

One Cold Sunday

ONE COLD SUNDAY

A Psychological Thriller

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Chapter 1

A yellow cab pulled up in front of his townhouse. Doyle stared at the door; something didn't feel right. *A fitting end to a crappy day.*

"This twenty-three-fifty-nine?"

"Yes, sir, twenty-three-fifty-nine Mass, like you said, sir."

Doyle shook his head and handed the taxi driver a wad of cash. He didn't know how much, but the cabdriver beamed. His airport conversation with Ralph had gone on far too long, three scotch and waters, an appetizer, entrée, and two bottles of wine too long.

Doyle fumbled for the door handle. "Where's the friggin handle?"

"Allow me, sir." The cabby said, exited his vehicle, and pulled open the door frustrating Doyle.

He steadied himself against the vehicle while the driver retrieved his luggage. He passed the roller board's handle to Doyle, who stood there, ogling the object, questioning its utility in his current condition. He pushed off from the cab. *Why didn't I come home directly and call Hampton? Now I'll have to deal with her on Monday morning.*

Doyle stared intently at his watch to determine the time, but he was unable to make any sense of the dials and numbers.

"Have a good night, sir."

Doyle wobbled and nodded. A head-clearing surge of cold air struck his face and blew a chill through his open overcoat. The night was late or the morning early. He wasn't sure which but decided it didn't matter. He took two steps and then stumbled at the curb, losing his grip on his rolling luggage.

"You okay?" yelled the driver.

"It's alright." Doyle waved his hand, his head bobbing, as he struggled with the flat ground. He recaptured his roller board and managed the few steps to his door. He heard the cab drive off as he fumbled with his keys, nudging the door as he did. It opened. A sobering pulse of adrenalin surged. *I locked the door when I left; double-checked it like always.* He released his luggage, prodded the door open with two fingers, and listened for any sound, but everything, even the wind, was quiet.

With balled fists, Doyle entered. Looked up the stairs for any signs of movement, but only his heavy breathing broke the silence. He reached into a closet on his left for any advantage. His hand found a cane, a mocking gift from his thirtieth birthday.

He felt the wall on his right for the light switch.

A sound.

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What was it? Feet shuffling, or the swirling of last fall's leaves outside the open door?

The day, his dinner, facing Hillary, all attacked his thoughts. *I laid out the plan, Doyle, don't screw things up. I dead-bolted the door I know I did. But I went back in to check the slider. I locked it, didn't I? You always fuck things up, Doyle. Come on another Manhattan. What's waiting for you at home? More boxes?*

Doyle shook his head and strained to hear, but nothing confirmed the noise. He flicked on the lights; the rooms appeared as he left them. The wooden armchair where he first sat that morning, still askew, his half-finished coffee on the low table in front of the sofa.

He ran his hand through his hair. I'm drunk, get some water, then bed.

Doyle closed the front door behind him. The room filled with the silence of the night, a click, a whirr, all from the guardians of modern convenience. He kept walking stick to steady his weaving gait and stepped the length of the carpeted living room to his dining area only defined so by parquet flooring and a dark stained contemporary dinner table. He halted mid-step and turned around, examining a blank white wall. The paintings, the objects of so much angst, were gone. He spun around, searching the room. What he missed as he entered sat wrapped in brown paper, leaning against the front wall, the paintings Cheryl so obsessively sought.

A black blur lunged from the kitchen onto his back.

Thrown to the floor, he squirmed to getaway. The lights went out.

Doyle reached for the escaping shadow, catching a foot with the cane.

He fell.

Doyle rushed forward, leaping to pin the would-be a robber, clothed in black, to the floor, but two feet met his torso and hurled him back into the dining room.

The cane flew out of his hand.

The attacker leaped on top of him, pinned his shoulders down, and pounded his face. Doyle rolled, and twisted, finally succeeding in throwing him under the dinner table.

Doyle bolted upright, but tangled by their legs, fell; his head caught the edge of the table. He lay in a fog. The dark figure scrambled to his feet. A foot plowed toward Doyle's head. Fog lifted. His hands caught the attacking shoe, twisted. The form fell on him.

Tangled and pulling his attacker stood. He pounded his head into Doyle's. Recoiling from the force of the blow, Doyle fell back slamming against the kitchen counter, his head splintering a cabinet door, he was losing his ability to fight.

The assaulting figure grabbed Doyle's thick mane of hair and pulled his head back, slamming it down into the granite countertop. Doyle's arms thrashing, he swept the counter behind him. His hands found his knife block. The intruder raised his head again. Flailing, Doyle grabbed a handle, pulled and spun facing his foe. Doyle plunged the blade into his right side.

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A groan, deep-throated, then a shrill gasp, sent a chill through Doyle's core. His assailant fell back but remained standing. Doyle stood gasping, eyes fixed on the bloody knife in his hand. The dark clothed assailant, one hand clutching a crimson flow, stretched out the other in futile defense. The arrogance of their act, the violation of his life erupted into Doyle's mind. In a flash of rage, Doyle launched the knife into his stomach, tearing across the body. A whimper, blood surged from his mouth, the figure clutched his shoulder, and slid to the floor, intestines bulging from the gash.

Doyle dropped the knife, stepped back, and lunged for the sink behind him. A wretch, then another, and his stomach erupted into the drain. He stood, braced against the cabinetry, spitting, gasping for breath. A tremor roiled through his body, his arms shaking, testing his grip on the granite.

The rush waned. Still panting, he turned back facing the figure, the black blur that had attacked him. A wisp of blond hair connected the chill that ran through him, the first hint of identity more terrifying than the attack. Doyle's vision cleared like a camera zooming in on a distant prominence, an emergent crimson pool framed the body of his attacker, not a man, but a woman of strength.

The haze of his struggle, the blindness of denial lifted as a revolting realization seeped into his consciousness. A surge of fear enfeebled his limbs as he moved toward the body. Using the cabinetry and appliances, to steady himself, he stooped low, touching the hair masking her face. His heart pounded at the suggestion of her features, his breath coming in gasps.

Be a man, a real man, instead of milk toast. Say the words so everyone can hear, I'll kill you, slice your guts out so you can carry them in your arms. Do the reasons matter?

"Cheryl?" He croaked. "Why... oh god, oh god no." Screaming Doyle repulsed back, slipping in the blood on the floor, he fell crashing against the refrigerator. This is a nightmare it couldn't be. It can't end, not this way. He sat in horror, staring at the fruit of his obsession.

Chapter 2

They didn't realize it then, but their marriage began to unravel when the couple walked up a winding driveway in Potomac Maryland. They were as paupers at a royal banquet. Cheryl Arnault was stunningly beautiful that day. Her roots were in a family synonymous with wealth and embedded in the founding history of Washington's Georgetown. Cheryl's father, Charles Arnault, was the wealthiest man in the District of Columbia. However, she married to spite him and lost everything except her name.

Doyle Laboy was her husband of two years, and a third-year lawyer at Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls. Doyle wasn't handsome, had no lineage. He was a mongrel, forgotten by his father, forsaken by his mother, and memories of both buried deep in his subconscious. Nevertheless, he managed to be here. S, H, and G is how it rolled from the tongue of the moneyed. Those who worked there used an epithetic form, SHaG. No matter the reference, Smith Hinchman was a top-tier H Street law firm. And it was no small miracle that Doyle found himself immersed in the wealth of Potomac like a cinder in a diamond sea.

He held his wife's arm, attempting to steady Cheryl's steps in four-inch heels over the leaf-strewn driveway.

"Cheryl, we must hurry," he said, "I was supposed to be here thirty minutes ago."

She stopped and glared as an autumn gust wrapped her thigh-length blond hair around her, obscuring her face.

"Really, Doyle," she said, tossing her head and brushing her hair behind her. "You wanted me to wear this tight dress and heels to impress your clients." She pulled her white fox wrap tighter around her exposed shoulders.

Doyle regretted his words. Nodding acknowledgment of her complaint, he urged her forward. He didn't think her words rang precisely true. The process of dress selection was always more of a wrestling match but had helped his career. However, Doyle didn't appreciate the implication.

His boss was hosting this open house. The invitations read to 'warm the new home with friends and family.' The working staff was neither and there to warm new clients to Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls. His boss was Hillary Mercedes Hampton, a full partner in the firm.

Cheryl loved her heels but not for long-distance walking. She glanced at Doyle. "You said they had valet service, so why did you park so far away?"

Doyle smiled, a thin pained grin as if experiencing a sudden throb behind his eyes. "Sorry Cher, I'm a junior associate, not a partner. The valet service is probably just for them and guests."

A short beep from an approaching car moved them hastily to the edge of the driveway. The accumulation of burnt-orange oak leaves there stopped Cheryl. They both turned, manikin grins acknowledging the passing of a champagne-white auto.

"Isn't that your buddy, Aiden, your cube-mate?" She asked her face tight, her brow furrowed in scorn.

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“I told him I got an Audi A7.”

“And you didn’t want to be seen without it. That’s why I’m breaking my ankles?”

“Well, I did look at them at a dealership in Tysons,” he said as they reached the steps to the house.

“I have also. My father owns three of them and promised me one. If I didn’t marry you, instead, I did,” she said, flashing a mocking grin. “You were a lot more fun then.”

They entered the palatial home. The vacuous foyer had a grand piano and room for three more. Its polished marble floor had veins of magenta that matched the suggestion of color in the walls and soaring Grecian columns in each corner. They coat-checked Cheryl’s wrap and his coat and walked to a table centered in the foyer.

A young woman sat there behind an array of name tags. She was thick-bodied with auburn hair tightly wound into a bun. “Hi Karen,” Doyle said, “you have name tag duty?”

“Yes, and Miss Arnault welcome, I’m Karen Dolan. I don’t think we’ve met.” That’s the way it usually went for Doyle, her beauty and recognition, he on the carousel but never the brass ring. He felt a twinge of regret, a small hole in the wall holding back his emotions.

He saw the contrast between the two women. Cheryl had a tight and well-proportioned body, conspicuous in her silver open shoulder dress, molded to her proportions. Eyes followed her into every room she entered for her looks or her father’s money, which everyone assumed was hers also. Karen was different. Her hair complimented her wine-red bell-sleeved blouse, and her black straight-line pants struggled to contain her figure and keep a waist. Few noticed when she entered a room, but she was aware of all of them. Doyle counted her as a friend since the day they both started at SHaG. She started in research, he a paralegal in litigation.

“Here is your name tag, Doyle. Ms. Hampton wanted to see you as soon as you arrived. She is in her study.” She pointed to a closed three-panel Mahogany door across the foyer. Doyle nodded, pulled on his tux jacket, and turned in that direction. “You might think about saying, Mr. Robert Kline caught you as you were leaving.”

Doyle ran a hand through his thick black hair. “Mr. Kline?”

“Your late, Doyle, you know she hates that. But being late for a client has merit. Kline’s litigious, rich, talks a lot and visits often. He caught Hillary in the lobby a few times, made her late. Fishing’s a favorite topic.”

Doyle pursed his lips and shook his head in understanding. “Thanks, Karen.” He walked toward the three-panel door.

“We are so happy you could join us, Miss Arnault,” Karen said.

“Where’s the bar, Karen, I’m going to need something strong to get me through another one of these socials.”

Karen hid a smile with her hand. She leaned over to Cheryl. “Silly isn’t it Cheryl? I get into my pitch, and I can’t stop. Did you hear, sisters are getting together Friday at the Panther. You going?” Then she straightened and gave a wave to a small group of tuxedoed young men at the stairs to the main building.

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"I don't know, I'll call Marge," Cheryl said, flashing a thin smile.

"Danny will escort you to the reception and open bar." A tall, athletic-looking man arrived and gave Cheryl a red-carpet grin. "Doyle will rejoin you in a few minutes, please enjoy the refreshments while you wait."

Doyle hesitating at the study door turned in time to see the man in a black tuxedo step over to Cheryl and saying something extend his arm. She laughed and seemed to be flirtatiously enjoying his attention. Doyle's impulse to interject himself as Cheryl's escort was apparent to anyone who was watching, but no one was. He leaned in the direction of the departing couple, and then caught himself, returning to his task. Doyle knocked and opened the door.

He stopped at the threshold. Hillary was reading something on her desk. She had her usual short crop of white hair highlighted with silver and combed back with a deep part on the left. Her face was granite hard without a hint of her age, high cheeks, full lips, and a low-profile nose. She ran a dictatorial office, and her reputation for wielding power in the boardroom and bedroom were common gossip at S, H, and G. "Where the hell you been Doyle?" She said without raising her head.

He entered, and with an open hand shrug related Karen's chatty Robert Kline story. A long silent pause caused Doyle to imagine the next moments dodging desk accouterments. A common pointed response for disappointing. Then Hillary dropped her silver-rimmed glasses to the desk. She raised her eyes and put a hand under her chin. "Bob can talk, what was his story this time?"

"Fishing, a big one... a Marlin, I believe he said, on a trip ten miles out from Ocean City."

Doyle held his breath. His words were an elaboration, bold or foolish, but a necessary risk to convince her. Hillary stared; he felt her cobalt blue eyes assessing his believability as she calculated the worth of a challenge.

She dropped her hand and picked up her glasses. "You need to work on your conversational skills, Doyle. Don't be late again."

"Yes, I won't talk to clients... I mean no more than necessary... ah, conversational skills, certainly."

Hillary pinched the bridge of her nose. "Come over here and sit, Doyle. You're giving me a headache."

Doyle took a seat in front of her desk. Hillary stood, behind her desk, an arm folded across her chest.

"I assume you thoroughly digested the file I sent you yesterday."

Half the night reading it. It would be nice to get these briefs before six at night. "Yes, Roman Wiseman, Gaylord Cruises, he had a problem."

Hillary raised a hand. "Normally, being late, I would have invited you here only for the pleasure of deriding your sorry ass before I fired you. But you are lucky. Roman Wiseman arrived ten minutes ago, Doyle. He doesn't like me, and he doesn't like our firm, but you're going to change that. He does like money, free booze, and pretty women. Your wife is Cheryl Arnault, isn't that correct?"

"Yes, yes, she is my wife."

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“Good. Wiseman is in trouble but doesn’t know it yet. One of his ships ran aground a few months back. You may have heard of it.”

“Yes, bridal shower cruise, yes, I remember, the family was from McLean, and very well off I believe. Several people were injured. The bride’s mother, I think.”

“Comforting that you are aware of some things, Doyle. The aggrieved are about to bring suit against Roman for a considerable amount of money, and S, H, and G wants... I want to represent him.”

“Yes, ma’am, I see.”

“Don’t use that term, Doyle. It’s Ms. Hampton. Now look, you make sure he has everything he wants to drink, and a good time. Introduce him to your wife, have her flirt a little, and convince him he needs to talk to me before he leaves.”

“Yes, Ms. Hampton, I’ll make that happen.”

“The partners are meeting before the holidays to consider new candidates, Doyle, so don’t screw things up,” Doyle said, remaining seated with his hands folded in his lap. *Cheryl’s not going to be thrilled. But getting a shot at associate partner should sweeten the effort.*

Hillary put on her glasses. “Doyle? Mr. Wiseman. Now,” she said, flicking him away with both hands.

Chapter 3

Cheryl stood in the living room, staring out soaring windows at the extensive patio and pool behind the house. She missed her life as an Arnault, the attention, the jetting to exotic places for excitement, to fend off boredom, but most of all, because she could. Cheryl turned to face the room and saw Doyle approaching with two martinis in hand. His thick black hair stacked like so much seaweed on top an oblong face, his prominent chin flicking upward as he sighted her. She had already consumed two cocktails when Danny excused himself minutes before.

“About time, Doyle,” she said, accepting one of the martinis, “I’m bored to tears. We’ve made our appearance can we leave now?”

A server carrying a tray of hors-d'oeuvres approached. Doyle waved him over. “Have something to eat, Cheryl” he said, and then to the server, “This looks good. What is it?”

“Lobster toast with avocado, sir, delightful.”

Doyle offered a Lobster toast to Cheryl. She sipped her martini and glared over her glass in mute refusal. Doyle continued holding his offering. “Okay, fine.”

Doyle downed the bit of toast and took two more. He then washed them down, draining his martini. “I could get a promotion out of litigation, perhaps associate partner, after tonight.”

“Oh Doyle, the allowance daddy used to give me makes your income, even if you did make associate partner, look like food stamps.”

“Except daddy has cut you off. Wouldn’t you like the freedom to say what you think?”

“I always do.”

“That’s for certain, but I mean without consequences.”

A server with a tray of martinis floated by and Cheryl snatched one as did Doyle. She remained silent.

“Of course you have a liberal arts degree,” Doyle said, “I sure you could find something to support your tastes.”

“Work?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, please.” Cheryl finished her drink and grabbed Doyle’s. “You’re going to pimp me again.”

“That’s rather strong, Cheryl dearest, very friendly with a little flirting, make him feel part of the family.”

“Family?”

“SHaG, of course.”

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“Who’s the mark?” Cheryl asked while working to slip off her diamond ring.

“Roman Wiseman, he owns Gaylord Cruises, he—”

“Yah, I’m aware,” Cheryl said, achieving success with the ring. “Here, put this in your pocket. One of his boats ran aground. My party mate, Agatha, her aunt, was on that boat, tragic, they had to postpone the wedding. I was so looking forward to it. The reception was to be at the Top of the Adams. Now, who knows where it will be, although Agee’s aunt, never one to be outdone, she will take—”

“Him for a big chunk of change, she broke both legs. Fortunately, he doesn’t realize what’s coming.”

Cheryl moved the open sleeves of her dress slightly off her shoulder, revealing more cleavage. “Oh, he’s being sued by Agatha’s... he is in trouble. When it comes to money, like, she is a pit bull.”

Doyle lightly touched Cheryl’s arm, pointing her to an open bar several sitting areas across the room. “He is the large fellow with the horse laugh at the entertainment room bar.”

“Aren’t they always?” She discarded her drink on a window ledge. “Well, the bar is convenient, anyway. Let’s go.

Roman, draped over the far end of the bar top, drink in hand, and his elbow on the counter, had spotted them. His outsized fleshy hands cradled a double single-malt. Cheryl knew the type. A high-rolling voyeur, the kind she sometimes had, and sometimes not, tried to avoid in Vegas, at the country club, or celebrity cruise. She could tick off what he was sure to display without being close enough to see. Gold chain, Rolex, pearl white teeth, and fake flashy smile. He was hunting for a trophy, for the night, for the weekend, but never forever.

Cheryl realized Roman was watching from across the room. He was now tracking her every movement. She sashayed her way through the mingling crowd exaggerating step and sway. She took her time, touching an arm, a hearty laugh with concave shoulders her dress exposing just a little more. It was a show, and for once, Doyle didn’t rush her.

Cheryl landed at the bar, like a wave crashing over sand; her hair spun over the side of her face as she washed over a stool. Without hesitation, she tasked the server with making a vodka gimlet. Blocking Roman’s approach, Doyle introduced himself. You’re Mr. Roman Wiseman, I believe. I’m Doyle Laboy, Smith, Hinchman and Grylls litigation associate.”

“Uh-huh, thanks for the name tag read.” Roman then tipped his head to Doyle’s ear. “Who is the silver goddess that came with you?”

“Oh, ah... Cheryl, she’s my wi—” Doyle coughed to stifle words. “Excuse me,” he continued his voice raspy and strained, “she is a great admirer of S, H, and G.” He cleared his throat. “Who I just had the pleasure of meeting.” He turned to Cheryl. “Cheryl, Mr. Wiseman, a future client, we hope. Roman, Cheryl Arnault.”

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“Ah, Miss Arnault.” Roman edged Doyle away from the counter. Cheryl tossed her tresses behind her and cocked her head in Roman’s direction. Doe eyes locking onto Roman as she sipped her drink through a cocktail straw. Roman settled on a stool next to her; she offered a coy smile.

“Arnault, as in Charles Arnault, grandson of Herman Arnault, builder, and developer of Georgetown.”

“One and the same Roman.”

“Tell me Miss Arnault are you really an admirer of, what do you people call it, oh yes, SHaG?”

“More of a marriage, you might say. But you didn’t come over here to talk shop; you had a different intercourse in mind, didn’t you?”

Roman bellowed a hearty laugh and turned facing Doyle. “You ought to marry this girl.”

“A few have tried,” Cheryl said, laughing with Roman, “but a girl has to be picky, what she’s got doesn’t last forever.”

Roman laughed again. “Marry me, Cheryl.”

“I don’t believe you can afford another, Roman. The Post gossip pages saying your fourth wife’s picking you cleaner than a feral dog’s bone.”

The laughter left Roman’s face. He glared at Cheryl. She rolled her bottom lip, her face a child-like pout. She ran her hand through his hair. “Sorry Romy, you couldn’t afford me.”

He tossed his drink down his throat and then set his glass on the bar. “Thanks for the laughs,” he said and turned for the door.

“Mr. Wiseman,” Doyle called after him, “I’ve been doing a little, well, research. When was the last time you were at your house in Cheverly Hills?”

“We’ve been separated for six months. I’m staying at the Residence Inn on E. Why?”

“Seems your wife is sponsoring a Bolivian student attending American U.”

“Yah, she has always been big on that philanthropic stuff.”

Doyle tapped the screen on his phone and then presented it to Roman. The image was of a curly-haired brown-skinned young man of modest facial features, broad open mouth smile, and his shirt off exposing a taught chest. “This is the student, Miquel Glacomitti, and according to his social media, he is living at you Cheverly house.”

Roman took hold of the phone and brought it closer.

“You know, Roman,” Doyle said, “Smith, Hinchman has a large research department with numerous investigative assets.”

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Roman handed the phone back to Doyle. "I have a lawyer on retainer. He has resources too." He stepped away.

"But not as extensive as—"

Roman continued walking. "Does he know about Meade V Wiseman?"

Roman Weisman stopped. His shoulders hiked up his neck. He turned, his face twisted in anger, he walked up to Doyle, his face inches away, hissing. "What, what did you say?"

Cheryl approached the two. "Gee Romy," Cheryl said and pressed a hand to Roman's chest inserting herself between the men. "Maybe I was wrong. Someone thinks there is more meat on that bone." Cheryl kissed him the cheek. "Maybe you could afford me," she said and flicked a finger under his chin. Flashing a stone-cold glance at Doyle, she walked away toward the foyer.

"Mr. Weisman," Doyle said, "Hilary Hampton is waiting for you in her study." Roman, his mouth agape, stared at Doyle. Doyle smiled and turned Roman's shoulder. "I think you will appreciate what the firm has already done to protect your interests."

Doyle led Roman to Hilary's study. She gave Roman a warm greeting and dismissed Doyle. Doyle returned to the foyer to see Cheryl standing there wearing her fox shoulder wrap and occupied with her phone. "Cheryl, you were great, but where are you going? I have to be here for another two hours; there are other clients.

"I Uber'd up a limo, I'm tired of riding in your three-year-old Ford, and I'm tired of your pedestrian life. You opened my eyes, Doyle. There are a lot of Weismans out there, and I'm going to have some fun."

"But you're married, you're married to me, and I still love you."

"Oh, sorry *dearest*, did I forget to mention. I want a divorce. You can keep the ring in your pocket, all half-care of it."

"If that is the way you feel, Cheryl, why did you marry me?"

"Daddy said I would marry for family. I wasn't letting that happen."

A limousine pulled up to the front door. "So, you married me."

Cheryl started for the door. "Not for family, not for money, God knows you have neither, and not for love, Doyle."

A doorman opened the door. "I married you for laughs, Doyle, to spite my father, but it's not funny anymore."

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Chapter 4

Winter followed the fall, and now spring, but some things in Doyle's life hadn't changed.

"I made you first chair for McLaren because I thought you had brains, Doyle."

Hillary was standing behind her desk wearing a grey-white striped suit with pearl buttons on the sleeves. Her white hair swept back looking sculptured from white marble. One hand held her glasses; the other was knuckles down on top of her desk.

Doyle, dressed in a black single-breasted suit without stripe or style, had entered her office confident of his decision, but her words sent a chill. "Miss Hampton, I assumed... well, I thought... granting leave to amend wouldn't happen," he said, pleading with his hands spread open at his waist. Hillary's cobalt blue eyes narrowed, her laser glare dissolving his confidence. "I mean, that is... was without precedent for Judge Cramer."

"So you moved to dismiss."

"Well yes, Rockville wrote a poorly written complaint, the citations were inappropriate. The filing was without merit. I concluded dismissal was the best approach to save Mr. McLaren fees and continued exposure in the press."

Hillary tossed her head back. "And you felt the need to cite every detail of their over-reach in your motion?"

"I was being thorough. Why should that matter?"

Hillary tossed a thick manila envelope to Doyle. "I'm sure Rockville's lawyers appreciate your efforts. I do not. They responded with a strong complaint. McLaren will not be happy with your fumbling, and your poor chances of winning. I suggest you request a settlement through arbitration."

"Miss Hampton, I think—"

"Too late for that, Doyle, leave," she said with a flick of her hand.

Doyle returned to his office, placing the envelope in the upper right corner of his desk, carefully aligning the edges of document and desk. Judge Cramer the previous week had expressed over coffee his disdain for poorly written complaints, what he termed *frivplaints*.

Doyle sat in his chair, rotated his neck to ease the tightness, but triggered a shooting pain from his right shoulder. He massaged his shoulder as an image ran through his head — the sense he was walking a trail and carrying something heavy. Doyle shook off the discomfort and vision, attributing both to another fitful night's sleep. The perceptions always followed. *Tonight, I'm taking a pill.*

Doyle precisely aligned his tablet in its stand and with the wireless keyboard and positioned his mouse and pad. He tapped on the tablet which flashed to life beeping notifications of social media alerts. Cheryl had sent him a new email, but with an old subject: returning the signed divorce papers.

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He had conceded everything except for the paintings, a wedding gift from her late granny. To him, they were macabre splashes of red, but they were also the last symbols of a relationship he didn't want to end. He selected the email on his tablet but didn't see the words. The vivid memory of that traumatic day took hold.

His life dream from the time of high school was to graduate with a law degree. When that day arrived, he would be alone. He and Cheryl had been dating, but theirs was not an exclusive arrangement. She was graduating and moving to the life of a socialite in Potomac. He had to say at least goodbye.

He arrived at her off-campus residence late in the morning. She came downstairs wearing a pink flowered nightdress, her hair bound in a towel. "Not a good time, Doyle."

"I know... your parties tonight you're very busy," he said as they moved to a well-worn living room sofa. She looked annoyed, her lips and eyes narrowed. "This won't take long. I have to—"

"Daddy's not paying for Cancun. We had a big fight. He wants me to meet Wilfred Tyson tonight at his catered affair in Cheverly. Wilfred, can you imagine Doyle, a Wilfred?"

"Your father is a developer and the Tysons own a great deal of property in Virginia."

"You're defending him?"

"No, not at all, I mean..."

"You're right, Doyle. It's like the thirteenth century. He's pimping me for the family fortune."

"Well, not something I would... He won't stop until he gets what he wants."

"Except... Doyle, do you love me?"

He took her hand. "Oh, Cheryl, so much so I can hardly think. But I'm just—"

"Enough to marry?"

"Please, don't tease, Cheryl, I could never support... I don't even have a job."

"But I have a trust worth millions as soon as I graduate." She shoved him off the sofa. "Do it right, Doyle, on your knees, ask the question, then we must hurry to Campus Jewelers. Tonight, you are going to a dinner party."

Cheryl met Wilfred as her father had requested, but then she announced her engagement to Doyle. Her father threw a glass against the wall, just missing Doyle's head.

Doyle shook off his daydream. They made it for two years and eight months. Now he opened Cheryl's email. She cajoled, reasoned, and then threatened. He pulled open the center drawer to his desk. An envelope containing the signed agreement lay in the center. He couldn't bring himself to mail it.

"Knock, Knock."

Doyle slammed the drawer closed. "Karen, what's up?" He asked with a toss of his head.

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She dressed to resonate with spring wearing a jacket of light green and flowered skirt. Her shoulder-length auburn hair held off her forehead by a white band. She was hugging a blue folder to her chest. “Just wondering how it went this morning with hatchet Hillary.”

He grabbed his aching shoulder and rotated it once more. “Not well, I filed too soon, should have pushed for a summary. Now they have the advantage, and she is pissed.”

“Cramer let them refile, figures, his son was recently elected alderman at large.”

“I wasn’t aware.”

“Doyle, it’s the first rule of any litigation strategy, know your judge. That’s what we are about in research.”

“I thought I knew him, dealt with him on other cases, but I’ve been so busy, a lot on my mind.”

“It’s your divorce, isn’t it? That’s what you snatched away, the final decree.”

Doyle pushed back in his chair and nodded.

“It doesn’t matter what the state says, Doyle. Its property settlement, what you two will do with your stuff. You’ll always be married to her Doyle, until death do us part, remember?”

Doyle smiled. “You’re right; it is really just about stuff. She used me, and now I can see I used her also, so it was inevitable.” He pulled open the drawer. “On your way to your office, would you drop this in the outgoing in the mailroom?”

“Why don’t you give it to her yourself? Make a date of it. She likes the Hay-Adams, invite her to the Lafayette Room for dinner.”

“I like that, Karen, thanks for the idea.”

Karen turned to leave but then stepped to his desk. “Here is something else that might interest you. Rockville annexed the site of the McLaren construction accident a month after the accident occurred.”

Chapter 5

His chair crashing into a table behind him, Doyle stood in the Lafayette room, frozen in fury. His threat, still echoing in a dining room paralyzed in silence. They would forever haunt him. The room had a hundred pair of eyes locked onto him. Cheryl's biting words pounding in his head, lips curled and face flushed, he glared.

Cheryl arched an eyebrow and gave a smug smile of surety before slouching back and sipping her martini. Despite his threat, she wasn't afraid, not angry. She was enjoying it. The room's silence eroded his rage. His forehead oozed dew of regret, and he wiped his face with a napkin still locked in his hand.

A rustling behind him jolted his attention to the entryway in time to see two security guards charging through the labyrinth of tables, like giant ships cutting through the sea. They grappled for his arms. Doyle flailed them away. He reached into his jacket, extracted an envelope, and threw in her face.

"This is what you wanted. I guess dinner is on you."

He turned and left with his escorts. The cloud of silence went with him, replaced with a din of diners and dishes.

She had won, and she would use his words against him. He had tried hard to live an average life: to love, to be respected, to be part of the group. But something within had always worked against him.

* * *

It was not a life he envisioned when they met a decade earlier. It was at a January off-campus party. Doyle took it upon himself to attend after hearing of the house's unique feature a working fireplace.

Cheryl pulled up an ottoman next to the fire as Doyle squatted to add another log.

He was a moth she the flame.

He risked talking to her. He loved her voice. Husky, more breath than sound, a soothing purr. Their eyes caught, an exchange of smiles, a connection. He liked what he saw, long blond hair, round hazel eyes, and alabaster skin.

"You here with someone?"

"I'm here with you."

Doyle laughed, bracing himself on the damper handle, he stood. A metallic snap of the damper broke his balance, he fell back, stumbling into the chair across from Cheryl.

Doyle stared at the lever still in his hand. He smirked at Cheryl, and they shared a laugh.

"You're obviously not in engineering."

"No Law."

One Cold Sunday

A carpet of smoke rolled out of the fireplace. Cheryl giggled and grabbed his hand. "Come on, let's get out of here, this party is getting a little too hot for me."

They dashed for the door, laughing, and reached the porch just as the screams from the inside told them the sprinkler system had activated.

That was the start of their life together.

Tonight, was the apparent end.

They both arrived early, Doyle first and into the scotch bar to wait. Cheryl took a seat in a winged red leather chair in the Hay Adams lobby and spent the time staring into a robust fire inside their massive field-stone fireplace.

Doyle studied her from the bar behind where she sat.

What was she thinking?

Doyle rubbed his hands together as if warming them in a winter chill. It was time to start the evening he'd carefully planned to the last minute hoping to salvage a relationship if not his marriage.

"They are ready for you in the Lafayette dining room, Mr. Laboy."

He nodded, acknowledging the bartender, he smoothed his jacket and tugging on his cuffs, he approached Cheryl. Doyle stopped behind her, leaned over, kissed her cheek. "Nice fire and no smoke."

"You're not tending it, Doyle." She said, flashing a thin smile.

That was a good start, he thought. He rounded her chair and stood in front. "Shall we go? Our reservation is ready, well in three minutes it is."

"You came from the bar. Really, you had me wait here in the lobby while you bolstered your courage, and precisely make our reservation? How you!"

"No, not my intent... I mean it just happened that way." Cheryl tilted her head and gave him a doubting eye. Doyle closed his and rolled his head. "You're right, over planning again. Would you like to wait here near the fire? I could order drinks, but that would make us twenty minutes late... perhaps we could take a few moments here... and... uh."

"Sit Doyle, people are staring, and it's not the good kind."

Doyle sat in an adjoining chair. "Umm, how's the dog?"

"Tessa is much calmer with you out of the house."

Tessa was a Wheaten Terrier, small, energetic, and who would do a flip in front of Cheryl and hid when Doyle walked into the room. Doyle checked his wristwatch and drummed his fingers on the chair.

Cheryl gave him a look.

One Cold Sunday

He flashed a feeble smile.

Cheryl rolled her eyes and stood. “Never mind your sh...” She grinned her head bobbing as she surveyed the room before continuing. “Never mind Doyle, if you’re going to check your watch every minute, let’s just do this.”

They crossed the lobby toward the stairs of the grand hall, a dark mahogany corridor trimmed in gold leaf. Doyle reached to assist Cheryl as they approached the stairs. She responded with her hand bent at the wrist. Doyle savored the connection. She was his again, and he drank in the view.

Cheryl wore silver four-inch heels and a long black dress with a shallow cut open neck. It clung to her body, muting its defects, and focusing, he imagined envious glances. They entered the Lafayette room, and Cheryl fingered a large diamond pendant that hung around her neck. The effect worked. The maître’d at his stand looked up and locked onto her.

Doyle leaned across Cheryl into the maître’d’s line of sight savoring the pleasure of knowing he had, for an instant, something others desired.

Noticing his nametag, Doyle said, “Mr. and Mrs. Laboy, Charles.”

“Ah, yes, Mrs. Arnault, it is a pleasure to seat you. I have selected one of the very best tables.” He gave a low bow, a hand prompting the direction as Cheryl stepped by. “Mr. Laboy,” he added as Doyle passed. He led them across a heart patterned gold and mauve carpet.

Doyle stepped alongside Cheryl. “Enjoy the moment, Doyle,” Cheryl breathed, “you will give me the papers at the table.”

Doyle nodded and touched her back, urging her forward.

Charles guided them to a somewhat removed windowed alcove overlooking Washington’s bustling H Street. The table, set with a candle, white linen, and gold inlaid bone china befitting the hotel’s eighteenth-century roots.

Taking their seats, Charles handed each a leather-bound menu. “Inviting me to dinner at the Hay Adams would be a tragic waste if you have an agenda in mind, Doyle.”

“No, no agenda, it’s for our anniversary of sorts.”

Cheryl responded with a narrow-eyed glare.

“Our last, I mean... of course, not exactly, that’s tomorrow, but I need to fly out to LA.”

“The fortune I squeezed from daddy for the Top of the Hays wedding. He would be touched. If it weren’t for the fact, Doyle dear, you need to sign the papers.”

“They are in my pocket,” he said. Doyle straightened the napkin on his lap, his eyes avoiding Cheryl’s. His scanned over the table looking for something, yet nothing, his stare fell on the place setting. Flickering candlelight caught in the highly polished tableware captured Doyle’s thoughts; cracking open the door to dark memories.

One Cold Sunday

He spread his menu over the place setting. "They're okay... I mean... yes signed. I just wanted to, uh, that is... it's hard for me to adjust."

"Something to drink before dinner, madam?" Their waiter asked.

Doyle watched Cheryl poised for the same conversation they always had. First, she would ask about the specialty drinks, then a cocktail menu, but it invariably resolved to the same cocktail.

"For my wife, a vodka martini with a twist, not too dry. I'll take an old fashion, no cherry."

The waiter glanced at Cheryl, and she nodded in affirmation. "Excellent, I will be but a moment," he said and walked away.

"Don't do that again, Doyle."

"What?"

"Order for me. That's a nit that soured our marriage," Cheryl picked up her menu, and scanned the contents, "that and you presenting me to your clients like some new toy."

"I'm sorry you're right to be angry about that, but I needed an edge. Having a wife as sexy and beautiful as you were... I'm just digging a deeper hole, aren't I?"

"Your career still went nowhere. Daddy even tried to help."

Doyle took a deep breath but managed a thin smile. "And *daddy*, by the way, wanted pro bono for his buddies." Doyle winced after his words and raised a hand of surrender. "But ah I... I was glad to help."

Their cocktails arrived, and with a tip of his head, he raised his glass, "To a new start then."

Cheryl hesitated, but then raised her glass tapping his. She sipped her martini before saying, "Hmm, you settled into your apartment?"

"Townhouse, just, yes I have, the Berkshire Provincial on Mass, nice layout upstairs, roomy first. Nice view of American U. Still, have a few boxes though," and after sampling his Manhattan, added, "we're working on that."

Cheryl kept her menu in front of her. "Sounds nice, Doyle. Small I'm sure, being on one floor."

Typical, she wasn't even listening.

"I moved into a townhouse," Doyle said, stretching over his menu, "bedrooms on the second floor."

Cheryl never looked up from her menu.

Their waiter returned. Cheryl ordered the Skuna Bay Salmon. Doyle hesitated and furrowed his brow feigning indecision.

Cheryl coughed, reminding him his habit was a source of irritation, a plague on their dinners. Doyle relented and ordered the sautéed Dover Sole, and a bottle of Russian River Sauvignon Blanc.

One Cold Sunday

They removed the bone china and replaced them with bread plates and bread.

Cheryl took a bit of bread, split it apart, buttered it, and then dropped it back on her plate. Doyle studied her, admiring her round hazel eyes, her lilliputian nose, and the way her neck flowed into her bare shoulders. He removed a small blue satin box from his jacket pocket. "I have something for you."

"Not jewelry, Doyle, you are so pedestrian at that."

Doyle's weak smile smothered a twinge of anger.

"No, a key," he said, opening the lid and extending it to her, "to my townhouse."

"To your townhouse? I thought you had an apartment." Cheryl glanced at the key. "Twenty-three-fifty-nine, how prophetic, why on earth would I want it?"

"It..." Doyle brought his hand to his mouth and took a breath. "I know, our separation has... I mean... there were a lot of hard feelings, but it would make it easier for me to accept."

He left the blue box open on the table. Cheryl sipped her wine, her eyes alternating between sighting the key and Doyle.

Their entrées arrived, and the waiter poured the wine.

"I guess it is a sweet thought, Doyle, but out of place. We are done, Doyle, accept that."

Doyle nodded, containing the scream in his head. *Take the fucking key.*

Head lowered, he took a fork to his fish, cutting it into a bit that no longer held his interest.

"To keep the peace, so to speak, I'll accept. Not as a key per se, but as a memento. We did, after all, have good days."

Doyle beamed, felt relieved. They both sipped their wine and worked on their entrées.

"Speaking of that," Cheryl said, "I would like the paintings you moved with you."

"You got the house. I have the paintings, and you have a key. You can see them anytime you want."

"They were my granny's favorite pieces."

"They are safe, insured, and the signed agreement in my pocket gives them to me."

"If you keep them, Doyle, there will never be peace between us."

"I am telling you cannot have them. They are our touchstone, our link going forward."

"You are so Victorian, Doyle."

Doyle dropped his fork and leaned back in his chair. "You have everything, why would you want them?"

"I don't want a touchstone, no lingering attachments. Control was the problem in our marriage. I want the paintings. They're mine, Doyle."

One Cold Sunday

“I forbid you to touch them.”

“Forbid?” She leaned forward and hissed. “I’m an Arnault. You little shit. I don’t know what I ever saw in you, except to teach daddy a lesson. You’re a social misfit. No money, no talent, no ambition. I need more, Doyle. I deserve more.”

Doyle rotated his head, popping the tension out of his neck but remained silent.

Cheryl leaned in and seethed. “I’m marrying a real man, Wilfred Tyson. He’s rich, really rich. His family traces back to the Rockefellers, blue blood and green money, not a mongrel like you.”

Doyle was shaking. His hand searching for a knife. Their eyes locked.

“That’s right Doyle. In two weeks I’ll be married again like daddy wanted.”

Doyle moved his head from side to side, denying her words, and in a whisper said, “You wanted a quiet divorce, I wanted the paintings. Do the reasons matter? If you persist, I won’t consent. Then where will your wedding plans be?”

“I want the goddamn paintings.”

“My consent means so little to you?”

Cheryl grabbed the satin box. “No, it’s you, Doyle, you mean so little to anyone.” She threw it at him. “You cheated me. Laboy is an old Louisiana family name. Little did I know you were a bastard of a cheap whore from New Orleans.”

“I’ll kill you for this.”

“You? You haven’t got the strength, Mr. keep-the-paintings-so-I’ll-feel-better.” She hissed back, “You threatening me? Be a man. A real man, instead of a milk toast. Say it so everyone can hear, you pitiful—”

Doyle bolted up from his chair. “If you fucking dump me, bitch,” he screamed, “I’ll kill you, tear your guts out so you can carry them in your arms.”

The room went deathly silent, his words hanging over him like a guillotine.