

### Excerpt from Guarding Shakespeare

Right after the people Norman Blalock came with left, Kavitha Netram, wearing a form-fitting little black dress, sat down at his table in a corner of the crowded *Hawk 'n' Dove* restaurant on Capitol Hill, which was going out of business after 44 years. She placed a glass of what he was having in front of him.

Kavitha sipped through a cocktail straw what appeared to be an Appletini.

They had to speak up to be heard above the music and the din of the crowd.

“Hello, Kavitha.”

“Hello, Norman.”

“I’m surprised to see you here,” he said.

“A pleasant surprise, I hope,” she said.

Norman nodded and said, “Certainly.”

He picked up the glass of cognac she’d set in front of him and said, “Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” Kavitha said. “I just wanted to repay you for the tour of the Folger last week. You taught me a lot about the place. For instance, I never knew that the Folgers’ urns are behind that plaque in the Gail Paster Reading Room. Their library is actually their tomb. Incredible.” She raised her glass. “Thank you.”

Blalock raised his glass of Hennessy. “You’re welcome.” He sipped his drink and then set it down.

Norman fell silent. He couldn’t figure out why the hell a young looker like Kavitha was talking to him. The fact of the matter was that he was blown away and rendered speechless. Never before had an object of his desire presented itself so miraculously. He didn’t believe in miracles.

After a few moments, Kavitha said, “I overheard you and Tanya Gant discussing how you were passed over for promotion. It’s a shame. I agree with Tanya. Nobody is more qualified for the position than you, I’m sure. It’s a travesty really. I’m sorry.”

Norm shrugged. “The hiring committee just decided to go another way.” After a moment he asked, “How did you know I was here?”

“I overheard you telling Officer Gant that you’d be here tonight to say farewell to this place.”

“I see,” Norm said. “You overhear a lot.”

Kavitha laughed. “The guard’s desk is only a couple of feet from the gift shop. I can’t help but overhear the guard’s talking, even when they’re whispering.”

Norm nodded.

Kavitha sipped her drink and then said, “I also overheard Officer Gant say you were passed over because you don’t have a bachelor’s degree. I find it hard to believe that you even need a degree for that position after being on the job for decades. You’re the best man for the job. Period. You remind me of my history professor.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I had a terrible crush on him.”

“Really?” said Norman.

“Of course, Norm. He was knowledgeable...and attractive. Very sexy. Just like you.”

Norman rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“I’ve just been listening to Folger docents for 25 years. I’m just repeating what I’ve heard...”

“No, Norman, it’s more than that.”

## Guarding Shakespeare Excerpt

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“If you say so,” Norm said. “Really, I’m just a good listener and I remember what I read, that’s all.” He quickly changed the subject. “So what’s your degree in?”

“I have a doctorate in art history from Oxford University.”

“Then why are you working in the Folger Gift Shop, doctor?”

Kavitha shrugged. “It’s just something to earn a little money while I track down the job I’m looking for, something in my field.”

Blalock nodded.

Kavitha picked up a folded black tee shirt off the table. “I see you got your souvenir tee shirt. *Hawk ‘n’ Dove, Last Call*. It’s a nice memento.”

Norman took the tee shirt from her and put it back on the table. He looked at her for a time and then asked, “What is this, Kavitha?”

“What do you mean, Norm?”

“C’mon. I’ve enjoyed our conversations at work, but why are you buttering up an old Billy goat like me? What’s *really* going on? What do you want?”

She smiled. “You’re very perceptive. Most men don’t question, they just follow their dream and go with the flow...”

“The dream of sleeping with you?” Norm asked. “Listen, if it’s a Sugar Daddy you’re looking for, you’ve got the wrong man. I’m a Splenda Daddy: sweet, but not the real thing.”

Kavitha laughed. It was delightful and infectious. Norm could not help but laugh along with her.

When she caught her breath, she leaned in and said, “My employer will make you a rich man if you acquire something for him from the Folger’s vault, something that will never be missed.”

Norman raised an eyebrow.

“The Folger has impeccable security, Dr. Netram. It can’t be done.”

“Kavitha, Norm, call me Kavitha, just like always. We’re friends.”

“Yeah, right,” Norman said. “Become a thief for me, Norm, go to prison for me. We’re friends. Ha!”

“My employer needs an inside man. He needs *you*, Norman. You won’t get caught and you will be well paid.”

He glared at her.

“Something extremely valuable that won’t be missed?”

Kavitha nodded.

Norman looked her in the eye and said, “Stolen valuables will *always* be missed, Kavitha...especially at the Folger.”

Kavitha smirked.

“Not if no one knows the valuable item was ever there,” she said.

Norman tilted his head.

Kavitha smiled and then got deadly serious. “I’ll arrange a meeting with my employer. You should at least hear him out before you turn him down. What have you got to lose?”