

THE COMFORT OF DISTANCE

A SEBASTIEN GREY NOVEL - SAMPLE
CHAPTERS

RYBURN DOBBS



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PROLOGUE

The car finally came to a stop, and the man in the trunk heard two doors open. The car rocked a little as driver and passenger alighted, slamming doors violently. Heavy steps fell on what sounded like gravel. He could hear both sets stop just outside of the trunk. The man held his breath in expectation of the trunk latch clicking free. Then, a few seconds later, it did. The trunk lid raised up just enough to let a wedge of moonlight through, casting a chalky horizontal gleam into the trunk. As quickly as the man could, he rolled from his left side onto his back, trying to ignore the lightning of pain that shot through his rib cage and into his sternum. He braced himself for the assault. It did not come.

The crunching of gravel under foot resumed, followed by muffled voices that became less audible as the moments passed. He tried to make out what they were saying, but the stifled syllables would not form words. A few more seconds passed, and the voices were gone altogether. Were *they* gone, or were they waiting to finish him off? Did they even know he was still alive? The man's mind raced, stoked by adrenaline. A few more minutes passed. He couldn't wait any longer. He must get

out now and make a run for it—that is, if he could get his legs untied and if his bum knee would cooperate. But what if they were somehow tricking him? What if they were just standing out there, listening for signs of life—of *his* life? His pathetic waste of a life.

She was right, he knew. He was a good-for-nothing, and now the reaper would have him. How many times had she said that? “If you keep this up, the reaper will have you!” And how many times had he replied with, “He’ll have all of us eventually—you, too!” *Eventually* can be such a comforting word, until you realize it has a shelf life. But he’d be damned if his shelf life was up. *Enough! Concentrate*, he told himself. *Stop thinking and think!* Those double-crossing bastards were gone. He’d get out of this, like all of the other times. Then it would be *his* turn to inflict the pain. Maybe he’d just wait a few minutes longer. He decided he would count to fifty. Then, if they were still not to be heard, he would make his move.

He cocked his head slightly to the left and strained to pick up any ambient signs of life. *1...2...3...4* Blood and crickets were all he could detect—the blood rushing through his ears and crickets stridulating ever so faintly some distance away. *25...26...27...* He noticed that his counting was now synched up with the *thump-p-p, thump-p-p, thump-p-p* pulsing in his ears. But wait! Crickets! If crickets were chirping, then those two hulking idiots must be gone! It was now or never. No more counting.

Slowly, his heart pounding, he raised his bound and bare feet to the underside of the trunk lid and pressed it upward. Slowly, very slowly, after what seemed like several minutes, the trunk was filled with pale moonlight. He threw his legs over the edge of the trunk, resting the crook of his knees on the trunk’s rubber seal. Then, he scooted his backside toward the rear of the Cadillac and flexed his torso upward as far as he could. Unfortunately, that was not very far. His abdominal muscles and cracked ribs were no match for gravity. He needed leverage,

so he gripped the edge of the trunk with his legs and scooted his backside closer to the latch. With all his strength, he wriggled his butt up onto the trunk's edge. *What now? What if they come back and I'm stuck here? Shut up! Think!* Grabbing the farthest edge of the lid that he could reach, the man pulled himself over onto his stomach. Pain, more pain, shot through his body as he felt his right ribcage actually buckle under his own weight. Swallowing a scream, he pushed against the floor of the trunk with his bound hands. His bare knees scraped the top edge of the license plate as his body slithered out of the trunk and poured itself supine onto the gravel.

Trying to ignore the agony, he curled his torso up to find a sitting position. Despite the full moon, it took a few seconds for him to make out his surroundings. Besides illuminating the severity of his injuries, the moonlight also caught the gravel road that extended into the night. The sides of the road were thick with tall ponderosa, and patches of light reflected dully off what appeared to be exposed granite. He saw no buildings, no artificial light. *Where did they go? Are they watching me now?* He hurriedly untied his ankles but could not slip his wrists out of the knots that had, for the last few hours, bored a red furrow into the skin of his wrists.

To hell with it. He grabbed the rear bumper of the car with his bound hands and pushed his left foot against the gravel-pocked tread of the left rear tire. Holding his breath to stifle the groans of pain, he pulled himself onto his feet and quickly spun around, looking for movement. There was none. None that he saw.

The only question now was, in which direction should he go? He had no idea where he was, but based on how long they had been driving, he guessed it was some place far and unfamiliar. He must be farther up into the hills, he reasoned. The tall, dense, odoriferous pine and rocky landscape ruled out any place within a few miles of the city. It probably also ruled out

finding anyone who could help him. It didn't rule out mountain lions though. *Stop thinking and think!* But the gravel road? Someone had to put it here. For what? And again, where the hell had they gone?

Just run! Anywhere away from this car. He chose the left side of the road, as he saw it. Why, he did not know. There was no reason, really; didn't need to be a reason. *Just go!*

He quickly discovered that he had misjudged his surroundings. The ground was not flat in this direction. It sloped downward sharply. The man tumbled forward, rolling through gravel, then dirt, then needles and bushes for several feet until he got lodged on the trunk of a narrow pine. Pulling himself up with the aid of the tree, the man tried to find his footing. Pinecones, needles, and small rocks punctured his feet, making the task doubly difficult. He heard the cracking of wood to his right, back in the direction of the road, and quickly spun around, instinctively ducking down against the tree as he did so. He saw nothing but noticed, for the first time, how cold it was—a slight breeze through the October air cutting like a knife, his breath diffusing into a white vapor that stood out against the dark. Maybe that's why they'd let him live, so he would freeze to death out here. Another "crack." This one from behind him and much heavier than the first. For the third and last time, he spun around.

Ingrid Nilsson pressed hard on the brake and the side-by-side jolted to a halt, sending a splash of liquid from her can of iced tea onto the center console. It had been a relatively dry summer, and the nimbus of dust that trailed her up the service road behind Wandering Hills RV Park now engulfed the vehicle. She set the brake, pulled a bandana out of her breast pocket, covered her mouth with it, and jumped out to clear the large tree branch that blocked her progress. Though Ingrid was in her mid-fifties, she was fitter than most and her motions bore a sort of rugged gracefulness—of muscle memory and economy of movement. The offending branch was a rather large one, and she considered it must have been the late summer thunderstorm a few weeks ago that threw the dead branch from the dead tree onto the dead earth. She chucked the branch down the slope on the east side of the road.

“Scoot over, Alice.” Ingrid lovingly pushed the yellow Labrador back onto the passenger side and resumed her journey up the dry dirt road. Alice sprung back and licked at Ingrid’s face, her paws pressing into Ingrid’s right leg. “I love you, too, girl. We’re almost there, then I’ll get you some water,

okay?” As if comprehending, Alice shifted back onto the passenger side and faced forward, panting heavily with her tongue lolling several inches out of her mouth.

After another fifty yards or so, the upward slope switched back sharply westward, then gave way to the flatter ground of the service area at the top of the hill. This is where Ingrid and Bill stored extra lumber and various plumbing and electrical supplies in two wooden sheds that were set about four feet back from the slope of granite and dirt that gently descended a thousand yards into French Creek Valley. The last people to rent cabin three—the family from Iowa with those insipid kids—broke the flushing mechanism on the toilet and Ingrid needed to dig through the sheds to find a spare. *They better have one! The next renters are due in two hours. Damn kids!*

Ingrid stepped out of the side-by-side and walked to the back to fill Alice’s water bowl from an ancient green jug that was kept just for that purpose. Alice hopped out behind her and began sniffing around—looking for the prairie dogs, Ingrid supposed. “You’re going to get bit on the nose again,” she called out. “Get over here and get your water so we can get on with it and fix up that cabin.” Ingrid set the filled water bowl carefully on the ground, trying not to spill any of the precious liquid.

She decided to check the smaller of the two sheds first. Ingrid seemed to recall that being the last place she saw their stock of bathroom fixtures. Several minutes went by, and Ingrid felt like she was getting closer to her quarry. She found a box labeled “misc bath” and found therein flex pipe, elbow connectors, washers, flappers, floats, fill valves and—*yes!*—flush handles. Well, one flush handle. But that was all she needed.

After re-boxing all of the parts and restacking the boxes in the order she found them, Ingrid turned to make her way back to the side-by-side. Suddenly, she became aware of a scratching noise coming from behind the shed. Alice must really want another bite on the nose, she thought. Prairie dogs were less

common at this elevation, but they had made a nice little colony up behind the park, and Alice took it upon herself to be their personal tormentor.

Ingrid hurriedly made her way behind the shed to find Alice scratching and growling at what looked to be a large, angular rock. “Girl, git! Stop that!” Ingrid dropped to her denimed knees and inspected the source of Alice’s fascination. She was no expert, but she also wasn’t stupid. It was a skull, or at least the remains of one, stained brown, with several dark hairs clinging by a paste of mud, now long dried. The image called to mind the shell of a shucked coconut.

She searched for a stick in the surrounding landscape and, finding one, used it to poke at the skull until it broke free from the earth. Another poke and it flipped over altogether. The face of whatever this was appeared to be shattered into several pieces—a papier mâché of dried flesh keeping the jigsaw together loosely. The grotesque and desiccated visage stared back at her in a crooked gape.

Ingrid grabbed Alice by the collar and yanked the poor yelping dog all the way back to the side-by-side.



“TELL me again why you think that bone is human?” Bill asked Ingrid as they stared down at the skull behind the shed. It had taken Ingrid several minutes to convince Bill to pull himself away from rewiring the hookups at site twenty-one and come with her up to the sheds. Evidently, racing down the service road like a bat out of hell and yelling for him halfway through that journey was not enough to set Bill’s alarm bells ringing. Ultimately, it was the look in her eyes and paleness of her normally tanned complexion that convinced him. He hopped in the side-by-side, they dropped Alice off with Sarah in the main office, and then they headed back up the hill.

“It’s human. Look, Bill, it’s a damn face. It’s busted to hell, but it’s a face.” Ingrid was poking at the skull with the same stick she’d used earlier, trying to get it positioned, to make the “face” appear.

“Okay, Ing, I get it.” Bill pulled the cell phone out of his front pocket and poked at the screen, then put it up to his ear.

“Hey-a Kathy, it’s Bill out at Wandering Hills...yeah, yeah, I know it rhymes, super funny...anyway can you send someone up here? We got kind of a situation.”

Ingrid was following the conversation while keeping her eyes fixed on the skull, as if it would try to run off.

“Well, Ing thinks she might have found a skull up here.”

“Ing *knows* she found a skull up here!” Ingrid interjected angrily, her eyes still holding onto the twisted broken face staring back up at her.

“Yep.” Bill turned and walked back toward the side-by-side, continuing his conversation. “We’ll be here. How long do you think? Thirty minutes at most? Perfect. Great. We’ll be down at the office waiting. Oh, and uh...could you ask them to be discreet? We got a lot of guests here, and more due to check in this afternoon. There’s no need to come all sirens blazing, if you know what I mean. Perfect. Thanks so much.”

Bill punched the *END* button on the phone, thanked the gods of technology for decent cell coverage this far from town, and ambled back to Ingrid’s side.

“How do you think it got here?” she asked, as he sidled up next to her. “Think it’s a cat that left it?”

“I have no idea,” he answered.

Ingrid finally lifted her gaze off of the skull and walked a few yards down the slope, her hands on her hips, swiveling her head like a lazy sprinkler. “I wonder where the rest of it is,” she called back to Bill. “It has to be here. Right?”

Bill closed the distance between them, put his arm around her shoulder, and gently drew her back toward the side-by-side.

“Let’s go back down, hon. Skull or no skull, we have guests coming, and they won’t like a broken toilet. I think I can get it fixed before the sheriff gets here. You found that part, right?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Ingrid replied distractedly.

“That’s my girl,” Bill said, as they got in the side-by-side and started down the hill.

NEARLY AN HOUR LATER, Detective Sergeant Hank LeGris of the Custer County Sheriff’s Office pulled the sunglasses off his head as he squatted down and stared fixedly into the dried patch of mud just in front of him. He squinted and bent his head, dog-like, as if the combination of those small movements would somehow lend clarity to the twisted and broken lump of bone that held his fascination.

“This is it?” he asked.

“Yep. We didn’t touch it. Aside from Ing poking at it with a stick, that is,” Bill answered.

“That stick, right there,” Ingrid said, in a tone that suggested this information was somehow critical.

Hank didn’t look at the stick. He just stared at the skull. After several minutes he abruptly stood up to his full six-foot-two height, put the sunglasses back on his head, and turned toward Bill. “Have you looked around for anything else? Any more bones? Anything different?” he asked.

“Not really,” Bill replied. “When we saw the bone, we called you. But there’s nothing different here that we can see.”

“And the sheds were still locked when I came up,” Ingrid added.

Hank took in his surroundings as he ran his hand through his medium length brown hair. To his immediate right was the back of the smaller of the two brown, rectangular sheds. Immediately behind the shed, where Hank now stood, was a few feet of level ground covered by dry, but once muddy, earth and low

grasses. To Hank's left, the level area gave way to a gentle, grassy slope descending about three hundred yards to a thick line of oak that lined French Creek. Beyond that, the valley, sparsely dotted by ranches and bisected by tenuous fences, extended a mile or so and broke at the foot of oak-speckled Mount Coolidge.

Hank pulled the radio mic from his lapel and pressed the talk button. "Y7 to dispatch."

"Dispatch copy," the radio crackled back.

"We have a ten-five-four. We need a D unit. And have them call me. Also, when Y3 goes ten-eight, we'll need her here."

"Copy. Will have D34 call."

The cop-speak gave the whole circumstance a weight that made Ingrid nervous. What if she was wrong? What if the bone was not human? What if it was not even a bone? What had she done? Was this all a terrible mistake?

"I hope we're doing the right thing," she whispered to Bill.

Bill put his arm around her. "You did good, hon," he whispered back. "Hank and the boys will figure this out. No matter what, we had to call them."

Ingrid broke from Bill and took a few steps in the direction of the skull.

"Don't touch it!" Hank blurted out.

"I won't! I'm not dumb, ya know!"

"Sorry. We just have to keep the scene clean for the coroner. You really shouldn't even be up here."

"So, you think it is human, after all?"

"I do. We don't see a ton of these, thank goodness. And what we do see is usually old, Native remains. But I've seen enough to think that it is human. It's smashed pretty good; but like you said, it has a face."

Ingrid suddenly felt better, in an odd sort of way. Whoever this is—was—is dead. But at least she hadn't cried wolf.

“Where do you think it came from?” Bill asked. “We heard about the cat attacks. Could this be—”

The radio on Hank’s uniform shirt screeched in interruption. “Y3 is ten-one-seven.”

“Copy,” Hank replied. He racked the mic back onto his uniform and turned to Bill. “I have no idea where this came from. I got the coroner coming, and Tiffany is heading up, too. We’re going to have to have a better look around. As for the mountain lion—we don’t even know if there have been any attacks.”

“But we read in the paper...” Ingrid replied.

“You read that some remains were found. Which is true. But at this point the whole cat angle is just a rumor, just a story.”

“There are mountain lions here, though. Everyone knows that,” Ingrid replied.

“And Carmichael told me he’s got sheep missing,” Bill added.

“Carmichael’s place is several miles away from here, Bill. You know that.”

“They travel, you know *that*.” Ingrid was getting irritated by the sergeant’s lack of cooperation. Something about hosting a hundred and fifty guests in an RV park did not mix with a roving beast with claws and teeth. Why couldn’t the sergeant understand how serious this was?

“Look, the bottom line is we have no proof that the remains were caused by a mountain lion, or lions.”

“But you don’t know they’re not!” Ingrid spat out.

“How many remains have been found? How many bodies?” Bill asked.

“I really can’t comment on that. Look, why don’t you two head back down and keep an eye out for the coroner and Tiffany. Lead them up here once they arrive. There’s just no point in speculating.”

“Okay, Hank, we’ll do that. Come on, Ingrid. We’ll want to

get the coroner up here as soon as he arrives anyway. We don't need any of the guests to catch on."



FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, the coroner's investigator, Gerry Good Crow, was gingerly holding the skull in his gloved hands. Once it was fully out of the earth, its humanness was unmistakable. The upper rear portion of the skull was draped by strands of muddied, medium-length hair. The face was smashed in a morbid jigsaw puzzle, but the holes for the nose and eyes could be discerned through the dried, desiccated skin that held forehead, face, and jaw together. To the back of the skull, near where the neck would be, was a layer of what looked to be Styrofoam.

"What do you think, Gerry?" Hank was looking over the investigator's shoulder.

"It's definitely human. It looks like a cow stepped on it though."

"Can you tell what killed him...or her?"

"No, but maybe if we find the rest of the body, we'll figure that out. The rest can't be far."

"I can get search and rescue up here, and maybe some cadets," Hank said, as he scanned the area once again.

"Okay. I'll bag up what's here. This is a mess, Hank. I hope you weren't planning on having dinner with the family."

"Same goes for you, Gerry. Any signs that this person was attacked by an animal?"

"Mountain lion, you mean? I wouldn't know what that looks like."

"No evidence from the other case, you mean?"

"Nope. Statistically it is very unlikely. But until we know for sure, it will be hard to stop people from spreading the rumors

and stirring up the panic. Like I said, we just honestly don't know what that kind of thing should look like."

Something in what Gerry said rang a bell with Hank. *Wouldn't know what that looks like.* He'd said it twice, and maybe it took the repetition for Hank's brain cells to fire in just the right way.

"Well crap," Hank blurted exasperatedly and pulled out his personal cell phone.

"What's the matter, Hank? Who are you calling?"

"I think I know a guy," Hank replied, as he walked away with his phone to his ear.

A youngish man tepidly entered the waiting room of Christina Lucas, MD., PhD. As he did so, he quickly scanned the sterile cube of ecru walls, mid-grade carpet, and faux leather armchairs and saw only one other soul. Unless, of course, one cared to count the souls of the assortment of tang, damsel fish, clown fish, triggers, and angel fish that swam placidly through the large aquarium opposite the entrance door. But Sebastien Grey cared not to count the fish and, if pressed, would be reluctant to even count himself.

The other person in the waiting area was an older man in an oversized brown cardigan intently reading a magazine; the man showed no sign that he noticed the new arrival. Almost automatically, Sebastien calculated the relative risks involved in taking each of the eight or so open seats. Would it be better to sit behind the man, which could be construed as unsocial and rude? Or, in front of him, and perhaps force an awkward eye contact? Or even worse, conversation!

After a perfunctory check-in with the receptionist, Sebastien turned, fixed his eyes on the carpet, and took the six or seven necessary steps to the empty chair on the other side of

the room, between a glass end table and one side of the aquarium. After a few moments, Sebastien's eyes could be found tracing the circuitous path of one particularly bright yellow tang. A few more moments and the ever-so-frequent self-recriminating ruminations began.

If someone had come into that waiting room, a third soul, so-to-speak, he or she would not have detected much consternation about the man in the corner by the fish tank. They likely would have only noticed a dark-haired, thinnish man of about 30 years, fastidiously dressed in blue dress slacks, butter yellow button-down shirt, brown herringbone waistcoat, and brown calfskin wingtips. In fact, the man's face would measure a few standard deviations in the direction of handsome on most scales—at least, in an everyman sort of way. And that, combined with his obviously over-studied wardrobe, gave the faint impression of an image from a menswear catalog.

The internal workings of this man were another matter, and by the eleventh or twelfth lap of the yellow tang, Sebastien's mind had fully capsized and fell onto the bed of a stormy sea, as it so often did. He simultaneously dreaded his visit with Dr. Lucas today and was grateful for it. He found himself both hoping the man in the cardigan was ahead of him in the order of clients, and praying that the man had already had his turn and just could not pull himself away from some captivating article in the magazine that continued to occupy his attention. It gradually occurred to Sebastien that he owed the good doctor some answers to questions and some homework—answers he did not have and homework he had not done. Five minutes or so later, the door to the hallway outside opened and a woman poked half of her body in.

“You ready, hon?”

The man in the cardigan closed the magazine and set it on the table beside him as he rose from his chair. “Thought you'd never get here.”

“Well, I told you I had to stop by Janice’s on the way in. How’d it go?”

“Fine, fine. There’s stuff at the pharmacy. Let’s go before they close.”

The door shut, muffling a, “We have plenty of time. Would you stop worrying all the time?”

The ship of Sebastien’s mind sunk deeper into the sand.

After what seemed to Sebastien to be an hour, but was probably closer to ten minutes, the woman behind the receptionist’s counter opened the door that bisected the waiting area and Dr. Lucas’s office. Her voice pierced Sebastien’s solemn thoughts.

“Sebastien, come on in. Tina is looking forward to your visit.”

Sebastien’s heart began thumping a little harder and his palms felt clammy as he made his way into the inner hallway and from there through to Dr. Lucas’s office—the opposite effect intended by the pleasant tone of the receptionist. But it could only be so; he had been coming to see Tina, as she preferred to be called, for seven months now, and he had only recently considered that perhaps, maybe just a little, he was a modicum less anxious about these weekly sessions. Still, spending an hour talking about himself, his loathsome self, pressed him so far outside his comfort zone that the physiological effects were unavoidable. He only hoped they had become less noticeable. He feared—no, he was sure—they hadn’t.

“Sebastien, welcome. Come in and sit. Yes, there. The usual seat. How was your week?”

Sebastien had thought many times and did so again as he took Tina’s hand to shake it, how unfair it was that she was so distractingly beautiful. Lowering himself into the red leather chair, he tried to take her all in without being obvious about it. Her hair was down today, a jet-black waterfall of silk cascading down her ivory cotton blouse. Her blue skirt reached to mid-

calf and her shoes were simple black flats. As usual, her outfit was modest and professional, no doubt calculated to illicit no arousal or emotional response whatsoever from the damaged and lost souls that were her clientele. But her piercing dark brown eyes and flawless skin were enough to belie whatever demure affectation her wardrobe attempted to convey.

“Oh, you know, good; I mean fine, I guess.” Normally, making eye contact was beyond Sebastien’s capacity, but as he answered her his eyes fixed like magnets upon the dark almonds that bookended her long, thin nose. It occurred to him that she may have some Central American ancestry. One day, he would screw up the courage to ask.

“Well, that’s great!” she beamed back warmly and with complete sincerity. “I’m eager to hear all about it. Let’s start off by revisiting some of the goals we set for the week. Would that be okay?” Tina waited for Sebastien’s nod, then continued. “I believe we talked about you doing more socializing and trying out some of the techniques we practiced. And you said something about a chamber of commerce mixer, and an opera, I think. Could you remind me about those?”

It always fascinated Sebastien that Tina could remember such details, as if she were really concerned with the minutiae of his ridiculous existence. “Well, it wasn’t an opera exactly. It was a dinner thing they have for people who donate to the opera. It’s called the Overture Society.”

“Oh, that sounds like a great opportunity to get to know people. How did it go?”

Sebastien’s eyes found the floor. “I uh...didn’t go. I mean I almost went.”

“What do you mean by *almost*? Would you mind explaining that a bit more?” Tina’s spine straightened perceptibly; her eyes remained on Sebastien as her graceful hands opened the notebook that sat on her lap—a silver Parker pen clipped to its spine.

“Okay, so, I got dressed up and everything and, you know, when I got to the place, I saw other people going in. The men were wearing jackets. I didn’t bring a jacket.”

“You mean, like a blazer or sport coat?” she asked.

“Yeah, they had them on, and I didn’t.”

“What were you wearing?”

“Just slacks and a dress shirt and vest—this vest actually; same one I’m wearing.”

“It’s a very nice vest,” she interjected warmly, then twisted the pen to expose the tip.

“Yeah, um...thanks. Well anyway it was hot, so I didn’t bring my jacket. So, I went home.” Sebastien felt the vibration of his phone in his pocket. He ignored it and hoped Tina wouldn’t notice it.

“Do you need to get that?” she asked.

Of course, he thought. “No, no. It will go to voicemail.”

“Great. Okay. You were concerned about being under-dressed for the occasion, you mean? I totally understand that. I think most people would be. But do you think your friends at the opera society—”

“Overture Society,” he broke in, then immediately flushed with shame for correcting her.

“...Overture Society—yes, thank you—do you think your friends at the Overture Society would mind that you didn’t have a jacket on? Do they seem like the kind of people who would be concerned about that?”

Sebastien noticed Tina scribbling something in her notebook. He wondered with suspicion what it could be. “Well, I’ve never met them.”

“Oh, it was your first time? Completely understandable. Social situations can be so difficult, can’t they?”

Sebastien shifted uncomfortably in his chair and Tina, catching his movement, paused her writing and looked up.

“What about the chamber of commerce mixer? Were you able to make it to that?”

“Nuh uh.” Sebastien once again looked down, fixing his eyes on the burgundy quatrefoil pattern in the carpet.

“Well, that’s okay. Let’s talk about work. Did you get any new cases this week?”

“Not really. Well, there was this one thing—a hiker found some bones and the deputy sent me pictures from the scene. They were just bird bones though, so it was really nothing.”

“That’s fascinating that you can tell that kind of thing just from bones.”

“Feathers,” Sebastien replied.

“I’m sorry. What do you mean?” Tina’s eyes narrowed.

“There were feathers scattered all around the scene.”

Tina suddenly lurched and heaved into a staccato of snorting laughter. Sebastien was caught off guard. He had never heard her laugh. It seemed so contrary to the pedestal of grace upon which he placed her. He could feel his face flush red with shame and embarrassment. *What a stupid answer! You are so stupid! See? This is why you shouldn’t talk about yourself!* He drove his forearms down onto the armrests of the chair as if to raise himself to his feet and flee.

SEBASTIEN SAT for several minutes in the Range Rover, replaying the appointment with Dr. Lucas over and over in his head. He had a pounding headache and his eyes stung. And even worse, he could not decide whether he should be embarrassed over-reacting to Tina’s laughter, or relieved that his outburst led to a deeper discussion of how his personality disorder causes him to be overly sensitive to the slightest insult. It was something for him to work on, anyway. More information was better than less, he felt.

Just as he was about to start the car, Sebastien remembered

that he had received a phone call during the session. He produced his phone from his breast pocket and saw the missed call and message. Both from his brother. A tinge of anxiety vibrated in his chest, and he debated whether to ignore the call. After all, what could he possibly want? Finally, Sebastien decided that ignoring his brother would be of no use. Henry was stubborn. Sebastien put his phone on speaker and pressed play on the message.

“Hey, Sebastien, what’s up, bro? It’s Ha...Henry. Been a while. Hey, could you give me a call back? I need a favor. And I, uh, I need it kind of fast. I’ve got a thing here I need your help on. Anyway, please, you know, just give me a call as soon as you can. Thanks, man.”

It had been almost a year since Sebastien had spoken to his brother. It wasn’t that they didn’t get along; they just sort of drifted apart after their mother died. It was easy, too; they were so different. Sebastien was taciturn, cerebral, and introspective. Henry was the older of the two, and much more confident, athletic, and gregarious. There just wasn’t that much in common to talk about. The fact is, Henry seemed to remind Sebastien of everything he wasn’t—and was fairly sure he was supposed to be. At least to their mother. Sebastien wondered whether there was something in this, something he should bring up with Tina.

Sebastien shook himself free from those thoughts and hit “call back” on the message from Henry. It was answered on the first ring.

“Sebastien, how’s it going, man?” Henry’s words were clipped; he sounded eager.

“Um...fine. Just calling you back. What’s up?”

“Yeah, thanks for that. Hey, what was it you did for your graduate project? You know, when you went to Namibia.”

“My dissertation, you mean?” Sebastien was genuinely confused. The question seemed out of left field.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s what I meant.”

“I was researching the impact of resource stress on the frequency of *Acinonyx* predation of *Cercopithecines*. Why?”

“Come on, Sebastien. Seriously, laymen’s terms here. I don’t have time for the nerd version.”

“Great to talk to you, too, Henry.” Sebastien reproved himself for bothering to return his brother’s call. He was about to say goodbye for another year, but before he could, Henry, in a less agitated voice, broke in.

“Sorry. I just mean I’m dealing with a situation here and figured your research might help me. It was something to do with Cheetahs eating monkeys, or something like that, right?”

“Yeah, that was part of it. What could you possibly care about that?” Sebastien was still hurt, and his tone showed it.

“How would you like to come up here for a few days? It would be great to see you. We could show you the place. I know Melissa would love it.”

His brother’s abrupt offer alarmed Sebastien, who curtly replied, “Henry, what’s going on?”

“Okay, look. We’ve had some strange cases up here; bodies, or parts of bodies, are being found.” Henry’s tone was almost desperate.

“There must be a forensic anthropologist up there, Henry. You don’t need me. Besides, I’m busy.” Sebastien knew he was less than honest in this reply. Despite being the consulting forensic anthropologist for several counties in the Bay Area, he still had not had a case, a real case, in several weeks. And his landlording gig, the thing that brought in the real money was essentially on autopilot.

“Busy with what? The Block runs itself, right? You don’t have a job to go to. I mean...I didn’t mean...I’m just saying you can spare a few days to come take a look.”

“I do have case work, you know; bodies are found down

here, too, and a lot more of them I bet. You wouldn't believe the crap I get involved in."

"I know, I know. I didn't mean that. It's just that there is a bit of a panic up here. We've had parts of two bodies found so far. In fact, I'm at one of the scenes now."

No wonder Henry sounded so direct, so urgent.

"Like I said, I can't be the only—"

"It's mountain lions."

"What?"

"I mean, some people up here are saying that we have a mountain lion problem."

"It's South Dakota. You do have a mountain lion problem."

"Not like this. We sometimes have small pets or livestock disappearing. But no one has ever reported humans being killed by mountain lions up here. People are worried."

"What makes you think it's mountain lions?"

"That's where you come in. You know what a big cat attack looks like on a skeleton?"

"On monkeys, yeah. But not humans."

"Sebastien, I remember, several years ago, you lectured an entire dinner party about how humans are just primates with bigger brains."

"One of the reasons I no longer do dinner parties."

"To be honest, I don't think we have a mountain lion problem. I think someone, a person, is leaving bodies around the county. But no one here believes me. I just need you to verify my hunch that it is not a cat killing people. I think they are either homicides or accidents. Maybe even suicides."

"That's not how science works. Or detective work, for that matter. I can't take a side without looking at the evidence."

"Okay, fine. Come look at the evidence. Come see for yourself."

"That's a long way to go just to verify a hunch."

“We still need to know what we do have up here. I still need an anthropologist.”

“Like I said, must be plenty of them in South Dakota.”

“Not like you,” replied Hank.

Sebastien gave no response, but, in truth, he was genuinely touched by his brother’s compliment.

“It’s been a while. And you’ve never seen my place. It’s actually very cool. We’re building stables and a corral. We’re going to get a horse for Kirby. You need to see it. It’s got everything.”

“Including mountain lions?”

“At least think about it. But hurry, okay?”

“I’ll think about it.” Sebastien pressed the ignition and put the Range Rover into reverse, sensing the end to the conversation. He once told someone that he liked the way the Rover purred. Had he recalled that now, he might have appreciated the irony. As it was, he was too irritated.

“Thanks, man. Been to Mom’s grave lately?”

“No.” A fresh wave of guilt and shame crested.

“How’s the Block? What a hassle it must be to run that place. I definitely got the better deal. I actually feel a bit bad about that.”

“Don’t. It’s fine. Really. It suits me.”

“Yeah, well, if you say so. You’re happy though? Right?”

Oh, come on. Not now, he thought. “Yeah, it’s all good. But hey, I’m driving so I better get going. Thanks for calling though, Henry.”

“Promise you’ll think about it? Oh and, by the way, it’s Hank up here. Henry just doesn’t seem...”

“I will. I promise, Hank.” Sebastien needed no explanation and was certainly in no position to judge anyone’s desire to reinvent themselves. He hit “end call” on the console at about the same time he reached the freeway on-ramp. He gunned all eight cylinders and overtook the BMW in front of him, then swung sharply into the leftmost lane through surprisingly light

early afternoon traffic. Speed limit or no speed limit. He was irritated now, and now certain, as he reflected, that he had made a total fool of himself in therapy.

“Busy with what? The Block runs itself, right? You don’t have a job to go to.”

Sebastien called up Wagner’s Siegfried on the audio system and turned up the volume. The creeping intensity of the *Vorspiel* mirrored his baleful mood. A tactile search of the console produced a prescription bottle, but it was empty.

Hank, Gerry, and the pathologist, Dr. Rose, stood around the metal autopsy table gaping at the hunk of mangled skull that was gaping back at them. Dr. Rose had just completed his examination and came up with precious little in the way of useful information. The lights in the autopsy suite flickered momentarily as an unexpected summer thunderstorm rolled by outside.

“How sure are we feeling that there is nothing more out there?” asked Dr. Rose.

Hank was pulling at his goatee subconsciously. “Can’t be a hundred percent, but we had eleven cadets, six search and rescue folks, and a dog. We did a grid search of the entire area.”

“Maybe it was brought in, planted there?” suggested Gerry.

“It’s possible,” admitted Hank. “Is there at least enough information from the skull to search it in the missing persons database?”

Dr. Rose began placing the skull in a small paper bag, then put the bag in a cardboard box. The lights from the ceiling reflected off his bald head as he worked. “Well, we know it is definitely human and definitely modern—the fillings tell us

that. Plus, there are a few missing teeth, and those sockets have been remodeled with bone, so it may be that this is an older person. I can't tell the sex, though."

"Can we get DNA?" Hank asked, hopefully. "Like maybe from the white stuff you found on the back part of the skull."

"We can probably get DNA from the teeth or the calvarium—the top of the skull—but I don't know about that tissue. It looks like fat or something. I'll submit it to the lab along with the rest. I think, all told, we are in good shape for DNA, though."

"As long as there is a match in MISPERS," Gerry interjected, referring to the missing persons database.

"Clearly," replied the doctor. "Given the condition of the skull and the lack of other diagnostic elements, there is not much we—I—can tell. That's why I asked if we were sure that there is nothing more there."

"You mean you can't tell whether or not this person was attacked by a mountain lion?" asked Hank.

"No. There is obvious trauma with the skull being in pieces. But I can't tell if it is pre- or post-mortem, or what caused it. Like I said, I need more."

Hank's eye lit up in an idea. "What about underground? What if it was buried and the prairie dogs dug it up? There's a colony up there; I saw the holes. What's that set-up called? Ground piercing..."

Gerry shook his head and frowned, interrupting. "Penetrating Radar. Ground Penetrating Radar is what they call it. We could try, but I doubt there is anything underground. The dog should have been able to detect a burial—at least that's what I've been told."

Dr. Rose silently nodded his agreement, then offered, "I think it would be a good idea to try, though. It certainly couldn't hurt, anyway."

Gerry pulled out his phone and started walking toward the

main office. “I’ll give Jenny a call. She has the gear and knows how to use it.”

Hank looked at Dr. Rose quizzically.

“Geologist at the college. She’s helped on some other cases. You remember the parking lot at the high school? They were digging it up to put in a new drainage system and found those Native burials?”

“Oh sure. I heard about that.”

“Well, Dr. Sommers—Jenny—did the ground penetrating radar on that. It actually helped quite a bit.”

A minute later, Gerry walked back into the autopsy suite, pocketing his phone. “I left a message. Can we at least tell how long it’s been out there, or how long whoever it is has been dead?”

“Given the fact that the thing is mostly bone, with just some desiccated skin holding the pieces together, I would say several months at least. It has been a relatively hot and dry spring, too. That would speed things up some.” Dr. Rose spoke over his shoulder, while washing his hands at the sink.

Just then, as if on cosmic cue, a clap of thunder shook through the building, causing the lights to flicker. The three men all looked up to the ceiling nervously.



DOWNTOWN VINEYARD HAD GONE through a process of gentrification over the last few decades. Buildings and streets born in the forties and fifties became sleepy relics by the eighties. But new money, squeezed from wine grapes and microprocessors, helped push affluence eastward from Silicon Valley up through the dust and weeds of the easternmost margins of the Bay Area. These winds of change resuscitated the town and transformed it into a hip, urban hub where new and quaint somehow found a happy collaboration in the form of expensive restaurants,

trendy bars, and niche boutiques, all stuffed into the art deco remains of Vineyard's post-war boom. The streets, once somnolent, had given way to outright commotion.

Aside from the Worthington—a state of the art performance center hosting concerts, operas, plays, and lectures—the most notable building downtown was affectionately referred to as “The Block” by the locals. The Block, a two-storied masonry building built in 1942, occupied an entire block between First and Second streets—hence its name. The reason for the building's fame is lost to the memory of most; but the more seasoned denizens of the town know it for the heated public debate that took place in 1982, when the owner, having fallen on hard times, sought a permit to demolish the building and replace it with a strip mall.

The fortieth anniversary of the building proved to be an unfortunate time to propose such architectural violence and, perhaps not surprisingly, uproar ensued. Public meetings were held, and picketers marched up and down First Street the better part of that fall. Finally, a Canadian architect named Claude LeGris got wind of the imminent demolition and swooped in to write a check big enough to send the building's owner into a comfortable retirement. Claude rehabilitated the building, converting the second story to luxury apartments and gutting the southwest corner to make room for a small parking garage. The building had been in the LeGris family ever since and, rumor had it, Claude's grandson now ran the place. Though few people had ever seen or spoken to the man, further rumor had it that he was rather youngish and somewhat handsome. Some of the more aggressive single socialites had suggested a bounty. Of course, Sebastien himself was oblivious to the rumors of his eligibility.

After pulling into his spot in the garage, Sebastien made his way to the front of the building. The ground floor of the Block was occupied by several businesses—a Chinese restaurant, a

rare book dealer, an attorney's office, an ice cream shop, a tailor, and a game shop. Sebastien looked over the façade on First Street and considered himself fortunate that his tenants were relatively easy to deal with, and they all paid their rent on time. Well, almost all.

“Sebastien! We're down here.”

Sebastien turned in the direction of the voice and saw about half a dozen people sitting at a long folding table at the far end of the Goblin's Lair Cards and Games, between a display of unpainted miniature soldiers and a large cardboard dragon. The group—what looked to be a mix of teens and twenty-somethings—were busy consulting books and scribbling on notepaper. Polyhedral dice covered the table like confetti.

“You should join us, man. We just lost our healer.” This from the head of the table, the proprietor and major domo of the Goblin's Lair, Eric Pool. The remainder of the table's occupants stopped what they were doing and looked up at Sebastien with apparent suspicion. After what seemed like a full minute, a pink bubble emerged from the mouth of the only girl of the group, then popped. As if prompted by the bubble-gum signal, the players rejoined their busywork.

“I don't think so, but thanks. I don't really know how to play. Plus, I have a lot of work to do still. I just came to ask if...uh...you know...if you got the, uh, invoice I left for you last week.”

“Okay, cool. Oh, and on that other thing, yeah, I got it. Next week alright for that?”

“Yeah, yeah, fine.” As the words came out it suddenly occurred to Sebastien how frequently he'd been lying these days.

In truth, Sebastien did want to play, or at least watch. The memory of fantasy role playing games played in the library of his middle school tugged at him whenever he set foot in the store. That may have been, indeed probably was, the last time

he had friends. And as far as “that other thing” went, no, next week would not be okay. The rent was already a full month late. He really must learn to assert himself, he thought, as he made his way for the door.

“Oh hey, Sebastien.” Eric stood up from the table and bounded awkwardly toward the front of the store—as if all his joints were stiff from sitting too long. “Some lady came by and left you something.”

“Oh really? Who? What did she leave?”

Eric ducked behind the sales counter and emerged with an envelope in his hand. “Don’t know. Never seen her before. She was old though. Pretty classy, too, by the look of her. She insisted you get this ASAP. Glad I remembered.”

A mocking “barely!” came from one of the youths at the game table.

He thanked Eric and pocketed the envelope as he emerged onto the sidewalk.

Sebastien offered a silent prayer—to whatever gods there may be—that he would not run into anyone at the mailboxes. Small talk was perfect torture, and he always felt stupid and awkward trying to fake his way through it. This day the gods obliged, and he was able to check his mail in peace before heading up to his apartment. Just a few circulars, the obligatory credit card application, and a largish package postmarked from Germany. It must be the book his old colleague Hugo Drechsler had promised to send him.

He closed the apartment door behind him and, as was always the case, instantly felt himself relax. He let out an audible sigh as he twisted the deadbolt on the door. He was safe now. Perfectly, warmly cocooned. No interactions, no byplay, no social obligations. Here he was alone and invisible. Or nearly so.

“Hello, Parsifal. How was your day? Did Mrs. Kimble take you for a nice walk?” Sebastien rubbed the head of his sable

corgi, which was peering at him from above the back of the couch, tail wagging violently. Parsifal yipped in response.

After taking Parsifal out to do his business and fishing through the refrigerator for something resembling a reasonable meal, Sebastien sat himself at the French partners desk—an inheritance from his grandfather—and carefully examined the envelope Eric had given him. It was fine stationary in light violet with the name “Mr. Grey” inscribed in a delicate and petit hand on the front. The flap was monogrammed “AKL.”

Sebastien carefully peeled the flap away from the envelope, trying not to rip it, or its contents. He pinched the small pale violet sheet and gingerly removed it from the envelope. Parsifal stared up from between his legs—eyes large with concern.

MR. GREY,

As a valued member of the Overture Society, I would like to invite you to the premiere of Der Fliegende Hollander next Sunday at seven o'clock. There will be a special reception with the cast after the performance, and I do hope you are able to make it, as I know you were not able to attend the dinner we had this week. Your presence was missed.

With Warmest Regards,

Adeline

Sebastien felt his forehead moisten as he tucked the note back in the envelope. Adeline Lindner was both a brilliant pediatric cardiologist and the longtime president of the Overture Society. Her largess beamed over the entire institution and allowed this relatively small and regional opera company to bring in some of the world's best singers. How in the world had Sebastien come to her notice? He wasn't on the donor page of the programs—he expressly asked to be listed as “anonymous.” She certainly did not know him from any of the society events since Sebastien never could bring himself to attend one. He

folded his arms and leaned back in the chair, scanning the ceiling.

Suddenly, a horrific thought occurred to him. Regardless of how he had found his way into the social crosshairs of Dr. Lindner, the fact is she had somehow associated him with the game store. The Goblin's Lair! Ugh, how embarrassing! He wondered what sort of bedraggled youth were in the store when Adeline walked in. What was being said? And done?! Just as quickly, as it often happened, Sebastien's mind turned on him. *Man, you are such an elitist jerk!* He rifled the desk drawer for his spare bottle of Buspar and swallowed one.

Sebastien opened the bottom drawer of the desk and pulled out a stack of catalogues. If he was going to attend the premier of *Der Fliegende Hollander*—if!—then he needed to make sure he was dressed appropriately. He knew, or rather felt, that his sartorial judgement was not to be trusted. Sebastien was already several laps behind the larger field of humanity, and his clothing had to be considered carefully. The only way for him to achieve the right look—a look that would allow him to fit in without standing out—was to be a scrupulous copycat. To that end, he kept stacks of printed catalogs from just the right menswear brands, and the browser on his computer was similarly filled with bookmarks to specific looks he wished to emulate. These he would search to find the right combination of trousers, shirt, shoes, tie, jacket, etc. befitting the weather and, most importantly, the occasion. His extra-large walk-in closet was filled with the necessary pieces to recreate most of the basic looks he found amongst the pictures of ridiculously handsome models in the catalogs. And he was always on the lookout to fill in the gaps. Of course, it was all ridiculous. He knew that. Though, he had never mentioned it to Tina. How embarrassing! No doubt she would point out how silly and unnecessary it was, that it was some obsessive-compulsive trait

upon which they should work. More fodder for uncomfortable conversations.

He found what looked to be a suitable outfit for the premier on page forty-three of the Brunello Cucinelli catalog—a linen three-piece suite, in crème. Fortunately, he had such a suit, although it was a cheaper brand. It will probably do, he considered. Tie? Absolutely. Brown loafers would go well, obviously, but socks or no socks? *Socks. Of course, socks. Remember, Sebastien—blending in is a subtle affair.*

END OF SAMPLE

I hope you enjoyed these chapters. For more visit
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