

THE LOST REFLECTION

Unleashing the darkest legend of New Orleans



BRUCE T. JONES

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The Lost Reflection
by Bruce Jones

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The journey has just begun.

*Throughout our lives we take our reflection for granted,
some more than others.*

*We wake up and stare, or perhaps merely glance into
the mirror, knowing the face we see
is the same as yesterday and the day before.*

*Aging slowly with time, reflecting pride or shame,
happiness or sadness,
many times not the person we want to see.*

*Some have the power to change their reflection,
most do not.*

*There is no hiding from the truth reflected,
but can you change it?*

*What would you give to see that familiar face again,
the one that has been lost forever?*



CHAPTER 1

THE NIGHT AIR in Jackson Square clung like a warm and soggy wool blanket—just another August night in the French Quarter. The spicy aroma of Cajun cooking permeated as tourists blended with the vast assortment of locals crowding the marketplace. Deep, earthy blues from a nearby restaurant reverberated off the historic walls of the surrounding structures. Saint Louis Cathedral, the oldest Catholic Church in the country, vigilantly towered over the square. Dim gas-glow flames scintillated from the street lanterns and buildings, scarcely illuminating the carnival atmosphere. Musicians, artists, and gypsies all worked their crafts to the delight of the nightly gatherers.

Stella LaRue was the oldest and wisest of the gypsy fortune tellers, a throwback to the classic gypsies in Lon Chaney movies of a bygone era. Stella was old, exactly how old nobody knew. An advancing kyphosis had given her a pronounced hump on her back. Crystal-blue eyes, so clear you would swear you could see right through them, highlighted her weathered cinnamon-brown face. Gray hair, tightly pulled back, framed her bandana-covered head. Jewelry excessively draped her neck and wrists. Most of it was worthless, but not to Stella. She valued it all with great reverence. Her mismatched,

bright, layered, oversized clothes stated simply that she was a fashion maven.

She did not waste her talents on the typical tourists. Leaving them to her brethren fortune tellers, Stella would wait, biding her time for the *one* to approach her. If she sensed there was something of value to share with this person, she would offer them her unique insight.

Even though the square was crowded with tourists, she felt no calling strong enough to make a little cash. She sat at her table and watched in amusement as many of the other girls worked their craft. They were indeed “working” the crowd, a skill she had taught most of them. Although the majority had never developed the gift Stella possessed, they were all good at mixing a little truth with a healthy dose of bullshit. Occasionally, Stella would casually eavesdrop, forcing herself to conceal a smile of amusement when she heard a good whopper.

Stella believed in hope and promise, not gloom and despair. Tap dancing around bad fortunes most of the time, she offered only a glimpse of potential tragedy. “What good is it to tell someone they are going to die tomorrow?” she would say. “Better to tell them that a loved one is about to suffer a great tragedy, show love to all near and dear. Tell them only a half-truth, for it’s never wise to share all of life’s mysteries.” Stella could sense bad karma like a mouthful of sour milk. Her purpose, she believed, was to set things right. And that is exactly what she did, masterfully blending truth and fiction. In the end, her message remained an undying constant. Love for another, yourself, the planet, it did not matter. Love conquers all.

Tonight was slow. There were no spiritual emergencies looming from any of these walking, talking specimens of sociologically decaying humans. Although it was a quiet night, Stella felt there was an ill cast to the moon, but the where or why had not become apparent. Imminently, this was about to change.

“Good evening, Madame Stella,” a young woman purred in a deep velvety voice as she approached.

“Good evenin’ to you, Lady Isabelle,” came a raspy, smoking induced reply.

The old woman was seated at a rickety fold-up card table with mismatched chairs, appearing to be salvaged from the Salvation

Army dumpster. On the table was a deck of Tarot cards and a crystal ball concealed by a blue velvet cover.

Accentuated by brilliant cobalt eyes, Isabelle's face was hauntingly flawless. Her black hair spiraled down just past her bare shoulders, contrasting against her moonlight-white skin. Tall and slender, she made her routine nightly rounds dressed in low-cut, lacy black attire, crippling the resistance of passing men regardless of female companionship.

It was ten o'clock, and like most nights, Lady Isabelle was on the prowl, constantly searching for fresh meat. As fate dictated, she was the anointed leader of the modern cult of vampire wanna be's inhabiting New Orleans. As the stories of vampirism traveled throughout the country, many wayward souls found the city's dark heritage created an ideal home. This modern-day cult consisted of the classic coffin-by-day-blood-drinker-by-night types, sexual predators, and mindfuckers. But they all shared one common thread: Lady Isabelle was their leader. Her mysterious persona, sex appeal, and gothic style made her matriarch of this bizarre cult of misfits. Her orgasmic consumption of blood was legendary amongst the clan of the "living dead."

"It looks like a slow night," Isabelle began.

"It's been steady 'ere, but I've got dis uneasy feeling 'bout the spirit ways tonight. I've been keepin' away from d'ose people," Stella reported as she thumbed in the direction of the tourists littering the square. "I'm jus' sittin' 'ere listenin' to da wind, what little dere is." Listening to the wind, as Stella put it, was her unique way of connecting with her karma. She claimed that she could hear voices calling, telling of things to be and things that had passed, all carried on the soft, gentle breeze that occasionally caressed her senses.

Periodically, the local police would visit Stella concerning unsolved crimes or missing persons. She would provide them with insight as to what had occurred, but often those clues were jumbled by insensible rantings and ravings from the spirit world. Stella was unable to interpret her messages, as she was in a transient state, totally unaware of the words flowing from her mouth. She existed somewhere between the world of the living and the dead and had no memory of these sessions. Only when the messages were comprehensible and clear did the police find her helpful. Although

somewhat inconsistent, her gift was known to many.

“Lord, child, sit down,” Stella exclaimed, alarmed by a sudden revelation. “It’s you.”

“What do you mean, it’s me?” Isabelle replied, unaware of Stella’s sudden premonition.

“I’ve been feelin’ something foul in da wind. Felt it dis morning when I got up. Been feelin’ it all day. Now ’ere you are and it’s plain as the black on your dress. It’s you! I can feel it.”

Having known Isabelle for many years through frequent nightly visits, they had grown close. Often, the wise gypsy would give stern advice, as one would their child. Like any daughter, Isabelle would choose to ignore or heed the advice. The tone of the warning, along with the belief the old lady’s craft was authentic, instantly sparked Isabelle’s curiosity.

“What is it? Can you tell me?”

“I don’ know. Maybe Kahlea can say.” Kahlea, Stella’s crystal ball, was her link to the spirit world. But unlike most portals, Kahlea worked, or at least Stella believed so. Whether the globe was indeed a medium, or in fact it was merely her psychic abilities, through Kahlea Stella witnessed glimpses of the future.

Isabelle did as instructed, sitting and pulling her chair close. Stella began caressing the ball with slow, intimate strokes. Kahlea suddenly developed a steamy condensation from within. Swirling cloud patterns flowed in a clockwise motion, intermittently mixed with dark abstract images that hovered against the current. “I see a man.”

Isabelle inched forward, attempting to discern the strange images being interpreted. “He comes like a storm. Misery and great danger surround his existence.” The patterns intensified and began to change hues. “I see evil, a great evil rising from da past. It clouds all our futures. Dere is so much death.” Stella paused and reflected. Unwillingly entangled, she fell deeper within the globe.

Genuine concern inched across Isabelle’s face. Never had Stella sounded such an alarm, or steered her down the wrong path. “Much remains unclear,” the old lady continued in a mesmerized tone. “There is great conflict wit’in dis man.”

Abruptly, the fog within the ball dissipated, transferring its energy to Stella’s eyes. Her once crystal-blue eyes quickly turned

opaque gray, blinding her. Fear welled up in the old woman. "Flee 'ere child. Dere is much danger."

"Ohhh," Stella moaned woefully as she glanced up searching, unable to make out the silhouette of the familiar woman before her. "Kahlea has lost her sight. Some evil from beyond has blinded us. Never before as dis 'appened," Stella wailed, confused, but not panicked by this anomaly. Isabelle remained transfixed on Kahlea, waiting for the globe to once again burst to life and reveal a sign or restore Stella's sight. Neither happened.

The gateway to an ancient evil had been breached and unexpectedly terminated. The evil had indeed blinded Kahlea and Stella. The danger of dwelling in the spirit world is never knowing who will awaken to answer the call of the medium. All of her long life, Stella had encountered spirits of many types, their triumphs and miseries, all laid out within the reaches of her enlightened mind. Even the most sinister of the spirit world could be tamed by her compassion. But the source from which this message came was not to be interpreted, communicated, or reasoned with. Its sole purpose was to forewarn of the unleashing of a great evil to come.

Stella sat in despair. The frightful calamity foretold paled in nature to the violent disruption from the message. Her eyes painstakingly began to clear as she continued to stare at the blurry silhouette before her. Isabelle's fine details remained shrouded in haze. "I fear Kahlea 'as been injured. I must take 'er 'ome now," Stella said as she rose and steadied herself against the table.

"But Stella, what does all this mean?"

"It means, child, you must leave dis place. Leave now and don' return any time soon. Your future remains unclear, but dis man, if you stay, his pain you will endure. You must leave. Dat is the only way."

"I can't leave here, this is my home," Isabelle proclaimed boldly. "Besides, I have many friends here who will protect me."

"I fear dat will not be enough. Dis man brings death to us all. Who lives or dies? Dat vision is lost. I don't know your part, but if you stay, you will be consumed in dis, dat much is certain," Stella lectured as she hurriedly gathered her belongings from the table. "Listen to me," she said, pointing a crooked finger, "I know your people will try to take care of you. I know you believe you 'ave to

stay, but please leave. Do dis for ol' Stella."

"I promise I will be careful." Taking the old lady's hand into her own, she gazed about the only city she had ever known. "You know I have nowhere else to go. Besides, traveling for my kind is not as simple as packing a suitcase."

"Your kind," Stella huffed, "I been tellin' you for years 'oney, you need new friends. Good people. D'ose people ain't doin' nothin' but bringin' you down baby."

"I am one of those people," Isabelle proclaimed stubbornly. "I know you think I can just change my ways, but you are wrong. I am what I am, and no desire to change will ever alter that."

"And so it is," Stella sighed, gazed up to the heavens, then back to Isabelle. "We are what we are, and dere's no denyin' dat. I know you 'ave no faith, but I pray, God be wit' you." With that, Stella broke hold of Isabelle's hand and finished packing her belongings into a worn tapestry bag.

Isabelle stood and watched Stella clumsily disappear around the corner. Silently, she contemplated the dire warning. But no man controlled her destiny. And after all, it was only one man. Besides, Stella did not know everything. She had never seen or believed in Isabelle's peculiar circumstances. With the old gypsy gone, Isabelle scoffed defiantly, "What do you know of my kind?"



CHAPTER 2

STARING OUT THE window of the Boeing 757, daydreams occupy my thoughts, which permits me a temporary disconnect from the intensity of life. On the plane there are no bullets, bombs, or assassins. Thanks to the castrations of homeland security, my fellow passengers are relatively harmless and rather boring. Lost in a daydream, I am shielded from meaningless encounters.

My profession demands I travel frequently, leaving no real home, few true friends, and certainly no serious romantic relationship. It was not like I did not try once, years ago. After that debacle, the notion of being attached to one woman became somewhat unappealing. Years passed, and I found the energy required for a relationship was better spent in other directions.

New York was the perfect fit for my lifestyle. I was raised in the city by my Aunt Rena. She was a large, robust woman with a heavy Romanian accent and a smile for everyone she met. Her size was only surpassed by her love of life.

Having no memory of my parents, who were killed during the early years of the Cold War, Rena filled in filtered details as she saw fit. According to Rena, I was smuggled out, only an infant, as

Communism began sweeping Eastern Europe. Vague details and general descriptions were the shallow roots I possessed. My family history, as well as half of the Romanian population, were destroyed during the war. Sadly, Rena and I were the only survivors of our family.

As a young adult, my interest led me to study computer technology at the University of Virginia. Thanks to Uncle Sam, I became a spook before finishing my degree. My forte with data encryption and foreign languages launched a career neither envisioned nor desired. It went like this: a mundane dinner meeting with the dean of computer sciences, two-hour limo ride to Washington, sign your name on the dotted line, handshake, and bam, I was a spook. For a financially crippled junior in college, that kind of money was impossible to refuse. Oddly enough, I never stepped foot on campus again, but magically a degree appeared about a year later. CIA magic.

And like the waves of the ocean, the magic never stopped. Computer geek extraordinaire, to field agent, to assassin—how does that happen? It was *kind of* a subtle thing. Subtle like a charging bull. If I knew what they had in mind for me, I would have bolted out the door and sprinted all the way back to UVA. One day while deciphering codes, a coworker suggested we go down to the pistol range to blow off some steam. Having done this on many occasions, he assured me I would love it. I had never even held a gun before, but after six hours of encryption, the thought of shooting something sounded appealing.

Appeal turned to love, then obsession. I could not get enough of the cold steely grip, the testosterone-pumping action of squeezing the trigger, the buck of the recoil, the smell of spent powder, and sound of the bullet singeing the air it dissected. In short order, I graduated to assault rifles. I made new friends there, very intense friends. They enjoyed sharing many aspects of their unique training in which I always participated, as a tagalong, so to speak. Now my daily regiment consisted of training—hand-to-hand combat, tactical assault, explosive devices, and occasionally computer work. Oddly, I never put two and two together until it was too late.

My first mission was rather simple. Sneak into the former Soviet Union, hack into an army general's computer, download a variety of top secret files, and get back home alive. Yep, piece of cake. Perhaps

it was time to reconsider that sprint back to UVA. But in a bizarre way, the danger beckoned me.

Spencer and Davis, two cowboys that had been thrown off the bull a few times too many, were in charge of the mission. The mission was a huge success, except Spencer got shot, Davis killed, and I had to waste two border guards crossing back into West Germany. Lesson seventy-eight—we were all expendable. The death of Buck Davis passed without notice. After all, we were on a mission that theoretically never happened. Quite frankly, we were not all expected to return.

Pulling the trigger on those guards was simple. It was live or die, and at age twenty-four I was not ready to check out just yet. Remorseless—that pretty much summed up my complete lack of emotion. A weaker man would have felt the pain, been concerned by the disconnect, but not me. Neptune became my code name. I was cold, hard, and distant as the sea. There was no funeral for Brian Denman, computer geek.

Never being privy to purpose, the less asked, the easier my job. Europe, Asia, South America, the Middle East, and all the shitholes in between became my playground. Years faded to decades. At the end, two years in Colombia convinced me enough was enough. Those fuckers were the craziest bastards I had ever run into. Sure, suicidal radical Muslims were crazy fucks, but they were no match for coked-up, drug-running cowboys. Not humanely killing people, but butchering and mutilating, they were the icing on the cake of lunacy. Not for any particular cause or shock value to a global audience, it was just good, old-fashioned fun, Colombian style.

After twenty years of service to my country, I quit for opportunities in the private sector. Politicians and the wealthy were always in need of my special talents. People with connections, power, and big checkbooks became my new employers. Some jobs were legitimate, others well, they legitimately paid well. The beauty was I now had the ability to pick and choose my assignments. Once again, my lack of conscience served as my capitalistic guide.

It was through this new career path that I met Phillip Wilder. Phillip was the owner and publisher of *Urban Legends Weekly* tabloid. *Urban Legends* was geared for a younger, hipper audience. On occasions, Phillip paid me dearly to unravel rumored stories

involving drug companies and their dangerous products. When subpoenas and grand jury inquisitions failed to get results, I was called in to apply more persuasive methods. It got ugly from time to time, but I always got results and was rewarded appropriately. In finality, a greater good was served. Phillip got one hell of a scoop, and I stayed gainfully employed and more important, compensated.

Occasionally, work proved to be entertaining—secrets of Hollywood stars, politicians and hookers, hell any public figure, and a rumor of misfortune that sold papers. True, I loved the added income, but more so it had become a favorite pastime, knocking down the high and mighty a notch or two. Especially the hypocrites.

A sudden violent drop in altitude jolted me from my reverie. Glancing out the window, I refocused my attention on the horizon. Once towering cotton cumulus clouds had darkened as the afternoon sun brewed up a powerful storm over the Gulf of Mexico. With each passing minute, the clouds swelled with moisture, and flashes of light announced the ensuing rodeo ride. As playful as a jeep traveling down mortar-shelled roads, our plane bounded through layers of unseen turbulence to the delight of nobody but me. Imaginary symphonies trumpeted Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, announcing my imminent approach. Sensing fear in the air, I suppressed an amused grin.

Brilliant streaks of lightning were followed by another substantial drop in altitude, the sort that catapult the stomach up your throat. We were descending into the storm on our final approach. A white-knuckled, double-fisted grip was attached to a rather attractive blonde who had been seated next to me since our departure from LA. Lost in my own world of self-absorption, I had completely tuned out the existence of anyone seated next to me. Now as the flight neared conclusion, I honed in on the most delectable pair of drumsticks I had seen in a long time. A slit in her short knit skirt revealed enough of her perfectly toned and tanned thighs to cause turbulence of a different nature. And yes, you might know it, those legs traversed past succulent sculpted calves all the way down to a pair of black leather pumps. White knuckles packed my one true

weakness: drop-dead legs.

Had we been in a restaurant, a department store, a park, or anywhere other than a plane, I would have succumbed to my weakness and made an attempt to connect with this leggy babe. But we were on a plane. I made that mistake once, years ago. It nearly cost me my life. Hence, golden rule number one.

Appearing reasonably distraught from the turbulence, I concluded she was near barf mode. Or was it mere theatrics to draw me into conversation to be followed by dinner and attempted murder for dessert? Paranoid? It mattered not. Rules are rules. Regardless of her wavy, sandy-blond hair appearing to have the texture of silk, draping neatly to her shoulders, and those full, moist, inviting lips framed by flawless skin, rule number one is never broken. Certainly those sparkling chestnut-hazel eyes would not sway my resolve, but damn those legs! I wondered if the shrinks back at the CIA had a name for my paranoia. Ever since the incident, chance encounters on airplanes were taboo. No more airplane buddies. Period.

Deciding to be the “good guy,” I attempted to help her. “Try to relax. It is far safer up here than it is down there.” She acknowledged me with a nervous smile. “You must not fly often.”

“It’s the first time in over five years,” she replied tensely.

“Up until the storm I would have taken you for a frequent flyer.” Any statement affording distraction would hopefully help her refrain from singing into the airsick bag.

“Why is that?”

Stupid, offbeat, or humorous statements usually work the best. Her death grip on the armrest eased, relaxing the swollen veins in her hands ever so slightly. Enemy operatives are skilled in faking these reactions to initiate conversations. I was not buying into this damsel in distress, not yet.

“Well, I do not wish to offend or embarrass you, but I find you very attractive. It has been my experience that women like you, that look like you, traveling from LA for whatever purpose, usually have a lifestyle that affords frequent travel.”

“Is that all?”

“No. I also noticed you don’t have a wedding ring. But I am willing to bet you are married or were married. Judging from your tan, you spend time outdoors, and legs that exceptional,” I said as my eyes

wandered south, “do not happen by accident.”

She absorbed my observations in brief silence as a smirk curled up from the corner of her mouth. “Wow, and to think I thought your head was crazy glued to the window the entire flight. I’ve often wondered what goes through people’s minds when they sit in isolation for hours. In your case, now I know. How long did it take you to assimilate your observations, detective? Did you do it on the fly?”

“I am not a detective, but I must confess, I saw the reflection of your legs in the window the moment you sat down. The rest of it was right off the cuff. My line of work requires me to analyze people and situations and preemptively remove threats which might prove harmful.”

She appeared perplexed.

“I hope I did not embarrass you, but I do not waste time with bullshit. I tell people what I am thinking whether they like it or not. Honesty is rarely pleasant. And my name is Brian, unless you prefer to call me detective. I have answered to worse.”

She held out a well-manicured hand. “Okay, Brian, Mister Straight Shooter, I am Samantha.”

I had never been one to shake the hand of women. I took her hand and kissed it softly. Her skin was lightly fragranced and smooth as chiffon. Her reaction was not uninviting. “It is my pleasure to meet you. So how did I do?”

The sensation of my lips on her hand appeared to rattle her calculating demeanor as she appeared to count off an imaginary checklist before answering.

“I have always hated flying and prefer to drive just about anywhere. I have been separated from my husband for more than a year, live in Beverly Hills, and love tennis and running. So all in all you are pretty much on the mark.”

I grinned at my accuracy.

“So what is your story, Brian? Are you always this brutally charming?”

“Handshakes are for guys. This is how I greet every woman I meet.”

“Darn, for a minute I thought I was getting some special treatment. That was the first kiss of any type since my husband left. And I’m not sure why, but the kiss reminded me it might be nice to enjoy

the company of a man for a change.”

“The company of a man? That sounds like an open-ended proposition.”

A sudden drop in altitude instantly diverted her attention as Samantha redoubled her grip on the armrest. I lightly touched her hand reassuringly. She looked at my hand on hers and then back to me nervously. “I have flown most of my life. This little turbulence is nothing. Try to relax.”

She loosened her grip ever so slightly and forced a smile. “Easy for you to say.” Gazing intently into each other’s eyes, that rare, silent, concise moment transpired when energy between two people connect, where all that exists are two naked spirits fully exploring each other’s being. It happens in a flash, then bam, the moment is gone.

Simultaneously we snapped our attentions forward. She felt it too.

Frightened by a sensation she could not perceive, “I can’t believe myself,” she said, blushing, continuing to stare at the seat in front of her. “I have known you all of five minutes and I’m ready to ...”

“Ready to what?”

“Nothing. It’s just ever since my husband decided he needed to be married to a twenty-one year-old Laker cheerleader with fake boobs, I’ve lived like a nun.”

“Relax, Sister Samantha. Your virtue is safe with me.”

Samantha felt compelled to explain, to justify her newly discovered desire to be free. Unwilling to leave the safe harbor the headrest granted, she talked to the seat in front of her. “I was so angry with all men. I just wanted all of you to go away. It is going on two years, and he is out having all the fun while I continue to live in our home, thinking he will come back. Kind of pathetic, don’t you think?”

“You do realize you are thinking out loud.”

“Too much information?”

“No, but I usually do not meet many women that open up quite as quickly as you. To answer your question, no, it is not pathetic. Not if you truly loved him. But it can be difficult to diagnose the difference between true love and love of a lifestyle. I know too many women that could not tell you the difference if you held a gun to their head. But take away their lifestyle and they know the difference instantly. Sadly, going from riches to rags, most will not even make

the effort to stomach it. The lifestyle goes away and so do they. That is what I consider truly pathetic.”

Samantha turned to me, waiting for more of my self-guided wisdom. This situation was getting out of hand. Her mesmerizing eyes glistened with sadness, reflecting pain. She glanced down at the floor momentarily, then back to me uneasily. Embarrassment and confusion resided within her eyes and were on the verge of spilling out all over me. I had never experienced such emotion merely looking into a woman’s eyes. Emotional thoughts, me? There was no way. Time to suppress that shit. She was not allowed anywhere near my inner thoughts, although she was clearly inching along that barbed-wire fence. Keep talking. Make something up! I broke eye contact and filled my head with another look at her legs.

“I’m up here,” she said timidly, managing a quirky smile.

“Busted!” I said. “It is easy to confuse love for a person with everything that person brings to your life—cars, homes, money, fame, or even simple companionship. I am willing to bet you had it all.” She nodded affirmatively. “That is nothing but easy love, if you ask me. Could you have stayed in love if he lost it all?”

Samantha looked as if she was waiting for me to continue, but then responded, “I could have.”

“Sorry if I seem a little cynical, but what little true love I’ve witnessed is where the greatest asset is each other. The people who have it all rely on all the wrong things. I believe wealth corrupts our ability and clouds our judgment when it comes to understanding the most basic human need—love.”

“What do you do that affords you all this insight? What makes you such an expert on the subject?”

“I am an outsider looking in, an armchair quarterback. It is easy to analyze the game when you are on the sidelines. And that is all you get to know about me.”

“You sound like a man who is hiding or ashamed of something.” Samantha’s demeanor flipped like a bad comb-over on a windy day. Unintentionally, I had insulted her way of life. On an offensive, she released the armrest, no longer paying attention to the turbulence which had intensified.

Not wanting to answer, I remained silent, sensing a growing connection on an undefinable level. Regretfully approaching New

Orleans, I found myself wishing this conversation started long before it did.

“Are you married, Brian, or have you been?” she asked insistently, arms crossed, trespassing on my thoughts and ignoring my insistence on personal privacy.

I sighed. Not an irritated sigh, but one of an unrelenting conviction succumbing to a weakness unfamiliar to me. “My job does not permit it.” There was an unintended sadness in my tone.

“Oh my gosh. Are you a priest?”

“As many confessions as I have heard, one might think so. But no. Love in my line of work is just not an option.” I paused to reflect on the very career that led to a life of shallow relationships. It was not that I enjoyed or disliked what some might call shallow, it was just the life that went with the territory.

My melancholy tone sparked sympathy. Again, my silence was invaded by her inquisitiveness. “So, if you are going to shut me out before we have a chance to get started, I feel you owe me an explanation.” Her infectious smile weakened my ironclad defenses.

“Well, honey, if it will make our divorce less painful then I shall illuminate. I was in love once, years ago. Ever seen a skyscraper collapse? That is the scale of how it ended. My job requires me to pick up and leave at the ring of a phone. It is dangerous, to the degree that one day I probably will not return home. It is much easier to have short, insignificant relationships rather than meaningful ones that crush two people in the end.”

Her eyes would not release me. Unforeseen guilt forced me to turn away once more. I could not remember the last time I lost a staring contest. She shifted in her seat, revealing more of those tantalizing legs. Way too much, I thought, as a new discomfort stirred. She followed my gaze down to the object of my attention. “Stay with me up here, Brian.” Damn, she was good. My concrete wall of resolve just suffered a major assault vis-à-vis my pathetic psychosexual fetish. Apparently my opponent was readily equipped with a lethal arsenal, hellbent on ruining what was once a damned good disciplined soldier.

“So why don’t you just quit?” she asked point-blank. “If you met the right person, I would think love would be so much more fulfilling than any career.”

I dared not tell her I did exactly that, the quitting part, almost twenty years ago. Talk about lame excuses, but that was all I had. I had never really thought about the concept of relationships after I retired. I kept on just getting on. “How would I know it was love? And love takes time and commitment. Look where it got you. You thought your husband loved you and it would last forever. Did you give up a career for him? Friends? Don’t you have regrets?”

“Touché,” she sighed. “But for fourteen years, I thought it was the right thing. Up until he left, I had no regrets about my marriage. Then one day he decided he wanted more than I could provide. I have spent many a sleepless night wondering what went wrong. The man I once loved, I now despise. The pain at times has been unbearable.

“As much as I loathe Mike now, as much as it still hurts like hell, I would never wish those years away. There is no promise love will last forever. Everything has an end. He was part of the life that made me who I am today. Thanks to him, we are having this conversation.”

Okay, she had a small point. But I was compelled to justify myself. “I did not want my relationship to end either, but it did. So I entrenched myself in my work, never making time to get involved again. Maybe I miss it, from time to time, but love is one thing that cannot be controlled, and I am an in-control type of guy.”

“Your attitude makes it hard for a girl to think she might have a chance.”

“We were doomed from hello.”

Samantha leaned toward me, akin to an attorney leaning over the jury box, prepared for the case-winning rebuttal. “Brian, you have made me feel ... so unexpectedly ... emotions I thought were lost. The least you can do is tell me why.”

“Fair enough.” I conceded to the desire in her eyes. “About twenty-five years ago, I met a woman like you on a flight—intelligent, witty, and good looking. We hit it off and one thing led to another, dinner, drinks, her place ... then boom! She put a bullet in my head. Since then, no more friendly skies. It turned out she was not just your garden-variety psycho bitch. She was a hitter. She sat right beside me, just like you, played mindfuck, then put a bullet right here.” I pointed to the faint scar. “Thus the golden rule. End of story.”

“Oh my gosh. Twenty-five years ago? I would think you should

have gotten over it by now.” A covert yet obvious smirk telegraphed her belief that I survived, thus I should put on my big-boy underwear and get on with life.

“I have, thank you very much.” I protested, retreating against the window. What the hell did she know. I bet she had never been shot. “It just so happens I choose not to include anyone I have met on a plane in my post-flight itinerary.” My thoughts became random and disorganized. “That woman was not the only person who would like to clock me out permanently. I know too many dirty little secrets about influential people. If I were to ever write a book, a tell-all, people would go to jail, get divorced, or have their lives totally screwed up.”

“If that were the case, why aren’t you living on a secluded island? Why only single out women on a plane?” Our conversation was interrupted by the standard tray table and seat upright announcement.

After a moment, Samantha broke the silence. “Brian, I want more.”

“I am sorry, Samantha, this is all there is. If circumstances were different, I would ...”

“Brian,” she began patronizingly.

I flashed back to my childhood. “Brian.” Aunt Rena’s parental lectures always began in the same tone.

“I like your straight-forward honesty, it is so refreshing. You have made me feel a bit adventurous, maybe even mischievous. But regardless of your reasons, please have dinner with me. I promise not to broach any topic you don’t want to discuss.”

I started to shake my head, signaling a silent rejection. Samantha intercepted my response and placed her hand on my leg. She smiled devilishly. “I promise, I won’t try to kill you.”

I flashed an awkward smile, but still found no words to respond. I had to turn her down, but did not want to. She turned to me once again, affording an excessive view of her legs, which I believe she did intentionally. She watched as my gaze returned to the objects of my weakness. I was on the ropes, and she damn well knew it. Unfortunately the inner boy had already left the plane and was headed for the nearest hotel room.

Samantha waited for a reply. Her expression telegraphed the Ironclad was sinking. “If it would help ease your suspicions, I am

willing to submit to a strip search before dinner, to ensure I am unarmed,” she whispered in my ear.

The clicking of seat belts announced our arrival. As we stood to deplane, Samantha turned, our faces closer than they had been the entire flight. She took advantage of the moment and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Sorry, that’s just a girl thing, I didn’t mean anything by it,” she giggled. She turned, leaving me lockjawed and astonished.

Samantha walked briskly up the jetway, her smile fading, not looking to see if Brian followed. “What in the hell did I just do?” she murmured.

Spotting her sister, waving comically in the baggage claim area, Samantha picked up the pace. Hugging her sister, she handed the baggage claim stubs to Dana. “I have to pee, watch for my bags.” Practically running, Samantha bolted for the restroom.

In the secluded safety of the restroom, she splashed her face with cold water. “To hell with the makeup,” she fussed loud enough to be heard.

She dried her face and stared into the mirror. “Samantha Allen, what have you done?”

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