

20. THE SHEPERD IS A WOMAN

I am supposed to meet Cynthia at the Ritz Carlton downtown. I walk briskly through the lobby. The doorman stares at me. I try to ignore him. His eyes follow me until I get on the elevator and the door closes. I stare at myself in the mirror. I don't feel well.

"I needed to see you. I've had trouble sleeping."

She looks at me, "I don't know what I can do."

"I need to lie down on your bed."

She seems surprised, "Do you want me to lie next to you?"

"If you want to. I don't care. I mean that would be nice."

We are both lying next to each other on the bed. We are dressed. There is almost a barrier separating us. We are both staring at the ceiling.

"I feel like it's been a year since I last saw you."

"We've never met in person," she reminds me.

"That's why it feels like a year."

"A year feels like forever."

"A year is forever," I tell her.

I imagine her getting on a plane to come here and leaving her lover.

I ask her, "Are you hiding something from me?"

"What are you talking about?"

I wonder. "Are you going with someone in Boston? Are you married?"

"I didn't come here to talk about my personal life."

I remind her, "We are lying on a bed together."

"In our clothes. We're not even close to each other."

How long is this going to go on?

"I'm running away from my life," she tell me.

"Did you commit a crime?"

"I might as well have done something wrong. That would explain things."

Cynthia feels a little disoriented. It is already a stretch for us to meet together. I first found her on the internet. She searched my website and sent me an email. She has read my writing. She has traveled all this way to discuss my recent book.

"Why did you stop writing romance novels?" She is teasing me. She wants to call me Skylar Green. Things are starting to heat up.

She continues, "I hear that Skylar Green steals her plot ideas from other writers."

"It's not as if her ideas are that original in the first place. Pirates kidnaping women and taking them to deserted islands. Holding them prisoner until they give themselves in love."

"I sort of need a pirate to take me to a desert island."

"Is that why you're here?"

She sits up for a second and looks over at me.

"Not at all. I wanted to talk about writing. It's like a form of therapy for me. Right now, I feel as if I need therapy. It might make me adjust better to my life."

"Where do you need to start? Sometime bad therapy can have the reverse effect. It can immerse you deeper in your problems."

“Immerse me or get me out. It’s pretty much all the same thing. I need a change.”

“So you’re not here to discuss your writing.”

“Maybe later.”

“So what are you running from?”

“My boring mixed up life. A husband whose been doing weird things to me.”

“I thought that you weren’t married. That you didn’t even have a lover.”

“There were a lot of things that I didn’t tell you about. What did you want this to be?

Did you want to open the door and have me fall in your arms?”

“I might find that comforting.”

“I don’t want to replace one clinging male with another.” She seems forceful.

“I won’t cling. I promise. We can have our fun, and then you can get on the next plane and leave.”

She wants to smoke. She’s quit recently, “That’s all that I need. More complications in my life.

“We could negotiate on a price.”

“Is that all that you think that I am?”

“Not at all. I just want to hear your story.”

“I have a husband. And he is sort of threatening to me.”

“And you want me to go back to Boston to take care of him for you.”

“Something like that.

I wonder what is in it for me. Why should I care about her problem in Boston. We have shared things on the internet. But there is really nothing between us.

She tells me, “That is why you are perfect. There is nothing connecting me and you.”

This always seems to be the same story. Someone needs a job done. And they outsource. I seem like the perfect candidate.

I note, “There are things connecting us together. We’ve exchanged emails.”

“I can eliminate all the traces.”

“It doesn’t work that way. If your husband dies mysteriously, they’re going to subpoena all your public records. They’ll find our internet correspondence.”

“We’ve never really said anything about my personal life.”

“I will still be a suspect.”

For what. For talking about literature online. Really!”

This is an old story. I want to be with her. I want her to wrap her comforting arms around me. After that I will be like putty in her arms. I will do whatever she wants. I will travel to Boston and do her bidding.

Why can’t we simply enjoy our time together? Why has our meeting turned into this intrigue? Obviously she is not free to let herself go. Cynthia has other commitments in her life. I am simply trying to offer her some comfort in her time of distress. That is the best that I can do under the circumstances.

But it has clearly turned into something else. That only makes sense. She would not have traveled all this way without some ulterior motive. I certainly believed that there was some romantic interest that may have motivated her trip. I have no illusions about that now.

I know that it gratified my fantasies to see her travel all this distance just to be with me. I

expected this result on her part. So it came as no surprise. Now I see how silly I have been. I really let what I want get away with me. It is more than ridiculous to think that she would hop on a flight just to escape her life in Boston. There must be something more to it.

At some points, I tell myself that she has offered this murder plot just to get me more involved in her life. It also seems to add a purpose to her actions that may have not been so obvious under the other version of things. Worse than that, it underlines how far I am willing to go just to realize my desires. I am letting flattery get the better of me. Of course, she isn't going to travel the country just to be with me. I know that we really got along on the internet, but there has to be more to it.

All along, I had this vision of the lonely woman looking for a friend. Melancholy had filled her life. And the internet provided the only means to dispel that sadness. I am not pretending that her feelings were of a clinical nature. I never suspected that she needed medication. I simply believed that she needed a change for the better. Her life had naturally made her a little morose. She had painted herself into a corner. All that she needed was a little cheering up.

I never thought that Cynthia was really the type who went into romance novels. The novels would only put a damper on the glamor that she associated with her own life. This is the rub. If she really was the fashion-plate, why would she seek me out? Why wouldn't others in her immediate circle offer her ready distraction. This is indeed my question. But such an understanding is rather new to my speculation about her. I simply assumed that she was attracted to me. If I had wondered about her other opportunities, I might have been more suspicious about her intent.

This adds another layer to my understanding of her violent plans for her husband. It confirms the intensity of my infatuation. Not only was I drawn to Cynthia from the moment that I began our communication. But I seldom questioned the reasons for her attraction. I had no suspicions about her whatsoever. I even have a feeling of jealousy in her regard. So I was committed to a mistaken belief on my part.

My feelings made me entirely vulnerable to her manipulative personality. Her true nature was entirely the opposite to how I initially conceived her. From her photograph, she seemed so caring, almost motherly. At present, I feel that I am being smothered by her matronly attitude. I can hardly breathe.

I know that if we had immediately plunged into a romantic encounter that I would be more susceptible to her influence. But even in the abstract, I feel that I have already been seduced by her. I am falling under her spell. Here she is in the flesh. All the characteristics that I associated with her are now manifest. Even if she is Lizzie Borden in the flesh, I am willing to wield the axe on her behalf. Kiss me and wake me up from this dream.

In my fantasy rendezvous, we were totally hesitant about our actions on first getting together. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to touch her. But I could feel all of this energy radiating from her. I shuddered with all the anticipation that had preceded this meeting. Ha!

I continued to embellish my vision. I could sense us melting together. Even that first kiss, that embrace touched off a numbness on my part. I could hardly feel her touching me. I was lost in the magnificence of the contact. I floated one blue league after another into the deep waters of our coincidence. Nothing could stop us from being together. It felt so natural. In a

flash the two of us were grinding naked together on the bed.

The fantasy could not be further from the truth. Yes, here we are on the bed. But layer upon layer seems to separate her from me. Except the fact that she has inflamed me with her plan, she might as well be a thousand miles away. Boom!

I want to hold her hand. I want some acknowledgment of all that I am willing to endure for my sweet thing. I will drink her venom, and then I will distribute the poisons to her spouse. I will give him the just desserts that have been specially prepared for him. I will offer him the gourmet delights that will transport him to his rightful place of rest. I will take care of him in all and every sense of the word care. I will be there to do him right!

I am realizing that my sexual fantasies are being metamorphosed into violent tendencies. I am embracing this transformation. She is doing a great job. She is leaving little residual of the sexual desire. She is offering me the opportunity to realize my pleasure. I am no longer doing this for her. I am doing it for myself. This is what I want. She is offering me a situation where I can accomplish my wishes without any consequences in the least. I don't know her husband. I have no connection to him. I can get in and out without being a suspect. And if I avoid any further contact with her, none of the suspicions will ever rest on me.

It almost seems that we should celebrate our discovery. I could take her in my arms and kiss her all over. But this would only make her more vulnerable. She does not want to be unprotected. If she sleeps with me, then that will serve as the foundation for the police investigation. They will have a reason to pursue me. Her flesh will exude passion.

For Cynthia's part, she must turn me into an assassin if all of this is to succeed on her terms. So I am accepting the meager terms of our arrangement. I will not even be paid for my efforts. I will be offered an opportunity. I will derive the utmost pleasure from acting out my fantasy. The plan is more than brilliant.

There is just one hitch. Why would I want to stop with the elimination of her husband? Her termination could offer benefits to me as well. At that point, they would really investigate our connection. So that is hardly a good option. I need to stop when and where I can.

"You really aren't married, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"And you couldn't get a divorce?"

"A divorce might get messy. I don't want him around anymore."

"That is a little drastic," I tell her. "I'm really not the kind of guy to do that sort of thing."

"I have offered you motive and opportunity."

I again wonder, "Why come all this way?"

"I don't want to be implicated. We have very little connection to each other. Up until this point, you have no credible motive. You barely gave me the time of day in our electronic communication."

So she may be getting back at me for ignoring her. Her visit is hardly a blessing; it is a curse. In all this time, we have not moved from the bed. I feel as if I am hearing her confession. This is an avowal that has not been elicited from torture. She has offered all this to me from her own free will. I thank providence for her beneficence.

Cynthia has offered me a bite that is more potent than any kiss. As I lie here, I am just getting over its sting. But it has only made me want more. I try to savor what she has offered to

this point.

Cynthia tells me, "I'm not really here to flatter your ego. Maybe you sat in your room staring at my picture in the hopes that we might eventually have some kind of illicit fling. That's never going to happen. I need you to do a job for me. That's where it starts and where it ends."

I am growing a little tired of her self-absorbed version of events. Why would I want to do her bidding. I can feel all the power just by imagining the dirty deed that she proposes. Why would I want to travel all the way to Boston to effect her craziness.

I agree to meet Cynthia at a hotel in New York. I take a plane into LaGuardia and take the train to Manhattan. My plane ticket and room have been paid for. I have had numerous fantasies about Cynthia. Meeting her for the first time is a real adventure.

We are now face to face in the hotel room. The lights go on and off. It is all part of the intense energy that we share. The door is still open. I begin to kiss her.

"You really expected something to happen by coming here?" she asks.

"I don't know what to say. I'm here. I kissed you."

Her lips are more than inviting. I lie down on the bed. She sits in a chair.

"Are you tired after your journey?"

"I am," I tell her.

She has driven here from Boston. She seems more eager than I am.

Cynthia admits, "I didn't come here for an affair. I can't really flatter you if that's what you think this is about. I need your help."

"How do you need my help?"

I have been thinking about this trip for quite a while. She offered to pay for things, and I showed up automatically. I never thought our correspondence on the internet would turn into an actual meeting.

"My whole life is unraveling. My marriage has turned into a real disaster."

I look up and face her.

"I didn't know that you were married."

She is tearful, "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I thought that you wouldn't meet me if you knew that I was married."

"I'm here." I remind her. "That's all that matters."

I am the one lying down. I feel as if it is my therapy. I take the cue.

I tell her how I feel, "I just feel as if no one is listening to me. I am being taunted."

"You are a well-known writer. People read your books. They feel that they know you."

"That's really not enough for who I want to be."

She asks, "Do you want to be loved?"

I stare longingly at her. She is not taking the bait. She wants to get back to her problems. We switch roles. I am again the therapist.

I question her, "Is your husband having an affair?" I feel a little uncomfortable about my question. I can only derive some voyeuristic satisfaction from her answer. I listen.

"I don't know."

Does she want him to be having an affair? Is that the excuse that she needs.

"What can I really do to help you. I don't know you. I just a writer."

She looks into my eyes. She wants my sympathy. "I thought that you could figure it out."

“I can figure it out. And I’m going to do what I can for you. You just need to tell me more.” I feel as if I am lying. I am only taking advantage of this situation. There is very little that I can do to help short of killing her husband. I am not really into this sort of thing. I came here for one reason alone, to gratify a fantasy. I am not some kind of criminal. I had no idea that the woman was married.

I close my eyes. I am not even sure that I want to be here. When I open my eyes again, I am back home. Cynthia’s face is staring back at me on my computer screen. It fills the dark room. I am going to hardly leave Atlanta to meet her in Boston or New York or anywhere. I have to do this right.

Cynthia calls me at noon.

“I’ve just got a job at Bloomingdale’s at Lenox. Come and see me.”

I thought that she was already working at Bloomingdale’s. That is where I first saw her. I do a few thing at home and then go down to meet her.

“How’s your new novel doing?” she asks me when I meet her.

She is working in men’s fragrances.

“I can’t find a publisher. My agent complains that I have become a little unhinged. He thinks that I am losing my touch.”

“And how do you feel?”

“I feel it’s the best stuff that I’ve done to date. He just can’t make sense of the abrupt shifts in time and space.”

Cynthia gives me a funny face, “What does that mean?”

“One minute the character is in a hotel room in Chicago, the next minute, he’s smoking a cigarette in an airport in Miami.”

Cynthia pretends to understand, “Like a dream.”

“Sort of. But not exactly. Each reality seems equally plausible.”

“I’m not into science fiction.”

“Do you want to meet after work, and we can grab some dinner?”

“Don’t you have to be home?” I thought that she was married.

“What gave you that idea?” She is positively beaming.

“I don’t know.”

She is using some Windex to clean the glass counter. The smell is getting to me. She has to do this day in and day out. The glass and the mirrors give off thousands of reflections. I can see myself seeing myself seeing myself. It gives me the creeps.

I ask her, “Is this like cleaning a plate until you can see your reflection inside?”

She gives me a strange look, “Are you trying to peek under my dress again?”

I look up at her, “I’m doing what I can to know the real Cynthia.”

She touches my hand. She takes it in hers and squeezes it.

I add, “I guess that I should go.”

I want to kiss her. In the department store light she looks like a star. The music is pumping. Everything says want me, buy me. I do! I will!

I am waiting for Cynthia at the restaurant. She calls me on my cell phone.

“Go ahead and eat without me. Something came up.”

I didn’t even want to come to this restaurant. She convinced me to show up. Now I have

to suffer for her troubles.

I feel uneasy eating alone. I am the only one who is not with a dinner partner. I look around at the tables and try to make eye contact with the woman in here. I wonder what these people are talking about. I feel as if I would be excellent company.

Maybe I have worked it all out too cleanly. I am doing what I can to offer some kind of change to my environment. It is too sedate here.

I look at one couple and try to imagine a suitable scenario. I chew bites of my sea bass as I fill in the plot. He is tired of her, and he is having an affair. But she has been tired of him at a much earlier juncture. She is using his dalliance to her advantage. She knows that he feels guilty and will twist that knife deep into his heart. I feel as if I should offer her my services. But she is way beyond needing me. She has done the requisite planning on her own. I only wonder about her endgame.

After dinner, I stop by at my favorite bar for a drink. When I get home, I try to communicate with Cynthia on the internet. She has gone to bed a while ago. I decide to write her a long message detailing my thoughts. I sense that she has been leading me on. I can hardly reason through her actual intent. I intend to go along with her plan in the hopes that it might eventually make sense.

I am still unconvinced when she tells me that she is single. She can barely afford her extravagant tastes on the salary that they give her at Bloomingdale's. Something else is going on with her that she is hiding from me.

She reads my message before she goes to work the next morning. She invites me to meet her at work one more time..

"I'm glad that you made it." She is her usual perky self. She tries to act busy while she is talking to me.

"Someone is watching me," she informs me.

I feels like the one who is being watched.

"What happened last night?" I ask.

"I had a little problem."

"Your husband?"

"I'm not married."

Maybe we need to start over again. She can explain what is really happening in her life. The fantasy has gone on long enough.

"You look great in this light."

"I always felt that it cast a sickly pallor over my face."

I complement her further, "It makes you look like a celebrity. It gives you a halo."

She blushes. She tries to ignore my comment by putting some boxes on shelves. I can tell that she has been affected. Her mouth turns up ever so slightly.

She turns back to face me, "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I thought that I read that you were going to get married."

"Just because you think that I'm a celebrity doesn't mean that I'm in the gossip columns now."

She has a great face. It is so expressive. She feels that she has already given me enough of a performance for the day. She needs to get back to work.

She tells me, "Call me when you I get off. We might do something."

I rush home to take a nap. I lie on my bed, and think about my exciting life. Cynthia watches over me. What would she think of me if she saw me like this.

"It's not as if I can really satisfy."

"Cynthia, just do a little thing for me."

"I can't. It feels dirty."

I am firm, "This is what you love just as much as I do."

"You're telling me this now. But it's all about your pleasure. I'm not one of the characters in your romance novels. I'm not here to gratify your whims."

I am stubborn, "It's not a whim. It's the kind of thing that would make me happy."

"What about my happiness," she asks.

"You can enjoy the fact that you are giving me pleasure."

This is how I want it to begin. She seems weak. I lover her tenderness. But this is only the calm before the storm. Somewhere off in that deep sea of hers the tempest is brewing.

"You're looking at me in a strange way," she tells me.

"You're my pleasure machine."

I fall asleep before we resolve our stalemate.

It is about 9 when I wake up. Cynthia is just getting off work. I call her.

"I can't get together tonight. That little problem came up again. Write me an email. I'll read it when I get in.

What is the little problem, and why does it continue to intervene at the most inopportune moments? I am hardly a mind reader.

I have told her too much already. She knows all my secrets of writing. She wants to manipulate them to her advantage.

I am in a hotel in Boston. I am sitting in total darkness. It is as if I am in a closet. I am accustoming myself to the night. I will have to be ready for him when I meet him. I have agreed to do away with her husband. It seems stupid. I have little to gain. But she has realized how to blackmail. I have done a rather salacious portrait of a well-known person. I sent her to her. She has threatened to reveal the story to the person involved. That could be very embarrassing for me.

The more that I think about this deed, the more that it becomes real for me. Will I feel any closer to her after I take care of her special one? I will do what I can.

I arrive at the house. It is the middle of the night. All the lights are on. It is illuminated everywhere around. What is going on?

Mr. Sheperd is waiting for me.

"Here, you're right on time. I poured you a glass of wine."

This makes no sense.

"You're wondering what this is all about. I'm Mr. Sheperd. And you met the woman who you thought was my wife. Of course, there really is no Cynthia Sheperd. Not as you know her. The woman that you met is an actress. I set up the web site for you. I did all the communication. And you thought that you were interacting with her."

"What is your purpose?"

"You wanted her so badly."

I feel that this is an all too familiar story. He is using me as a patsy. He wants me to develop an attraction for Cynthia. When I see him trying to harm her, I will rush to her rescue. I will arrive to late. I will find her murdered. I will be discovered by the police at the scene and will be blamed for the murder. In fact, I will never see his real wife. I will claim my innocence. The wife will be hurt too badly for me to recognize the body.

This is all a plan to excuse his brutality. And I will be the one to feel remorse as if I could have stopped something,

“You would have done anything to rescue Cynthia.”

“What about your cruelty? Nothing can justify what you planned to do.”

“I needed to make the body unrecognizable.”

“Why didn’t you follow through with the plan?”

He seems even more devious, “Who say that I won’t. You’ll just be found dead at the scene.”

“And why did you go through this effort? If you kill me, you’ve lost your witness.”

“Not exactly. You’ve witnessed it all. You fall in love with my wife who you assume is Cynthia. You meet her in New York and Chicago. Then she plans to go back to me. And you follow her to Boston. You confront her at the house and kill her. I catch you trying to escape and I kill you. It’s a perfect plan.”

“Cynthia paid for the ticket.”

“It was a credit card that was taken out in your name. And Cynthia used an internet account that was taken out in my wife’s name. So there is a record of your communications.”

“But it wasn’t your wife’s picture that you sent me.”

“I sent you a link to a site. And it’s my wife’s picture that is now up at that site. Everything says that it was my wife that you were interacting with.”

“I down-loaded Cynthia’s picture on the computer.”

“She’s a well-known model. You could have obtained the picture from her site.”

He appears to have every detail taken care of.

“Is your wife upstairs dead?”

I have my therapy session today. My therapist’s name is Joy Traeger. I have started to see her since I have had these bad dreams. They are so lucid. I wake up as if I’ve been passed out. I seem to be missing time. I feel as if my personality is splitting in two. Joy is trying to repair the split.

“Are you still feeling this uncertainty about yourself?” Joy understates my problem.

I go along with her, “I’m still having the headaches.”

We are sitting in arm chairs across from each other. There is a clock on the wall. She is always aware how long she has in her sessions.

“And the dream about your wife.”

“Yeah, I’m still having those.”

“Mr. Sheperd, have you ever thought that this represents a wish-fulfillment.”

“Are you telling me that I want to kill your wife.”

Joy tries to be more precise, “It’s not so much that you want to see her dead. It’s more as if you want to be able to stand up to her. You’re not feeling the assertive self that you need to be.”

“So that’s why I have these violent thoughts.”

“That’s one way of thinking about it. You’re frustrated. You let the opportunities pass you by. And all the frustration mounts up. Then it all hits you. It’s this incredible weight coming down on you.”

“I think it all makes sense. But the dreams are so weird.”

She tries to summarize it all, “You have these negative thoughts against your wife because you can’t vocalize how you feel. That makes you hold it all inside. All this pent up anger is just building up with nowhere to go. But you don’t want to admit what is happening to you. On the one hand, you are this innocent guy with a conscience. On the other hand, you are this raging maniac with no remorse. This is your superman alter ego. The sociopath that promises release from all your problems.”

“Are you calling me a sociopath, Dr. Traeger?”

She seems bothered that I have caught her in making a sweeping judgement. But she wants to continue her diagnosis.

“Not exactly.”

It has been a particularly long night. I have fallen asleep on the couch. I have one of these long dreams. I wake up all dis-oriented. I need to call Joy.

“So is your wife upstairs dead?”

“I don’t know. Do you want to check for me?”

Do I dare go upstairs? I have received a call in the middle of the night from one of my patients. Lorne Sheperd. He is frantic. He tells me that there has been a argument at his place. That he may have done something to his wife. I don’t want to go over to the house. But I feel that is the only way to make him calm down. This is hardly standard operating procedure. If I am going to go over there, I shouldn’t go alone. But I don’t want to disturb a colleague just in case he is only having a bad dream. I could call the police, but I don’t want to alarm him, and, again, I don’t want to get them over to the house on a false alarm.

I am now with him, and he claims that he wants me to go upstairs and check on things. What if I am the thing, and he surprises me? I have never seen pictures of his wife. I am not even sure that he has a wife.

Cynthia has invited me to her house. She has told me that the door is going to be open. She wants me to meet her in the bedroom. We have communicated by email. I have seen pictures of her. But we have never met face to face. It seems a little bold just to have me meet her in her house. Who knows what kind of guy I could be? Who knows what kind of girl she could be?

For the time being, I love the risk. I tingle with excitement as I open the door to the house. The lights are off. I can barely see as I start to make my way up the stairs. I am accustoming myself to the darkness. There is light from the outside that is penetrating the house. So it is not pitch black. I still grope a little to make my way to the room. There is a candle at the far side of the hallway. Everything else is darkness. I am walking on a rug. I try to be as still as a mouse.

As I cross the threshold of the room, something hits me in the head. I brace myself to remain standing. I pass out on her bedroom floor.

Everything is happening so quickly. Cynthia has agreed to meet me in Atlanta. She takes

a room at the Ritz. I head down there to meet her. My heart is racing. I can hardly keep the car on the road.

When I get up to the room, things are a little awkward.

“Do you want me to satisfy you?”

I don't know how to respond to her question. Everything seems so automatic. We don't even take time to get to know each other. I love her shoes. They make her legs go on forever. The heel of the shoe just shoots up in the air. Her foot looks so delicate in the shoe.

I run my hand along her leg. At this point, she could get me to do anything that she asks.

“I just have one little favor,” she tells me.

I am already naked. I am ready to hunt. I bark at her. She laughs.

“I want you down on all fours,” she says.

I want to ask her if her name really is Cynthia. Or did she simply make that up for our correspondence. I want to touch her. She remains in control. I am at one end of the room on all fours. She is lying on the bed all seductive. I wonder what I am supposed to do.

She asks, “Can you do what I need you to do?”

I am not sure. I bark back twice. Does twice mean go or stop.

We are at a restaurant. Cynthia is lecturing me. I take notes.

“The funny thing about cruelty is that we don't know where to stop.”

I am not sure what she is talking about. I look at my notes hoping to make sense of it all. I ask her to repeat her last point.