

The Man She Loves - A Novelette

Prelude

In the heroine's journey of Socialites and Suffragettes, we get to know our heroine, Ruth, very well. Through her eyes we see her motivations, her background, her relationships. The men in her life are viewed through her lens. But what do we really know of the man who is her love interest? His motivations and emotions are an important part of her journey. In Book 1 - No Time For Regrets, we know him only through her lens. This novelette is a chance to see Alex Benedict through his lens. Who is the man she loves?

A novelette is identified as a work of fiction that is less than 17,000 words and longer than a short story. This character study is designed to bridge Book 1 – No Time For Regrets and Book 2 Finding Her Happiness.

Chapter One - The Judge Ascends

“I am a man of integrity and virtue. I am a judge, elected by the people. They put their trust in me to make good and reasoned decisions. I expect to rise in the ranks of civic life and perhaps one day will run for a state office or even a Congressional seat. I have plans.”

I pause for dramatic effect and gauge my listener’s interest. He’s all in. Unfortunately, much of the story is a white lie. Shall I tell him my truth?

“Are you married?” the man says.

“Yes, to a lovely woman who went to Swarthmore. Sarah is the right touch to ensure my ascension,” I say as I pick up my drink.

“Doesn’t sound like you’re in love, but that works for a lot of men,” the man says.

As my glass lands on the wooden bar with a decided thump, I turn squarely to him. “I appreciate my wife, but I love another woman.”

“Do tell,” he says with a smirk.

“She was a secretary in a company that my law firm was doing business with. We got acquainted. Our mutual attraction propelled us to become close. This was before I married Sarah, of course.”

The man nods as if he understands my judgment.

“We began a love affair that I’m not sure will ever be over. Mainly because we have a child together, though no one outside of her family knows that progeny. Ruth is the love of my life, but I could not bring myself to marry her. My ambitions, her background, and her station in life precluded me from taking that step. Please don’t think poorly of me until you’ve heard the entire story.”

“You have a child out of wedlock?” the man says. He fumbles with his glass.

“Shocking, isn’t it?” I reply. Clearing my throat, I reach for my glass.

“I’m shocked you told me,” he says. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll tell your story? It might be worth a buck or two to a rag newspaper.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I say. “You look like an affable chap.” The young barkeep puts my dinner in front of me. It’s a cold plate. It’s all I want tonight.

“I’m eating too,” he says as his blue plate special arrives. “Why don’t we eat at a table like respectable fellows?” He gestures to an open table as he picks up his plate and hops off his barstool.

The barkeep shrugs his shoulders suggesting his indifference to us changing our seats. The restaurant is not full, and we find a nice table to continue our conversation - or rather me telling my story to him. I'm surprised I'm willing to share my intimate secrets with anyone - except Ruth. Even with her, I am circumspect. This man is very approachable and willing to listen. It's as if I'm supposed to confide in him.

"So, tell me more about your hottie. She sounds pretty special," the man says as he shovels food in his mouth.

I stare at him until he slows his pace and puts his fork down. "Please remember she is the mother of my child. She should be afforded every courtesy."

The man nods as he wipes his mouth with his napkin.

"Ruth is a very special woman. She is formidable and fearless. She does not stand on any pinnacle of social rules and lives by her code, though she is not wanton by any means. My position in the community, on the bench, and my desire for higher office meant I needed a wife who fit the expectations the public has for me. Or at least the public that makes career decisions and opens doors for advancement."

The man nods as he listens. His bald head reflects the light in the room like a flashlight beacon.

"She loved me deeply as I did her, but we can't always have everything we want, right?"

He nods as if to speak, but I keep talking.

"Of course, the arrival of our daughter two years ago complicated things. I was married to Sarah by then." I shake my head as I recall my infidelities.

"You was poking around where you shouldn't have," the man says with a slight grin. "No offense, as I'm sure you were torn between these two women." He winks at me.

"Not torn in my feelings," I say. "Only torn between which one could do me the most good. Sarah fit that bill." I hear my voice trail off as I think about this Faustian bargain I made. Funny, because Ruth said she saw herself making the same bargain. "Ruth put herself on the line for me and continues to do so with a young child," I say to the man. Nodding, I know my decisions were the best ones.

"What do you mean?" the man says. "Women don't put themselves on the line. They toe the line." He laughs and so do I. He's puddling his gravy in his mashed potatoes and dripping his food on the table.

I grip the table and emphasize my point. "I mean she carries on with a married man knowing that she could lose everything if we are caught." Then I chuckle at the irony. "She once worked

in my office at the courthouse. She could have been fired if anyone caught wind of us.” I shake my head. “Of course, I was exceptionally discreet and never would have let our secret be found out.”

“You’re telling me about it,” the man says as he raises one eyebrow. “I’d say your secret is out.”

My stomach tightens. Has my cavalier behavior let our secret out? I absentmindedly adjust my silk necktie and notice how well the tie goes with the bespoke suit that I had made by the finest tailor in Philadelphia. The fabric is lush. Appearances are important. The man across the table will not best me. He is an inferior person in a cheap suit who will never challenge me with my secret.

“Again, I say you look like a stand-up fellow, and we don’t know each other’s names. I feel secure,” I say.

The man focuses on his food. Has he heard me?

“Let me buy you another drink,” I say. I want to ensure his goodwill.

“I don’t need you to buy my silence. I’m a man of good character and have no interest in spilling your beans to anyone. You need to unburden yourself and I’m willing to hear it.”

“I thank you for that, my good sir,” I say as I tip my glass to him and motion to the barkeep to bring us another round.

“How are you going to keep your double life away from the newsmen when you run for a higher office? You know they sniff out everything,” the man says.

“We have legally buried the details of our daughter’s lineage and our affair is over.”

The man looks askance at me.

“Well, mostly over. Of course, we see each other as friends, and I visit my daughter in my alternate role as her godfather. It is well known that Ruth and I are friends, so my place in the little girl’s life does not raise suspicions.”

“Really?” the man says, looking incredulous. “That would be a good trick.”

“Ruth’s story is that her sister-in-law died in childbirth, and she could provide a solid upbringing to the child that her brother could not. People dote on Ruth for being so magnanimous.”

“That’s a creative story. Not only are you two matched in love but in skullduggery,” the man says, laughing again.

I smile because he is correct. I sip what's in my glass, passing for whiskey. "I despise prohibition," I say. "Free thinking men should be able to decide for themselves if they have a drink or not. We don't need teetotalers and women whining about temperance to dictate our personal habits." We clink our glasses in a toast to my sentiment.

"If you ask me," the man begins, "it was the vote for women that put this country on the wrong path. Women are not worldly enough to know who to vote for or how to decide. They'll follow their husbands if they vote at all. Mine does not vote at all because I do not agree she should." He nods in approval of his pronouncement.

"You may be a bit hasty. The suffragists want a voice for themselves, not a voice to tell us what to do," I say.

"And it got us prohibition," the man says, scowling.

I try to utter a comeback but decide it's not worth arguing over. He has a point. Women are a wild card in the public realm and men are put at a disadvantage because of it. Tumultuous days led to ratification. I shared the joy with Ruth when the amendment was finally ratified. I suppose I was happier for her than I was about the general impact on our politics.

"My wife, Sarah, has never voted. She never took an interest even though her best friend had been a suffragist with Ruth."

"That's why she don't vote. Because your mistress says she should." The man says as he sits back and nods.

"Sarah has stayed within her domestic sphere as a wife and homemaker," I say. "She limits her voting to the lady's card group at the Cricket Club. It has nothing to do with Ruth."

"If you say so," the man says as he shrugs. "Do you have any kids with Sarah? I have two myself. Two boys - Jack and Archie. Strapping lads I am proud of." The man smiles broadly.

"I do not. We have not had success in that department. I'm not sure if my wife is enthusiastic about children even though it's expected of us."

I would enjoy more children. Of course, they would bring only a few changes to my life if they came along. Sarah would have to give up many of her leisure hours to care for the children. I chuckle at the thought.

"What's funny?" the man asks.

"I was thinking of my wife taking care of babies with diapers and colic. Then I realized any child would have to come with a nanny, *pro forma*." I laugh again and so does the man.

"Judge, I wish you luck in your endeavors and in sorting out your affairs, so to speak. I do not envy your complications." He doffs his hat as he gets up to leave and puts on his coat.

“Thank you, good sir. I appreciate your listening.” I feign a salute to him as he takes his leave.

How has my life come to its current circumstance? I value the women in my life. Sarah is a dutiful wife, though her temperament can be unpredictable at times. We’ve had a few spirited arguments over household allowances and the ambitions she holds for expanding her wardrobe every season. But if I, a judge, need a woman of good society on my arm, then I should be generous in letting her have her style. She contributes to my career in ways I cannot. I am expected to have a wife of a certain standing; a wife that can help me keep my social status through her engagements in activities, by making sure we cultivate useful friends, and by maintaining our social station in Ardmore. I couldn’t do nearly as much as she does to meet those needs. Our names are regularly featured on the society pages of The Philadelphia Inquirer because she ensures we get invited to notable parties and attend social events in the city. I couldn’t care less about the symphony, but Sarah makes sure we have our season subscription and attend the most notable after-parties so that we are seen.

I think about my departed parents. I saw my father ascend in his profession. I never gave a thought to the role my mother must have played in setting the tone. I took all his success to reflect his skill and hard work. I hadn’t thought that my mother was part and parcel of giving rise to his position and promotion. I’m not sure how they would view my choices if they were still alive. My success is paramount, and they would be proud of my acumen, skills, connections, and ambition. But it cannot be done alone and somehow, I had the sense to know the right wife was necessary.

I’ve had enough of this hooch. I push the glass away. Time to retire for the evening. I trudge up the hotel stairs to catch the lift to my floor. I notice the fine carpets on the landing and smile at my good fortune to be here. How can the man in the cheap suit afford this place?

I see my reflection in the bathroom mirror in my room and think of Ruth. She knew as soon as we met, we were on a collision course between our desire for one another and my career.

“She did know that, right?” I say out loud to myself in the mirror.

I nod. I told her many times; I don’t write the rules, but I must play by them. She was acquainted with those rules and knew my conundrum. But she did not have the experience with Main Line society that I had. Does she feel blindsided? Is that what brings about her skullduggery? A shudder runs through my body. But I catch my reflection in the mirror and smile.

“I am hard to resist,” I say aloud as I run my fingers through my blonde hair. “It is inevitable that these women have fallen for me.”

Ruth continues to protest my decision not to marry her, but she acquiesces and willingly takes the risk. “I guess I’m worth it,” I say as I turn from the mirror. Without her bravery to flout

convention and risk exposure, we would never have had our dear Helen. With her, we both got the best of both our worlds. Time to let the topic go. I have important meetings in the morning.

Chapter Two - Who Is Responsible?

Despite my need for rest, I am on the edge of the bed, restless. My hotel room has beautiful furnishings and silk sheets. I gaze at my elevated surroundings. My position as a judge affords me a wealthy man's lifestyle. Pushing the curtains away, I look down on the street. It's quiet this time of night. Harrisburg is not Philadelphia. They shut down a bit earlier here.

A man stands under a streetlight lighting a cigarette. He is dressed reasonably well and does not look out of place. A young chap, lithe, and with a head of hair much like mine. He moves towards the door of a store and seems to be jimmying the lock. Is he robbing this store? He looks towards the street and continues to work the lock. Maybe the key is difficult. The store entryway is beyond the sphere of the streetlamp and my view is limited. Finally, the door opens, and he slips inside. No lights come on. Should I call the front desk to alert them to call the police? After about ten minutes the young man reappears at the door and comes out, carefully closing the door behind him. He is carrying a large satchel and walks down the street as if nothing is amiss. And indeed, there may be nothing amiss. He may be the store owner or manager. The lock may be difficult. I turn away and put those thoughts and myself to bed.

My reflection in the grand mirror on the stairway landing catches my eye. I look every bit the part I expect to play today. The breakfast room is abuzz with news that a huge heist occurred last night at a store across the street. The proprietor kept expensive jewelry and cash in the store safe. He was cleaned out in the robbery. My chatty waiter shares this news.

"I suppose this type of thing doesn't happen much around here," I say as I reach for my plate of food at the table.

"No, sir, it does not. This is a very refined area of town. Criminals don't lurk here without notice. Can't imagine how he did this without being seen." The waiter shakes his head.

"Perhaps someone saw him and didn't know it was a robbery," I say without looking at the waiter.

"Not in Harrisburg, Sir," he says as he holds the pitcher of water in his hand. I motion for him to fill my glass. "People look out for each other here. Not like it is in Philadelphia I can assure you."

"I'm from Philadelphia," I say as I raise my head to look him in the eye.

"Begging your pardon, Sir. I didn't mean to disrespect..." he says.

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. "I was speculating. No offense taken," I say.

Has Philadelphia jaded me to the point that I do not let myself believe what I was seeing last night? Robberies happen every day in Philadelphia as part and parcel of city life. But here the

people are quite upset that such a cavalier crime escaped their watchful eyes. I don't have any blame in the matter. It is not my job to police the streets. I shake my head. "For heaven's sake, I am a judge," I say to myself. If that man had been caught and brought to trial before me, I'm certain I would have no hesitation in sentencing him. I witnessed such an act and did nothing. Yet, I am convinced I had no idea what I saw and was in no position to know if a crime was in progress or not. "I am not responsible for any of this," I tell myself.

Later in the day, a colleague brings up the incident. "Can you imagine something like this happening in Harrisburg? I would hate to be the police chief today. I'm sure the mayor is giving him an earful," he says.

"I suppose so," I reply.

My colleague persists. "Right under a streetlamp too. Someone will come forward, I'm sure. There must be a witness from the hotel. I had been gazing on the street not thirty minutes before this happened. Someone saw something. I would bet on that," he says.

"Would you come forward?" I ask.

"Wouldn't you?" he replies. He looks at me like I have three heads.

"What if someone couldn't see what the man was doing?" I say. "He could have been jiggling his key in a sticky lock - maybe the owner was coming back because he forgot to bring something home. The store is set off the street a bit, obstructing a voyeur's view."

"You seem to have given this some thought," he says as he cocks his head to the side. "Did you see something?"

"What if I did? Would you expect me to say something, even if I had no details to give?" I say.

"Of course, I would," he says, nearly shouting. "You could pinpoint the time and give a physical description of the burglar. You might have even seen his face. You're a judge for mercy's sake." He gives me a look and a harumph to boot.

"Hmmm," is all I can muster in response.

"Did you see something?" he says. He is in full prosecutorial mode.

"No. I was merely speculating," I say. I quickly steer the conversation to our meeting topic.

Am I being selfish in not admitting I saw the whole thing? Should I help the authorities? I am the authority. And I am not interested in helping. Surely this was an inside job, and the proprietor probably is not interested in pursuing someone through the legal system. These things usually have a way of being worked out by the principals involved. Street justice, we call it in Philadelphia.

“All is fair in love and war and crime,” I say out loud as I head to the hotel bar having concluded my last meeting of the day.

Chapter Three - Holding Court

My membership in the state bar association reflects Pennsylvania upholding hundreds of years of legal tradition. Tradition and legacy are important qualities to maintain. It sets me apart from other lawyers who are not members. People seek me out because I have cultivated a stellar reputation. Today's meeting suggests my effort is paying off handsomely. At the hotel bar, my fellow jurists crowd around me. They ask my opinion on politics and policy, and I oblige by schooling them. One by one they leave me to my thoughts until my dinner companion from the other day sits next to me.

"Judge, you are still here. As am I. What's on your mind today that you need to share?" He grins as he orders a scotch, neat.

I clink the ice in my glass and swirl the brown liquid. Tonight, I ordered imported whiskey. Canada does not have prohibition and high-priced establishments serve it without too much concern that the local constabulary will stop them. My whiskey is served in their finest crystal glass. I run my finger along the rim and make the glass sing a little. I look over at him with a mix of confidence and gratitude.

"Have you heard about the robbery?" I ask the man.

"How could I not? Everyone on the street is talking about it. I had a meeting with a client and it's all he could discuss. I tried to get him to focus on our business matters, but he kept coming back to the robbery. He was shocked that such a thing would happen here. I guess it's not so impressive for a judge from Philadelphia who probably hears these kinds of cases all the time."

"I hear mostly corporate cases, not criminal ones," I say. "But certainly, this crime would hardly raise an eyebrow in the city."

"My client was most surprised that no one saw this robbery in progress. It was right across from the hotel. Maybe it happened too late for anyone to see it. I don't know. That would be dumb luck for the criminal." The man shakes his head while he orders another round of drinks for us.

"Maybe someone did but doesn't want to get involved," I say as I watch my drink swirl in the glass.

The man stops in mid-sip and stares at me. "We're in trouble if people are unwilling to get involved. This was a big heist." He looks concerned.

"Maybe it was an inside job. If the door was unlocked with a key and no windows were broken, then it is conceivable that this entire incident should be left to the players involved."

"How do you know that? I didn't see those details in the paper." He raises one eyebrow.

I chuckle. "Someone in my judicial meetings mentioned it. We tend to hear things before they go in the paper," I say.

"Is that what you say from the bench when a case comes before you - let the parties work it out themselves? That's a very jaded take on this, I must say." The man shakes his head as he sneers at me.

"Well, let's talk about more pleasant things, then," I say, raising my glass to him. "I should tell you about my love life." He grins and returns my salute. We ask to be seated at a discreet table in the formal dining room tonight.

"What's it like doing two women at the same time? Do you get their needs and habits confused?" the man says. He has the look of a teenager at a peep show.

"These women are completely different and there is no chance I would ever mix them up. I love both, but for different reasons and in very different ways." I stare into my glass.

"Sounds like one of them is a firecracker," the man says in a whisper.

"If you stop drooling, I might explain it to you," I say. "I'm not here to offer you a peep show experience. I'll give you an honest account of what it's like to love two women at the same time." I wait until he looks contrite. "Women are quite different from one another, despite being part of the fairer sex."

"I'm married," the man says. "Make this worth my while." He raises his eyebrow in his familiar way, and I relent.

"Ruth is very passionate." My face feels hot.

The man grins. "She's the mistress, right?"

I nod. "That sounds boorish, but it's accurate." The whiskey burns a little on the way down my throat but gives me license to continue my story. "She is bold and adventurous in getting what she wants. She made the first move after we met. She invited me to dinner via a handwritten note that was given to me by a train conductor."

The man nearly spits his drink as he contemplates the impropriety of it. "Quite the tart, eh?"

"To the contrary," I say. "She is sophisticated and goes after what she wants. She is formidable. And I find that a very attractive quality."

Before the man replies, the waitress brings our next round of drinks.

"Your waiter will be here with your menus and will take your dinner order. If there is anything you need from the bar, let me know. I'll check on you again." She turns and leaves us in a thin haze of powder and perfume.

I note that her dress is quite short in the back and low-cut in the front and she wears shockingly high-heeled shoes. She's the type of woman who would work at the Cotton Club, not the Regis Hotel in Harrisburg.

"I suppose the state capitol requires a saucier waitress to service the state politicians and business types than I might experience in an upscale hotel in Philadelphia," I say to the man. I smile as she fades into the crowd near the bar.

"Your gal like that?" the man says as he too follows the woman with his eyes.

"No. She is far more refined and tasteful. Just because she is passionate, does not mean she is tawdry." My voice has an edge as I defend Ruth.

"Fine by me," the man says as he raises his hands. "So, tell me what makes her so, form-id-able?" He elongates the syllables of the word for effect and makes a curving motion with his hands to imply Ruth's shape.

"I think any man, or at least a manly man, wants a woman to be passionate. Most women as far as I can tell are far too concerned about propriety and what someone would think of them if they let their hair down, so to speak. How brilliant is it of a woman to let down her defenses and let her body speak without hesitation?" I am satisfied that I capture Ruth's essence.

"That's why prostitutes were invented," the man says dryly. "Wives are not supposed to be passionate." He shoves a roll in his mouth.

"Poppycock," I say. "That's an outdated notion of a woman who must keep herself locked away except for pro-creating. I do not subscribe to that notion."

"But you understand it. You said so yourself. It's why you married one and not the other."

"It's not as simple as all that." I shift in my seat. "We, and I mean men that run things, put women into a terrible position. We admonish them to be a certain way and yet in the cover of darkness in our bedrooms we want them to be completely different. It's no wonder women do not trust us."

The waiter appears with our food. Beautiful plates of meat and potatoes with delicate side dishes are laid before us. My salivary glands nearly make me drool.

My dinner companion puts his napkin to his mouth as he does drool. The man holds his knife to cut his steak and stops. "What we want and what is right are two different things," he says. He attacks his steak with his fork and knife, savoring it. He cuts another piece and pauses with the fork hanging in the air with a bloody piece of beef on it. "And a woman that doesn't know the difference is on the road to ruin. I suspect your madame is now tarnished goods, whether any other man knows it for certain or not. She will never be able to carry herself as a lady having done what she's done." He sticks the meat in his mouth and closes his eyes in satisfaction.

Fear comes over me. "I never thought of it that way," I say.

I furrow my brow as I contemplate this man's point. Ruth is an uninhibited woman who is not afraid to take what she wants or at least grasp for it. Just as any man does. But by allowing her to carry on with me puts her in jeopardy of ever finding a respectable man. Have I ruined her? The blood drains from my face.

"A stark realization, judge? You look peaked," the man says with a look of concern.

"I'm not sure. I always assumed she was being formidable, not reckless. I'm concerned now that I may have put myself on the hook for her well-being." I dab my mouth with the linen napkin.

"Nah. Any woman who makes the decisions she has is on the hook for herself. You said she pursued you. You're off the hook. You didn't lead her on."

"That's right. I told her early on we could not marry because of the expectations of my position. But I did tell her I would always be there for her. And that is my choice," I say.

"It's always your choice. But what does your wife say? She may be formidable in less pleasant ways."

"Do you have some experience in this area?" I ask him.

"As a matter of fact, I do," he says as he puts his fork down and lifts his glass to his lips, taking a good sip of it. "My wife lets me know in her ways when she is not happy. If I'm out too frequently or not being attentive, she can turn real ugly. She'll stomp and pout or complain till I can't take any more. I cry "uncle" regularly. That turns things around and we get back to a harmonious existence." He smiles as he takes another forkful of food.

"That doesn't sound too bad," I say. "I thought you meant she would go on a rampage." I laugh.

"She has denied me my marital benefits on more than one occasion," he says as he nods his head. "I don't like that, but I know well enough that I have to do whatever it is she wants if I expect her to resume her wifely duties."

"Ah, it comes to that, doesn't it?" I nod. "Sarah has a separate bedroom which she frequents when she is mad at me for whatever slight I've made."

"That's a whole other level," the man says with some shock. "I would never allow my wife to have a separate bedroom. That goes too far." He nearly raises his voice but catches himself. "You have to keep a measure of control on these things," he says in a whisper, leaning over the table. "You know what I mean?" He nods and thrusts his fist in a jab.

“Do you get physical with your wife?” I say. “That’s scandalous.”

“I don’t punch her,” he says. “Sometimes I have to punctuate my physical desires so she knows I mean business.” He jabs his fist again.

I leave my mouth open for a moment at what he has described. “I can assure you that most wealthy women have separate bedrooms. No physicality is necessary. Sarah can retreat during times of the month when she is not well. And she retreats when we are not of the same mind on whether to have sex. It’s gives me space to cool down.”

“You say that,” the man says as he pauses. “But maybe she says no because she knows you’re cheating on her. Ever think of that?” He puts both hands on the edge of the table as he pushes back slightly.

“I hadn’t,” I say.

Maybe it is Sarah’s way of keeping her distance from this philandering husband. I shudder a little.

“Now, judge, I want you to get to the juicy parts. Where do you and your mistress spend the night? Do you take her to a nice hotel? Aren’t you afraid of being seen in public?” He cocks his head as he resumes his meal.

“I couldn’t be seen in public with her. It’s far too scandalous. I bought her an apartment in the next town over from where I live on the Main Line. I can take the train or drive there after work. It’s a very workable solution.” I keep cutting my steak. “This is quite good,” I say as we both chew enthusiastically.

“So, you put out a lot of dough for this woman. Was that before or after the kid?” he says.

“Before. And I never expected a child would enter the picture. But these things happen, I suppose. I love my daughter. But it did complicate things.”

“I’ll bet it did. Now you’re in for an apartment, a kid, and her job. That’s a tight web she has you in.”

“She doesn’t work for me anymore, but yes, we are well joined.” The words dangle in the air. “It’s not a web.” I shake my head. “I want to provide for her.”

“I guess you live in a different financial realm than me. I couldn’t afford to maintain two households,” he says as he salutes me.

“Money was never the issue for me. I wanted to take care of her and our daughter. My wife is a legal obligation, which I fully embrace. But my motivations are different.” I hesitate as I create the distinction.

“We keep drifting,” the man says. “I’m begging you for details that a married man without a mistress might appreciate. This is far from the realm of my usual domestic bliss.” He smirks.

“Fine,” I say and fold my hands in front of me. “She burns with the fire of the sun and has no hesitation for, shall we say, advanced positions.” The man takes a big gulp of his drink as I sip on mine. “Our lovemaking can go on for hours. Sometimes she is insatiable.” I pause as I recount some of our more vivid evenings. “Pillows fall to the floor. Sometimes we end up on the floor.” The poor man gasps at this detail and I smile. “And she can be quite tender as well.”

The man mops his brow with his kerchief as he sits back in his booth seat. He looks around as if he is worried that someone is listening. “Judge, you’ve outdone yourself,” he says. “I choose to believe you, even if you’ve just told me a whopper.” He smiles.

“I can assure you I did not embellish on the truth,” I say. “Passion is real, and I don’t know that I can live without it. It’s why our affair is not completely over.”

“You enjoy playing with matches, do you?” the man says.

“I believe we must fill our hearts whenever we can.”

“I think you’re filling more than just your heart,” the man says, winking.

My cheeks burn and I stir in my seat. I see images of Ruth’s hair falling in her face as she rode my body without hesitation. Her unbridled enthusiasm passed her lips in gasps and low moans. I responded in kind and pushed her to the side while I drove myself deep within her over and over. I shake my head to release my thoughts and mop my brow with my monogrammed handkerchief.

“You got yourself going, didn’t ya,” the man says as he chuckles. I nod and laugh with him. “I think I’ll go call the missus,” he says as he stands to leave the table. He shakes my hand and once again, leaves me for the evening with my thoughts.

I order an after-dinner brandy. The sweet liquid swirls in the snifter and the aroma is beautiful. I relish my memories of Ruth and have nothing even remotely similar to remember about Sarah. I think about our honeymoon in Europe. Sarah was the epitome of the blushing bride. She had no expectations and lay passively on our marital bed, waiting for me to take her. I tried to stroke her hair, her breasts, and kissed her tenderly. She lay there like a rag doll. I finally scooped her in my arms and gently inserted myself into her lady parts. She cried out for a moment and then fell silent. I thrust myself as quickly and gently as I could until I had satisfied myself and quickly removed myself. She pulled down her nightgown and drew the blanket over herself. I smiled tenderly and asked her if she was all right and if she enjoyed it. She looked aghast at me and said she had performed her duties as required and reminded me she was a proper lady, not some good-time gal. Fun was not part of her equation. I remember I laid next to her for some time, even after she had turned on her side away from me and fallen asleep. I wondered if the marriage was worth it, and my thoughts immediately went to Ruth. Before I knew it, I had grasped my member and brought myself to ecstasy, ending with some loud grunts

and a yell, waking Sarah. She turned towards me and saw what I had done to myself. She told me that if I planned to ever do that again to be sure she was not in the room. When we returned to Philadelphia she immediately took to furnishing and decorating a bedroom for herself. I never questioned her decision and we never spoke about it.

My marriage never got started, let alone had a chance of success in the sense of being a physical couple. Am I to blame for this? Did she sense that Ruth was there at every turn in that area? I shake my head. I give Sarah the credit she deserves for keeping a lovely home, for making sure there are meals for me, even when I come home late, that my clothes are cleaned and pressed and hung in my closet. Sheets are washed and towels are hung. Of course, the housekeeper does the work of all these details, but Sarah oversees it and makes sure they are done. For that, I am grateful. Have I ever expressed gratitude to her? Am I expected to? She has her duties as I have mine.

I wonder how my father reacted to my mother when they were young. He was working all the time when I was a child and he passed away when I was in law school. My mother seemed to walk on eggshells at home. She was quiet and reserved. I think I picked up that expectation about what a wife should be from her. My father was stern and often came off as cold. I attributed that to his many demands as a businessman. He had no time for domestic issues and delegated all those items to my mother. They produced me so they must have had an intimate relationship. I know when I was a boy, they each had a bedroom of their own. Yet, my father was not without his feelings. One birthday we had cake and candles and as we gathered around him at the table, he became overcome, and his eyes welled up. It's the only time I saw him in such a state. As I got older, he told me often that he was proud of me for my many scholastic accomplishments. I never heard him give my mother a compliment or a thank you, except for a perfunctory one in public.

When I went into law school my father took me aside to give me a talk about life. He told me, "Never let your guard down to any woman until you want to. You will meet women who see a lot of dollar signs in your educational degree and profession. Beware of them. Find a woman who will be an asset to your career." I had asked him, "Is that how you got together with mother?" He laughed and said, "My boy, your mother chose me, and I had no say in the matter. I was utterly captivated by her." I think about what he said in comparison to how he treated her daily.

I try to remember what I was thinking when I chose Sarah. She had set her sights on me. I know that because her friend Rebecca had told me. But I chose her too. I thought she would be an asset to me, as my father had cautioned. I wasn't head over heels for her, but she had a quiet dignity that led me to believe she would be an acceptable life partner.

"I wonder where that woman went?" I say out loud to myself.

I return to my room for the evening and wonder if I should have chosen Ruth because I am utterly captivated by her. Was I too calculating and missed the opportunity for fulfillment? No matter now. I pick up the telephone to call her and put the receiver down. Distance is useful.

I draw the curtains and look at the scene of the apparent crime. What had gone on there? I am not a detective. I don't know and I certainly couldn't identify the man. I caught only the briefest of looks at him from my fourth-floor vantage point. I dispel any thoughts of remorse I have for not going to the police as well as not choosing Ruth. "None of this is my fault or responsibility," I tell myself.

There is a knock on my door. Someone from the hotel front desk announces himself.

"Mr. Benedict, I hate to disturb you at this hour. We are contacting all the guests who occupied street-facing views last night to ask if they may have seen anything on the store robbery that happened."

"What do you want to know?" I ask as I open the door. This is my test of truth, and I will fail.

"Did you see anything? You needn't give me any details, but we will pass your name on to the detective investigating the incident."

"I can't help you," I say, parsing my words. I can live with that strategy.

To be honest I should have said, "I won't help you." But that's neither here nor there. I didn't see anything that would help the detective. That's that. I pick up a book on the nightstand. My eyes soon grow heavy, and sleep comes.

Chapter Four - Justice Is Not Blind

The noon train to Philadelphia is full but I don't see my dinner companion. He must live elsewhere. Something is freeing about being able to confide in another person anonymously. I think back on all that I told him - that I live in Ardmore and am a judge in Philadelphia. That my wife is Sarah, and my mistress is Ruth who used to work for me. It wouldn't take much to find me. The porter hands me today's mid-day Harrisburg paper. "I would prefer the *Inquirer*," I say but glance at the headline anyway and gasp.

"Suspect Shot Dead." The police went to the home of a man they suspected in the store robbery. They got a tip from someone who had been on the street and saw him trying to get in. I feel relieved. Someone else saved me from the anguish of whether to tell my tale or not. The police found cash and jewels in the man's home and consider the case closed. I nod my head in satisfaction at this outcome and open the newspaper to the story's continuing page. I put my hand to my mouth as I read. The story says the dead man is short, bald, and heavy-set - matching the witness's description. That's not at all what I remember he looked like. Perhaps there are two men involved and I only saw one of them. If the stolen goods are recovered, then that is a measure of justice. But if this dead man is one of two in the crime, then why aren't the police looking for the man I saw?

My stomach churns. A man is dead at the hands of the police. If he isn't an accomplice, then how could the police have found the goods stashed at his home? What happened to the man I saw? Maybe he delivered the stolen goods to this man and the police didn't know that detail. Though the man I saw may have been the actual thief, the worse man - the man in charge, faced swift justice. And if the victim now has his goods returned then justice has been done. Despite my best efforts to put this issue aside, my mind keeps returning to it. How could the witness have claimed to see this man when I didn't see him? How could the man I saw have escaped detection by the witness who came forward? The timeline matched what I saw. It must be a case of mistaken description by the newspaper. Maybe the police are trying to fool a larger gang of thugs into believing they caught someone else for the crime, leaving the gang to commit more robberies while the police are watching them. Yes, that's probably the ticket. I am well acquainted with criminal techniques used by the police. Sometimes the police skirt the bounds of propriety, but they do so in the name of justice. "But a man is dead," I say aloud.

The train ride lasts most of the day until finally, farmland starts to give way to housing and factories. The Philadelphia train station is in sight. The journey has ended. In the station, the evening newspapers have a bold headline that reads, "Police Err In Killing Of Harrisburg Suspect." My heart is racing as I buy the paper and find a seat to scan the article. There is a discrepancy in the Harrisburg police account. The dead man's family provided an excellent alibi for his whereabouts during the robbery. He had been at a restaurant for an anniversary party for his brother. Dozens of witnesses vouched for him. Now the police are backpedaling as to why they made a tragic mistake and took this man's life. Seems that the street witness is a long-time snitch for the police. Attempts to find the witness have failed. My stomach tightens. My lack of candor may have cost this man his life. How could the police be so careless and worse, how could the cash and jewels turn up at his house? Did the police plant them? Did he have any connection to the actual robber I saw?

The police statement lamented their seeming error, but they insist he is culpable because of the evidence found. The family is quoted as saying the police should show how this poor man was part of the robbery because they had no evidence he was associated. Are the police protecting someone by pinning the robbery on this poor soul? Did they kill this man under the assumption that dead men tell no tales? I am shaken.

Dozens of people pass by me as I read the article several times. A colleague who was in Harrisburg stops when he sees me and asks if I am all right. I must look ashen. I assure him I am fine and quickly change the conversation. He is easily distracted by gossip about another jurist. I toss the newspaper on my seat and leave the train station with him.

I anticipate the security of my own home as I make my way up the driveway. Sarah greets me warmly. I hold on tightly to her for an extra moment. She gives me a funny look when I finally let go and we sit down for supper.

“How was your conference? Were you a triumph?” Sarah says with some sarcasm dripping from her lips.

“I had a very productive time. Though much of yesterday’s agenda was distracted by the Harrisburg robbery. Then the police killed a man they claim was the robber. The evening newspaper says the man had an alibi and the family claims he was not involved. A sordid affair.” I haven’t looked at her for fear I might give myself away. I continue eating my supper but steal a quick look. Sarah has put her fork and knife down and is staring at me. “What?” I say.

“That is a most inappropriate topic for dinner conversation,” she says.

“You’re right. My apologies.” I focus on her. “What did you do while I was gone? Did you and Rebecca go shopping or go to a card party?” My voice is bordering on being light and fun.

Sarah puts her napkin down and purses her lips. “If you require a report, you could have let me know. I would have written the details for you.” Her dour look is all too familiar.

“I’m merely making polite conversation.” My voice is rising with my frustration, and I take a breath. “I hope you’ve had a pleasant couple of days.” I force a smile.

She narrows her eyes slightly and picks up her fork to resume her meal. “Rebecca and I did attend a card party. It was a lovely affair at Lydia’s,” she says without looking at me.

Her voice trails off as I wonder what Ruth is doing and when I will see her next.

Sarah’s voice shatters my wandering mind. “You asked. If you aren’t interested then don’t pretend you want to know,” Sarah says. She puts down her fork, picks up her plate, and heads through the butler doorway to the kitchen, letting the door swing in her wake.

Should I follow her? It's not worth the effort. She sticks her head out to tell me she is heading up for the night and that she will see me in the morning. That means she will be sleeping in her room and not with me. I finish my plate and am unsatisfied - not with the food, but with my surroundings. I live in a house that does not reflect my tastes with a woman who barely tolerates my presence. In the living room, I pour a snifter of brandy. This is far more satisfying. I lean back on the sofa and put my feet on the table, a move that Sarah hates. I don't care. It's my house and I'll do as I please. Sarah's household rules be damned. After a second glass of brandy, I trudge upstairs. My legs feel heavy. The housekeeper can handle the dishes and my suitcase in the morning.

My room, our room, is dark except for a sliver of light from the moon which I can see through the top of the drawn curtains. Had there been moonlight the night I saw the robbery? I don't remember any light but that which came from the streetlamp. "Tonight, is a full moon, so it must have been nearly full that fateful night," I say out loud. I look around as if someone might have heard me. Sarah is on the other side of the hall and a room down. The housekeeper is in her room on the first floor in the back of the house. No one is close enough to hear anything I say. I could shout out anything but of course I don't. My bed feels good. I run my hands up and down on the sheet, reveling in the comfort. Sleep comes.

My desk at work is strewn with case law books and notes as I prepare for a busy docket with an important corporate case. The enormity of my responsibility does not weigh me down. I relish it and feel powerful. My secretary comes into my office and hands me a message from Ruth and tells me there is a detective who wants to see me. I chuckle at Ruth's message. She made a little play on words in her message, and it is amusing. I speak with detectives regularly and give this visitor no mind as he walks into my office.

"Hello judge," he says. "This is a visit on a personal matter."

I nod and grow circumspect of my behavior. What personal matter would this be?

"I was asked by the Harrisburg PD to interview you about this robbery and subsequent killing of the primary suspect." He stops and stares at me.

I move my papers about on my desk. "Were you now?" I say. "How can I help?"

"You had a vantage point to this robbery. What did you see? Someone across the street saw you looking out your room window around the time the crime occurred."

The detective never took his eyes off me. Should I be direct or string him along?

"I didn't say anything to the police while in town because I had nothing to contribute to the story of the crime." The words hung in midair. Is sweat beading on my forehead?

“Someone saw you looking out the window at the time of the robbery. You didn’t see anything?” he says.

“I did not,” I say. I smile pleasantly at him and want him to accept my version of the events.

“Works for me,” he says, and he stands to leave.

We shake hands. I exhale and lean back in my chair as he leaves. It never occurred to me that someone might have seen me watching the spectacle unfold. I involuntarily flinch at the thought “Let the incident go and get on with your day,” I tell myself. But I have nagging questions. How did someone know I was the person looking out at the street? Is this someone I know? I’m not well known outside Philadelphia. How was I identified? Maybe I wasn’t. Maybe the police are telling everyone who had a view of the street that night that they were seen. It would be a good detective ploy. I dismiss the entire incident and get on with my day.

Unfortunately, the entire matter lingers into the afternoon. Should I call the prosecutor in Harrisburg to assure him that I had nothing to bring to light on the matter? I scoff at this notion. A man who is not involved would not profess his innocence. Instead of dwelling on this, I call Ruth to see her this evening. Seeing her will be a confirmation of my well-ordered life which I control.

Ruth asks all kinds of questions about my meetings in Harrisburg that Sarah never thought to ask. She never mentions the robbery, though the *Inquirer* is on the living room table with the headline about it.

“Terrible situation,” I say as I pick up the newspaper. “The robbery was bad enough, but the police killing an innocent man...” I say.

She shudders. “This is where religion is supposed to protect this man,” she says. She has a persistent tone in her voice.

“Religion?” I say.

“Yes, the article says he led a prayer at his brother’s anniversary dinner. He was in God’s ear and yet God allowed him to be killed later, at his own home?” Ruth shakes her head.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” I say. I drop the newspaper as if it is poisonous and walk to the kitchen to wash off the newsprint.

“That poor man,” I hear her say in the living room. “Can’t his family get justice?” I come back in and smile, but she persists. “Can’t the family get justice from the police?” she says.

I don’t reply and she lets it go. Our conversation turns to Helen. I look in on our sleeping daughter. “You have all the luck my little one,” I say as I kiss her forehead. “Sleep well knowing your father will never let any harm come to you.” I tiptoe out of her room to grab my hat and coat.

“You sure you don’t want to stay?” Ruth says to me with a longing look.

“I wish I could, but the timing is not right. Soon, I promise,” I say. I’m distracted by this Harrisburg incident. But I would enjoy a night with her. She kisses me and I kiss her back. We push and pull in our relationship. One of us is pushing for more and the other is pulling away. Tonight, is her turn to push and my turn to pull. I want to be with her. She clings to my arms as I pull away.

“I’m having a hard time keeping you out of my desires,” she says with a hint of blush on her cheeks. “I try to be neutral...,” she says as she stops and turns away.

I touch her shoulder and she turns towards me. “There will be another time for us, I promise,” I say.

We must be reasonable and responsible. Mustn’t we? I easily manage my life. I lie to my wife. I lie to my mistress. I lie to the police. I believe I am right to do so. I spare everyone the inevitable complications that would come if I am completely honest. Everyone does this and some for the wrong reasons. I’m within justifiable boundaries. I act as I please because being a judge makes me somewhat invincible.

In my courtroom, I have a case outside of my normal realm. I rarely hear criminal cases, but I am filling in for a judge who went out sick for a long time. This case is a battery and robbery case. The police are confident the defendant is their perpetrator because they found items belonging to the victim in his house. The man professed his innocence but had no alibi. It’s a bench trial and I find him guilty and sentence him appropriately to the city jail. The similarities make me think about the Harrisburg case again. That man had an alibi, and it came too late. How did the Harrisburg police find the goods from the robbery in his home? That was never addressed by the newspapers. Had the police planted the evidence? How did the dead man get chosen by the police? I have seen evidence of police on the take in Philadelphia as well as indications that evidence may be fabricated. Mostly the police justify their out-of-bounds behavior to ensure the bad guys get taken down. What if the police are protecting their position and need to clear cases to look good? How can I be sure that in this case before me the police are not railroading the defendant? I can’t be sure. Heading home for the day I compare the police impropriety to my own. “I’m cheating on my wife,” I tell myself. “They’re cheating on the public.”

I’m tired from the day and Sarah is not welcoming. She is her usual combative self. Her demands are predictable and annoying. She drones on and I notice the flowers on the table are sweet smelling. My new book is sitting next to them, waiting to be read. Her escalating tirade brings me back to reality. She doesn’t have enough household budget and I don’t make enough time for social occasions. I assure her that she has enough money and that there are many demands on my time that must be balanced.

“You are a cruel man,” she says. I wave her away, but she does not leave. “Joe dotes on Rebecca. He compliments her. He appreciates her. You take and take and never give.” She stomps her foot as she stands at the end of the dining table.

“My dear,” I say as I lean back in my dining chair. “I have no idea what you think I take. I am the earner in this household. Everything is mine except what I give to you, and you generally do not want for anything. I can’t account for how our friends run their household.” I nod to her. “I do not make demands of you, nor do I physically harm you. Many women might find your situation a good one.”

“You don’t love me. You are too busy loving your whore.” She turns and leaves before I can answer.

I jump out of my seat and follow her into the living room. I grab her by the arm. “Why are you jealous of Ruth? You don’t even want to be in our bed. A man has needs.”

“And that’s what a whore is for,” she says as she squirms in my grasp.

“Stop maligning her. I married you, didn’t I?” I let go of my grip. Several small welts are on her tender arm.

“You don’t get to tell me how to feel about her. She has come between us. She is always on your mind, even when I’m in your bed. I have no interest in competing for your attention.” She turns on her heel and slams the door as she retreats to her woman’s room.

I won’t see her again this evening and that is fine with me. I pick up my things and head to Ruth’s apartment. Ruth welcomes me even as she is surprised to see me. I throw my arms around her and kiss her deeply. I feel her shudder, but she pulls away.

“What’s brought all this on?” she says.

“Can’t I come here and love you?” I say.

“Of course, but we’ve been keeping our distance...”

I kiss her again before she can finish her sentence. We toddle to the sofa, and she falls back onto it. I lay my body on hers and she is resisting me ever so slightly. I push harder and finally throw her full skirt up to her waist as I undo my trousers. I push myself inside her and I feel good. I know she wants me, and her moaning confirms it. She thrusts her tongue in my mouth and I grab her waist to thrust harder inside her. Before I realize it, we fall on the carpet. She’s writhing beneath me, and I pin her arms down to fully take her and expel my fluid. She gasps as I finish and lay prone on top of her. I look at her and her expression is not one I’ve seen before. It’s almost fearful.

“I’m sorry, was my passion too forceful?” I say letting go of her wrists and moving off her.

She reaches for my shoulders and pulls me close. “You caught me off guard. We’ve never done this, this way,” she says as she loosens her grip on me.

She’s smiling now and I smile back. “I needed to have you,” I say.

“I always need to have you,” she says, winking.

I stay the night. Our unbridled relationship is a gift. Sarah can’t be this way. Deep sleep comes this night.

Chapter Five - Power Has Its Perks

Why shouldn't I be able to live my life as I see fit? I take care of my wife and I take care of my daughter. I deserve the pleasure I have with Ruth. I work hard for the people of Philadelphia and give them no reason to doubt me. Lots of men have mistresses. It's how we're built. Besides, I was with Ruth before I got married. Sarah didn't have to marry me, though I don't think she could have refused my generous proposal. I made her wealthy. She sits in an elite social circle. It's what every woman dreams of, and I gave it to her.

The steam swirls around my head and my stiff joints ease as I luxuriate in the sauna at my club. Other men sit with me and similarly enjoy the benefits of our status. I get up to go jump in the pool and a man reaches out to gently touch my arm.

"Judge?" he says.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Don't remember me or maybe it's the towel? I'm your Harrisburg dinner companion," he says as he flashes a smile that brings it all back to me.

"Of course," I say. "Indeed, the towel is a great disguise," I smile as I try to walk away.

"Judge Benedict, there is a telephone call for you," a young attendant says as he stops my retreat from the man from Harrisburg.

I look at the man from Harrisburg who mockingly zips his lips and turns back towards his companions. My name has been uttered in the man's presence. I am exposed.

I quickly change clothes in hopes I can get out of the club before the Harrisburg man comes into the locker room. Then I stop. I have nothing to fear from this inconsequential man. I'm an elected official, a judge, and a highly respected person. This man is nothing to me. At that moment of realization, the inconsequential man comes into the locker room.

"Forget something?" he says as he passes by me.

"I must take my leave for my telephone call," I say. I nod to him, and he nods back.

"How do you know Judge Benedict?" one of his companions asks him. I hear the conversation as I make my way to the door.

"We met in Harrisburg and had a chance meeting over a nice meal," he says to his friend.

"He's a good man to know," the friend says. "He's a powerful judge. Stay on his good side."

"Is there any other side to be on?" the Harrisburg man says as he chuckles.

Sarah is calling me to come home, and I oblige. She is brooding in the living room and springs out of her seat at my arrival.

“I want it to stop,” she says.

“This is the emergency?” I say. She’s been crying and I try to soften my stance. “What can I do to help?”

“Stop seeing her. It’s disgusting and it’s ruining our reputation. I won’t stand for it.”

There is no point in attempting a pretext of softness. I firmly plant myself in front of the fireplace and admonish her. “Get hold of yourself. You’re in no position to dictate anything to me.”

“Someone at my bridge club said she’d heard a rumor about you and Ruth seeing each other. I dispelled her of that notion and quickly tried to change the subject. I’m not here to clean up your mess,” she says.

“I have no mess that needs cleaning, I can assure you.” She looks a bit disheveled as if she had just thrown on this frock. Her hair is decidedly not in its usual perfect coif. “What have you been doing? You look like you just rolled out of bed?”

“Do you think you are so perfect?” she asks.

“Sarah,” I gasp. “Are you seeing someone?” What else would account for her appearance?

She slaps my face, forcing me to retreat. “How dare you malign my character,” she screams. “I had a dress fitting and my hair got undone putting the dress on and taking it off.”

I am a scolded child and say nothing.

“Do you think because you are well-educated, wealthy, and handsome, that nothing can touch you? It can. I assure you. And we are a team. It’s better for you if I’m on your side and not making trouble.”

“My dear Mrs. Benedict,” I say. I want to snatch her by her shoulders, but I hold steady not wanting to escalate this volatile situation. “Making trouble for me makes trouble for you. As you say, we are joined and cannot be asunder. I live with your eccentricities, and you must live with mine.”

“Is that what they’re calling whores today?” she says with a glaring smirk.

I reach out to slap her, but she bounds away from me. “Don’t speak of her that way. I let it go the other night but will not tolerate it again.”

“I’ll speak of her in any way I want,” she screams. The sound is deafening, and I turn away from her. “She is ruining our reputation - the reputation that I have cultivated for us. End it or we will suffer the consequences.”

“You do love your hyperbole, don’t you?” I take a seat in a leather club chair. I think about a similar rampage she pulled on Ruth’s poor sister while she was working on the store floor as a salesclerk at Wanamaker’s. Sarah is all about drama. “Go calm yourself and tell the gossip mongers to mind their own business. Tell them your husband dotes on you and you on him. They won’t know any different unless you tell them. Besides, you love your father’s money far too much to lose it by leaving me.” I smirk.

“You love to throw that in my face, don’t you?” She’s nearly spitting her words. “Just because you and Ruth silenced me then, doesn’t mean you can silence me forever.” She storms out of the living room and finally, I have some peace.

Her jealous outbursts had ended a year ago when Ruth and I figured out it was her father’s dowry terms that were driving her constant bedeviling. I laugh a little at the thought of Sarah’s attempts to make trouble. She blusters but is poor at executing her threats. I will settle her down again with some attention and money. Sarah is predictable. I write a check and put it in an envelope with her name on it. I leave it on the table. She’ll find it in the morning, and it will assuage her at least for one day.

As I sip my drink the words of the man from Harrisburg come to mind. He told me over one of our dinners that he had a loving relationship with his wife because they had some push and pull. Sarah is all push and neither one of us is pulling. Does anyone escape the torture of marital arguments? Is it the person or the institution that causes such tension?

No answers come to me, and I yawn. Sleep will shoo away the evening’s unpleasantness. In the dark, by myself, it is like most nights. I remember some pleasant experiences Ruth and I had. Then I recall a particularly memorable night of passion. I drift off to sleep with a memory of holding her.

In the morning, Sarah shows a semblance of calm and dignity. She must have found the envelope. I gently kiss her on top of her head being careful not to muss her hair. She is busy berating the housekeeper but at least it isn’t directed at me. I notice some letters on the kitchen counter. One is addressed to me with a return address of Harrisburg but no name. I flinch a little when I see it and Sarah sees this.

“Bad news? Seems rather odd to not have a return name, and from Harrisburg. Are you recruiting local trollops to attend to your needs when you’re out of town?” She sits at the kitchen banquette and curls her lips as she speaks.

“Probably a colleague from my meetings,” I say as I pocket the letter and sit across from her to eat breakfast. The housekeeper brings me some coffee and toast. I smile and thank her. She nods in return and takes a sideways glance at Sarah who is fussing with her fruit. She looks back at me and motions for me to follow her out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going? You haven’t finished your breakfast” Sarah says to me.

“I need something from my desk.” I hurry out of the kitchen.

The housekeeper has a letter for me and tells me she set it aside because it looked official, and she didn’t want Sarah to worry. The letter is from the Harrisburg Police Department. I thank her and shove the letter into my pocket with the other one. The maid scurries back into the kitchen as Sarah rings her bell for her.

Once at my office, I open each letter. The one from the police department is perfunctory - summarizing my statement and thanking me for my contribution to the investigation. If only they knew, but better they don’t. The second letter is unsigned and far more perilous.

“I know you saw the robbery as I watched you watch it. You know the police are lying and that the wrong man was killed. If you don’t come forward, I will expose you. You have until the first of next week to act.”

My fingers tremble as I hold this threat. I set the letter down and then pick it up to reread it.

This is a ridiculous threat. “No one saw me and If they did, they can’t definitively say I witnessed anything,” I tell myself. I throw the letter into my desk drawer. It’s a feeble prelude to blackmail. “Who will they believe?” I say aloud. “The jurist.”

My father nearly always got what he wanted in business. He told me once about a supplier who tried to squeeze him. My father boldly told the man to go stuff his threats down his pants and to never be so brazen again or he would regret it. The supplier experienced a mysterious fire soon after and never questioned my father again. When I heard this story I took a step back, disbelieving my father would be violent. He told me that there are two kinds of men in the world - those that take and those that get taken. I open the drawer and look at the letter. “I know which man I am,” I say.

I leave the threats in the drawer and out of my mind. At lunch, I dine with a colleague who also is a member of our club in Ardmore. He makes a peculiar request.

“My good man,” he says with a bit of a chuckle in his voice. “You need to talk with your wife about her temper. My Margaret said she blew up at the lady’s card game two days ago, ranting about some woman you’re seeing. Apparently, all the women got up and left the table leaving Sarah to stew by herself.” He dabs his mouth and looks for my reply.

“Why on earth do you think you should report to me on my wife’s behavior? She is responsible for herself, and I don’t take kindly to your gossip.” I sip my water and call for the waiter. I say nothing as I leave the table and stiff him for the bill. The nerve of him to chastise me about Sarah’s behavior. I’ll not be treated like some circus clown where every time she misbehaves, I’m expected to run after her and discipline her like a child. What nonsense. My

mother would never have put my father in such a ridiculous position and my father would never have chased after her.

I stumble on a curb because I'm not paying attention. I nearly take down a fellow pedestrian. I apologize for my carelessness and make sure the chap is no worse for wear. He tips his hat and bids me farewell with a smile. I'm not a boor and know when goodwill is called for.

My secretary hands me a telegram as I return to the office. I open it at my desk and pound the desktop.

"I expect \$1000 for my silence. Instructions to follow."

Harrisburg is spiraling out of my grasp. I take a deep breath and think about how my father would handle it. I stuff the telegram in the desk drawer with the letters and prepare for court.

A few weeks later I am enjoying a lovely dinner with Ruth at her Wynnewood apartment along with our darling Helen. The buzzer rings and she brings a telegram in her hand. She looks very perplexed. I feel my stomach churn as I read it. She snatches it from my hand and reads it. Her eyes are wide, and she looks first at me, then back to the telegram, and back to me. I snatch it back and she slumps into her yellow wingback chair.

"I know your secret. Tell your philandering boyfriend to pay up or your secret goes public."

"This is nothing," I say in a soothing voice like melted butter. "I received a similar threat. I've deduced it's from someone I sentenced and is now out of prison. They are bluffing and nothing will come of this. You know I will protect you, protect us, and protect Helen." Is this a plausible explanation? It seems to relieve her worry.

I tell Ruth I will hang onto the telegram as I may need to file a criminal complaint. I grasp her hands, bringing them to my lips and gently kissing them. She looks up adoringly at me. The crisis has passed for now.

Something must change in my relationship with my wife. The disharmony at home is making my life unpleasant. I have an idea that is sure to please Sarah. I suggest we go out for dinner.

"At the club, I suppose?" she says with no enthusiasm.

"I am thinking of a little bistro in Bryn Mawr. You've probably seen it on Lancaster Avenue? It's very chic." She blushes when I wink at her.

"That sounds lovely," she says. "What transgression are you overcoming with this gesture?" Her face returns to its normal sourness.

“None,” I say. “I think you deserve to be well treated, even if it is by me.”

Her demeanor shifts and she looks at what she’s wearing. “Let me put on a hat and a bit of jewelry. Get my blue wrap from the closet for me?” She dashes upstairs. My charm has power over women. Dour Sarah turns into a willing wife by a kind gesture. Who knows what else I might be able to coax from her?

Tonight, we are a happily married couple. We hold hands and enjoy each other’s company. We have no arguments or even ill-tempered comments. The harmony continues at home when Sarah gives herself to me in our marital bed. She seems to enjoy herself. My tenderness entices her, and my power lets her know she has been had by me. She lays there spent and sighs.

“What is it, Sarah?” I say. “Are you glad you are my wife tonight?”

“I imagine this is why Ruth won’t let you go. What woman would want to give up this pleasure?” she says without turning to me.

I smile because she is right. What woman would want to give up this pleasure? I turn to her only to glimpse her backside as she puts on a robe and makes her way to the bedroom door.

“This woman will forgo the pleasure until you stop seeing her.” She walks out and slams the door.

I leap into my robe and follow her. Her door is locked, and I pound on it. She won’t open the door, so I put my shoulder into the door and jar open the lock. I am breathing heavily, and she retreats to her bedpost, tightening the grip on her robe. In a quick move, I push her on the bed and throw aside her covering. I ignore her pleas to let her go and I ravage her. Once I finish, I sit back on my knees as she slowly turns to look at me. Tears flow and I gasp.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” I say as I reach for her. She slaps at me wildly. I grab both her wrists even as she writhes. “I want you to understand that your husband determines the rules of engagement in our marital bed. I won’t be threatened.”

She nods and looks for the covers. I help her pull the blanket up to cover her naked body. She continues to cry and turns her face into her pillow. I rub her shoulder.

“Sarah, you’ve turned a lovely evening into something it should not have been. I’m sorry I bullied my way in here. I was mad but thought you might enjoy an aggressive approach.” I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and look back at her, but she refuses to acknowledge me. Beads of sweat roll down my back and chest. I look at her as if I am frozen. She continues to ignore me. I stand and she turns to look at me in my full nakedness and quickly turns away.

“Your hostility makes me mad,” she says.

I touch her and she pulls away like a wounded animal.

“I want nothing to do with you,” she says. She pulls the covers over her head, and I leave.

It's morning and I send three dozen white roses to Sarah at the house as a peace offering. I am a man of good breeding and status, and I am flawed. Sarah thinks I'm deeply flawed. I only know that power is what determines our path to success, and I will not be deterred. I may have overstepped myself with Sarah out of anger, but Ruth does not recoil at my aggressiveness. I don't know what Sarah wants. Maybe it is difficult for her to accept her husband's foibles. We each have our lot in life.

Weeks later I sit alone at home and marvel at how well Sarah and I seem to have reached a new point of reconciliation. My new harmony at home has a price. Ruth has retreated from me. She thinks it is best for Helen if we keep our relationship a cordial friendship and no more. I know she's right and I do as she asks. I muse that maybe that's why I have time to work on regaining Sarah's trust - as much as she will give me. She hasn't raised the issue of Ruth with her card circle again. I haven't heard from any husbands that she's gossiping. We attend social events and maintain a high profile in Ardmore. This pleases Mrs. Livingston, Senior, who is the leader of our social pack. If she's happy, we get the perks from her well-oiled machine and that's why we are all on board. Power has its perks.

Chapter Six - Lessons Learned

I need to put a stop to the Harrisburg threats. I find them annoying and tedious. One of my private investigators is working to find the source of the threat. Judges don't get to be judges without some skillful approaches to damaging information. I am good at my job because my men are good at theirs. My father's voice guides me in my determination to be a man that takes and is not taken.

My investigator comes to see me with his report. I leap to my feet as he gives me a verbal report with explosive information.

"I can't believe this," I say. "Did you confront him to verify this?"

"Don't need to. Our evidence is solid." The investigator sits comfortably, and his voice is calm.

I gather myself and sit. The man who sits before me can be trusted. But can I trust my judgment for not having seen through the perpetrator?

"Judge, there is another wrinkle. By your reaction, it's obvious you know him, and our investigation confirmed you had dinner with him in Harrisburg and then saw him at your club a few months back. There are a lot of witnesses to these encounters."

My mind is racing, and I consciously keep my demeanor calm. "What do you suggest?"

"Get out ahead of this," my investigator says. "Admit to seeing something but because it was not clear what you were seeing, you declined to divulge it. You can see now that was a mistake, but an honest one." Blow up the secret and this man has nothing to bring against you."

My investigator pauses as he waits for my response. I am not willing to respond.

He continues. "I don't know and don't think I can find out whether this man has told anyone about his threats to you," he says. He's frowning at me.

"I have said all I need to say to the police," I say. I straighten the lapels of my suit coat and bring my body forward in my chair. I stare at him. "Bringing it up now will only raise speculation and suspicion. I don't believe this man would share his plot. He's in over his head as it is." I stand to indicate the meeting is over. "One final thought comes to mind. Find out if he has any history of this type of behavior to confirm my sense of his amateur status. I think he felt emboldened by my candor with him and that was foolish on my part. Make sure I am not underestimating him."

I don't want to know this man's name or what he does. I keep an arm's length between what my investigator knows and what he tells me. I know how to play this game. I consider the clues and it becomes clear that my investigator is likely correct in identifying my Harrisburg dinner companion as the person behind the threats. He knows that Ruth is my mistress. The circle of

people who know that for sure consists of Ruth's family members and me. Even though Sarah has suspicions, she has no proof. This man took advantage of my candor. I cannot let that stand. My investigator knows what to do to make this man stop.

I hurry to attend a fitting at my tailor's shop. The tailor brings out a small selection of fabrics that are nearly indistinguishable from one another. He knows that I will be able to see their differences and I smile.

"You always know how to challenge me to be discerning," I say. He nods and lays out the fabric. I touch each one and think about how I will look in it. I point to my final selection, and he leaves it while scooping up the other options and taking them away. I let my fingers run over the fabric again and know I've made an excellent choice. Upon his return, he takes the final measurements and scribbles in his tailor's book. I've come to trust this man with whom I share my most intimate body dimensions.

As I exit the shop, the day seems brilliant. The sky is blue, the air is crisp, and I have selected an excellent fabric for my suit. I stroll down Chestnut Street on my way back to the courthouse. Several men along the way stop me to chat. I am well known in my city. A carriage slows down as I walk and offers me a ride. "Why not?" I say and step into the hansom cab. We slowly progress down the street, barely faster than a footpace. The driver takes a turn and yells back that he will get off the slow street to hasten our trip. I lean back but notice that the landscape is becoming unfamiliar. We are heading towards the Delaware River and not the Courthouse. Despite my protests, the carriage continues and picks up its pace. Finally, we stop next to an open field that is strewn with shacks and garbage.

I see a cluster of rough-looking men coming towards me. I admonish the driver to hasten away but he holds steady. One of the largest of the men pulls me out of the carriage and I am encircled. I protest as a smaller man in a suit comes forward. He announces himself as William Vare and I am taken aback. He is a notorious contractor and political operative. His late brother led the south Philly contractors' squad that frequently holds City Hall hostage for construction awards.

"I figure your reaction means you've heard of me," Mr. Vare says. I nod. "Good. Then this can be a quick and easy meeting. I am the head of my family's business since my brother died." He stops to cross himself in what I can only assume is a Catholic ritual. "I know a friend of yours. A man you met in Harrisburg wants my protection. He thinks you are out to harm him. I told him that couldn't be true. You have a fine reputation, Judge. But you should know I'm taking his side in your feud, just in case you do wish him harm. Are we on the same page?"

His hat brim is obscuring his eyes as I am taller than him. He does not look up at me. As I contemplate his question a man takes my arm and starts to squeeze. Before I can make a move, another man takes my other arm.

“Judge, let’s not play around. I think we both know how this is going to go.” Mr. Vare pushes his hat back off his forehead and looks at me. I nod. He motions to the men to let me go and one of them roughly pushes me towards the carriage. Nothing else is said before I hastily retreat to the carriage and the driver pulls down the street. As I get out at the courthouse my hands are shaking. I hurry to my office where I pull a bottle of whiskey out of my credenza and pour myself a bit in a glass. It burns as it goes down my throat but my hands calm. I call my investigator and tell him to stop his inquiries on the Harrisburg man. He protests and I am insistent. This case is closed, I tell him.

I assume that Mr. Vare and I have reached an agreement that I will not punish the man from Harrisburg, and he will not use the information he has against me. Was the man in Harrisburg there to intentionally approach me? Had I been so arrogant that I didn’t see his true intentions? Does the Vare family want a judge in their pocket, or do they want insurance that a judge won’t get in the way? Only time will tell what they want from me. I am angry that I was so easily manipulated in Harrisburg. My father would never have fallen for such a ruse. I let my arrogance get the better of me in this instance. I won’t let that happen again. I only hope I can survive whatever political chicanery the Vare’s throw my way.

I pour myself another round and make my vow, as my father had shared his with me. Today I declare that a judge must preserve his image and squash those who seek to damage the judicial process. I’ve seen what I can only assume is corruption by the Harrisburg police and now it has come home to roost in my backyard. I’ll not fall prey to it under any circumstances. I vow to never corrupt my public position. I finish my drink and call Ruth. I ask her to meet me for dinner at her place and to have Helen stay with her sister. Tonight, I’m going to have a night of passion. No more boundaries. If I can manage these political scoundrels, I can manage Sarah’s temper tantrums and demands. I deserve Ruth and I shall have her.

Ruth is sitting in her yellow wing chair. How many times have I witnessed this frame? It encapsulates her style, her guile, her charm. I remember the day she brought the chairs home. “These are garish. What are you thinking?” I had said. She smiled and by the time she cleaned them, placed them and sat in one, it was clear, I must leave all interior decisions to her.

“I wasn’t expecting you for another half hour. A nice surprise,” she says.

Her lips feel like berries gently rubbing mine. Her ever-present perfume is intoxicating tonight. I sit on the couch and stare at her beauty. Though not as classically attractive as Sarah is, Ruth exudes a radiance that is brilliant. I smile but she is engrossed in her magazine and telling me about whatever it is she’s reading. Suddenly, my eyes well with tears. I turn away and find myself overcome. My chest tightens and my mind races. I turn back towards her, and she is mouthing words, but I can’t hear them. I drop to my knees and wrap my arms around her legs. “Don’t leave me,” I whisper. Her hands are stroking my hair and then my shoulders. She lifts my chin to capture my attention.

“I’m never leaving you, no matter what our relationship becomes.”

I lean back on my hip to gaze at her breathtaking smile. This is why she is the love of my life.

We spend the night together and remain chaste. Being in her presence must be enough for me. I toss and turn with all the thoughts in my head. Maybe I'm fooling myself into thinking I can have two women in my life at once. Maybe the delusion is my ploy to gratify my ego. Ruth makes me happy. My child makes me happy. I have so little happiness in my other life with Sarah, that I cannot bear to cut the ties that bind me and Ruth. Sleep is closing in. I reach in the darkness and touch Ruth's hand. She locks her fingers in mine. I am at peace.