CHASING THE GODDESS

A Novel By

Bill Froehlich

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For
Katrina
and the lightning bolt moment

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

After many exciting years of writing, directing and producing motion pictures and television, my desire to continue as a storyteller has deepened with this my first solo novel. The writing takes place in a state of inspired exploration of life's experiences, my imagination, and the unknown for the world is more than we know and something sacred emerges from every story that comes to us so I invite you into this soul journey story.

The Setting:

Life held many surprises before the pandemic compressed experience into endless waiting and the world held its breath. In the fall of 2019, this story was one such surprise.

Bill Froehlich
(November 2025 California)

PROLOGUE

"Be careful when a naked person offers you a shirt."

An African saying

The man was unknowable, this man, Eli Cross. Not because he was secretive. On the contrary, he was open, disturbingly so, and projected an energy of pure potential, a lively inner *presence* that arose by resisting the temptation to fully conceptualize an identity and thereby be limited by that concept. It captivated people. He radiated confidence without attempting to do so and utilized that perception to great effect.

Years of exotic foreign travel provided insight into the pliability of human behavior even across cultural differences. He developed an artist's eye of possibilities for the images and stories needed to sculpt a person's imagination into his masterpiece of desire.

The best art was often deceptively simple.

He could anticipate someone's next thought and set it in motion hurtling down a path conjuring images and assessments to his advantage. He knew the mind told stories, constantly creating the incessant swirl of thoughts, and with the right suggestion, a tale would arise, be woven in someone's mind, a self-perpetuating cavalcade of conclusions that were utterly convincing of who he was, and what he was going to do; people then thought they knew him. But they would be wrong. They had merely boarded a runaway train of thought with his light touch the hand of the engineer.

Much of this guesswork—the insatiable desire to pin him down and categorize him like an insect on an entomologist's mounting board—had been committed to paper. Assiduously archived in painstaking detail, the data of Eli Cross—what was generally agreed upon—was immortalized in the files of Interpol, the Police Nationale of France, the Préfecture de Police de Paris, MI-5, New Scotland Yard and its Art and Antique Squad, The BKA and Bundespolizei of Germany, The Guardia di Finanza of Italy, Policia Nacional of Spain, the Singapore Police Force, the Criminal Intelligence Service Canada

(CISC), the FBI Art Crime Team, the LAPD, the NYPD, as well as most law enforcement establishments throughout the United States, all listing him as a *thief*; and begrudgingly, for Search-Engine-Optimization, as a *Master Thief*.

The files were thick, but filled with conjecture, coincidence and circumstantial evidence only; no connecting criminal facts were provable. He had never been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. *Never caught*. That was all that was knowable.

It irritated the most righteous of law enforcement—maddening like the incessant itch of a tropical rash—that he could not even be properly defined by the categories of the official forms. *Nationality*: American, possibly; Canadian by way of Montréal or Québec perhaps; then again European, possibly, perhaps France or England, but Switzerland could not be ruled out; New Zealand could not be ruled out either, nor Singapore for that matter. He seemed to be an ex-pat from everywhere. He had a continental flair, but not necessarily by lineage.

It galled those assigned—or addicted—to tracking him, which were mostly men, that he was also charming, assured and drop dead gorgeous, standing over six feet tall with a thick head of lustrous, dark hair and luminous blue eyes flecked with splashes of green. His dashing good looks stole one's breath and drove a stake through the heart of their self-esteem.

Beauty, he knew, could be its own decoy.

A stunning achievement to have so many of the world's vast alphabet soup of law agencies clamoring to lock his body in a small space for years; even more so to exasperate them to hell and back by their not being able to do it. What really drove many of them straight up the wall pushed them to the edge of insanity; they liked the guy! A few really liked him and hated him all at once which turned their stomachs into ulcer soup. Others flat out hated him and wanted to shoot him dead for their own health reasons. Those miserable bastards racked up divorces like pinging pinball machines. However one looked at it, Eli Cross had a knack of getting under the skin; parasite or warm fuzzy, one never knew.

Having duped both the authorities and his targets, many of whom never knew they were fooled, he turned his focus to creating one final masterpiece. His simple and delicious recipe: a web of trust woven

with the strands of doubt and desire dazzled as a soufflé of hubris and human behavior. What he didn't concern himself with at those moments of past victory—attempting an iron discipline of thought—was what happened when you no longer can trust anything or anyone? This time would be different.

His web of deception now held a secret purpose known only to him.

Only one man, an NYPD Robbery-Homicide cop, got close to knowing that secret; but he was dead.

Unwritten by those living was the feeling of him they all carried in their gut… *dangerously unknowable.*

The horse knew him. The glistening, grey Arabian, *Saudade,* who carried him effortlessly over the French countryside near St. Tropez, knew him intuitively and undeniably. Together, they split the wind as their thunderous momentum propelled them along cliffs extending skyward from the azure waters of the Mediterranean. Thrashing hooves ripped apart the fertile earth as flesh strained against leather and forcefully expelled breath heralded another burst of speed.

Saudade also trusted him, utterly. Perhaps being one of the few who did or could. But then, horses were real to their core, being fully present. A person awakened to who they really were in their presence. This was an offering the horse gave to whoever was aware enough to receive it. It was grace.

This magnificently muscled creature, designed by nature to flee from all it did not know or trust, never fled from Eli Cross. He first spoke to Saudade in a language the horse understood: the language of movement, a non-predatory expression, until Saudade was willing to release his sense of self-preservation to Cross and be in harmony with his leadership; a trusting with his life. No human held such a depth of connection with Cross.

Perhaps this hinted at the horse's name—Saudade—even its sound when spoken—*so-dazh-zhey*—held the feelings—for from the Portuguese, it translated as *"the love that remains" after someone is gone, a yearning, a longing.*

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The soft, tapered bristles of the delicate paint brush barely touched the paper yet the water colors flowed independently of her artistic guidance. Nathalie Seeger knew precision eluded her attempts to control the flow of paint. She knew with increasing frustration that she couldn't control the paint no matter how sharp her focus.

Worse yet, she couldn't remember the face she wanted to capture with any precision. Tom's face. She wanted to capture the sensual memory of that face, a face she had kissed so often, and so recently.

The noise didn't help; the symphonic cacophony of sirens and car horns that made up the night music of New York. Even eight floors up the sounds penetrated. Wide awake, Nathalie Seeger should be sleeping; she had a big day coming up. She longed for stress-free sleep; yearned for the peace from knowing her ducks were all in a row. But she knew she had only one duck—the job she had to nail to prove herself.

Jerry had called from his late-night vantage point at The Waldorf Astoria, the job site. A new wrinkle needed to be dealt with. A last minute unexpected delivery of new state-of-the-art high security jewelry display cases required a shift in plans. It ratcheted up the pressure on them to pull off the job. *No big deal, we'll adjust* she had told him with her best confident tone.

But she couldn't remember Tom's face. Her thoughts fled here—not the pressing job—but the fading image of his face. This was a man she thought she loved—what the hell was she thinking—was she even thinking?! Now there were only feelings left—sharp penetrating shards of feelings she couldn't control. She couldn't control the paint. It all escaped her grasp. She had taken up painting as a refuge for her mind and soul. Water colors, an aggressively independent medium, needed nurturing from one's soul to flow in harmony. She felt all out of nurture, in command of nothing.

The city offered no solace. Its prominent buildings were modern masterpieces carved into the sky shoving aside the clouds, even blocking out the moon, and down below smaller blended structures of aging bricks mortared with sweat, blood and immigrant vision. To her, New York was an elegant, sensual storm; an in your face city not to be ignored. She liked it.

She clearly felt a storm was coming.

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In most cities, buildings were erected. In St. Tropez, they were kissed up against each other. Architecture was energy and generated feelings. Even the sun felt romantic in Southern France. Perhaps that was why Eli Cross lived there. Then again, maybe it was what they expected. And maybe he wanted it that way. The yachts anchored in the harbor and the artsy trend-setting streets splashed with pastel colors created an undeniable sense of style known the world over and to be part of that was like wearing the right clothes. It all set up to create a feeling. He liked that.

A sprawling villa commanded a view of the Mediterranean and the seaside landscape. The villa was as old as the land, but lovingly restored to its original grandeur, including the prominent stables. Seemingly impenetrable thickets marked the outer property edges and these rows of heavy brush added protective walls with their craggy and twisted wooden arms reaching for sea and sky, wildly untamed yet seductively aromatic.

The villa also had another distinct quality cherished by its owner. It was isolated.

Elements of behavior that were precise in their design unfolded in a rhythm that was natural; the discipline behind the actions unseen in the casual execution.

So it was that Marcel, the lanky stablehand, ambled toward the stables while a black Mercedes limousine rolled easily out of a multi-car garage as Saudade—in a mane-flying leap—cleared a thicket row and then abruptly a white perimeter fence by the villa's name plaque; its letters creatively gouged out of a wooden plank: *Maquis sur-mer*.

Eli Cross commanded the Arabian across the lush grounds with an effortless touch, a serene confidence.

Those who worked for him were loyal, well-paid and skilled at their jobs. They were aware of his reputation for it was the first thing Eli Cross would tell them when they sought their current position. But none of them had any hard evidence of how he got that reputation which allowed them to respond honestly to the legal authorities who pestered them from time to time.

There was something about his smile—they all felt it—a sly, charismatic force drawing one into an irresistible yet enigmatic lair. Perhaps the unknown kept them on edge. They knew only what he wanted them to know; yet they realized he knew all about them.

Marcel, in his early twenties, applied because he loved horses and the villa's stables were spacious and immaculate with five horses to care for and exercise; he regularly worked one Camargue, the native working horse of France, two Andalusians, a Lusitano and a Selle Francais sport horse. Saudade, the Arabian, was clearly the most loved of all and ridden only by Cross. Marcel wondered what Cross might do if anything ever happened to Saudade under his care.

Marcel's mother knew he liked this man, yet asked her son once if he ever worried for his own safety. After a thoughtful pause…he replied: "Sometimes." Those speculations would not bother Cross; he liked their not knowing.

They all arrived at the stables in a natural flowing rhythm propelled by expected discipline. The limo rolled to a stop as Cross dismounted gracefully and Marcel took the reins.

"It's time," Cross said simply.

"Would you like to shower first?" Marcel asked.

The driver opened the limo door for Cross.

"No, I'll do that on the plane."

The day before had been hot. Oppressive humidity had released relentless rivulets of sweat from the slightest effort. It was the last hurrah of a lingering summer.

This day the air was suddenly crisp. The skin tightened. Autumn insistently arrived. Change asserted itself. To most on the verge of risking everything, the sudden shift might have aroused suspicion, a possible ominous sign.

Not to Eli Cross. Given what he was about to attempt, it all made sense to him.

Expect change. That was solid ground, not shifting sand.

He slipped inside the limo and with the closing click of the door the rhythm was complete. Eli Cross was a man who went after what he wanted. He felt the wind at his back; clearly a time to strike.

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Across the pond it was still the middle of the night.

Nathalie thought she knew Tom. She was wrong. He had left. A month ago.

She told herself she didn't really know why. That allowed her to keep piling the blame on him…*the asshole*.

The nightgown she wore told a different story—and she knew it—and it pissed her off. She still wore it though—even now in the middle of the night staring out at the city—this nightgown that was torn the night her boyfriend Tom left.

Tom had not torn it.

She had.

Emotionally gobsmacked—*heartbroken* she had told herself—when she had watched him walk away from her. Not a word from his lips. Before he reached the door, she had yanked on her nightgown tearing open a flap of fabric above her left breast. The grating sound of the ripping lace had not stopped him as she had hoped. He had not even paused or turned around.

When the door had softly clicked shut—a *click* that had echoed around her apartment—and he was gone, she had stared stunned at her reflection in the large plate glass window, the lights of the city shimmering around her.

This was the French lace nightgown she had ordered from Paris to please him. Paris! For him…*the asshole.*

That night—and this night—the torn flap fell open exposing the curves of her left breast and rested precipitously just above her nipple like an open wound to her heart. *An open wound to her heart…yeah, that felt right…like a righteous scar*.

She had trusted him. Actually it was more like she had decided to trust how she knew *he could be*. She felt she really knew *he could be* the man who respected and liked her independence.

He didn't like her independence. He told her he did, but he didn't.

So she had been a chump.

That was why she tore the nightgown. That was why she still wore it…to remember. She still wondered though, just couldn't help it; it was so hard to admit being fooled.

Why all the deception? He could've been straight with me. I should've seen it—felt it—something. I just couldn't sense that he was…an asshole—and assholes shit on you—that's what assholes do. No more assholes! Simple, right? But assholes…disguise themselves. Next time eyes wide open—no bullshitting myself—I'll spot those red flags a mile away! The next romantic bastard better be real or be prepared to be neutered. Why the hell else would I pay all that money for Cutco knives?!

No comfort or answers came from her incomplete water color painting of Tom's face—and barely half a face at that—which lay on her kitchen table. Only pain flowed from the runaway colors that resembled a child's fever dream.

Her focus shifted quickly to her work, to finish her prep. Time to lock up the *props.* She stashed a Zeiss telephoto lens into her hidden safe in a wooden night table by her living room couch. She tossed in a security earpiece with attached miniature hand mic and it landed on a black metal box about the size and thickness of a hardback novel like *Don Quixote*. She slapped the safe door shut and locked it. The faux, wood-covered, outer door of the night table made it seem innocuous except for the 8x10 framed photograph lying face down on its top surface.

She stared at the back of the photo frame.

Her inner debate lasted only seconds. Nathalie grabbed the frame, turned it over and worked the glass cover loose which protected the photograph—the photograph of Tom. Once unprotected, she clawed at the photo; her fingernails shredded it into little strips with a few jagged pieces stuck along the outer edge.

One jagged piece contained a partial slice of Tom's right index finger but a full image of the more prominent middle finger. How apropos, she thought.

She flipped the bird to the shredded image and plopped it face down on the table.

This night in the reflection in the window, more jagged pieces caught her attention; the jagged edges of the ripped lace caressing her exposed breast seemed erotic. Naughty. Sort of like the city that lay before her, the taunting, tempting Big Apple, and she a badass Eve.

She wondered about the trend of those first designer blue jeans, the ones from Paris. Had it been an unspoken partnership between the two

cities? The elegant designer-created jeans born in Paris shipped to New York City where they were torn strategically and only then sent out into the world as the uniform of the radical, yet stylish, rebel woman.

God she loved Paris, all its glorious art, continental class, and innate sophistication; then again, she adored New York with its intimidating style, vibrant culture, and irrepressible individuality. Maybe this made her schizophrenic but she didn't care. And maybe she wasn't a chump but an erotic rebel.

Yeah, she could make that play. That would keep the boys on edge; give her the advantage, which was what she needed. Then her intelligence—her wit and wiles—would win the day. She knew that. She also knew there was so much she was hiding.

So…maybe…she shouldn't overlook *erotic rebel.* She could make it her own version of brass balls needed to take on the boys. Her imagination took flight. *Erotic Rebel* would demand some sort of cool costume, a uniform even—alluring, definitely alluring—that would accentuate the curves and compress the cellulite. *The boys* would be toast.

Her father had worn a uniform. Looked great. Kicked ass. That memory froze her thoughts for a jarring moment.

Her imagination fractured into shards of doubt and the dagger-like points perforated her fantasy wings. Her hopes crashed hard into reality. She knew the *erotic rebel* plan had serious potential pitfalls for her. For one, *erotic rebels* needed to keep a straight face while being forcibly erotic. Too many self-conscious smirks might give her away, but the idea of compressed cellulite felt really good.

No, wit and wiles were the solid, safe bet. Wit and wiles would be her badge. She knew they were a potent potion when liberally applied; yet even a subtle drop or two caused great speculation of what the sorceress might do, with her doubt being the only diluting agent. Nathalie wanted her place at the table in business and the boys wanted theirs, usually wanted it all. Feminine sorcery seemed like fair play.

Nathalie knew she could be formidable. She had proven that in her work, at least to herself. But her best friend, Megan, told her she could be a delusional doofus when she tried too hard.

Formidable and delusional doofus. Hard to reconcile. That she knew and it did not fill her with confidence. Neither did hearing the

Joni Mitchell refrain "*I really don't know love at all*" rattle around in her head when she thought of Tom.

Then there was job at the Waldorf Astoria to pull off—a presentation of precious jewels—where she could score some real points and prove her worth. Prepped and ready to go, she knew she was good at what she did. On this chess board, she felt the queen had all the right moves to best the king.

So the would be erotic rebel with the torn nightgown took a moment to reassess.

She knew how to check things out; she was after all an investigator of sorts. She handled insurance cases—more forms than field work—but felt her willingness to go the extra mile, to take risks, gave her an edge over most of the boys in her line of work. She insisted she could handle field work; she owned a pair of sneakers.

She was Nathalie Seeger. She felt that was enough.

Out of spite, she turned the shredded photo of Tom back to the propped upright position on her night table—the jagged pieces still stuck along the edges—but the center of the frame was empty; the image of Tom was gone.

Ready to move on…

However, the twinge in her gut felt like a whispered plea: hoping that *alone* wasn't a synonym for *independent.* She wanted to know that for sure.

CHAPTER ONE

Man is not what he thinks he is; he is what he hides.

André Malraux

The Bombardier Global 6000 swept through the clouds. For its six thousand mile cruising range, this trip barely registered as a blip, but even a blip in a fifty million dollar aircraft was pleasurable. A significant part of the pleasure for Eli Cross was the jet's ability to relocate quickly to far flung destinations. It fit his sense of humor as a getaway vehicle and there was no reason that a quick, unscheduled departure couldn't be a thing of beauty.

Luxury flowed inside where soft cream-colored leather seating and rich dark wood engaged the senses. A fully stocked galley capable of handling any meal also contained an enviable wine collection. Each reclining leather chair had a computer screen.

The sole item on the mahogany dining table was a jet black knapsack, fully packed.

On this trip…there were no passengers to be seen. At the rear of the cabin was a bedroom. Laid out neatly on the satin spread of the bed were clothes of stealth—all black.

At the back of the bedroom was a door and behind that door the sound of a running shower. Had someone else been present, they would've smelled a light but deeply masculine scent…just a hint of fresh musky cologne, but extremely distinctive that lingered like a memory.

Out the window, the whisper-smooth jet sliced through soft mountains of clouds on descent, breaking through into clear blue sky. Below was a winding river. The Rhine.

Germanic castles rose majestically up from the river banks. These rock-walled fortresses were once the domains of noble knights, lords and ladies, but now the domiciles of the uber-wealthy and ancestors clinging to a pastiche of royalty. Still the architectural majesty was ever-present. Cylindrical turrets linked by parapets topped with crenellated battlements of carved stone projected an expression of

fortitude, an engulfing beauty that dwarfed the human form and conjured apparitions of wielded sword, lance, and bloody battle ax.

In a patch of forest, thick brush gave way as Eli Cross pressed through the foliage dressed all in black with the knapsack slung on his back. He hiked with purpose but ease, slipping past the clinging branches as if he was gliding on a dance floor; his casual movements masked the disciplined athleticism that made them.

He kept moving steadily until he attained the high ground of a clearing on the mountainside which overlooked the Rhine and a restored ancient castle that rested atop a small hill guarding the bend in the river. Cross took a moment to appreciate the grandeur before him. It was a blending of olden times in a modern age.

To fully honor this experience, he pulled wine, bread and cheese from his black knapsack and sat back against a tree and waited.

The sun finally dropped below the horizon and pulled down the curtain of night.

The lights of the castle glistened as a Mercedes limousine glided across the narrow, stone bridge over the water-filled moat and then through the open, iron gate to the round keep. Cross watched intently but without concern. He knew what would transpire inside the walls when the Mercedes parked in the guest area. His research was thorough. But there was still time to relish the final slice of cheese and bread. Nothing needed to be rushed, especially a fine glass of Bordeaux.

Savoring this moment always had deeper meaning than mere pleasure. It rose from a feeling cauterized into the marrow of his soul. In these moments he honored why he was here, his real purpose. Each savored sip of wine heightened his resolve and renewed the solemn commitment made in his youth from a day he would never forget. It was the source of his *saudade*, the yearning and longing that drove him.

His eyes never left the target below. An innate sense of timing guided his decision of when to move. The last sip of wine preceded his action. Calculations clicked confidently through his mind like the precise movements of a Swiss timepiece; a world created for him with consummate skill. The alpha predatory spirit fully engaged.

Within seconds, he descended into the mountainside's darkness.

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A butler opened the enormous castle doors to two couples adorned in formal evening attire from famous designer names. Status achieved by association. They were all here to impress the owner of the castle or at least be seen to be on his level. Inside the extensive foyer, two suits of armor flanked a steel shield with the family crest of a rearing lion.

Striding forward with the proper sense of a theatrical entrance befitting his title, the master of the castle, Baron Johann von Hellerstadt greeted them with a glass of champagne in hand.

"Dieter, I welcome your friends," and then the Baron paused with a practiced grin, "to my humble pad."

"Baron, where is Siglinde?" Dieter threw a furtive glance to the sweeping staircase.

"Down in a moment. It's her jewels, Dieter," then continued with impish delight, "there are so many."

"Then take us to your other woman," Dieter exclaimed with a sweep of his hand.

The Library doors swung open and Baron von Hellerstadt swelled with pride as he led his guests over to *the other woman*. Mounted on the wall in the place of honor over the cavernous fireplace was an original Renoir, the voluptuous nudity of *Reclining Nude from the Back, Rest after the Bath*, the oil masterpiece from 1909.

The guests were suitably impressed but Baron von Hellerstadt was most pleased about the glint of envy he spotted in their eyes and the grimace on their lips. He took this opportunity to extend the duration of his delight by pouring champagne for everyone.

"You have given her a special place of honor, Baron," Dieter offered, "but may I say that your Siglinde is far more beautiful and lively."

"You may say. I heartily agree." Baron von Hellerstadt paused to stare at the painting. "But my beautiful wife is not worth sixty-eight million euros."

Dieter and the Baron clinked their champagne glasses in triumphant acknowledgement. Everyone raised their glasses toward the painting.

"Well Baron, for once, a mistress who pays you," Dieter grinned at his well-timed riposte.

With a nod, Baron von Hellerstadt was actually quite pleased with the snarky remark.

Outside there was movement in the night just below the tallest turret. A black rope snaked around a battlement along the connecting parapet at the base of the tower. A silent but swift tug lashed an intertwined knot tight against the stone battlement. The other end of the thick rope slithered then dropped over the side into the blackness. It dangled against the outside wall adjacent to the soft light from an open window.

Encased in his stealth black attire, Eli Cross—a black velvet pouch-type bag dangling from his waist and a black cylindrical tube strapped diagonally on his back like a quiver of arrows—descended the rough-hewn castle wall on the rope and slipped into the open window.

The room was a spacious lady's boudoir. A lady with money and accustomed to adornments. Cross moved past the king-sized bed encased in a pink canopy. An evening gown and lace panties neatly arrayed on the bed. The light that spilled out of the castle window from the boudoir flowed from around a walled corner where the bath was located. Soft sounds of movement emanated from the bath. Someone was there.

Cross hesitated. Slowed his breathing. Listened. And waited.

Outside, the moon waited for no one, and briefly broke out of thick cloud cover and cast its glow at the castle window. Inside the effect was instant. The glint of moonlight caught the faceted edges of jewelry displayed on top of the ornate antique wooden dresser and sprayed glistening reflections of light around the boudoir. With a stride quick and soft like a cat, Cross moved to the jewels.

They were laid out ready to be worn. Ready for Siglinde. Was she the one in the bath? Cross knew she was if his research was correct. If… But reality had a way of sabotaging research in the moment.

Eli bypassed the jewels and edged his way silently toward the bath. Out of the pocket of his black pants, he extracted a hinged black metal rod and unfolded it. Attached on its tip, a small circular mirror, the kind used by a dentist. He extended the mirror around the corner. Though the image was small, it was clear.

Naked before a floor length mirror, luxuriating in her own reflection stood Siglinde, an Austrian blonde whose dynamic curves

put the Renoir to shame. Not to be rushed, she indulged her naked ritual of sensuality taking pleasurable delight in allowing droplets of perfume to splash onto her aroused nipples. A natural blonde from head to toe, her thick, lustrous hair cascaded over her shoulders while the golden triangle of hair between her legs had been carefully brushed into a sweeping swirl which darkened as the scented droplets flowed to their final rest.

The temptation to stay and appreciate, even to taste and sample her delights, made the air thick and heavy with desire. This was nature's power. Women had it. Men, both in myth and reality, fell under its spell and succumbed. Like savoring the Bordeaux, Cross drank in her delicious sensuality until discipline turned him back to the hard beauty of the jewels.

Outside, the moon drifted back behind the clouds and the sparkling jewels suddenly fell into milky shadow. Wasting no time, his black gloves lifted a large diamond necklace from the dresser and silently slipped it into the black velvet pouch. Emerald encrusted bracelets, sapphire and diamond earrings, a ruby ring, a Tsavorite garnet ring, several smaller opal necklaces and a mother of pearl brooch still remained. Adorned with jewels was how Siglinde planned on greeting her guests.

Siglinde, utterly comfortable in her perfumed nudity, entered the bedroom and lifted the lace panties from her bed. Her evening gown clearly would not accommodate a bra. Her round natural breasts were still defiant of gravity. An eerie stillness settled in the darkness. She sensed something…something not right…but only silence persisted. A soft rustle of clothing brushed aside the silence as she stepped into her panties. Adoring guests awaited her.

A scraping sound near the window drew her attention—perhaps only a tree branch—then moonlight entered the open window, once again bathing everything in a soft glow.

She gasped! The air in her throat expelled in a burst of terror! Her eyes filled with horror!

Her jewels were gone!

So was Cross. No unseen movement or sound from leaving. He simply wasn't there.

A blood-curdling scream erupted from her lungs!

Even from a woman easily irritated when everything did not go her way, Baron von Hellerstadt had never heard such a scream. That outburst paled to the next wave of screams—not of terror—but eruptions of volcanic outrage!! Hot lava of imperious swearing flowed down from above!!

The Baron and his guests raced from the library fearing that hell had opened its gates! Wanting no part of hell unleashed—not the hell of a woman in mortal danger, but a pampered one denied her pleasure—Dieter and the guests made a hasty retreat out into the night and their Mercedes escape limo.

Baron von Hellerstadt, then all alone, gingerly climbed the staircase as Siglinde's screams sputtered into choking, coughing sobs and wailing! Lacking a husband's protective instinct or any control over his second prized possession, the Baron cringed and slowed his climb.

In the empty library, the Renoir adorned the wall all alone. The naked woman with her back and face turned away from all who would gaze upon her was still most alluring and inviting and not at all bothered by the unfeminine outrage that poured down from upstairs. Resplendent and casually stretched out on her bed, legs slightly bent with the left one resting comfortably on the top side of her right, while a white cloth underneath her languidly cascaded off the edge with a large colorful pillow propped under her right arm and shoulder. The blended background earth-tone colors of cream, moss green, brown and gold greatly added to the enveloping feeling of relaxation. Eli Cross felt relaxation to be most appropriate if one rested in this position since 1909. His black-gloved hand lightly patted her bare bottom.

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In the soft, golden light of dawn and through the mist which rose over the Rhine, the castle appeared almost as the apparition of myth. A knight astride a Holsteiner returning from battle once graced these very grounds. But this morning, the sounds clattering across the stone bridge were not from horse hooves but the tires from a Volkswagen van; Eli Cross, attired in a dark blue business suit from the German designer Hugo Boss, the van's driver and sole occupant.

In the castle's cavernous foyer, Cross wasted no time in presenting Baron von Hellerstadt his business card. The Baron had the exhausted look of a man who had been up all night dealing with calamitous events. Gone was the prideful grin, replaced now with a piercing scrutiny of this new visitor.

"Guten tag, Baron von Hellerstadt," said Cross.

The Baron merely studied the business card, glancing up every now and then at Cross's face as if proof of his profession would be written upon it. The embossed card held the imprint of ***Veritas***, an international insurance company with headquarters in Zurich. The name on the card was **Helmut Hauer** with the ***Fine Art Retrieval Division***.

The Baron addressed this new visitor with a certain entitled annoyance. "You are early."

"Yes, is it a problem?" Cross waited, his patience unflinching.

"No..."

"Good. I need to verify the authenticity before the insurance payment can be made."

"The thief also took two million euros in jewels," a point made by the Baron with the lingering expectancy of compassion and understanding.

"Something we don't cover."

"I'm aware of that, but surely—"

"Our policy prohibits contacting the authorities due to the *unusual way* in which you obtained the Renoir." Again Cross waited. His face registered no opening for argument.

"Let me show you what remains," said the defeated Baron.

What remained was the frame of the Renoir which still hung above the fireplace in the library. But only the frame and an old blank protective backing with some jagged pieces of the painting along the frame line now adorned the wall. The Renoir had been cut out, apparently rather quickly and crudely!

Cross and Baron von Hellerstadt moved toward it with reverence.

"I had no idea," said Cross with astonishment. "To desecrate such a work of art is...vile." A grimace of disgust furrowed his brow. "Tests will need to be run on the pieces remaining. I will require the entire frame."

Cross looked to Baron von Hellerstadt and simply gestured for help to remove the frame.The two men very carefully lifted the remnants of the desecrated Renoir off the wall. The Baron knew that Cross was all business, so he got right to the point of the payment.

"Once you authenticate, then the payment will be in full, the coverage of my policy."

"Baron," said Cross with studied assurance, "Your policy will be to the letter. You have already paid the substantial deductible for your premium policy so you are fully vested. As I understand it, the covered amount for the painting's loss would be seventy-two million euros."

"Seventy-two." The Baron was pleased at that.

"Yes, for you a four million euro profit. Two of which I imagine would cover the unfortunate loss of your wife's jewels. But for the art world, a terrible tragedy."

"Yes, terrible," said the Baron, attempting to hide his relief.

Out in the castle courtyard, the two men loaded the frame into the back of the Volkswagen van carefully securing it for transport. Cross shut the door. The Renoir frame tucked inside. Cross, with practiced indignation, wiped off some castle dust from his Hugo Boss suit.

Baron Johann von Hellerstadt, gripped with a sudden rush of concern, did not want to let Cross leave without some additional level of assurance. "What are the chances for recovery?"

"For the painting—or what is left of it—there is grave doubt. The nature of this theft is already a travesty. You must brace yourself. The Renoir may never be yours again."

"But my insurance payment—"

"Will be placed in my hands, I guarantee it."

The Baron smiled. "Then I will say auf Wiedersehen."

Cross offered a professional smile in return.

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The Bombardier Global 6000 descended toward the sparkling lights of Paris at night. The Eiffel Tower's bright beacon swept the sky, a welcome to the city of light and love.

The main court of the Musée du Louvre, the Cour Napoléon, stood eerily deserted. No security personnel, none whatsoever. The air deathly still. The grandeur of the massive façade, though subdued in

the breathless darkness, dwarfed a single man or woman; its parade of elegant archways mere curved holes in the night with the ornate pillars more like giant soldiers guarding the walls.

Something sinister slipped past those guards this night; it was darkness itself. A pressing canopy of darkness engulfed the extensive grounds like a death shroud. A haunting change for this most magnificent of museums, a treasure of France and the world, to not be accented by artistically arrayed beams of light in the night. The light had vanished. Human hands brought down this darkness. Quickly. Silently. Very skilled hands stealing the light.

Clouds even encased the moon in shadow like an accomplice until a slash of light broke through and struck the glass panels of I.M. Pei's the Louvre Pyramid. A distorted shape slithered along an inner corridor beneath the towering, glass-arched ceiling. Splotches of moonlight fell upon the walls dripping in priceless paintings.

In the hallway which connected Neoclassicism and French Romanticism, the shadow's movement suddenly stopped, then melted into a wall pocket in the darkened corridor.

Within that blackness, the sudden illuminated glow from tritium gas vials in the dial of a Luminox Navy SEAL wristwatch's hands appeared. They indicated 2:55 am. When the second hand swept up to twelve, the illumination slid back into blackness. The shadowy movement reemerged as a figure dressed in stealth black.

It was Eli Cross.

In appreciation, he paused, and took a moment to look up. He was after all in the Musée du Louvre, considered the largest castle in the world. At this moment he knew he was in the space that once was the apartment of the French king. With masterpieces from around the world surrounding the walls—many collected by the monarchs of France—Eli Cross knew not to neglect the ceiling.

Safely distanced from human touch, the ceiling of the Salle des Sept-Cheminées held every reason to look up to the heavens. The ornate skylight was surrounded by the Victories, the life-sized winged figurines by the sculptor Francisque-Joseph Duret whose two bronze figures also graced the entrance to Napoleon's tomb at Les Invalides. Eli Cross had always appreciated the Victories for they seemed eternally ready to take flight, a quality he keenly cultivated.

Art was not come by easily, *so attention must be paid*, and if one was going to *remove art* from its rightful home, it seemed only fair that it was first admired. Removing a masterpiece from this ceiling would make an amusing challenge, he thought. Some might even consider the theft an act of righteous reciprocity. A fair amount of the art within the Louvre arrived under less than auspicious arrangements; many pilfered from original owners, ripped out of tombs meant to be sealed for eternity, and looted in battle as the spoils of war. A cop might call sections of these hallowed halls an evidence locker of stolen property. The ethics of ownership created such a slippery slope that Eli Cross felt almost noble about his musings of personal art *liberation*.

Tonight though there was only a small patch of time allocated for rumination.

On this night, he hoped during this caper in this hallowed space, that he would not see the faces; the dead faces that haunted him in the dark. But this night was no exception. Even in his state of heightened focus for the job at hand, they were with him. They were what drove him. They were part of who he was and would be that way forever. There was certainly no going back and changing it.

He pushed a dolly loaded down with a packing crate, its wheels padded to muffle sound. He knew where he was headed. The route had been well planned. The silence within the massive hall was unsettling; even more so, the complete lack of security. He stopped again.

His black-gloved hand pulled back the black sleeve on his arm to reveal the black Navy SEAL watch. The illuminated second hand swept up to 3:00 am. He tugged the sleeve back down and plunged the space around him into darkness once more.

The padded wheels moved forward.

The plan was simple, but precise. He knew there would be no security personnel in this section at this exact time. Move, wait, move again, and always be where they were not.

Precisely how the Mona Lisa had left the Louvre in 1911. The thieves had hidden in an art-supply closet until everyone had gone. They simply were where the security guards were not. Not an intricate plan, but Einstein once remarked: "*When the solution was simple, God was answering.*"

Strangely enough, it took more than Leonardo da Vinci's God-given talent to bring world fame to the Mona Lisa. When recovered—two years later—people the world over wanted to know: *who was this smiling woman who had been taken from France's most illustrious museum*?

Fame delivered by the hand of a thief.

So it could be done. A masterpiece taken from the Louvre. Simplicity had its own reward.

The Mona Lisa had long intrigued him. A smile so mysterious it beguiled those who gazed upon it. Eli Cross felt he knew her secret. Her eyes gave away nothing, an enigma; yet he sensed a deep well of her own saudade behind her smile, an acceptance of life's irony. He liked that she hid her secrets well; he knew his own guarded secret. Everyone hid something; his talent, constantly honed, unlocked the secrets of others exposing their vulnerability to him. A well-planned theft was a work of art when the elements of the vision's possibilities became practical…and then profitable. Nothing human was perfect, even art, and his excitement rose from where the flawed *moment* in the theft would occur, then to elude that *moment.*

He knew he would face her smile again and share that *moment* together.

Cross stopped the dolly when French Romanticism changed to a special one-time exhibit on Impressionism. With three swift, practiced movements, he ripped the packing crate open; the packing material wrapped in such a way to emit no sound when torn.

Inside the crate was a frame—the frame that once held the Renoir.

Cross stood in front of an empty wall space between a Monet and a Cezanne. He lifted the desecrated Renoir frame into the empty space on the wall.

The placement of the frame and its missing painting—with only jagged pieces remaining along the edge—in between the two Impressionist masterpieces on either side seemed an act of revenge, a twisted and cruel display of humor.

Eli Cross took a moment to admire his work. He then moved to complete his task.

His black gloved hand felt around the frame's edge and carefully took hold of a jagged piece of painting that remained stuck in the frame. He then peeled the jagged piece backwards, which pulled the

attached blank backing from the frame's edge, revealing the untouched Renoir masterpiece underneath! The false backing with its expertly forged jagged pieces of the Renoir cleverly positioned and glued around its edges imitated a painting that had been crudely cut from its canvas. The original masterpiece had never been removed, never touched, never desecrated!

Suddenly, a piercing beam from a spotlight snapped on trapping Cross in its glare!

Aiming the light was an armed museum security guard.

Cross sighed, accepting the inevitable that this was the end of his perfect plan.

The guard was not alone and Cross nodded to his other *captors*. They were an illustrious ensemble to be sure—The French Minister of Culture, the Curator of the Louvre as well as the Director of the Louvre—and surrounded him by the Renoir. No escape.

In the dignified tone of a diplomat, the French Minister of Culture addressed the man they had caught in the beam of the spotlight. "You should be aware, Monsieur, that the Louvre does not usually house the work of the Impressionists and this special celebratory exhibit of Impressionism is on loan from the Musée d'Orsay, the Musée de L'Orangerie and the Musée Marmottan Monet. The government of France has an invested interest in the presentation of the art masterpieces under its watchful eye."

The Director of the Louvre continued without missing a beat. "And as the eyes of the world are always focused on the activities at the Louvre, should anything go missing it would be an embarrassment that would be difficult to explain."

The Curator of the Louvre picked up the sentiment. "To say nothing of the insult to the art world which Parisians, and may I say, all of France, would take personally."

"Have you anything to say, Monsieur?" asked the Minister of Culture.

"Oui," Cross replied, and then turned to the Renoir. "C'est magnifique, n'est-ce pas?"

Cross did not make a move to flee; unlike the readiness of the winged Victories gazing down from above, he merely continued his admiring gaze of the Renoir. The three men and the guard did not rush

to grab him and apply shackles and haul him off with incensed indignation. No, they waited. So Cross turned to face them once again.

"Pierre-Auguste Renoir, an inventive artist who helped birth the impressionist style. Most worthy of this exhibit of Impressionism. *Reclining Nude from the Back, Rest after the Bath.* A work of great passion."

"We honor the passion of the artist," the Curator said, referring to Cross.

The Director said hopefully, "I imagine you were able to obtain something for yourself?"

Cross produced the black velvet bag and gave it a little shake rattling the precious jewels inside. "For travel expenses."

"Indeed," said the Director.

"Poetic," chimed in the Curator.

"The government of France is once again grateful." The Minister of Culture extended his hand. "Merci, Monsieur."

Cross shook his hand. "De Rien."

"Au contraire, Monsieur. To France it is far more than nothing. It is…everything. C'est tout."

"Ah oui," agreed Cross, "Et pour France, toujours l'audace."

"Oui, monsieur, always daring," agreed the Minister of Culture, very pleased. "It is why we turn to you. Et maintenant, a tout a l'heure."

The men left Eli Cross by the Renoir and melted back into the darkness of the Louvre, content once again with being in control of all that they surveyed.

Cross was also very pleased with the casual and informal nature of their adieu. He had wanted it to seem as if they were friends. Friends could be useful. Eli Cross knew that was an edge to his advantage; their devotion to the art and culture of France and to *friendship*. The set up was crucial and the best ones took time. Patience yielded great wine among other things of value. Perhaps, one night this advantage may bring into his arms the Victories from the ceiling.

But not this night, for as grand of a challenge as that would be, it was not at the heart of his deepest desire. It was not his *everything.* The Renoir retrieval had been a side trip leading to his next step; it had been a mere prelude, a chance to warm up and be loose.

To lay it all on the line, that was *everything* to Cross. Was that perfect moment even possible? His next key heist would test *that moment* and set things in motion.

It was more dangerous than anything he had attempted before. There would be no turning back. It was to be the ultimate test, a swan song perhaps. His skills and readiness were at their height. To put his very life on the line would change—or end—that life forever.

He had to know if it was possible to meet *that moment*. The yearning to know had deepened for years. Underneath everything he did, *saudade* drove him.

Beware the wounded animal.

In this moment, he felt a long way from home.

The Bombardier was fueled at Orly. This trip would not be a blip. This was a long flight.

CHAPTER TWO

A woman is like a tea bag - you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water.

Eleanor Roosevelt

The Red Hook Container Terminal in Brooklyn, New York handled any type or size of cargo. On any given day the stevedores manned the gantry cranes and unloaded road salt to de-ice snow-clogged winter streets as well as pallets of tropical bananas for the grocery stores. Other days the big cranes swung loads of steel or lumber from the massive cargo ships to the docks where longshoremen would man the forklifts and reachstackers to move them along to the next transportation method or warehouse storage at the terminal. They handled arriving fleets of autos and even yachts.

The crisp cool air of the last autumn before things changed invigorated the work. No disruption to the flow of goods intruded yet. No collapse of the supply chain. There was plenty of toilet paper. The following year's numbers would be the same as those designated for perfect vision; yet the world would be seen quite differently. Change was in the air. The goods wrestled off the ships this day by hardened people who needed no masks to do their job flowed as they should. That trust would be tested soon in the following spring.

These stevedores and longshoremen were a breed of toughness with their own code hewn from their rock-ribbed determination, trash-talking sass, tradition and pride lathered in blood, beer, sweat and salty language. The pay was good, the camaraderie even better, and the fights were the best. Nobody, but nobody, called them pussies, not even the Teamsters. Some tough son-of-a-bitch women had broken through the barriers and joined this gritty band of brothers. There was a steep price to pay—enough abuse to choke a cow—and when they had won hard-earned respect they were still called *women longshoremen*. No one could pronounce or even utter the term *longshorewomen.* It was not allowed to exist. This was a tough man's world.

The first photo of Neil "Grab Ass" Grabowski on the docks was taken with a telephoto lens and clearly showcased his tattooed forearms and barrel chest as the longshoreman heaved crates onto a truck bed. The shutter clicked off a rapid series of shots which looked almost like a herky-jerky dance of images of "Grab Ass" working up a monster sweat. This was one tough son-of-a-bitch bastard.

"Oh, Mr. Grabowski, you are a fine physical specimen. And very photogenic."

The voice behind the camera belonged to Nathalie Seeger, the same Nathalie Seeger of the torn nightgown and shredded Tom photograph, now working an easy fact-gathering case. This simple job at the wharf merely paid the rent. She planned to knock this off—no problem—then change for the Waldorf-Astoria gala, the career-making opportunity set for the afternoon. It had all the makings of an ordinary day of business for her. She'd not given it a second thought when she rolled out of bed. Even if she had, she wouldn't have had the faintest idea that the next twenty four hours would irrevocably change her life.

She clicked off one final photo of Neil Grabowski flashing a two-fisted bird at his giant hulk of a working partner, appropriately named Bubba. A name Ms. Seeger assumed he used with pride. The final photo finished her portion of the job. Wrapped up. So simple…until Nathalie decided she should go the extra mile just to be better.

"I think we should meet."

Nathalie dismantled the heavy lens from the digital camera and packed it in her equipment bag. Her perch on the roof of a warehouse overlooked the entire terminal. She seemed somewhat out of place, alone on the expansive roof in a sleek, navy blue Ann Taylor business suit with slacks. Much better she thought than a torn nightgown and more professional than *erotic rebel.* The dose of practicality was provided by the sneakers. Skechers were her preference. But even in a business pants suit with sneakers, she was very female.

Her toned, nicely proportioned body—in her own words *nothing got in the* way—along with her tomboy athleticism served her well in her work. She was not obsessive about her looks but she enjoyed looking good when the occasion required it. Her hair had a stylish layered cut above the shoulders that was so practical it looked carefree and sexy just out of bed which worked well on the many days that the

alarm didn't go off and on the few days when the hangover still lingered. She actually was quite happy with her hair, it blew dry quickly and the rich browns with natural highlights gave her the impetus to prove that blondes did not have more fun. Mainly it stayed out of her way and she didn't have to bother with it.

This was New York City and she felt in competition with—well with everyone—but especially the guys. She fretted that her femininity was being left behind in the race to keep up, to maintain a business-edge. Tom's leaving did not help. This concern shoved a wedge of doubt into her self-confidence and her self-esteem, but especially into her desire to be an independent woman standing on her own two feet—an appendage to no one. Basically that meant her emotional stability was on roller coaster rails rising and dropping between rock star and total loser; an exaggeration perhaps, but that was how she would describe it when fishing for sympathy.

Nathalie wanted life to have a little kick to it; it's why she followed her own path and did what she did for work, and why she liked being single. She wouldn't have minded being in love, just didn't trust it. She was stubborn that way. She came by her stubbornness honestly. A dyed-in-the-wool, life-long, New Yorker father and a French—one-time art student—mother.

Nathalie was the French spelling of Natalie, the suggestion of which came from her mother. Her father always referred to it as the *suggestion* he graciously accepted, when the reality was that there were certain arguments that French women did not lose. Ever. Nate Seeger was no push-over, but neither was Odile Trenet. Nathalie was clearly her own woman and though comfortably into her thirties, she thought of her parents often, especially her father. But at this moment, she felt she needed a plan to do the right thing in dealing with Mr. Grabowski.

She needed to *take it to him.*

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Down on the dock, Grabowski slammed a boat hook into a large wooden crate and ripped the slats apart to expose wine cases packed inside.

"Hey, Bubba, what's that look like to you?"

The lingering hulk, Bubba, was even bigger than Grabowski and just as refined.

"Damaged shipping crate," said Bubba matter-of-factly.

"Yeah," Grabowski replied, "Total loss."

Grabowski sliced open a wine case with the boat hook and extracted a bottle.

"Helluva shame," Bubba said with practiced remorse.

"Terrible tragedy," Grabowski replied in their long-running routine.

Grabowski flipped the bottle to Bubba. A group of longshoremen gathered 'round. Bottles tossed with wild abandon got snatched out of the air by guys until one was caught by—

Nathalie as she stepped into the midst of the rough longshoremen with confidence.

"Mr. Grabowski…" she addressed him with a tilt of the wine bottle, like a nod to his tossing skills.

Grabowski looked up from the wine crate. "Me?"

"Mr. Neil "Grab Ass" Grabowski?"

Grabowski claimed the name with pride. "Yeah."

"She's got you pegged," Bubba said, clearly enjoying this encounter.

"We need to talk," Nathalie said simply.

"The ex-old lady send you?"

"No," said Nathalie firmly. She continued more softly, "I have an offer for you." She turned her back to the others. "A private offer." She gestured away from his buddies who drew closer. "Best if we do this alone," she whispered.

"You're a fine lookin' babe. We just gonna talk…all alone?" Grabowski made sure his buddies had heard that taunt.

The longshoremen were now getting into this and more had gathered around to witness Grabowski toy with this woman. It was a great break from their brutal physical routine. Their mate was going to provide some raucous and raw theater and if they were lucky it might be something that got out of hand.

"Bring her back when you're done," Bubba cried out.

Nathalie handed her bottle to the mountain that was Bubba. "Don't let the wine go to your head." Then she turned to her subject. "Let's step over here, Mr. Grabowski?"

Grabowski looked at Nathalie with a shit-eating grin and said, “You got somethin' to say,” and turned to his crowd of co-workers with his arms opened wide, “say it.”

This drew a series of whoops from the riveted stevedores and longshoremen. Even the lone woman, stout and tanned, with a short cropped cut of dark blonde hair and an eagle’s claw tattooed on her neck grinned at Nathalie as if to say *you asked for it, Honey.*

“I'm Nattie Seeger,” she said to Grabowski keeping her voice low, “a free-lance private investigator hired by the insurance company you're ripping off with your disability claim.”

“I can't do shit with this back,” Grabowski feigned a sudden grip of pain.

“I have photos of you doing all sorts of shit with that back.”

She looked Grabowski straight in the eye with an appeal to his humanity and his reason. She thought it was a moment of compassion expressed to someone who worked hard to make ends meet. It seemed the right thing to do, to give him a chance. So very slowly and with a deliberate tone, she told him, “However, I'm giving you the opportunity to return the insurance company's money before I submit the proof. No legal repercussions. A clean slate for you.”

“I gotta pay alimony with that money!” These words left a bad taste spurting out of his mouth.

“You haven't paid alimony or child support in six months,” Nathalie said simply.

“I ain't payin' that bitch for the kid.”

“You are the child's father.”

His past relationship clearly held some bitterness for Grabowski. “Look, she had the kid, not me. All I did was screw her,” he snapped.

“All it takes to earn the title.” Nathalie had no more time or sympathy for his pathetic one-sided view of his marital responsibilities. Doing the right thing didn’t include coddling well-practiced assholes. “All right, we’re done here.”

Grabowski took a quick stride forward as she stepped away and grabbed Nathalie by the ass and pulled her into his groin! “Wanna go a few rounds with the champ?!”

His co-workers erupted in cheers as he pumped himself against her a few times. Up until this pivotal moment, his co-workers had heard nothing of Nathalie’s fair offer.

"I'm only going to tell you once to let go of me," Nathalie said this so only Grabowski could hear her.

"Or what?" Grabowski laughed. His look intensified. This was his moment, the time to make his play. "I oughta do you right here," he said loud enough for everyone to hear.

The longshoremen were clearly itchin' for a show. This *woman* set foot in their territory making demands of one of their own, so that gauntlet thrown made this encounter a blood sport the way they looked at it. She was a woman to be taken, if "Grab Ass" was man enough.

"Do her, Grab Ass! Do the bitch!" Bubba played his role whipping up the crowd.

Grabowski's lips moved toward hers, but stopped when he found a Sig-Sauer 9mm "short" pressed against his nuts. He hadn't seen her reach behind her Ann Taylor blazer and slip the semi-automatic from its leather holster clipped to her belt.

"We're not in love and I'm not in the mood." Nathalie knew she had to regain control of the situation and the crowd and this would give her the space she needed to walk away. Any reasonable man would take the hint and back off. Game over. But this was not a reasonable man.

Grabowski wasn't going to let some bitch in a business suit take control of anything involving him. He grabbed her hands and held the gun against his genitalia!

"You wanna screw me with this?!" Grabowski humped her gun over and over.

"This is not smart," she said to him knowing she was losing her edge over the situation. It didn't help her confidence that the stevedores and longshoremen were taking sides.

"Do her!"

"Shoot him!"

"Nail her!"

"Blow his balls off!"

This was not good on so many levels. Nathalie knew she was no physical match for this brute. Her desire to do the right thing had gone terribly wrong. This was not the way to compete with the boys. No, this was how the boys crushed you. They never would've offered him a way out. File the photos and fuck him. What the hell was she thinking?! She was being *a girl,* that's what she thought!

Propelled by the jeers and cheers, Grabowski humped harder! A demented sexual frenzy infected the crowd of dockworkers jacking them up. This type of energy wiped out reason, obliterated humanity, and created a thirst for more action. In this atmosphere, rape would be nothing more than street theater, performance art, and these were rabid art lovers now.

"Back off!" Nathalie insisted.

Her heart beat rapidly, her skin flushed red from rampaging fear! She knew she had fallen into a deep pit of danger, a trap of her own making!

"I'm gonna do you now!" Grabowski knew he had the crowd with him but he also knew his manhood and standing in this tough community required that he delivered the whole nine yards. He let go of the gun and grabbed her suit jacket!

A gunshot ripped the air!

Everyone stopped!

A smoking hole had been blown through Grabowski's pants below the groin! Everyone stared. There was no blood…just smoke curling out of the hole in his pants.

Grabowski stared...mouth agape.

"Sorry. I missed," said Nathalie taking control of her breathing. She backed off a couple steps hoping that she had made her point and that now they could get real in a business-like fashion—like her leaving.

"You bitch!" Stunned at first, Grabowski went from dumbfounded to pissed-off in less than three seconds, his face a crimson red of rage.

The longshoremen whooped it up! This was a twist they hadn't expected from a city chick in a business suit. "Now that's sexual harassment!" someone yelled out. The catcalls erupted like the crescendo of an exploding fireworks display.

"Balls on fire!"

"That pussy's packin'!"

"Yeah, Honey with a heater!"

"Scorched his sack hairs, baby!"

"Better count your balls, Grabowski!"

No way in hell Grabowski wanted to lose face in front of his friends and co-workers. But they were having a great time. It was instantly clear to him that this was emotional life and death if he was

ever to hold his head up high on the docks again. He walked toward her with cold, dead eyes.

"This time you better kill me." He kept coming right at her.

Nathalie knew this time she was going to have to shoot him for real unless she found an alternate solution fast! She backed up and suddenly saw a cargo net swinging overhead from a giant hundred foot tall Liebherr gantry. She saw her way out, slipped the Sig in her belt-clip holster and clambered up a pyramid of crates scrambling for her life!

Grabowski went right after her!

When Nathalie reached the top crate, the stack teetered from the imbalance of her weight and Grab Ass Grabowski pawing at her feet as he clawed his way up the stack. She leaped off and grabbed onto the passing cargo net, which swept her off the dock and out over the water, but not until Grabowski had made a flying leap at her legs and latched on!

Both were carried out over the water!

The one hundred and fifty foot reach of the Liebherr gantry's arm swept the cargo net over a docked private yacht. Grabowski clawed at Nathalie legs with such venom he shredded her pantyhose beneath her pant leg and stripped her grip from the net!

They both plummeted down onto the yacht and crashed through the glass skylight over the main cabin and landed on the master bed below in a shower of glass!

Nathalie struggled to get up, but Grabowski yanked her down by her hair! He grasped her neck and pressed her into the mattress, while up above, longshoremen leaped aboard the yacht and peered over the skylight cheering on the show down below!

Grabowski yanked her gun and holster from her backside and tossed it off the bed, then fumbled at the belt and zipper on Nathalie's pants. Nathalie was choking from his grip.

"Kiss me," she gurgled.

"What'd you say, you bitch?!"

"If you're gonna do me, kiss me," she managed to choke out.

That prompted a chorus of "Kiss her!" from up above!

Grabowski fed off their frenzy. He let go of squeezing Nathalie's neck and pressed her down into the mattress from the front to re-grip. He then jammed his hand behind her head and pulled it up toward his

lips! As he lowered his lips to meet hers, Nathalie's left hand clamped onto his nuts and her right hand slipped a bottle of champagne out of the bedside ice bucket and christened his face with it, launching Grabowski off the bed!

Whistles and cheers rained down from the longshoreman audience above! This was their kind of kick-ass show!

Nathalie straightened her clothes and rustled her fingers through her hair. One more reason, she thought, to love her easily managed hairstyle. She retrieved her Sig Sauer, stepped over the unconscious lump that was Grabowski, and headed up the stairs to the main deck.

She stepped into the sunlight as longshoremen slapped her on the back.

"Lady, you're pretty good," Bubba offered.

"Good?" Nathalie turned to him. "I'm the best, pal."

Nathalie strode through the parting mass of men and one tattooed woman, accepting the slaps on the back and butt as the adrenalin pump kept her moving quickly through the raucous gauntlet. She figured she had maybe five minutes to clear the dock area before the adrenalin crashed and then just like *the girl* she didn't want to be, she'd probably faint.

On the roller coaster rails of her life, this fleeting moment was a boost to the self-confidence and self-esteem. At this moment, *rock star*. But she knew full well that she had been a single heartbeat away from *total loser.* It pissed her off that she couldn't completely own this *rock star* moment without the doubts lingering around waiting for recognition; unlike the men she felt in competition with—those bastards and their egos kept the doubts at bay.

Somehow…somehow she felt she just had to be better.

She picked up her pace, cleared the crowd, rounded the corner of the warehouse…and once all alone, vomited on her brand new Skechers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a Pittsburgh kid who grew up dreaming of telling stories that might make people's lives a little better, which led me from Ithaca College, where I met my first mentor, the great Rod Serling, and then on to Hollywood and forty exciting years as a writer-director-producer in film and TV—on series like *MacGyver*, *Scarecrow & Mrs. King*, *Hart to Hart*, and *The Outer Limits*–and working with icons from Paul Newman, Katharine Hepburn, Burt Lancaster, Suzanne Pleshette, Mary Tyler Moore, Robert Wagner to George Clooney, Sir Anthony Hopkins, Ryan Reynolds, Francis McDormand, Richard Dean Anderson, Kurt Russell, Henry Winkler and Ron Howard, earning membership in the DGA, WGA, SAG-AFTRA, and ATAS along the way. Now living on a California ranch with my wife, and a variety of animals, including four horses—happy rascals all—I've channeled my passion for storytelling into my first solo novel, believing that something sacred emerges from every story we share as authors and readers; so I invite you into the soul journey of CHASING THE GODDESS. Find out more about me at www.BillFroehlich.com.