

“In the Shadow of the Night”

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Fiction

May 2023

Sometime after midnight Colleen went home with a real estate developer named Brent, who owned a renovation-in-progress Spanish Colonial Revival in Cheviot Hills. He was dapper, older than she normally liked, but surprisingly humble, reticent in a way. She had seduced him, not the other way around.

She had to be at the station by 5:15 AM at the latest, so this quickie had to be, well, quick. On a typical night, she would be in bed no later than 8 PM, but she had been invited to a Cinco De Mayo party at a penthouse in one of the new high-rises in Santa Monica and, because she had been a bit lonely as of late as well as a bit sex-starved, she jumped at the chance.

Brent was more than adequate in bed – generous and hardworking, so to speak – but, to Colleen’s surprise, he seemed to want to spend more time getting to know her than making love. Initially, she was offput by this. Perhaps he was not as carnally inclined as she was or, god forbid, felt less of an attraction. But, as the evening wore on, she sensed that this affability was a genuine aspect of his character. It was, actually, endearing.

After their second go-round, he insisted that they go out to the pool and look at the stars. “You don’t have to put any clothes on,” he told her. “The hedges are tall enough to keep out the peeping Toms.” Colleen slipped on her underwear, to be prudent, and grabbed her handbag.

Brent poured two tumblers of whiskey rocks while Colleen did another bump of coke. She offered him one, but he waved it away.

“C’mon,” she implored. “You’ve got me for two more hours. Let’s make it worth our while.”

This time Brent turned it down somewhat sternly. “I don’t like being coerced,” he said.

Colleen apologized quickly and kissed him on the cheek.

Outside, she stripped again and followed Brent into the pool. They frolicked and screwed for a while before heading over to the hot tub where they soaked and sipped the remainders of their cocktails. Colleen felt satisfied, high, comfortably numb.

“Did you always want to be a news person?” Brent asked.

She giggled. “A news person? You mean, an anchor?”

“Whatever you call it.”

“I decided when I was a senior in high school. We had one of those career days when interesting people come in to speak to the class. Believe it or not, Dan Rather showed up.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. His niece was one of the teachers and she arranged it.”

Brent considered this. “You don’t seem like the Dan Rather type to me.”

“What type do I seem like? And don’t say Barbara Walters.”

“I don’t know. Dan Rather just seems stuffy to me, at least as compared to you.”

“Yeah, I guess he is,” said Colleen. “But, man, he had our attention. He talked about working his way up from the bottom, covering JFK’s assassination and Watergate and the fall of the Berlin Wall. 9/11 of course. He had a front-row seat to the most important moments in American history... in world history... and I knew right then that I wanted the same thing.”

“That’s admirable. So where does your road lead?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, where do you go from here? You’re an anchor for ABC–Los Angeles and you’re what, only thirty-five? Thirty-six?”

“Let’s keep my age out of this, dummy.”

Brent chuckled. She noticed for the first time that he had beautiful teeth. Dental quality happened to be high on her list of attributes she was looking for in a man. She made a note of it.

“So?” he asked.

“So...” She contemplated momentarily. “I want to go to the top.”

“And where’s the top?”

“Primetime news.”

“Not a national morning show?”

“Fuck the morning shows.”

Her brusqueness made Brent laugh out loud. “Fair enough.”

She smiled. “And when did little Brenty decide he wanted to become a rich real estate mogul?”

“Mogul? Hardly. This is a relatively recent thing. Only been playing the game for six years or so.”

“And before that?”

“Well, I worked for Delta Airlines for about twenty-two years. I was a pilot.”

“No way! That is so cool!”

“Oh, come on. We’re glorified bus drivers.”

“Pilots are sexy as hell, Brent. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Colleen shifted over and straddled his thighs to emphasize her enthusiasm.

He blushed ever so slightly. “I figured we’d get around to it at some point.”

“And that was your lifelong dream?”

“Well, part of it. I wanted to be an astronaut.”

“An astronaut?! That’s even sexier!”

“Calm down. I didn’t make the cut.”

“Their loss, their loss.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her lovingly and she realized that this might not be just a one-night stand after all.

Colleen was so enjoying her stay with Brent that she lost track of time. When they stepped out of the hot tub, she checked her phone, which read 4:25. She should have left by four. Now she was all but guaranteed to be late to the station. At minimum, her producer would be pissed. And, if she didn’t get a move on, she wouldn’t have time to record the voice-overs for the show, which would be a bigger issue. She was not in the best graces of the higher-ups as it stood.

She and Brent dressed and, as he walked her out to her silver Tesla, she realized that she was still buzzing hard.

“Will I get to see you again?” he asked, pulling her in for a final embrace.

“If you’re lucky,” Colleen replied, causing him to grin broadly.

She drove up Motor Avenue past the golf course and took a right on Pico. Despite the work-related stress, she was feeling nothing short of magnificent. She had gotten her rocks off for the first time in months. She had made the acquaintance of an intelligent, successful, and sensitive man who had the makings of a future partner. And the coke that her friend Ana had hooked her up with was absolutely primo. At the light at Beverly Drive, she pulled out the small vial and hit it one more time. It gave her the sensation of a crisp spring breeze rushing up her spinal column and into her brain stem. It made her head and lips tingle and an orgasmic sensation radiated along her limbs, through her loins. She found herself to be horny again.

As she cruised down Pico she thought about Brent, about what they had done in his pool, in his hot tub. She thought about his eyes, which were crystal blue, which locked with hers as she divulged the story of her life. He was a skilled listener. At one point she had gone on and on about her relationship with her mother, which had been fraught ever since the woman had cheated on and abandoned Colleen's father fifteen years earlier. It was almost a cliché: her mother fell for the carpenter who rebuilt the rear deck on their home. Colleen did not know the exact details but, allegedly, the two were sneaking around for months before her mother woke up one Sunday morning, packed a few suitcases, and scribbled out a terse and wholly insensitive "Dear John" letter.

Colleen's father was blindsided and utterly devastated. One night he rang Colleen while inebriated and threatened to swallow a bottle of pills. She called the police and they intervened. It was unlikely that her father, a generally weak-willed man, would have gone through with the mortal act, but the incident earned him a three-day stay in the psychiatric ward at Cedar-Sinai.

While Colleen recounted these tawdry details to Brent, she sensed that he related to her pain, that he cared genuinely. And, more notably, he gave no indication that he was judging her

or her parents. It was one of those things: they hardly knew each other, but the connection was immediate and deeply felt on both sides. At least that seemed to be the case.

Thinking of Brent, however, made Colleen recall James, her ex-husband. That relationship, too, had started off with a bit of a bang. They met while skydiving of all things: went out for a late, boozy brunch after the jump, and spent the day and night at a motel in Ventura. She was young then, twenty-five maybe, just embarking on her broadcast career. James was a promising stand-up comedian and camera operator. Their courtship was a whirlwind that culminated, just three months later, in an elopement to Vancouver. But, just as quickly, everything fell apart. James' unprovoked fits of anger grew more frequent and more severe. He punched her in the mouth outside of a party in the Hollywood Hills one night, in front of a gaggle of onlookers no less, and she called it quits the next day. James hurled all sorts of epithets, as well as a few pieces of furniture, but, when all was said and done, he left and never abused or even contacted Colleen again.

The experience had hardened Colleen's heart. It had been over twelve years since the divorce and, in that time, she had been in only three relationships that lasted marginally more than a year. Generally, at the first sign of discord, she hit the road. The consequence of this, she knew, was the premature termination of a few promising affairs. But she preferred that to the ugly alternative. Nonetheless, this morning, she wondered if Brent would turn into something meaningful. Again, he was older – at least fifty – but that was an acceptable age gap and he looked quite young and fit to boot. She knew that it was bad practice to get excited about these things so quickly, but the night had been just... just...

Suddenly the Tesla hit the curb, lurched onto the sidewalk, and smashed into a bus stop.

Colleen was buckled in, but the impact caused the seatbelt to saw into her ribs. The airbag deployed and blew up in her face with astonishing force. For a minute or longer, she was disoriented and completely winded, gasping for air, clinging to consciousness. Blood dripped from her nose onto her lap. The only sounds were the wheeze and whine of her breath and the clicking and hissing of the engine.

She shook her head from side to side and attempted to gather her wits. Her precise location was a mystery. She had been driving without thinking, almost unconsciously, for a matter of minutes before the crash. She got out of the car, stumbled a few steps, and vomited into the gutter. Her head felt like an untethered buoy, her chest as if it had collapsed onto her internal organs. She put her hands on her knees and imbibed the chilly night air.

Colleen realized, then, that she was in trouble – or at least, would be in trouble if she did not act quickly. She was still drunk, still coked up, and Los Angeles was known as one of the worst places in the world to get busted for DUI. Fortunately, as far as she knew, not a single vehicle had passed by since the accident. No witnesses. She stood up and looked around the area. The skyline of downtown loomed not far away. Up the street a bit was the illuminated sign of a Korean barbecue joint. She ascertained that she was on Olympic avenue, a few minutes west of her building.

She wiped blood from her nose with her forearm then hurriedly climbed back into the Tesla. It started normally. She put it in reverse and backed up carefully. There was a sickening, grinding crunch and a clatter of glass as her front bumper extracted itself from the steel frame of the bus stop. As she backed over the curb onto the street, it appeared that her headlights were not functioning. The road ahead was dim. She shifted into drive and accelerated.

Just then, she saw something move in her peripheral vision. Something near the bus stop. She hit the brakes and looked closely. There appeared to be a dark, amorphous pile of something lying on the sidewalk. She stared at it and her breath caught in her throat. It moved again: a limb, an arm. Then a face turned toward her – a face masked with blood.

Colleen, horrified, sped away from the scene, her damaged front-right quarter panel scraping against the tire.

When she pulled into her parking garage it was 4:56 AM. She zipped up the ramps and parked in her assigned spot. She turned the vehicle off and sat in silence for a long moment, her mind a jumble of panicked thoughts. She leaned forward and peered at herself in the rearview mirror. Her face looked like it had been ravaged by a wild animal, smears of blood all over it. A stream of crimson continued to roll down her lip from her left nostril. She grabbed some tissue from her purse and pressed it to her nose. It was not as painful as she had expected.

Minutes later, Colleen slipped into her apartment and locked the door behind her. She rushed to the bathroom and examined her damaged face. In addition to the bloodstains, there was a circle of redness and slight swelling around her left eye. She got into the shower and adjusted the spray to the hottest tolerable setting. Blood cascaded down her body and swirled into the drain at her feet.

Colleen forced herself to calm down, to think slowly and clearly. First, she was going to be late for work, very late. If she hurried, she might get to her desk at 5:45 for a 6 AM broadcast. Utterly unacceptable. Second, it would take some effort to make her face presentable for television. This meant more time applying makeup than normal. Third, the thing... the body... the person... at the bus stop. She could barely process that thought.

She hopped out of the shower and appraised herself in the mirror again. There was a seatbelt shaped bruise that spanned from her left shoulder to her cleavage. Despite the trickle of blood that continued to flow, her nose was not swollen or discolored. It was her eye that concerned her. Even if she could properly cover up the redness, the swelling might still be noticeable. She wouldn't be able to make that determination until she had applied makeup, however.

She pressed more tissue to her nostril and hurried into the bedroom. It became clear that she would have to show up for work. If she did not, it would likely further damage her standing at the station. Moreover, she needed an alibi. If there were an investigation into the accident, her absence from the broadcast would be a clear red flag. Colleen grabbed her phone and dialed her co-anchor Craig.

“Hey, Col,” he answered.

“Craig, hey. I need your help. Are you at the station?”

“Oh lord. What now?”

“I need you to record all the voiceovers. I'm running very late.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No... no. I just had a horrible night and didn't sleep and I'm a bit of a mess.”

“Why don't you take a sick day? Melanie can sit in for you. She's here. If you're not well, then you should take care of yourself.”

“No, I don't want to do that. I'll be there in half an hour. Just cover for me, please.”

“Sure. Sure. I'll do it.”

“Great. Thank you.” She clicked off.

Eighteen minutes later, Colleen, wearing large sunglasses to hide her damaged eye, took the elevator down to the lobby and hurried out to meet a waiting Uber.

“Hey, Miss Oliver,” said the doorman as she hurried past.

“Hey, Mitch.”

“Running behind this morning?”

“Very behind.”

When she entered the studio at 5:43 AM, she immediately ran into her producer Carol.

“Colleen, are you OK? Craig says you’re not well.”

“I’ll be fine, Carol. I just had a personal problem.”

“OK. I’m not mad. I’m just concerned.”

“No need. No need,” Colleen said in a casual, dismissive tone.

Colleen sat at her desk, set aside her sunglasses, and assessed her condition in the vanity mirror. She hurriedly applied foundation all over her face, then dabbed some concealer around the perimeter of her bruised eye. The discoloration and swelling were not horrible and the concealer, along with some blush and eyeshadow, made her face appear relatively normal – TV ready. Finishing the process, she sighed in relief.

With a minute to spare, she took her seat next to Craig at the anchors’ desk.

“Glad you’re here,” he said with a casual wink.

“Me too. All good,” she replied, slightly out of breath.

The broadcast went relatively smoothly but, near the end, as Colleen delivered a report about a warehouse fire in Torrance, she suddenly grew lightheaded. Her jaw felt as if it were locking up and her field of vision seemed to be collapsing. A sense of panic washed over her.

Her heart palpitated uncomfortably. She stuttered a few times, but succeeded in willing herself to recite the words on the teleprompter slowly and steadily.

Afterwards, she scurried out of the station before anyone could engage her in conversation or pull her into a meeting. She felt increasingly nauseous and her head had begun to throb, a pain which seemed to amplify the persistent aching she felt in her ribs and chest. When she returned to her apartment, she was inclined to bury herself under the covers and sleep for the remainder of the day. But that, she knew, would be beyond irresponsible. She had a crisis to manage.

She brewed a pot of coffee, lit a cigarette, and took a seat at the kitchen island. First things first, she needed to determine the fate of the person that she had apparently injured at the bus stop. However, due to the condition of her car, she could not drive back to the scene of the accident without risking drawing attention. And she did not want to take an Uber directly there because there would be a record of the trip. Despite a heavy hangover and her various aches and pains, she decided to walk the two miles.

It was just past noon when Colleen approached the scene. A typical sunny day in LA, hot and clear but comfortably dry. From a distance, she could see that the bus stop shelter was in ruins. It leaned asymmetrically away from the street. The side that she had collided with was crumpled and the glass panels were shattered. However, as she got closer, there was no sign of an injured or dead person. She attempted to remain inconspicuous as she strode past the bus stop, peering at the wreckage out of the side of her eye.

She continued up a block, then turned around to make another pass. Perhaps she had imagined seeing someone in the first place. She had snorted a significant amount of coke, after all, which, she knew, could cause hallucinations under certain circumstances. Colleen was just

about to breathe a sigh of relief, when she noticed something on the sidewalk next to the bus shelter. A dark patch. She stepped over to it and looked down. It was an irregularly shaped burgundy stain in the concrete, about two feet in diameter. She squatted to appraise it more closely. Could it be a blood stain? A spillage of wine? Spray paint? She put her fingers to it, but it was completely dry. Would a pool of blood have dried already? It had been at least seven hours. Yes, of course, the blood would be dry by this time.

Uncertain but increasingly disconcerted, she stood up and scanned the scene once more. There were no other indications that someone had been injured here or that police or medics had responded. Would they not have encircled the bus stop with police tape? Would not police or detectives still be at the scene? Colleen had reported on many hit-and-runs over the years, but somehow she did not know what the official response protocol was.

She walked home slowly, despondently. By her estimation, there was a ninety percent chance that she had, indeed, injured someone when she crashed and a decent chance that the victim was dead. She knew that she could check the internet for a report on the incident but, emotionally unprepared to learn the truth, turned off her phone instead. By the time she got back to her apartment, she was experiencing full-blown paranoia, convinced that the police would swoop in on her at any moment. Shivering and, again, sick to her stomach, she shut the drapes, turned off all the lights, and collapsed onto her bed.

Colleen awoke to the sound of knocking. It took a few moments for her to come to her senses. As she stepped out of the bedroom into the dark hallway, the knocking came again – from the front door. That could only mean one thing: the cops. She froze for a moment, her mind scrambling to devise a way out of this predicament. But, short of jumping off the balcony, there was just no hope. It was time to face the music.

She tiptoed down the hallway and stopped near the door. *Please, God... Please*, she muttered, nearly hyperventilating. Then she put her eye to the peephole. With great relief, she recognized the person standing on the other side: her cleaning lady Vivian. *Praise Jesus*.

She opened the door. Vivian, short and plump, was smiling, holding a bucket of spray bottles and rags.

“Hello, Miss Colleen. I forgot my key at home. I am so sorry.”

“Oh, it’s... it’s no problem, Vivian. What time is it?”

“About four-thirty.”

“I forgot you were coming today.”

“Every Friday! Are you OK, Miss Colleen? Your eye...”

Colleen touched her eye, which remained swollen. “Oh.” She forced a giggle. “I bumped my head in the, uh, uh, the shower. It’s OK.”

Vivian smiled again and looked at Colleen expectantly.

Colleen wanted to send the woman away, but quickly decided that it would be most prudent to continue living her life as if nothing were amiss. She stepped aside and let her enter.

While Vivian went about her work, Colleen slipped into the bathroom. She felt dirty and ill and thought that another shower might be soothing. It was not. Her mind continued to race with catastrophic thoughts. She contemplated consulting one of her brothers, both of whom were trial lawyers, but quickly ruled it out. There were really only two options: turn herself in or behave as if nothing were amiss and wait for the storm to pass. Bringing a family member into the mess, at this point, would have simply fomented greater stresses.

After drying off, she explained to Vivian that she needed her privacy and that there was no need to clean the master bedroom. Then she went inside and locked the door.

Colleen's cell phone was on the nightstand, still powered off. She absolutely dreaded the idea of turning it on, but knew that the moment of truth would come sooner or later. After a long while, she summoned the courage to check her text messages. Only two: one casual greeting from her friend Jessica and one from her father asking her to call him when she was free. Nothing unusual. She inhaled and exhaled heavily, then opened the Chrome browser on her phone. Hesitantly, she typed in a query: *hit and run Olympic Avenue Los Angeles*. The top result was a headline from the local NBC affiliate: "Police seek driver in hit-and-run in Koreatown." Colleen's eyes almost popped out of her head. But then she noticed the posting date. The story was from April 9, almost a month earlier.

She browsed the rest of the search results, but none cited her accident. She tried an assortment of additional search terms and read through the Koreatown police blotter before finally concluding that the incident had been disregarded by the media. "Thank you, Jesus!" she shouted.

From the other room, Vivian responded, "Did you say something, Miss Colleen?"

"No! Nothing! Carry on!" Colleen grabbed a pillow, pressed it to her mouth, and shrieked with joy. Her panic during the past twelve hours was much ado about nothing. Overcome, she began to cry.

Brent called early the next morning. "I've been thinking about you nonstop since you left," he said.

"Same here," Colleen replied, prevaricating.

"What do you say to brunch at the Beverly Hills Hotel?"

"I say that sounds swanky. Are you trying to impress me?"

“Of course. And afterwards, I was thinking about a walk on the beach. Would that be to your liking?”

“Indeed!” she said. “Indeed.”

Having learned her lesson the hard way, Colleen opted to hail an Uber for this particular excursion. She planned on having at least a few mimosas; no more drunk driving. Moreover, it would be rather uncouth to pull up to the Beverly Hills Hotel in a beat-up vehicle.

She found Brent at the bar. He was wearing hay-colored linen pants and a light-blue polo shirt. Somewhat of a Waspy ensemble, but he appeared very fresh and the shirt was snug upon his strong shoulders and, when he flashed that pristine smile, Colleen could not have been happier to see him.

“I’m not normally like this,” he told her as they worked their way through omelets and picked at a bowl of fresh fruit.

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Giddy, I guess.”

“You’re giddy, Brent? Whatever could have put you in such a mood?”

He chuckled. “You.”

“Me?”

“I mean – look at you? I can hardly concentrate enough to eat my food.”

She smiled and her face grew warm. She had spent a fair amount of time getting ready for this date and had selected her most flattering summer dress for the occasion. It seemed to be having the desired effect.

“But I have to tell you something,” Brent said, growing serious.

“Oh?”

“I’m not very comfortable with how things went down the other night.”

“What things?”

“The drinking, the drugs.”

“Drugs? It was just coke, Brent.”

“I know. And I know that I went along with it. It’s just – I’m too old for shenanigans like that, and I regret letting you drive home in the condition you were in.”

Colleen’s stomach dropped. She didn’t want to divulge anything about the accident, but she wanted to be open and honest with this lovely man. “I… I was fine, Brent. You don’t have to worry.”

“Actually, Colleen, I do. My brother, a long time ago, was seriously injured in a late-night accident. Cracked his skull. Shattered his knee. Very lucky to be alive. He’s suffered from chronic pain ever since. I just don’t want to condone that sort of thing. I should have been smarter about it.”

“Well…” she hesitated, “how about we say that it won’t happen again? No need to dwell on the past. I’ll be smarter going forward. We both will. I should note that I took an Uber here today because I wanted to have a few drinks. That’s a good start, no?”

“Yes,” Brent conceded. “That’s a good start.”

After breakfast, they went to the Santa Monica boardwalk and moseyed south toward Venice Beach. A perfect day, it was quite crowded. Skateboarders weaved their way through the masses. Artists and artisans lined the way, hawking their garish wares. The atmosphere was tinged with a musk of sunblock and marijuana smoke.

Colleen and Brent talked more about their previous relationships, about what they intended to achieve in their lives, about their families. Brent was married once before and had a

sixteen-year-old daughter who lived with her mother in La Jolla. He kept an apartment down there, where he spent one week per month. This did not bother Colleen. She found Brent's paternal, overprotective inclinations to be charming and reassuring. Having functioned as an emotional crutch for her father for so long, she did not mind the idea of linking up with a man who would dutifully look after her. She felt emboldened to bring up her desire to have at least two children, but ultimately decided that the topic might be a little heavy for a second date.

Then, she saw something out of the corner of her eye. Something at the base of a palm tree just off the boardwalk. A dark, amorphous mass. She slowed and directed her attention to it. Then it moved. A limb. An arm. A face turned and looked at her – a face masked in blood.

Colleen screamed.

Brent recoiled into a defensive position, reacting as if someone or something were about to pounce upon the two of them. Colleen quickly turned and buried her face in his shoulder.

“What? What is it?” he asked, putting his arms around her.

“Oh my God,” she rasped. “Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“The person?”

Brent looked around, confused. “What person?”

Colleen took a deep breath and then turned around. Where she had seen the murky figure with the bloody face was a blonde woman seated in the grass, stretching peacefully. She was dressed in a grey tank top and black yoga pants.

Colleen gestured to her. “That woman... I... for a second I thought she was...”

Brent looked into her panicked eyes. “You thought she was...”

“I thought she was in trouble or injured or...”

Brent appraised the woman, who was simply enjoying her time on the beach. “She looks just fine to me. Is everything OK?”

Colleen rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Yes. It’s fine. I was just... confused for a second.”

They returned to Brent’s house and laid out by the pool and listened to music for the rest of the afternoon. But Colleen remained unsettled. It seemed that she had now hallucinated the same harrowing image twice. Was she suffering from some sort of cognitive impairment, a drug-induced psychosis, or was this a symptom of PTSD? The car crash was indeed traumatizing.

Brent noticed her change in demeanor. “Tell me what’s bothering you,” he said as they lay in loungers under the beaming sun.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just in a mood.”

“Does it have to do with the woman on the beach?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Colleen answered hesitantly. “I want to just lay here and bake, if that’s all right.”

“I have no problem with that.”

That night, Colleen stayed at Brent’s house. They made love several times, which had a sedative effect on Colleen, before falling asleep near two in the morning.

She dreamed that she was on the run from a notorious gangster she had somehow double-crossed. She raced across dark, empty landscapes in her compromised Tesla but, for what seemed like hours, he tailed her in a burly, black pickup truck. At one point she seemed to have put a gap between them. She turned off the interstate and drove into a sleepy desert town. She made several evasive turns, then doubled-back in order to ensure that she was not being

followed. In time, she came upon a dusty cemetery and pulled in and parked her car behind a crumbling, stone mausoleum. Confident that the gangster had not followed her, she reclined her seat and prepared to sleep. At that moment, a pack of giant grey wolves emerged from the shadows of the headstones. They surrounded her vehicle and began howling – a deafening, unearthly chorus. Terrified, Colleen threw the car into drive and plowed through the animals.

She awoke, sweaty and agitated. It was a predawn hour. She slipped out of the bed and started to dress herself. Brent stirred.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I need to leave, baby,” she replied, pulling her dress on over her head.

“There’s no need for that.”

“I’ll be terribly grumpy if I stay.”

“I bet I’d like you grumpy.”

She chuckled, “No, you definitely would not.”

“Then I’m driving you home.”

“I’ll just get an Uber.”

“I wouldn’t be comfortable with that.”

“OK. We’ll do it your way.”

Brent grunted and got to his feet.

The sun was sending golden rays through the creases of the skyline as they drove to Colleen’s building. They took Olympic avenue and, as fate would have it, pulled up to a stoplight near the destroyed bus shelter. Colleen looked carefully, but saw nothing of substance in the shadows of the structure.

When they arrived, Brent pulled her in for a kiss and said, “Whatever it is, do not let it tear you apart.”

Colleen closed her eyes and nodded and fought back tears. She had a gnawing feeling that their relationship would not take another step forward. She attempted to formulate a proper farewell, but, stifled, exited the vehicle without a word.

As she crossed the lobby, Mitch said, “Mornin’, Miss Oliver. Another late night, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Then she paused. “You know, Mitch, you always seem to have a comment about my comings and goings. It’s a bit irritating.”

“Just making conversation, ma’am. I’ll be quiet in the future if you prefer.”

She shook her head. “No. It’s all right. Forget it.”

She called the elevator, but instead of going to her apartment on the eighteenth floor, she stopped at the third floor and walked to the parking garage. Her Tesla was there in her spot, as she had left it some forty-eight hours earlier. She walked around to the front and assessed the damage. Both headlights were shattered. The front bumper was dented deeply and the hood was wrenched out of its proper position. She looked under the engine and saw that a shiny fluid had leaked and formed a puddle near the front right tire.

She began to wonder how she was going to explain this wreckage to the insurance company when she noticed something on the misshapen passenger side wheel well. It was a smear of red approximately one foot long with spattering at the edges. It appeared dry and flaky. She scraped it with a fingernail and some of it came off onto her thumb. She turned on her cell phone light and examined the substance closely. A deep burgundy – the color of a scab. She put her tongue to it. It tasted ferrous, salty, organic.

Colleen's breath grew shallow and her abdomen clenched involuntarily. In her mind, the wolves howled in concert. She pulled a tissue from her purse and wiped the scarlet smudge off her thumb. Then she crumpled up the tissue and dumped it in a trash bin on her way back into the building.