

The Word of Jeb



Jeff Hayes

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Rapaciousness known by men
of self-claimed morality



JEFF
HAYES



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Dedicated to Mona
Her attentiveness keeps
this author true to course.

And a special shout-out to CS
for the inspirations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>The Word of Jeb</u>	1
<u>01 – Foremath</u>	1
<u>02 – Haus Ambiguous</u>	18
<u>03 – Lattermath</u>	38
<u>04 – Aftermath</u>	72
<u>About Jeff Hayes</u>	83
<u>Connect with Jeff Hayes</u>	84
<u>Summary</u>	85

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CHAPTER I

Foremath

A chirping filled the air. It rose up to swirl around, floating in the sky briefly before the cycle repeated. Among those present there remained silence. No words had been spoken since the campfire settled down into a relaxed burn. The fire had reflected and perhaps fueled the energy they exchanged. A full moon illuminated from low on the horizon, staring unblinking at them from across the ocean's break.

The foreign sound had disturbed a mood of blissful aftermath.

The man spoke first. Idly, he said, "We are happy."

"Hmm..." said the woman to his left.

"Yeah," confirmed the other.

There was no intention to speak more; the moment did not require it. Surf was the provider, playing an orchestra movement upon the beach.

It began again: the chirping. After the third cycle, he said, “That is odd, you know.”

“What is?”

“That a phone could have signal here. Being unreachable, that was the fun of this spot.”

Zuni, “Well, Darren. Progress. They have simply put in a new tower.”

Kara, “You could choose to ignore it.”

The sound remained insistent. The partners’ look soured to disappointment as he reached into the bag. Damage to the mood had already been done.

Acknowledging the screen, he said with restrained excitement, “It’s Jillian.”

“Don’t answer.”

Kara said, snuggling in, “It has remained his choice, Zuni. Accept that it has already been made. Be at peace.” She moved to require the other woman’s embrace. “We remain here, you and I. We will await his return.”

Darren looked at the women. Their peace flowed with his.

A finger swipe answered the phone. The connection must have been good as the call switched to video. He looked at the screen. The bright blue sky in the background pulled in his attention.

“Darren?!! I have been trying to reach you, like forever!”

He opened his mouth to speak but found it painful. Breath had become painful.

THE WORD OF JEB

She continued without waiting for him to respond, “Where are you? I have looked up and down the deck but couldn’t find you or Zuni. They won’t let us leave here. I am at the orange station. What color are you at?”

He hadn’t heard most of the words. Thinking about breathing brought awareness of pain. His leg throbbed. A cough brought on piercing sharp pain.

“Are you injured?”

No response.

“Darren, what color station are you at?”

He managed the sound, “Orange?”

“What?!! No. I am at orange. What color are you and Zuni at?”

“Color?”

“Yes. What color?!”

Darren looked around. The beach was gone. Kara was gone. Zuni was here, but the image was horrible. The nightmare had returned. He turned away, closing his eyes, and pressed into the seat.

He said aloud, “Please, let this go away. I want to be back at the beach. I want to be back with Kara and Zuni.” The distant sound of surf began to return. Light was brightening. Pain was receding.

The sound of Jillian was jarring, interrupting the soliloquy. “Darren! What are you talking about? What beach?!! I don’t understand you. Is Zuni there? Can you give the phone to her!”

THE WORD OF JEB

No response.

“Darren, where is Zuni?!!”

His eyes opened. The cracked windshield was still there, he sighed. The moment had been lost. His partners were left on the beach without him.

He said, “Oh, Jillian,” and turned the phone’s camera towards Zuni.

Silence.

Jillian took in a sharp breath; it was transmitted through the phone.

After a moment, she said, calmly, “OK. You are on the car deck. Can you pan the phone around so I can see where?”

Darren complied.

Though she had willed herself calm, the words blurted out, “Oh my! The ferry has lost its bow door!”

In the background, a man’s voice, “What?! Who are you talking to?”

Another, a woman, “The ship has lost its bow?!”

Jillian, “Hans, shush. I can’t hear. You too, Claudia.” Turning back to the phone, “OK. Darren, I know where on the deck your car is. You are injured. Remain there. I will bring help. We will get you out.”

She paused to observe his face on the phone. His look was disoriented.

Firmly, she spoke, “Do you understand?”

THE WORD OF JEB

He had wanted to laugh at being told to remain, but the sound came out as a wet cough.

Panic flickered across Jillian's face before it returned to calm. "Darren, hold on. That's an order. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Jillian."

"I am going to end the call now; my battery is low. We are coming for you, Darren."

The screen displayed: Call Ended.

"Oh Zuni," he said. He clutched at her hand; it was cool. His vision had become blurry from tears. "I love you."

Hans and Claudia waited.

"That was Darren. He is still on the ship."

Hans, "Where? We didn't see them anywhere on deck."

"He's in their car, on the car deck."

"What?!!"

Claudia, "Where's Zuni?"

"She's in the car with him." Looking around quickly, "Where's the station officer?"

"By the railing, fiddling with the boat rigging."

Making her way forward, she said, "Stay with me. I need you two."

Approaching the man, "Officer," she said, calmly, "There are people trapped on the car deck. I was just in contact with them by phone."

He turned to look at her. The crewman assisting said, "It's OK. I'll finish with this."

"People trapped? Everybody is accounted for at this station."

"Yes. I'm sure they are. However, these people were to report to another station."

"Which one?"

"Surely that I do not know; however, I am sure of their present location. They are on the car deck, by the bow door, starboard."

The crewman came up, also an officer. "Bow?"

"Yes. The missing bow door."

Chief, "I cannot leave the station. I advise you remain here. The order to depart ship might come at any minute."

"Chief, the rigging is repaired." Glancing at Jillian, he said, "The ship is stable at present. I'll go with them."

"Right. Keep your radio handy. If the order comes, I want you back up here pronto. No argument."

"Will do, Chief. Let's go..."

"Jillian."

"I am Ron."

Chief was on the radio as they began to make their way. Ron led through the crowd, "Excuse us. Let us pass, please."

As they emerged from the group, Ron saw the other two following. "Whoa. Where do you think you are going? You

two will remain here.” He looked at Claudia, then back to Jillian. “What the...”

Jillian, “My twin sister, Claudia. And he is Hans, our partner. We will be in need of their help.”

“Sha–zam! You two are identical.” Studying the sisters’ features, he said, “Well. More’s the merrier, eh? But you will follow my direction. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” Jillian said.

Ron looked at her cross.

“Reflex. I’m ex-military. Army Ranger Medic.”

“I was a Seabee, Steelworker Second Class.”

“Glad to make your acquaintance. We will be in need of your competent expertise. First stop, the infirmary for two litters and a triage kit.”

“Right. This way, through here. Fast walk. No running.”

They moved quickly across the ship and down to the infirmary. Materials acquired, they carried on. The men toted the litters between them. Jillian had the triage bag slung across her shoulder. Nearby was an entrance onto the car deck, by the stern. They entered.

Claudia spoke first, saying aloud what they all thought, “Oh my! Most all the vehicles not strapped down have slid forward to the bow.”

Hans, “Our truck is still in place. So is yours, Jillian. Heavy strapping.”

“This is what was on the monitors. It was the captain’s concern that the shifted vehicles would destabilize the ship. Seems to have remained true though.” He waved at a camera hanging off a beam, before giving it a thumbs up.

The radio barked out, “Right, Ron. Things remain stable up here. Proceed with the rescue.”

A second thumbs up.

The camera wagged back and forth once in acknowledgment.

Hans said, turning away from the carnage. “Cars don’t weigh as much as they used to—flimsy built.”

Jillian, “I need tools from my truck.” Handing her phone to Claudia, “Call Darren. Say: we will be there shortly. Keep him talking.”

“This battery is almost dead. Hans, let me have your phone.”

Jillian unlocked the truck. From storage, a stout pry bar was retrieved. She handed that and a canvas bag to Hans. Then followed a metal box, which went to Ron, who almost dropped it.

“Jeez! What is in this?”

“Yeah, everything we need, I think,” she said, patting him on the shoulder. “Channel your inner Seabee.”

That got a smile out of him—the first.

Asking Claudia, “You got signal?”

“Still ringing. Come on...”

As if on command, Darren answered. He spoke out a weak, “Hello?”

“Darren!” Jillian said, from over her sister’s shoulder. “You have been holding on as ordered. Good soldier. We are coming for you. Be ready for us.”

She said quietly to the others, “Let’s move out. Starboard hatch, down the way to the forward hatch.” Ron fell in behind her. The serious face had returned. Weight of the box had become light as a feather, balanced with the litters he toted with Hans.

As they crossed the deck and exited out onto the way, Claudia said to the phone, “You listen to her, Darren. Believe what she says. She’s a combat-tough chick.”

“I believe. You are from breakfast?”

“I’m Claudia, Jillian’s sister. Hans is with us. He was sitting with me this morning. Our partner. Do you remember him too?”

“Yes. You both had a nice smile for us.”

“And you did in return. Jillian moves fast. She had excellent instincts—sees what she wants and makes it so.”

“Compersion.”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Right.”

They came back into the deck through the hatch. Before them was the car jumble.

Claudia added, “We also have Ron with us. He’s from the ship. A metal see bee, or something.”

Ron winked at her, “Stay here, just inside the doorway, where the camera can see you. It’s up there. See it?”

“Ah, yes. OK.”

“You are to be the radioman,” he said, handing it to her. “Stand right here. Relay the words if there’s communication on it for us. Clear?”

“Yes. I understand.”

He squeezed her shoulder, “Excellent.”

Jillian had made her way past the first car. Climbing up and over the roof of the second, she called back, “Let’s move it, gentlemen. No dawdling talking up the pretty lady.”

Claudia, “Go on. I got this handled.”

Hans hopped upon the trunk of the car, which promptly complained from his weight; the boots left twin dents. Ron joined him. Jillian was already far ahead. She scampered from car to car like a deer bouncing across a meadow of high grass. The red cross target of the triage bag remained tight against her back.

Ron to Hans, “You good?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Affirmative. Safety first. Slow and steady gets it done. Move out.”

They followed Jillian’s direction, leaving a trail of bent hoods behind.

There was an open space behind the car. Jillian hopped down from the SUV. The corner by the driver's door was clear. She slithered over into the gap. Darren looked up from the phone. The window was cracked, streaked with a bloody smear. Through it, his eyes met hers—a little boy pleading for rescue. She tried the door. It was bound tight in the bent frame.

“Darren, can the window be rolled down?”

“Aah, I don't know.” He pulled at the rocker and the window dutifully responded.

She bent over into the car, keeping her attention carefully focused only on him. “Give me your wrist.”

Claudia, from the phone, “Jillian? Is that you?”

“Yes.”

“They asked on the radio how we were proceeding. If we need assistance?”

“I do not know as yet. Tell them we have just arrived and are evaluating. Where are the men?”

“Not as fast as you, of course. They are making the way, but the gear is tricky to carry over the wreckage.”

“Got you. Call back on the radio with our status. Tell them: stand-by on the assistance.”

“Will do.”

She finished the count and released his arm. “Darren, look at me,” she said and drew the flashlight beam across his eyes. “Can you move your head? OK? No sharp pain?”

“No. But breathing hurts.”

“Ah,” she said, and reached in to release the seat belt. The movement distracted her for an instant, drawing to Zuni. Her stomach immediately prepared a response. It was willed back into submission.

“How does that feel now? Is there pain in your lower back?”

“No. My leg.”

“Yes. I saw that.” She went to the bag, returning with trauma shears. “Let’s have a look-see.” The pants were cut back, exposing the rod. Blood weeped from the wound. “Keep it still. Understood?”

“I’ll just stay put then, shall I?”

She flashed him a smile, in reassurance. “If you don’t mind.”

At that moment, the men climbed upon the SUV at the rear. Jillian met their look, and said, “We are good here for the moment. Leave the litters on the hood. We will focus on this side of the vehicle. The space is too confined for egress. We will use the hatchback.”

Ron, “Understood.”

They climbed down behind the car.

“In the case, Ron, you will find bolt cutters. I need those.”

“Here you go,” he said, reaching across to her. He got a full view into the car. She gave him a stern look, shaking her head slightly: no.

He nodded in reply.

Hans had been looking into the car through the back glass. Ron caught him up and talked quietly. Hearing the words, shock grew across his face. Jillian was watching; he dropped his head.

Ron, "You still with me, Hans?"

"Yes," he said, his voice shaky.

"Jillian and I need you. We will keep busy through this."

"Yes."

"Jillian, we will remove the gear from the back and drop the backseat. Agreed?"

"Good. I need a few minutes here before he is ready."

She said to Darren, "I am going to give you a local. The leg will feel nice and sleepy. That work for you?"

"Yes, Jillian. Kara. Take care of Kara too."

She looked at him confused, not allowing a side glance at Zuni.

"Box with yellow tape. Her urn is inside."

Ron, "Got the box, Darren. She will be with us on the exit."

"Thank you." He took a breath. "Do it, Jillian."

Without hesitation, the needle found its mark. "Let's give that a minute. I will tie your thigh now, then the cutters will make quick work."

She proffered a leather strap. "Bite into this."

"Mmpfh," he grunted, as the rod end parted smoothly from the shears.

“One more.”

“Mmpfh! Aagh!”

“Sorry. You are free now. Move a little aside, so I can get this other bandage around.”

He took a breath and held it before passing the air out slowly between his teeth.

“You are a hardy guy, Darren.” She looked back over the seat. “How’s it going back there, guys?”

The pry bar levered at the rear seatback, which popped forward.

Ron, “Ready back here.”

Hans was looking at her, his face wet with tears. She raised her eyebrows at him. He turned his back quickly, and wiped at his face with a sleeve.

Speaking at the phone, “You still there Claudia?”

“Affirmative.”

“Good. Call this in. We are going to extract Darren now. This is going to happen quickly. The guys will bring him across in the litter. He has an injury to his leg and blood loss because of it. Possibly some broken ribs. Also, a hard crack to the skull. He will be brought to the infirmary. The ship’s doctor needs to be informed to meet there. You got that?”

“Affirmative. Relaying.”

“Right. Ron, can you drop Darren’s seat back? Easy now. Perfect. You ready, Hans?”

“Yes. What shall I do?”

“I want you and Ron to reach into Darren’s armpits and lift. Pull him straight back. Be careful not to put pressure on the ribs, if you can help it.”

“Darren, I want you to bite into that leather. Feel the texture grit between your teeth.”

“Let’s move, guys.”

With a single movement, the guys lifted Darren, and crab walked him out and into the litter.

Jillian had him strapped in the basket with a single fluid movement.

“Careful now. Get him to the infirmary. Then, I want you both back here pronto. I will need your help. Do you understand me clearly?”

Ron, “Yes, ma’am.”

Hans nodded.

Darren, “No. I need Kara.”

“I’ve already strapped her in. She’s between your shins.”

“Can’t feel.”

“That’s the second shot. You’ll feel sleepy. Do not worry.”

“OK, Jillian. I won’t. You take care of me and Zuni.”

“I shall, with the help of these fine gentlemen. Off with you all. Back pronto.”

Ron, “Understood, ma’am. Ready Hans? And, lift!”

The men disappeared towards the starboard hatch, leaving Jillian alone with Zuni.

After pulling on coveralls, she crawled in through the back, pulling the canvas bag behind.

“Dear Zuni. You are not the first soul lost to damn cruel fate I have medic’d, but I hope you are the last.”

Tin snips were retrieved from the bag. Jillian began at the grim task.

Claudia called out over the phone, “Captain has relaxed protocol at the lifeboat stations. The ship is stable. There are tugs nearing with another ship to disembark onto.”

“Understood.”

“How you doing?”

“Done here.”

“The guys are on their way back to you. Ships doctor is with Darren now. There was a surgeon onboard; more than one responded to the captain’s call, it turned out. They have given him blood and were evaluating if the rod should be removed, or to wait.”

“Strong guy.”

“You know how to pick ‘em, Jillian.”

“Can smell it on them, Claudia.”

“Hans said Darren asked them, ‘As they were going to the beach, could more fire wood be brought along? The cart was left at the base of the dunes.’”

THE WORD OF JEB

“Delirious. Pain avoidance.” Jillian looked up to see Hans crossing the roof of the SUV. He and Ron hopped down. They looked at her, and then at the wrapped form in the litter.

She said to them, “Ready here. Bear the litter back. I have the rest.” Ron raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, I got it.”

Hans was staring at the bloody coveralls wadded up in the back of the open car.

“Let’s go!” she said.

Claudia radioed: they are on the way.

CHAPTER II

Haus Ambiguous

Dropped up on the bed, Darren watched Jillian enter the room. His eyes brightened in acknowledgment. She looked at his leg while approaching.

“Sawbones got the metal out of you, I see.”

He reached for her hand, pulling it to his chest. Her head followed, resting lightly, looking up to him.

After listening for a few beats, she said, “You got a strong heart, Darren. How’s the head?”

The words resonated in the room’s silence.

She continued, “I saw you off in the ambulance helicopter. You were out of it on pain meds, so you probably don’t remember. We were evacuated later.”

“I had gone back to the beach. Talked with Kara and Zuni. We had a family meeting about you.”

“Did you? Are you there now?”

THE WORD OF JEB

A curious look crossed his face before continuing, “They agree. As you have brought me back, I am your problem now. They share me with you.”

“I see.”

“I was happy to remain there, but Kara told me, ‘No, Darren. It is not yet your time.’”

“Delirium. The mind plays fun when reality has become unbearable.”

“You have brought me to a reality where I have lost my family. In just two weeks, both gone. Yes, that is unbearable.”

“Selfish of me,” she whispered before lifting her head, so she could speak the words and judge his reaction, “I am here, Darren.”

“You have laid claim to me.”

“I suppose I have. The papers are signed for your transportation back home. The hospital released you to me; otherwise, you’d be here another week arranging the ambulance ride home.”

“In your truck?”

“Yeah. Loaded in back with the freight. No, silly. We came in a van. You can sit or lie. Whatever is your comfort.”

“If the van’s a rockin’...”

“You think you are up for that?”

He pushed to sit up straighter, wincing from a flash of pain. “Maybe not quite yet.”

“Smart guy. That head of yours had them really worried. Diffuse axonal injury.”

“‘Decompressive craniectomy,’ the doctor called it. Skull skylight. Sexy, huh?”

“DAI is dangerous, Darren. The pressure had to be reduced. Luckily, that surgeon passenger had head trauma experience. He recognized the emergency. Saved your life. The ship’s Love Boat doctor had no idea. I told him your head had shattered the door window. Impact like that, there’s bound to be internal damage. He thought you didn’t have any sign of a concussion—‘just a hard bop on the old noggin.’ He and I had quite a row. The surgeon came in and shut the man down. Sent Dr. Clueless away to apply band-aids to skinned knees among the passengers. You were that first helicopter’s exclusive passenger. They brought you straight to hospital here. Quite a sprint.”

“Nurse told me how lucky I was.”

“Amazing, actually. Admitted with severe DAI, most never regain consciousness.”

“A bit of a nap though.”

“Coma.”

“I am feeling well rested.”

“You look good.”

“Shoulda seen me when the bandage came off. Bad hair day. I was a bit depressed. Nurse Crawford, Judy, brought in Bettina. She gave me a trim, snip here, buzz there.”

“Nice look. She did a good job of it.”

“Beauty college graduate. Total sweetie. I think Nurse Judy was trying to hook us up.”

“Oh—ho! You got Bettina’s number?”

“She comes by most every day. Already had her visit this morning.”

“Hospital love affair?”

“Actually, I’m part of her job rounds. She’s the hospital massage therapist.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do. I do. This morning was more of a social visit. One last alignment before the road.”

“You don’t live so far away as to not keep the visits up.”

Darren looked at her, his face beaming, and then it crashed down.

Jillian, “Your house. Yes. I know. I have thought about an arrangement. A proposal. Would you hear me out?”

Tears were running down his face.

“Ah, Darren,” she said, as tears also began to well up. “I was so strong on the ship. I totally kept it together, bottled up. Kept busy. Kept useful. After you were seen off, I helped evacuate passengers. Captain gave me an honorary crew hat.

“The next day, the three of us rented a car and drove home, non-stop. We hardly spoke a word. Along the way, we stopped at a diner. The ferry accident was on the TV. You were part of the story, your rescue. Zuni. Kara’s urn, and the circumstances

that lead to her death. She was that Karissa! The sacrifice she made, a hero! I hadn't put it together before. You didn't speak of her."

"She was just Kara to us."

Jillian waited for him to continue, which developed into an awkward pause. When it was obvious he didn't want to talk about Kara, she prattled on—providing distraction.

"My picture was flashed up as well. Some people at the diner recognized me. I didn't want to talk about it. Hans got me back outside while Claudia ran interference. She drove the rest of the way. Hans sat with me in the back. I totally lost it. Crying. Bawling, actually. Didn't know we were home until Claudia asked if I would get out or wanted to remain in the car. See, we had already been parked for a while; they had been waiting for me."

Darren looked through tears at the bleary image of Jillian, before blotting his vision clear. She remained looking down into the bed, pulling at the sheet.

After they had finished a box of tissues, emotions settled down. Jillian drew herself up. "Claudia was worried that the PTSD had come back. Catatonia. That's why I was discharged from the Army."

"Oh."

"No 'oh.' I won't indulge myself that. I've learned to beat it. Had the privilege of excellent teachers. Patient teachers.

And I wasn't too dense to receive the message: Live this life. Build from what is known, bitter ashes and all."

"I lost a few days to the coma."

"More than a few."

"Nurse said you had come by, returning regularly for a while. But then, you disappeared. You weren't here when I woke up."

She held his hand, "Yes. Sorry."

"What happened?"

"Life distractions. Our trucks were retrieved from the ferry, but had been impounded at the harbor dock. The ferry company was slow to release them. My shipping agent was furious. He got the insurance broker involved to push for the release; otherwise, the trucks would still be there. My cargo and Claudia's wasn't perishable. If it had been, the release wouldn't have mattered; it would have already been a total loss. Our loads were manufacturing robots and computer equipment controls, or such. High value. We weren't to know the details. The release remained a 'no' from the harbor master. And then, we got a call to claim our trucks: get them out of there immediately."

"What did you do?"

"The client had been pushy. They had called the agent early that morning to say the harbor master was going to release the trucks. There would be bonus pay if we could be on the road that day. My response was, 'No problemo.' The friend I was

visiting works at the airport, which is near the harbor. Hitched a ride in with them. Claudia and Hans flew in later. There was an arranged shuttle to the harbor—a limo van. Really luxurious: leather seats, bar, TV. No markings. It was just us they picked up. Strangest thing. My RADAR was pinging a hard signal. At the harbor, our trucks were there, waiting by the gate: washed, fueled, and ready.”

“Who were the clients?”

“Don’t know. We dropped the load at the destined freight depot. Being off schedule, we had lost the prior scheduled return load. The agent said not to worry about it. All will work out. A return load had been already arranged. Don’t ask questions.”

“So, did you? Worry about it?”

“Nah. Trucking’s like the military: don’t ask questions if they are not asked for.”

“Claudia and Hans?”

“They aren’t vets, but they get it. We were happy for the business. The agent continued to keep us busy-busy, pulling loads here to there. I visited you. Sometimes it was a bit out of the way for the route. But you continued to pull the sleeping beauty. Until one day, you didn’t.

“I was on the road. When I called, instead of connecting me to a nurse, they put me on hold. Said they wanted to connect me to a doctor. Oh my, Darren, what ran through my head. Those were the longest several minutes since leaving active

duty with the rangers. The truck and I went rolling along a deserted highway. Each white line took forever to pass. A hill was approaching. Had to downshift for it. And then, Dr. Ramos came on the line. He confirmed who I was. I had told them I was your partner—significant other. Otherwise, they would have excluded me.”

“But that was truthiness, Jillian: I am. You are.”

She stared at him for a couple heartbeats before continuing. “Waiting for the doctor to come on the line, I tried to have no expectations. But when he began to talk in platitudes, despair flooded in. Fearing the worst, I felt the world crash. There was a roadside ahead. He waited patiently while I pulled the rig in.”

“Dr. Ramos is nice. He prefers to be called Dr. Joel though, or just Joel. You really had to pull over?”

“Yes, Darren. I can’t explain it. That’s how I felt.” Her eyes flashed. “Dr. Joel said you had awakened earlier that morning. Your condition was guarded but good. Really good. Like you had just awoken from a long nap. You impressed him, saying you were starving, and asking for a cheeseburger and fries. Did you really ask him that?”

“I did. I was. Sadly, it was hospital food only, at first. Later, Bettina snuck me in some real food I craved.”

“Did you get your burger?”

“Yeah, and then some. It was OK. Dr. Joel was in on it. We shared a pizza with him.”

“Yeah. He seems a pretty hip guy. I left Claudia and Hans talking with him in the cafeteria. Hans was asking all sorts of questions about brain stuff, cognification, Artificial Intelligence. Dr. Joel was into it. I think he enjoys our Hans’ tech fetish. Claudia was bored, rolling her eyes at me when I left. She wanted to come up too, but I told her to stay put; that we should chat lightly at first. And there was a question to pop.”

“Oh. Did I answer your evaluation satisfactory, doctor?”

She drew her head back with a blank look. “I’ve been going about it in a round about way. Though Dr. Joel described you as completely here, I had to be sure myself.”

“And am I?”

“Here? Seems so.”

“Your question?”

“I’ve had a bit of time, a bit of a think. That is what happens on the road. So, I have prepared a bit of a monologue.”

“Excellent! Start at the beginning and carry on until the end.”

“I will, if you give me the chance. This is a ‘something’ to me.”

“Sorry. Please elaborate upon your ‘something.’”

She gave Darren a smirk, and then began, “See, I’ve been solo since my service days. After the discharge, I was such a mess. I didn’t want the responsibility, no, that’s not right: I

couldn't handle the responsibility of other human beings. Claudia was there for me, as was Hans; however, they did not flip it around and require from me. Those were rough times. The PTSD demon haunted me. You understand?"

"PTSD? Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? Yes. I've heard of that."

"Heard? OK, well more about that later. I"—a woman knocked on the doorjamb and walked in. But for her hair length—which was long—she was a mirror image of Jillian. Even her clothes style was similar.

Darren's mouth fell open.

Jillian had her back to the door. She saw Darren's expression and watched him a moment before saying, "Hi Claudia." She turned to face her sister. "I thought we agreed? I would call before you came up. Where is Hans?"

"Still talking up Dr. Ramos. I couldn't hear Hans any longer."

"Read a magazine."

"I did."

"Go to the news vendor's stall. There will be more magazines there."

"Have you asked him? What did he say?"

"Nothing. He hasn't said anything, as I've yet to ask him."

"Well, what have you been doing all this time?"

"Talking."

“Talking. Yes, talking is good. Asking. That would be good too. Stalling, now that would be less good.”

“You are right. The stall warning indicator has been on for a good long while. This is hard for me, Claudia.”

“I know it is, sis. That’s the real reason I came up.” She pulled a chair out of the corner and slid it over to the bed.

Darren had been turning his head, looking back and forth between the sisters.

Claudia, “I see you haven’t told him you have a twin.”

“Darren, stop. You are going to make yourself dizzy. Claudia and I are twins.”

“Identical, in fact.”

“Yes. Identical.”

Darren, “I saw you and a man—”

“Hans.”

“—Hans, in the ferry restaurant, at breakfast. I didn’t remember...”

“Well, they were clear across the restaurant.”

Claudia, “And, you were quite infatuated, at the time. I have heard this tale told upon many an occasion.”

Darren, “Amazing.”

Claudia, “Quite. So, I will blurt it out for my sister’s convenience—the ranger who has been in the shit, but who has become tongue-tied in the presence of a lovely man. You are, by the way, a lovely man. I understand why she was smitten from the first.”

Darren looked to Jillian, who was staring intently at him. Her eyes trapped him, startled him.

Claudia, “That’s her war face. You’ll get used to it, or maybe you won’t. Hans hates it: spooks him.” Pause. “Darren. Darren! Look at me.”

He complied.

“Jillian wants you to stay with us. I concur. It will be good for you, for your ongoing physical healing, and your pending psyche recovery. Your presence will also be good for Jillian. The events have bruised her psyche as well, whether she admits it or not.”

“I acknowledge.”

“Good, Jillian. You’ll be less work. What say you, Darren?” Now Claudia turned on her war face.

It was too much for Darren, these twins staring at him. He wanted to melt into the pillow, seek oblivion. The sheets twisted in his now sweaty palms. Within closed eyes, he counted heartbeats.

“Oh!” Claudia and Jillian said, simultaneously.

Darren flinched. With his eyes still tightly closed, he said, “Before you came in, Claudia, Jillian was telling me she was solo.”

“I know. Voices carry. Heard her in the hall. And, it was ‘solo poly,’ she meant to say, actually.”

Darren’s eyes flashed open. “You heard?!”

“Well, sometimes I hear Jillian not with just my ears.”

“A twin thing?”

“Yes. Thoughts. Emotions. Sometimes even stimulation, when they are strong.”

“Ah...”

“That too, if it’s strong.”

His eyes panned two smiling women, each a mirror of the other: fiercely intense, not with anger, but with compassion. A compassion, he realized, focused upon him.

Claudia, “Jillian was working up to say, though she has remained solo poly for some time, the encounter with you has her presently in a re-think. It is your decision if you want to try us on for size. Our house is open. We have room in our lives, if that is your direction. For the short while, there is no question of it. You will stay with us. The term of your discharge today is on condition that Jillian continues your nursing. But after, when your physical and mental fitness returns, it is up to you. There is no door to open as no fetters bind you.”

“Jillian, I—”

“Shush. Relax. Float with Claudia’s words.”

He looked down at his hands, how tightly they had been gripping at the sheets. “I do not want to go back to my house. Even if I was physically able, I do not want to be alone. It would not be healthy. But I do not want to be a burden for others.”

“No burden. You will carry your weight when you are ready. Jillian is good with her list of chore orders, aren’t you, dear?”

“Somebody’s gotta keep discipline, and it certainly won’t be you lazy civilians.”

“I see how you are looking at my sister, Darren. You have made your decision.”

“And Hans? Will he be OK with me?”

“We don’t have a hierarchy. It was Jillian’s say. When I told you I concurred, that was for your consumption. But I will tell you, Darren, Hans would be happy to have you.”

Jillian nodded and said, “A word of advice. You might want to express boundaries with Hans. You can tell him flat out. He is used to that from us. Otherwise, he tends to push until he feels an ahem...”

“Push back,” Claudia completed. They both laughed.

Darren looked quizzically between them, “O–K?”

“Up to you,” Jillian said, stroking his cheek. Claudia rose to stand beside him. She stroked his other cheek, offering her hand to kiss. Jillian did the same. She then loosened her hair and shook it. It fell long down her back.

“Really?!” Darren asked. “Hair too? In my head, you both are identical. How will I tell you two apart?”

Jillian started, “If we are truly identical—”

“—does it matter?” Claudia completed.

Together, “We are Sis.”

“Your room is back here,” Hans said, leading the way. “Sorry it’s at the other end of the house. But it’s big and private. This section was built as maid’s quarters.”

They entered the room. Hans continued, “Nice, don’t you think? It has its own bathroom”—turned on the light—“with shower. That switch turns on the steam. And, bonus! An access door to the backyard patio.”

Opening the door, “See? Pool. Jacuzzi. That’s the guest bungalow back there. It has a kitchen. Two bedrooms. Fully self-contained. If the urge arises to escape us, or entertain exotic guests.”

Walking back through the house, he said, “Jillian keeps a calendar in the kitchen, if you have bungalow booking needs. The shopping list is on the refrigerator. Do you have any dietary restrictions, or preferences?” he asked, hands on hips, with one thrust out. A sister snuck up behind and gave him a mighty slap on it. He closed his eyes and squeezed his lips tight.

Turning to her, he said as he left, “You tart! Don’t break him.” He leaned back in from the doorway mischievously, “Darren, you do know which one this is, don’t you?”

Darren looked at the woman smirking before him. “Jillian.”

Hans came back into the room looking confused. “Why do you think Sis is Jillian?”

The woman’s smirk grew.

“Because Jillian wears two ear studs in her left ear. Claudia wears two in her right.”

“Oh.”

The woman lifted Darren’s hand to her right ear. It was also pierced; there were two holes.

Hans, “Welcome to the Sis mind games of ambiguity.”

“A girl’s got to have some fun. Don’t you think?”

“Best relax and enjoy the ride. They will, regardless if you like it or not.”

“Come on, Hans. Don’t play with Darren. Tell the truth.”

“I love it. Every minute with these wonderful ladies. Sis takes me there.”

“Well spoken. You are released. Now run along.”

Hans kissed her. He looked at Darren with a sigh, and left.

“You are Jillian, aren’t you?”

“Would you like me to be?”

“Then you aren’t?”

“Maybe I am. Kiss and see.”

So he did. Their tongues danced. His breathing grew sharply, as did hers.

“You are Jillian. I know your kisses. I remember how you responded.”

“Do you now? You remember how I responded upon our first kiss? I’m impressed. You’ve quite a memory, Señor, seeing as how that was our first kiss.”

“Claudia!”

“Would you like me to be? Try that kiss on me again, and we’ll see, won’t we?”

He paused.

“Huh. Your circuits are fried. I can help with that.” She took his hand. “Your room is back here, isn’t it?” she asked, pulling him along. “I forgot to check if there was fresh linen on the bed.”

Entering the room, she went to the windows, opening one. “Stuffy in here.” She turned back to him. “You are worried about Hans, how hard I spanked him. Well, he likes it like that. Less doesn’t work. Just so you know, for future reference,” she said, observing, “should the need arise.”

Crossing the room to him, “With you, I am gentle as a kitten, as your condition dictates.”

“Kittens have been known to scratch and bite.”

“Do they now?”

“Playfully so. Little tigers.”

Lowering him to the bed. “Well, how about that. A handy tip. Have to keep that in mind.”

Darren woke in the bed alone. A gentle breeze was playing with the curtain. The air smelled wet. In the distance, quietly, a pool pump cycled on.

He got up stiffly. Wobbling into the bathroom, the image came to him of Bettina splashing water in his face and adjusting his styled hair. Stretching his back, he thought that

was a fine bed. More images of Bettina followed. The stiffness from the drive had melted away. Perhaps Sis had a hand, or two, in helping. But something deeper lurked, requiring attention. “Masseuse home visit?” he mused.

Entering the kitchen, the three were at the table. Dinner remnants were before them. Each had a glass of wine.

They looked to him in greeting.

Darren said, cheerfully, “I know those glasses. Mexican bubble glass.”

“We wondered how long you were going to sleep. Hans was worried Sis had broken you—and on the first day too.”

“He told me kittens scratch and bite.”

“Did he now. Good to know. Oh wait. Forgot. Did I know that before?”

“Perhaps you were never acquainted?”

“Ah. Good point. Could be. But we did dress appropriately, didn’t we?”

“You were right. Good call.”

“Sis! You really will break him keeping this up.”

“Just having a bit of fun.”

“Lightening the mood.”

“You did make me wear all this clothes at table, as though we had the neighbor priest over for dinner.”

“Mm-hmm. Yummy. Priestie’s a hottie.”

Hans, “Darren, the girls are teasing you about keeping dinner clothing optional. Sometimes on hot evenings”—Sis

laughed, each mouthing ‘hot evenings,’ while Hans looked across them—“That’s what they are on about. All this clothes has got them in a rather silly mood tonight.”

“Something else had got to my mood earlier. But just now, I find myself a bit more... How do you say, Sis?”

“Relaxed?”

“Thank you. Yes, that’s it, exactly. Relaxed.” She pointed: two ear studs, left ear.

Hans, “There is no priest next door.”

“But wouldn’t that be fun if there were?”

“Right, you two. Go for a swim. Cool off.” Hans turned to Darren. “Are you hungry? I’ll fix you a plate.”

Sis got up, leaving a trail of clothes behind on the walk to the pool.

One called back, “A little problem with your suggestion, Hans. How are we to cool off when we know Darren here is all over us with his eyes?”

The other, “He is, isn’t he? And what do we do with naughty thought’d boys?”

“Scratch and bite, like we heard kittens have been known to do?”

Both sisters shouted together, as they jumped into the water, “If we are asked nicely!”

Hans, “They are in quite high spirits—really excited you are here. I am very happy about that. You bring some kind of chemistry to them.”


THE WORD OF JEB

“Catnip?”

Hans doubled over with laughter. Darren joined him, careful of the tender ribs.

CHAPTER III

Lattermath

arren's hair had grown. On their last video chat, Bettina had mentioned the length was in need of attention. An invitation had been offered to visit Haus Ambiguous, as Hans had named the place. She accepted for some weekend to come, but they had yet to set a date; work schedule at the hospital kept her at long hours.

She rushed out the words nervously, "Finally, it's come. Next week, I can arrange to be free. See to that raggy hair of yours. Would that work? I didn't want to come for just a short stay. We need more time than that."

What had only prior been a game of innuendo between them now had the promise of consummation.

He visibly caught his breath. "I would like that very much, Bettina."

She had played through so many possible responses. His simple reaction was unexpected. It brought a wave of relief. The suspense was over.

“Settled. The weather is forecast to be warmer. I thought to moto over on the bike. Take a slight detour through the hills along the way. Two day ride. Would Monday work for you?”

“Monday? Next week?”

“Oh. Is that too soon? Are you busy? Sorry. With my crazy schedule I didn’t know earlier. Colleagues have been on vacation. But now that school is back in, routine is returning.” She took a breath, suddenly nervous, almost pleading, “I didn’t know until just now. I called soon as the possibility arose.”

He had been watching her sparkling eyes, and open lips exposing white teeth, “Bettina, of course it’s OK. I am happy.”

The rumble of a motorcycle grew in the distance. Darren was alone at the house, reclining on the patio. The last of the morning sun played across him. He had fidgeted through breakfast attending to Jillian.

After a thermos was filled with coffee, Jillian took it under an arm and said, “Today will be a local haul. Ron is in town. You remember him, from the ferry? He wants to hang out. If he’s a good boy, I’ll stay over: give you and Bettina space. I

would be back after tomorrow's run. We can catch up then. Suits?"

"Really? You don't need to stay away."

"Hey, Darren. No heroics here. Ron has been trying to get Sis in the sack since we got off the ferry. He's found these tough chick sisters really turn him on. We have been teasing, playing coy—kinda like you and Miss Bettina, but much more graphically stereo. The compersion I'm feeling about her finally paying a visit has got my juices going. You know how I get. Needing to take it out on someone, Ron seemed the likely victim."

"Offered himself willingly for the sacrifice? You are going to give him 100% Sis for the first time?"

"Nah. An all-Sis encounter would probably break him. It will just be me. Start slow, then turn up the volume."

"I am very happy."

"We know you are. Your happiness bounces right back to us. Show Bettina that; she will respond." Coming around the counter, they embraced, pressing hips. The kiss continued deeply.

Jillian leaned back and said, "How can she not, with such a cute guy?"

"Hmm..."

"You taste of strawberries, by the way. Gotta run!"

Darren put the thermos into the tote. Zipping it shut, she took it from him.

“Have fun, gorgeous,” she said, looking at him closely before giving a parting kiss.

He followed her to the door, where she paused and turned back, throwing herself into his arms. Her lips found his ear, “I love you, Darren. We all do.”

With that said, her body, which had been pressing deeply against him, stepped back and crossed the threshold. The door closed softly behind.

The nervousness from Bettina’s impending arrival had melted away: Jillian’s parting gift. She had spoken the exact right words—words he needed to hear.

The coffee was finished. Drip was not his drink. That brew was for the sisters, who called it: the beverage of choice for the truckers they were. While he washed up, the coffee machine cycled off. It was taken apart and cleaned. The rituals of the morning provided continuity of purpose. It was a pleasure to contribute to the family—each did as they could.

For him this morning herbal tea was what he craved. Something flowery. A steaming cupful was brought along to the patio. He reclined on the lounge chair and attended the bird performance. They were noisy today, flying back and forth. A humming bird arrived at the feeder, punctuating the performance. Another came along, alighting by the first. Their stillness was but a moment’s pause to us, forever to them. With a squeak they were back in the air, chasing each other across

the yard. Their piercing little calls faded into the distance, replaced by the barely audible rumble of a motorcycle. As the sound approached, Darren's pulse increased.

The garage door had been left open after Jillian's departure. Darren stood in the shadow, just inside. The motorcycle made its way along the gravel road trailing behind a cloud of dust. It slowed. A hand came off the bar to wave in reply. Rolling into the garage, the rider switched off the motor and pushed the side-stand down. She leaned back. Opening the dark visor revealed a smiling face.

"Darren!"

"Hi, Bettina."

She pulled off the helmet. A rope of red hair was braided tightly down her back. It swung behind like a tail.

They moved to each other automatically. He leaned in to kiss her cheeks, but she would have none of that. She directed his lips to hers before hugging him tightly against stiff leathers.

"Wow!" she said, leaning back. "I'm here! Can you believe it!"

"I am so happy to see you."

"Me too! You weren't kidding about this place being off the beaten path. It is way out here. The GPS had warned me when I left the pavement that beyond this point there be dragons."

"Just past the black stump, turn right—"

“Yes. By Farmer John’s shed, the one that burned down back in ‘86.”

“And yet, you found the way.”

She stood before him, having removed the bags from the bike. “I did! Technology can be such a wonderful thing.”

“Let’s go in.”

“Please. Without air flow, these leathers get hot. I am already sweaty.”

“You good with the bags?”

“Sure. Lead on.”

“I can’t believe you are here!”

He led into the house. “Your room’s ready. Back here.”

“Nice kitchen. Marble counter tops? Spotless too.”

“I clean when I am nervous.”

“Nervous? About me? Aah, that’s so sweet. I don’t bite.”

Darren expected her to follow with, “Unless you ask me nicely,” but the words didn’t come.

“This is it,” he said, panning his hand across the room.

“Sweet. Is this the bathroom? A steam shower? How fun!” She turned back to him. “This is a great room, Darren.”

“I’ll be in Claudia and Hans’. They are away on a long-haul. Not sure when they’ll be back. Maybe next week.”

She looked at him, her head tilted slightly, “I am so totally melting in this suit.” She pulled the zipper long and stepped out of it. A thin white cotton shirt hung from her shoulders; the leggings were painted on. “See? Sweaty.”

His tongue didn't work.

"Are we alone?"

"Yes."

"Good." She smiled at him knowing what her look was doing to his brain, and elsewhere. "What's for lunch? Only had a piece of burned toast this morning at the motel. Got on the road early. I am like totally starving."

He snapped out of it. "Ah, egg salad sandwiches. Fruit salad. I can toast the bread burned, if that's what you like."

"Would you? That is so sweet. Raw bread is so boring."

"I'm on it," he said, leaving the room, unsure if she had been joking.

There were words on her lips, but he had departed too quickly. She didn't utter them to his back. The sight of him wiggling away drew her attention. She said to herself, "OK, Bettina. Way to cover it, saying you were hot rather than explaining the nervous sweat to him. He's nervous too. Calm down. You are gonna say something goofy. Try to relax."

There was a moment's thought before coming to a conclusion. She took the leggings off and pulled on shorts—no underwear in between. The thin shirt was left as it was, braless underneath.

"Feels good being naughty," she said.

Placing the sandwiches on a tray with the drinks, he looked up to see her enter the kitchen. "Va-voom!" he thought.

“Good!” she thought back.

After clearing his throat, he said, “Let’s sit outside. Is that OK?”

“Suits,” she said, stepping out the open door. Crossing to the glider bench, she sat.

He looked at the table, then at her.

She asked, “Is this OK? More comfy floating.”

“That’s fine,” he said, and pulled over a side table.

Taking a sandwich, a pouty frown crossed her face, “Ah, you didn’t burn the bread.”

He was taken aback, “I thought you were kidding! You were, weren’t you?”

After letting him suffer a moment, she turned the frown upside-down, “Of course! Silly. I am a redhead, you know. I’ve a reputation to keep, among other things.” She pointed to the word printed on the shirt below the cleavage, between the mounds of her breasts.

He stared.

She looked down, the smile now becoming a mischievous grin. “Oh, it’s all bunched up. You can’t read it.” She pulled the loose shirt tight against her definition.

“Better?”

When an immediate answer wasn’t returned, the pout was back. “It says, ‘Brat.’ You aren’t gonna have a heart attack, are you? Just having a little fun.”

Continuing to eye him, she took a sip of the drink. “Look at you. Can’t talk, but the communication is clear: you are enjoying this too.”

She sat back. “OK, alright, alright. So I am a little excited. Can you blame me? I will tone it down. Let’s finish our lunch. I did tell you I was starving, right?”

“Yes. You did.”

“He speaks. Great! Reward!” She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss before taking a bite of sandwich. Over the mouthful she said, “Let me tell you a story.”

“I like stories. Will this be a good one?”

“Leads us to here.”

“Then it is a good one. Please, carry on.”

“I had been at Eastlands Hospital only a short while before Dr. Ramos and Nurse Crawford started. Dr. Joel and Nurse Judy, as you know them. They had been at University Hospital before then. He’s well known in the brain field. A bit famous actually, academia-wise. Eastlands had heard the rumor he had wanted to get out into the real world. They made an offer and snatched him up quick. The esteem was flattering, but it didn’t turn Joel’s head. Judy keeps him honest.”

“They are really good together, like they complete each other.”

“Yes. That’s a nice way to put their relationship. I liked them immediately. They became very important in my life. Especially through all the turmoil when the Catholic Church took over Eastlands Hospital. They renamed it Saint Louisa. The reformation was really hard, on me in particular. I wouldn’t have made it through emotionally were it not for Joel and Judy, and my guys.”

“He and Judy have been by here, you know?”

“Yes.”

“‘Checking up on me. See how I am making out,’ he had said. They stayed in the guest house.”

“Ah—huh.”

“Their first night we were up late, sitting here like this by the pool—chit-chatting like teenagers. There was a lot of energy. But eventually I got tired and excused myself for bed. The sound of them going on drifted in through the open window while I drifted off to dreamland, punctuated occasionally by Hans’ laughter.

“The next morning Joel confided that they had accepted positions back with University. Hans insisted they stay with us as long as they needed, while the relocation was being settled.”

“Amazing coincidence, huh?”

“Life can be like that: happens all the time around us, if we have open eyes and hearts.”

“Well spoken. I’d like to carry on with my story, if I may.”

“Oh yes, please. Sorry.”

She picked up his hand and laced their fingers together. Observing this new apparatus, she said, “But first, a digression. Did Joel explain why they were leaving St. Louisa?”

“Something about wanting to refocus on research.”

“Yeah. Something like that. But really, he was bored with having to continuously navigate the profit and loss politics between the hospital and the insurance board who dictated treatment parameters.”

“Death panels run by insurance suits.”

“Exactly. Health care is a for-profit business, thus the church’s interest.”

“When you said, ‘reformation,’ what did you mean?”

“When the hospital’s name was changed, it wasn’t just a rebranding. They brought in their edict on what care meant.”

“Like women’s care?”

“For instance. Any care that was at odds with church doctrine was heresy—forbidden.”

“And the community?”

“Could go to another hospital.”

“Was there another hospital in the area?”

“No. Only a doc-in-a-box, out-patient surgery.”

“Nasty business against patients.”

“Not just patients, but staff too.”

“Wasn’t there protest?”

“Of course.”

“But it didn’t help?”

“The purple suits had it all worked out before. They knew exactly how to manipulate the situation to neuter dissent.”

“Couldn’t you join together to complain to the state, or something?”

“We did. The union got the state involved. They came in strong, offering protection. That there would be an investigation.”

“What came of that?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?! Really?”

“It was all a show. The government representatives were stooges, actors. They showed up already paid off. My colleagues that were the leaders, or were involved in the protest, were fired. Every single one of them. The entire gynecology group was sacked. Can you imagine?”

“Horrible.”

“One, a woman who was the chief nurse of the cardiovascular department, didn’t accept the termination. She fought it.”

“Good for her.”

“No. Not really. The purple frock show continued to turn the crank. In the end, she was blacklisted. Ruined her. She works now as a cocktail waitress at a silly dance club.”

“That is terrible. But can’t she move somewhere else?”

“Eastlands is where she is from—lived there her whole life. All her family is there. Even if she could leave, try a start

somewhere else, the hospital saw to that. They got her license revoked with prejudice. Tainted credentials means her medical career is over.”

“Argh. Poor woman.”

“Linda.”

“Is that her name?”

“Yes. She is very nice. A sister in the redhead tribe. We’ve stayed in touch; we take coffee together sometimes. I’ve been out with her, met her family, and been to the bar where she now works—though I’m not much for the social thing. I didn’t care for the bar: the place was such a pick-up joint.”

“Aahh.”

“I did like talking to her family. They were really nice, but probably found me dull.”

“Dull? You? I can’t believe that.”

“I was different then.”

“I can’t imagine you as introverted. It takes no imagination to know what a tease you are, flashing your goods.”

“You’re sweet. I’m not really flirty. The Brat, that’s for you, Darren. You perceive the world around you. I enjoy your attention.”

“It’s on you a lot.”

“Yeah,” she said, holding the smile. “I know what that does for you, and it’s right back at me. We got a feedback loop thing going on. It’s fun.”

He slid over against her and rested his head on her shoulder. He said quietly, "It is."

"A last thing about Linda and her family. They are poly."

"OK. How did you feel when she told you that?"

"I was confused. It was still Eastlands Hospital then. We had finished our shift together and were chatting in the parking lot. I get really wired after work. She was hungry and wanted to keep our talk going too. The sun was going down. There's a nice restaurant with a patio on a cliff above the river that runs through town. We went there. I don't think before that night we had talked much personal. She asked me if I knew what polyamory was. I said I hadn't realized she was a Mormon. After a laugh, she explained the basics, and then sat back. She's a good listener. That's good, as the words, the questions, kept bubbling out of me. The short of it was, for her, being poly was having multiple intimate loves simultaneously in her life."

"Yeah, that's essentially it."

Her hand found his cheek. "I told her I understood. That there were three men in my life. They were everything to me: Manny, Moe, and Jack."

"Oh-ho! You are doing it with The Pep Boys?"

She nudged him playfully off her shoulder, "Oh-ho yourself, Darren. The Boys are my horses. Between work and them, I haven't had the time for any others."

"OK. Peace. I was just teasing you back, Miss Cleavage."

“I know you didn’t put your head on my shoulder just because you were sleepy.”

“Well...”

“Come on. Put it back. I like your head here.”

“How is it you came to have horses named for an auto parts store?”

“They aren’t actually. Just another one of those random things. Manny came into my life when I was in my preteens. My best friend, Sabé, introduced us. She had invited me over for the weekend. They kept horses on a big pasture at her house. We were both having a hard time of it. Our parents didn’t understand. It wasn’t school. Our grades were OK—that was all parents seemed to care about. It was our bodies that were difficult, changing. Sabé and I were going through that together. Getting curves where before there were none. Boys. They can be so stupid. And girls, they can be worse. So mean. She and I would run away and hide from the world. That meant hanging out at the barn, being with her horses.”

“I like horses.”

“That’s nice,” she said, squeezing at his fingers between hers. “Still OK? Not fallen asleep?”

“My fingers? No. I like the contact. Keep going with the story.”

“Before I had met Sabé, the thought of horses, these huge animals, had intimidated me. But her horses were nice. I liked them from when we were first introduced. I wasn’t scared at

all. Being near them felt natural. Sabé showed me how to care for them—feeding and brushing. They responded and were gentle, calm. But oh man! The first time they took off across the pasture running, playing with each other, I saw how fast and agile they were. Sabé said they were happy and were showing off for me.

“Right away I learned to ride. Sabé taught me. She said I was, ‘A natural.’ That was it. Hooked me deeply. I was over frequently after that. Sabé’s parents would have me for dinners and sleep overs. Like, I became their adopted daughter. I think they were glad to have me there. Their only child was not a dour mooney teenager when I was around.”

“Lovely friend.”

“My best girlfriend.”

“Are you still in touch?”

“Yes. Perhaps you will meet her.”

“I would enjoy learning to ride. Have always wanted to, but there was never the time, or opportunity.”

“Perhaps that can be arranged. My first horse was arranged by Sabé.”

“Manny?”

“Yes. He had a few years on him, but he had a disposition excellent for the eager novice I was. He took care of me as I took care him, like Sabé showed me. We did trail riding. And when my seat was better—”

“Your seat?”

“My balance and confidence. Anticipating Manny, and he anticipating me.”

“Riding sounds complicated. I thought you just sit there and the horse goes clip, clop.”

“Ah, no. A bit more to it than that. Later, when we were in our teens, Sabé invited me to attend a competition she was in. It was a state level event, held in the north. She and her parents would be gone for a week. As it was summer break, the trip was OK with my parents. They were happy to have a holiday from their dour teenager. I was so happy to be invited—proud, actually of my friend, Sabé: horsewoman athlete. I had no idea what was going on.”

“What was the competition?”

“Three Day Eventing.”

“And that is?”

“Eventing is like an equestrian triathlon, over three days. Dressage, cross-country, and show jumping. Totally grueling. She had involved me in her training. We really got into cross-country. Unfortunately, the coursework proved to be too much for Manny. He wanted to keep up, but afterwards was so sore for it. Age had brought arthritis to his legs. We just stayed with trail riding for him after that. Then, Moe came into my life. He is a big and bold thoroughbred. We trained side by side with Sabé, but for when I did set-ups for her.”

“Roadie?”

“Something like that.”

“How was the competition?”

“Oh—my—god! Amazing! Horses everywhere. I was so high on the energy. That was it. Totally hooked, in love with horses —thoroughbreds in particular.”

“And Sabé?”

“Totally in love with her too.”

“Oh. No, I meant, how did she do?”

“She did excellent. Tops for the cross-country and jumping. Her horse had a fifth leg when some jumps got a bit sticky. The dressage, though. That caught her out. We knew that discipline was going to be weak for them. ‘Prissy dance contest,’ she called it. Operating a robo-horsie was not their thing. She’s an action girl, so was her horse. I learned from her that I was one too.”

“Dressage? I’ve no idea what you are talking about.”

She laughed. He sat up. Turning on the bench to face each other, a curious look crossed her face.

“What?” he asked.

After a moment, she composed herself. “You don’t get it, do you? Sabé was my girlfriend.”

“You said that, girl friend.”

“No, girlfriend, as in lover. We were intimate.”

“Oh. You are right. I didn’t get that. Guys are dense. This one in particular.”

“In more ways than one. Come here. Put your head back. I want to tell you another story, and then I’ll want a shower—wash off this sticky road grime sweat.”

He slid back into place. “I’m ready.”

“You were admitted at St. Louisa with great fanfare. The doctors met the helicopter on the roof, bringing you in. The administrators lurked behind, rubbing their greedy little hands together. They salivated at the fame you would bring their hospital: the husband of Karissa Dechinta. Oh, but they were excited. On the way in, your status had been forwarded to Dr. Ramos. All was at the ready.”

“Kara never found peace from the attention.”

“Huh? What do you mean? The newspaper said she gave of herself selflessly.”

“It was just her job, she had said. No heroics. Her co-worker. He was the one who went into the chamber. He was the one who sacrificed himself.”

“But she remained at the controls and was poisoned for it. What happened to the co-worker?”

“He was already a walking dead man before entering the chamber. He knew it, as did she.”

“How?”

“Their exposure badges. His was at lethal. Hers was less. It was the logical choice, he insisted. She watched his progress on the monitor. He fell several times, but each time got back

up. The valve lever was there before him. Feeling the way along the wall, he crossed straight to it. The override was pulled to open. And then he fell, crumpled into a fetal position. He did not get up. His face, Kara said, was burned black. That was it. He did not move again. She went back to the controls and completed the procedure, each step calmly, and then the next. After the critical shutdown initiated, she left. Made her way along the hallway and into the gallery. The sled was there, waiting to take her out. She climbed in. Sealed the hatch and was pressed heavily into the seat from the sharp acceleration. The g-force blacked her out. She was next conscious at the facility hospital. Zuni and I were there, sitting with her.”

“I didn’t know anything of this story.”

“It was suppressed.”

“The co-worker?”

“Jeb. His body remained in the chamber. A robot was sent in. His form fell apart into ashes when they tried to retrieve it. There was nothing more that could be done. His remains were entombed within the chamber when it was encased. Sealed within the obscurity of forever.”

There was silence between them.

Darren’s mind was still. Bettina’s was not, but words would not come.

After a while, he broke the silence. “It is nice out here. I enjoy sharing this time with you. Birds know not our trivial worries.”

“The hummingbirds are amazing. They love that butterfly bush.”

“As do the butterflies.”

“Yes.” She drew in a deep breath and let it out. A second was drawn, and then she said, “I am sorry about where we went just now. This was not the conversation I wanted.”

“Don’t apologize, Bettina. That was all on me. I needed to tell someone. I’m glad it was you.”

“I appreciate your trust.”

He sobbed softly, pulling into her.

She took a breath and blurted out, “Let me tell you something silly OK? Change of mood. Something about this silly girl.”

Mopping at his face, “I would like to hear your words.”

“It’s about the story of Mr. Woody. Have you heard it?”

“Ah, no.”

“Judy didn’t mention?”

“’fraid not.”

“Good! This will be new to you. Something fun.”

“You have my attention.”

“As you will learn how you first got mine. You really did. Still do. This attention grabbing originally came about, so to speak, while you were in a coma. I was the physiotherapist for the ward. Protocol for patients in your state is to assist in keeping joints and muscles flexible. This was Dr. Ramos’,

Joel's, philosophy of care: we give our patients attention as they require.

"Generally it's a routine of quiet on the floor. We like to make a bit of humor to lighten the dreary mood. Some fun backstories are invented. With the ones that strike us as clever, perhaps we elaborate a bit more. Judy explained when you were brought in who you were."

"What did you think of me?"

"Dutiful of my role. Your condition was stable. A nice man. Pleasant looking. Having a lovely sleep. That's what was going through my head when we were first getting acquainted. Dr. Ramos had instructed the course I was to follow. Judy helped me with the initial manipulations; with the latter part, I didn't require her. I'm a pretty fit chick."

"I've noticed. Check out these arms and shoulders. Totally buff."

"Aww, shucks, mister. 'Tweren't nothin'," she said, and playfully punched him on the arm. "I was cooling down, finishing with your feet. Joel thinks the feet talk directly to the deepest part of the brain. I agree. You were the last patient left on the shift for me. As it was our first session, I was happy to spend extra time getting to know you, so to speak."

"I feel you are leading this story, building up for something?"

"Yes. I had become aware you had a little performance going on."

“I did? In a coma?”

“Ah–huh. I hadn’t noticed at first, until you made a small groan. Could hardly hear it over the whirling noise of the equipment in the room. I was sitting below, working a foot. You were prone before me. Hearing you groan again, I lifted my head up to see. You had a towel across your waist, but were otherwise nude. And there it was.”

“What was?”

“Your cock, of course. It was hugely erect and had pushed itself out from under the towel.”

She looked at Darren, who didn’t say anything.

“So there I was. Professional medical staff, staring at this erection. It was moving too, quivering. I was stunned, or so I thought. I told myself: be relaxed, stay composed. But what happened next...”

“What?”

“The quivering increased. Your whole body stiffened, and you ejaculated.”

“Oh. I take it that was not normal for patients in my state?”

“Ah, no. There was quite a bit of volume too.”

“I can be productive.”

She wrinkled her brow, and said, “Yeah. The third shock followed immediately. Just after you finished off your selfie, in walks Judy. She saw the prodigious fluids spattered across your chest. And then she looked at me standing at your feet, my face aghast.”

“Hah! What did she do?”

“She was instantly sympathetic. Closing the door behind her, she said, mischievously, ‘Bettina, I see you have met Mr. Woody.’

“No idea what I said—certainly nothing coherent. Without a pause, she was all business. A warm towel cleaned you up, while I continued to mumble, trying to explain my terror. If this event was found out, I’d lose my job, or worse.

“The priest administrators running the hospital were severe prudish. Remember I told you about Linda? The real reason she was treated so harshly wasn’t just because of her protest—they had weathered more effective dissent. It was that they disapproved of her multiple partner lifestyle.”

“Judy shushed me to calm down. ‘Not to worry,’ she said, ‘you are in the club now.’

“After you were cleaned up, she explained: In the short time since your arrival, this was not the first episode. Indeed, you had Joel rather intrigued. There had been some investigation into your ability. It was thought, by remaining in a lucid dreaming state, your mind experienced a world of its own crafting. The reality of interacting with it could stimulate nocturnal emissions.”

“Huh. Welcome to the show that never ends. We’re so glad you could attend. Come inside, come inside. Club Darren.”

“So to speak. On the way home I picked up Chinese. Opened a bottle of wine that had been in the refrigerator for

way too long. I was still so out of it that night. The next days were off. Anyway, I needed the down time. Reclined on the couch and vegged. Ate out of the take-away box with chopsticks. Drank wine from a big glass. Watched a movie. A romantic French comedy, *Les deux Heureux* (Two are Happy).”

“You speak French?”

“I do. Isn’t that cool? Still leave the subtitles on for the difficult dialect, but for the most part I don’t need them.”

“What was the film about?”

“The classic setup. Two people, a man and a woman, who don’t know each other. Each booked a suite at a spa hotel in the French Alps. They had been given a gift certificate for the booking as birthday gifts. The hotel was way up in the mountains. The drive up with the view was stunning. They arrived at the same time. The woman had followed the man—stuck behind him—on the curvy road; she complained all the way about his slow driving. He complained about the crazy person tailgating. When they turned into the hotel parking, he didn’t recognize that she pulled in as well. The lot was really full causing them to park in different sections. It took a while to get the luggage out of the car. But finally, he made his way up, just in time to hold the door for the woman entering the hotel: she had finally passed him. He did not recognize her as the tailgating driver. When they came to the front desk, the clerk talked to them as though they were together. They

paused, actually seeing each other for the first time. Both tried to talk at the same moment. One excused for the other to talk; this went round several times. The clerk's attention went back and forth like a tennis match chair umpire. Finally, finishing the other's sentence, each admitted nervously that they were not together. A second clerk came over to service the man. Straining to overhear the other's conversation, they learned neither was with a partner. The first clerk, an attractive woman who was the chief, motioned for the man to come over. She said there was a problem: the rooms they had booked were not available. A water pipe had burst the night before. The whole floor was closed. Sorry. The woman was verbally upset. The man got quietly depressed. Continuing in a calm voice, the chief said she understood that they both had such a long drive to the hotel. And rather than turn them away, there was another possibility, if it was agreeable. Because of a cancellation, a room had become available. She had just gotten off the phone with the Sheikh that had booked it. He had apologized for the late notice and had asked that they please bill him for the full stay and all the arranged amenities. This was a unique opportunity. To overcome any inconvenience, she would be happy to put them in that suite, if they wouldn't mind sharing. It had two bedrooms, by the way."

"I think I might have seen that one. There was some embarrassing accidental nudity concerning the bathroom. The woman walked in while the guy was taking a shower. He had

shampoo in his eyes and didn't see her. She turned to leave and walked into the back of the closed door."

"Yes! Then later the woman accidentally exposes herself in the kitchen while making an espresso—that silk robe of hers just kept coming untied.

"It was hilarious when they later went to the spa together. It was the first time either of them had been there. They walked out onto the terrace in white terrycloth robes—"

"Wearing bathing suits underneath."

"Exactly. All the other guests were nude. Laying in the sun. Swimming. Strolling around."

"So of course, they had to disrobe as well."

"Of course. The conversation after was a scream: unintentional innuendo, and such. Trying not to stare, but embarrassingly being caught doing just that. The man having to cross his legs rather severely, and hide himself with a drink tray he took from a waiter. I was rolling on the floor from laughing so hard,"

"The wet mark on the woman's towel where she had been sitting."

"Oh yeah! I forgot that. She had actually spilled a drink on it earlier."

"But it worked out for them in the end, didn't it? The panorama view through the window. The sunrise on the mountain peaks..."

"The couple cuddled in bed together."

“Beautiful.”

“And when they got back to the city, wasn’t that a big surprise waiting for them!”

Bettina, “I really enjoyed that movie. Rolling on the floor laughing was exactly what I needed. The wine had gotten me a little drunk, but not enough. So I opened a second bottle. It wasn’t that late, and I felt like being a night owl. I was back on the couch blanking out to scenes from the movie; unbeknownst, the next show had begun. The opening credits were almost through when I recognized. It was a series episode. Finding Comfort. You know it?”

“Finding Comfort? Sure! That’s from a few years back. Kara was totally into the series. She got Zuni and I hooked as well.”

Bettina took a breath, thinking quick to avoid this turn back to Kara. “Could I have more tea? I am getting a bit parched from all my yammering on.”

“Well, certainly, Miss Scarlett. Won’t be but a minute.” He stood to gather up the plates and glasses.

“Thank you most kindly, sir,” she said, and pushed off, rocking the glider bench. She began to hum. The sound was distracting; it followed him inside the house.

Usually by this time of the day Darren would be feeling a bit tired, and would want to lay down for a while. This energy cycle had limited tagging along with Jillian in the truck. She

had thought to get him involved in the profession, and had started him as a trucker-in-training. But the tiredness would come on, and then it was back to the navigator seat for him—staring out the window until he would conk off. She would wake him, and he would crawl back to the sleeper compartment.

Today however, he was feeling energetic, wide awake.

In the meanwhile, Bettina had become hypnotized by the activity around the butterfly bush. Two hummingbirds were working the flowers edging ever closer to each other.

Coming out through the slider door, a huge smile was across Darren's face; a glass was in each hand.

She turned as he sat. "There you are. I've missed you!" She leaned forward and kissed him. This went on for a while until they each leaned back for air.

"Firsties!" she said.

"Hmm..." came the response, his head had nestled atop her shoulder.

"Passion kiss," she explained. "I like being here with you."

"Your visit was overdue."

"I know, wasn't it? I am here now!"

"Yes!"

"Hey so, I am feeling a bit sore and sticky from sweating in the leathers. I'd like to"—nudging shoulders—"shower. Would you join me?"

THE WORD OF JEB

Raising his head to find her lips in answer, “Yes.”

She stood, and pulled him up. “Come on then. Show me how those fancy fixtures operate. I want steam!”

“You can have that.”

The glasses of tea were left abandoned on the side table. The ice occasionally clinked as it melted in the ambient heat of the day. Some giggling and oohing came into the yard through the open bedroom window, mixing with the hum of the steam generator. The water ran on and on, until it didn’t.

Bettina lifted up on an elbow. She had been playing thoughtlessly with a lock of Darren’s hair, twirling it around a finger. “Should cut this.”

“So you said.”

“Meant it! I had every intention of doing so. Gave you a nice shampoo scalp massage, didn’t I?”

“You certainly did. And I gave one back in return.”

“Yes. But then you got distracted.”

“I believe it was you that took us there.”

“Hmm... Yes. Understandable, don’t you think?”

“The teasing you used to give me at the hospital, leaning over; your smock would fall open strategically.”

“You liked that?”

“I looked forward to time with you very much.”

“I’m glad. I did too. You were my special guy in the ward.”

“The entertaining talent of Mr. Woody?”

“Yeah, OK. I’ll admit it. Had me thinking, Guy-wise. It had just been my equines for a long time. Work, training, horse-keeping, repeat. Time goes by.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Mr. Woody, in my imagination. Yeah, we had fun. But it was the guy attached that pushed me over. I organized it so we would have more session time.”

“Had me wondering how you got through the day if you spent as much time with the others as you spent with me—”

“My special guy. As for the others, they were taken care of. Judy knew what was going on. She helped facilitate the time.”

“Dr. Ramos?”

“Joel was fascinated objectively by what was going on in your brain. I was as well, by the way, but from a more subjective perspective.”

“Oh?”

“More secret telling time.”

Sitting up, he said, “Do tell, do!”

She moved against him, wiggling to embrace his chest. “There was this birthday gift, from a friend.”

“Sabé?”

“Yes!” she said, squeezing him. “It was a prank gift, really. My face turned bright red when I opened it. She had her fun teasing me. Though she had suggestions, I was shy. They were left unexplored. The gift ended up in the back of a drawer.

“At our next meetup, she asked all innocent like, ‘How’s it going?’”

“You lost me there.”

“It was a sex toy, OK? A big rabbit vibrator.”

“Ah...”

“Yes, ‘ah.’ Because of my guyleless-ness—”

“Right. Got it.”

“That was just the setup. Now begins the secret part. Imagine: Me at home. It’s late. Finding Comfort series comes on. Gets a girl ta thinkin’—”

“Mr. Woody?”

“—about a nice guy.”

“The drawer where Sabé’s thoughtful gift resided?”

“Back of the underwear drawer.”

“Naturally. However, I am confused. You wear underwear?”

She squeezed.

“Ouch! No, wait. You can keep your hand there.”

“You like that?”

“Yeah.”

“OK. Like I was saying. Found the big ol’ rabbit. Had a hell of a time finding batteries though. Had to scavenge them from a flashlight.”

“I see.”

“The flashlight was in the car.”

“Right. Good place for a flashlight.”

“The car was parked in the driveway.”

“A–huh.”

“I hadn’t been wearing any clothes.”

“So?”

“I’m a bit body shy.”

“That, I don’t believe. You?!”

“Well, I was. That is why the tease show for you was so...”

“Stimulating?”

“Yes. Doing exhibitionist things was not in my comfort zone.”

“Your blush gave you away. Knew you were into it.”

“Judy knew too. She thought those little teases were harmless, and were helping to draw me out of my shell. That’s why she helped: to encourage me. As for you, it was clear to us both that you were enjoying the show.”

“There was, after all, a lot to enjoy.”

More movement.

“Ahmm,” he tried to carry on, “So you went out nude to your car for batteries for your vibrator?”

“No! Of course not, silly. I put on a nightie first.”

“That’s good. Was it silk? Heard those can be tricky to tie-up reliably.”

She ignored him, but carried on, “I didn’t realize until after that the material didn’t cover my bottom-side. There was a wee bit of a draft when I bent over to reach into the trunk.”

“Ha–ha!”

“It gets better. After I found the flashlight and closed the trunk lid, I saw there was this old neighbor guy out walking his dog.”

Darren didn’t say anything for his part in the banter.

Realizing she had gotten involved in the story telling and hadn’t been paying attention to the increased attention she had been providing him, she asked, “You still OK? Want me to go on with the story?”

“Ah, yeah. Walk and chew bubblegum.”

“Right. I can manage both for you.

“So the neighbor just kept walking by, casually greeting me a good evening.”

“And you?”

“After I picked my jaw up from the ground, I replied with a good evening to him. Then I went back inside the house.”

“Distracted?”

“At first, yes. But the episode was on pause at a rather explicit scene—”

“And the batteries were found. So?”

“Unpaused! Learned more about myself that night. More than just grooming tips to pick up from the series.”

“I liked your story, but would further detail be forthcoming concerning the big ending?”

“Yeah. I know you would like to hear about those details. I can count your pulse. Wanna give mine a try? Hum me a tune, will ya, love?”

CHAPTER IV

Aftermath

In dreams truth can be found

Claudia, “You sure Bettina can’t come with us?”
Darren, “Not until next week.”

“Does she know what this trip means? How important the closure is to you? It is the year anniversary since the accident.”

“I told her the trials competition was more important. She has been working for so long to reach the state level. It is her dream. Now, everything has come together. If she does well, then it is the nationals next.”

“Still...”

“She would give it up if I asked, but I couldn’t do that. It would always remain between us: what could have been?”

“Next week then?”

“Yes. Claudia, I am totally fine with that. Can you be as well, please? There will be the three of you there with me,” he

said, holding her tight. Each felt the other's heart beat, and the singing of enveloped flesh. Desire deepened between them.

Darren whispered, "What more could I ask?"

Words were no longer necessary as the moment unfolded. Each spiraled, chasing the other, joined at the movement's center. A singleness of pulses in alignment built upon breath. Movement blurred. At exhaustion, entered the annihilation of self. The result commingling was overwhelming.

They unwrapped themselves and fell back sweating against the pillows.

Claudia, "Jillian is back tomorrow. We will travel together. After Hans has dropped his load off at the ferry port, he will join us there."

"I am glad for our family. You bring me peace."

"The rest of today until tomorrow morning is our time—me and you."

He brushed at the wetness upon her forehead, pushing back at the hair. "Dear Claudia."

"You know us now, Jillian and I."

"Sis knows me."

"That is true. We enjoy your peacefulness. There are talents of note, as well. Thought I might mention that, just so there is no misunderstanding."

"Look at the state of us and the state of our bed. We are far from misunderstanding each other."

“Come here. Tell me more about that.”

The competition went well. Jack grumbled, but made it through the dressage. In all three disciplines they scored excellent. The Nationals would be offered. Her reply had been practiced casual: that she would think about it. The organizers would learn of her answer in due time. But first, there was a reunion to attend. That was the priority.

Sabé drove them back to the barn. An ecstatic Jack was reestablished with his horse buddies. They galloped across the pasture playing and gossiping about his adventure. Joel and Judy had been by, assuring they would remain dutiful horse sitters; all would be taken care of in her absence. The chore calendar and veterinary number was tacked to the inside of the feed room door. The farrier would be by tomorrow.

Sabé scolded, “Not to fret. Off with you now. Darren and crew are waiting.”

The drive went quick. The ferry crossing had been spent in her cabin, recouping sleep mostly; there was a lot to catch up on. Muscles needed to mend. A few bruises were in want to fade. Offloading at the port, the remainder of the drive to the cape was on fast-forward, blurring by until the last curve brought the beach house into view. Parking the car in the driveway and grabbing her bag, she ran up the stairs.

They were at the railing, three of them. In a lounge chair, passed out in the sun and turning lobster red, was Hans.

“Darren! Sis! Hans! I placed! I am in!!”

She danced over, joining with them in a group hug.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Hans said, feebly. “Just detoxing.”

“He was up late last night,” Jillian explained. “Claudia’s twins were restless.”

Bettina looked at Claudia, who said, “Why is it always my twins?”

“Because mine are quiet, perfect little angels.”

All of them, but for Jillian, laughed and said together, “Not!”

Jillian echoed, “OK, OK,” and laughed, “Not!”

Claudia, “But what about you, our dear Bettina? Did you decide?”

“I did!”

Darren and Hans looked at each other.

Bettina, “Me too!”

Hans said, pretending to grumble, “This is turning into a real commune.”

Jillian, “The compound expands. Our free woman has decided to commit to the family!”

Claudia, “Lets get started on our victorious athlete’s celebration dinner and drinks. Hans, you’ve got BBQ duty.”

Jillian, “Let’s leave Bettina and Darren alone for a little discussion time.”

Claudia, “Not little. I feel the compersion flowing already.”

Jillian, “Oh, I know. I know.”

Hans, “Not too long, you two. Sis will be getting herself all wound up. I will be in need of help later.”

“No way, Hans. Bettina just arrived. Darren will be occupied. You are ours solo tonight, Señor,” they said, pulling at the man playing helpless, dragging him inside.

Darren said after them, “Let’s let her get unpacked first, eh?”

Bettina stepped out of her clothes and joined Darren, similarly attired, at the railing. “What were you looking at out there when I arrived?”

He moved to embrace her from behind, leaning to speak into her ear, “Our resident surfer girls”—pointing at a wave—“See them? The storm swell is from the south; it breaks perfect here.”

“I do!” She waved, before shouting “Hi Zuni! Hi Kara!”

They waved back before turning to paddle out.

She returned her attention to Darren, holding at his encircling arms. “Remember our first? Steamy in your shower.”

“Before the steam generator had warmed up, we were already mighty hot.”

“The shower scene.”

“Yeah. I’ve replayed us many times in my head when you weren’t around.”

“Have you? Thinking about me often?” she asked, wiggling herself.

“Yes, miss.”

“And now that you have me here, do you want to have me?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“I do. Quite obvious you are, sir. I am ovulating, by the way.”

“I know. You have said as much.”

“That’s OK for you? You do have a say in this as well, you know.”

“Yes, as we discussed. The timing is right; it was clear when you brought the possibility up. I haven’t changed my mind.”

“This is a beautiful location.”

“Are you going to keep talking? Just wanted to know.”

They remained spooned, standing by the railing. A breeze brought cooling relief. The surf connected with their senses.

Bettina said, putting sounds into the moment, “Zuni and Kara are coming in. We have a lot to talk about. Do they know?”

“Some hints have been dropped.”

“Need a towel, lover. I am leaking.”

“I’ll fetch one.”

By the railing near the house was something she hadn't noticed earlier: binoculars, mounted on a tripod.

"That's curious."

Disengaging from Darren's embrace, she went over to it.

The metal housing was inviting. She reached out a hand. "It is really cold. Brass eye cups. This is an antique."

Reminded of Darren, she turned but did not notice the flatness of his face.

"Were you watching the girls earlier—peeping on them, Tom? Something kinky going on, voyeurism of neoprene with the knowledge of nothing on underneath?"

Darren was resigned. He remained silent.

"Think of the fun unzipping them to rediscover what is packaged underneath? Maybe I might share the thrill with you."

The binoculars were before her. As she bent forward, he said, "Don't Bettina, you shouldn't."

"But why not?"

She put her eyes to the lenses. Distortion. It took a moment for the scene to focus. Comprehension took longer. The image was not of surf, or further into the ocean gulf. It was a room. A hospital room. There was a woman on a bed. Her head was within the scaffolding of a brace. Most of her face was hidden behind a ventilator mask. From the forehead and redhead eyebrows it was clear who this person was. The monitor demanded attention. It was indicating an emergency, calling in

a critical tone. People rushed into view. The bedding sheet was stripped back. The woman had been nude underneath. There were nasty purple and yellow bruises across her chest leading into the shoulder.

Two people were having a discussion, straining to keep it quiet between them.

“But Dr. Ramos, there is a signed order to not resuscitate.”

“You know how this goes, Nurse Crawford. It is hospital policy to ignore the order as non-binding. The administrators made it clear that were we to follow the order, then we would be contributing to the patient’s suicide. Their Lord and Savior, Jesus, forbids suicide as an act of blasphemy, a mortal sin. We are ordered to do all we can to keep the patient alive, be the action heroic or otherwise.”

“That is not right. She will never recover from the injuries.”

“But still, as her brain remains in an active state of lucid dreaming, she is alive.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Her body is in distress. It knows. We won’t hurry the inevitable, but we won’t prolong it. That would be cruel. We will keep her comfortable.”

“I am glad to hear you say that.”

“You have become personally attached to Bettina, haven’t you, Judy?”

“As have you, Joel. The tragedy of her accident at the national event was televised. The sight of the horse stumbling after that huge jump, I’ve replayed it countless times in my head.”

“His knee was injured. He knew, but yet, completed the course. For her.”

“I had no idea horses could have such a strong bond. Her Jack gave everything.”

“The horse’s name was Jack? You have followed her story.”

“I have. The story of how she made it to the nationals, her determination, is inspirational.”

“I agree, Judy. If the administrators even bother to conduct a review, let them. I am quite done with the priest mob of St. Louisa. They have lost the plot on compassion, trading instead for usury.”

“Then you will accept the position at the University?”

“Yes. It would be a mistake to remain here any longer. Will you come with me?”

“You know that I will, Joel.”

“Oh!” he said, attending to a monitor. “This is it. Her body has shut down. Brain signals are fading.”

He returned to stand beside the bed and touched at the back of Bettina’s hand. “Good night, sweet lady. Go to your sleep peacefully.”

Bettina pulled back from the binoculars to look for Darren. The light was dim, though the sky hadn't become foggy. It was the sun, its energy was diminishing.

"Darren! I don't want you to go as well!"

"Dear Bettina. We are you, having a conversation with yourself."

"No! Please!" She reached out the short distance to him.

He extended his arms, awaiting her.

As she leaned into his embrace, the light faded to black. The surf no longer drummed the beach. She fell forward, evaporating into the nothingness of oblivion.

Light returned. It was harsh fluorescence. The location could have been an underground metro station, as the walls were of curved tiles, stained from humid dripping grit. A middle-aged man sat rigidly on a backless bench. He wore a black jacket. In fact, all of his clothes were black. Thick rectangular framed glasses—also black—pinched tightly upon his pale face. Beside him on the bench, nearly half his seated height, was a child's toy robot. It possessed no legs, but a track belt hinted at mobility. There were claws for hands and a helmet for a head. Out of the visor, two red lights pierced from the black. A hideous caricature of a smile was drawn upon the helmet.

THE WORD OF JEB

The man did not acknowledge Bettina. Indeed, the robot had not either. Its head was oriented in her direction purely by coincidence.

As she spoke, he turned. Cold eyes sought her out, “Is that it, Jeb?”

A confused look was his response.

She continued. “Is that all? I would have thought you capable of more.”

He looked to the robot.

“Perhaps your toy has proved too much of a distraction. Must it be remediated?”

The light faded to black before he could ready himself to speak.

THE END.

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ABOUT JEFF HAYES

Jeff Hayes has been working for many years as a Software Engineering Consultant- not to be confused with his evil-twin, of no relation. Now located in Switzerland as an employee with a financial firm, he has found several hours free in his daily commute. Daydreaming out the carriage window on the green Swiss countryside, the idea came to him to consider the train commute as renting a public space office. Balancing the distraction of the fellow passengers with life within office space cube walls, thus began Jeff's side work realizing his thoughts into words.

Though many pets and a few horses have graced Jeff's life, he presently finds himself pet free, for the short term.

THE WORD OF JEB

CONNECT WITH JEFF HAYES

Jeff enjoys talking with his readers for reflections words can bring. Their impressions can be fascinating and unexpected.

He can be reached at his website, deppli.com



Summary

[The Word of Jeb](#), a short story. Part, the fifth, in [Rabbitry](#), a pentalogy.

From reconciling the senselessness of fate, can comfort be found in one's life? Would understanding the intricacies of a tragedy bring solace?

The remaining member of a family relives the guilt of survival in this continuing story begun in [End of the World](#).

Live this life. Build from what is known, bitter ashes and all. —JILLIAN