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# **CRIMINAL BEWARE**

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**A Paranormal Novel**

**JOSEPH STONE**



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# DEDICATION

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*FOR JOSHUA STOUT,  
a beloved friend and mentor.*

*Your expert coaching in the gym and on the disciplines of fitness inspired me to  
take up writing, so I'd finally have a legitimate reason to sit down.*

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# EPIGRAPH

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Psychology teaches that it is possible to influence others with your mind, the expression and influence going from the eyes...

— JOHNSON SMITH, THE BOOK OF FORBIDDEN  
KNOWLEDGE

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Friday, January 13, 1922

“I’M VERY PLEASED to say we’ll be sending you out west.”  
The words set my blood to chill. They belonged to my supervisor, Lewis E. Riley, the eastern regional director of Westchester Corporation. He was the number two man at the company, an enterprise with controlling interest in many hotels and resorts around the country. A cornerstone of its portfolio was the property on which we both stood, The Plaza Hotel of New York City.

“This will be an excellent opportunity for you,” he added.

Riley sat me down on the fine Kensington leather sofa in his office. Years ago, on my first day reporting to him, I’d expected the handsome piece was meant to be a comfortable respite from the man’s hard, spartan desk chair. But as often as I’d been in this room since that day, I’d never once seen him sit on it. In fact, Riley didn’t bother to sit now as he offered me a glass of fine brandy to compliment his monologue. A smarter man might have realized the fine offering was the harbinger of catastrophe.

“Everyone here agrees with Executive Director Donovan’s decision. We’ve even received approval from all the way out there in California. You’ll leave us in two weeks. A first-class box, of course. The company has already assigned an agent to find a home for you to move into the

very day you arrive. I understand the weather's the best in the country; like Florida in the spring, but all year long."

Riley pretended not to notice the blood drain from my face. He focused instead on his prepared speech, both hands locked securely behind his back, stalking the tall arched windows through which he stared down at Manhattan. The gleaming grey sky of falling snow behind him outlined the silhouette of his flawless charcoal wool suit. It was a handsome garment that reluctantly made room for a deceiving gardenia affixed at the lapel, a bit of soft beauty to dent the strong design of its fine cut. He was a true metropolitan in form and fashion and was a figure I genuinely admired.

"And we'll handle the remaining lease of your apartment here, of course. You won't need that hanging over your head," said Riley, his smoky tenor making a sales pitch on this already done deal. "Yes, Daniel, everyone's excited about this decision. You'll head home immediately after you finish your brandy and start packing. We need you out at the coast by early February; all things here settled."

I didn't move a muscle, not even to raise the glass to my lips, though I desperately needed the sweet relief it promised. Riley didn't stop for a second to wait for my response before he continued.

"You've got a lady friend? Yes, I remember her from the Christmas party. The one in that photograph on your desk. She has a beautiful face—quite lovely, that girl. She can go with you, of course. You should marry her, Daniel. Marriage is always a smart decision for a young man like yourself."

Ruth wouldn't be interested in marriage, I guessed. We weren't in love; whenever I had hinted at it, she'd done little more than quietly smile at me. Though I'd never admitted it, I wasn't the man she was after. At best, I was a convenient escort, reliable for attending dinners and the theatre with her. She'd most likely been involved with me all this time simply to avoid being alone. I didn't know if that was such a terrible thing, to exploit someone for that reason. For all I knew, Ruth might receive the news of my leaving with all the tears of a girl waving farewell to her soldier beau at the docks. I supposed I might appreciate the scene, but the envisioned drama of Ruth's goodbye was not the reason my injured heart now pounded loudly in my chest.

“The region’s a gold mine of opportunity for a young man like yourself. Sharp, motivated, and with such excellent training. San Diego has everything a smart lad on the move could ever want. You’ll see motion picture stars. All of Hollywood vacations there. Can you even imagine, Daniel, people needing to get away from all that sunshine?” asked Riley, shaking his head with mock exhaustion.

I thought my director had delivered this sermon better than any clergyman could ever hope to. His words managed to promote the place—one I’d barely heard of—with all the righteous vigor of an evangelist. He confidently made the young coastal town which lay over a hundred miles south from the excitement of Hollywood sound as something less than a disaster for me.

*Of course, it couldn’t even have been Chicago or San Francisco, I thought. Someplace with a life I might enjoy.*

A New Yorker will complain until they’re blue in the face about all that’s lacking in their city—that is, until challenged to compare it to anywhere else in the world. At which, a New Yorker—a proud metropolite—would invariably shift their position and proclaim how their home is wholly essential for intelligent life on earth. And there I was like clockwork, contemplating how my life was near to being shattered by a swift expulsion from home.

Nothing came from me at that moment, neither protest nor whimper. Not so much as a single resistant word in defense of my life. That opportunity had passed, I now understood, before I’d ever been welcomed into his office.

“Well, say something, son!” said Riley, flashing a grin possessed of all the villainy in the world. In fairness, he might have appeared honestly proud and joyful to anyone else. Still, his feigned bewilderment to the absence of my response was brief. His true expectations weren’t hidden too deeply underneath his mask.

“Daniel, I know you had your heart set on managing the Plaza,” said Riley, his voice abandoning all pretense, “but it isn’t going to happen. Not now—not yet. You must remember there are men ahead of you in this company. Good men. Men with more experience, if not your sharp head alone. Certainly, more age. Just because you’re the brightest manager I’ve ever taken a hand in

training doesn't mean there aren't other considerations to be made. And no matter what you think, this opportunity in California is truly a gift. You might be in San Diego for only a couple years before we move you north to Los Angeles or San Francisco. At the end of five years, you'll have the pick of almost any hotel in the country, I promise you."

At his admission, I felt the searing pain of embarrassment, a damning hurt that months of allusions from the man had set me up for. But I didn't argue; I was still too stunned to answer.

Riley lowered his voice, though he stood even taller when he saw the light in my eyes falter.

"This has nothing to do with how you came to us. I'm far more impressed that you're sitting before me now, having started on here as a busboy."

He wasn't far off. I'd begun my career with The Plaza as a bellhop, remembering the lie I told at fifteen to get the job. I'd stood as tall as I could, my shoes filled with folded newspaper to gain the extra inch that helped me convince the hiring manager. I'd just been orphaned by my mother's cancer, to say nothing of my father's infidelity before I was born. My grandparents were unable to support me with much more than the small sofa in their one-bedroom apartment. We'd survived on two meals per day, which was all they could manage to provide. I had understood what hunger felt like, both in my stomach and in my soul. I hadn't had a choice but to win that job, and I hadn't let my eyes betray me when I'd told the skeptical man that yes, I was eighteen years old, and no, I wouldn't have any trouble lifting the bags with my lean frame.

"You're a self-made man," he continued, "and I respect that far more than what your peers brought us when they arrived here from college. You know more about our business from experience than could ever be learned from a classroom. And what you don't yet know can't be learned while you're still here. This hotel doesn't need a mind like yours. Everything already runs perfectly here, don't you see? You need to get out there and show me what you can do—without training wheels. I promise you, Daniel, if you demonstrate you can do the job, I won't let you down.

“Come on, now,” he implored softly, when I remained silent, “tell me that you’ll go.”

It was inevitable, I knew. I didn’t even try to voice my disagreement. There wasn’t any passion left in me to pull from. Instead, fallen into numbness, I resigned to let my course be steered for me.

“Thank you, sir,” I answered. “I’m grateful for your confidence in me.”

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“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?”

There was no hesitation in the violence of Ruth’s response, nor in her ensuing argument. The fabric of her simple dark dress struggled to follow the speed of her pacing throughout my living room as she unloaded at me.

“How could you think to ask me to go all the way out to California at a moment’s notice?” She was genuinely outraged that I’d suggested it. It played out for twenty minutes this way, her angered words resonating off the thin walls of my apartment. I’d even gone so far as to suggest it would be the best way for us to afford getting married sooner. But upon the inevitable conclusion of her melodramatic noise, she firmly announced the position I’d so easily predicted: she would *not* be leaving New York; nor would she be waiting for me to return. And more to the point, I’d broken her heart. That sentiment, however, failed to produce so much as a fine mist in her eyes as Ruth left my apartment door wide open on her way out.

I never saw her again after that night.

With no other living family left in town, Ruth had proven to be the most tangible attachment left holding me to New York. I was somewhat surprised to find myself packed and ready within a week’s time. I supposed it was a testament to just how unattached a person really is to their home—the measure of time in which it takes one to uproot and leave. My furniture and half a dozen boxes had departed within days of my acceptance of Riley’s offer. The remainder of my time in New York was spent in a suite at The Plaza Hotel, a parting

gift from Riley that generously included several anxious and sleepless nights.

It amused me that I'd never really felt like an orphan until this moment, even though my family had either deserted me or died well before I became an adult. On the cusp of thirty years of age, I could still hear their voices as I walked through the streets. Altogether, I suffered many regrets during those final days, confronting events and decisions in my life—good or bad—that had led to this unforeseen occurrence. In a bid to stop my obsessing over them, I decided to burn them. On my final night in the hotel, I wrote them down on a leaf of the room's stationery and lit the paper ceremoniously. There was something liberating about that ritual, as if the weight of it all had begun to lift from my chest as each name and decision on the paper darkened and became ash. The last name to burn was the hotel's, handsomely embossed at the top of the sheet.

By the time my taxi dropped me off at Penn Station, I was fully resolved that the New York of my childhood was formally concluded. After I found my way onto the train, I sat somewhat paralyzed as it slowly rolled out of the city, building significant momentum only once it was off the island and deep into the country.

When night fell, and the view from my compartment darkened, I noticed my reflection in the windowpane and thought I saw a different person staring back at me.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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I HEADED WEST OVER THE NEXT WEEK on four separate trains, but always in a private box. It was a splendid way to travel, and I marveled at all I saw through my window. The views were at times the most beautiful vistas imaginable—an endless natural wilderness that I'd only seen in paintings. But even the finest museum painting, enhanced with the color and emotional resonance of its artist, couldn't do wild America justice. The civilized parts of the country that were still rough still held an intense fascination for me. They bore an austere beauty that underlined just how unique New York City really was. Knowing I would be away from her indefinitely became dreary at times. I couldn't shake the feeling I was riding in a police wagon, being transported out to a hard prison sentence in the wastes of southern California. And the days spent aboard those tight little cells only served to worsen my anxiety, the emotion compounding with each stop or carriage change.

After a daunting push up through the tight, snowcapped mountains of the Sierra Nevada, I arrived in California. We pulled through Los Angeles, a city with an unfathomably wide footprint where there was currently no snow on the ground at all. Bewildered, I looked down from my seat to see that spring had come very early to this place. It was only days into February, and I couldn't quite

reconcile the dry ground and cloudless sky. I considered walking outside as we sat at the L.A. station awaiting our final stretch. However, by the fifth day of my journey, I didn't have the nerve to explore yet another unobtainable land. Within the hour, the train was on its way again, headed south for San Diego.

I'd had quite enough of the nomadic sentence aboard a moving cell. I was ready to be done with trains forever and decided to embrace my new home with open arms, whatever disappointments it might hold.

When the tracks eventually led the train up to and along the coastline, the unexpected beauty of the vista took my breath away. The ocean was obviously not new to me, but I'd never seen its majesty quite like this. The tracks moved along a small terrace only ten feet above the white, sandy beaches of the California coast for miles and miles. We rode along thin stretches where tidal waves crashed not a hundred feet from the train's iron tracks. The mighty Pacific, a stunning azure expanse, with its many small islands lying just off in the distance on this clear day, stole my imagination and my heart. The sight lasted for only half an hour before the train moved back inland as we neared San Diego, but something about the unexpected grace of that view changed my sour disposition.

When we reached our final destination, I waited patiently in my compartment. Not wanting to be rushed through, I waved off the attendant and asked him to first tend to the people in the units around me. When another attendant finally came for my luggage, I was standing calmly, my mind set to begin.

Stepping down from the narrow stairs to find the unmoving land of the Santa Fe Depot felt different from how I'd imagined it would. I'd only walked a couple steps before I involuntarily paused to feel the sweet air that filled my lungs. The sensation of this warm, salty breeze baffled me as I looked up to find massive Queen Anne palm trees swaying gently underneath a cloudless sky. I felt the harsh sunlight on my fair skin, beaming down past the rim of my hat to reach my face.

"We don't really *do* winter out here," a man remarked with a smirk, apparently certain that he'd correctly identified his new charge. "It's part of the bargain we make—trading the hassles of New England

for this latitude. Got to give up those miserable winters for all this tiresome perfect weather, I'm afraid," he said, smiling.

The man stood handsomely in the noon sun, his finely crafted hat casually holding the frame of his face. He later revealed that I'd been easily marked by the long, woolen coat that I'd bundled myself in when it was seventy-three degrees outside.

"I'm joking with you, of course. I'm from L.A., but I've been to New York and know painfully well what you've just come from. I suppose you expected to find yourself stepping into more of the same winter you're accustomed to?"

Johnathan Richardson was a deputy regional director for the company, overseeing the long-term direction of several luxury properties in the Pacific states, the U.S. Grant Hotel of San Diego included. He was a friendly man with a quick intellect and jovial charm that compensated for what any easterner might have observed as a lack of social breeding. Richardson was someone who could be just as comfortable at a formal dinner in white tie and tails as he might be at the beach in short pants and sandals. He was a Southern Californian, born and raised. A different breed, I felt—arguably devoid of a distinguishable class, aside from the distinct characteristics of being highly intelligent, unmistakably well-dressed, and elevated to a prestigious position in his community.

Falling out of my trance, I shook the man's hand and introduced myself to him properly, thanking him for meeting me. Richardson was only slightly shorter than me, which the man remarked upon after adopting a taller posture. Walking through the depot, Richardson led a porter and me to a new royal-blue Duesenberg Straight-8 convertible roadster. The top was down, and she glimmered in the sunlight like a sapphire jewel, catching more than a few looks from passersby as she refused to go unnoticed. Richardson cheerfully announced that the handsome vehicle was mine, a congratulatory gift from the company.

"They hinted over the telephone that you were well accustomed to using the public transportation system," he remarked flippantly, shaking his head. "As if this were Manhattan and you could find a set of stairs to the subway on every other corner."

"Well, I'm sure I could—" I began.

“No, no,’ I said to them,” Richardson replied, cutting me off. “It’s quite impossible for you to make it out here without your own set of wheels. The city layout demands it! Everything is so spread out, you see. All these valleys and mountains and hills and mesas all running into one another. Impossible to manage by any other mode. And I’m not about to allow you to sit and stare at your employees on the streetcar every day. You’re younger than half of them,” he added dourly, as if this fact were unfortunate for everyone.

The Duesenberg was like a dream—unused and issued that very year. It was the most attractive gift I’d ever received in my life. Richardson pointed out to me that cars were what this new civilization was about. San Diego was a wild construction of asphalt roads that bypassed and encircled the most impressive scenes of natural beauty to be found out here. They were the only reliable transportation for people “on the go.” The city would simply shut down without its cars, he insisted.

Leaving the station with a healthy roar, Richardson drove us through the downtown streets while I sat lightheaded, my overcoat and gloves cast off between us on the seat. We rushed through the avenues of downtown, past the many storefronts and small plazas. It was not New York City in any respect. The land was simply too different to be compared to Manhattan. But neither did it resemble your average New England city. No, indeed; this place was beautiful in a way that I hadn’t expected. I did not see many tall trees, and the ones that promised to find height one day were decades away from achieving that maturity. The town sparkled in its newness. It didn’t feel like the revision of a much older city, with newer ideas built upon older ones. San Diego was an original design made from different, newer materials. It was not a place that reached to the clouds in search of room, but rather as far along the horizon as one could see.

We found our way up the hill just north of downtown, and Richardson pointed to the awesome warships anchored along the harbor in the distance over his left shoulder. In a short time, the car moved through the winding suburban roads to the district where my new house lay patiently awaiting my arrival.

“You’re going to love this place they found for you in Mission

Hills. We live in Los Angeles, but when we're down here, my wife and I often stay at her girlfriend's place in the same neighborhood. It was a stroke of luck that the broker was able to stumble on such a great find only a few blocks down. The house will be recorded in your name, and you'll simply repay the company, at cost, one paycheck at a time. It's a hell of a deal if you ask me."

I had spoken to Donovan at length about the arrangement before I left the east coast. Indeed, it was no small courtesy to be assisted in this manner. I was far from poorly off and had enjoyed the accomplishments of my career, but I'd never owned a home before. Having my first buying experience facilitated in this manner was as great a loyalty stimulant as any gift could ever be, including the gorgeous machine we rode in. Just hearing Richardson's comment—his agreement as to the magnitude of the courtesy—made me again grateful to be a member of the Westchester Corporation.

We eventually arrived in a newer neighborhood that still offered several empty lots waiting for buyers to come and build their dream. Present here was the frame of a first-rate neighborhood being born, most notably defined by wide avenues that pushed through many branching streets, each meandering independently without so much as a hint of the rigid downtown grid. On each street, palm trees had been newly planted, far shorter than those that had welcomed me downtown but promising to tower just as gracefully one day soon.

The car pulled up to a house on Saint James Place, a quiet street resting in the center of a section of Mission Hills known as Inspiration Heights. Richardson parked behind a black car, which he immediately acknowledged as his own. The man admitted that although he had wanted to surprise me with my new Duesenberg, he also wanted a fair shot behind its wheel first.

"I deserve it," he added, "considering all the work I've undertaken to have it present and ready for you today."

The house stood out amongst its neighbors because it was a small, single-story structure nestled among much larger dwellings. It was still a far larger home than what I'd expected to find, not that I'd expected anything specific from what the agent had told me over the phone. The property had been described with a barrage of superlatives

that would challenge even the most verbose theatre critic. The endorsement left me with only a handful of facts: that I alone was to occupy three bedrooms, not to mention something the agent repeatedly referred to as an “entertainer’s kitchen,” whatever that was.

What my eyes set upon was what every American searched for when they flipped through the pages of *Architectural Digest*. It was a little Spanish Revival style bungalow with grace and style to spare, covered with cream stucco and an abundance of handsome, arched windows. The polished structure was set back from the sidewalk-lined street in accordance with the other homes on the block. I fell in love with it before I could manage to stand up from the car.

Richardson carried one of my bags and led us from the curb to the front walkway to open the front door. Before I’d even crossed the threshold, Richardson had moved across the living room to open some windows to let the breeze in.

“My wife did her best to keep the decorator in line. She was concerned he might not take the necessary care with some of the furniture you sent on ahead. She’s found a place there for your oak desk,” he said, pointing to the smallest bedroom, which Mrs. Richardson had made into an office, “and your side table there in the dining room. It’s all blended in real smartly.

“The other things, of course, didn’t really complement the colors the man had chosen for you in advance of their arrival. Eleanor had them all stored in the rear carriage house. She approved of all the new pieces the decorator selected, but if you want some of the old ones back, you go right ahead. She won’t think you don’t care for her taste.” He winked. “At least, she’ll tell you as much to your face.”

Everything was more than perfect, I assured him. The feel of the house was better than anything I could have hoped for. The living room was crowned with thick mahogany moldings that gave it a masculine feel and height. A romantic but simple tiled fireplace stood at the center of the far wall. The entrance to the hallway was arched similarly to the front door and led toward a private rear yard and garage off the alleyway. The kitchen was spacious with an ample counter space that jutted out to support an entire buffet of trays. In

all, the home had a smart, modern floor plan that seemed perfectly laid out to live in.

“I guess I won’t have much use for the fireplace,” I joked.

“That’s not true,” Richardson answered honestly. “I suspect that you’ll eventually acclimate to this weather and likely find some nights very chilly. The lows fell to the mid-fifties around Christmas, and I nearly froze my ass off.”

I couldn’t stifle my laugh at the man’s language, or at the idea of associating fifty-degree nights with winter.

“Trust me, you’ll need that fireplace just to survive. Still, this place is brand new, so you shouldn’t encounter a single problem with it for some time.”

It was remarkable, I thought, that so much effort had been exerted on my behalf before I’d even arrived. I felt a genuine apprehension for the enormous expectations that must have already been placed upon my name. “Sight unseen,” as they say.

“Eleanor ensured that groceries were placed in the kitchen, so you’d have time to figure it all out. But then, you haven’t anyone to cook for you here...” Richardson said this last part aloud with an absent tone, not really speaking to me, but to himself. “Oh, but I suppose you didn’t have anyone to cook for you in New York, either. Silly of me to say it, really. I suppose I’ve been married too long to remember when I could cook for myself. Nevertheless, I’ve reserved you a table at the hotel restaurant tonight. At least, you won’t have to starve on account of my neglecting to arrange for a girl to cook for you.”

I didn’t bother to explain that I’d never relied on servants in New York for anything but light housekeeping once a month. It certainly wouldn’t have been in my favor, I thought, to note how unusually rich this new home seemed in comparison to my apartment back east.

“Most unfortunate that I won’t be there to show you around tonight. I promise I’ll be there tomorrow, bright and early. But you’ll love The Grill, that I can guarantee. We all think it’s one of the finest restaurants in the city. And the price for executive members is excellent, if I do say so,” he smirked. “Just sign the bill over to your expense account and they’ll take care of it for you.”

In moments, Richardson walked over to shake my hand, seizing my attention from the details of my new home.

“I’ll be on my way now. No doubt you’ll need to settle in and rest before dinner. You’re probably exhausted from your trip.”

He found his hat on the entrance table and let himself out after repeating the simple directions for driving back downtown to the hotel. “It’s hard to miss when you’re down there—right in the center of everything. Make sure not to drive too recklessly until you get your license.”

Richardson left me with a final smile. Even with his frank viewpoint, I thought the man was nothing but warmth and friendly charm. I was certainly grateful to be in his hands. His welcome had calmed so many of the fears I’d developed over the past weeks. Still, with all my nervous excitement, I couldn’t have sat down now if I’d tried to.

I gave the house another tour. The large bed in the master bedroom was already made up, though the sheets were not my own; new and far more luxurious than anything I’d sent ahead. Many of my clothes had been pressed and were hanging orderly in a spacious closet built into the room wall. The rest of my clothes were folded neatly in several dresser drawers. Such care had been taken with each room that, at times, my investigation felt like an intrusion, as if I were digging through someone else’s house that happened to hold a few of my possessions strangely scattered about it.

When I’d eventually made it through all its corners, I stepped out back to wander the yard. It was separated from its neighbors by a solid wooden fence that stood behind newer shrubbery and short trees. A small concrete path led from the back door to a paved seating area furnished with modern chairs and small tables covered with oil lanterns.

Ruth might have died to find herself sitting in her own outdoor garden space like this, I thought. But that was just a convenient delusion, I knew, based on the idea that a Manhattan girl would ever want to find herself living in a suburb. I stopped myself before the angry sound of her voice could come through to set a torch to my sentimental heart.

I opened the side door of the small garage to find the remainder of my furniture, as Richardson had promised. I figured that I would just junk it all and thank Richardson's wife for banishing it from her gorgeous creation. There wasn't much, and she'd ensured that the movers had arranged it so that my car would fit comfortably, although barely. *Better move the handsome beast now before I never see it again.*

Walking back through the yard and house, out through my front door, I became aware of Saint James Place in a way that had escaped me when I'd arrived on the small street with Richardson. It was empty, scattered with only a couple other vehicles in either direction. Two small children were playing across the street in view of a woman, likely their mother. The children were the only source of the slightest bit of noise, besides the palm trees that dotted the sidewalks, whose lazily bending branches swayed gently in the breeze. This jarring silence led my senses to discover the small birds chirping in the pepper and sycamore trees in my neighbors' yards. This was the suburbs and were it not fifteen minutes from the city, it might have terrified me. *How would I ever get to sleep with all this quiet?* I wondered. It struck me that crime had likely never existed in my new neighborhood, certainly not as it had back home.

I sat down in the Duesenberg, remembering how Richardson had worked it, and brought the engine up to roar in defiance of the street's silence. I pulled forward and down the slanted road, circled the block, and found my way into the alley. I managed to keep my confidence while steering through the narrow passageway, pulling up to my garage.

Farther down the alley, I could see a small group of boys playing ball. They glanced at me when they heard the car engine stalking through the lane. *So, this is where they keep the noisemakers,* I mused.

Engaging the handbrake, I slipped out and unlocked the garage doors to swing them open. When I'd turned back only seconds later, I found the boys gathering around the vehicle, each more impressed at the sight of the glistening machine than the last.

"Did you just get it, sir?" the oldest and tallest boy asked, stepping forward. He was a stocky blond who couldn't have been more than fourteen years old.

“It’s my first day with her.” I smiled. “Would you like to sit down and take a look?”

The boy’s eyes lit up, and he moved around to the passenger’s side without uttering a single word in response, hopping aboard silently as the other boys swayed to and fro with excitement.

“Close your door,” I instructed the boy when we were both seated. I placed the vehicle in drive and gingerly moved the Duesenberg forward into its snug little nest. It brought me no small sense of accomplishment that I didn’t hit anything, even with a passenger and an audience to distract me.

“What’s your name?” I asked the boy when we’d exited and moved back into the alley.

“Bobby McMillan, sir.”

“Daniel Archer,” I answered in kind, extending my hand. “Thank you for lending me your co-piloting skills, Bobby. Do you live around here?”

“Down that ways,” the boy replied, pointing to a house that must have stood beyond where the alleyway eventually shot to the left.

In moments, Bobby had introduced the other boys, Mikey, Douglass, and Ian, who was his little brother. I received assurances from each member of this crew that they could be counted upon to keep a watchful lookout for strangers, though ‘strangers’ was clearly not a word that they heard in everyday speech. The expressions on their faces seemed to sharpen as they processed the sinister idea imposed upon their young, innocent minds, before I shut the garage doors behind me with a smile.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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**T**HE DREAM WAS EROTIC, some sort of special welcome from my new bed in the late afternoon. I might have taken it as a good omen, had it not been so overwhelming, but this one was like the fever-pitched dreams brought on by hallucinogens. It came sharply, like the uneasy burn of swallowing a hard spirit, some magic poison that I grimaced at as it slid down my throat. I felt caught beneath the dream, its weight pushing down upon my chest as I struggled to breathe.

The pulsing heat of the vision stalked me in the form of a shimmering pair of hazel eyes, which somehow commanded the world. Those two indescribable jewels controlled my body, and liquid walls that pulsed with some illuminated breath in my periphery eventually materialized in the form of a moonlit garden, ablaze with emerald leaves covered in diamonds. The two sensuous eyes held me, then slowly shown their inescapable light upon the face of a woman, too magnificent and beautiful to be anything other than a goddess. She was the Venus of love and beauty, with a Madonna's sweet happiness in her subdued smile. But there was something more to this expression, something which revealed itself only in her eyes. It was sexual, a look of carnal desire that hinted of masculine possession. Finally, it was a look of content.

In my rapture, I was seized by a tension unlike that of sexual excitement. This tension was not localized in my sex organ but within every fiber of my body, and it empowered me while consuming my will to resist.

At once, the shadows that covered us shifted in an unexplainable dance of movement. A destructive wind swept through the forest of trees in the garden where we stood. I saw all of these images in the periphery, for I was unable to leave her gaze for any length of time. Without notice, the woman's hand reached to my chest, and the power of her touch contracted and released every muscle in my body.

I awoke violently with the fabric of the dream still fading against the physical dimensions of my bedroom. The sublime release of my tightened body gave way to a sweet fatigue for some time. The line in my vision that separated physical reality from imagination was still not clear. Blinking several times, my eyes eventually came into focus and the garden and its mistress were no more.

My face, neck, back, and chest were covered with a thin layer of sweat as I stood up from the bed. I immediately felt the warm dampness of semen in my undergarment as it dripped down my thigh.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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I TOOK COMMAND OF MY NEW CITY that evening from the helm of the Duesenberg, speeding through the streets in all the style and comfort that one could desire. I was impressed by how quickly I'd learned to become rather good at driving. Finding myself behind the wheel of such an excellent machine was no minor condolence for my western transplant, for I genuinely loved the feeling of being behind its wheel.

It was not lost on me that I likely would never have even thought to buy a car in New York City. Raised within that hulking, eternal noise, it now felt strange to ride down the hill of this alternate Fourth Avenue in largely open skies, dotted by structures that were only a small fraction of the size of those titanic buildings. It felt like a bit of archaeology, being immersed in what Manhattan might've been similar to a century ago. Though, of course, that notion was absurd. I acknowledged that with a shake of my head. *This place is simply different*, I thought, as the car drove down the gentle decline.

On Broadway, I pulled the Duesenberg to the curb beside a relatively immense building that bore a brass nameplate inscribed with "U.S. GRANT HOTEL." Across the street in a small park, a beautiful Spanish fountain was lit from within by electric light, its water shimmering like a beacon in the night. I felt a reluctant thrill to

realize that, of all the places I might've ended up, this exceptional palace was now to be my own.

The Grant's lobby was more finely appointed than I'd expected, overwhelming me with its gilded beauty. She bore high ceilings molded with delicate Venetian carvings that bore magnificent Italian crystal chandeliers. The ethereal electric light of these exquisite torches drenched the vast mosaic tiled floor that was dotted with plush green rugs. Fine high-backed chairs were placed along the walls, and the bases of each of the room's many marble columns were crowned in gold and surrounded by circular, tufted leather sofas. Everything else was covered in splendid velvets and edged with brass hardware.

Huge vases of flowers and tropical plants colored the lobby and its offshoot passageways, no doubt supported by the abundant sunlight that must've poured in through the large windows during the day. The exotic size of these blooms heralded the truth of the climate. To have found such fauna in New York at the Plaza would not have been a novelty; they would simply have been imported from hundreds of miles away. Here, I was surrounded with birds-of-paradise that grew indoors as lushly as they did in the plaza garden across the street.

Pulling away from my examinations, I quickly found my way downstairs to the Bivouac Grill, a comfortable restaurant that resembled a castle cellar with a dozen pillars holding up its barreled roof, each adorned in coats of arms from around Europe. The perimeter walls were painted with frescos of famous battle scenes, and at the center of the room stood a black, high-gloss grand piano commanded by an elderly musician at the keys. Dressed in an old tuxedo and swaying contentedly to his own playing, the man produced a comfortable Mozart sonata that gently emanated from the beautiful instrument over the dense sounds of dining conversation. The tables were large and comfortably covered with immaculate white linen and heavy silver. From the reception area in which I waited to be seated, I noticed small bouquets of fresh, red and yellow blooms lit by crystal oil lamps on each table.

Preferring to observe the present function of the service, I didn't move to draw the maître d'hôtel's attention to my arrival, but simply

waited to be seated in order behind two small parties of guests who'd arrived before me.

"No, I don't have a reservation," I lied when it was my turn to receive the host's attention. I preferred to experience the service as an everyday customer at least once to get a feel for its quality. Short and lean, the man was as well-mannered as he was dressed. He told me that there was indeed room for a walk-in guest but asked that I wait in the lobby for a few minutes until a table could be prepared for me.

I sat in an arm chair several feet from the doors of the dining room. In moments, I noticed another man arrive by himself. He was older than me, most likely in his fifties or maybe even sixties. He had salted black hair clipped short to crown a noble forehead that brooded over grey-blue eyes. This man was stocky of build, though tall enough that his good, stiff posture was sure to cut a fine figure.

When the maître d'hôtel returned to his station, I heard the older man ask if a Mr. Archer had arrived. He spoke with a crisp British accent, the tenor of his voice carrying unexpectedly loud in this outer room still filled with the piano notes from the interior dining space. When told that the man in question had not yet shown for his reservation, the older man asked to be informed the moment after he had been seated.

I thought the man was likely someone important that Richardson had arranged to be introduced to me, but I found it nevertheless off-putting to be expected by a stranger. Uncharacteristically, I remained silent and seated in the chair, thinking he'd perhaps go away and I could deal with him tomorrow.

I reached for an unread copy of the evening's newspaper on the table beside me, which I'd only noticed because of the huge block printing of its front-page headline: "Police Identify Third Cabrillo Bridge Murder Victim." Before I could do more than lift the copy up to read, I heard my name being called gently from a foot away.

The man was stone-faced for several seconds before an honest smirk registered subtly in the crook of his mouth.

"Henry Jackson, Sir," his voice eased out as he nodded slightly with his head. "I don't wish to disturb you. I am employed by Mizz Gabrielle Roussade, a business acquaintance of Johnathan Richardson.

I understand that you met with Mister Richardson for the first time this afternoon, and he mentioned to my employer that you would be taking your dinner here in the hotel. Mizz Roussade sent me to deliver this message.”

Jackson moved slowly to remove a cream-colored envelope from within the breast pocket of his navy jacket. It was a heavy parchment with a gold, waxen seal embossed by an ornate initial R. “It is an invitation to an event she is hosting, and I am to add that Mister Richardson will be in attendance.”

I stood up and accepted the invitation from him, attempting to appear friendly. I mumbled an assurance that I would be delighted to attend, thanking him as jovially as I could. It would never have occurred to me to show the slightest hesitation after how I’d just wasted the poor man’s time in such an undignified manner. Jackson gave a slight bow, signaling he had been well-received and excused himself. He headed out of sight and upstairs toward the rear main lobby.

When I was certain the man had gone, I fondled the envelope in my hand momentarily before opening it. The card inside had a sweet floral perfume which rose inoffensively from the parchment. The gilded stationary bore the same ornate golden R, embossed along the top in the center above the sender’s handwritten message:

M. GABRIELLE BORCHARDT ROUSSADE  
REQUESTS THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE  
THIS SATURDAY EVENING, 11 FEBRUARY, 1922,  
TO WELCOME MR. DANIEL ARCHER OF NEW YORK.

2055 SUNSET BOULEVARD, MISSION HILLS

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Joseph Stone is a paranormal and historical novelist who lives in San Diego, California. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from San Diego State University and a Master of Arts in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology.



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