

# **Second Honeymoon**

Mark Souza

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## **Second Honeymoon**

**J**ack Duncan grumbled as he cinched his robe. The knocks at his door as people stopped to offer condolences were becoming tedious. A stream of familiar faces had filed into his home to deliver an awkward moment and a story about how wonderful Marianne had been, and to say how much she'd be missed. He'd had his fill of pity and Marianne stories by the end of the first day. Privacy is what he wanted most – that and the insurance payout.

A stranger stood at the door smiling. The man looked unremarkable: average height, middle aged with a slight paunch, meaty face, curly salt and pepper hair. He wore a navy suit, red tie, well shined black shoes, and carried a matching briefcase. He looked like a salesman.

After opening the door a crack, Jack asked, “Do I know you?”

The man's dimples deepened. “Mr. Duncan, I'm Tova Burke with Gemini Insurance. I'm visiting to discuss your wife's policy with us. May we speak?”

Jack noticed the blue panel van at the curb with GEMINI painted across the side in large gold letters. He glanced inside his house then at Burke. "Can I get dressed first?"

"Of course."

Jack closed the door just as Burke started to raise a finger. Perhaps it was a precursor to the question, "May I wait inside?" Better to just shut the door in the man's face than have to answer "*no*" and appear even ruder. He rushed to the master bedroom at the back of the house. While he pulled clothes from the dresser, he admired the form in his bed. Half covered by a sheet, Abby Meacham lay sprawled out spread-eagle taking up most of the king-size mattress. Her hair sprayed a flaxen arc across the pillow. Her proud buttocks pressed high against 700-thread-count, Egyptian cotton. And what a magnificent backside it was. A tiny grin played on Jack's lips before he lightly smacked Abby's rear. She jerked and moaned.

"Get up sleepy head," Jack said, "The insurance man is here."

"Wha'?"

"No time for questions, darling. It's payday. It won't look good if he finds you here. You need to skidaddle."

Abby sat up and stretched. "What time is it?"

"Just get dressed. We can talk later." Jack pulled on a pair of jeans and buttoned them closed. He topped his ensemble off with a polo shirt.

"You're getting your money – so soon?"

"Maybe." Jack found Abby's clothes in a heap on the far side of the bed and tossed them in her lap. "I need you out of here before I let him in. Slip out the back and either hide in the garage, or use the back alley to walk home."

"I don't like all this sneaking around," Abby said as she slipped into her clothes.

"Don't worry. Once I cash the check and sell this dump, we can go somewhere nice and start over. No more sneaking around. I promise."

"Vegas?"

"Yeah, why not?"

Jack waited until he heard the soft click of the back door before he ushered in the insurance agent. His time on the front porch had wilted Burke's dimples. Burke took a seat on the couch and left enough room for Jack to join him. He set his briefcase down on the coffee table and released the latches. From it, he pulled a stack of documents and placed them down.

"I'm so sorry to hear of your loss. What happened, if I might be so bold?"

"No, it's okay," Jack said. The story, his subdued tone, stern expression, clenched teeth; all affectations he'd rehearsed and mastered well before Marianne's death. It all had to be right each time he told it, whether to first responders, the police, friends, relatives, or now to the insurance adjuster. He couldn't afford to get it wrong and raise suspicions.

"We were camping. She went down to the river for a dip while I set up camp. The current was strong. I warned her, but she thought she was up to it. Search and Rescue found her body a quarter mile downstream pinned under a tree."

"Tragic, truly tragic," Burke said. Burke's expression mimicked the sorrow Jack had worked so hard to perfect. Jack wondered if Burke, too, had rehearsed. He must have. It was practically a requirement of his job.

"Perhaps I can brighten your day just a little," Burke said.

"You have a check for me?"

Burke stiffened and his mouth hung open. Jack could tell he had caught him off guard. Perhaps the question was a bit crass and callous.

“Check?” Burke sputtered, “There’s been some kind of misunderstanding. There is no check.”

At first what Burke said didn’t register. Then the words ‘*no check*’ burned into Jack’s consciousness like molten lead. “Excuse me for being so blunt, Mr. Burke, but I’ve been through a lot over the last few weeks. The misunderstanding is on your end, I assure you. I bought life insurance through your company covering both me and my wife. It pays out two-million dollars should one of us die. I know because we both signed it, and I’m the one who wrote the premium checks to your company every month.”

Burke frantically shuffled through the pile of documents. “Your wife changed the terms of the policy. Here it is.” Burke handed Jack a page from the pile. “She opted for our clone option instead of a cash payout. See, that’s her signature and it’s dated just weeks before her death.”

Jack took the page Burke offered. The writing was Marianne’s. He felt the way he had the first time he’d been punched in the face: dazed, unable to react, his brain locked in a numb tingle, defenseless.

“A clone?” he finally sputtered.

Burke responded to Jack’s shock with concern. “You didn’t know? It’s a beautiful gesture, really. No amount of money can replace a loved one, don’t you agree?”

“That’s not legal, is it, one spouse changing the terms of a policy without consulting the other?”

“It is. See, she only changed the terms with regard to the payout on herself. The terms covering you are unchanged, two-million dollars.

“No, if she had tried to change the terms regarding your coverage, it wouldn’t have been permitted. It sets up a situation that might create incentive for one spouse to take rather lamentable actions against the other, if you know what I mean.”

“Is she...,” Jack hesitated. He fumbled to straighten his thoughts before locking his eyes on Burke’s. “You have to understand, I never thought I’d see her again. This is a bit overwhelming.”

Burke nodded. “I understand. Gemini realizes the magnitude of this kind of event. That’s the reason for my visit. I have training as a counselor to help with the transition.”

Jack gazed at the wall as if he could see through it all the way to the street. “Is she in your van?”

Burke’s face broke into an understanding grin. “No, no, that would be a bit much for one day, don’t you think? We’ll drop her by tomorrow. That’ll give you a little time to adjust.”

The news did little to relieve Jack’s apprehension. His brow remained knotted while he absently kneaded his palms across his thighs. “Will she be exactly the same?”

“Exactly, in fact she’ll be the same person.”

“And she’ll remember everything?”

“Of course. What is a person without their memories? That’s not the way Gemini operates. Believe me when I say you won’t know the difference.”

“Everything, including her death?”

“Ah, I see your point. No, she won’t remember that. No need to have that kind of trauma in her head. It changes a person and usually not for the better. That’s why we erase the last day. She gets to skip it like it never happened.” Burke shot Jack a serious

look. “Now here’s where it gets a little sticky. She won’t have any idea what’s happened. But, of course, all her friends and family will. You need to call them and tell them what’s happening, that she’s coming back, and warn them not to discuss her death around her. Then at some point you need to tell her she drowned, so if it comes up in conversation, she’s not caught off guard. We find the truth is the best thing. Just be vague about it and don’t go into too much detail or she might become fearful or fixated on her demise. I’ve seen it happen before. Just tell her we were able to bring her back, and that it’s no different than if mouth to mouth had been successful.”

Burke stood and offered Jack his card. “I can be reached at that number day or night. Call if you have any problems or questions. It’s what I’m here for. I’ll be seeing you tomorrow, and I’ll have company with me.”

After Burke left, Jack peeked through a crack in the blinds and watched the van pull away. He rushed out the back door into the garage hoping Abby had decided to hang around. She sat atop a sack of potting soil in a wheelbarrow swinging her legs restlessly. She grinned when she heard Jack crack the door. “Sure took his time, didn’t he. I did my nails while you two yammered and they’re dry now. What’s the good word?”

“There is no good word. There won’t be a payout.”

“I thought you said it all went to plan, no evidence, no witnesses.”

“It did. Everything was perfect except for one thing.” Jack felt his rage surge. This time he didn’t need to stifle it the way he had in front of Burke. His hands found the nearest thing that wasn’t bolted down, a hammer. He flung it at the wall and hit the window instead. Glass exploded outward and shards tinkled onto the grass outside.

Abby flinched, eyes wide with alarm. “What’s the matter?”

“The bitch changed the policy without telling me. I don’t get any money, not one cent. I get a clone instead. I get the bitch back. It’s like it was all for nothing. Fuck!”

Abby pressed her body into Jack’s and stroked his back. “It’s only a setback,” she said. “We just need to come up with another way, something involving fire or acid so she can’t be cloned.”

He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her away. “Don’t you get it? We can’t. How’s it going to look to have her die twice? They’d be all over us. We’d never get away with it. She’s beaten us, plain and simple. It’s checkmate, baby. Game over.”

Abby looked up at him, her green eyes glowing hot. “It’s not over. We’re bright people. We should be able to come up with something. I’m not letting you quit on me. Suppose the clone doesn’t work out? What’s the insurance company supposed to do then?”

“I don’t know.”

Abby smiled, “Well let’s read your policy and find out.”

He nodded. For the first time since Burke entered his house, Jack felt at ease.

“Abby Meacham, I like the way your mind works.”

The two of them pored over the document Burke had left on the coffee table, a ream of gobblety-gook and legalese. Abby’s focus was keen as a heron’s. It was a side of her Jack had never seen. As her eyes followed her finger down the page, she murmured, “No, no, no. . . .”

When her finger came to a stop, she announced, “Here it is, redress for defective clone.” Her eyes scanned back and forth over the page. “It says you’re entitled to half-a-

mil if something goes wrong. It lists a large assortment of problems they cover. Most require concurrence from their psychiatrists. Good luck getting that. But get this, near term suicide is one of the covered conditions. It must be common if it's written into the standard policy language."

"Half-a-mil?" Jack muttered. "From two to a half, she screwed me but good."

"Something is better than nothing," Abby assured. "Keep in mind that it wasn't entirely about the money."

Jack wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. Abby didn't know how wrong she was. It was still all about the money. Abby was merely a side benefit, one that could be discarded at any time if she became annoying or stale.

The knock at the door came promptly at ten in the morning. Jack was waiting at the window and saw them walk up. Tova Burke stood on the porch wearing the same suit as the day before. Next to him stood Jack's wife, Marianne — act two, dressed in a plain white smock and slippers. Her eyes flitted between Burke and the door. She seemed anxious. Jack closed his eyes and sighed.

She looked exactly the same. She stood a few inches taller than Burke, her wavy brunette hair cropped close to reveal a long elegant neck and straight delicate features. She was a fine looking woman. That was never the issue. It was all of her habits and foibles, the way she thought, the unimaginative and predictable pattern of their lives, the dreams that had died at her hands along the way. He forced a smile onto his face before he opened the door.

Jack gave a quick nod to Burke and leaned in to hug his wife. He felt her stiffen at his touch before her arms embraced him. She turned her head and pressed her face to his chest, a move calculated to look endearing while preventing Jack from kissing her. It was the same old Marianne.

"It's good to have you back, honey," he said. "How do you feel?"

Marianne stepped into the house and took in her surroundings. A small smile played on her lips. "I feel better now. It's a bit unnerving waking up in an unfamiliar place. What happened? No one will talk to me."

Jack looked to Burke who had followed Marianne inside. Burke shook his head.

"Perhaps we should sit down and talk," Burke offered. Jack sat next to his wife on the couch and took her hand. Burke sat across from them in an overstuffed chair.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Marianne's brow furrowed as she tried to recall. "Uh, we were planning a trip to the State Park for yesterday. I had packed the car so it would be ready to go in the morning. Then I woke up in that white room. I know something happened in between, but no one will tell me what."

Burke rocked gently and strummed his fingers on his knees while he considered a response. He spoke slowly and succinctly, almost as if speaking to a child. "You had an accident," he said, "but we were able to resuscitate you. That's the event that's missing."

Marianne shot Burke a confused look and shifted her gaze to Jack. "What kind of accident?"

"The details are unimportant at this time," Burke said. "What's important is that you pick up with your life. We will eventually provide you with the details later if you're still interested."

“How long was I out?”

“Two weeks.”

Marianne’s mouth dropped. “Two weeks? Was I in a coma?”

Jack stood and made a come hither motion to Burke. “We’ll be right back, honey. Just give us a second.”

Jack led Burke into the kitchen. “This isn’t going to work,” Jack whispered. “You don’t know her like I do. She’s very controlling. She’s the kind of person who needs to know and understand everything. Not knowing will drive her nuts.”

Burke rested a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I’ve had a lot of experience at this. Trust me, it’s the best way.”

Jack shook his head.

“Trust me,” Burke repeated. “Set up a family get-together or a party with friends so she can start reconnecting. That’s the best thing right now. I’ll call and stop by from time to time to see how things are going. I’ll be monitoring your progress. The first tick mark on Marianne’s recovery plan will be this party, understand?”

Jack nodded.

Tova Burke was a pebble in Jack’s shoe with his constant calls and unscheduled visits, but a necessary cog in his plan. Whenever Burke called, Jack used the opportunity to report on Marianne’s deepening depression. And later when Marianne committed suicide, Burke’s reports would serve as evidence showing the warning signs were all present.

Marianne’s friends and family were more than willing to set up a party for her at the Four Seasons ballroom. Marianne looked stunning in her black Halston and glowed in the attention. The evening was warm. Marianne seemed happy to hold court on the terrace with the rush of the city below and the lights of skyscrapers above serving as manmade stars in the dark city sky.

Jack behaved like a cutting horse drifting among the guests, getting them alone, and directing them to his wife. He spoke to them in hushed tones along the way. “She’s been terribly depressed lately. I think talking to you might lift her spirits.”

The night had been a success in every respect in Jack’s book. Attendance had been good. The seeds of his wife’s demise had been planted. Everyone had a good time. And even Marianne’s family, who had practically shunned him at her funeral, complimented him on the party and his steadfastness in trying to help his wife readjust.

The buoyant demeanor Marianne had displayed for her guests evaporated during the drive home. She seemed distracted, her eyes fixed ahead on the windshield, her face expressionless. It was as if Jack wasn’t even in the car with her. She finally spoke when he turned for the First Avenue Bridge. “Pull over, please. I need some air.”

Jack swung the car into the Scenic Viewpoint parking lot and parked next to the stone wall guarding the bluff. Marianne got out and walked to the railing. She started up the sidewalk along the rising slope of the bridge. The vision of her in heels, evening gown billowing behind her in the breeze, juxtaposed against the dirty metal bridge girders was surreal. Jack followed. She stopped midway and bent over the rail. She gazed at the

dark water below. She straightened as he approached and smiled. “Lovely view don’t you think?” she said.

Jack returned her smile. He had imagined events progressing differently. He thought he’d have to lure her out to a place like this, come up with an excuse, something that would pass her scrutiny. In the city this span was known as *Jumper’s Bridge* because of its popularity with the terminally depressed. It was so nice that she’d taken the initiative, convenient really. The opportunity was too good to pass up. Traffic was nonexistent. Just a check that the road was clear, a quick heave-ho, a frantic call to 911, and his new life could begin.

“I know what you did, Jack.” She was so calm, her voice so self-assured. “And I know what you’re planning to do.”

Jack froze. It felt as though his chest had shrunk around his lungs. Did she really know? ‘*I know what you did and what you’re planning to do*’ could be referring to the party, or anything for that matter. Her eyes glistened in the glow of the streetlights and her smile turned cruel.

“Don’t play dumb,” she said, “I’m not an idiot. I found out about your mistress and your so called business trips. I feared you might try something, which is why I changed the insurance policy.” She hesitated. Her expression seemed to implore him to respond, to try to deny what she was saying. When he didn’t, she continued on.

“Everyone has been so hush-hush about my accident. The only thing I’m sure of is that whatever happened to me; you were the one who did it. So what’s the plan now — tell my friends I’m depressed to pave the way for my suicide? Was I supposed to hang myself, take pills?” She looked over the edge. “Or jump off a bridge?”

Jack furrowed his brow and let his mouth hang open in feigned surprise. “What? Where do you get this from?”

Marianne leaned back into the rail, akimbo. She looked in control and comfortable. She had a surprise coming to her. Confronting him on a dark bridge was a fatal mistake.

“Carol told me what you said to her tonight about me being depressed lately. Nice.”

Jack didn’t try to deny it this time. She’d always been a bright cookie, maybe too bright for her own good. But what did it matter anymore? She’d signed her death warrant when she walked onto the bridge.

“You were never the sharpest pencil in the box, were you, Jack? Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

Jack marveled at her attempts to belittle him and throw him off balance. She was the Chihuahua convinced it was a mastiff. He thought back to that day by the river when he’d held her head under the water. Her mouth hadn’t saved her then, and it wouldn’t save her now. He remembered the feeling of her strength ebbing in his hands, and the moment when he knew she was dead. It was freedom. It was success. Gemini Insurance had stolen that from him once, but not this time. His smile returned.

“Did you think I would wait in the wings while you showered your attentions on Abby Meacham? Did you think I was incapable of finding someone else? Have you ever heard the saying, *what goes around comes around*?” Marianne glanced to her right.

Jack followed her eyes toward the end of the bridge to see if anyone was coming. The bridge was empty. From the corner of his eye he spotted movement near a pillar. A man stepped out of the shadows. He was tall and broad shouldered. Dark eyes peered out from beneath a thick thatch of dark hair.

Marianne arched her brows at Jack's surprise. "Did you think I'd let you get me alone on a bridge without a plan? Jack, meet Brad. He's a cop and my boyfriend. Brad, this is my husband Jack. He's already killed me once, and I think he'd like to do it again."

Marianne stepped away and Brad advanced. Jack reacted too late. Brad had him cornered against the rail. Jack tightened his hand into a fist and lunged. Brad easily ducked the roundhouse and shoved. Jack hit the rail hard and buckled. Momentum sent Jack's legs hurtling over the rail. Jack clutched the vertical balusters to save himself. When his body jerked at the bottom of its arc, the force ripped his hands from the bars. Jack clawed at the air desperate to stop his fall, desperate for a second chance. He tried to scream but his throat clamped shut. Marianne's laughter rang out from the bridge deck.

Marianne peered through the blinds. Tova Burke stood on the doorstep with his eyes cast down at his briefcase and his mouth set in a tight line that made his lips disappear. Dejection creased furrows and folds in Burke's face. Something was wrong. She invited him inside and made him a cup of tea.

"I should have seen this coming, Mrs. Duncan. Jack was behaving so oddly. But I was so focused on you, I didn't see it. I'm sorry. I should have been paying attention. I can't help but feel his suicide is partially my fault."

"Nonsense. I don't blame you. At the time, I didn't see it either. In retrospect, maybe the signs were there."

Burke grimaced and Marianne knew there was more eating at him. Was there a witness? No, there couldn't be, or it would have been the police at her door, not Burke. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Burke wagged his head. "I hate being the bearer of bad news. But with two claims in such a short period, I'm afraid Gemini is dropping you as a client. It's corporate policy. I'm truly sorry."

Marianne rested her hand on Burke's shoulder while inwardly she breathed a sigh of relief. "Policy is policy, I understand. I'd just like to put this whole incident behind me."

Burke's face brightened. "I'm so glad to hear you say that. I do have one bit of good news. Are you aware that your husband changed the terms of his life insurance last week?"

Marianne looked confused and shook her head.

"Yes," Burke said, his grin forged deep dimples in his cheeks. "He opted for a clone, the same as you. It's a fresh start for both of you, like a second honeymoon. It's what I like most about living in these times. With modern technology, not even death can stop true love."

## **Second Honeymoon Tidbits**

The story, *Second Honeymoon*, first appeared in the Pill Hill Press anthology, *Patented DNA*. The theme was open to anything DNA, cloning, or genetic science related. I happen to have quite a few relatives in the insurance business. It occurred to me, that in

the future, when cloning is perfected, why wouldn't a person have the option with their life insurance to eschew a monetary payout in favor of coming back to their lives as a clone?

That thought spawned a trio of delicious problems. How would the clone deal with the knowledge of their death? The answer was, not well. So I came up with the idea that this trauma would be omitted from memory to prevent psychological issues. That created another problem. Wouldn't the clone also be disturbed by the missing time in their memory, and fixate on finding out what happened during that time.

The third revelation in the case of the unhappy couple was, when the murdered spouse is returned, isn't the situation rolled right back to the circumstances that led to the first murder? Cloning seemed to set up an endless Tom & Jerry-like cycle of violence.

### **About the Author**



Mark Souza lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife, two children, and mongrel beast-dog, Tater. When he's not writing, he's out among you trying to look and act normal (whatever that is), reminding himself that the monsters he's created are all in his head, no more real than campaign promises.

### **Upcoming Titles**

My novel ***Robyn's Egg*** will be released in the spring of 2012

A collection of my short stories, ***Try 2 Stop Me***, will be released in September of 2012

Other **FREE** short stories coming soon:

***Cupid's Maze***

***Murphy's Law***

***Appliances Included***

***The Diary of Horatio White***

***The Comfort Shack***

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An Excerpt From

## Murphy's Law

By Mark Souza

When I was a kid, I jumped off our garage with a towel tucked into my collar emulating Superman. Seconds passed like minutes. Wind raced through the bristles of my crew cut. Not until the last few feet did I have doubts I would fly. That's the kind of sucker I am. Hero complex is what the shrink at the hospital said. It was the first time I'd broken my nose, though far from the last. Murphy's Law has been in effect ever since.

A few weeks ago at Frank's Bar, I was shooting off my mouth with just enough of a buzz on that I didn't feel ashamed to admit I'd had my pistol in my mouth with the safety off. My intent was to show I had at least contemplated whether continuing to live was worthwhile. Most people never even consider the question. They live their lives without thought, unaware they have a choice. At least I had faced the choice. I live now because I choose to.

"Does he ever shut up?" the bartender asked.

"Only when he passes out," someone yelled. Laughter erupted around the bar. The bartender turned away to wash glasses. He wasn't buying my bravado. Maybe he sensed that I was only alive because I was too chicken to pull the trigger.

They say it doesn't hurt, that death is instantaneous, but how does anyone really know? While lining up the shot, trying to extrapolate the best angle through my brain, my hands shook and the gun barrel chattered against my teeth. I finally quit, worried that in a few more seconds, eight years of orthodontia might be ruined. I left that part out. Why ruin a good tale?

My story hadn't gotten very far when a pretty blonde in her mid-thirties strutted through the door. Stuffed into a little red sausage skin that passed for a dress, she was hard to miss.

I drink at Frank's because it's just a neighborhood bar that's not aspiring to be more. There's no dance floor, funky lights, or music, and drinks aren't priced pretentiously high. And the fact that it's walking distance from my place comes in handy for the stagger home. The point is it's not the kind of place that normally attracts the likes of her. She stuck out from the regulars like a cat in a dog show.

By the time I finished my story my fifth scotch at Frank's was a dead soldier and needed refilling. I was in the zone. Bobby the bartender – I think it's Bobby - came carrying a cheap bottle of scotch looking annoyed, jaw set and molars grinding. He was no more than a freckle-faced kid resembling Sunny Jim more than anything. I smiled and

jingled the ice in my glass signaling him to pour. He raised an eyebrow expectantly, and moved the bottle away.

“Put it on my tab,” I said.

“Your tab is over four-hundred bucks. Pay it off and we can talk.” The turnover for bartenders at Frank’s is high. Even so, the kid knew enough to make me pony up. I smacked a fin down on the bar. Bobby snatched it up and refilled my tumbler. I checked to see if the blonde had been listening while Bobby announced the dismal status of my finances. Her attention seemed rapt on a glass of Chardonnay. Maybe I’d lucked out and she hadn’t heard the deadbeat tag being applied. I moved down a couple of stools for a closer look.

She appeared a little hard around the edges, but tasty enough. Though she had been around the block a time or two, there was still enough tread left on the tires to turn heads. A faint band of lighter skin on her ring finger hinted at a recent divorce. I’m a private investigator. It’s my job to notice little things like that. She was here trolling, and not for Mr. Right. Reality had lowered her expectations. No, she was here looking for Mr. Just-Good-Enough -- hard work on a weeknight. She probably had a chick or two back in the nest who could benefit from a second income. She looked over at me and I gave her the winning McEvoy smile. Her brows pinched and she rolled her tired green eyes as if to say, Puleeeease.

Sure, I was over a decade older than she was and maybe twenty over fighting weight, but I was still tall, dark, and had most of my hair. I’m not a bad looking guy. It was more than that, though. In a fraction of a second she had labeled me a loser with no prospects. The part that stung was that she had utterly nailed it.

I turned toward her and leaned forward slightly to let my coat drape away so she could see my gun. Some women like a touch of danger in their men.

“Pills, next time,” she said. “Pills are painless.” I love a helper. She must have overheard my conversation a minute earlier with Bobby the bartender.

“I don’t like the thought of puking,” I replied.

She looked up from her wine. “If you mix the pills with alcohol it increases their potency and you won’t puke. You look to me like you have half that equation perfected already.” She turned her attention back to her drink, which was just as well. She was losing appeal by the syllable.

I moved off to a corner booth to salve my wounds. For a while I watched her. She put out an aura as effective as porcupine quills, further fortified by Exhibit A, her public filleting of me. No one else even tried.

After finishing my drink, I didn’t feel like hanging around anymore. The mood in the bar had flat-lined. I gathered up my coat and stood to put it on. A hand on my arm stopped me. When I turned, it was the blonde.

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