

The Penance



The Penance

The
Penance
by
Crystal
Brewton

The Penance

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Acknowledgments

To Terry, Lapis and Rose (my children), J.L. Foster (my best friend), the Muses, and my Lovelies (my dedicated readers and fans!)

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Dedication: You know who you are ... this one's for you.
Cheers!

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George Summerset drank deeply and moaned in something akin to a carnal pleasure. He looked at the empty glass and licked his lips as if he were dying of thirst. The bartender was watching him and George shook his head slowly in the negative, turning down the silently offered next drink.

“That's enough for me tonight, Mike,” he announced, just as he announced at least three nights a week, every week. “Time to be heading home.”

Mike shrugged and gave the man that wasn't his best customer, but certainly was not his worst, a nod. “Good night, Mister Summerset,” he called as George stood, rolled his shoulders and turned to walk out of the bar for home. He watched the man go as he absentmindedly polished a beer stein. George wasn't stumbling or weaving. Nothing to indicate that he was drunk. In all the time Mike had known the middle aged man, he had never seen him get drunk, even though he came in three nights a week to put away five bourbons, straight up.

The man's ability to hold his liquor was admirable.

A happy “Whoop!” from a darkened corner took Mike's attention away from the departing George. With a sigh, he motioned to a mountain of a man leaning on a stool by the door.

“Manny, get him out of here. I'll call the cab,” Mike called out, putting the highly polished glass in its place and moving to the phone.

Dialing, he caught the car keys Manny tossed him as he dragged rather than helped the drunk man to the front door.

He wished all of his patrons could hold their liquor like Mister Summerset.

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George pulled into the driveway and shut off the engine. With a gulp, he swallowed the shards of breath mints he'd been chewing since he'd left Mike's bar. One thing he loved was that his breath wouldn't smell like bourbon, but it wouldn't smell like he'd chewed through an entire roll of strong peppermint breath mints like they were candy either. He barked a laugh as he realized the mints were, indeed, candy.

He cleared his throat as he got out of the car and headed up the walk. Climbing the stairs, he took a quick look at himself in the reflection of the glass in the door and was silently satisfied. Unlocking the door, he affixed a small smile to his face and entered the house.

The smile on her face reminded him of his wife's. Something about it made him want to lift his hand and smack it off of her face. But he was in excellent control of himself. He returned the smile and sat himself on the couch.

"So, how'd the meeting go?" she asked him, like she asked him three days a week no matter what.

"It was great!" he offered the lie enthusiastically. He watched her swallow it and he let loose a laugh of derision. To cover it, he added, "I really learned a lot tonight, Karen."

Karen, his sister, beamed at him. "I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see you getting your life back together again, George."

He kept his smile fixed. "I know," he replied. "My sponsor says we have some work to do this weekend. On my Fourth Step." He sighed deeply. "I have a lot to make up to a lot of people."

She kept beaming at him. "I'm so proud of you, George," she told him, and not for the first time. "Soon, you'll be calling the kids, right?"

George narrowly avoided flinching. "Maybe. I... I don't want to..." He shrugged in the helpless way that he learned got his sister right in her bleeding heart. "I want to make sure I'm completely together before I make that move. What must they

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think of me?"

Karen sighed deeply. "It's been a year since you last saw them... talked to them." She reminded him of this, and he felt another hot flash of anger. Did she think he couldn't read a calendar? How stupid did she think he was?

"I know, and I miss them every minute of every day," he lied. She wouldn't understand that he didn't miss his kids one bit. They were like a lead weight around his neck. The children and their mother...

He pushed the thought of his wife away as roughly as he had pushed her around in reality. "Soon. I promise." He stretched. "I better get to bed. Wouldn't want to be late for work."

She smiled as he stood and headed for the stairs and his small bedroom. The moment his back was turned his smile vanished, and by the time he closed his bedroom door, a scowl was where the grin had been.

Nothing bothered him more than living with his bitch of a sister and her ass-wipe husband. Josh owned a small take-out place, and every day George took orders and delivered lunches to snot nosed businessmen in the downtown area where the store was located. He hated the job, he hated Josh, he hated Karen, and he hated New York. Not that California had been much better. There, he had hated a different job and his wife and kids.

But at least in New York he had a place to live, and he made such a pittance of a salary that there wasn't very much for the courts to steal to give to the bloodsuckers that called themselves his children.

He stripped down to his boxers and climbed into bed. The alcohol was doing its job – he was completely relaxed and felt no guilt at all over lying to his sister about being at the A.A meeting. He'd been going to Mike's Bar instead now for more than nine months and no one knew. It was a secret.

George was good at keeping secrets.

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Nice's NYSE Sports Bar was in the lobby of the building where George's noontime A.A meetings were. He knew that because he had stopped in after his first meeting in the building and never went to another A.A meeting again.

George was more the 'blue collar' type, but in the bar, none of the people seemed to care. Bourbon, vodka, and gin proved the great equalizer. They were all brothers and sisters in inebriation.

The bartender here was called Jimbo. He was like all good bartenders – friendly almost to a fault. Everyone knew Jimbo and no one could find anything wrong with him. Normally, he was someone George would have hated, with his tall sculpted body, perfect blond hair, and lady killer blue eyes. But George would also have hated all the other men and women in the bar, since they were all considerably richer than he was, making minimum wage.

Jimbo smiled as George approached the bar. “Bourbon, straight up,” he ordered before George could say a single word. It had been his lunch of choice every weekday for six months now.

“Thanks, Jimbo,” George sat at the bar and started.

His voice wasn't the only one thanking Jimbo.

Looking to his right, he saw a man that he'd never seen before. This man was also tall, but obviously not the eternally sculpted, permanently twenty-something that Jimbo was. He looked like 'everyman' to George, and as a result, he was liked immediately. At the same time, his curly rich brown hair speckled with gray and his thick curly beard made him look like Santa Claus before the elf went completely gray. Either way, the man was instantly likable.

Jimbo poured two neat bourbons and set a glass in front of both men. Nodding to George, Jimbo all but sang out, “Mister Summerset,” and then, turning his head slightly he spoke to the other man, “Mister Dennison.”

George nodded and took his drink, noting as he did that the man at his elbow did also. As if they were reflections of each other, they tossed the drinks back as one man and set the empty

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glasses on the bar, where Jimbo took them and refilled them without having to be told.

Looking at him with a slight grin on his face, the man nodded. "Erik Dennison," he introduced himself.

As they both reached for their drinks, George nodded right back, like a sophisticated man might. "George Summerset."

The men toasted each other and tossed back the second drink, again in unison. "Man after my own heart," Erik noted, his amber eyes twinkling. George couldn't help but compare them to the color of the very bourbon they were drinking now. "I don't remember seeing you around here." He barked a rich laugh as Jimbo brought them both fresh drinks.

George shrugged and took his drink, sipping of it this time. He'd needed the first two badly. Now, he could take his time. "I've been coming here for about six months, I guess." He looked at Erik. "I don't remember seeing you, either Mister Dennison."

"Please. Call me Erik," he insisted. "I've been busy the last six or seven months." He sipped his drink. "The wife." He looked at George out of the corner of his eye. "You know how it is, don't you, George. I can call you George, can't I?"

After another long sip of his drink, George nodded. "Yea. Call me George, Erik," he told his newfound friend. "And I know how it is. I'm going through a divorce myself."

Erik shook his head. "Let me guess. Nagged like an Olympian."

George couldn't help but laugh. "*Constantly*. Bitched about the mortgage, the car payment... everything and anything."

Holding up his glass, Erik looked sympathetic. "I hear ya, man. You'd think we'd learn."

After a short laugh, they drank.

One thing George noticed during his five bourbon lunch was that Erik could keep up with him with ease. He also noticed that, like himself, Erik could hold his liquor. By the time lunch was over, George had to admit he was impressed.

They left Nice's NYSE Sports Bar together and headed in the direction of the take-out joint where George worked for his brother-in-law.

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Erik followed him in. "I suppose I should buy something to eat, eh?" he chuckled.

George nodded but was slightly ashamed at serving this apparently richer man. All of that vanished when Josh came from the small kitchen in the back, asking, "How'd the meeting go?"

Narrowly avoiding a scowl, George was about to mumble something about how the whole point of A.A was anonymity when Erik spoke up. "Great as always, right George?" He clapped his new friend on the back.

Josh looked at Erik, curiously. "Is this the guy you'll be working with this weekend?" he wondered aloud.

The pause was barely noticeable, and George was about to answer truthfully when Erik lied for him. "Yes, I am." He offered Josh his hand. "I'm Erik."

George watched as the men shook hands, wondering what had possessed Erik to say what he said. Granted, he had just saved George from the possibility of explaining that he hadn't had a sponsor in months. That stemmed from him not having gone to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous since shortly after moving to New York. In the months since, he'd simply lied to his sister, her husband, and their kids. Lying was easy. They fell for the lies as readily as his wife had.

Erik ordered a burger and fries, paid, and asked Josh about the possibility of delivery arrangements. Josh was always willing to deliver, so he could charge the steep delivery fee, and George was always willing to deliver, as it meant tips under the table. More income the government couldn't steal from him to give to his kids.

Just before he left with his late lunch, Erik handed George his business card. The card-stock was a delicate brown, and the raised lettering was golden. As he read, George wondered if it was actually gold leaf.

Erikryptos Dennison
Bacchus Wine and Spirit Brokers
11 Wall Street, Suite 1603
New York, New York

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Macedonia, Rome, London, Chicago, and New York

“Stop by my office on your way home, George. We can hit the evening meeting.” His new friend and sponsor suggested as he turned and walked out.

George went back to work in a better mood than he'd been in for some time. He had a drinking buddy who just happened to be a booze broker and could lie about A.A like a real pro.

Life was good.

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Josh closed his take-out place at six-thirty. He wished George a good A.A. meeting and headed for his home. George walked in the other direction, back towards the NYSE building. Nice's NYSE Sports Bar was open, and would likely be for some hours yet. But George was heading for the offices of Bacchus Wine and Spirit Brokers.

In the elevators, he tried to contain himself. Something about Erik was exciting for George, as if things were finally looking up for him.

Exiting the elevators on the top floor, he was almost surprised to see the doors open into a small alcove. The walls were a beautiful shade of cream, and directly in front of the elevator doors was a single door. Single, but by no means simple. The oak was rich and the glass panel it held was an intricate pattern of grapes and grape leaves.

George opened the office door and walked into a waiting room that was as lush as any he had ever seen. Along the walls were lined pictures of various vineyards at their peaks, just waiting to be harvested into wine. The carpeting was a shade of brown that reminded one of soil that promised to coax the very best out of any seed planted in it. The furniture was of some dark wood that shined, almost like gold.

For a long while, George was awestruck by its brilliance. He was brought from his admiration by the clearing of a throat. When he turned to look, he had to blink. The brilliance of the office had nothing on the man standing at one of the open office doors.

The curly hair and beard marked him as some relation of Erik's. However, this man was wearing a grape purple suit and a golden tie. George found himself staring at it and wondering if it was, indeed, made of gold. It seemed to shimmer just as gold would if turned into a fabric. He thought back and remembered some gay friend of his wife's calling it gold lame.

"Hello," the man in the golden tie greeted him, taking a step forward. "You must be George. My father told us to expect

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you.” He offered his hand, every finger perfectly manicured. “I am Comus Dennison.”

George pulled his head back even as he shook Comus's hand. He had on such an excess of cologne that George could actually imagine the younger man drowning in a sea of it.

“Yea. I'm...” he cleared his throat and could taste the cologne Comus was wearing, “I'm George. I'm not late, am I?”

Comus beamed. “It's never too late, George,” he proclaimed and turned, nodding George through the half open door. “We were just about to have a drink. Would you care to join us?”

“I'd love to,” George replied, sincerely. He walked through the door, already feeling half drunk from the cologne and stepped into a magnificent looking office.

The same dark wood furniture was in the office, but it seemed even richer and more decadent here. Directly in front of him was Erik's desk, with Erik rising to his feet behind it. Behind him was a floor to ceiling window. George thought if anything spoiled the office it was the view, which was of the taller Eckerson Building next door. However, the ivy that grew along the outside walls made up for a lot. George had not known that ivy could grow so high up a building.

Erik came around his desk, beaming. “Welcome, George!” he greeted in his turn. “I see you've met Comus. I'd like to introduce you then to my other son, Phineas.”

George turned in the direction that Erik motioned, half afraid to see little more than another Comus. He almost sighed in relief when his eyes fell on Phineas Dennison.

The curly hair and beard was obviously inherited. However, Phineas's was tied back in a pony tail. On him it did not look at all feminine. George fought back a pang of jealousy. Not many men could claim to have such an incredible head of hair and look as good as Erik and his sons did at their ages.

Phineas was dressed in a simple, but obviously expensive, black suit with a plain white business shirt and wine colored tie. He was only slightly taller than his brother and father, but he held himself in such a way that he seemed much larger than life. Inclining his head in greeting, he took a step forward. “A

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pleasure, George.” His voice was deep and resonating. “I’m glad you could join us.” He turned his eyes to his father. “How about we have drinks in my office. The view is much better.”

Erik chuckled slightly as Comus picked up a tray, which included a decanter and several glasses. “Yes. Let us show off dear Phineas’s magnificent view.” He rolled his eyes. “The envy of all of New York,” he mocked as he passed George. “As arrogant as a peacock, that one is,” he grumbled.

Obviously Phineas overheard, as he tossed over his shoulder as he entered his office, “This coming from the man who looks like a peacock exploded all over him? Did you get that suit from Liberace or Prince?”

George caught the slightly exasperated smile on Erik’s lips as he passed and they all walked into Phineas’s office. This office was smaller, but somehow grander. Unable to keep the gasp at bay, George felt his jaw drop at the view. Phineas hadn’t been kidding. Where Erik’s view was blocked by a ivy covered wall, Phineas’s overlooked the city. It was, without question, a breathtaking view.

“Was I right, or was I right?” Phineas asked, standing before his window watching George’s reaction.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Comus grumbled, placing the tray on the desk and pouring drinks. He brought his father a glass and then tended to George. “Your view is incredible.” He then handed his brother a filled glass, and finally took one for himself. “I’m jealous. Happy?” And he knocked back his drink, then turned to give himself a refill.

Erik silently toasted the view as Phineas dryly replied, “Ecstatic,” and knocked back his own drink. George sipped and could not suppress a moan of pleasure. He’d never tasted anything as wonderful in all his years of drinking.

Phineas noticed his reaction. “You like?” he asked, and went on without an answer. “One hundred and ninety proof neutral organic alcohol,” he smirked. “We *make* only the best, *sell* only the best, and *serve* only the best from our vineyards.”

Comus rolled his eyes and refilled all the glasses. George hadn’t even been aware he’d downed the drink and was shocked.

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It was much stronger than what he was used to, yet he seemed to be holding the liquor just fine. "We now return you to The View That Can't Be Beat," he almost groaned. "God, Phineas. He isn't here for a sales pitch. Relax. Have a good time."

The brothers exchanged a look that George couldn't interpret. At length, Phineas shrugged and knocked back his drink. Glancing into the empty glass, he spoke quietly. "I see holding your liquor isn't exclusive to the family."

George bit his lip a moment. "I've always been able to hold my liquor." He looked into his glass. "Even this stuff, and I've never had stronger." With that, he downed the drink.

Erik laughed richly. "We are truly blessed," he agreed. "I know this is no A.A. Meeting, but..." He looked at George. "I figured it out, in cast you didn't know."

"I knew. And thanks for that. My brother-in-law is a real ass, but it's about all I can do." He shrugged and nodded thanks to Comus, who refilled his glass.

Phineas arched an eyebrow, effectively ignoring his brother as his glass was refilled. "I see," he spoke slowly. "Working under the table to hide income from the wife, the wife's lawyers, and the government?" It was just barely a question.

Comus laughed. "Birds of a feather, Phineas." He looked at George. "Brother dear has had his fair share of marriage problems."

George sighed and sat in one of the luxurious chairs. "I suppose if I have a problem, it is my temper when I've been drinking."

Leaning against his rich desk, Phineas nodded. "I wouldn't blame the drink." He chuckled dryly. "I blame the whores I married."

Erik sat in the chair beside George. "I'd hoped my son would learn a lesson. I have only been married once."

Comus laughed again. "Yet Phineas and I have different mothers."

All four of them laughed richly. After downing another drink, George leaned back. "I'm supposed to be doing a fourth step with my sponsor this weekend." He murmured, more to the

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glass in his hand than to the men around him.

“Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,” Comus spoke as he made the rounds, refilling glasses again.

“Followed, of course by the fifth step...” Phineas began.

“Admitted to God, ourselves, and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” Erik finished the sentence and raised his full glass in a toast. “Here's to confession.”

George raised his glass with them. “To confession.” He joined his voice in the toast with Eriks sons and killed his drink.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Erik glanced at George. “So that is what we will be doing this weekend, eh?”

A snort of derision greeted this. “You're serious?” George scoffed. “Write down all my flaws and then confess to a moonshiner?”

Erik and his sons all roared with laughter. “Moonshiner?” Comus guffawed. “I like that.”

“Not a bad idea, actually.” Phineas sounded thoughtful as his laughter began to subside. “Aren't all mortals flawed?” he asked, rhetorically. “Only God is perfect.” His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

Tapping the side of his glass, George considered. “But I'm still drinking,” he reminded them all. “I mean... Doesn't that sort of make it a moot point?”

Comus and Phineas looked to their father, just as George did. “It is always a good idea to, from time to time, look deep within ourselves to see where our lives may need improvement.” His voice was slow and thoughtful.

George seemed to consider this. “Well...” he began. “I am making improvements to my life. Leaving my wife. Getting a divorce. I would move out on my own but the child support payments will about kill me,” he grumbled. “Never wanted kids...”

Phineas nodded. “The old child trap. Works almost every time.” He pursed his lips and shook his head. “Don't take this the wrong way, George...” he straightened, “but I know in my case...” he shrugged, “there has been a time or two when paternity

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was in doubt.”

Comus snorted. “A *couple* of times?” he scoffed. “More than that, if *my* memory serves.”

Narrowed eyes and a reddening face were the only signs of Phineas's upset at his brothers words. Erik sighed and looked at his younger son. “You have to be on the floor early tomorrow morning.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Comus nodded and turned to George. “A pleasure meeting you. Maybe we'll see each other this weekend.” And with a final mischievous look at Phineas, he left the room, gently closing the door behind him.

In the silence that followed, Erik looked closely at Phineas. “You know how Comus loves to cause trouble...”

Phineas nodded and licked his lips slowly. “I know.” He looked at George. “But the little shit has a point,” he admitted. “I've been married a fair few times, and I've suspected more than one of the bitches of adultery.”

Sitting back, empty glass in hand, George considered Phineas's words. “I always thought Alicia was faithful...” he murmured.

“What man wants to think their wife is getting it from another man?” Phineas wondered aloud. “That their children may not be theirs?”

George swallowed hard and tightened the grip he had on his glass. Suddenly, he stood. “I think I had better be going,” he found himself saying suddenly. He shook hands with Phineas and then with Erik. “Maybe we can get together for a...” he managed a small chuckle, “lunch meeting tomorrow?”

Erik smiled and nodded. “Absolutely. Meet me up here at noon. I can assure you, when you leave you will feel much better about yourself.”

Father and son watched as George left Phineas's office. Both of them had the slightest of smiles on their lips.

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“You... you...” she seemed almost speechless, “fucktard!”

While George knew exactly what had raised his wife's ire, he didn't even flinch. He'd learned long ago to let as many of her childish antics roll off of his back like water off a duck's back. When he couldn't, he'd lash out at her, giving her a good smack to keep her in place. Now, however, she was on the other side of the country, despite how much he would love to put her in her place. Preferably with a bat or shotgun up her ass.

“What is it now, Alicia?” he demanded. “And why aren't you talking to my attorney about it, whatever your problem is this week.”

“A *paternity* test, George?” she sounded incredulous. “This is your latest stunt to get out of paying child support? Accusing me of adultery and claiming the kids aren't even *yours*?” Her voice shook, but George couldn't make himself care if it was out of rage or hurt.

“Talk to my attorney,” he told her and hung up the phone before Alicia could make any reply whatsoever.

Karen looked up from the breakfast she was feeding her children. “Was that Alicia?”

George tightened his jaw, fighting the urge to retort or worse, smack his sister across the room. “Yea,” he replied, albeit shortly. “I told her to call my attorney.”

“How are the kids?” Karen wondered.

With a shrug, George poured himself a cup of coffee. “I didn't ask.” He looked into the dark liquid and thought about the coffee he'd had in Erik's office the night before. It was heavily flavored with some kind of alcohol. And it had been wonderful. He sighed and spoke into the cup. “Karen, my attorney is demanding a paternity test. I don't think the kids are mine.”

Karen's jaw dropped and all of a sudden she spoke, not to George, but to her children. “Hurry up. You'll be late for school.”

The children knew that tone of voice and obeyed it with only

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token grumbling. Once they were out the door and on their way to catch the school bus, Karen turned to her brother. "Do you really believe that?" she all but demanded.

Whether she was shocked or defending Alicia, George didn't know. Either way, it stirred his temper again. "Yes," he answered her, shortly. Then, he turned and marched toward the door. "It's Friday. I'll be with my sponsor all weekend, so don't worry." He exited, slamming the door behind him before Karen could say another word.

In the small eatery, Josh was no help to George. Karen had called ahead and shared what she likely considered juicy gossip with her husband. The result was that Josh wanted to take some time out of his own busy day and have a talk, mano-e-mano, with his brother-in-law. George would rather have eaten raw cockroaches.

He was able to avoid many of the questions in the morning rush and Josh had just handed him a cup of coffee for a long break afterwards, when the door opened and Erik walked in. The wine broker was dressed impeccably as always. Sparkling even in the dimmer light of the inside of the small restaurant, the gray interspersed in the bark brown did not make him look aged. Erik always looked timeless, somehow.

Shaking hands with Josh, Erik smiled kindly. "I was hoping to steal George away from you for the afternoon," he requested of the small businessman. "The sooner we get started on this, the sooner things improve."

George could barely keep the sigh of relief and gratitude inside of himself. With baited breath, he waited for Josh to reply, although he knew that as long as Josh thought it was A.A related he wouldn't say 'no'.

While Josh did look disappointed at not being able to hear the latest divorce drama in George's life, he still nodded and spoke quickly. "Of course. Of course. Take the rest of the day, George. And we'll see you Sunday night."

Erik gave Josh a very polite nod as he led George out onto the street. Throughout the week, George had been complaining to Erik, so the elder man already knew that he'd taken Phineas's

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advice and demanded paternity tests on all of his children. With a scoff, George told Erik Alicia's reaction.

"Women can be quite sensitive when it comes to their children," Erik explained.

George shrugged as they walked. "Not my kids. Not my problem," he announced.

"Unless they're proven to be your kids," Erik pointed out. "Then there are indeed problems."

The men walked to the building that housed Erik's office. However, Erik did not head inside as they had done all week. Instead, he paused and glanced down the street.

George barely noticed. "I can't afford child support," he tried to explain to his older companion.

Erik chuckled and nodded to the limousine that pulled up in front of them. "There are ways around child support, George," he told the younger man. "That is one of the things we shall discuss this weekend."

Staring at the limousine, George could only nod in reply. The limo was a stretch. Not black, like a million others in the city. It was some shade of blue-purple that George had never seen before. On the hood was an ornament made of some kind of gnarled wood that George couldn't identify.

As the driver got out and came around to open the door, Erik nodded to him and motioned George in ahead of him. Once the door was firmly shut, Erik turned to George. "Grapewood." His voice was low, and held a slight hint of amusement.

George blinked. "Huh? What's..." he began, when suddenly the limo started forward with such force that he was thrown backward into the plush leather seat. He stared ahead at the back of the driver's head, wondering where the man had gotten his driver's license.

"The hood ornament is grapewood," Erik continued. "You were wondering about it." His tone was very matter-of-fact.

"I... I see," George stammered. He looked past Erik and out of his window. The limo was rising into the air. "What the..." He ripped his eyes from the buildings passing on either side of him. "What the fuck is going on, Erik?" he demanded, suddenly

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finding his temper all but gone.

Erik gave him a smile that was part amused and part chilled. "We are going to work on *you* this weekend, George," he reminded him. "What did you *think* was going on?" He seemed oblivious to the flying car.

George worked to control a rising panic. "The car is *flying*, Erik," he pointed out. "That isn't real *normal* where I come from."

Chuckling, Erik leaned forward and opened a panel, exposing a bottle and several cut crystalline glasses. "You are not a god, George." He leaned back. "We are."

When Comus appeared suddenly seated beside his father, George narrowly avoided crying out in fear. Comus took the bottle, opened it and began to fill the glasses. "Care for a drink, George?" he asked as casually as if he'd been sitting there all along.

Reaching for his glass, Erik smiled at his son. "Thank you, Comus." He watched as George reached automatically for the glass, and chuckled as the mortal drained it. "Do you know who we are yet George?" he wondered aloud.

Licking his lips from the taste of the grape derived alcohol, George shook his head, allowing the warmth of the liquid to warm him against the chill he was beginning to feel. "Gods..." was all he could say before he noticed that his glass had refilled all on its own.

Smiling, Erik accepted a refill from Comus. "In Macedonia, I am attested to as Erikryptos, which means 'completely hidden'." He sipped his drink. "But perhaps you know me by another name." He looked askance at George. "Bacchus, perhaps?"

It hit George like a ton of bricks then. He drained his glass and watched the liquid refill again. After he'd drained it yet again, he sighed. "The god of wine..."

"Dennison is a name that derives itself from Dionysus," the voice on the other side of George made him jump but, miraculously, he did not spill a drop of his drink. Phineas now sat beside him and George vaguely realized he was bookended into the car. He could not escape through either door, even if the car

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was not flying in the skies high above New York. Phineas chuckled at his reaction to his voice. "I am Phthonus."

A chuckle rose from Comus. "The personification of jealousy and envy. Yes, we know that, dear brother." He looked at George in his turn. "I thought it would be nice to bring in my dear brother. He helped you realize that you needed to make further mistakes in your marriage by making you doubt your wife's fidelity to you, and so the paternity of your children." He shrugged and filled the glasses of his father and brother. "He has no children, of course. He killed all his wives in jealous fits before he could knock any of them up properly." He filled his own glass and lifted it in a silent toast. "And I am Comus. Yes, I used my own name for this caper." He nodded his head. "I represent in your mortal world anarchy and chaos. Why else do you think I was so happy to work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange? In peacetime, it doesn't get more chaotic than that."

George gulped down more of the strong alcohol. "So what?" he wondered. "Am I being rewarded?"

The gods laughed as one, but the sound did not warm George.

"One thing all the gods have in common, including myself and my sons..." Erik motioned to Phineas and Comus. "We do not care for anyone who tries to make the lives of children miserable..."

For a long time, George simply stared at the gods in the limousine, completely at a loss for words. After a little while, he somehow managed to stammer. "Children?"

Comus laughed aloud with unmistakable delight. "Children." He repeated the word that George had managed to utter. "Those little people you created during what may or may not have been lurid sex acts with your wife. You remember what they are now?"

"I know what children are," George snapped, "and it's possible that those aren't my kids anyway."

Phineas looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Children are a gift from the gods." His voice was quite even. "To deny one

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simply to be an asshole..." he shook his head, "tisk tisk, tisk, George."

Erik drank again from his glass and Comus refilled it. "You see. We don't care if you give your wife a hard time. She is a grown woman, even though she has been nothing but supportive of you, even when she had to take over the family finances in order to make sure money for the bills didn't go straight down your throat." He drank deeply. "Although, she was still far too late. She's lucky she still has the car. But the house..." He shook his head, as if delivering the news that someone had died. "The house was foreclosed on. But you know that, George. You just don't *care*."

George licked his lips but denied nothing. Erik was right. He didn't care. Not anymore. Money had been tight and he'd drunk the mortgage on more than one occasion. But it was Alicia who decided to be a bitch and treat him like a little boy who couldn't handle the simplest things. Once she resorted to giving him an allowance... that was the end for George. His already fractured marriage was then over in his eyes.

While he remembered getting drunk, coming home, and literally driving her and the kids out of the house with a butcher knife and threats against all of their lives, in the end it was *he* who moved out. That still rankled him to no end.

"Shit. I wasn't *living* in the fucking house. Worked like a goddamned slave to keep that roof over her head and *I* am the one that had to move out?" He found himself grumbling. Downing another glass of the liquor, he shrugged as the glass refilled. "To hell with all of them."

Phineas shook his head slowly as if in some kind of pity for the mortal beside him. Comus simply laughed again in delight. Erik looked at George with raised eyebrows. "Hell..." he murmured.

George looked at him and gulped. "Is that what you plan to do? Send me to Hell?" He found bravado in the next few gulps of his drink. "Anything's better than being with that nagging cunt."

The gods around him smiled at him as he again tipped the

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glass and drank deeply.

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He woke up with a start and looked around, not knowing where he was for a moment. Gone was the lush back of the limousine he'd been in... how long ago? Moments, it felt like.

Placing a hand to his temple, he tried to rub away the unearthly headache that he had. When had that happened? He never got hangovers. *Ever*.

As he rubbed, he looked around the car, which he now recognized as his own. In the passengers seat sat Comus, grinning like a drunken fool.

"You're awake!" he all but sang. "Marvelous!"

With a groan, George massaged his temples harder. Each of Comus's words was like ground glass rubbed into his brain. "Not so loud!"

The laugh that came from the god's mouth was rich and painful. "You have a hangover!" he sang again. "*Outstanding!* First one?"

George ignored him. "What the hell am I doing here?" he demanded, looking out of the windshield and glaring at the very house his wife had thrown him out of. "I don't live here anymore."

"Ah, but you *do*!" Comus laughed. "This is your punishment, Georgie Porgie, Puddin' Pie." He pinched George's cheek just like his old aunt used to do.

He hated that bitch.

"What the hell are you talking about?" George demanded.

Comus opened his mouth, but it was George's own voice that came out of it. "Is that what you plan to do? Send me to Hell?" The god laughed and then continued "Anything's better than being with that nagging cunt."

George's mouth fell open. For a moment, it opened and closed with no words coming out. Just as he was beginning to think Comus had stolen his voice, he heard himself speak. "You sent me *back* to her?" He knew he sounded disbelieving.

"Actually," Comus smiled cheerfully, "right this moment

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you're over *there*.” He nodded out of the side window and George saw, as if through a barrier of thin smoke, himself laying in a hospital bed. Alicia was standing over him, unsmiling, just watching him.

Mouth agape, George watched as a man in the white lab coat of a doctor walked in and placed one hand on Alicia's elbow. In his other hand, he held a clipboard.

“I have to ask you again, Mrs Summerset.” The doctor's voice was low, just the side of a whisper. “Are you sure you don't want to take him off of life support? Your husband could be in this coma for *years*.”

“George would not want me to give up,” Alicia sniffed. “Ever. It is up to a power greater than myself to decide if he comes out of the coma, stays in the coma, or dies.”

Watching through the car window, George winced at the words, wondering if she had gotten them from an A.A meeting or if he was just being paranoid.

The doctor sighed deeply. “Well, the administration tells me he has insurance enough to be kept on life support indefinitely.” He looked at his patient. “I'll ask you again in a month. You understand, of course.”

Alicia nodded. “Yes. I understand,” she all but whispered, looking down at George, who had tubes coming out of him and was surrounded by beeping machinery.

Hearing the door swish closed, Alicia did not move. As she stared down at George, a small smile began to appear at the corners of her mouth. Seeing it, the George in the car grew so cold he began to shiver.

“You were taken to the hospital by your sponsor. Dear, loving, caring Erik,” Comus explained. “He'd left his office to tend an emergency with me and Phineas down on the trading floor, and when we came back...” he motioned dramatically to the hospital scene, “you'd gotten into the bottles of pure grape alcohol we have up there. Drank yourself into a coma. Look...” the god giggled. “A month later, and you're still out for the count. Your sister and brother-in-law can't argue with your wife. They know you are a fighter. They won't fight to have you taken off life

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support.” His smile grew. “Trust me on this one.”

From the scene in the hospital room, Alicia whispered. “The gods know what they're doing, George...”

Comus laughed his delighted laugh again. “We most certainly do,” he agreed.

George continued to gape. He was in a coma, yet here he was, sitting in his car in the driveway of his old house. The door of the house opened and Alicia came storming out, holding a piece of paper and looking livid.

“You haven't been paying the fucking *mortgage*?” she began.

From beside him, Comus began to laugh. “Every day, you will live this. And every day we will watch you. If you handle it *right* you might even find yourself free and out of that coma.”

George glared at Comus. “What do I have to do?” he demanded to know.

Comus's laughter became uproarious. “Now, what fun would it be for us if we told you?” he asked and faded away.

From just outside the drivers side window, George heard Alicia. “You've been drinking haven't you?”

Even though he knew it would not help him, George felt his temper begin to flair...

It was the beginning of a long penance.

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About the Author

Crystal Brewton – also known as the Indie Author Extraordinaire – has crafted rich novels and stories on nearly every subject line, spanning from erotic romance to horror to sheer revenge. Some of her best-known tales include her popular *Cassandra's Cops* series, her science fiction piece *Caeli's Daniachew*, and the erotic short story collection *Rainy Day Confessions*. Brewton, who grew up in Chicago, currently lives in sunny California with her three children. *Caeli's Daniachew* was nominated for the 2006 CBS Parallax Award. View all of Ms. Brewton's works and much more online at www.crystalbrewton.biz

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