

# TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

(Tree-Trilogy, Book 2)

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# The Expulsion

Thump!

As if something large had fallen far and hard.

Every living thing felt it.

And, because of that thump there came a pause. Time stopped—at least time as they had known it until the thump—while all that lived, from small to large, considered what it meant. Then, every living thing that could run began running. Every flying thing flew. Every swimming thing swam. And all went in the same direction—away.

While they ran, the Cherubim materialized, almost leisurely—as if time didn't matter. As if this wasn't the most urgent thing in the universe. As if all the time in the world would be available for what was destined to take place. At first, they were like mist, but the steam was glowing. The very notion of space itself on every side was pushed apart to accommodate the massive beings. The phenomenon might have reminded the man and woman of a flame, if they had ever seen fire. At first, they could look through the blazing figure in front of them. The two Cherubim stood firm, backs to the Garden.

The man and woman had never imagined anything like this. That it had come so swiftly after that terrible meeting...after their blasphemous eating...was a line of thought neither wanted to follow. A new emotion enveloped them: the fear of death, the meaning of which they couldn't envision.

When the man and woman passed the first shining creature, something foreign inside them chafed. It was the cousin of Shame, one of the impudent feelings they had endured earlier that day. But this distraction whispered, "Depart. Get past the apparition. Now." Although they didn't know the word "apparition," they understood enough to run away.

For nearly a day, they had discovered new ways to think, all manner of opinions, conflicting ideas, and thoughts. One of these was Curiosity, the herald of Temptation. Curiosity said, "Stop. What is that? This is something we've never seen." It was not of their world, but they knew from whose world this had come.

In response, the man stopped and bade the woman stop as well. They turned around and looked at the giant. Now like jewels, now like fire, now like liquid diamond—fully materialized, the Cherub was huge; almost three times as tall as the man.

It held something—something the man and the woman had never seen before: a flaming sword. The moment they saw it, they realized what would happen if it were swung in an arc while they were in its path—which they were. Just days ago, they'd swung things too: flowers, lambs, strands of grapes, themselves—anything that made them laugh. But that was before they had eaten the fruit that changed the world, the fruit of the tree that they could still see, now out of reach forever.

From where they were standing, they could feel the heat of the flaming sword, and at that moment, Instinct was born. It was a gift; a gift for protection; one last gift

from the Father for His loved ones on whom He had meted out the nearly ultimate punishment.

He had given them a multitude of gifts as they ran away from the Garden. Besides Curiosity and Instinct: Preservation, Resourcefulness, Intuition, Creativity, and more. Generations would rise and fall before they understood the gifts He'd given them on that day.

As they gazed upon the Cherub, Preservation told them that the flames of its sword were hot; well beyond the elysian warmth that was all they'd known before. *This* heat could sear their flesh in an instant; the image of which came into their minds not from His gifts, but from knowledge—knowledge acquired when they partook the fruit of the forbidden tree. Knowledge that had opened their eyes to things like their own mortality—something they had never considered. Surely, that was no gift.

Both the man and the woman understood that their world had begun to change at the Tree of Knowledge. They received the knowledge of suffering and mortality, the feelings of shame, embarrassment, and immorality; emotions and inhibitions: fear, worry, and distrust; and the awareness that everything they had thus far experienced also possessed a bad side. The knowledge of things they never knew they hadn't known, and the knowledge that if they had gone on in Obedient Bliss, they would not have cared about the things they hadn't known they didn't know.

*Take it back, Lord!*

Silence.

With its right hand, the Cherub slammed its sword down to the ground exactly the same time as its twin did so at the other end of the Garden. Their every move mirrored one another three miles apart, though their backs were to each other. Their swords didn't

enter the earth; they were not of this world—they *bent* the earth. And that was the first earthquake.

The first earthquake was as loud as it was powerful. All the remaining creatures, the ones that had held back, now rushed out of the Garden in terror.

Between the sword of the one Cherub and the other, there came a distortion of time and space. With flawless synchronization, they sliced through the air in a semicircle, cutting a rift through the very foundation of existence. The arc of their swords pulled this fabric-of-the-universe over the Garden, making a great dome in the process. As their swords hit the ground again in perfect unison, the dome was complete; no one could get into the Garden; space and time began to warp around Paradise.

The angels swung their swords up as one, using both hands to raise them skyward and give glory to God. Through this glorification, power surged into them; and through that power, the sphere enclosing the garden appeared to contract. Fire of Heaven, golden light, pure and bright, illuminated the angels and refracted into uncountable rainbows. There had never been a rainbow on the earth before.

The dome collapsed inward, slowly, and imperceptibly—millimeter-by-millimeter, minute-by-minute. It was meant to be so. Had it collapsed instantly, the disturbance in the continuum of reality would have destroyed the planet. The Garden did not actually become smaller inside the dome, but the warping of the space enclosing it gave that impression to the world of Man in which it had formerly existed.

The man and the woman could see through the dome into the Garden, they could see the Tree of Life; they longed to be back inside. Their aching regret came and went, replaced by remorse, then anguish. They stepped backwards; their first steps outside the

Garden. Sharp stones cut their feet and bruised their heels— skin that had never been pierced—and for the first time but not the last, they felt pain.

*God!* They cried out.

He didn't answer.

*Where are you?* They couldn't hear Him, couldn't see Him... couldn't feel His presence.

Emptiness.

The hot air was thick with dust, smothering—nothing like the deliciously moist air to which they had become accustomed. The thunder of fleeing creatures faded in the distance, replaced by shrieks, roars, and blood-curdling screams, as the game of prey and predator commenced.

*Why are they doing that?* The woman's eyes glazed in confusion. *Yesterday we played with them, rolled with them...*

She touched the garment God had made for her; it was rough against her skin. Lamb! *Why did it have to be Lamb?*

Of all the animals, Lamb had been their favorite. Lamb had played with them every day, and they had nuzzled to sleep against the animal's shining fleece, every night, soft and warm. Now, this lifeless mantle was all that was left of their friend. Lamb was surely dead.

*Will I be like Lamb when I am dead? Will God take me for a garment? Or,* she clutched her belly—new life stirred in her womb—*will he take one of my children?*

With the world's first tears in their eyes, the man and the woman looked up to the Cherub's face. He stared at them with an expression that their newfound knowledge told

them had yet no name. The man paused to name it, as was his prerogative, and he named it Pity. But pity was something the Cherub knew to be of the world of Man, and the Cherubim's link to the flow of time in that world was loosening; with each passing moment it slowed its speed to the rhythm of the Garden. One second in the Garden now exceeded a worldly minute; soon it would be an hour, then a year. Standing at the nexus of two such disparate time-streams, the Cherubim were more like statues than living spiritual beings.

Without warning, a hymenal laceration appeared above the tip of the angel's upstretched sword. With an earsplitting belch, it vomited forth a projectile of malevolent phlegm almost the size of the angel itself. The emerging blur arced upward. Had it maintained its trajectory, the fiend it was would have landed far beyond the man and the woman. However, it traced the Cherub's gaze to the terrified couple. Seizing the moment, Evil whipped its tail around in midair—a tail that had not been there yesterday when, bedecked with jewels, he had been the most beautiful of them all. The putrid appendage slapped the now-not-so-innocent couple across their chests, shredding their flesh while propelling them backward onto the stinging gravel.

Collapsing, they gagged on the smell of the Serpent's mighty tail, their stomachs spasming at the touch of its ooze. In its eyes, they saw malice, death, and maniacal triumph. All this happened in the instant before they struck the ground—the impact causing blinding pain. Their breath was knocked out of them, and mercifully, so was their consciousness.

But before the hideous Tempter had a chance to slink away, before the woman had succumbed to the reprieve of faint, she locked eyes with the Prince of Darkness himself, his face defiant, triumphant. She finally understood the diametric *other* side of everything that ever was, the worst of all that through his scheming she had wrought:

Hate.

## Meredith & Stuart on the Boat

“L-O-V-E.” Meredith batted her eyes at Stuart. “Fourteen points!” The word ended on the pink square in the center of the board. The first word of their first game on the first day of their honeymoon: ‘LOVE.’ It was quite a coincidence. *Something we’ll tell our grandchildren about*, she thought.

Meredith saw a look of smug surprise on Stuart’s face. She suspected he would attribute her luck to divine intervention. For him, there were no coincidences; God was in control, he always said. She wished she could agree with him.

Stuart placed a ‘D’ below Meredith’s word, flicking the tile downward with his forefinger so it made an audible slap. ‘LOVE’ became ‘LOVED.’ Then he added four more letters. “And D-E-A-T-H.”

Meredith presumed Stuart’s word choice reflected inner concerns. Thoughts of death were inescapable a thousand miles from the nearest land, eighteen floors above the surface of the Atlantic Ocean.

The trip to Europe on the *Queen Mary II* had been a wedding gift from her father and grandmother; it would be a pilgrimage to her family's roots among the Hasidic community in Antwerp. *Hadn't she been looking for her roots three years ago that summer at the kibbutz?* And then, she'd met Stuart on the plane coming home to Los Angeles. Now they were headed back. Married! *Was some circle of life being completed? Or, were they unraveling the very warp and woof of the well-worn fabric making up their comfortable tie-dyed existence?*

Meredith added a 'B-E' to make 'BELOVED.' She stressed the last syllable.

Instinctively, Meredith touched the heart-shaped crystal hanging from her neck—it had two compartments, one contained water, the other, earth. Stuart's matching pendant held three apple seeds in pure air. Earth, water, air, life—theoretically, by putting their hearts together, they could grow an orchard; nourish themselves in times of need; even restore the human race after global disaster. Feeling the smooth ornament, she was aware of the click her wedding ring made against it. *Her marriage—her roots; what would her relatives in Antwerp say? Stuart was a goy, a gentile, a Christian!* She squeezed the tiny symbol of their love.

Stuart picked up all seven tiles—Meredith gasped; it was too early—but he was teasing. He used only six. "D-E-A-R-I-E. Whew! I needed a vowel dump!"

"I don't have any vowels! Unless you count the 'Y' in M-Y-R-R-H."

"Two 'R's?!" He pretended he was going to challenge her, pulling out his PalmPad—it had a built-in dictionary.

"Yes!" She thrust out her chin, then softened, smiling. "This was a wonderful idea." She kissed him, and put on a heavy Yiddish accent. "Thank you *Schtoodles*"—one of many pet names.

“Don’t thank me, thank Monty... and my dad too, and grandma Miriam. It was their idea. If you’d asked me, I’d have said, ‘Honeymoon? You mean a weekend on Cape Cod, right?’”

Meredith laughed.

“But this...” he swept his arm across the deck, “this is beyond my wildest dreams.”

“I’m glad you like it,” she paused. “Dearie!”

Meredith knew how hard her father had worked so she and Stuart could have this trip, a combined graduation present and honeymoon. Ever since they’d graduated, it seemed like money grew on trees. Most of it came from her father, “Monty,” Melvin Montgomery. She didn’t feel guilty spending it; she knew he’d been saving it for her, and just for her, all his life.

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Meredith Montgomery had grown up in “The Valley”— the famous San Fernando Valley, in California. From birth until college, she lived on Ventura Boulevard in Sherman Oaks, in the apartment above “Monty’s Deli,” her father’s restaurant.

Monty’s Deli competed with “Sam’s Deli,” several miles to the East. At the foot of Laurel Canyon, “Sam’s” catered to workaholics from CBS. Monty’s clientele came from farther west, Sepulveda Boulevard: blue-collar workers off the longest street in America, the backdrop of countless made-for-TV movies trying to capture a mood between seedy and proletariat. Traveling along Sepulveda from Sherman Oaks to Van Nuys one turned the dial counterclockwise, from affluence to drug-rehab.

Daylight Saving Time had ended the night of Meredith's birth. Everyone had one less hour of sleep; schedules were confused; the Deli was chaotic. Pandemonium was the norm in the kitchen anyway, so the birth of Meredith was scarcely noticed. Some items had been overcooked; some undercooked. Thankfully, Meredith had come out just right.

Born with a full head of hair, Meredith didn't have it cut until her 13<sup>th</sup> year when it was well below her waist. She made sure the hairdresser cut no higher than her belly button.

Her hair was unique. It was the first thing anyone noticed, and it was beautiful: copper-colored; so thick she bought shampoo by the case. Stuart often joked that she personally skewed detergent pollution statistics. Moreover, he claimed that her hair had an impact upon the balance of nature—it caused forty men to go bald prematurely.

Like most of her childhood chums, she enrolled in UCLA, directly over the ridge separating Los Angeles from The Valley. She had experienced a barrage of secular humanism from her professors, but refused to adopt the party line for the sake of her grades. The best thing about college had been meeting Stuart and Roger.

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“And Roger's parents,” Stuart reminded her. “Don't forget them. They chipped in for the trip too.”

“It's your turn.” Meredith stretched out in her deck chair. “Forty to thirty-three. I'm winning.”

“You were winning.” Stuart slowly revealed his word. He always started from the last letter when he had a bingo! “I-D-O-L-A-T-E-R!” *Was he implying something?*

She thought back two summers. Stuart and his best friend Roger Warren had been hiking in Turkey. Minutes after cresting the rim of a crater two miles in diameter, Roger had fallen to his death. Stuart ended up in a secret monastery in the crater with monks who had been cut off from the outside world for two thousand years. For a while, everyone thought Stuart was dead, too. Meredith had talked his parents into allowing her to accompany them on a search mission. Her knowledge of Hebrew—she could translate the menu at Bornstein’s Bakery—convinced Stuart’s mother to let her come.

They’d finally found Stuart—a changed Stuart, a spiritual Stuart—in the hidden village of Stauros. Then, things had become weird: trees turning into...what? Angels, Stuart said. There were machine guns, bolts of lightning. It was all a big muddle. And then the earthquake...

*Had it really been a miracle as Stuart said?* Even Stuart’s father claimed the whole thing was a mass hallucination.

She knew Stuart hoped she would someday come to his way of thinking about God. Yet, Meredith became quiet whenever the subject turned to spiritual matters. Yes, something extraordinary had happened in the crater, but was it miraculous? Did it prove the existence of God or the Bible?

“R-E-J-E-C-T. Sixteen points.” *Oops!* She saw that she had picked the wrong word to follow Stuart’s triumph. He had that hurt look in his eyes, the one he tried to hide; it showed what he felt inside. *Did people always spell out their inner fears and dreams when they concentrated on Scrabble?* It made sense: the words that come to mind deal with our most consuming thoughts.

She squeezed Stuart’s hand. “Did you know Scrabble was rejected by every game company in the world? Finally, its inventor self-published the game from his garage.”

Her husband’s expression cleared. His face was like an open book. She wondered if he knew how well she could read it.

“A-N-O-I-N-T. Ten points.” He half smiled.

*Oh boy! Here we go again.* “Don’t let me win! And don’t get preachy with me!”

Meredith studied her tiles.

“P-U-P-A.” The ‘A’ adjoined the ‘A’ in ‘ANOINT.’

“And ‘AA’?” Stuart pointed. “Abbreviations aren’t allowed.”

“It’s a type of lava.”

*Lava like in the crater where Roger had died.*

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Back in Los Angeles, they had joined a Messianic fellowship. *She was Jewish, after all.* Nevertheless, she could not hide the fact that she was still seeking.

By summer’s end, the clash of Stuart’s newfound faith with his father’s denials became unbearable. Stuart consoled himself with Jesus’ words: “...I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother...” In August, the widening rift between them led Stuart to another scriptural passage: “If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town.” He transferred to Boston University. Meredith joined him for their final year, and they married right after graduation.

Meredith’s mother did not attend the wedding. As close as Meredith was with Monty—she was estranged from her mother. The distance between them widened every year. Her mother had committed unconscionable acts to prevent the marriage. Stuart was

not Jewish. But her mother hadn't been to synagogue in twenty years, and that made her a hypocrite in Meredith's opinion.

Although Meredith and Stuart's relationship was made in Heaven, it had its fallen angels and golden calves. Meredith suspected these conflicts grew from not being of one mind spiritually. She knew that Stuart believed their return to Turkey would lead her to accept what they'd experienced two years ago as miraculous. Their itinerary was clear.

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Stuart pretended to be choking. "I have HEMLOCK, but I can't get it down."

"Very funny, Socrates." She'd heard the joke before.

"No. This time I really do have it." And he did—for thirty-eight points. He built 'HEMLOCK' off the 'C' in 'REJECTS.'

"L-A-V-A. Fourteen." *The lava hadn't been what killed Roger.* Meredith shuddered as her mind replayed the scene: Roger's broken body at the base of the crater rim.

Stuart looked at her quizzingly.

"I miss Roger," Meredith said.

The newlyweds became somber, staring at the sun breaching the horizon. Meredith knew her husband was remembering the same thing she was: the good times the three of them had shared.

Two waitresses working the deck in tandem interrupted their reverie; one offered a tray of pastries, the other, coffee or tea.

"T-O-A-S-T-Y," Stuart said. "Twenty-one points."

“You’re eating a croissant, and you make the word ‘TOASTY.’ Is that a coincidence?” She’d outlined her theory to Stuart before. He called it the “Double Word Projection Hypothesis.”

“Not everything can be explained by science.”

“L-I-E!” she snapped (and spelled).

“Time to bring in my hunter.” Stuart knew she wouldn’t challenge this; she’d lost a turn for that in another game. “N-I-M-R-O-D.”

“F-U-S-E-D. Thirty!”

“G-O-D. Infinity.” They smiled at each other. “I meant to say ‘twenty-one.’”

“You always make ‘GOD’,” she said. “O-N-Y-X.”

“And you always make ‘ONYX,’” Stuart said as he added an ‘I’ to make ‘XI.’

She finished her pastry with one hand, placing her tiles with the other. “I-G-N-E-O-U-S!” She laughed! “Bingo! Seventy-six! Who’s winning now?”

Stuart always kept score. “You are.”

Meredith beamed.

“Are you going to start throwing those igneous rocks at me again?” he asked.

“I don’t do that.” Meredith knew that Stuart believed she’d taken her degree in geology to give herself an endless supply of ammunition—in the form of 600-million-year-old rocks—for certain discussions. Stuart’s degree in Biblical Archeology guaranteed that inflammatory topics were a mainstay in their conversations.

In fact, Meredith’s spiritual quest had been the basis for her choice of profession, but not for the reasons Stuart assumed. She suspected that if God were truly everywhere, then all of Him must be in every thing; even the smallest rock must contain God in His entirety. Besides that, she had taken all those courses in plate tectonics *because* of what had happened in the crater, the crater where Roger had died—what Stuart called a

miracle and her professor called a right-lateral strike-slip: eight-point-six on the Richter scale.

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“Are you sure you’re OK with this?”

“What’s not to be OK with?”

“You know — with the Jewish part.”

“I’ll adjust.” He didn’t look so sure of himself. “Hey! They’re God’s chosen people, right?”

“Yes, and I am one. Remember? What if I become a Hassidim? I might ask you to wear a *yarmulke* for the rest of your life.”

“You’re entitled to find your roots. Just *leave* me the *branches*.” He leaned forward and picked up a mass of her hair, raised it high, and poured it over them, ducking beneath to nuzzle her cheek. “I’ll *stick* them in my *trunk*.” he whispered; he kissed her.

“I’ll put a rock on your trunk,” Meredith teased, pretending they were playing *Rock-Paper-Scissor*. “Rock locks trunk!”

“You can’t lock a trunk with a rock!”

“Yes I can,” she teased. “I can put a big rock on top of your trunk and you won’t be able to open it!”

“Would you do that to me?” He made a face.

It was one of their inside jokes: *Rock-Paper-Scissors*. “Rock,” because Meredith’s degree was in geology; “Paper,” because—as she claimed—Stuart’s degree in Theology was based on paper: the Bible. And “Scissors”... They hadn’t come up with anything for scissors. Yet!

Meredith remembered how the game started. She and Stuart had been on a summer dig in Texas—a patch of desert outside of Del Rio near the Mexican border. She loved it; they could practically work side-by-side. As the group broke through the upper crustaceous into the lower, she called out the names of minerals, “Pyrite, Selenite, Celestite... Bound to be some fossils here,” she turned to Stuart. “These minerals are known to preserve fossils.”

Stuart was huddled with a group of Biblical Archeology students. When she slid under his arm, she saw what they were looking at: the skeleton of an armadillo. Several of the students hastily pocketed their GPS handhelds.

*What’s going on here?*

Her husband-to-be squeezed her hand. “I’m going to take this specimen to Del Rio for Carbon-14 dating.”

“Well, don’t you date any Texas fillies over there,” Meredith replied; the other students blushed.

The following afternoon, Stuart had entered her tent. “You remember that armadillo?”

“Of course!”

“It was buried by the School of Theology four years ago. They left precise GPS coordinates of the location.”

“Wow! It looked very old!”

“It was skeletelized.”

“That’s not a word!” Meredith reached for her worn copy of the Official Scrabble Dictionary; she carried it everywhere.

Stuart stopped her. He put a stack of papers on her specimen basket. “Read the report.”

She flipped through the pages. “This says the armadillo was between six and seven thousand years old!”

“That’s the point. Carbon-14 dating. It’s sooooo accurate. Don’t ya love it?”

Meredith was speechless.

Stuart nodded to her specimen basket. His tattered Bible had been under the report. The book was face-up on her case, the words “Holy Bible” embossed in 14-carat gold on the cover.

“What do you have in there?” Stuart asked.

“Pyrite.”

“You mean, Fool’s Gold, don’t you?”

“But—”

“Paper covers rock!” Stuart said, grinning. And that had started it.

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“Adam was missing one of his—” Stuart paused, dramatically, “—R-I-B-S. Triple word.”

The ship’s horn blasted. From where they were sitting—almost right next to it—the soundwaves penetrated their bodies as if their flesh was jelly. They covered their ears.

“I-C-E. Six.” Meredith scowled. She couldn’t stand scoring in the single digits.

“Speaking of ice,” Stuart said, “they blow the horn when they spot icebergs.”

Meredith searched the sea. She thought he was kidding, but the air had become chilly, too chilly. She beckoned to the blanket porter.

“B-E-G-E-T. Nine.” Stuart added up their scores. “Thou shalt beget sons and daughters... Let’s not forget that.” He displayed the score sheet. “You’re winning.”

“W-I-Z for thirty. Double word!”

“And I have the other ‘W’,” Stuart said. He put two tiles down with a flourish.  
“Triple word. Now, I’m winning.”

The elderly porter tucked them into scrumptious *QM2* deck-blankets. Meredith felt perfectly content. Something moved just outside her field of vision and she quickly turned. A middle-Eastern-looking man was arranging his blanket. He nodded a greeting toward her. *There was something strange about him...almost sinister.*

Stuart cleared his throat impatiently, and Meredith returned to their game.

She was prepared. “Q-A-T.”

“That’s not a word!”

“Yes it is. I found it in a book on Scrabble from the 4-deck library. You should read and memorize the ‘Q-without-U’ words. I did. Qat, tranq, qi—”

“What does it mean?”

“It’s an African shrub. It’s like an amphetamine—illegal in the United States.”

“And ‘tranq’ is a word?”

“Yes. Short for tranquilizer.”

“Well then, ‘T-R-A-N-Q’ for forty-two. I just broke three-hundred—302 to be precise.”

“H-A-J brings me to 303, and I’m out!” Meredith countered.

“And two more from me. Final score: 305 to 300. You win.” He shook her hand, mimicking a tournament.

They packed up the game and arose, intending to return to their cabin. The dark, muscular man in the deck chair behind them was staring back and forth, first at a photograph, then at Meredith.

“*Qvite* a coincidence, *vouldn’t* you say?” He had a middle-eastern accent.

The man held up the photo. It was a picture of the top of a wooden box, covered with elaborate carvings and inlaid with copper and gold. The carvings on the sides were indecipherable; clearly, they would have continued if the box top were seated upon its rightful bottom. It appeared to be a primitive map; four rivers defined by inlays of white gold. At one end was the profile of a woman’s head. Her face was rudimentary: an abstract depiction of a Mediterranean woman; she wore a royal calash. The headgear was inlaid copper, with jewels. It looked exactly like Meredith’s hair. Furthermore, it was the same color.

Meredith caught her breath. She’d often imagined her hair as the imperial headdress of an Israeli princess. In fact, she’d always thought of it that way. What she saw on the box top was exactly what she had imagined.

*This can’t be.*

She sat back down; so did Stuart.

“Your wife is beautiful,” the man said to Stuart, as if Meredith weren’t even present. “I heard you say that she’s a geologist, and you are an archeologist.” He still ignored Meredith.

“You heard right. What do you do?” Stuart asked.

“I kill beautiful women.”

## After the Fall

Seth and his brothers called the rock-hard heavenly being the “statue.” As children, they played in front of it, standing on each other’s shoulders and climbing to the very top. They could see the vertical wound of time and space above the tip of the sword. Sometimes it looked like an icicle of congealed light; at night, it could look like a translucent vanilla bean.

When one boy stood on the shoulders of the statue, and another stood on his shoulders, the person on top could press his eye against the strange gash in reality and look into another world. They could see the beautiful Garden. It seemed to continue forever.

Oh, to be inside.

They had circled the statue repeatedly, but couldn’t find the Garden; it simply wasn’t there. They searched the entire region for another entrance, but found none. Whenever they were near the statue, they climbed up to peek inside that floating crystal, to make sure they hadn’t dreamt it all.

They had seen their reflections mirrored in ponds, and they'd heard the ocean through seashells, so they knew that some things in life were not as real as they appeared, and neither were their dreams. However, the statue was more than a reflection, and Seth and his brothers were wide-awake.

For some reason, their parents refused to look through that crack. Instead, when they asked their father to come look, he told them the story of the Garden of Delight within, and his story agreed with everything they saw through that small slit of *whatever-it-was* cleaving the universe.

He told them they had lived there once. It was beautiful compared to where they were living now; they wanted to go back. He told them they couldn't, and explained why: about God, and how He used to walk with them; about how important it was to obey Him.

The children had never seen God, but they believed him because they had seen the Garden.

Their father also told them of two trees; one of these they could see when they peeked inside the crack. They knew which tree it was just by looking at it. The knowledge came to them out of the same wellspring that sets whales swimming on ten-thousand mile journeys every year; that leads dying elephants to hidden graveyards; that assures hawks above the clouds that a moving dot is a mouse, and not a leaf.

Gradually, they moved farther from the angel, farther away from the unimaginable opening. Returning to the playground of their youth became a longer and longer pilgrimage. It was difficult to believe that this statue had once been alive, as their father claimed. Or that it was still alive as he insisted.

Nine hundred years later, when their father lay dying, Seth made the hike back to that place of childhood memories. It took three days. Ten feet of dirt and rubble now covered the base of the Cherub. The part that remained exposed was just high enough to allow Seth to stand eye to eye with it...almost. He still had to look up, although now it was a simple matter for him to peer through that fissure of time.

As time flowed in the Garden only hours had passed. The tree was still there, just as it had been the last time Seth looked. He knew that the leaves of *that* tree would heal his father—that eating of the Tree of Life would allow his father to live forever. He knew that his parents’ disobedience was the reason they were forbidden to eat of that tree. His mother had been beguiled by the Serpent, but his father had sinned with his eyes wide open. They would all die for it.

Seth steeled himself. “Angel of the Lord, your servant, my father, lies dying. Pray give me a branch of the holy tree to heal him.”

No answer.

Seth bowed in front of the Cherub. “If you are real, at least give me the oil of mercy that flows from the Tree, that I might anoint my father with it...” he implored the angel hour after hour.

He kneeled. He beat upon the Cherub’s chest until his hands bled. He wept. He swooned from exhaustion.

Seth had no idea whether he’d slept an hour or a day, but he awoke with an awareness of presence—the way one awakes when another person creeps up to them no matter how silently. He leapt to his feet and looked around.

No one, as far as he could see.

Only the upper part of the statue was there, poking through the dirt as if long since discarded.

*But wait!*

Something about the statue was different, almost as if it had shifted position while Seth slept. He studied it carefully. *Had it changed?*

As he looked, he saw the statue moving, ever so slowly, yet faster each second. The Cherub slipped from the time of the Garden to the time of the world. Seth had been holding his breath in wonder. The angelic acceleration was the most graceful thing the young man had ever seen. It happened before Seth exhaled.

The angel held out a massive fist, slowly opening it, palm up; in its hand were three seeds. *Seeds from the Tree of Life?* Seth assumed they were, and, forgetting all about the fruit, reached to take them, then pulled back. He looked into the Cherub's eyes to see whether he was permitted. He was.

When he scooped up the seeds, his knuckles brushed the Cherub's palm. A flash of energy coursed through Seth and he shivered with excitement. It felt so good he wanted to touch the angel again, but he knew he shouldn't.

His hand closed around the seeds, tightly, as if they might disappear or turn into pebbles. Even as he did so, the Cherub resumed its original position, adjusting to the time of the Garden. When Seth looked back up at its eyes, it was as if nothing had happened. The angel was a frozen statue before him as it had been for 900 years.

Yet, the seeds of the Tree of Life were in Seth's hand, or so he thought. He didn't plan to open it until he returned to his father.

When Seth got back, he faced devastating news. His father had died while he was away. Looking at the seeds in his hand he said, "Now what?"

Seven days earlier, he'd left with the expectation of coming back to feed the leaves of the Tree of Life to the dying Adam. As weak as his father was, Seth had imagined cutting them into small pieces and putting them into his father's mouth.

Not knowing what else to do, Seth placed the three seeds the Cherub had given him onto his father's tongue. Then they buried the old man while Seth wept.

From a hidden vantage point, the Serpent watched with great curiosity. He was glad the situation was ending. He longed to go back to the place where he'd made his nest years ago: that delicious puddle: the stain left by Cain after he'd smashed Abel's head to release the first blood of murder onto the earth.

When he saw the seeds on Adam's tongue, the Evil One's eyes glazed over with wickedness. He had to do one more thing. Night came, and he slithered through the spaces between the mound of rocks until he reached the corpse. It felt good; it brought back memories of unspeakable games he'd played with Abel's flesh in a similar place.

He squeezed and scraped along Adam's skin; where there wasn't room, he burrowed in using his teeth to clear the path. He could smell the seeds as he bit through the throat. He was delirious with bloodlust as he gnawed through the bottom of the tongue.

Vowing to eat all the seeds he'd seen Seth place in Adam's mouth, he swallowed the first one. He ate like a snake: swallowing things whole, then letting them digest in his stomach for many days.

As the seed passed through his throat it scraped his malicious spirit with something so opposed to the Serpent's nature that he gagged, choking and writhing; he would have screamed if he still had vocal cords. It was as poison to him. He rued the moment he had swallowed the seed, knowing from experience that a long time would

pass before his body ejected it. If he had arms, he would have torn his own flesh asunder to remove it.

Eating the other seeds was out of the question. Not after the taste of that first one. His only thought was, Flee!

He slithered as fast as his belly would take him, away from that place, far away. When he stopped moving, the pain returned, so he didn't stop until the moon had waned six times. His skin in shreds and festering, he finally felt the contractions that told him the seed was being expelled from his body.

He strained and pushed, as if giving birth. The seed emerged, seemingly unchanged. The Serpent, awash with relief, looked around the place where he'd ended up, the place outside the walls of Jerusalem, the place that one day would become known as Potter's Field, where one day a man named Judas would hang himself.

Already, the seed was sprouting roots.

## Femke, Reiner, Max

Femke de Gier was pretending again. The guy sitting next to her thought she was a man; so did everyone else on the plane. They were supposed to; she was dressed like a man.

“E.U.E.I.A.” Femke said to her seatmate. “E.U. Environmental Impact Assessment.” She shook his hand. “We’re the ones who make sure that pipeline doesn’t wreck the planet for future inhabitants.” Sensing his astonishment upon feeling the softness of her hand, she quickly pulled away and gazed out the window.

Below, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers wound southward, sparkling in the sunlight. She extended her arm and spread her fingers to form a letter ‘V,’ forefinger pointing at the sun, carefully aligning the vertex with the intersection of the rivers—she knew they didn’t really meet; she could picture the map of central Turkey. The earth leapt into sharp focus as she strained her eyes to see the triangle of land, thirteen miles on two of its sides. Somewhere down there, on the ground framed by her fingers, she would find what she was seeking. A familiar refrain entered her thoughts: *If only I knew what I was looking for.*

The environmental impact ruse was a good cover story—one Femke could pull off without arousing suspicion. As chief field investigator for the clandestine *Stichting Nederlandse Verbeteren*, the Foundation for the Betterment of the Netherlands, Femke controlled people and money beyond her wildest dreams—certainly more than any other 29-year-old businesswoman in Holland. The goal of the S.N.V., that of returning the Dutch to the glory they had held before the industrial age, meshed well with Femke’s own ambitions. She now knew that her superiors had groomed her for this position since university, maybe even before.

Femke enjoyed the attention. She would have stood out in a crowd anyway; she was six foot six. The distance from the heel of her foot to the inside of her thigh comprised more than half her height. Usually she appeared even taller: she wore high heels so she could look down upon—and compete against—the men of her country, the tallest people in the world.

Well aware of how men were affected by her legs, Femke adorned them with costly stockings, boots, and ankle bracelets, to enhance their power. She often prowled Amsterdam’s seedier districts for ideas.

She dressed like a man whenever she was in Turkey. She had to: the length of her skirt could invoke the death penalty from Muslims. It wasn’t difficult, her face was ambisexual, and her Dutchboy haircut—blonde—allowed her to change her appearance from male to female merely by changing her clothes.

She’d been in her late teens when the Dutch started exporting their culture of death with abortion ships—the brainchild of the former ship’s surgeon on the *Rainbow Warrior*: Dr. Rebecca Gomperts. Femke’s political science studies at the university in Utrecht had prevented her from volunteering for “Women of the Waves.” While Gomperts was sailing around Ireland in the *Sea Change* leaving a backwash of death,

Femke was mobilizing the “Take Back the Netherlands” student movement, the T.B.N (*Terugbrengen Nederlands*). Members of the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* political party, the L.P.F., cast a watchful eye in Femke’s direction.

The Dutch government resigned, *en masse*, in early 2002, when the United Nations uncovered the culpability of elite Dutchbat troops in the 1995 massacre of 8,000 Muslims at Srebrenica—a war atrocity recalling those of the Nazi regime. Femke wept, not for the dead Croats, many of whom were mere teenagers, but because of what it said about the spine of her government—the victims had been Muslims, after all.

The demonstrations she organized propelled her to the inner circle of the L.P.F.; to their leader Pim Fortuyn. The ill-fated leader advocated a “one-strike—you’re out” policy for all people of dark skin. Muslims were targeted, and they hated him. Pim was effeminate to a fault: he kept two miniature poodles and a leather-clad butler, and regularly declared he’d rather be in a gay bath than church. Femke loved him from a distance.

Although an animal rights activist assassinated Fortuyn just before the elections, 28 members of his fledgling L.P.F. won seats in the Second Chamber; for 89 days they led the controlling coalition of the Dutch congress. When the truth about the L.P.F. came out, Queen Beatrix disbanded the new regime. Femke was disgusted. The Dutch would never return to greatness if such shenanigans continued.

Femke believed the country needed to find a solution to the Muslim problem. In January 2003, newspapers proclaimed, “Arabians Now Number 52% of Youth in Holland,”— “youth” in the Netherlands encompassed age 12 to 25 inclusive. Femke was furious; her elite T.B.N. escalated its vigilance. On weekends, she teamed up with several men. She’d lure Muslim youths to an alley; even let them touch her. Then, upon detecting

their arousal, she'd give a signal and her buddies would spring out. Femke would deliver the crowning blow.

By her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, Femke was entrenched in the Dutch culture of death: abortion ships, garbage-dump baby-hatches, euthanasia of the young and old, and the continuance of two-year penalty limits for murder. Philip Nitschke, Australia's "Dr. Death," had moved to Holland hoping to follow in Rebecca Gomperts wake. His plan for euthanasia ships attracted the disgruntled de Gier. She steered her T.B.N. organization, now a group with some influence, to Nitschke's new vessel.

The euthanasia ships recruited support from Denmark as well as the Netherlands, and Svend Knudson was one of these recruits. This fair-skinned Aryan—tall, quiet, and hairless—was everything Femke had dreamed of, both ideologically and physically. While *Femke* needed accoutrements to effect her gender transformations—*Svend* was one of the 1 in 14,000 people on the planet who truly required nothing of the kind. And he was first mate on the second euthanasia ship. Counting Gomperts' four original vessels, the number of Dutch death ships then totaled six.

On Femke's 27<sup>th</sup> birthday, she and the young Dane registered a cohabitation contract with City Hall in Rotterdam; in the Netherlands, such agreements carried the force of marriage but were far easier to dissolve. Svend was six years her junior. They spent their honeymoon at a brothel in Thailand.

Four months later, Sven was dead—killed by a group of militant Mormons from Utah who rammed the ship he helped command. Femke hadn't been on board at the time because she had been recovering from an abortion.

*Cramps!* She felt cheated; she should have been killed with her partner! The thought made her hate her womanhood.

When not contemplating the local death parlor for herself, she transferred her loathing of Mormons onto the United States as a whole. She began a muscle-building regimen that, coupled with the steroids she was taking, began to put hair on her chest. She started drinking heavily.

She picked fights in bars with all Americans, particularly those who mentioned “family values.” After one such brawl, she awoke in an alley with a well-dressed man towering over her. She allowed him to help her up, then took a swing at his nose that almost connected. That was a mistake. In an instant, she found herself back on the pile of rubbish.

“Femke,” he said, as if nothing had happened.

“Do I know you?”

“No. But *we* know you.” He listed three of her most private memories. “Brussels, Spring 2004; Groningen, 2003; Stuttgart...”

“You’re with De Groot!” she said, instantly deducing the one common denominator shared by the events. But this man was not the Professor De Groot who had mentored her during her “formative” years.

“You’re very quick,” the man said. “That’s one of the reasons we want you.”

“We?”

“The S.N.V.—”

“Which is?”

“—Not important at this time.” He extended a hand and pointed to a dark blue Mercedes. “Come. It’s warm and dry in there.”

For the first time that evening, Femke noticed it was pouring rain. Several men had been relieving themselves at the end of the alley. The rain carried their urine toward her in a steady river of stink. She scrambled after the mysterious figure.

The plane hit an air-pocket and Femke looked out the window again—still over Turkey. She edged out of her seat without waking the man beside her who was now fast asleep. She went to the restroom to change to woman’s clothes; not easy for someone her size. When she returned to her seat, she stretched her legs; her black leather boots extended to her thighs, their heels resembled the “boot” of Italy. Soon she’d be over Rome.

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Reiner Hartmann stepped up to the highest point on the ridge beside Lake Van; the plume from Femke’s plane still formed a seam across sky.

“Documentation,” he bellowed, and a wiry sycophant scurried to align a video camera into Reiner’s field of view. The German smiled, holding his hands palms outward, thumbs touching like a Hollywood director, fingers pointing toward the sky. He saw the mist of the Tigris River in the distance.

Aiming his binoculars in the opposite direction, Reiner saw clouds of dust and smoke at the far end of the valley. His crew advanced; he could almost hear the machinery. *EuroPOK!* The European Petroleum Overland *Konduit*. EPOK for short. The first EU pipeline with a capacity of one million barrels per day. *And he was in charge!*

He nodded in satisfaction. A tall man, he unfolded his canvas chair and made himself smaller. He could sit for hours, barely moving, so silent that people forgot he was there, until it was time to get up. When he did, everyone would step back; it was as if a giant had suddenly materialized.

“Herr Hartmann,” the cameraman said.

Reiner's concentration shattered. "What is it?" He leapt up, raising his fist.

"There..." The man aimed his camera east and zoomed in. From their observation point, they could see the minor canyons merging with the main one—long-dead rivers that had once fed Lake Van. The camera monitor displayed a grainy image; a band of Kurdish militants huddling impatiently, concealed within the canyon Reiner's men were about to cross. *An ambush!* He had been expecting this. The poorly organized militia was no match for the cache of weapons his crew kept within arm's reach. Still, Reiner flicked on his walkie-talkie.

It was as if they were watching a silent film. The EPOK crew passed the canyon entrance; the Kurds waited hidden. Reiner's men probably wouldn't have seen them even if they had thought to look over their shoulders—which they hadn't.

"To the Northeast," Reiner barked into his walkie-talkie.

"Commander?"

"Behind you. Twenty Kurds. Don't worry! Just pretend you don't notice."

There was no visible change in the scene on the monitor.

"I'll tell you when to take them out."

Reiner and the cameraman watched the Kurds creep from behind boulders, obviously feeling secure, believing the advancing workers were clueless and unarmed.

"Now!" Reiner commanded.

The scene on the screen erupted into mayhem as Reiner's men turned as one, firing on the bewildered Kurds without mercy. It was over in less than a minute. The Kurds lay dead and Reiner watched his men drag the bodies back behind the boulders where they'd laid in wait.

"No casualties, Commander Hartmann!" came the report through the Walkie-talkie.

“Good work.”

Reiner was frustrated. He wished he had been with his men instead of scouting a mile away. These people had killed his father; he loved to watch their Kurdish heads explode inside their turbans.

Reiner held out his hand. “Let me see your camera.”

The cameraman complied.

“You know we keep no records of encounters with the Turks.”

Reiner removed the SRAM module and tossed it skyward like a clay pigeon. He pulled out his pistol and shot, scattering all traces of the incident across the hills above Lake Van.

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Max Kunsli looked across the English Channel at the same moment Femke was stepping off the jet in Holland. He’d arrived early, days early, but what did he care? A couple more days wouldn’t matter: he’d waited half his life for this. Closing in on ninety, he didn’t look a day over sixty. He would sit by the coast and think.

Max’s briefcase was in his lap, his thumbs rubbing its leather sides instinctively, just as they did with its contents. His briefcase made a loud *click* when he opened it, and he looked around. There was no one in sight. He took out the engraved wooden box, the box with the name “Sigismund Schlomo Freud” carved on its bottom, the box his wife—a nurse—claimed was permeated with a thick residue of cocaine. It called to him; it wanted to be out in the air. He laid it on the top of his briefcase. His fingers traced the lines etched upon its sides; they always did. Then, he rubbed his thumb against the first

knuckle of his left ring finger; right at the point where his finger had been cut off by an escaped lunatic when he was fifteen.

The box had been missing its lid for many years. The lid would have fit snugly over the four sides and meshed with the carvings that came halfway up each side of the box. Without the lid, there was no way to tell what the carvings depicted, except that three of its sides formed part of a map, the crucial portions of which remained on the box top.

Max had done enough research to determine that the box's previous owner had been the famous cocaine addict, Sigmund Freud. However, he'd also discovered that the box was much older than Freud. In fact, it was more than a thousand years old, maybe two. Without the top, there was no way to determine its origin.

Max was certain of one thing: following that map would lead him to unimaginable wealth, just as the box had led him to riches since it had come into his possession.

Max had found the box when he was a student at the Z.H.T.—the *Zurich Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft*. Before his final year of law school, while the rest of the world was escalating World War II, Max accepted summer employment as a guard at the local prison. To say he “found the box” is far from the truth.

The Nazis were shipping trainloads of Mediterranean Jews through Switzerland to death camps in Germany, and the Swiss, who took pride in their neutrality and the fact that they had not fought in a war since 1291, chose to look the other way— it was Hitler's business; it had nothing to do with them.

The Jews who lived in Zurich didn't see it that way. The younger ones staged a demonstration. Many protestors were arrested. When the local jail was full, the overflow was brought to the prison where Max worked.

Max recognized his fellow student Lorenz Hirsch among the detainees. He didn't know what to do when Lorenz's pleading eyes met his. Just then, another guard pulled Max into a small room. The room contained a mountain of suitcases, and the suitcases contained many valuables. Max had picked up a curiously carved wooden box that was missing its lid. The box was exactly the size of the thousand-Franc notes of which it was full.

"Achtung!" a voice shouted from the room where the prisoners waited.

Max shoved the box of money into his coat pocket and returned to the main room just in time to see one of the other guards—Urs Speiser, another fellow student on a summer job—beating Lorenz Hirsch. Lorenz's blood splattered on Max's leg.

Max's heart pounded—*Had he just stolen a box of money? Was it considered stealing if it belonged to a Jew?* He imagined everyone was looking at him.

As Lorenz fell, he started to say "Max," but his chin hit the floor. The young man clamped his teeth together on his tongue, splitting the flesh even as three of his teeth bounced across the tiles. Max swore that this would be his last night on the job, if he made it through the night—if he made it through the gate with the box of cash in his pocket. He patted the box, to assure it was still there.

Max did make it through the night, and he made it through the checkpoint. He never returned to the penitentiary. He never discovered the fate of his Jewish friend. He found 186,000 francs in the box; that was much more than he would have made, even if he had kept the prison job for four years.

The money allowed him to find a wife and start a life in Basel as manager of the Frigo refrigerated storage facility, a position he held until his retirement in 1985. He kept the box on a shelf behind his desk, holding it in times of stress, absentmindedly tracing the strange lines on its sides, caressing it. Superstitiously, he believed the box was the cause of his financial good fortune. *Was it also responsible for his physical well-being?* Part of him felt changed when he stroked it. *His soul?*

Urs came back into Max's life in the early 1960s. He appeared at Max's office with a friend; they wanted to place some things in deep storage. Max was suspicious but Urs assured him the crates contained only freshly picked cherries. In the mid-1970s, Max saw a death notice for Urs' friend, and didn't know whether to throw out the cherries. Urs showed up shortly thereafter and suggested they make cherry kirsch out of the lot. It was a big production, involving many days, many bottles, and many bathtubs full of the fermenting fruit. After that, the two enjoyed a glass of kirsch together once a month, usually following a session in the company steam room.

In 1989, Urs discovered that his insides were rotting with cancer; Max visited him in the hospital every other week, then every week. Near the end, Urs drew him close to his bed. "Do you remember those days, back at the Zurich Penitentiary?"

"I wasn't there as long as you."

"You know what happened to all the money, don't you?"

"I think so," Max replied. He didn't really. Although, he did remember what happened to 186,000 francs of it.

"I have a brother and two sisters."

"I know."

"They've never come to visit me in the hospital, not once." He coughed with pain.

Max couldn't see where Urs was going with this talk.

“I want you to have the money.”

“What money?”

“You know. The money from back then, from all those J—”

“—Don’t say it!”

“Well. Someone has to get it.”

Max looked out the window, thinking of his box. “Money should be kept in the family,” he said.

“You’re like a brother to me.”

Max put his hand on Urs’ shoulder. “Do what you believe is right.”

After Urs’ death in 1991, Max held a meeting with his four children, all in their thirties at the time: Jacques, Monika, Clarice, and Charlotte. He divided Urs’ fortune between them. It was done on paper; the money never left the vaults of the private bank at 16 Aeschenvorstadt in Basel: Dreyfus Söhne & Cie Banquiers. The office looked like an apartment building from the outside. Basel was riddled with such private banks; each held millions stolen from Jews during the war.

Max traced the origin of the box through sketchy records of the events that took place at the prison on the night that he would never forget. Slowly, he made progress. He met some people who knew the meaning of one of the strange carvings.

The people were devil worshipers. The more they talked to Max, the more he realized his whole life had led up to that moment. Sitting with them—people he would have considered despicable earlier in his life—he knew that he, too, was despicable.

Calm enveloped him as his newfound friends arranged the tracking of the box top through their network of cohorts. They assured him they’d be able to put the pieces

together quickly. It took fourteen years, but considering everything that had led him to that point in his life, fourteen years passed relatively quickly.

A mere seven years later, Max received the phone call from the man in America, the man with the box top!

# Meredith & Stuart debarkation

## (1600 words)

“Excuse me?” Meredith couldn’t believe her ears.

“It’s part of my job,” the man said, still not looking at Meredith but addressing Stuart directly. “I kill beautiful women.”

The young couple was speechless.

“I’m a harem guard,” he said, as if that explained everything, “in Saudi Arabia.”

“Oh, I see,” Stuart said, “Of course,” but his expression belied the truth.

Meredith’s heart raced; she suspected her husband was just as uncomfortable.

“You can probably tell that I’m Iranian,” he continued. “I work in the Saudi palaces three months of the year. They don’t employ their own people for those jobs, and no one is allowed to work a shift longer than three months. It’s the rule.”

As the sun touched the horizon, Meredith nuzzled under Stuart’s arm. The strange man with the vacant black eyes was frightening, but she felt safe in Stuart’s grasp.

“Oh? And who makes the rules?” Stuart asked.

“The Saudi family, the Koran, the *Habith*.”

“Maybe I didn’t hear you correctly; did you say your job was to kill beautiful women?” Stuart’s voice took on the ring of authority that Meredith loved.

The man grinned.

Meredith frowned.

“I guard the palace concubines. They must wear the veil, the *hijab*. If a concubine exposes her face, I have no choice—I must cut her throat, and toss her in the lye pit. It is not always pleasant for me, I assure you. I appreciate beauty, you see.” He allowed his eyes to drift toward Meredith, then looked away, not with shame but with an expression of sadness that she couldn’t place.

*Why, he’s a eunuch!* Meredith realized. *He’s so muscular, so masculine. I never would have suspected.*

“There are women from many countries in the harems,” he continued. “The Saudi princes run beauty contests in Paris, London, New York, Miami, Houston... Winners with no ‘next-of-kin’ can end up in a harem in less than 24 hours, whether they want to or not.”

“You mean, they’re kidnapped?”

He shrugged. “Either way, they are paid \$3,000 per day for as long as they stay.”

“Don’t they complain? Try to escape?”

“The Saudi princes have immunity in most countries, including the United States. It’s the oil.”

Meredith knew that Stuart was out of his depth when it came to talking politics and oil; as a geology student, she had studied depth-imaging with a focus on petrochemicals. She changed the subject: “Can I see that photo?”

“Sure. It’s a box top, a collector’s item.” As he handed it to her, she noticed a chain between his wrist and the briefcase next to the deckchair.

The image in the photo seemed so familiar. She felt dizzy. *Is that me?* Her stomach churned. The carving appeared old, the hair made of copper, exactly the color of hers—identical in shape and proportion.

“The most beautiful girl I ever killed was an American. She walked up to me, stood directly in front of me, and lifted her veil. On purpose. She knew I would have to kill her for that.” The tone of his voice conveyed regret. “She was committing suicide; I had no choice.” For the second time, his soulless eyes reached into Meredith’s.

Her forehead was hot; beads of sweat were forming.

“She wanted to die—what they were doing to her, she couldn’t take that.”

Meredith’s heart pounded.

He stared into space. “Women are no different from cattle.” He made it sound like he was stating something everyone accepted as truth.

The sun disappeared below the horizon, and Meredith fainted.

When she regained consciousness, Stuart was kneeling beside her, taking her pulse. She felt like she was about to vomit.

“How long was I out?”

“About a minute.” He said. He sighed with relief. “The deck boy is getting a doctor.”

“I’m all right,” she said. “That conversation freaked me out.”

“Me too. And that photo...”

They both turned to the chair by the railing, but the dark-skinned man was nowhere to be seen.