

JUSTICE AT RISK

by

John Morgan Wilson



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PROLOGUE

I've heard that turning forty is the hardest passage for men. It's such a clear demarcation point in the average male life span—youth gone, middle age looming, physical powers and youthful passion waning, dreams unrealized and starting to feel dishearteningly elusive, while the reality and finality of death begin to insinuate themselves on the consciousness now that the years seem to pass so much more swiftly. Perhaps that's why so many men attempt such desperate transformations as they pass through their forties: dumping mates, leaving families, changing careers, consuming more and more alcohol to numb the fear, as the suffocation of routine and the shock of shattered illusions leave them trembling deep inside where we men keep our private truths so well hidden.

My fortieth year was not like that. Most of my close friends were gone by then, having died suddenly or faded miserably away beginning in the early eighties, many of them well before their fortieth birthdays. This wholesale loss of friends, and the rapid succession of funerals and memorials that followed, is something men and women are supposed to experience piecemeal over several decades as they grow older, with enough healing time in between to allow for genuine grieving when the next death notice comes. Yet more and more in my world, it was the lucky survivors who buried the young, with numbing regularity, as in a long war.

My landlords, Maurice and Fred, together now for almost five decades, were among those who attended selflessly to the dying and the dead. I stood dutifully if more aloofly beside them, saluting the fallen long after my tears were spent, until I lost Jacques, the one who

mattered most to me, and the tears came back in a torrent, erupting from somewhere within me I previously had no knowledge of, with such wild force I was left shaken to my soul. My shameful reaction was to write a fictitious series of newspaper articles about a young man dying, cared for by his lover, but changing enough of the cold, harsh facts to create a warm fantasy I foolishly felt I might live with. I wrote with such desperate guilt that many people were moved by the articles, by their strange power, and a great prize was awarded to me that I was later forced to return when my pathetic act of fraud was exposed. After that, I shut myself away, hiding from the plague that had consumed us both in different ways, burying the pain, embracing denial like a sedative, and seriously afraid I would go mad if I attempted to participate in a world that went merrily about its business while so many suffered so horribly and died so young.

Then, after several years, I was turning forty. Why I had survived—uninfected by the virus, no less—was something unanswerable, as impenetrable as the notion of fate. To a generation of men like me, the age of forty was an unexpected threshold, and the possibility of reaching fifty a near miracle. It came upon us like a burst of sunlight illuminating a path in a dark forest where we had become utterly lost, never expecting to emerge. I realize this may sound overly dramatic, needlessly exaggerated, to those who were not directly involved in the plague that swept my particular community. I realize also that many people are simply tired of hearing about it. I cannot help that. It was a terrible, terrible time.

So I turned forty, with life ahead, but without the usual markers behind me. I had no career to change; to even think in those terms was laughable. I had no real family to abandon, only the faint outlines of one, made up of others, like myself, who had no close families in the traditional sense. There was no central relationship in my life; I had made sure of that by falling safely in love with the most improbable partners, or those for whom death was imminent, a guarantee the union would be brief, the loss expected, preordained. I was nearly without possessions, certainly without goals or dreams. The millennium was quickly approaching, with its own inevitable momentum and change, reminding me that forty was merely a number without much meaning in the great scheme of things.

In an odd way, with such a messy life behind me, turning forty

felt like the end of a long, troubled childhood, and the brink of a bright adventure. It was a milestone that marked the end of the long crisis, a time for celebration, renewal.

Maurice and Fred wanted to throw a little party—Maurice, of course, never forgot a birthday or an anniversary, and loved nothing better than the gathering of friends. The idea was to invite Harry Brofsky, who had once been my editor at the *Los Angeles Times* and had managed to forgive my journalistic transgressions, even though they had nearly destroyed his own career; Alexandra Templeton, a young reporter at the less respected *Los Angeles Sun*, where Harry now worked as her editor, and with whom I had become friends; and one or two others whom I saw from time to time. Predictably, I begged off, finding arranged social gatherings not just awkward, but almost unbearable.

So Maurice and Fred climbed the old wooden stairs to the small apartment over the garage that I called home, and invited me down to the house for dinner. We celebrated afterward with a delicious sponge cake Maurice had baked that afternoon, frosted white and decorated with colored sprinkles, and festooned with a single tiny candle. Maurice led the way, and we took our plates out to the front porch, where we sat in the swing in the peace of the early autumn evening, looking out on Norma Place as our West Hollywood neighbors passed in the twilight, with the dog and the two cats curled up at our feet or in our laps.

That was how I quietly entered my forties, and began a year in which two men, each improbably beautiful and appealing in his own way, would come into my life and turn it in a profoundly new direction, while the cold shadow of violence returned, darkening my existence as it never had before.

CHAPTER ONE

A cool spring rain fell throughout the afternoon, cleansing the city, and when the skies cleared at dusk, the streets glistened and sparkled in the changing light.

It was a Sunday, early March. I drove to Little Ethiopia with the top down, south along Fairfax Avenue, listening to a tape of *soukous*, Congolese rumba. It featured the great Zairian vocalist Nyboma, and had been a gift from my friend Alexandra Templeton. The music was jubilant and rousing, a hot mix of rhythmic guitars punctuated by brilliant drum passages that sounded Cuban and got my pulse pounding. It suited my mood; for the first time in years, I was feeling reasonably good about things.

The dinner was also on Templeton, who was bringing with her an advance copy of the April issue of *Gentleman's Quarterly*. *GQ*, as it was better known, had once been a lightweight fashion rag whose most devoted readership was comprised of gay men who liked to ogle the gorgeous male models in the designer clothing spreads. In more recent years, *GQ* had grown considerably in scope and stature, regularly running articles of substance along with the usual Hollywood pop culture claptrap that had come to clutter up so many of the national slicks, but without entirely losing its underlying homosexual sensibility. The April issue carried an article by Templeton, her first major magazine piece, for which she had been paid the astounding sum of \$10,000—astounding by my personal standards, at least, and remarkable, I felt, for a youthful reporter like Templeton, who still spent the bulk of her working time covering the crime beat for the *Los Angeles Sun*. But then, Templeton had scored an exclusive, pitching *GQ* a story no one else had, or could

get, about an elusive subject the editors apparently felt many readers were eager to fathom. The subject was me.

I crossed Olympic Boulevard into the vintage commercial zone that served as the culinary heart of the Ethiopian community in Los Angeles, which was dominated, like Ethiopia itself, by the Amharas, the Christian peoples of the highlands. Back in the eighties, before I had self-destructed as a reporter, I had written a series for the *Los Angeles Times* on the political conflicts that had torn the motherland apart, causing tens of thousands to flee to Southern California and elsewhere, looking for a better life. Some of the details were coming back to me, a welcome indicator that after nearly a decade of wallowing in alcohol, depression, and self-pity, my brain wasn't a total wasteland.

As I reached the crosswalk that divided the long block, the angular squiggles of the Amharic alphabet shared sign space with lettering in English, and the air was heavily scented by frankincense and myrrh. The neighborhood had been Danish in the nineteen forties, Jewish in the fifties and sixties, then Asian well into the eighties, with the city's first Vietnamese restaurant nestled among a number of Chinese cafés. In the nineties, Ethiopian emigres ushered in a new ethnic identity by opening a scattering of Amharic-flavored boutiques, restaurants, and one or two espresso bars that served dark, rich coffee brewed in the traditional way from bright green beans imported from their homeland, where *Coffea arabica* was a native plant.

Templeton and I had eaten here on a few occasions in the past year, as our friendship gradually deepened. While I had consumed more of an Ethiopian beer called Orit than was good for me during our last visit, I had apparently not behaved so badly as to rule out a return invitation. The restaurant Templeton had chosen this time was called Addis Ababa, after the Ethiopian capital that had once been one of civilization's great centers of commerce and culture. I found it near the end of the block, occupying a large corner space. I slipped the old Mustang into an available slot and put the top up. A minute later I was stepping into a foyer designed with a thatched roof, where the atmosphere was aromatic with the spicy kitchen smells of ginger and red pepper, cardamom and rue seed, and in the background, flutelike music floated. Within moments, I was welcomed by a dusky-skinned, middle-aged woman wearing an embroidered white cotton dress and flowing shawl, in the Ethiopian tradition. She showed me to a small round table near

the back, which turned out to be a large drum covered with goatskin, propped up on a goat's feet and legs, which were anchored to the body of the drum. Templeton, usually a teetotaler, was sipping a glass of *t'ej*, the Ethiopian honey wine distilled from the *gesho* herb that I had amply sampled on one of our earlier dinner dates. The hostess asked me if I cared to order the same, or one of several Ethiopian grape wines the restaurant carried. I declined, and asked for coffee. She nodded, smiled, and went to get it.

I sat on a hand-carved wooden chair, resting my elbows on the tanned hide of the deceased goat, and gazed into Templeton's extraordinary face. With her striking bone structure and dark beauty, she might have been an African princess sitting there, although she had recently given up the long braids she had been wearing the day Harry Brofsky introduced us not quite three years ago. Now, her dark hair was cut into a boyish bob, accentuating her large brown eyes and delicate, shapely mouth, and making her look younger than her twenty-seven years.

She regarded me curiously.

"Not drinking tonight?"

"Not for a while, actually."

Her eyes widened.

"When did you quit?"

"I didn't say I quit."

"Oh."

I shrugged.

"It's been a few weeks."

She leaned over to survey my body.

"It shows."

"I've been working out a little."

"You? At the gym?"

"I said I was working out a little, Templeton. I didn't say I'd lost my sanity."

"The gym's not such a bad place, Justice. Who knows? You might meet someone interesting there."

"A remote possibility, I suppose."

She smiled mischievously.

"Afraid of the competition?"

"With what? All those mirrors?"

She laughed, then paused significantly.

“So. *Are* you seeing anyone?”

I shook my head, feeling my fair skin starting to flush, and happy to find the coffee arriving. The hostess set a round tray with three cups on the table. I was surprised to see the third cup. Also on the tray was a small tin saucepan, a *miqhat*; a black clay pot, or *jabana*, rounded at the bottom and resting on a donut-shaped pillow to keep it upright; a tin brazier, filled with glowing charcoal; and a single piece of burning charcoal in a small copper bowl, on top of which rested a lump of myrrh, its pale smoke rising to sweetly scent the air. The hostess filled the bottom of the *miqhat* with green coffee beans, breathed life into the charcoal by waving a woven straw fan, then stirred the beans over the brazier until they were roasted darkly. She brewed the coffee in the *jabana* and when she felt it was ready, began pouring the steaming brown liquid into the small cups.

After filling the second one, she turned to Templeton.

“Will your other friend be joining us soon?”

“He’s been delayed. Just pour two for now, please.”

The other woman smiled, set the *jabana* back on its pillow, handed each of us a filled cup, and departed again.

Templeton raised her cup to mine, and we toasted.

“Here’s to the halfway point in your fortieth year, Benjamin, which seems to have started out quite well.” Her eyes swept over me again, looking gratified. “I see that you’ve even invested in a new wardrobe.”

“I used some of the magazine money we earned together last year. The jeans and T-shirts were wearing thin.”

“Nice change. Also, the beard. Thick, blond, nicely trimmed. I like it.”

“To compensate for the disappearing hair.”

She patted the small bald spot on the top of my head.

“Still, a far cry from the grungy Justice I used to know.”

I sipped my coffee, but kept my eyes on hers.

“The hostess mentioned a third person.”

Templeton attempted a shrug that fell flat under the weight of its insincerity.

“Just a friend.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Not really.”

“Does this friend have a name?”

“Oree. Oree Joffrien.”

“A date?”

“Not exactly.”

Whenever Templeton used the words *not exactly*, my radar started looking for mysterious missiles.

“You didn’t mention a third person. That’s not like you, Templeton. You’re usually quite thorough and precise.”

“I guess I forgot.”

“That’s not like you, either.”

“You haven’t asked about the *GQ* piece.” She reached into her big handbag, fumbling for the magazine. “That’s the whole purpose for our getting together tonight.”

“Is it?”

Our eyes met; hers moved away.

“If you must know, Oree’s a professor at UCLA. Anthropology. Very smart, and genuinely sweet, once you get to know him.” She laughed uneasily. “Also, quite good-looking. Here it is. The *GQ*.”

She handed it across. Gracing the cover was the face of a pretty young actor who appeared, though in his mid-twenties, to be stuck permanently in mid-puberty, and in need of hormone shots. Apparently, the megastar of the moment. I set the magazine aside.

“Aren’t you going to look at it?”

“Later, maybe.”

“I figured you’d be crazy with anticipation.”

“Not really.”

“Are you mad at me, Justice? For writing it?”

“You asked my permission beforehand, which was gracious of you. I didn’t ask you not to.”

“You didn’t exactly give me your blessing, either.”

“It wasn’t my place to stand in your way, Templeton. You’re a journalist, and a grown woman. Readers love to revisit a good scandal. As they say, it’s a free country.”

“It isn’t just a rehash of the Pulitzer scandal, Ben. It goes all the way back to your childhood, then forward, through your relationship with Jacques when he was dying. It puts things in perspective.”

“I’m sure you wrote a fine piece, Alex.”

“I really appreciate your support.”

“Don’t mistake it for support.”

“You are mad at me.”

“Don’t mistake ambivalence for anger.” I sipped more of the rich, dark coffee. “Now, tell me about this person who’s having dinner with us, this Oree fellow, before I begin to suspect I’ve been set up with a blind date.”

Her eyes flickered defensively. She reached across and placed her hand on the magazine.

“You’ll read the article and tell me what you think?”

“Quit stalling.”

“You’re not going to be upset, are you? Even if, just by the slightest coincidence, he turns out to be gay and unattached.”

“Damn you, Templeton.”

“Promise me you won’t be unpleasant.”

“I wasn’t put on this earth to please people, Templeton, any more than a self-respecting author writes books to please critics.”

She sighed heavily, settled back in her chair, picked up her wine, frowned, put it down, selected her coffee instead.

“I met him at a conference of African American journalists.”

“I thought you said he was an academic.”

“He does some freelance writing on the side. High-level stuff *Harper’s*, *The American Scholar*, the *New York Times* op-ed page. He’s younger than you, only thirty-six, but he can be just as intimidating. Somehow we hit it off right away.”

“Let me guess—you were on the rebound.”

“I’d just broken up with that point guard from the Lakers.”

“The one with the big hands.”

If Templeton had been fair-skinned like me, I’m certain her face would have been a raging wildfire.

“Right.” She smiled sheepishly. “The big hands.”

“So you broke up with the point guard, and ran into this Oree fellow.”

“Oree Joffrien. I believe it’s French. His father’s Creole, from down around New Orleans. Mother’s Malaysian. He has an interesting look.”

“If he’s as cute as Tiger Woods—”

Templeton put up a hand.

“Please don’t mention Tiger Woods, Justice. It’s a touchy issue with Oree. You know, the Asian thing.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Certain people make a point of emphasizing that Tiger Woods is half Asian, as if that might be the reason he’s so smart and personable. They never do that when it’s a black guy who’s in trouble. You never hear them say, ‘Oh, that murderer has light skin. Must be the white blood in him that made him kill.’ Oree says they only question your blackness when you’ve accomplished something, never the other way around.”

“Anything else you need to tell me?”

“When he gets here, try not to drool.”

“He’s that good-looking?”

“Spectacular would not be overstating it.”

“Let me take a wild guess, Templeton. Being on the rebound, which is most of the time, you fell immediately in lust, and you still haven’t quite come out of it.”

“It wasn’t like that, I swear.”

“What was it like?”

“I really liked him, Justice. We got along so easily. He’s interested in politics, social issues, race, all the things that matter to me. He’s even a fan of straight-ahead jazz, like me.” She laughed awkwardly. “And, well, like you.”

I tried to keep my voice from grating.

“Go on.”

“We went out a few times. Dinner, a movie, coffee afterward. We became friends very quickly—that should have been a tip-off right away that he wasn’t straight.” She shrugged, and sighed again. “Not with my luck, anyway.”

“He sounds perfect.”

She sat forward, brightening.

“He is, Justice! Did I mention that he’s quite good-looking? Not that it would matter to you, of course.”

“As a matter of fact, you did. Twice.”

“I hate it when you get that edge in your voice.”

“I hate it when you attempt to engineer my life.”

“I think I’ve done a pretty good job so far. With Harry’s help.”

I wasn't amused, and didn't pretend to be. I finished my coffee, fixing Templeton with my most malevolent stare. Suddenly, her eyes darted with relief across the restaurant, toward the entrance.

"There he is now!" She raised her long, slim arm, waving a hand. "Oree! Over here!"

Templeton hadn't been exaggerating when she'd used the word *spectacular* to describe Oree Joffrien. He was roughly my height, six feet, maybe an inch taller, with a lean, lanky frame and surprisingly broad shoulders that tapered to a waist so narrow it suggested that his upper body might topple. The attractive frame was draped in a stylish, loose-fitting, dark brown jacket, a brightly patterned tie against an off-white dress shirt, and pleated, tawny-colored slacks that floated slightly as he moved. I figured his soft loafers for Italian, and probably expensive. His motion had the ease and grace of an athlete, reminiscent of the finest runners—those in the long-legged events, like the hurdles, or the four hundred meters.

For all that, it was his remarkable face that riveted my eye: molasses brown, clean-shaven, with piercing dark eyes set at an attractive slant, hinting at the Asian blood I'd been cautioned not to mention. His cheekbones arched dramatically, like his dark brows and oddly pointed ears, toward a smooth-domed head shaved clean. His nose was broad and blunt, and his upper lip voluptuously large, shaped sensually like the double-curved crown of a valentine heart. With his keen, narrow eyes and unsmiling mouth, he looked almost fierce. Not a scowl, exactly; more like a statement of pride, challenging anyone to think otherwise. What some with small minds might call supreme confidence in a white man, and arrogance in a man who was black.

As he made his way in our direction, Templeton leaned across the table and said quickly: "I didn't find out until our third date that he's gay. How was I supposed to know? He's so masculine."

"I thought that stereotype died with Rock Hudson."

She made a quick face, then smiled as we stood to meet Oree Joffrien. The hostess was right behind him, bringing menus. Templeton introduced us and we shook hands—single grip, the old-fashioned way, which seemed to be coming back into style—but he barely looked at me as we sat down. Without being asked, he ordered a bottle of Congolese beer called Ngok'. The menus were handed around, and they kept us

busy for a minute or two. Joffrien was apparently well acquainted with the cuisine—it was he, I learned, who had suggested we meet at the Addis Ababa and Templeton asked him for recommendations.

“Both the *wat*’ and the *alich’a* are quite good. They’re both spicy beef stews—red peppers in the *wat*’, green peppers in the *alich’a*.” Joffrien’s voice was deep, rich, and cultured, with a trace of Louisiana bayou country. “I’m told the *kitfo* is also quite good here, though it’s beef served raw. If you’d prefer it lightly fried, ask for *lebleb*.”

Templeton made a face at the mention of uncooked beef.

“I’m suddenly feeling veggie.”

“You might try the lentil salad then. They season it with chopped shallots, lime, minced ginger root, and serrano chiles. Tasty, and fairly substantial.”

She slapped her menu shut.

“You’ve made up my mind. Justice?”

I closed my menu as well.

“I’ll try the beef *t’ibs*,” I said evenly, referring to a braised dish served with a hot red chile paste on the side.

Joffrien raised his eyebrows in understated salute.

“You’re the adventurous type.”

“Or maybe just independent-minded.”

His penetrating eyes settled calmly on mine.

“Admirable, either way.”

“To a point,” Templeton put in. “Justice has a way of taking things to extremes.”

“I got that impression when I read the *GQ* piece.”

This time, my eyebrows did the arching, though less pleasantly.

“You’ve already seen Templeton’s article?”

“She faxed me a copy this morning. Thought it might be a good icebreaker when we met this evening.” He glanced her way, as calm and composed as a Buddha, but with the trace of an ironic smile softening his formidable face. “That was the way you put it, wasn’t it, Alex?”

I shot Templeton a glance sharp enough to slice a cheap steak. She responded with a sheepish look, as the hostess arrived with Joffrien’s beer to take our orders. When that was accomplished, and she was gone, an awkward silence fell over us. Joffrien sipped his beer thoughtfully, stared into the distance a moment, then turned purposefully in my direction.

“Alex tells me you might be looking for a writing assignment.”

“I’m always looking for a writing assignment. Given my history, they’re not easy to come by.”

“It was my impression you were doing fairly well.”

“I’ve managed a few freelance magazine pieces lately. Mostly nonmainstream, publications like *Out* and *Poz*. That’s about it.”

“You don’t sound all that happy about the way it’s going.”

“I’m grateful for the work.”

“The assignments aren’t meaty enough?”

“I’m getting strictly color pieces, offbeat features, usually on the seamy side. As if my checkered past enables me to bring something special to tawdry subject matter, but also limits me to it. I’m becoming a journalistic oddity, the reporter tainted by scandal, and I’m not sure I like that. On the other hand, I made my bed, so I have to sleep in it, don’t I?”

“Restlessly, it seems.”

Joffrien’s eyes had never left mine; I felt strangely connected to him, almost against my will.

“I’ve always been restless. And you? Does academia suit you?”

Instead of answering, he looked up as the hostess returned, accompanied by a slim, handsome waiter with the same dusky skin, who served plates all around, and placed bowls of side dishes in the center of the table. We ate in the traditional way: with our fingers, using swatches of *injera* bread in place of utensils, mopping up the rich, spicy pastes and sauces with the meat and vegetables. During a long silence, I caught Joffrien exchanging a glance with Templeton. A moment later, he spoke offhandedly, without looking up from his food.

“I have a friend, a television producer, who might have a project for you.”

I swiped at the red chile paste on my plate, fed the peppery *injera* into my mouth, and chewed, saying nothing. Joffrien pushed his point.

“Have you ever considered working in television?”

“Not for a moment.”

“Justice considers television the death knell of civilization.”

“My friend, Cecile Chang, does some interesting work. Documentaries mostly, funded by grants. At the moment, she’s producing a nine-part series for PBS.”

“What’s her topic?”

“AIDS.” He hesitated, as if to let the word sink in. “From what I read in *GQ*, you might bring something special to the subject—some interesting insights.”

“I’m afraid my credibility is suspect.”

“Cecile’s a maverick. She likes to take chances on people, looks for the alternative viewpoint. When she did a series on prisons, she hired an ex-con to write one of the segments.”

“Sounds like an interesting lady.”

“I’d be happy to give her a call.”

“Thanks, but I don’t know the slightest thing about writing a television script.”

“Neither did the ex-con. Cecile gave him the guidance he needed. He won a Peabody Award.”

“He didn’t have to give it back, did he?”

Joffrien grinned, and shook his head.

“No, Ben, he didn’t have to give it back.”

Templeton leaned forward on her elbows, her hands folded optimistically.

“At least you could talk to her, Benjamin.”

“I guess I could do that.” She beamed. Joffrien didn’t move a muscle, just kept his reassuring eyes on me, as if giving me whatever time I needed. Accepting kindness, even simple compliments, had never been easy for me; I had grown up tasting love in the form of scraps, handed out on loan, attached to debts and expectations. I believe Joffrien sensed that instinctively; perhaps he’d even read something of it in Templeton’s *GQ* profile, and remembered. Whatever the reason, he exuded patience and understanding. I was beginning to see why Templeton had fallen so hard for him so fast.

“I appreciate the offer, Oree.”

His voice became warm, his words slow.

“Not at all. Cecile’s an old friend.”

Templeton clapped her hands.

“Just like the three of us!” Suddenly, she was standing, looking very pleased with the way things had gone. “I hate to be a party pooper, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave you two to have dessert without me.”

I looked up, perplexed.

“You’re leaving already?”

“I’ve got a shot at a plum assignment. Editorial meeting first thing in the morning. I want to be well prepared.”

I stood, worried as much about the check as being left alone with Oree Joffrien. I had no credit card—hadn’t for years—and was carrying barely enough cash for a tip.

“It’s not that late, Templeton. Stay awhile.”

“I’ve got a ton of notes to go over, Justice. Harry’s going to choose a lead reporter to cover the selection process for the new police chief. I think I’ve got the inside track, and I don’t want to blow it.”

Joffrien stood and helped her on with her coat.

“From what I hear, with an African American chief suddenly retiring, the old boys’ club sees an opportunity to get the first white chief appointed since Daryl Gates.”

“That’s one of the issues, for sure.”

Joffrien’s smile turned sly.

“The one no one wants to talk about.”

Templeton grinned.

“Maybe the *Sun* will change that.”

“We’ll keep our fingers crossed for you.”

She and Joffrien hugged, and she kissed him on the cheek. When she embraced me, her lips were close to my ear, whispering.

“Don’t worry about the check. It was all taken care of in advance.”

“You really planned this well, didn’t you?”

“Just have a good time, OK?”

She kissed me quickly and left us. Joffrien and I watched her disappear out to the street, where headlights and taillights crisscrossed in the deepening darkness.

Joffrien moved first, retaking his chair, refilling my cup.

“She’s full of surprises, isn’t she?”

“Templeton? More and more.”

When he’d warmed my cup, he refilled his own, and we began to talk. An hour later, I realized that the sole subject of conversation had been me. Joffrien had skillfully steered the discussion back to Templeton’s *GQ* piece, my childhood in Buffalo, my unfortunate flirtation with patricide, and the subsequent deaths, to alcohol and drugs respectively, of my mother and sister. It wasn’t territory I was eager to reexplore, yet Joffrien had coaxed me through the entire story—

including my fast rise in the journalism world after college, straight through to the fabricated *L.A. Times* series that had won me the Pulitzer eight years ago, along with a ruined reputation when I'd been found out. In his steady, mesmerizing way, Joffrien kept me talking until I was speaking falteringly of my relationship with Harry Brofsky, my onetime mentor, who had maneuvered me three years ago into teaming up with Templeton on a reporting assignment.

Joffrien folded his long fingers under his chin, regarding me thoughtfully. "You survived. You've got friends, your health—a lot to be grateful for."

"I suppose that's true. Harry and Templeton try to remind me of it when I forget."

His smile was comforting, almost paternal.

"Things, as they say, could be worse."

"And what about you, Oree? Happy with the way life has gone?"

His steady gaze shifted, almost imperceptibly.

"All in all, no serious complaints. Though I'm not saying there aren't things I'd change if I could."

"We met more than two hours ago, and I have yet to hear about even one of those things. I know almost nothing about you."

He glanced at his watch, then pushed back his chair, and stood.

"Another time, maybe. Like Templeton, I've got a busy day tomorrow."

As I rose, I told him that Templeton had taken care of the check, something he already knew. We thanked the hostess, and stepped outside, where we stood listening to an outrageous jazz recording coming from a small café two doors away. I cocked an ear, as the musician performed a devilish dance up and down the scales with his saxophone.

"That's quite an ax."

"James Carter, if I'm not mistaken."

"You've got a sharper ear than I do, Oree."

"It's a passion of mine."

Another half minute passed, each second ticking pointedly away. The fine jazz continued, but I sensed that neither of us was listening to it quite so keenly now. Finally, I took a deep breath, gathering my courage.

"Maybe we can catch a concert some night. Make an evening of it."

“Sounds like a possibility.”

The night sky had clouded over again, and a cold wind gusted along the street, suggesting another storm. Joffrien turned up the collar of his jacket and hugged himself, looking vulnerable for the first time.

“I should have brought a topcoat. I need to be more careful.”

I put a hand on his arm, rubbing it warm.

“It’s really not that late. Do you have to be on your way?”

He smiled apologetically.

“Everything in its time, Ben. If it’s meant to be.”

“Fair enough.”

We’d exchanged phone numbers inside, and there didn’t seem to be a lot more to say. Joffrien prepared his departure.

“I’ll call Cecile first thing in the morning. Give her your number. I’m sure she’ll be in touch.”

“Where did you say you knew her from?”

“I didn’t, actually.” He was stepping away, on the verge of turning. “Let’s talk soon.”

Then I was watching him move away in long, loose strides, toward the corner, and around it. A section of newspaper scuttled by me in the gutter, rattling dryly against the curb before being caught in a puddle, where it struggled but finally settled helplessly into the oily rainwater.

From an adjoining neighborhood, I heard the wail of a police siren, reaching across the streets and boundaries, searing the cold night with auditory heat, like a cry of pain from a distant stranger.