

## CHAPTER 1: GIVE AND TAKE

THERE WAS A TIME TO QUESTION, AND A TIME TO ANSWER FIRST.

Turning the wheel, I sought refuge from this whirl of fate sweeping me. As the car veered off Madison Avenue and halted along a quiet block, my heart raced more restless. Nestled inside the visor, her photo appeared peaceful. By a flip, danger lurked all around again, even in the best part of town and the light of day. Love at first sight had brought conflict unforeseen. A worthy Helen bore another feud, just as a new Troy fell to a bigger colossal ruse - the Wooden House, mortgaged. Against the great crash of markets and fortunes, a more personal clash had erupted. War engulfing my world so became my world war. Such was life: a passage from the fair to the fatal, an endless trial of a most fragile end.

I had to meet her soon - the only appeal of my watch other than vanity checking. Beneath the luster was an intricate shackle. Hours stopped counting at the edge though, when seconds began to dictate. Precious time really registered, by what touched or impacted. My years on the Street seemed but a game, past. It was no wonder where it all went, for it all had brought me here to this point. Now there was no opening or closing bell, rather one constant contest, scored too directly. Civilization belied the savagery.

Tap on the window startled my reflection. Trigger reflex reached for the concealed grip, as bare sight locked onto the intruder. Rather than peril, it was pity knocking. A gaunt old woman was saying something. Her lips moved, but her voice just quit against the glass and Beethoven rumbling in stereo. Supremacy, undisputed, rested its weapon and fumbled with its gadgetry for

the right button. Lazy whine of the power window all the way down - an obnoxious delay - interrupted her and seemingly the city commotion at that instant. A cold blast blew in the outside. I hissed with a hasty "Yes?" that already said no, as my inflection struck harsher than my intention. She hesitated and her glance sank. Lit eyes recovered, and stared in mine. The bloodshot flared some deep distress.

Her throat scratched to elevate: "May I have one dollar to get something to eat," she pleaded politely but purposely. Her misty breath seeped faintly to the breeze. Yet, her gaze held - onto my last vein of compassion - demanding more than words could and pressing me to act. A measly buck suddenly appreciated. Digging at the stash of quarters inside the cup-holder clenched a fist full of change. Her palms, in worn-out gloves, cupped slowly and reached for mere pittance. Cascade of coins onto leather sounded medieval. How little had changed. She twitched a smile and bowed with a gratefulness that defied her circumstance. "Thank you for your kindness," she apologized for the bother, before leaving me to my devices and insulation again.

Through the rising glass, her manners captivated. Gentle speech still resonated, sounding Gotham's higher society, far above such plight on these ratty streets. She kneeled to stow in her tote, the trove of tokens already spilling. A dark scarf loosely hooded over her greying hair. Calm face had cracked. Long overcoat shrouded a hollow form, on rubber boots. The drab fabric caught the ray of sun in a warm sheen, lighting her figure from the shadows. As she turned away, fine mends on the backside of her garment revealed pride weathering the elements set dead against it. In one hand, she carried a bag of vintage leather, and in the other, a canvas tote densely heavy. To her thin stature, such was apparently more than a day's load, but a life's remnants - packed too smartly, at wit's end. Pausing along, she teetered through the gust of

winter. I watched her in the mirror: head up the block toward the avenue, around the corner and out of sight. Even the chance to give in this world slipped away.

It humbled me to see her beg. Sure, she wasn't the first homeless I had seen this morning. The City created fortunes as it broke: to plunder and be plundered every day. Yet a deeper tragedy hanged here - of grace losing her place. I had to help .. rather than be the helpless. Shutting off the engine, as the music began to surge, escaped from cozy melancholy. My one step out met the brisk wind. The chill raked every fiber, to being. I could feel her hardship - though different than mine, equally for existence. With each breath in pursuit, life steamed against the void and invigorated more than puffing a prime cigar in a decadent den.

I caught up with her on Madison before a row of boutiques, where she well may have been a patron, another life ago. Receiving me was a gracious warmth that contrasted the cold City and such mean predicament. My largesse extended the only way it knew - by the largest bill, straight to the point. She resisted, as if it were stolen. Her stubborn dignity prompted instead my insistent "Please" and the better me, hidden from all the bitter: "You asked for a dollar, here is a hundred." "I don't need that much," she declined too modestly: "Lives are lost for less out here," vehemently puzzling me.

Strangely, I was drawn to help this stranger, not only for her sake but also mine, maybe even more. A good dispelled much bad. Playing God was empowering, as a provider or a destroyer. Salvation could never be too soon for the needy and the needless alike. The best in each man was so perishable, until rendered. If ever be, an appearing angel in this trying world would surely be a test of charity before gaudy testament. All culminated in a selfless and selfish urge to get her off these streets, right now, for good.

Probing her situation seemed like intrusion, which raised her guard: "My problem is far beyond your interest, Sir. You have already done more than most," she dismissed. Half-flattery and rejection couldn't deter me so easily. Getting information from dodgy CEOs, with more to conceal, was a tool of my trade before. Eventually asking, "Do you have family I can connect you with? If nothing else," either proved my sincerity or her vulnerability. Her reserve was overcome with emotion: "I have no one left .. Harold, my husband, died of a heart attack, after losing our savings in that big Ponzi scheme," where some fraud had made off with billions. Somber expression trembled, but not teared. "The road to disaster is shorter than you think, however remote the notion," counseled her experience. Fortune, though favoring the rich, was only to its fate. She now stayed the nights at a shelter on Lex, but every day she walked her yester walk of life as if still hers.

As my mind plotted, she pleaded, "Do you have work to offer?" The withered instantly blossomed .. and promoted, "I have skills in languages, and am very reliable. I can make a good assistant, a nanny, or a maid just as well." Her appeal gripped undeniably, like a bid for survival. Each person was not some circumstance, but own stance. Inexplicably across a city of millions, two strangers connected. Though ready to accept all her propositions, my position now was anything but family life or legitimate enterprise. "I do have something for you," hard-fought possession tendered, a deeper bounty unbound. She gaped curiously. Pausing the moment with but a finger, I marched back quickly to the car. My thoughts ran ahead faster.

The question wasn't how to help, but how much. Popping the trunk revealed the brown leather duffle: my Plan B, if I had to leave behind everything - my troubles, and my happiness for which there was no sum. Yet, Noah's Ark of today reduced to a satchel of loot, to buy an entire zoo or clan, wherever the currents would carry. Unzipping the top reunited with my illicit temptress:

bricks of cash packed inside. The face was gritty; the sides, cutting - for what it could demand. Dirty money, clean money looked all the same. Weighing to split the cache, I knew she needed it more. A homeless old woman faced dim prospects, much less in this grim economy and in the City of all places where any sign of desperation made a leper. A half-measure would only buy her temporary stay before she was out on the street again. At the precipice, there was no compromise with gravity. While a hundred bucks brought trouble, it took thousands-fold to make go away. The bag had plenty for her to start anew. Rather than escape, I had to fight it out in my world sinking, but with everything for me to uphold.

Watching over my shoulders, I slipped the intimidating piece out of the duffle, and into the folds of the overcoat lying flat on the trunk floor. My own remedy needed the gun more, even if she wanted to shoot her swindler. What was once aimed at me now served my aims. It felt surreal to handle a weapon in the middle of the City. An arsenal within reach had become my daily accessory - and accomplice, discreet but outspoken. Not too long ago, being armed had meant toting an umbrella on a cloudy day. How quickly reality could turn unreal, and unfathomable. Grasping the bag to give her, and bringing it into the sunlight surprisingly uplifted me. Time had come for greed to make amends.

My return brought her a look of relief, not to be refused. And so I accepted sincerely .. by pretending, "You can start as a translator at my company" - guilty of many allegations. Her joyous beam tore in tears, to the most heartwarming gratitude I had ever felt .. before even hearing thanks. Yes, my offer was a lie, but hard cash was better truth. Extending the bag I claimed, "My details are inside, as well as some clothes and shoes which my wife will not miss." She received the peculiar load and my emphatic gesture. Avoiding much questions, answers were always harder to afford. The only thing left for me to do was ensuring her safety - from

carrying a bag of cash through NYC. To prompt her, my bossiness reawakened for business again: "There is advance pay in there, with the expectation you find a place to stay and start work immediately, of course. We can use your Hungarian right away," I recalled that enticing menu. Still stunned, she mentioned some hostel on the East side, where she would go now. The sudden happy outcome urged me to embrace her, but the pretense restrained my outburst.

Satisfied, I hailed a cab for her .. until gradual fingertips settling on my shivery carcass stopped me, and melted the human divide. "I don't even know your name," womanly gush demanded with a too patient, endearing smile. How quickly our entire exchange had unfolded. "Michael," stated my real name, as my alias readied to misstate all else. "Like the saint?" she appealed. I obliged, only to appease her judge of character, without any delusion. My war was for earthly spoils, not God. She introduced herself as Hanna - her charm dawning as a far cry from the despair first met. Every beggar wasn't so, if the better would just help.

Soon, a cab darted toward our spot. She could see in my stare this ride was hers. Within that brief moment known to be a final farewell, my flurry of hopes and fears for her - and for all the money - muted me. "See you tomorrow morning, bright and early, Sir Michael," she so trusted, boarding my promise. Loss for true words, for truest intentions, murmured but a nod, as I shut her door and tapped the metal hull away. Just like that, the cab sped up the avenue - green signals in succession - until all sight of her and my humanity faded into the distance .. but for a half tear beading, already ice.

On my walk back to the car, a surge of spirit came over me, missing and missed for the longest time. It wasn't that I had forsaken God, rather this godforsaken path of mine. I would make amends with heaven after escaping hell. Giving some measure had gained something

immeasurable. Goodness could in deed be bought. Plunder was easier taken than kept anyway. For once, past ideals agreed with embittered realism.

Tomorrow endangered empowered today as the means and end - contrary to my upbringing and undertakings since. Harsh awakening revolted against lifelong constitution. Prudence underestimated its erratic nemesis. Looking too far ahead missed the nearest at hand. Facade of safety only fostered complacency, and more vulnerability. So, seizing the moment freed it. Situations and outcomes tended to own persuasion - as finely or firmly as required to sway. Force greatly expanded capabilities, and possibilities.

Kindness, when reconnected though, felt like instant kin: however lost and estranged, a familiar consolation. Gulfs in life - between bodies or beliefs - weren't so wide, but only took a wider view and reach. Starting the engine resumed the dramatic music. Rash peace cut the orchestrated madness. My hands still burned frozen. As I clenched for sensation, the phone rang.

It was Alexa, my love. A click opened up the heavens again - foremost a feeling. Sweet chant of my name through the car speakers, in surround sound, emanated as higher calling. Breathy presence filled the cabin, like a scintillating breeze even thru static silence. She could've been a jazz diva, love's songstress, humming about nothing. "When are you coming?" my inseparable asked, as if I had forgotten. Her talk soothed more than any melody. "When you look for me, I'll be there," my wisecrack sounded promising. "I'm already outside and looking .. You are nowhere to be seen," her tune sharpened, calling my bluff. "Give me a minute, Dear," still offered more than an even bargain - after well risking my life for her.

Magnetic attraction pulled me out of the sycamore-groved street, around and back up Madison .. along the trail of fond memories, to their cherished source. Holiday decorations decked the avenue. Every year, the excess somehow exceeded that before, as its own reality -

detached from the world around, now on the brink. The verge loomed always closer than realized. Noons descended to night; boon drew ruin, if not courting outright.

Much the same, she was both my bliss and my worry. Life itself was a give and take, more or less or entirely. I knew that head-turner would whirl my world for better or worse, but not imaginably both. Yes, she had made the wrong enemy, yet chosen the right man. Perhaps she was guilty, though her fairness proved so innocent. Even the City had fallen to greed. Enchantment was the most I could accuse her of. For that, I was equally to blame. The flame at first spark had never waned, and only blazed. Lust was the usual culprit, but greater so was devotion put to the test. More than infatuation, she had become my inner fact, my lasting stand. When virtue conspired with vice, the course was truly unrestrained and inescapable: beyond reproach, past salvation, and so rightly wrong. Love now became my sole moral and deliverance, however mortal and damned.

As I approached, there she was, outside the building .. her lavish hair shining in the patch of sun, amid the City's winter shadows. Such was the luster of every man's greed and treasure, the wheat of his deepest appetite and sustenance, the fire of his heart and hearth. She wore an overcoat, white as an avalanche that swept her shapely height. A graceful creature she was, undaunted by her circumstance. Despite being their prime target and a walking bounty, her glory was irrepressible. Courage belonged not only to the brawliest, but to the loveliest.

The chipper doorman basked in her beauty, beckoning him to serve. He pulled on the rear door of the S8^ saloon, as if I were her chauffeur, until she corrected. Opening the front, he bent to trade glances with an approving smirk and a tip of the hat. The cold air gusted in, but it was her radiance I felt most. By a closing thud and soothing closeness, my dearest was within



embrace. Warmths greeted first. Torches reunited. Joy purged my heart. Together, I was complete in this commanding cabin.

She was love in every form and force, evoking untold praise and appreciation, felt at once. Her splendor was a God's extravagance. All infinity could not have conceived such perfection without the inclination. When lost from Eden, Adam just had to look at Eve to believe again. She was a feast for the senses - the delight that fulfilled and hungered in the same sip. Her lips seduced from afar and were undeniable up-close; so ravishing against serenity. Her smile seemed that of fortune. A kiss connected deep, stilling time and all other matter. No language could equal .. hellos struck too distant. Her rouge tasted like desire itself. The angel was in the details more than the devil, if only reading the delicate. She seized my body by a touch and my soul with but a gaze. Her eyes were oceans of eternity, my divine vision.

"Still boycotting clocks, are we?" she taunted, tapping her wrist: "I have become your lady in waiting," poked her sarcasm. "Found just the holiday gift for you, in the nick of time," my good alibi rendered, "The gift of giving. You're sure to like it." "Giving is better than squandering," she accepted: "That was an emergency board meeting again, only to report more losses at the foundation. Suddenly there is less for charity and much to blame. And all they can think of is suing, after mismanaging these years. I couldn't sit for another minute through their flatulence and had to stand outside for fresh air .. Sorry for rushing you from your shopping, Santa," she reverted to the festive season: "I would've caught a cab home, but have really been waiting to see this young sculptor in Williamsburg with you - at last. I should ask her to cast you in stone .. for when you leave me all alone." "How about The Thinke.." the thought bid for its idol, before flesh pulsed again - with immediate motive.

A swell of tear, from the shearing winds, trickled down her cheek like a sudden tidal wave .. to be caught with a thirst and savor. Deserts bloomed once more. How sad it was to realize, in happiness, that most tears went unnoticed and wasted. Her complexion without cosmetics defied this scarring life. Pleasantness - set in finest smile lines - refused aging frown. Even her imperfections seemed perfect. Natural rosiness highlighted those cheekbones. Her incense was like no earthly scent; such heavenly whiff roused through the reeks of hell. Breathing her heat, I was but a feather flying and blown by love's tempest.

Shedding the gloves, her butter fingers appeared so gentle against supplest leather. After all that had happened, I would still take her hand again, for however many grapples. Creamy brush teased my stubble. She was my tenderest refuge in this harsh world. She leaned into me - right to my soft spot below the jaw, just above the leatherneck - and nibbled finer than a whisper. "My prickly man," she quipped, "If you keep this up, your beard will be longer than up top." Her approval of my manly flaws well sealed my fate to hers. I would have given her my last strand, but she didn't need it. Her always trim hair the gust had tried to ravage. Tilt of her head and the ease of fingers sprang her bob back in place. To a regal neck, her mane recovered like a crown of nature, cascading exactly around her face again. Left with no excuse but the urge, my claw combed through fineness and aspired finesse in kind. Sketching above her threaded eyebrow .. and sweeping behind a figurine ear .. bared that blush again. Like the ribbon of a present, her red scarf opened to glowing flesh.

The doorman, still in my rearview mirror, had been directing the bustle around us, and now walked hastily toward my side to prod away. With the cluster of cabs honking impatiently behind, toil couldn't stand leisure. If only they knew my burden. Before he too blurred the obvious, I slipped him a generous note from my pocket, and motioned a tip of the hat .. thereby

fixing poor attitude with paid gratitude. Bribe was much cheaper than amends. She was my sole care, whatever the cost. Her incorruptible stare spurred me onward, to her desire.

Love was all she had wanted really. Yet, love - in an unloving world - ultimately asked and bid everything. Passion recklessly gambled. Prime reason wagered even higher. After all, life's greatest reward surpassed its biggest risk. The most precious bore promise above any price. A heart being broken or pierced was fateful danger, but one left forsaken and perishing became ever fateless agony, extended. Lifetime of search or denial, isolation and bitterness was too long a sentence. A decent soul might meet eternal heaven, but vast earth, with all its wonders and trappings, would turn barren hell to the empty mortal. Neither purchase nor conquest could attain the priceless. The boldest power was powerless in its sigh. Only that gentle jolt released its spell, and kept it. One look at her beauty beside me was all the testament I needed: *Risk everything for love* (Footnote 1: Rumi), to find it and to grow it, before the restless heart squandered for less.

An absolute woman was the absolution of man; rousing his fortunes by alleviating his misery and deficit, taming his passions by unleashing them. A lass would have lesser enemies for sure, yet could be no greater ally. It was her sophistication to which I was captivated, and now captive. Without demanding attention, she drew it naturally. To remark at only her appearances was to not know her. My affection for her was never forced, rather my affection for her forced so much in me. Truth compelled to its very extent. Her justice was worth all war. While there were greater causes for saints and heroes than a good dame, not for common bastards.

"How did you spend the night?" she suspected my trysts - not with another temptress, but the same fatality tearing us. I had nothing to hide from her, except that thing to hide her from: "Tomcatting around .. and missing you." Darkness offered the only cover for dark plots; the light of day was to live once more. "I miss you even now," confessed as no cheap admission for long-

fought independence. Love became the sole surrender that liberated. "Then you should stop your mind from wandering off," she neared: "I'm right here beside you, and hard to miss."

"I must say, I have been seeing much more of Manuel than you lately," she still nudged. Manuel guarded her when I couldn't. Not the least bit a hack for hire, he had won the Silver Star in Afghanistan and lost a foot. Such uncommon valor in combat was becoming too common today regrettably, to be forgotten in unequal spoils at home. "I'll have to make up for it then," my concession - much easier - turned cocky. "Yes, you will," she egged on: "For some reason though, he is planning to work through the holiday. Let the man spend time with his family, Michael," she was always advocating something, someone .. or us: "We will be at the island anyway. So, it'll be good just you and I." That fond thought made even harder my plan of leaving her there - to bring this fight to a head on the mainland once and for all.

She slipped out of her white overcoat, to a red sweater dress stretching beneath .. which settled me, and inflamed me at the same time. River of lava parted purest snow, down to her ankles. "I'm burning up the more you layer down," her fire struck me more than the color she donned. "Well, I know next time what poker to make you lose your cool," she grinned: "Womano a mano, without the rest of those card sharks." Seeing her fashion of the day had become my favorite show - before the real, finest art would reveal. Fitted form of the skirt, and a single fold running between defined her heavenly curves. Draping a gorgeous gorge couldn't hide its grandeur. That majestic sight could move any beholder, man or woman, if but for a fever. Love for such beauty was its own orientation, and persuasion - as straight as its honesty. Touching perfection perfected touch, healingly. I drove under her influence, thru City traffic, short of a fender-bender.

All gloom faded in her delight. When apart, love grew singular and unequalled; when together, dual and equal. Her presence dispelled the past and a fate without her. The present was truly a gift, as they say, but if only unwrapped and enjoyed. I remembered the flower for her: a purple rose, her favorite. Just a stem pleased her through the day. Perhaps, it pleased me even more how the simplest could appease the exquisite, and to see her tenderness tending.

Pulling the car over to the curb and reaching to the backseat, I picked the bloom, so full .. that recalled ever spring. It was the most flawless of the bunch - like her. Stroking the bud across her cheeks stoked the gentlest expression. A blessing flourished manifold by giving. All vigor and aims suddenly directed into a delicate stem, down to petals on flesh .. for her utter content. Effortless indulgence cherished the nearest wonders; the greater effort seemed quitting the lesser. Her pent pleasure erupted into titillating reprisal. She kissed the corners of my overstretched smile, until the truce of total caress. I was defenseless to her attack, despite the firepower on me. "You're killing me, Love," my uncontrollable surge burst. It was so much better to live and die by the rose than the sword - a mere spade. "Love never kills .. or dies," she countered.

On the mortal brink emerged the true power of love. Every harvest sustained most at the very dearth. Only more life sown could beat the Reaper. The heart exceeded the heartless. Ultimately, the purest intensity was an enduring force of nature. Like the breeze blowing into a gale, the drops that deluged, the balmy dawn radiating into midday scorch, a pulse undeterred became its own effect. And when two purities combined, they compounded .. unlocking life. Brute strength tired alone. Even hard iron broke brittle, yet when mixed with an exact softer substance formed tougher steel. Love was the infinite source, force, and consequence: empowering, bonding the physical, all by a feeling. Two souls united was atomic fusion no less - unleashing energies of

the universe to create, not just destroy. After all, the omnipotent was the most benevolent. Good could ever turn to the better, but every bad fell to a badder.

Just as war begged love, love could not be without war though in a troubled world - this dual realm of sweet duet broken by bitter duel. Truce was hardly the solution to an aggressor, even if the resolution. A dove could no more pacify the diving hawk than an olive branch dissuade the swung sword. Peace came the hard way or the hardest: from the stroke of victory or the fatal blow of defeat. *Thou shall not kill* surely didn't let thy killer. Tragedy couldn't be reversed, but remedied at best. Renouncing my undying vow would not retract my death warrant, already endorsed in assassins' blood. As spark became flame, the cause of war became the cause for war, from trigger to aim. Like awesome nature that nourished and devastated, beauty too brought ugliness. I could never love another as her. So what was my retreat: a lesser fling, back to who I was before? Defending her defended my best.

As for the law, it would condemn what it could not protect. The final appeal became own determination. Justice wasn't granted, just won. Truth amid the false was the firmest conviction, rather than a naive ideal that would be convicted by a bolder lie. By love, right made might and might was made right. Greatest injustice was relinquishing love - the greatest justice. Together, we were bound solely by our bond.

Alexa turned on the music. With a few clicks, she skipped thru an entire Beethoven symphony and was not in the mood for any of it. Her easy, womanly composure enthralled more than any intricate composition by man. Such melancholy rang amiss in her joy. "Why so glum?" she jested: "No one has died, have they?" If she only knew the toll. "Let's get you cheery," she bid, tuning into the Beatles album she kept in the changer. Her content carried even against the tide, and seduced to her own rush. She was not chatty nor chilly, like other women before. Calm

became her, drowning my many storms. True brilliance was sensational as sensible. While much was ever debatable, the most proved mutual and irrefutable. Seeing her take in the rose, I could never get used to another side of her - just noticed, or shown. A year had passed in the epoch of our love: from spring alive to this deadly winter. Yet, her beauty endured, more remarkable. Without this peril, I still could not take her for granted; indifference was the least she provoked. But, on life's verge, the bud turned more precious and a lover's rag hallowed to the last clench. I accepted all charge of loving her.

Even in her peace, the looming date with the devil drummed once again inside me as the instigator, ever for her peace. Perhaps it was my own demon calling. My ultimate target was the very head of the serpent. Fighting by pawns had been his advantage. Playing against greater numbers was to taunt the odds and my own mortality. Every strength concealed a weakness, as weakness revealed a strength. Grander the snake, longer was its slither, offering the neck equally as the tail. Cruel greed always afforded staunch defense. Yet each rule and ruler, fort and fortune had its vulnerability. Blackest armor daunted invincible, even diabolic - until pale courage struck and found its might, when a sure predator reeled as unaccustomed prey from the hunt suddenly reversing. Several nights, I had plotted around his sprawling estate, to find my opening just outside his gates of hell, where he would enter mine - of as spectacular ambush. The crucial strike rested on the pivotal stroke. First, Alexa had to go into hiding, without a trace. This feud was about to get bloodier. Her move to a new flat had broken their pursuit; but even this big city could not contain her ways and my greatest worry.

Reading the surroundings for danger had become first nature, after the opening shot and a second chance. Instinct, once awakened, wasn't easily quelled. Madness would have already perished in the all-too-real onslaught. Full senses only guarded against the insanity. This world

felt as a much different place when knowing death lurked so close. The jungle was everywhere, crawling. Each setting and character had to be judged instantly for motive and threat. Man was a complicated creature: One species could rise or descend into so many. Wrong impressions required right reflexes. Stories abounded - detached, disjointed, and dramatic. The edge was never far from around the corner.

The car mirrors hadn't reflected trouble for days. Past few minutes, a black sedan shadowed us over a number of blocks and thru each of my turns. Its daylights shined icy white, distinct from the traffic. Was it them? Flashy display for the fast lane appeared as rather tacky and tactless for a would-be tracker by stealth. Anticipation prepared. Adrenaline ignited. Confidence bested or betrayed. My tense fist drew her gentle curiosity. She stoked her hair, and lured consciously or not. Love became the absolute distraction, to the most significant. "Whatever has you riled right now, let it go, Michael .. and just unwind together." Her wholesomeness reminded this struggle was for her wholly. Bravery wasn't bravado. Surviving such cruelty this far had been by some higher grace, and any error by our murderous enemy was an outright gift of life. "How can they possibly track us now," she tried to reassure, "after we have turned our lives upside down? If you left them alone.." If was always the big question, even without the mark.

"We should leave town and head to the island already," I urged. With the cottage rented, the refuge of the vast Atlantic lay an afternoon ride away - removed from the creeping city. She sensed unease in my best nonchalance. A sheer woman could bare her man by a feeling. Her alarm challenged: "You can't mean now?" My nod shook, repeating. "But we're going to that studio .. And we have the holiday party tomorrow night," she clung to a semblance of normality .. before seeing my frozen stare into the mirror and grasping the reality. She didn't even glance back, well knowing the road we were both on: "At least let me pack first. I need more than a



toothbrush from the pharmacy aisle." The run for life, however urban and urbane, felt underway. Motion in stride or stumble meant still alive. "We have the irreplaceable on us," the most vital tallied right away.

Evading our pursuer through the City's congestion negotiated sharp curves than curves. She was used to my offensive driving. Absurdly slow race was so heart-pounding. As the traffic eased, the stalking intensified into open chase. Brazen daylight drew near in the rearview. The driver and a sidekick were enough to outgun me by the simplest math. Alexa noticed the more than usual frenzy, and didn't question the obvious .. nor lay blame. She uncrossed her legs and tightened the belt, then braced against the carseat for an exchange. She had already faced their worst, while riding her fine stallion in the Park and escaping by the seat of her pants. Their blatant move, this time on crowded streets, was astonishing - as if the witness of Times Square didn't matter to their calculus. The Beatles played on: "I Feel Fine" blaring that very moment was a parody neither of us interrupted. Joy merely scattered, unfelt.

As we reached 9<sup>th</sup> Ave and its faster flow this time of day, the high noon sun throned over the entire corridor and blazed a path through the gray City. Hoping for a changing light to snag them instead brought them directly to our tail, with just speed separating. Desperation could only stare at the chain of green in the distance, to not betray us now. Dare reverted to prayer. Blocks down, a yellow changed red .. to be eclipsed by the sun above, ever yielding forth. Screaming engines bit with screech. The S8^ was more roar than bark. Accelerating into the sequence of signals and the synchrony of City governance soon took us below 42<sup>nd</sup> St, toward the entrances of Lincoln Tunnel. Long entrapment inside seemed a dim prospect.

Chasing madly not to bicker, they forced our last resort: all-out force. I warned Alexa, "Have to stop them. Get ready to take the wheel when I jump out. Drive on without me. I will call .. or ..

know that I love you." The backup plan was hardly but, that the primary had to succeed at all cost. She reached for me. Touch spoke deeper than words. This whole wide world of so many differences and choices all reduced to love versus hate - a relentless fight without surrender. Ultimate price affirmed ultimate value.

Beholding the urban jungle cast the everyday stroll into another dimension. Behind the storefronts and facades lay terrain in which to hide and seek. Expecting their scourge, I had surveyed the City's scapes for such contingency. The unexpected proved harder if unprepared. Beating the odds took equal calculation and determination. Own justice faced not only the outlaw but also the law. This high-speed pursuit through the busiest part of Gotham made a gauntlet by both a possibility today. As a mere man fighting his hell, I mustered every bit of sharper instinct in me, however dormant and dull - stirring a stint of infantry, lifelong hunting, and the inseparable occupation of speculation - to plot and wage this revolt for love. A passion like no other made a man more than just a man.

Our best hope around was the self-park garage atop the bus terminal. A right onto 39<sup>th</sup> St led up the long winding ramp that climbed some four stories to the entrance. A maze, once solved, offered an ever way thru and out. Beauty of this concrete stack was so elusive: a grand arena in the middle of a metropolis, without spectators. It spanned an entire city block on each of its three levels, but had barely a crew and no surveillance. Its monolith skeleton provided cover inside out. Picking the spot though still didn't know the pecker's sport - his arms and armor. In the greatest gamble, every slight edge was wagered for total stakes.

They let us pull on ahead, perhaps anticipating an attendant or cameras where there were none. Or, they assumed this to be our dead-end. They were entering my grounds. I pressed the green button for the ticket. Waiting for the machine to stamp out .. and their approach at any

moment .. felt like judgment at the Pearly Gates - but decked in rusty yellow paint rather than pearls. Drawing the compact pistol readied for all my sins, past and pending. She didn't deserve my damnation though. Snatching the spit ticket with a rip raised the gate arm no faster. There was admission for the sinner, after all - or for his lover. A hard left led up to the next level. Half-wall of the ascending spiral revealed between the pursued and the pursuer, just as they climbed the final stretch to the gate.

At the second level, I halted and gave Alexa the wheel. "Keep driving to the elevators .. Park in handicapped .. Use the steps," I was suddenly barking at my beloved across the widening rift. There was no chance for a parting kiss, only eyes embracing to their souls. "Get into the subway at the basement .. and take this," only my handgun extended by its gentler end, with roguery trying to rile her fairness: "Just hold and pull," just as her hold pulled my trigger now. A rush, breaking us apart, thumped me - fist on heart - and jolted for battle. Valor was but the act over fear. Her solemn countenance centered my storm.

Tearing open the rear door, I grabbed the Harrods plastic bag off the floor. Grasping its hefty contents felt assuring, as equalizer. In it was a silenced machine pistol, that had become my acquisition after their forfeit; an accessory which no proper couple would carry in the City this political season, but which none pursued by the mafia should ever leave home without. Pulling back the bolt readied the weapon. The extra clips stuck under my belt, like Cupid's fiery quiver. Slamming the door left love for war. Immediate longing though watched her retreat, as she drove into the bunker .. until candescent silver and ember taillights turned pitch coal under the distant cover of dark.

Monstrous engine growled below. Tires screamed and stirred the vicious game. I ran to greet their arrival and put on a black ski mask from any witness. The bag still wrapped the gun, with

no need for the sights at close range. My palms sweated on plastic, in the freezing cold. Leaning against the numbing wall and scrambling to behind the entrance, my utter aim braced with both hands and leveled the piece. In one second, all the loaded thirty rounds would fire: the only trick was timing the release, which applied to killing as it did living. Steamy breath sputtered uncontrollably, as if drowning in thick air. My heart attacked, before the gun. But I had to stand.

The car approaching up the spiral slowed to an idle. Brake rotors whirled like the Reaper's mower, seeking. Speed and time stilled, on the verge of mortality .. with awareness to everything. Then, the hood came through - brilliant darkness, eclipsing daylight. Tinted glass appeared as Death's mirror.

The trigger struck, hailing on the grim machine and on my own reflection caught in this curse. Windows exploded, exposing two intruders and freeing my apparition again. Impact on glass and metal sounded louder than the gunfire, silenced. The bolt cycled like a sewing machine, stitching in lead - not to mend, but to shred apart. The magazine emptied. Devastation could be so swift. I reloaded, as the instantaneous wreck of a car veered unguided. It rolled ahead few paces, before side-swiping the row of bumpers .. and coming to a dead stop in the discord of alarms.

Charging the accused affirmed the execution. Only awe still riddled, as aim held onto its marks. Sunlight, pouring above the near half-wall, beamed thru the stripped metal frame and the slump of two raw bodies. Bullets had been overly ruthless to their design and purpose. It was a ghastly surgery gone very wrong for the patients. Minds afflicted by the disease of evil were forever inflicted by it. Coming from the passenger side was a groan that any strain of pity - however vengeful - would rather not hear: a killer's gasp and torment. The gruesome weapon he clenched gave him no consolation. His fading hostility could not even look at me. Coup de grace

was the last grace left. A burst quelled the whimper. A hunt exacted a prey, and every bounty, a cost. They picked the game and lost. Only death won either way.

The windshield had shattered into giant snowflakes with the tinge of red .. that shimmered under purging rays, like stained glass. The sight, in a flash, took me back to *Sainte-Chapelle*. Faith could be found at the strangest moments, and sins. Circling around the wreckage, I was suddenly caught in the scathing headlamp, yet burning unabated: the light of darkness that had haunted us on this day and fed by extinguishing others. The glow transfixed, like the eerie eye of the dead serpent after the fright had passed. Sharper fire unlit. Icy breeze carried the stench of death and fuel. Empty cartridges on pavement were strewn like plucked fatal petals, sticking into my leather soles: They'd hated me, now they hated me not, but their ghosts hated me. Bullets for mere coins tolled so much.

As I scurried for a way out, stark taillights ignited up ahead and a fervent engine uttered .. which grew most familiar on quick silver, backing all the way closer. It was Alexa, womanning my wheels - as much as I had manned her to flee. Dismay soon became relief, to which I surely ran. Against better judgment, true love proved the best salvation. Hearts had the mightier plan. Her vivid voice called, as she pulled up beside: "Michael!" was the only word she mustered, vigorously bringing me back. Merciful arm extended open the passenger door, rendering her as the getaway driver. The terrified could be so brave. With clemency, she removed my mask and received me. I surrendered to her compassion once again. She was livelier than all life without.

At the self-pay machine, checking out with cash was the easy part. Trembling hands and looking back over my own shoulder spoilt the spoils of this risky business. Inside the car, I still shook uncontrollably, right through the glove, reaching across Alexa to the slot on the gate. It took four arms to steady a sliver of paper .. her clasp reining runaway rage. The arena gate lifted,

freeing us from another trial, and back on course - of fate. Into the uncertain away from certain destruction, with my most treasured beside me, love yet offered the best promise. She had the wheel .. and our destiny in her hands.

Silence gripped us both, as we escaped near death. Excruciating peace did not relieve though. Her teary eye still witnessed the crime. Desperate to break the horror, my thoughts grappled for happier occasions of our affair. Trying to allay, I could come up with no good suggestion. Her anguish became my deep remorse. Holding her was the sole solace. Ultimately, to keep going though became the very choice. There was a time to question and a time to just answer first. It had been a day of give and take, as I could have never imagined or feared. Life, protected, was reborn. We would live and love today with greater determination.

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