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# The Weight of the Moon

By

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For my beautiful wife Joann—my love, my strength, my  
favorite indulgence



## *Prologue*

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Tulip directed her question at the actress who was messing up the scene. “Do you like your job, honey? Can you not imagine the hundreds of girls who would die to be in your place? Maybe you’d like to get a little more into character, show a little more enthusiasm, huh? Or maybe we should just recast—what do you think Joe?”

Joe was the film’s director, and this was not his first film. “I think we should just re-shoot the scene from the top. Tuley, why don’t you have a nice chat with the cast, but make it a little more personable—you know, be a little nicer; could you do that for me? Alright gang, we’re taking five.”

Tulip didn’t take Joe’s comment as an affront. It was just part of her job as the film’s consultant, or Assistant to the Director, as the credits would reveal. She had worked with Joe many times, and they often fell into this “good cop bad cop” bit. Tulip was a perpetually happy and friendly person, but sometimes called upon her dramatic talents when Joe needed her to.

She was still a relatively young woman, but, at thirty-one, Tulip had already played out her career as an actress. She had been such a successful performer for so many years that lots of studios sought her services as a kind of liaison between the actors and the crew. It was her job to keep things rolling, but not at the expense of quality.

Tulip really enjoyed her career. She loved the atmosphere of a film studio and the electric feeling she received from being on a soundstage. Most of all, she loved the people and the small challenges they created; it was never life and death. Films were being made, and little problems arose constantly. They never seemed to be too big a challenge for Tulip.

Tulip approached the two performers who had caused her to erupt moments earlier. “I’m sorry I got a little hot just now,” she said to Jamie, the actress she had confronted. “Something seemed to be bothering you though. Can you share with me?”

“It’s him,” Jamie answered, nodding toward Lance, the other performer.

“And?”

“It’s his dick. It tastes horrible!”

This was a situation Tulip had encountered many times in her career. Most actresses learned to handle these things themselves. Jamie was relatively new however, and had a few things yet to learn.

“Lance, is this your first scene of the day?” Tulip queried.

“No ma’am,” Lance responded. “I shot the milkman scene earlier.”

“Ah, and did you shower after?”

“I kind of cleaned myself off with a towel,” Lance replied.

“Okay, here’s the deal Lance. You’re something special—I think we all know that. In fact, I can’t recall anything quite as special as you in all my years in the business. But listen honey, even with that special something you have, you absolutely must take a thorough shower after every anal scene, alright? Now go jump in the shower—and don’t be shy about the soap. We have cases of it in the back.”

Once again Tulip had stepped in to keep the production flowing. This was her life, and she loved it.

Tulip would be a little sad an hour later when the director would call it a day. She really had no place to go after work, except to her cute little house she kept in the valley. It wasn’t much, at least to Tulip, but she appreciated how her debatably ignoble career covered the million-dollar mortgage, and in California, you really needed to fork over that kind of dough just to live someplace safe and decent.

As fulfilled as Tulip was in her career, the rest of her life had always seemed empty. She was born out of wedlock to a couple destined for great things, but who didn’t need or want the baggage associated with raising a child conceived before any vows had been exchanged. During one of her parents’ infrequent visits, she questioned why she hadn’t been aborted. Her parents’ response was one of silence, accompanied by a squinty-eyed look of derision. As a young lady, Tulip herself became pregnant three times, yet chose not to expose any child to the confusion and nonsense of the self-righteous society she lived in.

Shortly after Tulip was born, her parents took her to California to live with her Great Aunt Rose. Her

aunt did the best she could to nurture the child, but she was an older lady who had no children or experience raising them. Fortunately, she did have a very nice house and received a handsome check every month from Tulip's parents, so Tulip was never wanting—at least for material things.

When Tulip was thirteen years old, her aunt passed away. As much as she wanted to, her parents would not allow her to live on her own. They enrolled Tulip in the best boarding school they could find. She lived there until high school graduation. The Edison School for Girls did the best they could, but when Tulip was spewed out at the end, she was what she was—a product of her upbringing and her surroundings. It was about this time that she became Tulip.

When she was born, her name was Lily. She always liked this name, because so few other children possessed it. When she became an actress, she thought it best to have some sort of stage name. Not that it would bother her family if she were to keep her legal name. She didn't even have a family, as far as she was concerned. But she didn't feel Lily was a proper sort of name for the type of actress she wanted to be. So, in keeping with the only family tradition she had been part of, she thought of some other, more suitable flower-inspired name. She came up with Tulip—Tulip Sonrod, in fact.

Tulip Sonrod became synonymous with quality porn. She was definitely hot: a lithe, tanned, silky smooth body with flowing long legs, taut, perfectly toned ass, luscious, firm breasts ignored by the surgeon's scalpel, and a permanent and radiant smile. Then there was that nose—a feature not usually considered when analyzing most adult film stars. But on Tulip, it was something you noticed. It was sharp and thin and angular, but for some reason, it oddly enhanced her appearance.

## *Chapter One*

Evelyn carefully placed the five neatly packed grocery bags in the far back corner of the Lexus SUV, close to the hatch. She slid her Coach purse, weighty with necessities and just-in-case non-necessities, tight to the bags. There was little chance the stiff paper containers, which cradled the nibbles to be shared later with company, could now topple over. Even though evasive turns weren't part of her itinerary, the bags were very nicely secured, just in case. There wasn't anything in them more valuable than a box of basil and parmesan brittle crackers, but still they were treated with the same respect Evelyn showed everything and everyone in her life. She was brought up to be that kind of person.

Sitting properly postured in the driver's seat, Evelyn waited for the elderly couple pushing a near-empty grocery cart to pass behind. While she could have backed out of her space and re-parked six or seven times before hitting the pair, she evaluated the moment. It wasn't much of a stretch, maybe twenty years max, before this would be her and Sidney, shuffling behind a metal cart, feigning its importance as a transporter, but mostly just using it for support. Things had not gotten complicated for them yet, at least in terms of their health. In fact, they were enjoying the best years of their lives. Evelyn attributed this status to a life devoid of conflict and filled with unwavering and unquestionable values.

Seemingly minutes passed, yet the old folks were still creaking along the path of danger behind the SUV. As Evelyn's dreamlike state waned, she could feel her temper start to swell, and her stoic resolve fade. After all, she had graciously given Grammy and Grampy more than enough time to make their way to safety.

Evelyn briefly considered lowering her window to ask the sloths if they understood the concept of time, and did they realize they weren't getting any younger by spending it strolling through an asphalted parking lot. If they were lucky, they'd make it to their car just in time for their funerals. Her eyes darted back to the rear-view mirror and she caught her reflection. Who was this woman with the ruffled face? Of course she wouldn't say such a thing to these people. In fact, she truly respected her elders, and was ashamed for even entertaining these impudent notions.

Finally the path cleared, and Evelyn was free to proceed home. But there was now less time to prepare than she had anticipated.

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Sidney Banks peeked quickly at his watch, the sober face of the gold Movado Evelyn had given him for their thirtieth staring back at him. He had promised his wife he would be home in fifteen minutes; his office was twenty minutes from the house. Fortunately for Sidney, he was able to excuse himself from the board meeting without causing too much disruption. He hoped the Friday afternoon freeway logjam he regularly endured would have dissipated somewhat by now, and that he'd be a mere five minutes late. His wife had invited the Hanovers to the opera, which meant George and Iris would be popping by for a few minutes of socializing before leaving for the venue.

Sidney was confident that he could quickly make himself presentable when he reached the house. He continually adhered to a high standard of grooming, and little time would be needed to repair any superficial damage triggered by the stress of his day. A quick change of clothes and he'd be ready for the evening.

Always having maintained a certain conceit regarding his appearance, Sidney hadn't allowed the decades to muddle with his body the way it had with many of his contemporaries. He ardently resisted the notion that he looked different than he did when he was a much younger man. Even at sixty-two, he wore the same size slacks as the day he was married. He could not be considered slight by those who gauged such things, but was properly dimensioned for a man precisely six feet tall. His black hair was the one feature, however, that had ripened noticeably with time—still crowded across his scalp, but now interspersed with strands of silver. With the help of the shimmering pomade that he used, his hair imparted a distinguished look he did not mind. He had great confidence in his appearance, but very little

in his ability to make it home on time.

Sidney pictured Evelyn laying out an assortment of delicacies about now, which usually amounted to an array of fine, unique cheeses complemented by appropriate pâtés. She was a flawless hostess, and had made Sidney a proud husband the last thirty years. As much as he appreciated her assets though, being married to her was a little like being married to the school librarian—distractions of any sort wouldn't be tolerated. Some of these were gentlemanly traditions that Evelyn just didn't grasp.

Only at certain social gatherings was Evelyn amenable to Sidney's desire for a swallow of liquor. Even though she adored crystal glasses, sterling ice buckets, and unbuttoned conversations, she never quite followed the allure of alcohol. On the rare occasion when Sidney would partake, she would turn a blind eye as if something more consequential, such as a tired dish of cashews in need of freshening, was calling to her. She was also unaware of the quantity of drink being consumed on these occasions, and Sidney meant for it to stay that way. The later Sidney arrived home, the less time he and George would have to inconspicuously slug down the appropriate amount of beverage to bear three hours at the opera. Evelyn would insist on being the driver for the evening anyway, as she refused to give Sidney the honors if he so much as glanced at the stuff. All would be well if he could just make it home without delay.

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Evelyn reviewed the checklist she had created earlier in the week, confirming she hadn't forgotten anything. The carpets were impeccably groomed, as if the greens keeper from Pebble Beach had something to do with them. Perfectly aligned swaths of alternating nap flow gave the floor a pristine appearance. In fact, it wasn't a greens keeper, but rather the maid, Louisa, who was responsible. Evelyn was pleased that she had finally landed quality help after Eatoy retired. She had gone through so many maids since, none of whom had made the grade.

Shortly after she arrived home from the market, Evelyn unwrapped the cheeses she purchased and set them on the coffee table in the living room. If they weren't given time to rest, there would be no purpose in eating them. The aroma, texture, and ripeness of the cheese needed to arrive before company did. Fancy crackers of all sorts were painstakingly arranged to balance out the cheese boards. Normally, she would have supplemented this presentation with crudités and maybe thick slices of pâté, but with reservations at Dominick's after the performance, too lavish a spread would certainly have been inappropriate.

After patting the outer reaches of her russet hair, Evelyn confirmed that it was arranged as her stylist had intended. She hadn't the time to trek back to her dressing area off the master to verify her appearance in a mirror. Of course there were plenty of mirrors within yards of where she stood, but she couldn't risk being caught in a moment of vanity; the Hanovers might walk in any time. In her mind's eye though, she was looking pretty good.

Evelyn was proud of her poise and of her assets, both above and below the waist. Everything seemed to still be defying gravity. She attributed at least part of her youthful appearance to the lack of wear and tear on her body. She kept her best assets fresh and only slightly used—the car was always garaged so to speak. She didn't consent to Sidney putting his key in the ignition very often. Typically, he was only permitted to open the door and touch the upholstery. On the occasion that Sidney was allowed in for routine maintenance it would be straightforward, without any tugging, pinching, or biting of any of the delicate mechanics. Evelyn didn't really have to fight the ravages of time, as long as Sidney stayed on his side of the garage.

As Evelyn was giving the room and herself a once over, she heard the doorbell. Her dress, hemmed below the knees, prohibited her from moving too quickly. She eventually reached the front door.

"Iris, don't you look wonderful!" Evelyn cackled to her guest as she opened the door.

Iris did look pretty good for a woman a week from sixty-five, so Evelyn's sincerity would not be doubted. She had striking features, some of which she was born with. Although her nose looked as if it could serve well as the pointy bow of a small ship, with its angular precision and ability to cut through any surface with ease, it did not diminish her attractiveness in any way, and somehow oddly enhanced it.

Her auburn hair, which had obviously been coiffed and colored that day, was short and neat and framed her heart shaped face and bright brown eyes nicely.

Iris was a good three inches shorter than Evelyn, but the Cole Haan skyscrapers strapped to her feet more than erased that deficit. Her new finely tailored charcoal suit completed the picture.

“As do you, my dear, as do you!” Iris replied.

“And George, how nice it is to see you,” Evelyn countered as she angled a small part of her face to George’s right cheek. “Won’t you please both come in and make yourselves comfortable?”

Evelyn led her guests to the living room, assuring George along the way that Sidney would be home momentarily.

“He must have been trapped in that dreadful board meeting he was forced to attend this afternoon,” Evelyn continued. “He used to be so dependable. Now look, he’s going to be at least five minutes past the time he was expected. Please do make yourselves comfortable.”

Once the Hanovers were situated in front of the cheese trays, their fingers nimbly poking around the spread laid before them, Evelyn excused herself. She was growing furious over Sidney’s delinquency, and her frustration was becoming quite evident. What bothered her most perhaps was that Sidney wasn’t keeping just anyone waiting; it was the couple Evelyn idolized more than any other—the Hanovers.

When Sidney and Evelyn moved to Arizona from Baltimore twenty years ago, the Hanovers befriended them. Almost instantly, they became very close. The Banks could not have had any more respect for their newfound acquaintances. George and Iris always lived so properly, doing and saying the right things and forever exhibiting the essence of grace. Neither couple had children, which made the bond between them even more pure. Although Iris was only three years older, Evelyn aspired to be just like her, as if she wished to be her when she grew up.

Now Sidney was late, and Evelyn was dreadfully ashamed and terribly distressed that she had fallen short of the standards set by her good friends in the next room. As she was bemoaning her inadequacies, Sidney pulled up the drive. Evelyn took a deep breath, allowed her blood to settle and her nerves to calm, and then opened the door for her husband.

“Sidney dear, you’re almost ten minutes late! I hope everything is okay with you, but no time for that now. The Hanovers are in the living room, and you must change your jacket, at the very least!” Evelyn’s voice grew higher in pitch and faster in pace as she spoke.

“Okay darling—I’m so sorry. Traffic wasn’t as light as I’d hoped, and it was difficult finding the proper moment to excuse myself from the board meeting. I almost considered calling you from my car, but you know how I feel about that.” Sidney not only regarded the act of phoning while driving a potentially perilous distraction, but a distinctly flamboyant display of bad manners.

“Of course, dear—now scurry off to the bedroom and change that jacket. I’ll inform George and Iris that you’ll be down in a minute!”

Evelyn made a quick retreat back to the living room where she found her guests sitting comfortably with their legs crossed and a cloth napkin in George’s left hand supporting exactly half a cheese laden cracker.

“Sidney will be down shortly—my apologies,” Evelyn announced. “Oh my goodness, I’ve left you without offering a beverage!” With that, Evelyn turned a shade of red and scrambled for a recovery. “Iris, I found a special new tea at the store today. May I get you a cup, or do you prefer a club soda?”

“That tea sounds lovely, but I’d prefer the soda thank you. Let me come with you to the kitchen, doll.”

“Of course! George, Sidney will want to make you something special, I’m sure.”

“George my old friend!” Sidney bellowed, as he passed the girls and made his way into the room. “Come with me!”

Sidney led George to the mahogany bar on the far side of the room. The bar was a highly polished and very elegant example of classic furniture carved in a serpentine shape, adding a pleasant dimension to the square room. It provided the decorator touch Evelyn was seeking for the space. The fact that it was a bar was totally irrelevant.

“We will catch up on each other’s lives in a minute, but first I want to show you my latest

acquisitions,” Sidney whispered.

For a man on such a short leash, Sidney had quite a selection of single malt Scotch. He proceeded to introduce his friend to a thirty-year-old Macallan Fine Oak and a twenty-one-year-old Balvenie Portwood. Though not extremely rare, the two bottles had set him back over \$1,200.

“Neat, as usual?” Sidney asked George as he uncorked the Macallan.

“Naturally!” was George’s exaggerated, yet muted response.

Sidney poured his friend a finger of the sainted liquid, and then doubled the amount for himself. As much as he knew George wanted to scale away the strain associated with a night at the opera and the wives, he also appreciated the man’s fervent self-control; the chap could walk past a roll of bubble-wrap without touching it. He was almost inhuman in his behavior. Sidney had never witnessed his friend in an obvious state of intoxication, and doubted he ever would. Perhaps, Sidney thought, he might be able to coax George into a drop of the Balvenie before they departed for the opera, but odds were the man would still be nursing the Macallan when it was time to leave.

On the other hand, Sidney required Novocain level numbness to survive an evening such as this. He was determined to reach that place located just below sloppiness, and stay there as long as he could. After splashing an almost reckless serving of Balvenie into his now empty tumbler, he turned toward George, who still cradled his smooth, heavy glass in his palm, contemplating his first sip.

“George, I can appreciate you, but I sure don’t understand you, my friend.” Sidney was starting to loosen up. “We have but a minute to prepare ourselves for a long evening of tenors and sopranos and such. Not that I don’t value the talent these entertainers possess, but if you haven’t noticed, we have third row seats—very close to the source, so to speak. I don’t want to rush you, but wouldn’t you be better prepared if you were to have another?”

“Sidney, what can I say?” George responded. “I’m very pleased at the sixty-six years I’ve been given so far. If I were forced to rate my life, I’d say it’s been more than wonderful. But I’ll let you in on a secret of mine—I’m most comfortable when I’m doing the right thing. I avoid most vices, and, of the rest, I partake in moderation. I have no worries, really. I’ve never knowingly lied—with the exception of some government business many years back. I don’t smoke, I don’t curse, I have a chivalrous passion for proper etiquette, and though mostly not my decision, I have quite a modest sex life; any sexual release I experience transpires on the date of my birth, or on my wedding anniversary. I have sexual relations so infrequently that it feels promiscuous sleeping with my wife! All in all, this lifestyle seems to work very well for me. It’s not necessary for me to be inebriated my friend, although I do enjoy a taste now and then. Thank you so much for offering though.”

“George, I must admit you are something special. If I could be more like you, I would in an instant.”

“You are like me Sidney. You are perhaps the most upstanding gentleman I have acquaintance with. There is nothing inappropriate about an occasional waltz with the bottle. As far as I can tell, you only drink when you’re in my presence! The level of Scotch in those bottles of yours never varies from visit to visit. Of course I’m not privy to your bedroom activities, but knowing how close the girls are, I can’t imagine Evelyn is much more generous in that department than Iris.”

“You know me quite well my friend. And I’m afraid your analysis of my wife has hit the target straight on. When we do have intercourse, it’s quite the scene. Seconds after I ejaculate, she’s off to that bidet of hers as if I’ve deposited Satan’s seed!”

Sidney realized the Scotch was doing its job and silently regretted his outburst regarding his sexual standing with Evelyn. Without looking up to catch George’s reaction, Sidney swirled the remaining drops of liquid gold around the bottom of his glass, then tilted his head back and drained the remnants.

“Boys! I hope you’re ready to go!” It was Evelyn’s voice, excitedly intimating their departure.

The timing couldn’t have been better for Sidney whose skin had flushed with his last comment to George. He had also reached that plateau of bliss from the alcohol he had hoped to achieve, and now prayed he’d retain.

Evelyn pulled the SUV around to the front so her guests would not have to see, touch, smell, or experience in any way, her garage. Not that it was filthy or cluttered. It just wasn’t the place for company.

After everyone had channeled into the car, they were on their way.



## Chapter Two

The seats were as Sidney promised—third row from the stage. The theater itself was nothing classic, but a predictable representation of mid-eighties architecture. Modern, clean lines defined the arena, giving the expansive space an impressive feel. Still, there was something missing.

Evelyn had enjoyed the timeless, ornate stages of New York and Baltimore, and this experience was far removed. Living in Scottsdale did not offer as many opportunities to revel in historical culture as living Back East did. When it came to the arts, seemingly nothing existed before the seventies. Of course this wasn't the case, but to Evelyn there was a level of sophistication missing that she yearned for. After twenty years, she had not fully evolved from the East Coast woman she was raised to be. As much as she loved her "new" home, her roots defined her.

The two couples settled into their seats shortly before the orchestra began tuning their instruments. There was a typical measure of muttering traversing the restless crowd as they awaited the start of the performance. As most of the clatter came from behind the third row, it was more bothersome than usual to the foursome. After a brief spell, Iris could no longer suppress her judgment of the insolent audience, and whispered cursorily to Evelyn who was seated to her immediate left.

"It's rather embarrassing, the social skills our neighbors possess."

"They have deteriorated over time, haven't they," Evelyn responded, a hand coyly cupped over her mouth as she spoke. "Last season, in this same theater, a man seated in front of us was flatulent—audibly flatulent. He obviously had no manners and no control."

"Goodness," Iris sighed in response.

The lights dimmed, and the string section came alive. The audience calmed to an appropriate stillness, and the girls settled deeper in their seats, a modest grin crossing their faces. Sidney was grinning too, the result of well measured dosing. George had a complacent look about him, which he would maintain throughout the performance.

*La Traviata* was beginning. This mid-nineteenth century Verdi classic had always been one of Iris's favorites. It was not the happiest of stories, but it did feature the soprano voice, and Iris could listen to a quality soprano all day long. Tonight's featured artist would be a good one—there was no doubt in her mind. This was due to the fact that Iris, in a roundabout way, knew this performer. She had not shared this special tidbit with the Banks yet, because it was part of a much bigger surprise she had planned for them later. A cozy smugness embraced her as her somewhat friend Alicia Cavoloni took the stage.

Although Iris had never actually met this woman, she was determined to create a bond with her. After all, she and Alicia had a mutual friend in New York City. Per Iris's interpretation of social hierarchy, Alicia would therefore be considered her friend-in-law.

Iris had been reviewing her upcoming social calendar with this shared acquaintance, Winnie, during a recent call, which all told amounted to a slugfest of who had the busiest, most impressive social schedule. As Iris was itemizing the arts functions she would be attending, she mentioned this performance of *La Traviata*. Winnie, only too happy to one-up Iris, was aware that her dear friend Alicia was starring in the touring company that would be performing in Arizona, and brought it to Iris's attention immediately.

Several days later, Winnie called with some wonderful news: Alicia would love to receive Iris and her friends in her dressing room after the performance. Although this gave Winnie the upper hand socially speaking, Iris was delighted to cash in this chip for a chance to mingle with an operatic luminary. Not wanting to appear boastful at all, she held off on mentioning this exciting encounter to Evelyn, saving it as a special surprise.

The opera was in full swing now, and the large crowd was fully captivated by the emotional story. The Banks and Hanovers had never experienced an opera as exquisitely performed as this one. Even Sidney, who at this point would have been just as easily entertained by a plate spinning on a stick, was impressed with the talent set before him.

Intermission was a minute away, and Sidney was aching for another beverage. He did not want to press his luck and possibly be caught only one sheet to the wind with the second act just ahead. There was

a bar in the lobby, which would be very busy moments after the lights came up. If Sidney was not efficient in exiting his third row seat and quickly maneuvering to the back of the theater, the line would be insufferable. Another obstacle standing, or, more specifically, seated, in his way was Evelyn, who at this point decided to hold Sidney's hand, a strategy she employed from time to time to keep her husband in place. It wouldn't have been proper for her to tell her husband to stay put, but by using her deceptive strength, she could keep him where he was for the duration of the intermission.

As the theater brightened signaling the start of the break, Sidney reached with his free hand into a pocket of his jacket, removing a clean white handkerchief. He excused his other hand from Evelyn's embrace by indicating a need to cover his nose for an impending sneeze. Certainly Evelyn would release her hand for that, which she did. The sneeze did not arrive, but the free man stood and asked his friend George if he would like to stretch his legs. The ploy worked well, and the two men were quickly in the lobby. They stood in the brief line at the bar, Sidney fishing a fifty from his trouser pocket.

"Well then, what do you make of it so far?" Sidney asked his friend.

"Highly entertaining; I'm very impressed with the entire troupe!" George replied. "I must say, they made an excellent casting decision when they chose that fantastic soprano for the role of Violetta. I don't believe I've seen her before."

"I think you would have remembered her, my friend," Sidney countered. Sidney was in enough control to know it would have been improper to continue this thought. He was also dismayed that George had replanted the image of this woman in his head, after he had fought hard to suppress it. The woman they were discussing was not lacking in talent. She didn't seem to be lacking for anything, in fact. The first five minutes of her performance had been nothing but distracting to Sidney. He had been so absorbed trying to calculate this woman's weight that he hadn't noticed the quality voice she possessed. He eventually settled on somewhere between four hundred and five hundred pounds, then tried his best to re-focus his attention on the other players, or at least the magnificent set. Still, he couldn't help but think that if he saw this woman on the street, he would assume her voice to be like that of a large frog, not of an angel.

"How do you mean, Sidney?" George had given it a moment's thought, and had obviously given up.

"Well, she does stand out doesn't she!" Sidney replied in as lighthearted a manner as he could muster. Now that he was thinking about her again, he wasn't sure if it *was* possible for a five hundred pound woman to have the necessary dexterity to waltz around the stage as she did; maybe there were wires somewhere. He made a mental note to check for them in the second act.

"I see," said George. "You're referring to her girth, aren't you?"

"Well, it is an impressive dimension. George, what may I order you to drink?" Sidney was anxious to change the tack of the conversation.

The two gentlemen eventually returned to their third row seats, both smiling. Sidney's double Scotch hurriedly swallowed by the bar accounted for his. George was just happy the second act was about to start. Fortunately for Sidney, the theater prohibited taking any food or beverage past the lobby, so Evelyn would be forced to guess whether anything beyond leg stretching had taken place.

The lights dimmed, and Evelyn reached for Sidney's hand once again. This time, Sidney knew the reason for this action wasn't to hold him in his seat, but rather Evelyn's play at that perfunctory bonding ritual practiced by women everywhere. He was pretty sure Evelyn didn't have any magician's talent that could help her determine by this act whether he had consumed anything he should be ashamed of, but he made certain to breathe the other direction, just in case.

The second act was as good as the first, if not better. The emotional struggles, the romance, the tragedy—the audience was together on this ride, and when it was over they demonstrated their appreciation by uniformly rising and presenting the players with seemingly incessant rounds of acclamation.

Evelyn and Iris turned toward each other wearing broad smiles—applause ringing in their ears—tears shimmering in the corners of their eyes. Iris was very excited to tell Evelyn her big surprise, but needed a moment first to recover from the overwhelming waves of sentiment coursing through her veins. After the curtain was lowered the final time, she gathered herself so she could tell Evelyn the news.

“Evelyn dear, what did you think?” It was a rhetorical question, but still warranted asking. After all, it wasn’t polite to share one’s thoughts until others had shared theirs first.

“My goodness!” Evelyn replied, her left hand flat against her breastbone as if to keep her chest from falling to the ground. “That was such a striking performance! I have not seen such a polished and talented troupe of performers in quite some time. And that Violetta! What a magnificent voice!”

“Well Evelyn Banks,” Iris responded, “I have a bit of a surprise I’d like to share with you. We are not going to leave the theater quite yet.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow, Iris. Whatever do you mean?”

“The four of us are invited to Alicia Cavaloni’s private dressing room... right now!” Iris couldn’t help but notice the mixture of expressions building quickly on her friend’s face as she stood speechless. She could sense confusion and excitement all balled together, producing a contorted look Iris had never seen on Evelyn before. Iris knew that Evelyn had mixed with privileged society on many occasions, and assumed she had brushed shoulders with celebrity, but this was something special and unexpected. Iris quickly summarized the story of her relationship with the star, and then the eager pair grabbed their mates to head backstage.

The girls forged ahead trying to locate the luminary’s dressing room, while the boys lagged somewhat behind. Sidney had a most pleasant reaction when informed by Evelyn of their new plans, though privately wishing they were now in the car, closer to food and beverage. In spite of the recent surge of emotion and activity, he was still feeling mellow from the drink he had at intermission. He decided that if he could maintain appropriate conduct in this woman’s dressing room, he would reward himself with one more swallow before dinner.

“Sidney, may I have a word?” George pulled his friend to the side of the hallway as their wives endeavored to locate the correct door.

“What is it George?” Sidney replied. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay, Sidney. I just want to be sure that you are. Those comments you made to me in the lobby at intermission. They have me concerned that you are behaving loosely, and may say something inappropriate to our hostess.”

“If you’re referring to my comments regarding Ms. Cavaloni’s dimensions...” Sidney paused to collect his thoughts before continuing, “Certainly you know my regard for others feelings would not allow me to even whisper anything demeaning. My conversation with you earlier was meant as cordial banter, nothing more. Of course I shall be on best behavior!”

Sidney’s last words were slightly slurred, causing George a small amount of concern. He knew Sidney was about to see something up-close that he wasn’t sure he had the gut for. Be that as it may, George was confident the girls would occupy the lion’s share of time spent with the diva, and that there would be no awkward situations.

“This is it!” Evelyn exclaimed with a discreet, subdued hiss.

The two couples gathered outside the door, and, after exchanging hurried, furtive glances at one another, elected Iris to have the honors. Evelyn, Sidney, and George watched as she knocked firmly, but not too abrasively, on the dull gray metal portal. Iris stood closest so that she could introduce herself first, then her husband and friends.

Inelegant lumbering noises emanating from the room could soon be heard from the hallway. The portentous sounds intensified at a tedious pace. The suspense was almost too much for the girls, whose breathing had become almost embarrassingly audible.

“Well, good evening everyone!” Alicia Cavaloni remarked, opening the door with a dramatic *whoosh*. “I must be looking at Iris Hanover, am I not?”

“Why yes you are!” Iris responded, extending her hand with polished grace.

Alicia welcomed the two couples inside as Iris formally introduced everyone. There were congratulations and bravos all around, directed toward Alicia and delivered by each of the four. Alicia gestured toward a loveseat, a narrow piece with thin, dullish-green cushions. By a hair’s breadth it was able to accommodate Iris and George. Evelyn and Sidney sat in the two chairs, which angled off the loveseat. For some reason Alicia remained standing, even though there were two more chairs available.

Sidney was grateful that Alicia had extended her hand when they were introduced. He had no idea how he could access that cheek of hers with his lips, and he was concerned Evelyn was expecting him to plant a peck somewhere about the sizable canvass. She seemed even larger to Sidney than when she was on stage. He had hoped being on stage was akin to being on television, where the talent is actually smaller in real life than they appear on the screen.

Sidney noticed from his vantage point a broad table on the far side of the room, laden with assorted morsels. He could detect from his seat all manner of cakes and sweets. His mental reflex was to assume the diva anticipated family members, or maybe some true, non-groupie friends, to join her for a meal shortly, and he breathed easier for a moment. After mulling it over, he realized this probably was not the case, and that this was simply her post-game snack, so to speak. He hoped she would wait for them to leave before indulging.

All in all, Sidney was behaving himself nicely, at least from his perspective. If he wasn't, he knew he would receive earfuls later.

Iris and Evelyn continued to chat up the opera star, as if they were long lost sorority sisters. Once they were done showering Alicia with praise, they moved on to discuss the "four f's": fashion, friends, and fine art. They left out the fourth f, fitness. They didn't deem this a necessary topic to cover at this time.

George was busy soaking in everything. He kept a pleasant smile on his face, appearing legitimately interested in the girls' conversation. He was nestled very close to his wife on the loveseat, as it was barely wide enough to accommodate two adults. Not that he minded; he was always proud to be associated with Iris. He admired her in every respect. Sitting this close just reinforced his attachment to her. He had never known another woman who was so proper, and yet so beautiful.

With this unanticipated proximity to his wife, George could easily inhale her ordinarily out of reach, subtle, provocative fragrance. He found himself calculating the weeks until his birthday, when he would be granted access to the treasured blooms behind this intoxicating bouquet.

The group had been gathered in Alicia's dressing room for more than fifteen minutes, when the star offered her guests a bite to eat from the spread across the room. This caught the four of them off guard, as they each privately assumed Alicia would be attacking the fare herself the minute they were gone. Evelyn and Iris locked eyes, searching for each other's encyclopedic grasp of manners and proper protocol in this instance. There was clearly enough food laid out for a dozen guests or more, but if the diva wanted to share, why hadn't she made the offer sooner? Both George and Sidney were clearly staying far from this one, deferring instead to one of the girls. As Iris was the official connection to Alicia, she understood it was her duty to respond.

"My dear Alicia, you are so kind to invite us to break bread with you! Unfortunately, we have but a couple more moments before we must excuse ourselves. We had previously engaged a table at a beloved restaurant, and would feel dreadful if we showed up behind schedule."

"But of course," Evelyn chimed in, "you are most welcome to join us—in fact, we insist!" Evelyn beamed with pride at the quick rejoinder, reasoning that her offer would mitigate any bad feelings Iris's response may have caused.

George's expression remained unchanged: a pleasant smile and hopeful eyes. Sidney was praying his outward appearance mirrored George's, as inwardly he was about to explode. He found the woman personable enough, but dinner? His numbness was dissipating, and this meal could derail an otherwise well managed evening. He was even having a hard time visualizing a strategy for wedging the woman into the car. Sidney realized this was an inappropriate thought and forced a feeble attempt at pinching his leg through his trouser pocket.

"How nice you are," Alicia replied, "that is such a thoughtful offer! I am a stranger in town, and to be escorted to a delightful restaurant by such a wonderful group of friends...I would love to join you!"

Alicia was still standing in the small space between the two couples, facing Iris and George when she accepted the invitation. In a theatrical move, she rotated her torso and humbly bowed in the direction of Evelyn and Sidney, expressing her appreciation. Sidney was incredulous that she had accepted the invitation, and was momentarily flustered. In an attempt to cover any horror he may have been displaying, he overreacted and stood to grab Alicia's hand. His thinking was that he would be confirming her

welcome with this gesture. The timing couldn't have been worse.

Sidney's momentum was carrying him up and toward the diva. As he reached for her, she was in somewhat of a twisted position, bowing toward him. This maneuver by Sidney caught Alicia off-guard. The couples watched as her already precarious balance began to falter. Still holding his hand in hers, Sidney's body wrenched forward from the pull of the swaying tonnage, his arm stretching until it could extend no further. And then she released her grip. Evelyn sat in absolute horror, her right hand moving to cover her mouth, which was unable to emit any sound. She could see Alicia slowly descending backward, but was helpless to do anything about it. The entire scene seemed to present itself in slow motion—very slow motion.

The most unique and terrifying perspective on this impending tragedy would come from directly behind the slow falling songstress. The loveseat, with its fast grip on Iris and George, was precisely in her path. George wasn't quite sure how to react. His instincts encouraged him to flee, that this was not the place to be. The gallant response however, would be to stay, and soften Alicia's fall as much as he could. Although it seemed an eternity from her initial loss of balance to impact, there wasn't enough time for George to make the right decision.

Iris was also glued to the loveseat due to her indecision. It wouldn't have been proper to jump out of the way and let her new friend descend to a most certain injury. On the other hand, what good would it really do any of them if she remained seated? As Iris's mind raced toward the proper solution to this conundrum, time ran out.

## *Chapter Three*

Sidney was still facing the falling Alicia, his mouth agape, watching her eyes grow larger as the inevitable drew closer. He was helpless to do anything at this point. He could only imagine the expressions on the faces of his friends, the Hanovers. When the collision finally occurred, it resonated like an accident at a construction site. The bulk of the sound was created by the loveseat as it splintered into dozens of pieces, as if it had been thrust into a wood shredder.

Evelyn sat in a state of semi-shock while Sidney rushed forward to do whatever he could to extricate the now possibly injured opera star from her predicament and his friends. The expression on Alicia Cavaloni's face was quite unique; Sidney had never seen anything like it. Her eyes were bulging as if she were a hamster being squeezed by a python, her cheeks were flushed and her mouth appeared unhinged—as if she were preparing to swallow a large hoagie in one bite.

There was little Sidney could do to shift the singer even a smidge. He tried to remember any sort of leverage formula or tactic he could. He had taken a course in physics while at the University of Pennsylvania; it wasn't part of his major—just a class he picked to fulfill the science requirement he needed. At the time, it sounded easier and less complicated than chemistry or biology. After all, he would never be using anything from a science textbook later in life—not a businessman. Now he was struggling to come up with something, anything that might work to pry this woman off the mess beneath her.

“How do you get yourself out of bed in the morning!” Sidney screamed at the flailing songstress. He assumed she did sit down occasionally, and figured she must lie down at least once a day. “How can I help you get up!”

Alicia could only respond like a large captured fish, flapping on the dock and gasping for air. In the meantime, Evelyn had officially become a basket case. She started rocking back and forth, one hand over her mouth, her eyes staring into space.

“George! Iris!” Sidney called out to his friends loud enough for them to hear, knowing their ears were certainly muffled by the substantial load surrounding them. There was no response.

After making this attempt twice more, Sidney shouted to Evelyn, pleading with her to find a phone and dial 911. His wife remained seated, her eyes fuzzy puddles of horror-spawned disquietude.

Sidney rushed to the door of the dressing room and threw it open, hoping to find some sort of help in the hallway. About thirty feet away, a young man who Sidney recognized as one of the performers was leaning against an open door, apparently having a conversation with someone inside the room. He was no longer in costume. By the look on the young man's face, he was flirting with the other person. Sidney raised his voice, intending to be loud without affecting a scream. He called out to this person for assistance, assuming the young man would leave the girl he was seemingly trying to seduce, and come help Sidney. Perhaps two men would be able to leverage the woman to her feet.

The young man hurried down the hallway, closely followed by his friend who apparently was also a young man. Sidney realized he had made a mistake assuming there was a seduction taking place, but was more than glad to have the extra assistance.

“I need your help please, and quickly!” Sidney started. “There are two people beneath her, and I'm afraid they may be injured!”

The two cast members stared in awe at the scene. Sidney at first regretted spending the time recruiting these two instead of calling emergency. They stood like male versions of Evelyn—hands over their mouths, a look of disbelief glazing their ashen faces. Suddenly, they sprang into action, each reaching for one of Alicia's fluttering upper limbs.

Sidney moved behind the fallen star, hoping to use his strength to push while the others pulled. At the count of four (one of the performer's ideas, not Sidney's), the trio attempted to raise the diva from her position. The smallest progress was being made, when suddenly an extremely loud bleating sound filled the room.

“My ass! My fucking ass!” It was the diva, sounding very diva-like. “Let go—now!”

Sidney and the two cast members released her at once, and she slumped back into her previous

position.

“We need to call 911 right away!” one of the two young men cried out. It wasn’t that Sidney hadn’t thought of this before; he had checked the hallway for help first, thinking that might be quicker. He didn’t want to take the time to explain this to the men, so he scanned the room instead, searching for a phone. He found it, just to the side of what used to be a loveseat.

Sidney must have explained the situation three times to the dispatcher before she called for assistance. She couldn’t understand how one person falling backwards could so severely be impacting the lives of two others. Sidney was not about to give the dispatcher his estimate of Alicia’s weight, not with her lying in front of him and within earshot. After all, he felt she was suffering enough at the moment—why embarrass her like that? Plus, George would have words with him when this was over, as Sidney had pledged not to be offensive in any way.

While they were waiting for help to arrive, Sidney thought he would apologize for instigating this calamity, even though he really didn’t believe he was at fault. After all, his only mistake was offering to shake Alicia’s hand. She should not have put herself in the position she had, if she did not possess a proper sense of balance. Regardless, it was the gentlemanly thing to do, and so Sidney looked into the eyes of the fallen beast and pleaded forgiveness.

Alicia did not respond to Sidney’s petition, as she was obviously smarting from the fall. Her face was even more bloated than it had appeared moments earlier. She did not seem to care, or appreciate, Sidney’s attempted apology.

Sidney turned his attention toward the two young men who had come to the rescue. They had not yet left, but were lingering like two helpless flowers in a field of dust. They were probably waiting around just to see how the emergency team planned to fix the situation, or at least to see the expressions on the crew’s faces when they entered the scene.

Sidney, mindful of his manners, offered the two helpers a bite to eat from the spread that somehow remained intact through the experience. The two men looked at each other briefly before turning to Sidney and saying: “sure, we’ll have a little something.”

As Sidney redirected his interest back toward the problem, the emergency crew arrived. There were two men, both of whom appeared to be exceptionally fit, wearing navy blue polos and slacks. One of them was carrying a case like a traditional doctor’s satchel, but much larger.

Somehow they remained poised; they gave no indication this wasn’t something they encountered on a regular basis.

Evelyn, who had remained speechless throughout the ordeal, was finally able to speak, praising the medics for their speedy arrival and asking if there was anything she could do. Before she received a response, she rushed to the medic closest to her and whispered to him: “There are two people beneath her. I wasn’t sure if you were aware.” She briefly removed her hand from around his ear, and then put it back as she thought of more to say. “They may very well be injured. We haven’t heard a peep from them.”

The emergency team didn’t appear disturbed after receiving this information, but neither did they seem to be displaying much sense of urgency. They stood relaxed, perhaps analyzing the chaos, perhaps trying to formulate a strategy.

Sidney, not hearing his wife’s comments, assumed she had apprised the medics of particulars she considered significant enough to share, but too rude to verbalize in front of their hostess, Alicia. He thought it best to give the gentlemen important information as well.

“She hurt her ass,” Sidney screeched in the direction of the medics. “You’ll want to be careful about that.” Sidney felt he wasn’t being impertinent, and in fact thought his comments would be welcomed by the fallen colossus. Based upon the look Evelyn shot him however, he might have been wrong.

Just then, four more rescuers marched through the doorway, two of them wheeling a stretcher. Apparently, this is what the first two men were waiting for—help to arrive. Immediately, the six heroes set about to remove Alicia from her situation so they could tend to the Hanovers.

Alicia shrieked in an octave that must have been in the soprano range, though sounding nothing like an aria, as the six rescuers rolled her to her feet and on to the stretcher. Two of the men started to wheel her from the room as the other four set about on their search and rescue for George and Iris.

When the medics who were rolling Alicia reached the door, they realized she would not fit through the opening—at least while she was lying on her back. They summoned the others, who were preparing to unearth the Hanovers, for assistance. It was necessary, they discovered, to position Alicia on her side in order to facilitate the move. The opera star had never belted out a sound as piercingly forceful as she did while she was being manipulated into this position.

By now, a small crowd had gathered in the hallway outside the diva's dressing room. The group was comprised, in great part, of chorus members and stagehands. The featured players had long ago left the theater. The director of the opera was in the hallway witnessing the debacle, and seemed to be in tears. As the two medics made their way out of the room with Alicia in tow, one of them closed the door behind him to isolate the gawkers.

The four that were left immediately started prying pieces of broken furniture away from Iris and George. Evelyn hugged her husband tight while the rescuers set about their task. As the couple watched the liberators at work, Sidney started to become aroused. He couldn't explain it, as his friends were certainly in some degree of peril—but with Evelyn's heaving breasts pressed against his chest, and her warm breath punching at his neck, his seldom-serviced genitals spontaneously reacted.

Evelyn sensed her husband's cane nudging her thigh and responded by smacking him across the cheek with the back of her hand. It wasn't a particularly rough slap, but the message was clear. Evelyn recalled her mother once alerting her to the fact that men were the strangest creatures; they served their purpose she supposed, and for that reason they must be tolerated—to an extent. Evelyn knew all too well what her mother meant.

By now, the rescuers had Iris and George spread out cleanly on the floor. The couple was obviously unconscious. Sidney assumed this was why they had not responded to him earlier.

The emergency crew remained quite active, murmuring strange commands to each other, and frantically passing exotic equipment back and forth; they used some of it directly on Iris and George. Everything was happening so fast, and it was all very scary to Evelyn and Sidney. Sidney recognized what the men were doing to his friends; they were performing cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. About two years ago, his office manager organized a CPR class, which Sidney mandated all employees attend. Of course, Sidney couldn't be seen fumbling around a pliant and possibly alluring mannequin's open mouth, and so he failed to obtain the knowledge these rescuers apparently possessed.

Evelyn could not watch anymore, electing to relocate to the now vacant hallway outside the dressing room door. Since Sidney was fused to his wife and her unyielding, vice-like grip, he went too.

"Dear lord," Evelyn exclaimed to her husband as she closed the door behind them, "what on earth do you think is the matter with Iris and George?"

"I'm sure whatever it is my dear, they'll be fine. Those men assisting them are professionals."

"It looks bad—it looks very bad, Sidney."

"Now now, don't you worry at all my darling. It looks to me as if they've passed out, and the nice gentlemen are stimulating them back to consciousness. I'm afraid they will probably need to spend a few hours in emergency. We will do the right thing, as they would for us, and accompany them to the hospital." Sidney's comforting words seemed to relax Evelyn somewhat, and she released him from her clinging embrace.

The couple had slowly paced the hallway for what seemed an eternity, but in reality amounted to ten minute's time, when they saw four men approaching. They were dressed the same as the men helping the Hanovers, and had brought two gurneys with them. The Banks signaled to the men, swinging their arms high above their heads in an exaggerated fashion, then toward the door as if they were directing a large jet to its parking space. A more modest gesture would have sufficed in the otherwise empty hallway.

The men entered the room and Evelyn turned away, not wanting to glimpse the work that was being performed on her friends. Sidney was very curious, but also looked away. The last thing he wanted was a permanent visual fixed in his head of either George or Iris sans clothing—especially in their condition.

A minute later, two men wearing suits and ties approached from the far end of the hallway. Neither Evelyn nor Sidney immediately understood who these men were or what their purpose was, and so they did not motion to them as they had the previous group. The men seemed to know just where they were

going however, drifting past the Banks and into the room, volunteering only a cursory tip of their narrow-brimmed fedoras.

Evelyn and Sidney slumped awkwardly against the unadorned, ecru-colored wall by the door, wondering what was happening inside the room. Sidney was now certain that dinner would be out of the question. His head was starting to pound slightly from his earlier abuse of alcohol and his failure to follow up with more. He hoped that some angel at the hospital they'd no doubt be visiting would compassionately supply him with at least some quality aspirin.

While Evelyn scanned the hallway for any sort of chair to rest on, the door to the dressing room groaned open, drawing her and Sidney's attention. The two suited men caught the Banks' eyes, and shuffled toward them with a ponderous gait.

"May we have a word please?" the shorter of the two asked.

"Of course you may," Sidney replied. "But may I first ask to whom I'm speaking?"

Both simultaneously reached inside their jackets, removed their wallets and flicked them open, revealing shiny badges.

"I'm Detective Jeff Dach, Phoenix police. This is my partner Larry Hollahan. We'd like to ask you some questions."

Sidney was confused as to why the police were involved, but assumed records needed to be made in the event of future legal action. He realized he needed to carefully craft his responses to any questions he might be asked. If he mitigated his involvement in this fiasco, he could avert being a defendant in a lawsuit.

"Ask away," Sidney responded.

"I'm assuming you were acquainted with the deceased?" Detective Hollahan asked.

With that question, any blood that was near Evelyn's head quickly migrated somewhere else, transforming her appearance to that of an anemic specter.

"What do you mean, deceased?" Sidney replied. "Are you telling me that Alicia Cavoloni has passed on?"

"No sir," Detective Dach chimed in, "we're referring to the deceased, as in plural. There are two of them—on the other side of this door."

"Excuse me, Jeff," Detective Hollahan interrupted, turning toward his partner, "I think what you meant to say is 'decedents', and not use deceased as a plural. You can't use the word deceased to refer to more than one deceased person."

"I beg to differ, Larry," Detective Dach countered, "why don't you look it up? The term is used to refer to one or hundreds of dead people, if need be."

Sidney was torn between throwing up and taking a swing at both Abbot *and* Costello. "My God—they're dead?" Sidney asked incredulously. "Iris and George are dead?"

"We found identification in the deceased's wallet," Detective Dach answered as he threw a sideways look toward his partner. "His name is George H. Hanover. There was no identification we could find for the female. Maybe you could help us."

Sidney heard a loud thud and turned to find Evelyn flat on her back, spread out on the floor.

After calling for assistance from the medical attendants who were busy wrapping up the Hanovers as if they were giant salamis at a deli, and receiving assurance from one of them that his wife would be fine, Sidney proceeded to give the detectives all the information they wanted.

A half hour later everyone was gone, except for Evelyn and Sidney. Evelyn had responded well to the smelling salts and was now sitting on the floor in the hallway next to Sidney. Sidney knew she was feeling better when she asked if he had cancelled their reservations at Dominick's. The two of them looked like kids hours after their high school prom, pasted to the floor and loosely dressed. They weren't kids though; they were a couple of sixty somethings, dealing with the loss of contemporaries—and good friends.