama. Seeing Uncle Terry in his condition was going to be enough of a shocker. Lights out. Lifeless. Uncle Terry had been smart, quick witted and a very bright individual. He’d always been so full of life

and zest that Jack couldn't imagine seeing him in such a state. His light snuffed out.

The taxicab pulled up in front of the hotel and Jack handed the cab fare through front passenger window and told the cabbie to keep the change. He pulled his hand back just in time before the wheels of the cab screeched. He watched as it roared its way out of the valet circle of the Marriott.

"Tanks Pal!" The cabbie shouted, his voice competing with the honking commuters.

On his way into the hotel, Jack stopped to admire the floral display in the center of the lobby before he got in line to check in. The Marriott knew how to do things right. The arrangement was huge, towering over him by at least four feet. It was a beautiful ensemble of fall flowers and foliage with the main focus on the Brugmansia branches with their beautiful upside down flowers that resemble huge pixie hat bells.

The branches were hung in perfect strings that swirled around the entire display from top to bottom giving it an art deco facade of a Christmas tree. Different colored flowers were sprinkled all over in between the Brugmansia branches, mimicking Christmas balls. The top of the faux-tree was adorned with a large bunch of Bird of Paradise flowers that were arranged just so, that it looked like a big exotic multicolored star sitting atop of the creation. The final touch of tinsel dressed the entire tree, bringing it to life from the breezy sliding entrance door.

Jack was next in line and the young woman behind the reservation desk, wearing a vest and jacket said, "Good afternoon and welcome to the Marriott. Have you a reservation?"

"Yes. Thank you." He pulled his luggage up to the desk. "It's under Elliot. Jack Elliot."

"Thank you Mr. Elliot. It'll just be a moment while I pull up

your reservation,” she said typing his name into the computer. Once she found his reservation she frowned for a moment.

“Is everything okay?” He asked, leaning a little closer trying to get a glimpse at her computer screen. “I used Priceline.com to book the room. I have the print out in my bag. Let me get it out for ___”

“No worries, Mr. Elliot. That isn’t necessary. Everything is fine. I have your reservation right here. I just need your ID and a credit card for incidentals.” She began preparing the hotel key card. Frowning again, she continued. “You have an urgent message here to call a Dr. Alderson.”

“Dr. Alderson?” He repeated, tugging at his goatee. “That isn’t my doctor. Could that be—I wonder if it’s about my uncle?” he thought out loud. “How did he know where I was staying? Did he say what it was in regards to?” He handed over his driver’s license and credit card.

After double-checking her computer, the girl behind the desk adjusted her vest and said, “No, I’m sorry. He didn’t.” She squinted at the screen and tapped a few keys. “He called twice and left you a voicemail which I’ve just forwarded to your suite, room number 732, located on the seventh floor next to the newly installed pool. Then he called a third time and insisted that we have you contact him as soon as you check in.” Taking the ID and credit card she asked, “Is this the same card on file for any incidentals?”

“Yes,” he nodded, releasing his goatee and scratching his head. Did he tell his mother which hotel? He couldn’t remember. It had to be about Uncle Terry. Hopefully he wasn’t too late.

The hotel clerk confirmed the card and ID and handed them back, along with the hotel key card. “Thank you Mr. Elliot. Please enjoy your stay with us here at the Marriott and I hope that everything turns out okay.” She nodded, locking eyes with him,

emphasizing her concern.

“Thank you.” Jack took the cards and gathered up his luggage.

The mysterious phone calls had him worried. His parents would have called if something happened, then he remembered the call he’d sent to voicemail during the cab ride. He’d check the message when he got to his room. That still didn’t explain how the doctor knew where to leave a message. He was sure he hadn’t told his mother where he was staying. Jack loved the Marriott when he traveled. Everyone knew it. Maybe someone had gotten word to the doctor. But who? His mother would have given the doctor his cell number, not the hotel.

Leaving the reservation desk he hurried past the Starbucks located in the hotel, taking note that its entrance led out onto the street. Normally, he’d never be able to pass up the chance for life-sustaining espresso, but he needed to retrieve the doctor’s message in his room. He really hoped he wasn’t too late.

He walked down the hallway to the elevator and pressed the up button. As he waited, he pulled his wallet from the carry-on bag and flipped past photos of Clavis until he found the one his mother had taken during Christmas. He was four years old sitting in Santa’s lap next to the Christmas tree he’d helped the maids decorate. It was the year that Uncle Terry had dressed up as Old Saint Nick and delivered all the presents on Christmas morning.

Rubbing his eyes at the memory, he wished he’d spent more time with Uncle Terry as an adult. Jack loved the holidays as a young boy, not only for the festivities and presents, but for that sense of home and family his uncle always brought, *along with the gifts*. His uncle filled the missing gap in Jack’s life that his father failed to fill.

The elevator bell snapped Jack back to the present. Quickly,

he started wrestling with the flap on his carry-on to put the wallet back when the doors slid open. Focusing on the bag and simultaneously grabbing his other piece of luggage, Jack bumped into the man exiting the elevator and tripped him by mistake.

“Excuse me, my son.” The man said with a pinched voice, regaining momentum and shuffling around Jack’s luggage.

Once Jack safely secured his wallet in the carry-on, he turned around in the elevator to apologize and caught a glimpse of black jacket as the man turned the corner down the hall.

“Oops—sorry! Excuse me, I was in such a hurry. Do I know you?” He called down the hallway. Apparently the man was in a hurry, too. Funny. He thought the voice sounded familiar, but not quite. He couldn’t quite place it and that was odd. He always knew a voice before he knew a face.

Jack rode the elevator up to the seventh floor. When the doors opened, the smell of chlorine flooded the elevator. On his way past the pool, he looked through the glass doors at a bunch of young girls splashing about, playing a game of Marco Polo. Their parents watched over them in the adjoining hot tub. Only if this trip was for leisure, he could move those parents over and take a relaxing soak after unpacking, but that wouldn’t be the case, as he’d soon find out.

Jack slid the hotel key card into the mechanism and it made a little shift-click-sound. As he pushed the door open with his luggage, he noticed the phone’s message light blinking on and off like a hazard sign. Smartly designed and fashionable as always, the Marriott’s room had been equipped for leisure and business alike with an armoire housing a TV entertainment system, a little breakfast nook with coffee service, mini-fridge and an executive desk with Wi-Fi capabilities, along with the usual double beds and full bath.

Jack shoved the luggage and carry-on into the closet by the door to be tended to later and tossed the hotel key on top of the armoire before he sat down at the desk. The message light blinked on and off as if signaling his growing apprehensions. He wanted the moment to stay frozen in time, to advance no further than the blinking hazard light. On and off. On and off. No bad news could announce itself if the light just kept blinking on and off, on and off.

Fulfilling the inevitable, Jack snatched the phone off its cradle and hit the message button, bringing the endless beacon to a stop. He pulled on his goatee while he listened to a series of clicks as the message service began to play his fate.

“Paging Doctor Larson to ER, STAT!” echoed in the receiver before a man’s deep voice said, “Mr. Elliot. This is Dr. Alderson, head of ICU at Mount Sinai. I’ve tried reaching you several times in regards to your uncle, Mr. Terrance Elliot. Your number was found in his wallet in case of emergencies and I spoke with your partner and he informed me of your stay at the Marriott.” *Mystery solved.* Jack’s heart ached. His uncle felt him important enough to be his emergency contact. “I’m in charge of your uncle’s care here at the hospital and need to speak to you regarding his condition. There has been a medical altercation, however, policy doesn’t permit me to discuss specific medical information over the phone, so I’ll be brief. He’s had a momentary lapse of lucidity that is fading rapidly in which he’s urgently requesting your presence. I’m going to be frank with you, Mr. Elliot. I’m advising that you come quickly at his request. He is in room four in ICU. Please heed my advice and come as quickly as you can. I apologize for not informing you in person, but I’m left no choice.”

Jack eased the phone down on the cradle. Fate had been served. Although the devastating blow had yet to happen, it was on its way and wasting no time according to the doctor. His uncle had

regained consciousness on his deathbed and the first thing he thought about was his nephew, Jack.

He didn't have time to feel. This was happening all too fast. He hasn't even unpacked yet. Racking his brain, Jack needed to find the quickest way to get to the hospital. A taxi would conveniently get caught up in traffic somewhere along the route to the hospital as the meter raced to catch the national deficit. A combination of foot and taxi would still serve as a cumbersome means.

The good ole Metro was always the best way to get across the city, quickly. Not wanting to waste valuable time in case his memory didn't serve him accurately, Jack pulled out his iPhone, tapped up the Map App and surveyed his options. After considering the distance and time he didn't have that it would take him to walk to the appropriate subway, he opted for the quickest bus route according to the iPhone.

A bus would be departing in four minutes, just outside the hotel at the 42nd street station and that would get him to the hospital in twenty-five minutes. If it got jammed up in traffic, depending on how far it made its way through the three mile journey, he would just have to jump off and run the rest of the way. He had to hurry. That was four minutes to the bus's arrival, give or take a few if it was on schedule and if the iPhone App had been accurate.

He scrambled up from the desk and ran out into the hallway. He'd avoid the unpredictable elevator sans check-in time and prepared to sprint all the way down the stairwell, using the stairs. Down was always easier than up. Just before his room's door shut and locked him out, he realized he hadn't grabbed the hotel key. Quickly elbowing the door in time, he ran back in and snatched the key off the armoire. Before the door had a chance to close for a second time, he was down the hall and running.

He flew past the pool and rounded the corner to the

elevators. He barely avoided a head-on collision with an elderly woman in a pink sun-visor hat and matching velour jump suit, pumping the elevator button. He ran past so fast, that the wake of his breeze caused her to turn in the direction of his trailing wind. Seeing nothing but the empty hallway, she turned back around to see the stairwell door swinging shut, nary a soul in sight. She nervously shrugged her shoulders and resumed pumping away at the elevator button.

“Where the hell is this damned thing?” She spoke, as if expecting an answer.

Jack descended the stairs two and three at a time, nearly tripping and falling at least four times before he made his way to the first floor. Sweat ran down his face as he bolted out of the stairwell door and wiggled his way through a crowd of Asian tourists waiting to file into the elevator.

Once the path was clear, he made a beeline for the Starbucks. Only a single Asian man at the counter. All the other customers were seated, drinks in hand, laptops and electronic reading devices open. It was clear sailing. He slowed his pace to a light jog and took in a deep breath as he passed the barista pulling out a fresh shot of espresso for the Asian gentleman before he saw the bus pulling up to the curb through the window. He made it in time. He held the door open to let a young woman, struggling with one of those extremely annoying mammoth-sized baby strollers, into the coffee shop.

The bus’s door opened, and a few Asian tourist stragglers made their way off the bus as Jack waited to get on. When he got to the top of the stairs to pay the bus driver the fare, he realized that his wallet was in his carry-on, back in the room.

“Damn! I left my wallet in my room. Can you front me a ride to the hospital and I promise I’ll pay you once I get back?”

The bus driver whipped his head around with a scowl at the ready. The corner of his mouth twitched as he said, “Buddy, if you needed to get to the hospital in such a rush,” *twitch, twitch*, “you shoulda called a ambulance. This, is a *bus*. With payin’ customers who got places to be.” *Twitch, twitch*. “And number two ain’t been late on my shift in the ten years I been drivin’ her and I ain’t intended on startin’. Please step back down to the platform.”

“Please, my uncle’s at Mount Sinai and he doesn’t have much longer to live and I need to get there. Please let me ride, just this one time for free. I give you my word. I’ll come back and pay!” He saw the passengers starting to gawk at the scene he was causing.

The bus driver looked out the bus’s window, then back at Jack yanking on his goatee and said, “Buddy, do you realize how many times I hear that one?” *Twitch, twitch*. “I got a schedule to keep, here. Number three is behind me ‘bout ten minutes. Please get off the bus.”

Ten minutes. That should be enough time. Before he stepped back down, he turned and looked at the passengers and thought about asking one of them for the fare. Immediately, like all true New Yorkers, they all turned their heads in another direction.

“Look,” *twitch, twitch*, “buddy—” the bus driver started to say.

“Okay! Okay!” Throwing his hands up in the air, he stepped back down onto the platform, letting number two keep its schedule. He couldn’t blame them, the driver or the passengers. He’d grown up in this city. A hell-of-a-town it was, but you never could be too careful.

Jack remembered the time he and Calvin had lunch at a Cosi cafe in Montréal. On their way in, they’d passed this nice little old lady wearing authentic cat-eye glasses and a scarf tied around her neatly teased hairdo. She was holding the door open for customers and begging for change as they entered the establishment. She was

not the typical picture of a panhandling bum.

Lacking Mayor Giuliani's aggressive assault on cleaning up New York's bums and panhandlers, it wasn't an uncommon sight in Montréal to see them begging for change or food outside places like Così or especially Schwartz's deli, where people lined up down the street to get a taste of their fine pastrami.

Normally immune to bums—growing up in New York City—her age-old innocence and neatness had caught Calvin's and Jack's eyes. When they sat down to eat, they saw her scoot into a booth at a nearby table that hadn't been cleared off. She sipped leftover coffee from the half empty cups left by the lazy patrons that didn't clean up after themselves.

Such extremes as eating or drinking from stranger's left overs left Calvin and Jack to think about the authenticity of her act. Surely someone wouldn't do that for mere change unless necessity really called for it. So they decided that this little old lady was really down on her luck and needed a little help.

When they were finished with lunch, Jack slipped a twenty towards her over the table. She had moved on from the coffee and was picking a crumpled, lipstick-stained napkin off a gold mine of a half-eaten sandwich underneath.

She looked up at them through those hideous glasses, a slight grin forming at the corner of her mouth and said, "God bless you", before quickly palming the twenty off the table.

On their way out of the Così, Jack felt a little strange about what they had just done. After all, she was probably someone's Grandmother that was too proud to ask her children for help.

Calvin stepped outside, but Jack's journalistic curiosity got the better of him and he glanced back. His eyes widened when he saw her counting a wad of cash, her glasses sitting on the table next to the half-eaten sandwich. Apparently, they had been the top score

of the day.

Number two made a loud swishing sound as it pulled away from the bus stop. Jack could feel the heat from the engine flush over him as it passed by. Shaking his head, he hurried back into the hotel. The young woman with the obnoxious stroller was waiting for her latte, feeding the baby a madeleine cookie. The enticing smell of fresh espresso permeated the coffee shop and the barista just placed a venti on the pick-up table underneath those peculiarly shaped red lights.

His feet had nine minutes to beat.

He wasn't going to miss number three. He gave the barista a sorrowful look and started sprinting into the hotel. When he reached the elevator, the doors opened and the pink clad elderly woman was just stepping out.

"Be careful dear. This place is haunted," she said and quickly shuffled away.

Jack sized-up the stairwell door, wondering if he could outrun the elevator to the seventh floor and still have breath left to make it back down to the bus stop and keep his date with number three.

No.

Before the doors shut, Jack slipped onto the elevator and punched the button for the seventh floor. His days of running track had long since passed. Once the elevator started to climb, he held his finger on the *CLOSE DOOR* button. He didn't know if it would work, but it was worth a shot.

Once the elevator reached the seventh floor, the doors opened up to six young girls. They were dripping wet and dressed in hotel towels, waving to someone beyond his sight.

"Thank you Father!" They said, snickering in unison, before

Jack heard the sound of the stairwell door close. Then, in an exuberant pre-teen schoolgirl fashion, they turned around and bum-rushed Jack out of the elevator, practically trampling him like a herd of wet water-logged elephants before he could step out of the way.

He ran down the hallway, past the empty pool and around the corner. When he reached his room, he started to put the hotel key card into the locking mechanism and felt the door give way before the lock had a chance to disengage.

It was already unlocked.

He couldn't remember in his hasty exit if he'd heard the door click shut.

"Hello?" he called through the cracked door.

Sweat began to gather on his brow as he looked down each side of the hallway. Empty, except for the maid's cleaning cart at the far end. He'd forgotten to put the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the handle.

"Hellooooo? Is anyone in there?" He tried again, rapping on the door this time. Maybe the maid had forgotten something and was checking the room before she started cleaning the rest of the floor.

He pushed the door open with sweaty hands and his mouth fell slightly open at the sight.

The lights were off but the room was still dimly lit from a sullen overcast bleeding through the gap between the drapes, making the room look like a graveyard in pale moonlight. Even though his eyes were still adjusting to the eerie illumination, he could see what his brain was having a hard time processing.

He felt like he'd just stepped into a different reality where the room he knew was worlds apart from what he knew it to be.

He stood stone-still, mouth hanging open a little wider.

“What the fu—,” he said, flipping on the lights.

The room looked like it had been hit by a whirlwind. Furniture was overturned and strewn haphazardly about the room. He could hear the dial tone from the phone hanging by its cord, dangling from the toppled desk. What remained of the lamp lay in pieces next to the desk.

Both beds and box springs had been flipped on end and stripped of their sheets. The pillows had been shredded, their feathers scattered across the bedding inside of the empty bed frames. The faux-headboards that had been nailed onto the wall had been pried loose and overhung the mess. The nightstands were in no better shape, up-ended with their drawers upright, resembling grave stones amidst the rubble.

When the initial shock had faded, he stood still a moment longer listening for sounds. Once he was sure the room was empty, he went in search of his luggage so he could take inventory of his personal damage. The luggage and carry-on weren't in the closet where he'd left them.

Bad sign.

He quickly sifted through the debris in the bedroom and found nothing but the hotel's ruined contents.

He found his belongings in the bathroom, same manner as the room—up-ended and disheveled. His luggage was splayed open on the tile floor. Clothes and toiletries everywhere.

Jack slammed the luggage lid closed and stood it upright in the middle of his clothes. The handle brushed the shower curtain, causing it to stir. Then he realized that he hadn't checked behind it.

Anger started to replace fear. He'd never been violated in such a manner and he was getting pissed off. Forgetting caution, he

grabbed the shower curtain and wrenched it open, hoping to find the person responsible for the ransacking so he could ransack them.

All he found was the disheveled contents of his carry-on bag inside the tub. He stooped over to examine his belongings. His laptop was underneath the empty carry-on bag with a gash on the cover. So much for returning it he thought, picking it up and gently placing it on the floor beside the luggage and clothes.

He sifted through the emptied contents of his carry-on bag in the tub until he found his wallet. Credit cards, photos and money were still intact. Even his flattened out lucky penny he got from the vending machine at the New Jersey Turnpike rest stop on his way to the shore after senior prom. The inscription he'd stamped into it read *Achieve Greatness*. There hadn't been enough room to include *without Dad*.

In fact, all his belongings were still there. Whoever broke into his room had taken nothing.

What had they been looking for?

Why break into a hotel room, demolish it and then walk away with nothing? Not to mention the unbelievable fact it took less than fifteen minutes—the time it took him from the bus stop and back—to create this devastation.

His room must have been mistaken for someone else's. That thought was even less comforting because if they hadn't found what they were looking for, they'd be back to look again.

He didn't have time to deal with this right now. He probably already missed number three. He'd call the front desk and alert the authorities on the way to see his uncle. He needed to focus on catching number three if he hadn't already missed it. He was out the hotel room door and on his way down again.

“Damn!” He cupped a hand over his eyes as he stepped down from the curb. The sun was gleaming off the back of number three, charging down Broadway. He couldn’t believe it. Time was growing shorter than his patience. He jogged past Planet Hollywood to the corner of Broadway and 46th and started to hail a taxi. He was going to have to trust his luck and as luck would have it, Jack knew this taxi cab driver.

“Heeeey Mack! Whatta de odds?” The cabby said, warmth radiating from his tone as Jack got into the cab.

“Aaah—hey, Mr—” searching the back of the cab for the cabbie’s ID.

“Name’s Harold. Harold Poytner. What can I do ya for?” He said with a Cheshire grin, offering his hand in front of the open divider-window.

“Pleasure, Harold. I’m Jack. Pleasure to meet you again and I am so very glad I did.” He said, winded from the jog, gripping Harold’s hand.

“Pleasure’s all mine, Jack.” Harold gripped Jack’s hand.

“I need to get to Mount Sinai Hospital. My uncle is dying. How fast can you make it to the Hospital?”

He let go of Jack’s hand as if it was electrified—palm up and said, “Say no more. I gotcha on dis one, buddy. Just hold tight. We’ll be dare in five.” And with that, Harold flipped his golf hat around and laid on the horn as he tore away from the curb, barely a glance given.

The cab sped down 46th and hung a louie onto 6th Avenue. “On da green! Not in between!” Harold shouted out the cab window. A woman and her poodle wearing matching purple jumpsuits were disobeying the DO NOT WALK sign. “Geez! Pedestrians think they own da damn streets!”

The pedestrians? Jack closed his eyes and put his faith in the seasoned cabbie. Plus the cab was built like a tank. Jack would be safe. The pedestrians? That might be a different story.

Passing Radio City Music Hall, down the stretch of 6th and turning right on to Central Park South, Jack eased back into the seat. If anyone could get him to the hospital on time it would be this guy. Looking up at the iconic Radio City Music Hall sign as they passed reminded Jack of all the times his uncle had taken him to see the Rockettes and their amazing synchronized high kicks. Somehow, Uncle Terry always managed to get front row orchestra seats and Jack would stare at all those legs, trying to catch one of the Rockettes out of sync. This became one of their special traditions. Without fail every year, Jack and his uncle never caught a leg out of sync until Jack started high school and tradition was trumped by the ninth grade coolness factor.

One year before the ninth grade factor, his uncle started a new tradition: FAO Schwarz. A young boy's fantasy come true. Each year they combed every inch of the toy mecca and his uncle would let him pick out one toy for an early Christmas gift. Anything, anything at all. One year Jack had wanted Han Solo's Millennium Falcon spaceship from the movie Star Wars, but his uncle persuaded him a remote controlled toy boat was a lot cooler and actually worked, unlike the spaceship. Jack had been so excited about the boat, his uncle suggested they walk over to Central Park and give it a try if the pond wasn't frozen over.

Once they reached the park, they ran into a friend of his uncle's. The man was standing by a little bodega that sold hot beverages and baked goodies to people strolling through the park. The man was tall, decked out in a black trench coat buttoned to his neck, further accentuating his tall stature, with a black fedora hat resting on his head. Two eyes peered out underneath the black fedora, like shiny lumps of coal.

As they approached his uncle's friend, the man just stared through coal-black eyes at Jack clutching his new toy to his chest. His uncle told Jack to stay by the bodega while he ushered the man off to the side for a quiet conversation. Jack couldn't hear them, so he assumed they were talking about business. On numerous occasions, Jack's father had shooed him away during his business discussions. His father had said that women and young boys didn't need to hear or talk about men's business.

When Uncle Terry finished talking, the man in the black coat slowly nodded and took a step towards Jack, never taking his dark eyes off of him, nor blinking once. The man extended a gloved hand towards him and said in a deep thick accent Jack had never heard before, "I'm Emmerich Koenig."

Uncle Terry walked around the man and said, "Um-ah, Jack, this is an old friend of mine from—law school." Uncle Terry's tone was unfamiliar to Jack. "What do you say, pal? Introduce yourself proper and give my old friend, Emmerich, a man's handshake."

Jack looked at his uncle for a second, then turned to stare into those icy lumps of coal before shifting the toy boat under his arm to extend his tiny palm. As the man drew near, the shadows of fall shifted and Jack could see the misshapen bulbous nose on the man's face. A slow grin spread as Jack reached for his hand, revealing pointy, jagged teeth.

When he took hold of Emmerich's hand, the lumps of coal grew intense as he gripped a forceful, tightening hold on Jack's. He raised the boy's hand up to an unnatural position for a hand shake and pumped it with a strong force.

"Ouch!" Jack yelped, yanking his hand back. A huge drop of crimson blood was forming between his right thumb and forefinger.

"My dear boy! What *haas* happened?" Emmerich asked,

grabbing Jack's hand and examining it. "It seems as if the eyelet from my glove *baas* cut your hand." He quickly produced a handkerchief from his black overcoat and dabbed it at Jack's wound. "There! *Das* is better? No?" Emmerich asked, letting go of Jack's hand and replacing the handkerchief in his overcoat. Jack put his hand to his mouth and immediately began to suck.

"Accidents happen. Isn't that right, Jack?" His uncle said looking at Emmerich who nodded in agreement. "Emmerich and I have some catching up to do Jack and I need you to do me a favor. I need you to stay here and play with your new toy while we attend to business. Can you do that for me, Jack?"

"Uhhuh." Jack mumbled around his hand.

Uncle Terry handed him a fifty-dollar bill for hot cocoa and a muffin if he got cold or hungry and told him to stay in that spot and play with his new boat until he returned. Under no circumstances was he to leave this spot and if there was a problem he was to tell the man behind the stand. He said that he knew Jack was a big boy and could take care of himself until he came back. He asked Jack to promise to keep it a secret between the two of them.

"Okay, Uncle Terry. Cool!" Jack replied, pulling his hand from his mouth. The blood had already started to slow. He was pleased that his uncle trusted him like an adult. His father never took that kind of faith in him.

Jack played for hours with that boat, thanks to the stock of batteries his uncle had purchased along with it. When his uncle finally returned, they went back to FAO Schwarz to get the Millennium Falcon. His uncle said he deserved two presents for being such a good boy, but the store was already closed by the time they had arrived. Uncle Terry promised he would get him the spaceship, as long as he continued to be a good boy and keep his promise about their little secret.

It's a funny thing how the brain works. Age, maturity level and experience play such a big part in our development at different stages in our cognitive awareness. A memory evoked and relived from the past rings different perceptions and understandings in the mind's eye after a lifetime of experience-sharpened intellect.

Until the cab had driven past Central Park and triggered Jack's memory of FAO Schwarz and the remote controlled toy boat, he'd forgotten all about his and his uncle's little secret. Back then as a child, his uncle was the coolest adult, ever, for trusting him alone in the park for so long, when none of the other adults in his life—the maids, his parents—ever had or ever would.

Jack began racking his brain for more forgotten memories and time was running against him. He wasn't sure exactly how long his uncle would be lucid and parenting skills weren't at the top of the list for discussion for his last moments with Uncle Terry. He looked on as the cab flew past FAO Schwarz and made a left onto Madison, nearly bringing the metallic beast up on two wheels.

Harold saw the look on Jack's face. "Don't worry. We're 'bout halfway dere'. I woulda took Park Ave, but Vera told me they're holdin' a festival or somethin' dere today. She's takin' Hilda, the ole battle axe of mutter-in-laws over dere and it'll be jammed up with lookie-loos. My wife an her ole lady love those tings! Rummagin' around a buncha old junk!"

He smiled at Harold's attempt at levity. Jack was trying his damndest to remember any other strange incidences with his uncle from the past. That day in the park had been so long ago and so forgotten. All of his memories, including that one, had been happy memories of Uncle Terry. He was the father that Jack's father hadn't been. He cherished Uncle Terry and now he was racing to get his chance at goodbye.

Harold barely missed sideswiping the ambulance pulling up to the emergency entrance of the hospital before the cab screeched

to a halt. The ambulance driver was smirking and gestured something in the side mirror when Harold turned to Jack and said, “Best wishes for your uncle, pal, I mean Jack. I hope e’rything turns out alright. Vera sends best wishes, too. Or at least she will, when I tell her tonight.” He gave Jack a wink. “You want I should wait for ya?”

“No. I’m not sure how long I’ll be, but I want to thank you, Harold. It’s good to be home. Keep the change and take Vera to another movie.” Jack slipped a Benjamin through the window.

“Hey geez—whoa! You crazy, buddy? It’s only ten bucks.”

Jack jumped out and closed the door just in time to see an NYPD cop car pulling up behind the cab, lights whirling. He bent down to the passenger window with a remorseful grin and said, “Sorry. I hope that takes care of it.”

“Git goin’! Yer uncle! Yer uncle! I’ll take care a dis flat foot! Now go on!” Harold assured him, righting his golf cap and smoothing down his bushy eyebrows with a lick to his pinky and fore finger before running them over his brows like a devil sign to the forehead.

Officer Rodgers straightened his hat and left the cruiser with pen and pad in hand as Jack started towards the emergency room entrance.

The electronic sliding doors opened like the maw of a giant beast. The loud grating sound from the door’s tract like a roar. A putrid smell of stale disinfectant wafted from the maw and blew over him like a hot summer breeze in Newark. As he stood gathering the courage to go in, nurses and patients bustled past inside in each direction.

This was it.

He’d labored so hard at getting to the hospital as fast as he

could, unfortunately at Harold's expense, and now the reality of the situation had caught up to him. A fresh wave of the nauseating disinfectant hit his face before the doors closed from his hesitation.

He took a deep breath, let go of his goatee and entered the death-stench of the emergency room waiting area. He weaved around the traffic of people and in to the reception desk.

The waiting room was full of patients, old, young and middle aged, from all different nationalities. There was a woman—oddly resembling Rachael Ray—sitting next to the bathroom holding her blood-soaked hand wrapped in paper towels.

He opened his mouth to ask the old nurse behind the desk for directions to room four in ICU when she looked up and called out in a raspy, too-many-Pall-Mall's voice, "Mr. Kutzler? Mr. Kutzler?" Louder now, "Mr Kutzler? Mis-ter KUT-ZLER?!"

Before he had a chance to open his mouth again, a man—face beet red—burst from the bathroom with his pants around his ankles. He quickly shuffled his way to the desk and pleaded with the nurse, sweat pouring from his brow.

"Please, please help me! I can't take it!" He moaned, wiping at the sweat.

"I understand that you're in a lot of pain Mr. Kutzler, but please try to compose yourself. We put you at the top of the list when you came in and the doctor can see you now. And please, pull up your pants!"

The nurse hoisted her ample bosom with a haggard grunt and came around the desk to help Mr. Kutzler pull up his pants. Once he was zipped, she led him to one of the emergency examining rooms. When she came back, muffled moans of agony escaped from behind the door.

"Kidney stones," she coughed. "They can bring a soul to

their knees, make a grown man cry and make a sane person crazy. Painful little crystals!” the nurse said to no one in particular, coughing as she sat back behind the desk. Shaking her head, she finally addressed Jack, “Now what can I help you with? As you can see, we have a full house today. On a scale of one to ten, ten being the most intense, and one being the least intense, tell me what level of pain you’re in.” She regarded him as if he had been invisible.

“Oh, I’m not in any pain. I’m here—”

“The mental health ward is located on the fifth floor, down the hall from radiology.” She sternly cut him off with a cough, wiping at her mouth with a crumpled tissue she produced from the valley between her mountains.

“Ah, excuse me. I’m not a patient here. My name is Jack Elliot and I’m here to see my *dying* uncle, Terry Elliot. Can you tell me how to get to ICU?” He asked as politely as he could.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said trying to curb another cough. Then under her breath with an added eye roll she wheezed, “*Coulda fooled me.*”

“No—problem.” Jack was perturbed at her mental health judgment and rude attitude.

“It’s just that lately for some reason, we’ve gotten so many of them—you know what I mean—aah. Oh heck! Forget it!” The nurse said apologetically, more to herself. “It’s been a very hectic day here so far. ICU? ICU?” The old nurse reached into the pocket of her nurse’s uniform and pulled out her dime-store glasses. Squinting at the computer screen and tapping on a few keys she said, “ICU—Go straight through those doors on your left, follow the red line on the floor until you come to a set of elevators. Take the elevator up to the eighth floor, then resume following the red line until you pass Geriatrics. After Geriatrics, you will make the next left and ICU is straight through the next set of doors. Press

the button and someone will buzz you in.”

Jack started to head for the doors when the nurse shouted, “Wait! You need a visitor’s pass! Hospital policy.” She coughed in her hand before extending the pass to him.

“Thank you.” Jack said squinting at her as he snatched the germ-infested pass and headed for the doors.

“Sorry ‘bout your uncle!” she called out before the doors swung shut. “Why wouldn’t I think you’re crazy with that weird, arrow-straight goatee? Geez—you never know these days,” she said under her breath.

Anxiety washed over Jack as he trotted down the hall. The more he followed the red line, the dizzier he got. The dizzier he got, the sicker he became. Between the overpowering stench of stale disinfectant, flickering fluorescent lighting and the hospital’s clientele of sick and dying, scattered about the hallways sitting in wheelchairs or moaning on gurneys, he could hardly clear his head. He wasn’t having a panic attack. Not quite.

This hospital, like many, was overcrowded and under staffed. The unified sound of pain and anguish spilled into the hallway from the patients’ rooms and added to the unnatural sadness that the dingy decor exuded.

Jack was getting a pit-in-the-stomach feeling. A strange sense of vertigo began to overwhelm him from building anxiety. Like a panic attack, but not quite.

The overturned hotel room, the crazy race to the hospital, the strange trip down memory lane at Central Park—all of these things had distracted Jack from the task at hand. There were no other obstacles to tackle or problems to be solved. Just like with his writing, his brain would focus on any other possible chore at hand to avoid the strenuous task of pulling pure creation from the air and putting pen to paper. Now that the race to the hospital was

over, there was nothing left to do or contemplate except for his uncle's fate.

He started mentally preparing for what he was about to see, going over all the good times with his uncle, thinking about what he was going to say. It felt like rehashing a big story idea in his head just before pitching it to the editor at the Gazette, but the stress was tenfold. Only this wasn't a story to be sold and he wasn't pitching to his editor. He wasn't even sure his uncle was still alive judging from the severity of the doctor's message.

In all his twenty-nine years, luckily he'd never dealt with a sick or dying friend or loved one. Nor had he ever been in a hospital of this magnitude. He wished Calvin were here. He wished he hadn't fought and won on his staying home. Now he was like a lone sparrow, flying off into the distance over an endless sea with no land in sight.

"Hold that elevator!" Jack hollered, quickening his pace.

As he approached the closing doors, he saw a man in an oversized, black coat and hat, pulling the brim down to cover his face. Out of sight, out of mind.

"Damn! People are so inconsiderate." Jack ran into the elevator doors, smudging the stainless steel with his nose. He glanced at the stairwell and decided he'd done enough stairs for one day and punched the elevator button. As he waited, he went back to thinking about what he was going to say to Uncle Terry. He hoped his father hadn't gotten there yet. That was another stressful event to be had and hopefully not right now. He felt awful for feeling that way but couldn't lie to himself.

When the elevator arrived after what seemed like an unusually long time, the front doors opened simultaneously with the rear doors on the other side of the cabin. A sickly looking old man in a wheelchair wearing a dirty teal hospital gown with his

head twisted in an odd manor was waiting outside in the hall. An oxen-like orderly, who looked like he could single-handedly take out the New York Jets' whole line of defense, wheeled him into the elevator and pawed at one of the buttons.

Jack got in at the same time and pressed the button for the eighth floor. He couldn't help staring at the old man's head. It was tilted like a curious dog when it sees something out of the ordinary. That cute curious cock of the head, ears at attention like an amphitheater, ready to interpret the foreign sight and send the appropriate signal to the brain. Eat! Run! Bark! Although this was a man, he wasn't cute—curious cock and all.

As Jack got on the elevator, the old man twisted his head around, dramatically sharpening the angle even further. He peered up at Jack through decrepit eyes that were yellow and milky from cataracts from age. His head was so far twisted around, that his right eye nearly sat on top of his left.

He regarded Jack with a vicious sneer, showing a slit of rotted teeth dripping with discolored spittle. He looked at Jack as if he was looking at a writhing patch of maggots on top of a pile of excrement that had been sitting in the sun for several days.

Seeing Jack's bewilderment, the orderly explained, "Mr. Jameson has an extremely severe case of spasmodic torticollis." A big smirk beamed across his face, clearly proud of his medical knowledge like a little boy holding up a building block, saying, 'bwock', waiting for a pat on the head and to hear what a good boy he was.

"Oh," Jack said, not knowing what else to say.

"Or to the lay—man," the orderly nodded in Jack's direction, "that's wry neck!"

The elevator door closed and the cabin started its ascent. The carriage jerked and bounced causing the bad fluorescent

lighting to buzz, then flicker on and off intermittently. The air was getting a little stuffy in the elevator and the temperature was starting to rise. When the lights buzzed out and didn't return, the wretched old man started to wheeze.

"Relax Mr. Jameson. It'll be okay. It's just the elevator. It'll be on in a sec. You know this happens all the time." The oxen-like orderly reassured his patient in the dark.

An odd crackling sound followed by ruffling dominated the darkness of the elevator in an instant. The familiar stench of disinfectant was replaced by a pungent odor that smelled like an abscessed wisdom tooth ready to burst. The stench carried an acrid humidity as it blew across Jack's face in short bursts. The walls were closing in on them. It was the sense of space suddenly becoming occupied in the dark. A change in the acoustics. That difficult feeling to describe, like a sixth sense of space.

The elevator jerked and bucked. The overhead-lights made a loud zapping noise, so loud that Jack half expected to see sparks and the smell of ozone flooded the elevator. When the lights finally flickered back on, Jack was staring directly into the bulging iris of a slimy old eyeball.

His face was a hair away from the old man's. The man's nose was tilted so far around Jack could see wiry black hairs blowing in and out of his nostrils with each putrid breath.

"Yerrrrr too late!" the old man wheezed. He was standing up in front of his wheelchair, pushing up on the arm rests for balance as he strained to get closer to Jack's face. His head was tilted at an impossibly upside down angle. "Yer too laaaaate!" He hissed, planting a fresh lumpy wad of amber saliva on Jack's face. "They come! They come and they can't be stopped. Won't be. Ever! Never!"

"What the—?" Jack felt the wetness of the old man's eyeball

and grease from his lumpy nose against his face. He'd bumped into it when the lights had come back on because the old coot was that close.

"Jee-sus Fuck-ing Christ!" Jack yelled, losing his temper, wiping the spit with his sleeve.

"Tooouoo late! It can't be stopped! Never!" The old man was yelling. His upside down head was turning purple from all the exertion or lack of oxygen from the impossible tilt.

"What the fuck is wrong with him? What the hell is he talking about?" Jack was still wiping at his face.

"Calm down Mr. Jameson! Mr. Jameson! Sit back down!" The orderly unorthodoxly shoved the wheelchair behind the old man's legs causing him to sit back down. "I'm sorry mister. He ain't done nothing like this before. I think the lights freaked him out or something."

The old man started wheezing harder and thrashing about in the wheelchair, attempting to stand. His face turned a serious shade of crimson and discolored spittle dotted his dirty hospital gown. He wobbled his head back and forth like he was trying to straighten it out. "Mr. Jameson! We're almost to your floor. It will be okay." The orderly pleaded, restraining him to the chair with a beefy paw. "I'll make sure they replace the lights when we get you back to your room. Right now you have to calm down. Stop working yourself up before you get hurt."

The elevator thrummed to a stop at the fifth floor and the doors slid open. The orderly wheeled the old man out and said, "Sorry again about that mister. I really don't know what got into him."

The doors started to close and Jack saw the old man stretching around to look back at him. His face was returning to a normal color but the sneer he previously regarded Jack with was

replaced by a frightened look.

“Now I see what that rude nurse was talking about.” Jack said to himself as the elevator resumed its ascent. The little escapade with topsy-turvy had once again distracted him from the inevitable. He was just minutes away from seeing his uncle.

What do you say to someone that is dying? Especially someone that you love and care for? ‘See you on the other side?’ Maybe that worked for Ozzy, but that wasn’t helping here.

The elevator bounced the rest of its way up to the eighth floor with the lights on for the duration. Jack got off and resumed following the dizzying red line to the Intensive Care Unit.

On his way past Geriatrics, he came across a tiny elderly woman—easily in her nineties—standing by herself up against the wall in her bare feet. She was no more than four and a half feet tall, eighty pounds soaking wet. Her hair was a magnificent oddity, full and abundant for a woman of such age and the color was the brightest silvery gray Jack had ever seen on an old blue-hair. It was impossibly gleaming as if by sunlight, despite the windowless hallway, and it hung to the floor in pin-straight locks that must have taken countless hours for the nurses to do. Her complexion, once a pure porcelain, now resembled fine cracked bone china, weathered, but beautifully enhanced from the passing of time. Her features were of a stately manor in respect to her small stature. Her eyes were set deeply into her face and had been closed as if she was taking a little break from walking.

Once again, recalling the rude ER nurse, Jack began to find validation in the reasoning of that rudeness. He looked about the hallway and realized she was by herself. He thought about asking her if she was okay or needed help, but remembered the last patient he ran into.

Sensing his presence in the hallway as if being wired to a

hidden sensor beam, the elderly woman slowly came to life.

“So you have come.” The elderly woman deadpanned in a deep voice. Jack raised an eyebrow. Her voice was misleading from her tiny feminine stature. It was stoic and deep, like a female version of James Earl Jones.

She remained against the wall as she spoke slowly, turning her head towards Jack and sniffing the air as she opened her eyes at the same time, locking with his. Jack expected her eyes to be as magnificently beautiful and glowing as the rest of her form, but this wasn't the case. They were entirely black as obsidian, like an event horizon with no boundaries—black holes drawing in all matter, allowing nothing to escape.

The sight of the elderly woman's eyes stopped Jack cold. He was transfixed by her blackened stare, wondering if this was another condition that the oxen orderly could explain away. This place should have been labeled a mental institution instead of a hospital.

“Excuse me ma'am? Is everything okay? Do you need me to get someone for you?” Jack asked, thinking that she got off on the wrong floor or maybe she got exasperated on her way back to the psych ward and a nurse or orderly left her propped up against the wall while they fetched a wheelchair. She clearly had an issue with her eyes and probably couldn't see to get about on her own.

“You've come to stop what should have been?” she asked, tilting her head, raising her brow and intensifying her deadening stare. Stop what? The old man in the elevator had said something like that. Didn't he? Were they all on the same medication?

“Aaaaah, I'm sorry ma'am. I don't exactly—ah, follow you. Were you waiting for the nurse to return? Do you need me to get someone to—“ She cut him short, slapping the wall, like the crack of a whip.

“Silence!” Her voice boomed like thunder. It was surreal like an amphitheater inside of Jack’s head. “You have come and you will not stop that which has begun! Centuries of old have held meaning to the cause, which has stricken this world long enough. It will not be stopped!”

“Excuse—, ah me. I—think,” Jack said, struggling to shake the bone-chilling feeling the presence of this woman was creating in him. She was just a harmless, crazy old lady lost in the hospital. She’d probably been administered one too many crazy pills.

Getting a grip on his building terror, he said, “I think this whole place has lost its mind. I’m sure the nurse will be along any minute now.” He forced himself to look away from the lunatic’s darkened stare. She was mental, blind and had clearly mistaken Jack for someone else.

“It can’t be stopped! It will not!” she warned.

“Ah, yeah. Can’t stop, won’t stop. Got it! I’m going now” Jack said, nodding his head as he resumed walking past the woman.

The old woman’s eyes followed Jack with that dark stare until he was nearly past her. In an instant, like a surge of electricity hit her, she spun about-face toward his direction, landing a stinging blow with the zap of lightning on the back of his neck with her palm opened wide. *CRACK!*

“Heed my vow! It shall come full circle!” She yelled, pointing the finger at him from the hand that delivered the stinging blow. And with that, the plug had been pulled, the light had been snuffed and she dropped listlessly to the floor. Her hair billowed up around her as she fell like a parachute on its final float to ground.

In the wake of her blow, Jack stumbled and landed up against the opposite wall. His neck felt like it had been struck by someone with twice the width, height and strength of the little old woman. His neck was on fire and started to swell. He could feel the

impression from her hand on his neck.

A skinny young nurse of twenty-something in Sponge Bob scrubs came running down the hall. “Ms. Fredrickson!” Looking at Jack she said, “What happened? What did you do?”

“What did I do?” Jack asked, raising his voice and rubbing at his neck. “I—I was—I was just trying to get past her and she slapped me on the neck!”

The nurse pulled a scrunchy off her wrist and gathered her chestnut brown hair into a ponytail as she bent down and started to check for a pulse. “That’s impossible! Ms. Fredrickson has been comatose and bed ridden for months. ICU is always locked! How did she get out? She was scheduled to be disconnected from life support today.” She continued checking for a pulse. “It was the strangest thing—I checked on her earlier this morning and she was in the same condition as usual. She’s never shown any signs of even the slightest recovery. I went back to say goodbye before they disconnected her and she was gone! The intubation tube was just lying there on the bed. That’s when I went looking for her. I don’t understand how this could have happened. Ms. Fredrickson! Ms. Fredrickson!” the nurse said, looking for any signs of life left in the little old lady.

Jack looked down at the lifeless Ms. Fredrickson and noticed that she didn’t possess the same commanding aura that she’d had moments before. Did someone slip him something on his way in to the hospital? Dying does have a funny way of playing on one’s looks, but this was absurd. Her hair was no longer pin-straight and brilliant. When did that change? Had he been imagining it? It now looked more suited for an old woman that had been lying in a bed, comatose for months. The length wasn’t even the same. Her dead eyes were closed, rightly so, but he was betting that they were no longer black holes.

Rubbing at his neck, he bent down next to the nurse over

the dead woman's body. He needed to see for himself if her eyes were normal.

The nurse shifted over, startled by his actions and said, "What are you doing? How did you know this woman and what did you do to her?"

"Like I said! I didn't do anything to her!" He said, carefully lifting one of her eyelids like he was tempting fate and peeking into a snake charmer's basket. Nothing but the cloudy cataract-stricken eye of a normal woman her age. "Like I told you, I didn't do anything. I was on my way to see my uncle in ICU and I tried to get past her and she slapped me on the neck! Inhumanly hard I might add! So hard that she knocked me up against the wall! And she—she looked different." The nurse eyed the huge hand-sized welt on his neck. "Ever since I entered this hospital, strange things have been happening. It's more like a mental ward!"

The nurse seemed to relax a little at his comment. "I must admit, things haven't been the same here the last few days. But this woman wasn't capable of conscious thought let alone extubating herself, walking away from her bed and slapping someone. Her muscles alone would be atrophied to the point where she could barely sit up in bed." She raised her eyebrow at Jack as he gently let go of the old woman's eyelid. "Don't worry. She can't hurt you anymore. I haven't seen it myself, but some of the veteran nurses say they've seen patients on their death beds display a surge of energy before they pass on. My fiancé says it's like a star shining brighter before it burns out. Or is it a light bulb?"

"Both. He may have something there." Jack said, seeing her relax a little.

"It's very sad, ya know? Ms. Fredrickson's been here in a vegetative state for months. In all that time, she'd only had one visitor and that was just last week. It was funny, at first I thought it was man. But when I asked if I could be of any help, there was no

disguising the voice. It took me off guard. She pulled her hat down and tried to deepen it, but I could tell. My fiancé's Mom's a lesbian now and she does the same thing. We laugh about it," the young nurse said, shaking her head.

They watched as the orderlies wheeled the deceased Ms. Fredrickson away on a gurney to the annals of the morgue, where she would be bagged, toe—tagged and catalogued away. Jack took the opportunity to question the nurse about his uncle while they were on their way to ICU. She didn't know much about him, only that he'd been in their ICU for a few days, had suffered a traumatizing unrecoverable event and was scheduled to be extubated soon. She remembered the night that he was admitted. She'd just started her shift.

"I remember thinking to myself how young he was and what a tragedy. We found his meds on him, carbamazepine. It's mainly to treat seizures, so he may have been epileptic. Not sure there. This has nothing to do with epilepsy, but I keep telling my fiancé that it doesn't matter how thin or young you are. If you don't start eating right, your body will revolt. I've never been more health conscious than when I started nursing. The reality never hits until you see what happens to people when they let themselves go. Combating old age is enough of a battle. Why help it along? Have you ever been to a nursing home? Visit one. You'll be on the health bandwagon soon enough." She adjusted her stethoscope and secured it beneath her Smiley Face name badge, which read Julie Carlson.

They were getting closer to ICU. Jack was still stalling. "Was my uncle conscious when he was admitted? Did he say anything?"

"I don't mean to make this any harder for you, but when he first came in he was lucid and we had to restrain him. He kept saying he needed to tell someone something. After Dr. Alderson examined him, he mentioned that it was unusual for him to display such vigor after the immediate trauma he'd been through. I think

by that point the damage to his brain was making him react erratically, causing his condition to worsen, but I'm not a doctor. A stroke victim has to be calmed as much as possible. Whenever you see an ambulance flying down the street with no siren blaring, just the lights on, nine times out of ten they're transporting a heart attack or stroke victim to the hospital. The noise of the siren would create more adrenaline in the victim, possibly causing another attack or stroke. I'm really sorry about your uncle. Were you close?"

"He was like a father to me. Not that I don't have a father. I do." His face reddened at the thought of her thinking him an orphan and it surprised and shamed him. "It's just that, my uncle has always been special to me." Jack's eyes began to well up a little as he continued. "Yes. My uncle, Uncle Terry and I were very close. You mentioned that things weren't the same around here? What did you mean?"

"It's like a full moon or something around here these last few days. All the machines in ICU went haywire the other day. Never saw that happen before! It was like walking into the game room at Harrah's in Atlantic City. My fiancé took me there for our anniversary." A warm smile spread across her face at the memory. "All the machines were ringing and flashing together making that strange continuous uplifting noise, almost like they were doing it on purpose. And the patients have been unusually difficult too. As you just experienced," she said with a little laugh, coming to a halt.

The time had come and all the distractions were now beyond Jack. He and the nurse were standing before the doors to the Intensive Care Unit. No more chance to prepare for what he was about to see or what he would say. He'd spent his lifetime taking for granted the things that he held dear. If ever a school lesson was learned, the old adages '*Live life to the fullest!*' and '*Cherish each day as if it were the last!*' should have been the number one lesson on the agenda for the principal. Principal spelled with a P A L. Only these lessons are learned by experience, not in the textbooks. Try as any

might, until faced with losing a loved one, no lesson taught in any class will school a soul harder than life itself.

The nurse pressed the button next to the locked doors of the ICU. They waited in silence as the security camera rotated in their direction. After an annoying buzzing and clicking sound, the tumblers in the mechanism released the lock and the doors slowly swung open. It was surprisingly quiet and better kept inside the ICU than the rest of the hospital. The individual room units consisted of glass walls with curtains that were kept open to better aid the staff in keeping a close watch on their patients. They remained open unless there was an emergency in which they were shut for privacy or respect to the visitors and not to upset the other patients during times of crisis. Next to each room number there was a red light like the one on top of old Car 54.

Each critical care patient was fitted into the center of the room like a part of machinery that was intricately placed inside its component, surrounded by other parts consisting of monitors, tubes and hoses and strange lighted panels that blinked and monitored and measured. Ample room was left around the patient, in between the wires and tubes that integrated them with the machinery, for easy access for the doctors and nurses.

Room number one was empty, except for a tube laying down the middle of the bed. A pair of yellow hospital-issued socks were on the floor next to the bed. Room two had the curtains drawn and the red light was whirling in hot pursuit. There was a lot of bustling going on behind the curtain and the desk nurse just ran into the room, leaving the station empty.

“Ah—I’m very sorry about your uncle Mr—ahh,”

“Jack, Jack Elliot and thank you—”

“Julie,” she said, rushing toward room number two. “I’m truly sorry, Jack. Your uncle’s room is on the other side of the

nurse's station just around the corner. I have to assist the team. There's an emergency going on in two. I'm sorry. I will check in on the both of you as soon as I can." She rushed off to room number two.

Jack wasn't ready to face this alone. He was hoping that the young nurse would have gone in with him. It would have helped. He was kicking himself in the head for not letting Calvin come to New York.

As he started to pass room number two, he caught a glimpse before the door shut behind Nurse Julie. A small person, possibly a young boy of no more than ten or twelve, bandaged from head to toe, was violently convulsing and thrashing about on the bed. The bed tray stand was rattling from the boy's knees knocking against it and the monitors were going haywire. The nurses and doctors were all around the small patient trying to keep him steady and safe while he rode out the seizure. The tubes and wires were writhing like snakes from his assault as they fought to keep him connected. He was choking on the ventilation tube and his bandaged head was starting to seep through with fresh bloodstains. Julie looked back at Jack with a forlorn smile just before the door clicked shut.

Stifled with shock from the scene, he stood there a moment. He didn't want to see anymore. He didn't want to do this. He longed to be anywhere else. What happened to that poor child? He didn't want to know. He had enough to deal with and he didn't need to witness that right before seeing his uncle.

How do these young nurses and doctors cope with such tragedy and heartache? Where would this world be without saints as such to aid the sick and dying? Elderly and mortally wounded animals crawl off into the woods to die alone. Animal experts say they do this so they don't become a burden on the living. How do humans differ? The elderly are left in nursing homes to rot the rest of their existence out. Voluntarily crawling off alone into the

woods to quicken the fate seems a far lesser evil than being forgotten and left alone to rot a slow, solitary death.

The entire staff was assisting in room number two. The nurse's station was an empty beacon. Jack was all alone. *Thump—thump—thump*. His heart started pounding. Was it a hundred degrees in here?

Thumpa—thumpa—thumpa.

He could feel the pooled sweat underneath his goatee start to run down his hidden chin as he let go of it to steady himself on the nurse's station desk.

Thumpa—thumpa—Thumpa.

The file bins on the desk began to rattle, he looked down and saw his hand. It was shaking. He couldn't bare this place any longer.

Thumpa—Thumpa.

Racing faster, pounding harder. The room was spinning. He felt like vomiting. The rattling sound was overcome by the building rush of white noise in his ears. His peripheral vision began to fade like vignetting on an old photograph and a black shadow passed before his eyes.

Thumpa—Thumpa.

He had to calm down before the shadow fell like a curtain and he completely blacked out and became a patient in this insane asylum of a hospital. The thought of being a patient in this place made his heart pound even harder.

THUMP—THUMP—THUMP...

Jack stood still with his eyes squeezed shut. The roar of white noise was overwhelming. He was in the grip of a panic

attack. What do people do when this happens? Calm down. That's what he needed to do, he needed to calm down.

Breathe.

He needed to concentrate on breathing.

Breathe. In with the *good*. Exhale. Out with the *bad*. His nostrils flared. In with the *good*. Shoulders down. Out with the *bad*. He tried to think of *good* thoughts. Thoughts of when Uncle Terry was healthy, vital, full of life.

This was his first experience with death and he had to suck it up. His head was dizzy. He'd been given a chance that most people never get. Breathe in. If it still existed. Nausea. Breathe out. Now wasn't the time to lose it. He's never even considered his own mortality before, until now. Not *good*. In with the—*good*. He wasn't ready. Out with the—*bad*. He didn't have a choice. In with the—*good*—out with the—*bad*.

Breathe...

Breathe...

The rattling file bins slowly hushed their shake. The roaring tide of white noise started to ebb and his vision was gently washing back to the shore of sight.

In—with—the—*good*.

Jack was finding that calm inner core within himself.

Out—with—the—*bad*.

As peace was slowly finding its way back into his mind, the last few sounds of white noise were replaced by a soft sound of chanting.

Not quite chanting. Praying. More like the soft sounds of someone praying.

Jack turned his head towards the sound. The curtains to room number three had been partially drawn and the door was halfway open. A man with small shoulders, dressed all in black except for a bit of white sticking out of his collar, adjusted an oversized black hat and made motion of a cross over the patient. The patient looked on in bewilderment. Although Jack realized that this wasn't his uncle's room, his fate wouldn't be far behind.

Jack took a few more breaths and calmed himself the best he could. The panic attack left him ill to his stomach, but he wasn't blowing whatever chance he had left to see his uncle. He let go of the nurse's station, grabbed his goatee and headed around the desk to room number four.

The curtains were closed.

He looked up at the Car 54 light, it was off duty.

Had he been too late?

Jack took one last breath and swallowed hard. He took hold of the handle and slowly opened the door to room number four. He looked about the room, purposely avoiding looking at his uncle. The machines were all running, a little fast he thought, but running. That was a good sign. He wasn't too late. Jack approached his uncle.

Now or never.

He didn't know what he was going to say to his uncle, if he was even still coherent, but Jack realized that it didn't matter what he said. What really mattered most was that he was there.

He made it.

The inevitability of escaping death had pulled back the shades on the realization that no words or actions could change what was brought on by the end of life's cycle. Death has many definitions—defined as peace for the suffering, and defined as a

means to the end for the rest of us. Within the scope of that end, helplessness is all there is left to cling to. Death, like time, is unstoppable.

Jack finally faced his uncle. Like a cog in a machine, he idly laid there in the center of the room, grinding away motionlessly with the rest of the mechanics. There was a tube for him to pee, a pouch to take care of the thicker stuff and a hose that brought him breath. More tubes administered drippy fluids and wires were all over him to monitor their progress.

His uncle's head was to the side, facing away from Jack as if to spare him the sight. His skin was the most subtle of the grays. Not dove gray, nor slate gray, but the sullen gray of death.

Jack put his hand on his uncle's arm. His muscle immediately tensed and the monitors blipped a bit louder. Reflexes Jack thought, another good sign. "Hey Uncle Terry," he said in the softest voice. "It's just me, Jackie Boy." His uncle always called him that as a term of endearment. When Jack was little, he secretly hated the term because it made reference to his age. *I'm six and a half! NOT six!* Jackie Boy would always say when his uncle would ask how old his big boy was that year.

"I got here as fast as I could. What a hell of a time I had getting here, too. The doctor said that you were asking for me? Can you hear me Uncle Terry? It's Jackie Boy, your favorite nephew." They used to joke about him being his 'favorite nephew'. *Hey! I'm your only nephew!* Jackie Boy would say. "Are you awake? You with me, Uncle Terry?" Jack gently shook his arm.

The monitors began racing faster as Jack watched his uncle begin to stir. Maybe this was a bad idea? He should have talked to the doctor first. The last thing he wanted to do was cause him another stroke.

"Just take it easy, Uncle Terry. Just stay calm," Jack said,

more to himself. His uncle's arm began to shake beneath his hand. Wouldn't the alarms on the monitor go off if he was having another stroke? Was this how it started? Maybe the excitement was too much for him? Then he heard faint muffled sounds of moaning coming from his uncle. He needed to get the doctor or at least the nice Nurse Julie. "It's going to be all right, Uncle Terry. I'm going to go get—" As he started to turn and get help, Uncle Terry grabbed at Jack's arm. Startled by his sudden movement, Jack stopped and looked back at his uncle.

Uncle Terry's head lolled slowly in Jack's direction. His face wore a painful grimace and his eyes were wide open, dilated and terror stricken. His hair was stuck to his brow from sweat, his face was a serious shade of red. Jack was scared. He thought the worst part he'd have to endure would be to visit his dying uncle. He never fathomed witnessing his end.

"Stay calm, Uncle Terry. Stay calm. I'm just going to get the doctor." Jack looked into his eyes. He was looking back almost beseechingly at him. A single teardrop started at the corner of his eye and ran down the curvature of his cheek. Maybe he was just happy to see his nephew, Jackie Boy?

Could that be all that was going on here?

Was it possible he could get better?

Jack could tell by the weak grip of his uncle's hand that he wasn't strong. He wasn't strong at all. It took all he had to stop Jack from leaving, yet he still held fast to his arm.

"Are you just happy to see me, Unc'?" Is that all? Are you okay?" His uncle squeezed his eyes shut hard and more tears ran down both cheeks this time. His head slowly started to shake. "Are you trying to tell me something? The doctor's message said you really wanted to see me?" His uncle's head stopped shaking and he opened his eyes. There was that look again, but more sorrowful

this time. “What is it, Uncle Terry?”

His eyes started rolling in the back of his head. Jack gently took a hold of his face, trying to remain calm, remembering what the nurse had told him about stroke victims. “Uncle Terry? Uncle Terry!” Is he choking on his tongue? The railings on the bed started clanking. The monitors were out of control. Jack could feel his uncle’s body starting to convulse. He didn’t need to be a doctor to see that this wasn’t another stroke. He was having another seizure.

Could a patient even choke to death on a ventilator?

Ventilator or not, he quickly decided it wouldn’t hurt to make sure he wasn’t swallowing his tongue before he got some help. Jack tried to get his fingers around the tube and into his uncle’s mouth to fish around and see if he’d swallowed it.

Clamped shut.

No time to waste. He needed to get help.

Jack let go of his uncle’s face, never imagining what would happen next. The monitors were a blur of activity, the sound alone anxiety inducing.

Thump.

Jack could feel the white—*Thumpa*—noise—*Thump—Thump*—ocean—*Thumpa—Thumpa*—starting to rush back in at high tide. *Thumpa—Thumpa—Thumpa*. He was frozen. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t blink. His uncle’s head started shaking wildly back and forth, the intubation tube pulsating like a snake.

Jack was paralyzed as he watched his uncle ride out the seizure, powerless to help him. His head bobbed back and forth then lolled to a halt on the side of his face. His eyes were rolled to the back of his head and he started making a terrible choking sound as if he was dry-heaving.

Then it happened.

His uncle let out a guttural gasp and a spray of thick red blood shot out in all directions, gurgling over his chin like a waterfall, followed by a bloody grayish mass that smacked the bed guard before it flopped over onto the floor with a meaty splat.