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Paper Cuts

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About the Author

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Paper Cuts

by Chris Jackson

"Alexandra Stark? Lexy?" The soft male voice outside my apartment hauled me out of hibernation.

I lobbed a pillow at the door and knocked a lamp over in the dark.

"Hey! You all right in there?" A gorilla kept pounding, rattling the doorknob.

I managed a rusty voice. "It's 4:30, for God's sake." Plus, it was Sunday morning.

More door-bashing. Jeez, he'd wake the whole building. I kicked off my sleeping bag and hugged the door, my eye to the peep-hole.

Under the dim hall light stood a raw-boned guy with an earnest, grinning face. He was a few years younger than I was, maybe a junior. His shoulders were hunched in a shiny *Waldingham University* jacket. He wore a green cyclist's cap with a jaunty flipped-up visor. He stepped up to the peephole and grinned. He looked innocent enough. I opened the door.

"Can you pay?" I said.

After fumbling at a cargo pocket, he withdrew a handful of credit cards, gleaming like precious metals.

I shook my head. "Cash only."

He dug into a different pocket. "Eight smackers is what I got. Please?"

I cast a wary eye at the lower landing. The building super's door was closed now, but the wee hours were never too wee for Lolly. She was a studio arts major, frustrated because she had to supplement her income in mysterious ways. She had a strict rule barring strangers from the building, and she could show up at any moment. I plucked the bills from his fist. "C'mon in."

Mr. Eight Smackers took off his cap and stepped inside, eyeing my bookcases. Manila folders lined each shelf, some at odd angles, like gravestones in an overgrown churchyard. He rearranged the tangled sleeping bag to clear a place on the futon, and I saw he had a pony tail.

I sat at my IKEA table. "Give me a minute to log on." The laptop's screensaver lit up a picture of my brother Sean, smiling under a summer sky, hand on the tiller of his wooden day sailer. The image disappeared when I double-clicked on a numbered folder.

"I saw your paper on Dickens last year in the school journal." His knee jiggled. "Dr. Lawson said you were the best researcher he'd ever had." He extended a hand. "I'm—"

"Hey!" I turned to him, hands crossed in front, warding off a vampire. "No names, got it? See this?" I pointed to the screen. "Three-seven-oh-nine-nine. That's you. Permanently."

He blinked. "Sure. Whatever you say."

I thumped the keys, perturbed. The last thing I needed was a referral, especially from Pete Lawson, who was pure poison to me now. "What's the course?"

"Modern Brit History."

I checked my master list. "I can do that. Who's the prof?"

"Winn."

Minimizing my database of paper titles, I opened an Excel list of faculty at WU, and clicked on *Winn, Anthony J.* Ph.D. in History from Purdue the previous May. Dissertation on Gladstone's Victorian liberalism. He had published one book review in a journal called *British Culture*. No peer-reviewed articles. "Hmm. He knows how to research, but you're in luck."

"Wow." He raised his eyebrows. "How come?"

"He was just hired in August and teaches six sections. He's flooded with paperwork, and needs time to find his sea-legs. He won't chase you. What's the assignment?" I held my hands poised over the keyboard as if waiting for surgical gloves. This was indeed a delicate operation.

"What do you have on Churchill?" he said. "At least ten pages."

I consulted the master file then unfolded my step-stool and hopped up for "Churchill, medium length. The dossier held five papers; one conference-worthy, three decent-but-forgettable, and one cut-rate-cheapo. I pulled that. "How about 'Churchill and the Nature of Leadership?'" Fitting for eight bucks.

He made a face as if he'd swallowed a Red Hot. "I was thinking more about his military schooling, how it later affected his war strategy. A cause and effect paper."

I nodded. He had brains. "Not bad. Why don't you work that one up yourself? It's a fifty-dollar idea."

"I need this by Tuesday, and I've been overwhelmed with training and what not. Ideas are cheap. When it comes to wrestling actual sentences, I lose interest."

I could relate. "Here's one. 'Churchill's Rejection of Appeasement.' Seven verified sources. Hidden behind two password-protected gates. This product usually goes for twenty, but you have an honest face."

He widened his eyes. "Thanks. That's nice of you."

"Niceness has nothing to do with it. I want you out of here so I can crawl back into the sack." Checking the paper number, I opened a desktop folder, and searched for the file. He stood behind my chair.

"You've been to London?" he said. I had tacked Sean's postcards to my bulletin board. They formed a kaleidoscope of London landmarks, Buckingham Palace, the Albert Hall, lit twin turrets of the Tower Bridge after dark.

I reviewed the document via Print Preview. "Not yet, but I plan to move there soon. Maybe go to the London School of Economics. My older brother lived there."

"So you'll visit him?"

"He's not there now."

"Oh. It's an awesome city. I spent a few months in London." He said it without fanfare.

"Really?" I punched "Ctrl P" and spun the chair around. "Did you love it? Was it beyond cool?"

He nodded. "Totally. I'll go back, but I want to see all of Europe. After I graduate, I'm trying out for the Tour de France. I'm heavy into training now and looking for a sponsor."

My mind hummed along with the printer, spinning out its assigned ten sheets. I tidied the stack and held it out. "Here you go, three-seven-oh-nine-nine, but you have to promise; give up this life of larceny and focus on training."

"Thanks for your time. Actually, this isn't what you think. I'm not exactly stealing."

Yeh, whatever. I had my excuses, too. "Promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die." He flashed an imp's grin, and even at four o'clock in the morning, I had to laugh.

"That won't be necessary." I handed over his purchase. "Good luck in the big race."

He re-donned his cap, touching the brim as a salute. "You, too."

A pale strip of Massachusetts sky was visible through my window. The Tour de France. For an instant, I felt the sun on my back and whirred past fields dotted with daisies.

Sean in his craft materialized on the screen saver. I had watched as he lovingly restored every inch of that old wooden boat himself. Dad had taken the picture three summers ago. That was before Sean and his classic boat went down a few miles off Marblehead. A crushed pack of Camels lay on the crate I used as a dresser. I fingered out the last one and snapped a light.

###

The languorous Monday afternoon arched its back like a cat, and I fell asleep in Macro class. Afterward, I sleepwalked to the closest campus coffee shop.

"Lexy." It was Pete Lawson beckoning from across the street. Damn. He loped toward me. "Hi. Got a minute?" he said, huffing.

"Maybe after I get some caffeine."

His hair was longer than I remembered, a color that the Brits called "ginger." It sprouted upward over the top of his forehead. His mustache was thick and well-trimmed. He had shining brown eyes and a light spray of freckles that I loved.

"Will you walk me back to the office?" he said. "I need to ask you something."

Pete waited while I bought a coffee. I liked how he looked leaning against the wall, arms folded, sure of his place in the world. He was so wrong for me, too old, too arrogant, but at the time I didn't care. Maybe I still didn't. We headed across the street toward Mather Hall.

As we hiked up the front steps of Mather, a short, slim man in a brown leather aviator jacket and sunglasses appeared from behind a column at the top of the stairs. He raised a hand in greeting.

"Hi ya." The man gave up trying to zip his jacket. "Are we all set for tomorrow, Pete? We can do this thing, you know."

"Almost. This is Alexandra Stark, the young lady I was telling you about. Lexy, have you met the History Department's new addition? The illustrious Dr. Tony Winn."

We shook hands, and Anthony Winn, Ph.D., Purdue, eyed me in a way that made me wonder exactly what Pete had told him. The sleek and stylish Dr. Winn hurried toward the quad.

Pete held the heavy door for me, and I said, "So that's the famous Tony Winn?"

"Steer clear of him. He's too smooth with women and wears expensive shoes."

"I've been warned."

In the century-old building, we climbed the creaky stairs to Pete's office, and he closed the door. The ancient chair behind his desk squeaked as he eased into it. I took the student's seat and scanned the rows of faded volumes behind him. "I heard you had published an article. Congratulations. I haven't read it yet."

"No problem. It's sort of obscure anyway. Now then." He paused and looked at me. I focused on my hands. The office still smelled of his minty aftershave. "What I'm about to tell you is extremely confidential."

I nodded. "I understand." So what else was new? Our entire relationship had been wreathed in secrecy.

He cleared his throat. "University Court voted to expel a student, and he's coming back at us. We thought we had him cold on one plagiarized paper, but that prof dropped the complaint. It sure would help if we could verify another instance of his cheating from last spring. We need you and your files for a search party."

"Can I look at the paper topics before I commit?"

He thought. "I can't reveal too much. There are a few, one in philosophy, another on the Reformation, I think."

"I might have something." The paper I'd given *The Cyclist* wasn't due until tomorrow, but I wanted to steer wide of any topic smacking of Churchill. Not that I advocated academic dishonesty, but *The Cyclist* with his Tour de France dream posed a special case.

"We have to see this evidence pronto. When can we have those magic fingers of yours?"

"I have a Macro paper to finish tonight." The heat must have been on in Pete's office, because I could barely breathe. His remark about "magic fingers" brought up memories.

"Should be a piece of cake for you. Your usual research. A link and a download."

My face burned. "Still the charmer, Pete. This is how you ask me for a favor?" I unfolded the lid tab on my coffee and sipped. It was burnt and scalded the roof of my mouth. "What do you expect?" His eyes flashed, and he flushed from his ginger roots. "I don't see you for months. You refuse a full ride to a Comp Lit Ph.D. at Brown and end up in an MBA program here. You were top tier, Lexy. Now you're shredding your talent."

"I have my reasons."

"What? Your financial aid ran dry, so you help undergrads cheat. Then you turn around and rat the kids out to their teachers? Nice racket. Ever hear of getting an honest job?"

"Don't say that."

"What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? Again? That I'm sorry you lost your—" he stopped.

My heart thudded hard against my ribs. I couldn't look at him.

"Anyway," his voice was soft. He waited. "I'm in a terrible bind here. Please help us. I'll pay your usual finder's fee. It won't take you long."

I struggled to keep my voice even. "All right."

He exhaled. "Can we meet tonight? I could come by your—?"

"No." I needed neutral territory. "The library. Meet me on the fourth floor, around six-thirty. I'll be in our usual study room with my Macro stuff. Bring your laptop, and we'll use the wi-fi."

"Sounds good." He evened the edges of papers on his desk. "I've missed you."

"Don't." I stood and pointed at him. "We agreed."

"That was you. I didn't agree to anything. You said—" Someone knocked on the door. From a long ago habit, we exchanged guilty looks. Pete checked his watch. "It's my advisee."

I gathered my purse and left the bitter coffee on his desk.

###

Ivy obscured the ancient brick of Waldingham University's Merrill Library, five stories of academic tradition. Where the old library sheltered musty learning, the adjacent new wing was like a jewel case, all light and gleaming surfaces. Glass walls formed three sides covered by a soaring atrium ceiling. The new wing housed The Founders Reading Room. Plush club chairs formed conversational groupings on a polished marble floor. Sitting in cushy leather, a visitor could gaze upward at the dizzying succession of railed balconies marking each level.

My usual study room was on floor four. Pete arrived a few minutes early, computer case in hand. Ripping off the Velcro fasteners holding his laptop, he began setting up. "As I said, Lydia Ramirez had this same student last year, and she swears he turned in stolen papers for her class, but she couldn't prove it."

"What's this kid's major?"

He nibbled on his ginger mustache. "Oh no. You get nothing from me."

I let that pass. "I assume Dr. Ramirez ran them through Paper Check. She's a terrier on these things. Did she find Internet sources?"

"Each one had an originality rating in the 90s." Pete logged on then slid his laptop over.

After two years of selling papers, I had an impressive collection of juicy sites. Pop ups flashed *Quality Term Papers For Sale*. Neon banners advertised *Custom Essays*. In *Homework Universe*, Java-script stars and planets promised student customers grades in the stratosphere. Watching from behind my neck, Pete followed the blossoming web pages.

"Man," he said. "It's an online theme park for cheaters."

"Most of these are garbage. Only about a dozen are blue-chip."

He pointed to the screen. "Try that. A dollar a page. Looks student-friendly."

"Too obvious." I scrolled through the lists. "Paper Check will flag it in a heartbeat. Plus, the site has only the first few paragraphs, no actual papers. How much would he pay?"

"Lydia told me the kid's dad is a judge in Connecticut. Maybe five a page?"

"That's a start." Judge? No wonder the student was fighting it. I opened one of my premier sites, *Be Brilliant dot com*. "Uh-oh. Get out the plastic. This one costs us to look."

He opened a wallet. "I thought you took only cash."

"Where I'm going, the computer needs to pay tolls. I have to slip in and out without a trace, and your credit is the only way. I'm not keying my identity into this thing."

He handed me a platinum Citi card. I typed in his number, and the screen froze. "It's expired. Had a credit check recently, Pete?"

"Hell." He left the useless plastic on the desk and pulled out a gold Amex. "Try this."

I picked up the old card. "Don't forget this silver baby." It was the same Citi card he'd given me to book our trip to Cancun last year.

"Keep it. Old times. Besides, I'm letting it lapse."

"I'll cut it for you." I relished taking scissors to it. Goodbye, Cancun. I slipped it into my pocket.

The numbers on his gold card worked, and we were in business.

I said, "What's the next beauty of a topic?"

"Wittgenstein and language."

Pete hovered and exclaimed over the links. "Sensational. So we search for quality stuff near the top?"

"I usually start mid-list," I said. "He wants to leave no fingerprints, so he won't take the first or second choice. There are fourteen pages on Wittgenstein and language alone. Who knew?" I clicked on page seven and scrolled through. Words and graphics flowed upward on the screen.

He spoke from over my shoulder. "You're so good at this it's scary."

"Too much practice, unfortunately." I continued the rhythmic keyboard patter and felt him lean close and stroke my hair. "Stop it." I pulled away. "Please. This is business, all right? Touch me again, and I'm leaving."

"Sorry. I forgot."

"Well, concentrate on remembering." I was remembering too much and was eager to move on. "No paper match for Ludwig. What's next?"

He handed me an actual paper. No student name. The grade was an "F," circled in red. The title was *The Role of Sandhurst Academy in Churchill's War Strategy*.

What the? I looked again, puzzled. "Is this right, Pete? Not about the Reformation. Where did this one come from?"

"Oh, the committee thought it might have an Internet match. I didn't tell you."

The Cyclist had first asked for a paper about this exact subject. How could that be? It wasn't the one he bought. Had he handed in a paper on Churchill's military schooling last year? If so, he couldn't have written it for Tony Winn, who wasn't even here yet. But if he had submitted it to a different prof, say Dr. Ramirez, why did he ask me for it first thing? Maybe The Cyclist was worried they were on his trail, and he wanted to be sure he had covered his tracks. *Actually, this isn't what you think*, he had said. *I'm not exactly stealing*. It didn't add up.

Sitting before the monitor, I tried to follow a thread of explanation, but each try ended in a tangle. I felt Pete next to me, staring intently at my profile. I had to keep working the cursor, so I flipped open five sites then six that I knew to be dead ends. "Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Here." I turned the screen so he could see it. "You try."

He sighed. "I trust you. Obviously, there's no traceable paper on this topic. Let's move ahead. Here's that Reformation one I'd mentioned."

We worked fifteen more minutes sifting through freshman-level sites with papers on Martin Luther, but my mind fizzed. Client Number Three-Five-Nine-Nine was the rabbit. Pete and Tony Winn were hunters, and I had baited the trap.

Pete was right. I was no better than a snitch, setting up students only to expose them later. My stomach tightened, carrying a weight of shame.

"Are we done here? I gotta go."

"I thought you had to do more research for your own paper."

"I'm not in a very systematic mood."

He raised his eyebrows. "What are you in the mood for?"

I shot him a stern look.

"Hoo-boy." He pulled out a fistful of twenties. "Your finder's fee."

"Keep it. I didn't find anything."

"Suit yourself. The court meets at three tomorrow. If anything surfaces, call my cell."

Sure. Combing the Internet on my own time is exactly what I'd do for you, Dr. Lawson.

I rushed out. Even if The Cyclist hadn't yet handed in the Appeasement paper he bought, University Court was gunning for him, and the paper was radioactive. Paper Check might not find it, thanks to me, but the Court could find the cheat if they looked hard enough. And they would. Lydia Ramirez was irritated. An eager Tony Winn wanted Pete to be "all set." If he talked, I'd be dragged in. I could at least warn the kid to salve my conscience. But then I didn't know who he was. Pete did, for sure. *Dr. Lawson said you were the best researcher he'd ever had.* Yes, well.

Pete knew his name, and he wasn't about to tell me.

I had one fact about The Cyclist. I'd start there.

###

The old Rec Office was scary at high noon, let alone after dark. But the cycling team sometimes stored bikes inside after doing sprints around the track.

The Quonset-style structure was more of an overgrown shed on a platform. It had been slated for years to be torn down. Now the roof leaked and rats hid under its rotted floor, but the athletes used it anyway. Assorted weights and rickety treadmills formed a make-shift gym at one end. Fraternity guys used it to stash contraband outlawed from the Greek houses, burying drug baggies or switchblades under the floorboards.

The place sat at the edge of the athletic field parking lots, easy access by car. The winding footpath from campus led through a wooded area cluttered with dead leaves and miasma of skunk. Ahead, the bushes rustled, and I broke stride to avoid the trembling leaves.

I emerged from under a stand of pines. Low and dark, the structure looked like the buildings of British Parliament keeping watch over the Thames.

A handful of guys were still there, some working out, others playing a raucous card game in the corner. A tall jock with a shaved head finished a round of ab crunches and toweled off.

"And he's training for the Tour?" he said. "You mean, like, all of us?"

"He wears a blue jacket and green cap," I said. "And a ponytail."

"Garrett would know. That's him over there. Hey Gooch! This girl wants to go out with you."

"Lemme finish this hand." Gooch wore a red bandana, two gold earrings, and a torn wife-beater t-shirt. Lovely.

A few minutes later, Gooch threw his cards in disgust. He sidled over. "Yeah? You wanted to see me?"

"I sat behind this guy in a meeting the other day, and a wad of money fell out of his pocket. I want to return it, and I don't know his name."

His sleepy eyes opened. "How much? We talking over a hundred, or what?"

"It's a lot. Never mind. Anyway, he's tall like you, brown hair, pony tail, wears a little green hat, cargo pants. Said he was a serious cyclist. He's been to London. I'm not sure, but he might be a history major."

He pointed over my head. "Check those out. If he's on the team, he should be there." On the wall were eight by twelve framed team photos, all at rakish angles. Gooch followed me over. "Hard to tell, I know. The faces are so small."

I examined the rows of blurry ovals. None of them matched my recollection of him. "Nope. He said he was into serious training."

"I can't think who you mean, sorry. But if he's a history major, Cindy Freeling could peg him. She's a senior, into history big time. She knows everybody. Check with her."

"Where can I find her?"

"She lives at the house. Delta Chi." He tugged at one earring. "Is there a reward?"

Cindy Freeling was out of town, but her sorority sister Monique sat with me on an elegant sofa in Delta Chi's living room. From the kitchen came shrieks and chatters of girls talking about men, with an occasional clank of pans. A TV murmured at a tasteful volume.

Monique tried her best. "I never heard his name, but I know who you mean."

"You do?"

"Cindy has been dating this dude off and on for about a month. He wears a little hat like what you said. She met him in one of her classes, so he probably does study history. He looks like one of those bicycle guys, like Lance Whatsisname. He even shaves his legs, Cindy said."

"When will she be back?"

Monique wrinkled her forehead. "No clue." Then she brightened. "But you know what? Cindy works at the library. Before she left, she headed there to rearrange her schedule."

Sheila, a former client, was working the Info Desk. I had dug up an excellent product for her on George Eliot, and she was grateful. I waited while Sheila checked the schedule.

"Cindy doesn't come in again until tomorrow afternoon. In Binding, they told me she had to go home to her dentist in Newton. Wisdom teeth. Boy, I been there."

I had another idea. "Have you been here at work the past few days?"

"Are you kidding? Way too much. I'd love to stay home and sleep."

"Has anyone come in this week asking for books on Churchill?"

"You mean, like, that bulldog English guy with the cigar? Sure. One dude came in all hopped up about him. I think it was last Friday. I sent him to the old wing, fifth floor, DA section for some Churchill biography. Kaplan, I think was the author."

Sheila had a good mind. "Is the book still there? Can you check?"

She accessed the system in a snap. "Yup."

"What did the guy look like?"

"I'm only doing this, Lexy, because if you can't find out for yourself, this one must really be a corker." She closed her eyes to summon the memory. The desk phone rang, but she stayed with me. "Tall, nice smile, hair pulled back in a pony tail, great body, muscular calves." She opened her eyes. "Leave it to me to remember that especially." She picked up the whining phone. "Merrill Library. How may we help?"

On the upper floors, the old library housed actual books. Three capacious elevators ferried mortals to these regions. I boarded one to re-trace the alleged path of The Cyclist as he pedaled after Winston Churchill.

I leaned against the elevator rail. This search gave me zip for results. It was nine-thirty, and I should have been exhausted. Still, I hadn't felt this revved up, this alive, in a while. An actual hunt in the stacks was more exhilarating than twitching a cursor.

The door slid open, confusing me for a second. I had forgotten that this west side of the old library now opened onto the new wing. A railing was the only guard between me and a sixty-foot drop onto the club chairs. Staying close to the wall, I moved into the hunt.

The quiet floor seemed deserted. I chose a cubicle under a lightly whistling heater vent and took out a piece of note paper for my Churchill source. *DA 566.36* by an author named Kaplan.

Brass plates on each shelf-end identified the Library of Congress catalog numbers. Rounding a shelf, I peered at the *DA-DS* brass plate. Looming behind me was a reflected pale oval with two black holes for eyes.

I whirled. No one.

The nearby carrels were empty. Some deep breaths pulled in my scattered nerves. I continued the search.

From a few shelves over, two guys spoke in low tones. Not completely deserted. I located Ari Kaplan's *The Disappointed Heart: A Spiritual Biography of Winston Churchill* and brought the treasure with care back to my cubicle.

A scan of the chapters revealed that the book focused on Churchill's psychological development. Kaplan wrote that his purpose was to explore "the little seen side of Churchill, like soil under a moon rock exposed to earth light for the first time." I felt prickles on the back of my neck and looked up.

I stood and peered over the tops of the carrels. All were empty. No one was on this side of the floor. I ventured toward the balcony edge. Down in the reading room, a handful of students lounged among easy chairs, consulting their laptops.

I returned to Kaplan, who had many pages on Churchill's early schooling.

From across the room, the elevator dinged, signaling a stop. I paid little attention.

On April 8, the young Churchill wrote to his Military Science professor, 'I am quite unable to continue with this current course of - I lifted two fingers to turn the page, when my hand jumped.

"HEY!"

The cry was barely a human voice. Screams echoed from the atrium below. Then the building's fire alarm began a pulsating whoop. I got up and stood on tip-toe to peer over the atrium railing.

On the marble floor five stories below sprawled a dark-clad human figure. With splayed arms and legs, the shape resembled a starfish. A red haze had fanned out from the shape as from an explosion. People swarmed into the Founders Room.

I backed away and sank against the wall. The building seemed to sway. My toes registered a wave motion, as if I'd been waterskiing, then my knees gave way. It was The Cyclist.

###

Merrill Library's public address system clicked on. A too-calm female voice announced, "The library is now closed. Please gather your belongings, and exit the library through doors adjacent to the old library building. Before exiting, sign your name at the Information Desk. After that, please leave the grounds. Thank you."

The elevator took an eternity to arrive and descend. After signing the sheet at Sheila's desk, I stood on ground-level with the others, trying to visualize nothing. Sheila couldn't look at me. Did she think I was to blame? She had added two and two to make six. Around me, students spoke in hushed tones. My feet stayed planted on the floor, but my stomach was still riding waves.

Sirens from rescue units floated over from the entrance to the new wing. I risked a look. Paramedics draped a plastic sheet over the body. They placed the form on a gurney then wheeled it to a waiting ambulance. To get away from the knots of people in the lobby, I wandered outside in a daze.

In the garden, uniformed officers with clipboards monitored the crowd. A few men in sports coats gave quiet orders. One was handing out business cards. He was barrel-chested and tall, with a shock of hair the color of a brown bear. He extended a card to me. *Detective Barry Dove, Waldingham Police Department.*

Staggering past a row of low shrubs, I sank onto a wrought-iron bench.

"You okay?" It was Tony Winn. He placed a solicitous hand on my shoulder.

I bent and stared at the ground. Frost was starting to form along the edges of crimson sugar maple leaves. "I don't know, I guess so."

"You're Alexandra, right? You saw what happened?"

I shook my head. "I—I heard voices. Next thing I knew—"

"Easy. You're white as a sheet. Take a deep breath."

Was this really happening? "I'm so cold—"

"You could be going into shock. Here. Take my jacket. Let me help you up."

Tony Winn offered to drive me home, but I didn't want to be alone. The image of that crumpled shape on the marble floor stayed in the furrows of my brain.

He drove me to Plummer's Tavern, an upscale place outside of town with white tablecloths and candles. Pete and I had been there before many times during school breaks.

Tony Winn ordered a bottle of Merlot and two glasses, and the waitress requested my ID.

She eyed it. "You pass." She handed it back. "Barely." She sniffed and glided away.

"So what happened?" Tony asked. "You were on that same floor?"

My brain still refused to focus. "The elevator stopped a few times. I had a vague sense of people getting out. Then I heard scratching and a horrible throat sound. Screams from the Founders Room below." My voice caught. "I looked over the railing and . . ."

The bottle came, and Tony took command of the uncorking and taste approval process. The ceremony gave me time to calm down. The sting of Merlot also helped.

"I appreciate your help," I said. "Thank you."

"Please," he twirled his glass. "No thanks necessary. So where are you from?"

"Marblehead. My dad owns a dry cleaning store in the downtown. Ever been there?"

"Not that I recall. I'm from Chicago. Too busy to explore this area just now."

"No worries." I tried to smile but it felt pale and pathetic, like the light on a late winter afternoon. "The place is eminently forgettable."

"Pete Lawson said you were a grad student. What are you studying?"

"International Finance, mostly. I'm nearly finished."

"Ah ha. Very practical. What are the plans after graduation?"

"I'll see what happens." Tony Winn seemed nice enough, but not enough to share my London dream.

"No thoughts about returning to Marblehead to run your father's store?"

"Heavens, no." I was horrified. "I can hardly bear to visit on weekends. It's so gray and run-down."

He shook his head. "Only on the outside. What about talking with your father?"

I drew back. "That's what a cell phone is for. If I go home, I'll end up staying, strangled in plastic garment bags. I'm not spending the rest of my life smelling like solvent."

"Sorry to get so personal." He held out his hands. He had long delicate fingers. "It's just that my father died last year, and I miss him. I regret not spending more time with him."

My own fingers needed a cigarette, which was outlawed at Plummer's Tavern. I was eager to switch subjects. The Cyclist supposedly planned to hand the purchased paper in to Dr. Winn. I said, "Did you know the boy who fell?"

"Sure. He always sat near the door, ready to escape." Tony Winn sipped and examined the glass. "Hillstrand. Kyle."

The reversed name echoed in my head..

"He was a senior," Tony Winn said. "Ever have a class with him?"

I thought of the little cycling cap and distracted smile when he talked about the Tour de France. "I'd met Kyle recently, very briefly. Seemed very sweet." My throat caught. "Could I have some more wine, please?"

Tony Winn dropped me off at the trash barrels in front of my apartment. I felt as if a huge piece of me had cracked and sheared off, like from a glacier, crashing into an icy sea. What happened to Kyle didn't have anything to do with me. Why did I keep thinking it did?

On the first landing, the door to Lolly's apartment was ajar, and a rap song boomed into the hallway. "Hey, Stark," she said as I passed. "You look like hell."

I stayed quiet, not knowing what to say.

She turned down the volume, but the music thudded along with my insides. "Big wow at the library, huh?" she said.

I stopped and shouldered inside her half-open door. "Got any nicotine?" Her place was larger than mine, with a full bedroom and kitchen. Her swirling canvases covered the walls.

Lolly had a few more holes in her face than originally provided by Mother Nature. The piercings through her eyebrows and nostril gleamed. She produced a pack of Kents and a match.

I examined the intricate pattern on the canvas and exhaled. "What have you heard?"

"Some kid fell off the balcony into the new room. The buzzards are out." Her spiky hair flamed upward, and semicircles of dark blue arched above her eyes. A tattoo of barbed wire ringed her bare forearm.

The cigarette's burn edged closer to my fingers. "Do they know yet what happened?" "They say he took a header. The cops found a suicide note taped to a bookshelf on the fifth floor."

We smoked in silence, letting the music waft over us until Lolly had to leave for another night appointment.

I unlocked the door to my hovel. Suicide? The idea threw me. I had thought someone was watching me from the stacks. Could it have been The Cyclist, Kyle, just before he placed his suicide note? After midnight, I collapsed onto the sleeping bag and into forgetfulness.

###

At daybreak, the crushed spider image on the marble floor hit me again.

I made coffee and booted up the laptop, passing an opportunity to linger on Sean smiling in his custom boat. Instead, my fingers wiggled, ready for a search. For once my excavation wasn't in the slimy cyber-cave of term papers for sale.

Kaplan's Churchill biography was my launch point. I ventured from there, combining search topics, scrolling titles of mainstream journals, stodgy big names, and off-the-wall e-pubs. I had no hits before when Pete and I searched, but then I'd sabotaged the process to keep Pete off balance. There had to be something. Kyle was after this topic for a reason.

I ran a few comparisons on book chapters then checked dissertations. There it was—in an abstract by Winn, Anthony J. Purdue. *Gladstone's policies set the standard for future leaders, including Churchill*. Tony Winn had produced a whole chapter on Winston.

I sat back and stared at the screen.

Now it made sense why Kyle had asked for that Churchill paper. Not for himself, but because he suspected someone else. Pete's phrase said that the Committee's target was "coming back at them." Kyle had discovered plagiarism by a Committee member and was planning to present it to University Court. That's why he needed it by today.

Another shudder shook me to the core. Tony Winn had asked if I'd seen what happened. The state I was in, I could hardly fathom that he was pumping me for information. Did Tony Winn push Kyle over the balcony railing?

What was the phrase TV detectives used? "Opportunity, motive, and means." Tony Winn had opportunity. What was he doing outside the library anyway? He never said. Kyle had discovered

Tony's cheating and threatened to call him out on it. Winn had motive in spades, to silence Kyle and protect his burgeoning reputation. As for the means of murder? The last piece fell into place. Lack of balance, a push, and Kyle toppled to his death.

I rooted in my bag for the business card. *Detective Barry Dove, Waldingham Police Department.* Should I take that step? Before I made a fool of myself, I needed reinforcements. Then from inside my purse, I saw the message light flashing on my cell.

Hi. This is Cindy calling for Lexy Stark. Monique told me you were asking about Kyle, and I can't believe what's happened. Suicide, my ass. I know he was being set up. One of his profs stole from a book, and the guy accused him instead. I have the proof. Gooch and I will be at the Rec Office tonight at five-thirty. Meet us there, can you? Call me back at this number.

No answer when I called Cindy. I tried another number. Come on, pick up.

'Hi, you've reached Pete. Leave a message.' Damn.

Words tumbling, my message to Pete told of Cindy at Delta Chi and Kyle's evidence against Winn. "Pete, explain to the police. They'll arrest Anthony Winn for Kyle's murder."

The late October sun brushed the pine tops as I parked my Honda across the field from the Rec shed. I trekked along the sidelines lugging my laptop. When I approached the shed, a frantic scrabbling sounded from underneath the porch. Night creatures. I shivered.

Inside, the place was deserted. No guys were working out. I set up on a card table away from their gym. Despite the hut's location, the wi-fi signal was strong. I drove the cursor hard, looking for Winn's dissertation without success. Maybe pairing search words would help.

The front door creaked open. "Lexy?" It was Pete. Thank God.

"In here past the weights." Darkness had fallen. Where were Cindy and Gooch?

"Sorry I'm late." He had a dirty metal box under his arm. "I had to retrieve this," he tapped it, "from under the back porch."

"Your stash? You're as bad as the kids. By the way, I have the pieces of your—"

"What's going on?" Pete said. "Who's this Cindy you mentioned? Tony called, too. Court was cancelled, of course. He told me what happened and that after, you two went out."

"You won't believe this. Tony pushed his student off the library balcony."

"What?"

"Cindy Freeling is bringing evidence to show us. I'm looking for more on here." The screen showed one result. "Kyle discovered Tony had cheated, so the scum set him up."

"Hoo-boy." Pete unlatched the metal box.

Then, from as far away as the moon, a thunderbolt struck. *"the little seen side of Churchill, like soil under a moon rock exposed to earth light for the first time."* The hit for a matched phrase was in a *British Studies* article by Peter Lawson, Ph.D., Waldingham University.

My mouth dropped. I turned to find Pete pointing a gun at my forehead.

He pursed his lips. "Don't look at me like that. I didn't mean for him to fall, okay? Kyle met me in a study room, yours and mine, in fact. First, he asked about sources for my article. He threatened to expose me if I didn't withdraw his case." His forehead reddened. "Too late. Winn would never agree to it. And I'm not on the actual Court, just a consultant."

His voice droned as if on autopilot, and his eyes showed a terrifying blank stare. I had to move away from the pistol, but how? I looked around. The weights? Out of reach.

"I was safe," he said. "Even you couldn't trace it. Then the kid found the Kaplan book. Let's get it, he said. Compare the words. I couldn't let him. The elevator opened, and we skirted the balcony. I pushed, just to scare him. Honest. When he screamed, I grabbed his arms to shut him up, but he went over backwards. Oh God." He covered his face. The gun wavered.

I had one chance. My jeans pocket held the jagged piece of Pete's credit card that I'd cut up. With pointed edge forward, I lunged, finding the gap between his shirt buttons and forcing the sharp ridge of plastic into his midsection. He grunted and dropped the gun. As he doubled over, I bashed his chin with the heel of my left hand. He tumbled back, crashing into a stack of folding chairs, and I dashed out the front door to see a bobbing flashlight, Gooch and a short blonde approaching from across the field.

###

Peter Lawson, Ph.D. was arrested on two counts, murder and attempted murder—mine.

Detective Barry Dove looked like a lumbering grizzly, but he was quick on the uptake and understanding about my past moneymaking activities. He explained that the police had found sheets of plastic and rope in the trunk of Pete's car, his plan for dealing with me. Since I didn't keep close contact with my family, it would be a while before people noticed I was missing. Pete had called Cindy at her sorority, pretending to be Tony Winn. He told her to meet me instead at the coffee shop across from Mather Hall. Meanwhile, I worked in the deserted Rec Office, a lone sacrifice.

Before the questioning, Detective Dove let me sob it all out, the affair, my term paper business, everything. If I signed a deposition, I wouldn't have to appear in court.

My checking account had a balance of \$6, 983.54. I put a check for that amount in an envelope, and slipped it under Lolly's door. It might keep her painting and off the streets.

The idea of clearing out my library of manila folders was too daunting for now. Instead, I untacked Sean's London postcards from the bulletin board and slipped them inside a Macro book. I didn't want to look at them every day. Still, I needed to keep them. Then I rolled up my sleeping bag and packed a small duffel for a weekend visit to Marblehead.