

M.M.BYGROVE

# Little Guilt



**Little Guilt**

A Short Story

by

M. M. Bygrove



Blue dawn was seeping through the window when Scott put the last period to his manuscript. He sat back and contemplated the dirty dishes and empty cans cluttering his desk, eerie in the steel-blue sheen of the early morning. How long had he been writing? The cold light of dawn set off deep shadows under his eyes. He was tired but pleased with his work.

He saved the file he had been working on, made a backup copy on an external disk and another backup online, and rolled his chair away from the desk. He had been sitting with a leg folded under, he did not know for how long, and now it felt dead as a log. He gingerly extracted his foot from under himself and immediately a swarm of invisible ants started crawling up and down, pinching and tickling. Moaning, Scott clung awkwardly to the chair while blood came back, restoring his feeling.

When he could stand again he went to the kitchen and stuck his head in the fridge. There were a couple of cans, a rather dry onion, and a moldy block of yellow cheese. He took out the cheese, cut off the greenish edges, and chewed down the rest while fighting to keep his eyes open.

As he was taking a leak he briefly considered brushing his teeth, but he was too tired to hold onto the thought. He stumbled back into his room and crawled under the sheets still fully dressed. With a half-formulated notion concerning crumbs on the mattress, he fell asleep.

The room was bathed in sunshine and hot when the ringing of his cell phone woke him up.

“Yeah?” Scott mumbled into the phone groggy with sleep.

“Scott, it’s Tony. Barry didn’t show up, I need you to come in earlier today.”

“Huh?”

“I need you to come in earlier today. As in now! Got no one to man the till.”

“Boss?” Scott’s head was hollow but for the pain radiating behind his eyes.

“Yes, boss! What is wrong with you? Be here in half an hour.”

“Can’t do, boss. Ugh, sorry, but just can’t do it today,” he muttered and hung up.

He could not deal with anything now. His head was pounding, his eyes would not open properly, and his thoughts seemed to be going backwards.

Scott switched off the phone and fumbled at his bedside table for painkillers. He popped two pills, then, without getting out of bed, he tried the cans laying about. One of them had some stale coke left. He drank it and went straight back to sleep.

He woke up again when it was dark. The headache was gone but he felt only half rested. His bladder screamed. He went to the bathroom and as he was peeing he realized it must be late.

Fuck.

He had switched off his phone and with it the alarm. He was late. Fuck, fuck.

He arrived to work two hours late. Sonny, Tony’s pimply nephew, was at the till looking terrified. He pointed at the back office. Scott knocked and walked in.

“You!” Tony was sitting square behind his desk, sweat stains under his armpits, and red blotches on his neck, the usual signs of a recent rage.

“Sorry boss, I was asleep when you called.”

“Asleep. In the middle of the day.”

Scott shrugged.

“And then my alarm didn’t go off. Sorry, it won’t happen again.”

“You bet.”

“I’ll just go take over the till then.”

“You just go.”

“Huh?”

“You just go and don’t bother coming back. Don’t need unreliable crackheads here.”

Scott blinked. He didn’t do crack.

“Get the fuck out of here!”

He turned around and left.

He didn’t do crack. He didn’t do any drugs. Barry might have, but not him. He didn’t do drugs, didn’t smoke, or drink anything stronger than beer. He wrote. Not something he could very much explain to Tony for whom till slips and porn magazines were the only points of contact with print culture.

Scott walked back home with a mixture of relief and dread. He did not have to sit behind that till ever again, and that was an elating thought, but he still had to somehow pay his bills, and that was distressing.

But maybe his new book would sell. Yes, Scott remembered how pleased he felt with the manuscript that morning. It was only the first draft, coarse and in need of polishing, but he knew it was good. It had it all, the monster within and the monster without, big themes and juicy details, love and sex, out of this world technology, mounting drama, and a bomb ending. It was big.

Who knew, maybe this book would be his breakthrough.

On the way home he stopped to get some groceries, mostly cans of coke, bags of chips, and bars of yellow cheese. Being newly unemployed he decided he could not afford

any fruit or veg. Besides, he still had that onion in the fridge.

Back at home, he melted some cheese over nachos, opened a can of coke, and plopped into the chair at his desk. He had to push the dirty plates and empty cans with his elbows to make space for the piping hot nachos. Mess. He felt it was only appropriate considering his life situation.

He clicked open the dashboard of his self-publishing account and considered his sales stats. In the last week he had sold zero copies of *Colder Than Heavens*, zero copies of *Before Indivision*, three copies of *Starscape. Book One*, one copy of *Starscape. Book Two*, and one copy of *Last Dimension*. This would bring him just over ten dollars for which he'd receive a check in two months.

It was hardly going to pay the rent.

He checked the feedback section of the stats and sat up. There was a new review for *Last Dimension*. That was exciting because reviews were even harder to come by than sales. And it was a five-star review too! Scott put down the nacho he was about to maneuver into his mouth and clicked on the link to see what it said.

“Awesome shit!” read the title.

“Awesome shit!” read the review.

Scott reached back for the nacho, washed it down with a gulp of coke, and leaned back. He reread the review.

“Awesome shit!”

Shit wasn't good. Shit would alienate the non-swearing part of his potential readers. In *Last Dimension* Scott didn't use swear words, there were no sex scenes, no descriptive violence. *Last Dimension* was intellectual.

Awesome shit was good though, a high praise, if not fully elaborated.

And five stars was definitely great. It raised the average rating of *Last Dimension* to 4.9 stars and boosted Scott's ego in a way that could not be quantified in stars or any other scale.

Maybe it was time to run another promo.

Scott considered it. He had run promos on his books many times before, making one of them free or discounted for a period of time, hoping that this would generate more traffic and reviews which would later result in increased sales. Other writers swore by this technique. Apparently it worked best if one of the freebee websites picked up your book and gave the promo extra advertising.

None of these sites had ever picked up any of Scott's books, which was maybe why none of his promos ever produced the desired result. But being pessimistic was not an attitude he could afford at the moment.

He would offer *Last Dimension* free for a couple of days and hope that the five-star review drew attention. And maybe he'd email some of the freebee sites. He remembered online forums discussing whether it was a good idea to pitch your promos to those sites or not, and if they were more likely to feature your book if you did so. In Scott's experience, it made no difference.

He pondered this difficulty while finishing his nachos and, unable to make up his mind, he decided on a middle way. He would start the promo tonight, give it a day or two, and if none of the sites featured it, then he would email them and try to pitch. Yes, a brilliant solution.

Through the self-publishing dashboard Scott changed the price settings of *Last Dimension*, posted a short note on his blog about the promo, shut down the computer, and crawled into bed. Still tired from his binge writing he fell asleep almost instantly.

He woke up to a gloomy morning which was unusual weather-wise this time of the year and unusual in general because he seldom woke up in the mornings.

He resisted the urge to go online and check how his books were doing. Instead he set to cleaning up. Empty cans and takeout boxes into a garbage bag. Dirty dishes into the sink. Bed linens and clothes into the laundry basket. He washed all the dishes, took out the garbage, showered, brushed his teeth and wondered when was the last time he had. With a pocketful of change and his laundry basket full to the brim he left the apartment.

Half an hour later he was eating a bagel and sipping coffee from a paper cup while watching his clothes spin round and round. A short, middle-aged man wearing little round glasses came into the laundromat carrying a duffle bag. Scott had seen the guy there before and nodded a hello.

His laundry loaded and spinning away, the guy sat on the bench next to Scott and handed him a business card: "Jack Bowler. Private Investigator."

"Hi," Scott said uncertainly. "Don't think I need a..."

"You never know, man, you never know," the little man said shaking his head. "Only the other day I got a call from this guy, I gave him my card five years ago at a hotdog stand."

"Yeah?" Scott asked politely. "What did he want investigated?"

"Can't tell you, man. Customer confidentiality."

"Oh, sure."

"But I can tell you that it looks like some nasty shit and might involve some serious money. All I can say."

"Mhm."

"Yeah, the woman I'm after looks guilty as hell."

"She does?"



“But then again, they all do, once you’ve seen enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“Take anyone in this place.” Jack pointed with his chin towards the other customers and lowered his voice. “I bet you anything, man, that each and every one of them has a secret.”

Scott looked around. There was an old lady, shriveled like a prune, feeding coins to a dryer. There was a teenager with a visible pregnancy reading a magazine atop a washing machine. On the opposite bench a foreign-looking guy was playing with his phone.

“Hey, man, I’m not saying they all killed their grandma for an inheritance or anything,” Jack clarified. “But there are all sorts of secrets, you know, things they did and they’d rather no one knew about, you know what I mean.”

“I guess.”

“Anyway, man, you ever need any tailing or digging, just give me a call.”

“Thanks, I’ll be sure to call.”

The little man nodded, seemingly satisfied, and jumped up.

“See you around, man.”

Scott raised his hand in a farewell gesture but Jack Bowler was already out the door.

Back with a basket full of clean sheets and clothes, Scott made a last effort at self restraint and made his bed and put away the clothes before turning on his computer to check the stats. But once everything was done, and he was sitting at the desk, all eagerness to see the promo progress left him. Maybe he should give it a couple more hours.

To while away the time he played a couple rounds of online sudoku. Then he watched a couple episodes of Buffy, then played some more. When the day turned into night and the street lights came on, Scott decided it was high time to quit procrastinating. He opened his

sales stats.

In the twenty hours of the promo so far the free *Last Dimension* had been downloaded once. No sales on any of the other books.

As he looked at the wretched figures Scott could almost feel the cold breath of despair on his neck. He shook his head.

He pulled up a list of all the sites that could possibly feature his promo and then drafted the email. When he was done he read the draft and decided it came across way too toady, he'd need to rewrite it. His palms were starting to sweat. Writing stories was easy, it was fun, it flowed. But something like this, was pure stress. This email might make or break his future.

Scott went to the kitchen to get a coke and as he was rummaging in the fridge he discovered a can of beer he forgot he had. He decided that if ever there was a time for a beer, it was now.

Thus reinforced he sat down to rewrite his pitch email. First he cut the obsequious phrases from the letter, decided it was much better, and sent it to a niche site covering sci-fi releases and promos.

Then he reread the email again and decided it was too dry and formal. He added some personal touches, penned a joke, and sent it to a freebee blog which did not deal with books exclusively but was becoming very popular lately.

Then he decided against the joke and made the letter shorter; busy employed people might not have time to read long emails. He rewrote the letter again and sent it off to another site, and another one, and again.

The beer was almost gone and with it what remained of Scott's resolve not to despair.

While rewriting the letter for the nth time before sending it to the biggest sites, he

briefly considered including a threat — if you don't feature my book I will kill myself to escape starvation and you will have to live with it — or something along those lines. Then he remembered Bowler's theory of universal liability. Everyone had a secret.

He had only one last email to send, the one to ReadADeal.com. They were the most influential freebee webpage out there but he only managed to find a generic contact email. Most likely no one would even read his message. They probably got hundreds of emails like this a day, maybe thousands. They probably treated it just like spam.

What would Buffy do?

Ah, what the heck.

Scott gulped down the last sip of the beer, put the cursor under his signature in the email, and added a post script: "I know what you did last summer." He clicked Send.

Immediately he felt a bit stupid but also somewhat relieved. He'd tried every possible thing. That was it. Nothing more to be done. Which was just as well because he was starting to feel a bit queasy, probably from the beer. He really did not drink.

#

Emily drunk but rarely before midday. She would have a glass of wine with her lunch around one o'clock and after that she would have a glass of wine nearby pretty much all the time. She managed to keep fairly focused until five at which point she usually left work.

Not drinking before midday was a tentative rule inherited from her alcoholic father. Wine was a taste acquired later on in her life, after she'd left home and moved to the city. And leaving work at five was a luxury half earned and half acquired by luck, as is with most luxuries anyway.

Emily was the boss. She was the only boss since Laura's death, so she could drink at

work if she liked, and she could leave when she liked, too. The business was doing well, so there was no need for her to work overtime.

In the evenings she would continue drinking in the reluctant company of other representatives of the book industry, who were usually more sober than Emily, at least to begin with, and significantly more literary, at least in their own view, and would never refer to their line of work as the book industry. They were writers, publishers, editors, agents, and critics. Emily ran a webpage featuring ebook deals, freebees, and bargains.

Her inebriation notwithstanding, Emily was quite aware of their disregard towards her, but she had a thick skin and, frankly, she couldn't care less. She went to those literary evenings mostly for the free drinks and food, which she considered a far superior alternative to cooking, and for the gossip and intelligence, which she found very useful for her business.

Like tonight, Emily gladly ignored the speeches and readings of a book authored, if not really written, by some skinny celebrity, and instead huddled in the corner of the room with Hart, a guy working for a romance publisher, gossiping about their upcoming releases. Hart was very fat - which Emily suspected was what made him less snobbish than the rest of the crowd - and they always got along well. He was unassuming, chatty, and often full of useful information, and, Emily suspected, shared her interest in the complimentary food.

As soon as the boring part of the evening was over they both hurried to the adjoining room, beating the crowd to the tables laden with fancy nibbles and drinks. Once she was holding a full plate in one hand and a glass of wine in the other Emily looked around for Hart but he was nowhere in sight. She didn't waste time and pushed her way through the oncoming people, who all tried to look like they were not interested in the food at all. She headed towards the far wall where, she knew, there was a cushioned window sill which was the only form of respite offered by the reception room and which she was eager to claim. By

now she was feeling less than steady in her high heels.

She made herself comfortable, ate and drank, and observed the pretentious crowd with a degree of amusement. They were all very artistic and intellectual, read their books only on paper, preferably hardback, and considered themselves elite.

In Emily's opinion they were more like a dying out breed and she thought their refusal to see books as products and part of mass culture was either foolish or hypocritical. She enjoyed a good book like anyone else but she also enjoyed making money and, to the surprise of those who didn't understand the basic principles of supply and demand, she made her money on free ebooks.

There were exceptions, of course. Like Brad, standing over by the dessert table; he was more in Emily's corner. He worked for a major online retailer and understood the modern book market better than most other people in the room.

Emily got up from her comfortable spot and moved toward the cupcakes and chocolate soufflés. Brad had his back turned to her and was talking in muted tones with a man she did not recognize. She edged closer while filling her plate with treats.

"And she was all like, 'Oh, I would give so much to get Baily's autograph,' and I thought, well let's see just how much," Brad said to his companion and they both giggled.

"So I checked in our files where the Baily woman lived, and it turned out not far away, just up the coast. So on the weekend I tell her, we're going for a trip. And then we're walking around this place, pretty little town, seaside promenade, and she's like, 'What are we doing here Brad,' and I just walk. And then we're passing the church, and I get her to sit on a bench outside, we hang out a bit. And then the service finished, people are coming out, and there she is too, Linda's favorite author. And she's all like, 'Oh my god,' and, 'Look who's that.' And I walk over to the woman and get her the autograph."

“So what did she give you for the autograph, huh?” Brad’s friend asked.

Brad must have made some face or gesture because then they both chuckled. Emily had her back turned to them, licking her spoon clean of chocolate, seemingly oblivious. That was perhaps not as interesting a gossip as what she had heard from Hart, but then you never knew what might come in handy.

Having satisfied all her appetites, she left her empty glass and the unsuspecting company, collected her coat, and headed for home. Soon she was snoring softly and contentedly into her pillow.

Little did she know that her peace of mind was to be disturbed.

The following day she was woken up by drilling and hammering on the street outside, and then discovered that there was no hot water in the tap.

A morning like that was like a sip of sour wine and Emily knew from experience that if that first sip was sour, one could not expect any better from the rest of the bottle. So when she got to the office and found out that her intern secretary did not show up for work, Emily wasn’t all that surprised. It was obviously going to be one of those days.

In Emily’s opinion a bottle of sweet wine was the best way to restore balance to the universe on days like this. On days like this it was acceptable to have it at eleven in the morning.

Emily’s office was a trendy open space furnished with sofas and beanbags where her few employees and many interns could work in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. In the corner of that space Emily had a room of her own with a super-comfy couch, a coffee table, and a small wine collection from which she chose a bottle of rosé and poured herself a glass. Then, stretched on the couch, with a laptop on her lap, she set to work.

She looked through a folder of intern applications which she arranged, as they came,

by general likability. At the top of the list was a girl named Ashley, an English Lit major, who had applied several months ago. Emily dialed her number, found out that Ashley already had another engagement, and deleted her application from the folder. Then she proceeded to call the next person. Jay was thrilled to hear from her and happily agreed to come in for an interview in the afternoon. One problem sorted.

Cheng, her senior editor, knocked and came in with his tablet to show her the list of features to be released at midday. Emily looked through the articles and deleted one at random. She felt it was good to interfere every now and again, lest she begin feeling redundant.

Then she chatted with Cheng about how the interns were doing and exchanged gossip from the city. She mentioned the news she had heard from Hart the previous evening and Cheng promised to look into it.

When he left, Emily poured herself another glass of wine and began looking through emails, which was normally the intern secretary's job. A lot of emails, judging by their subjects, were from authors who wanted to be featured. She forwarded a bunch of unopened emails to Carol, another intern, who would look through them and forward any auspicious ones to Sam, a junior editor.

Then Emily got an email on her personal account from the bookkeeper's office, one she might actually have to deal with. She decided to procrastinate a while by reading through some authors' emails herself.

“Dear Sir or Madam,…”

Delete. Anyone who started an email with ‘dear sir or madam’ was in Emily's confident opinion unable to produce anything worth featuring.

“Hi guys, just to let you know, my bestselling novel…”

Delete. If it was bestselling, Emily would have known about it.

“Hello, I wrote the book and now is free on...”

Delete. Either the book’s grammar was just as sloppy, or the author could not be bothered with it while writing to them, which, if taken as a personal insult, was possibly even worse.

“Hi, a gripping tale of friendship and betrayal set in the tough reality of interstellar colonization...”, blah blah but a maybe, “will be available free,” blah blah, “Kind regards, Scott Sellars. P.S. I know what you did last summer.” An idiot after all. Delete.

After a couple more of these Emily poured herself another glass of rosé, closed her eyes, savored its delicate sweetness, and called the bookkeeper.

She went out for lunch to a small Japanese deli and, as she was having a seaweed salad with peanut dressing, her mind inexplicably jumped back to one of the emails.

I know what you did last summer.

Can’t be.

Just some idiot being funny, referencing a crappy movie, hoping to stand out or something.

It might have even been one of those automatic signatures people set in their emails, she wasn’t sure.

She finished her glass of wine and paid her bill.

It couldn’t be. Surely.

Back in the office, unsettled, Emily fished out the email from the trash box.

“Hi, the gripping tale of friendship and betrayal set in the tough reality of interstellar colonization, the novel *Last Dimension* by Scott Sellars, will be available free from all major online retailers! Your subscribers will be able to appreciate this great deal for four days,



starting from April 5th. Kind regards, Scott Sellars. P.S. I know what you did last summer.”

It was a P.S., not an automatic signature.

If it was supposed to be a joke, it was a poor one, with nothing leading up to it, a punch line without a story, a headache without the wine.

Was that supposed to be a threat? Blackmail? What did he want? To be featured? Was getting featured a matter worth blackmailing?

Maybe.

But how on earth...

Who was that Scott Sellars guy anyway? Emily typed him into a browser and found his blog. A writer. Unless someone went to a great deal of trouble faking it. But if they did, then why would they want to be featured on her site? She checked online bookstores. Yes, there were several positions available, classified under literary sci-fi, horror, and mystery. She went back to the blog looking for some personal information. Where did he live? How old was he? She couldn't find anything. She typed his name into a couple of social network sites and got two hits. One was a teenager in South Africa and she dismissed him as unlikely. The other one was from Canada, a partygoer judging by the photos, early thirties, no mention of any literary interests.

Emily's wineglass was empty. She got up and before pouring herself another one she stuck her head out into the main office space.

Everyone was busy at work, typing or reading, on laptops and tablets, sitting at tables or sprawled on sofas. Chang was on the phone quietly discussing some dates. He scribbled something on a pad and held it up for her: "Sally." Emily nodded and went back to her office. Looked like they would have an exclusive with the queen of romance for her next book launch.

With another glass of wine beside her Emily was immersed in the virtual web looking for a likely Scott Sellars, when Sam knocked on her door saying that Jay was there for his interview.

They chatted for a while and the guy made a good impression on Emily. He was obviously enthusiastic about what they did, knew his way around e-publishing and freebee sites, apparently he was a prolific, diverse reader, and did not mind starting off doing the dirty work. Emily insinuated that this was a test position which could lead to an intern editorship, and let his mind draw the conclusion that a paid position was looming on the horizon. Jay was happy to start the following day.

When he left it was after four and less than an hour to their next release, the last one for today. Emily's mind circled back to Sellars and his email. His book had been on promo since the previous day. She called in Carol and told her to whip up a feature for *Last Dimension* and add it to the five-pm releases. The girl scurried away, flustered with the importance of her new task, picturing herself a real reporter producing news under the pressure of time.

When Cheng came in with the releases to be approved the feature on Sellars' book was there, not Pulitzer material, way too many adjectives, but who cared. Emily hoped that this would be the end of the story. She would do her best not to waste any more time or energy on the silly affair, and if it ever came up, she'd claim the feature was a random pick.

As soon as the releases went live, she finished the last of her wine, said goodbye to her team, and went out. The weather was very pleasant, rather cool for this time of the year, but the clouds cleared up, and the afternoon sun painted the buildings in shades of yellow and pink and reflected from windows in golden gleams.

Emily stopped appreciating the sight and then decided not to go home. Instead she

called Myra. Her friend answered on the second ring.

“Hey, girl!”

“Hi, are you busy tonight?”

“Busy? Are you kidding? What’s up?”

“A sour day on my end. How are you?”

“Sweet to the bottom, lover. Are you coming over?”

“I could. Shall I bring anything?”

“No, honey. All stocked and good.”

“Then I’ll see you in half an hour or so.”

“Right you are, girl. See you soon!”

#

It was the second day in a row that Scott woke up in the morning. As he drew back the curtains he paused to admire the golden day spreading outside his window to the left. To the right, as always, come rain or shine, morning or evening, was the concrete wall of the building on the other side of a narrow alley.

The glorious morning and promise of an almost summer’s day made Scott optimistic, which only goes to show how unreliable all such weather auguries are.

When he logged into his self-publishing dashboard the sales stats reported three downloads of *Last Dimension* and zero sales on any of the other books. For all the glory of the day outside Scott could have sworn that it got colder and gloomier in that instant. Despair, he felt, was standing right behind him, its cold fingers outstretched ready to choke him.

In moments like this Scott tried to exercise the Unappreciated Artist’s Reality Check. He reminded himself of all the giants who never got to taste their fame. Kafka died of

starvation at the age of forty. William Blake was buried in an unmarked grave. Herman Melville didn't make a single dime on Moby Dick. Philip K. Dick died before his books became famous.

And so it went, Scott's litany of unappreciated artists, proof that unresponsive audience did not necessarily mean that your art was crap.

Today, however, it did not make him feel any better to know that if he did indeed starve to death he would find himself in such splendid company. Because what if he did not get discovered as an artist even after his stinking body had been discovered by his angry landlord? The company of dead losers would be where he'd find himself then!

Scott sprung up from his chair and paced about his room, Doubt and Despair hand in hand pacing at his heels. Maybe this whole dream of writing was just foolish? Maybe no one would ever appreciate his books? Maybe it was time to quit, time to grow up, find a proper job?

If he was prone to aggressive outbursts, Scott might have punched the walls and kicked the furniture in an attempt to silence Doubt. Were he prone to intoxication, he might have boozed his way through bottles of cheap liquor into oblivion. Instead he walked around his room, fuming, and huffing, curling his fingers into fists, until anger and indignation took the form of a storyline and characters. He sat back down at his desk and began pounding furiously at the keyboard, word after word, creating a fictional world out of his miserable reality.

Hours went by, the golden day turned into a bloody evening, then drowned in the darkness of night, while Scott remained hunched over his keyboard. He looked up only when a new dawn started to seep through the window and revealed the empty surface on his desk. No dirty dishes, no empty cans, not even breadcrumbs. That was why the hollow sucking and

tugging feeling in his gut disturbed his work flow. He hadn't eaten since breakfast.

But at least he starved-out Despair too. He exorcised Doubt with exhaustion.

In the kitchen he made sandwiches with cheese, warmed them up in the microwave, and adorned them generously with ketchup. He ate and when his fatigue became stronger than his hunger he went back to his room and collapsed in bed.

When he woke up the sun was setting over the roofs making the ugly industrial suburb appear almost picturesque in the pink attire. Scott stayed in bed for a while. He realized that there was indeed nothing he had to do, no work to go to, no family to take care of, almost perfect freedom. If he wanted to, he could stay in bed interminably. Or at least until his landlord came knocking on payday.

That thought propelled him to get out of bed and get on with the day. Or the night. Whichever it was. His life.

Out of habit he opened his author's page to have a look at the sales figures and then went to the bathroom to take a leak. He was standing over the toilet trying to aim, when the figures he had just seen registered in his mind. His bladder contracted. Scott made himself pee to the end and flush before running back to the computer.

*Last Dimension* — 1,023 downloads, 2 reviews

*Colder Than Heavens* — 2 sales

*Before Indivision* — 3 sales, 1 review

*Starscape. Book One* — 4 sales

*Starscape. Book Two* — 1 sale

Just to make sure, he reloaded the page, but the figures didn't change. He stared at the numbers with unexpected unease. So many people got his books in their hands. They were going to read his words. And they were going to judge. What if the 1,023 people didn't like

what they read? That would mean that his art was crap. That would be the ultimate truth. No excuse, no escape.

He clicked on the review links. *Last Dimension* got a four-star and a five-star review. *Before Indivision* got a five-star. His head was starting to swim. The four-star review was three lines long but both five-stars were long, elaborate assessments. They praised the language, commended the characters and story twists, one of the reviewers admitted to being deeply moved. Scott's palms were sweating and he was hyperventilating. Deeply moved, someone felt deeply moved by his words.

A quick online search revealed that the ReadADeal site had featured his promo and that was probably what had generated all the traffic. Whether it was due to his email or not, there was no way of knowing. And though he felt profoundly grateful, deep in the darkest corner of his soul there was a twinge of resentment that his books themselves did not manage to stir as much interest as the short feature on ReadADeal. Not even a very good feature. A collection of generic qualifiers: gripping, fantastic, great. He thought that a high school kid could do a better job, but hey, apparently it worked.

Maybe he should celebrate somehow. Lame adjectives or not, this might well be the beginning of his career. Scott felt it required a proper punctuation.

The town he lived in did not offer much in terms of nightlife, which normally suited him just fine as he wasn't much of a party animal. But he knew there was this place, Mike's, or Jim's, just across the street from the laundromat. It would have to do.

When he got there the bar was packed, hot, and loud, and Scott was promptly reminded why he never went out. He pushed through the sweaty bodies in the direction of the bar realizing that it was Friday evening and he should have known better. To leave now, however, would feel too much like a defeat.

Scott made his way to the counter, apologized to a guy built like a rugby player for bumping into him, got a friendly pound on the back from the guy, and then spent an eternity trying to catch the bartender's attention. He was about to give up, admit defeat and leave, when the rugby guy smashed his giant palm on the counter. This got the bartender's attention and Scott ordered his beer. As soon as he had it in hand he moved away from the bar under the pressure of the oncoming traffic. He stood a while in the middle of the crowded bar, jostled this way and that, and feeling more and more ridiculous by the moment. Finally he located a relatively calm spot at the back of the room, near the entrance to the bathrooms.

His relief at finding a quieter place was doubled after he noticed a familiar face. Scott moved over and put down his beer on a ledge next to Jack Bowler's half empty glass.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Not too bad, man, not too bad. Yourself?"

"Yeah, not bad," Scott stammered with a sudden terror of having nothing more to say. Then he remembered their earlier conversation.

"So, how's your investigation going?"

"Ah, the investigation," Jack waved his hand and took a big gulp of his beer leaving the glass almost empty. "It's going down the tubes that's how it's going."

"Oh."

"It's just how it is, man. The client gives you a target, you investigate, you find out they're guilty, and then you find out your client is even guiltier, and then you find out that no matter what you do, you'll never see any of that big money. Or any money in fact."

"Oh," was all Scott managed to put in.

"So you settle for what you can," Jack continued grimly, "which barely pays for a beer after a day of running around and chatting up crooks. Then you try to forget the crooks

and the client and the whole case, cause what's the point, man."

Bowler took a last sip and with the empty glass in hand he dove into the crowd heading for the bar, leaving Scott standing there, bewildered. Bowler was gone for quite a while but just as Scott decided that he had probably left the bar or at least his company, the little man appeared again, pushing through the crowd clutching a full glass.

"Sorry, man, didn't mean to go on a rant on you."

"No worries. Sorry for asking, none of my business."

"Eh, man, you were just being polite, I know. Cheers!" Jack raised his glass and took a swig which left a foamy mustache on his upper lip and the glass considerably less full.

"See, I found this woman I was looking for. She stole the husband's money alright, and took off, but then when I found her, I also found out that she had a pretty good reason to run, cause you see, the guy was beating her up, regularly."

Jack shook his head.

"Man, thief or no, there was no way I could give that guy her whereabouts. So I told him I could not find her, and that was my paycheck down the drain. It's just a fucking dumb job, that's all," Jack finished and looked to his beer for comfort.

"Wow, I never thought of it this way," Scott said. "I guess that's not the part one usually hears about."

"Nah. People think PI is all damsels in distress and solving riddles and chasing the bad guys. That's what I used to think myself, too." Jack chuckled. "But mostly it's paperwork and dealing with all sorts of crooks. And waiting, there's a lot of waiting, man."

"Right. And peeing into bottles."

"You bet, man," Jack toasted Scott again and knocked down another big gulp. "But it's not all bad, really. It pulls you in. When I'm on to something I just can't let go until I get



to the bottom of it. You know what I mean?”

Scott nodded recognizing the symptoms.

“Guess I’m just curious or something,” Jack shrugged. “The problem is,” he continued, “that people will almost always disappoint you. The truth you’ll find out will almost always be worse than you thought and, like I said, they’re all guilty.”

Jack finished his beer and peered at Scott’s glass, still more full than not.

“Man, not much of a drinker, are you?” he said and wobbled away to the bar.

Back with a fresh refill Jack surveyed Scott through his round glasses.

“So, what is it that you do, man?”

Scott considered for a moment; it was a question that all beginning writers hesitate to answer. But something about Jack’s forthcoming made it easier to admit.

“I’m a writer.”

“A writer, huh?” Jack peered at him. “Now that is a beautiful profession, man. That is a calling. To write some sense and beauty into this world of ours. A beautiful profession,” he added, nodding approvingly and dipping into his beer.

#

Emily woke up in the big bed which she occupied more often than Myra’s husband. Her friend was still asleep, a manicured hand across her eyes, keeping away the morning sun. Emily got out of bed and drew the curtains, leaving the bedroom in semi-darkness. In the kitchen she made herself a cup of coffee from an Italian espresso machine the size of a fridge. Then she found milk in a fridge the size of a double-door wardrobe, and drank her coffee looking at the spectacular view of the city stretching below her.

Several empty wine bottles littered the kitchen which explained her headache. This

was a lot even for her. But Emily was pretty sure that even after all the wine she hadn't mentioned anything to Myra about the email. Pretty sure. And even if she did, chances were that Myra would not remember; this was more than a lot for her.

Emily showered and borrowed a fresh shirt from Myra's cupboard, left a lipstick kiss on her dressing table mirror, and let herself out of the apartment.

When she arrived to the office she was pleased to see that Jay was already there, listening attentively to Cheng explaining the ropes. In her room she made herself comfortable on the couch and started by checking if there were any new messages from Sellars. She was relieved to find there were none. Just to be sure, she moved the old one to her personal account, made sure there was no trace of it in the general trash box, and set up a redirect so that if he ever sent them any more emails they would appear directly in her private inbox.

Deciding that this was all the attention she would give to the matter she moved on to other tasks.

Jay put his head around to her office.

"Cheng arranged the interview with Sally for lunch tomorrow. Shall I put it into your calendar? He says he can manage it, if you're busy."

"No, I'll be there. Put it in."

"Okay." He nodded and was gone.

"Thanks, Jay," she called after him. He seemed like an okay kid.

Emily uncorked a bottle of red wine, poured herself a medicinal glass for the lingering headache, and went over to Sam to look through the readership stats. The wine relaxed her.

She went for lunch with Cheng and they discussed the interview with Sally. They would ask if she was staying with her publisher or were the gossips true that she was about to go indie. They would ask about her new house but not about the new partner, that was the

deal, Cheng said. They would of course ask if she was planning to go back to the Lovers Lost series, the series that made her a bestselling author, and for the culmination of which millions of readers were still waiting.

After lunch Emily sat to work with the rest of her team. They needed to prepare the afternoon release for Friday and a release each for Saturday and Sunday. Sam would come in for two hours on the following day to finish it up and Cheng would do the same on Sunday, adding the interview too.

When the five o'clock release was out and her bottle of wine empty, Emily wished everyone a good weekend and went home. On the way she considered her options for the evening. Myra's husband was supposed to be back so they wouldn't be meeting up. There was a cocktail party that she wasn't actually invited to but she was sure she could get into. But she didn't really feel like it today. Or she could always just stay home, watch a movie, or read a book.

A book. She could, for example, read Sellars' book, the one he seemed so desperate to promote. Though it was probably just crap, she decided. And anyway, she had a long list of books she wanted to read, she'd just pick one of them.

Back at home Emily rustled up a plate of olives and cheese, poured a glass of wine, and made herself comfortable on the couch. She went online. She'd just have a look at it, she thought, just 'cause it was free.

She downloaded *Last Dimension* onto her tablet and began reading. It was a sci-fi story, which put her off at first, but then it did not seem to have any tedious descriptions of super weapons and spacecrafts, so she continued reading. The main character was rather intriguing, Gunner, a funny guy. She got hooked.

It was around midnight, her plate and bottle long empty, when she stopped short in

her reading. It was there, it was all there. For all the world to see.

Her head was swimming a little.

Sellars did know what she had done last summer and he had the nerve to put it into his story. Oh, it wasn't explicit or anything, no one would recognize the little episode for what it was. No one but her.

It was encrypted, convoluted within the sci-fi story, only a metaphor really. But she understood. It was a message for her. He knew and he meant business.

Emily went to the kitchen to open another bottle of wine and while perched on the kitchen counter she kept on reading until the early hours of the morning. She went to sleep dead tired, anxious, and drunk. It was amazing that for all that, she still rather enjoyed the book.

When she woke up, her mind rushed back to that little subplot of *Last Dimension* that she recognized as a message to herself. She tried to analyze the whole thing calmly.

Sellars first emailed her with the taunting post script, and got his feature. But also with that stupid post script he aroused her suspicions enough to make sure that she would read his book. And he could be sure that once she read it, she would be out of her mind. And then he'd just wait, oh yes, let her steam in her anxiety, and only when he was quite sure she was ready to meet all his demands, he'd come forth. He was toying with her, Emily realized.

Just stay calm, she told herself, stay calm and think. What could she do?

She could come clean. Admit to what she'd done and kick the cards out of Sellars' hand. He wouldn't be able to blackmail her then. But coming clean would ruin her. Not a good alternative to blackmail.

She could go to the police. But then she'd probably need to tell them what she'd done anyway, so that just led to the same thing.

She could try to confront the guy. No, that was probably a stupid idea, devious crook that he was. Besides, she didn't know how to find him.

She racked her brains all morning but didn't come up with any solution.

She met with Cheng and Sally for lunch but her heart was not in it and her mind kept wandering off. Cheng had to pull most of the interview. Fortunately Sally was her usual chatty self and they got all they wanted.

Once the recorder was off and their desserts eaten Sally excused herself. She had to run home to change before the reading.

"Oh, are you doing a reading tonight?" Cheng asked suspiciously. Their interview was supposed to be exclusive.

"Oh no," Sally reassured, "not me. My friend, Amanda, she's publishing a new novel next week too. Amanda Baily, do you know her?"

"Doesn't she write Christian fiction?" Cheng asked.

"Yes, very popular lately."

"Baily." Emily looked up. "She lives somewhere up the coast, doesn't she?"

"Yes, that's right. Only she likes to keep it private."

"Oh sure," Emily agreed.

She's probably not very fond of being harassed by fans. Like Brad and his girlfriend, who, by the way, might very well be at the reading tonight.

"So where did you say her reading was?" Emily asked. "I might pop in there too. We haven't featured much Christian lit lately, isn't that right, Cheng?"

Emily arrived at the venue early but there were already a lot of people milling about, mostly women. There were trays with juices and soft drinks but no wine which Emily thought to be a ridiculous arrangement. With a glass of soda in her hand, mostly to keep it

occupied, she circled about, keeping an eye out for Brad.

He better be here, if I have to endure a reading of Christian fiction without a single drop of wine, she thought.

He came, accompanied by a very pretty blond. Emily kept her eye on them throughout the reading. When it was finally over, and the blond hurried to stand in the line to get a book signed, Emily angled over to Brad.

“Hey! Fancy meeting you here.”

“Hi Emily, how are you?”

“Who’s your lovely friend?”

“Oh, Linda, she’s really into this kind of books.”

“That’s nice. Listen, it’s actually great that I’ve bumped into you.” Emily was quick to cut to the point before Linda came back. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a bit awkward, but I hope you won’t mind. Not a big thing, really.”

“Awkward?”

“Well, I need the address of this guy, a writer. And I know it’s not exactly kosher, but since you guys have him in the files...” Emily let her voice trail away.

“You want me to get you his...? Emily, I couldn’t possibly. That’s totally illegal.”

“Oh, illegal. It’s just a piece of info, not like you’re stealing anything. And no one would ever find out.”

Emily could see that Brad was resolving to take the high road and she jumped in to play her ace.

“Oh come on, don’t be so uptight. I mean, how big of a deal was it when you got Amanda’s address from your files,” Emily said and nodded towards the author and the queue

of fans.

“What?”

“Oh, you know what I mean. And I’m not going to mention it ever or anything. All I’m saying is that it’s not such a big deal.”

Brad looked abashed.

“Listen,” Emily continued, sensing that now she had a chance. “I promise, it’ll stay just between you and me. You don’t have to worry about anything.”

Then she turned toward the blonde who was just coming over, clutching a hardback, smiling.

“Linda!” Emily beamed. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

The next morning Brad called her and gave her the address. He said it was a one-off favor and his tone implied that he did not want to talk to her again. Pity. He was an alright guy and it was good to have a friend on the inside of a retailer as big as the one he worked for, but Emily was not about to allow herself any regrets.

The address he gave her was in a dingy industrial town, an hour away from the city. This made Sellars almost a local which explained how he could possibly, just possibly, know what she had done last summer.

She didn’t hesitate long. She took a taxi to the station, caught a local train, and then found the street and the house where Sellars was supposed to live. It was a grey building, several stories high. The flats had small windows and low ceilings, obviously low rent. Well, if she lived in this place she’d be pretty desperate to get her books selling too, Emily admitted.

The neighborhood made her uncomfortable. There were few people on the street, mostly dark-skinned young men in hoodies and baggy jeans. She decided she’d rather go in

and knock on Sellars' door than stand there all conspicuous.

There was no lift in the building so she walked up to the third floor and found the door with the number that Brad had given her. That was where her resolve abandoned her.

What if Sellars was a violent junkie, what if he had a gun, what if he grabbed her, or hit her. What would she do then? She was stupid for coming here. Stupid. Stupid.

And then she heard movement behind the door. She darted back to the stairwell and down the first flight of steps. She stopped and listened. On the floor above her she could hear someone closing the door, locking it with a key, footsteps.

She ran all the way down the stairs, crossed the hall and was out of the building in seconds. She ran across the street and stopped in front of some long-abandoned shop. She pretended to be reading ads posted on the window display. Reflected in the dirty glass she could barely make out the building behind her.

The door opened and a figure came out and went left along the pavement. That must have been Sellars. When she was sure he had his back to her Emily turned around. The guy wore jeans and a t-shirt, looked rather young, with narrow shoulders and in need of a haircut. Non-threatening. She followed him, staying on her side of the street.

When he turned around the corner she crossed the street and kept on following him. They were on a main street, shabby as it was, with some shops, take-aways, and a laundromat. Sellars crossed the road and walked into a seedy looking bar which gave Emily a pause.

She considered going into the laundromat and pretending to do her laundry while watching the door of the bar. But that might prove to be a long wait. And what would she gain by it anyway? Most likely she'd see him eventually walk back home, maybe not alone.

On the other hand, if she went into the bar after him she risked him seeing her,



recognizing her. She rummaged through her handbag, found her dark glasses and put them on. She found a silk scarf and wrapped around her head, hijab style. She checked herself out in the laundromat window. Well, at least there wasn't much of her visible.

She took a deep breath, crossed the street and pushed open the door to the bar. The place was tacky and not exactly clean, and there was a game playing on several screens. A bunch of people, mostly men, were discussing the results, whooping, adding to the noise of the place. As she walked over to the bar she scanned the room and spotted Sellars with another man, a bald middle-aged guy with little round glasses.

At the bar she ordered a glass of wine and had to repeat her order to the surprised bartender.

“Red wine?”

She nodded.

“Are you guys having some kind of a bet, a contest?” the bartender looked at her suspiciously.

Emily was not sure what he meant so she just smiled. He shook his head in disbelief and turned around to look for a bottle of wine and a suitable glass.

#

When Scott met Jack on Sunday afternoon the bar seemed a different place. No sweaty, heavy-drinking crowd. Instead just a bunch of guys watching a game. Though less packed, the bar was almost just as noisy.

Scott ordered his drink and joined Bowler at a table.

“Hey, man, what is that supposed to be?” Jack asked, pointing at Scott's glass.

“Half a pint,” Scott shrugged.

“They have beer on the kids’ menu?” Jack shook his head.

“Well, the bartender was a bit surprised too, but that’s all I can drink or afford at the moment.”

“Ha, I see writing doesn’t pay better than investigating, huh?”

“For now. But it will change.”

“Keeping up the spirits, man, that’s the only way.”

“No, I’m serious,” Scott could not hold back his excitement. “My books started to sell. They actually started to sell last Friday and I came down here to celebrate.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything, man? We could have celebrated together.”

“Well, we kind of did. Only I wasn’t sure then, it was sort of the first day, didn’t want to say anything to jinx it. But they kept on selling!”

Scott had worked throughout the weekend with a newly acquired conviction that what he was doing made sense. He kept checking the stats and every time he refreshed the screen the figures grew. *Last Dimension* had thousands of downloads a day, his other books sold, and he got more and more reviews, so far only good ones.

“Well that’s swell. Congratulations, man!” Jack raised his half empty pint glass and Scott raised his full half pint.

“Thanks.”

“See, I told you, man, writing is a beautiful profession.”

Jack finished his beer and went over to the bar for another. When he came back to the table he leaned over to Scott and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“So, exactly how famous are you now?”

“Famous? Not at all.”

“No?”

Scott shook his head.

“So, if she ain’t a fan of yours, why do you think a city chick would be following you?”

“What?” Scott was about to turn around but Jack caught his arm.

“Tsk. Don’t look, man, you don’t want to be obvious.”

“There’s someone following me? How do you know?”

“Mostly cause she’s a rookie, man. She came in just after you, looked around and when she spotted you, she ordered and took a seat just behind you. She’s wearing a headscarf and dark glasses, no kidding.” Jack rolled his eyes. “And I can tell she ain’t local cause she’s drinking wine. Did you know they sold wine in this joint?” He shook his head with disbelief. “Anyway, she’s been pretending to watch the game ever since while trying to listen in, and giving us sneaky peaks every now and again. So,” Jack prompted, “any idea who it might be?”

“None at all. I am really not famous or anything. And even if she was a fan how would she know where to find me?”

“Phew, there are ways to find out, man,” Jack shrugged. “Well, why don’t you go to the john, don’t turn around or anything, and then take a look at her on your way back,” he suggested.

Scott nodded, took a sip of his beer, and got up. He moved stiffly and self-consciously as he walked to the bathroom. A few minutes later he came out, just as stiff, perfectly obvious in his attempt to look normal and relaxed. He threw a sweeping glance around the bar and then arrested his look at the woman who had been watching him since he left the bathroom. They both lowered their eyes, abashed.

“Amateurs,” Jack mumbled to himself.

“No idea who she is,” Scott whispered leaning over their table, his back to the woman. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before, but it’s hard to tell with the glasses.”

“Well, you definitely spooked her,” Jack said, now quite openly looking after the woman as she scrambled to the exit. “One way to find out.”

He finished his beer in one big gulp, jumped up, grabbed his jacket and was out the door before Scott realized what was what. He was left at the table alone, with quarter-pint of beer and a mystery.

On Monday morning Scott checked the sales stats again. The promo was over but his books kept on selling, every day a couple more. That must have been it, his breakthrough. The snowball was rolling and Scott was eager not to let it stop and melt away.

He decided to try and finish his big novel, the one that had it all, as soon as possible. He spent the whole day working fastidiously, moving scenes around, rewriting dialogues, cutting out paragraphs, adding lines, pruning and fine-tuning, dressing his big story in beautiful prose. A second draft always required time and concentration but Scott’s heart was all in it. He was determined to publish it while the snowball still had momentum.

He was busy fleshing out his main character when his phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey, man.”

“Jack, what’s up?”

“Followed your mysterious stalker lady.”

“What, all day?”

“Pretty much, man.”

“Wow, you do know that I can’t pay you, right?”

“Ah, forget it man, just professional curiosity.”

“So, what did you find out?”

“Her name’s Emily Tider.”

“Never heard of her.”

“She works for ReadADeal.”

“Oh.” That hit the target. “Oh! Oh shit!”

“Actually, she owns it.”

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.”

“Well, what is it, man?”

“The email,” Scott said faintly.

“The email?”

“Yeah, I wrote them this email, with a threat.”

“A threat?”

“Well, not really a threat. I wrote, ‘I know what you did last summer.’”

“And what did she do?”

“I’ve no idea! I didn’t think anyone would even read the email. I just wanted them to feature my book, and I added this stupid post script, I know what you did last summer. So lame. I think I must have been drunk.”

“Drunk? You don’t drink, man.”

“I know. But I was desperate then. Oh shit. Ooooh shit.”

“Well, it looks like she did read it, and it looks like she did something bad last summer.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Cause she is obviously nervous, man. She came to check you out, find out how much you know. She wouldn’t have bothered if she had nothing to hide.”

“Oh shit.”

“I found out some other things about her. She’s from some shithole called Bybridge, seriously back end of nowhere. When she was a teenager she ran away to the city with two other friends. One of her friends is dead. The other is married to a rich investment guy. And your Emily lady is having an affair with the married one.”

“She’s having an affair with her married girlfriend?”

“Yep.”

“Oh shit.”

“Maybe that’s what she did last summer. Maybe she and the girlfriend bamboozled the rich guy out of some money.”

“Oh shit.”

“Or maybe it’s something about the dead friend.”

“Oh shit.”

“If you want I can dig some more. I bet you I can find out what it was she did.”

“I don’t know if I want to know.”

“There might be money in it.”

“Oh shit, I don’t know. Let me sleep on it.”

“Okay, man.”

“Don’t do anything, okay? Don’t follow her. I’ll think about it and call you, all right?”

“Sure, man, no problem. You sleep on it.”

“Hey, thanks for doing it.”

“No worries, man.”

On Tuesday Emily did not go to work. She had hardly slept, tossing and turning all night, her thoughts running around in circles. What was she thinking spying on the Sellars guy, she made such a mess of it. He had obviously noticed her. And yesterday she was sure she saw that other guy, the little one with funny round glasses that Sellars was meeting in the pub. Now he must have been spying on her.

Was it supposed to be a payback? Was he trying to threaten her? Or was he gathering evidence for what she'd done last summer?

Emily tried to suppress her surges of panic and analyze her situation rationally. Sunday's fiasco didn't really change the fact that she still had the same three options: to come clean, to go to the police, or to confront Sellars. And even though it hadn't quite worked out on Sunday, that third option remained the most appealing. Emily thought it was probably because she had already seen him and he wasn't the unknown terror lurking in the dark anymore. Truth be told, he didn't strike her as threatening at all, awkward yes, but not really mean.

But then on the other hand he had sent her that email with a threat. And now he obviously had her followed. And there was the book, proof that he knew what she'd done.

A fucking mess!

She was damn sick of the whole thing. This had to stop.

She grabbed her laptop and wrote Sellars an email. She suggested a meeting. She wanted to get it over with as soon as possible so she suggested they meet that day, lunchtime. She named a cafe she knew downtown. It would be a public place and she'd be safe.

After she hit Send she waited in front of her laptop for a couple of excruciating minutes and then decided she was being stupid.

She took a shower, then, still wrapped in her towel, checked the email. No answer.

She got dressed and checked the email. No answer.

She made a coffee and while it was brewing checked the email. There it was!

“Okay, see you then.”

Well. Not a man of many words, Sellars. But then she’d played it short, too.

She got there ten minutes before the appointed time, picked a table, and ordered a glass of organic wine. She liked the place, it was an upmarket cafe that sold only fair-trade stuff, the slow-food sort of place, healthy and pricey.

Emily noticed Sellars as soon as he walked through the door. He stood there for a moment, looking around, a little disoriented. He glanced her way but did not seem to recognize her. What a goof. She waved to catch his attention.

He came over.

“Hi,” he said, then stood there, waiting, uncertain what to do. Finally he sat down opposite her. Emily stared him down. All her anxiety left she felt only anger at the idiot who wanted to play at blackmailing her.

Their awkward silence was broken by a smiling waitress.

“Hi, what can I get you?” she asked Scott.

“Er, I’ll...,” he stammered, looking around. “I’ll have a coke. Please.”

“A coke?” the waitress’ eyebrows moved imperceptibly upwards.

“Yeah.”

“We don’t have any coke, I’m afraid.” She pronounced it as if the word itself was poisonous.

“Oh.”

“Could I suggest one of our organic coffees perhaps? Or an infusion?”

“Infusion?”



Emily almost giggled at his discomfiture. Her anger was suddenly all gone.

“Hey, they have this really good kombucha here,” she said. “Why don’t you try it. It’s like a natural coke,” she added.

“Ok, that’d be great.” Scott exhaled and was glad to see the back of the disapproving waitress.

“Thanks,” he mumbled without looking at Emily, suspecting she was making fun of him.

“So.” Emily straightened herself up. “What is it that you want?”

She had planned to be tough but now she could not quite muster her anger.

“Nothing really. And I’m very sorry about the email.” Sellars finally looked up at her.

“What?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out or anything. I mean I did, but not for real.”

Now Emily’s eyebrows were shooting straight up.

“It’s just, I really, really needed a breakthrough,” he said. “I lost my job, my books weren’t selling, and I was desperate. I emailed all the freebee sites about my promo, like I had before. It never worked. And this guy I met, he said that all people had a secret, so I thought what the heck, and I added that post script. I really did not think anyone would even read it.”

Emily folded her arms and leaned back in her chair.

“But I guess you did read it. And then there was the feature and my books started selling. Oh, this is just so stupid but it was exactly the breakthrough that I needed. They are still selling, you know, and people are leaving good reviews. So, I guess, thank you for the feature,” he added with a sheepish smile.

“You are very welcome,” Emily’s voice was all sarcasm. “So, may I ask, why do you

have someone spying on me?”

“What?”

“That guy you were with on Sunday has been spying on me.”

“Oh, him. No, he’s just a friend and he happens to be a professional PI. And when he saw you spy on me that evening he got curious and he went and followed you.”

“Some professional! I saw him,” Emily snorted.

“Well no, he is professional and he’s good too,” Scott suddenly got all protective about his friend. “He followed you only for a day and he found out lots of stuff about you.”

“Oh, did he?”

Scott got all flustered remembering what Jack told him about Emily’s affair with a woman and a pink blush crept up his cheeks.

Just then the waitress turned up with a jar of brownish liquid. Scott took a long gulp of the cold prickly drink and wiped his forehead.

“So what exactly did your friend find out about me?”

“Listen, it’s nothing, it’s none of my business.”

“No kidding.”

“And anyway, I told him to drop it. He’s not going to bother you anymore or anything. It was just his professional curiosity, you know.”

“I see.”

“Honestly, that email was just a stupid joke, a desperate act. Have you ever done anything stupid when you were desperate?”

“That is none of your business, either,” Emily snapped thinking of last summer, when she was desperate.

“No, sure. All I’m saying is, you can forget it. I really did not mean anything by it. I

just needed a break. And now, after your feature, my books started selling. They are, I mean, I think they are good enough to just sell on their own now.”

“They are.”

“Huh?”

“Your books, they actually are good.”

“You’ve read my books?” Scott forgot all about his embarrassment.

“Yeah.”

“Wow. I mean, which one?”

“Well, I read *Last Dimension* after I got your email. And it actually hooked me right from the start. I don’t usually read sci-fi but this one was really intriguing. And I got to like Gunner from the start, like I really wanted him to make it, and I kept reading right through the night.”

“Wow, that’s great. Oh my god, you’re like the first person I’ve talked to that has read my book.”

“Yeah.” Some sarcasm crept back into Emily’s voice. “I read it all in one go until I got to the part with Starry Land Co.”

“Yeah?”

“That was a fucking sneaky thing to do, you know.”

“You think?” He was a bit confused. Was she praising the part or criticizing it?

“Yeah, I think,” Emily snorted. “And anyway, would you mind telling me how you knew?”

“How did I know what?”

“Stop fucking around with me! How did you know what I did?”

“I… I didn’t. I told you. I just wrote that I did, a stupid phrase, that was all.”

“You put it in your fucking book, remember? I read it. I know you know.”

“I put what in my book?”

“What I did! You fucking wrote it in that part.”

Scott was looking at her as if she suddenly became all green and sprouted tentacles or other Martian appendages.

“You sold plots on the moon?”

Either the guy was a pro actor or he really had no fucking clue what she was talking about. Of course she did not sell plots on the moon, it was a metaphor. She sold other fakes. But...

It was the first time that it occurred to Emily that maybe it wasn't a metaphor at all. Maybe it was nothing more than a story. Maybe her own imagination, paranoid as it was at that point, saw parallels that weren't there at all.

“Okay, lady, I'm guessing you did not sell plots on the moon or any other planet,” Scott said. “But if you did, good for you, I guess. This friend of mine, he has a theory that every one of us is guilty of something, that everyone has done something they're not proud of. Whatever it is you did, your crime probably isn't any worse than most people's. And if it is, I really don't want to know.”

“I sold reviews.”

“Reviews?”

Emily nodded.

“My friend, Laura, died last spring. A car accident. She was the co-owner of ReadADeal. We never arranged for any eventualities like that so after she died it was her brother that was going to inherit her part of the business. He's a douche bag, a lazy bastard who hasn't worked a day in his life and I'm not even sure if he can read. There was no way I

could let him have half of my business. I offered to buy his shares and he was happier to get the money, too. So I needed cash and fast.”

All that spilled out of her in a torrent.

“Well, I guess you were desperate,” Scott nodded.

“Yeah. And I knew of this author who was desperate to get his books moving on the market. I produced hundreds of online reviews for him never reading any of his books. And then I did the same for a couple of others. They paid good money cause they were paying not only for the reviews but also for the secrecy.”

“So did you manage to buy off the shares?”

“Yep. Over that summer I wrote several thousand reviews. That money plus a bank loan and I managed to buy him off.”

Scott was nodding again.

“I don’t do it anymore. I earn enough to pay off the loan.”

“Hey, I’m not judging. Though I’m glad you did not kill anyone cause then I might have felt like I needed to go to the police or something.”

“Yeah, I guess it could have been worse.” Emily shook her head. “You know, it’s unbelievable. I was so worried that you somehow found out what I did, and now here I go, just telling you myself. And you know what’s the weirdest thing? I actually feel better now.”

“Like a confession.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, as your confessor, may I suggest a way to redeem your crime?” Scott said and continued before Emily could protest his cheek, “You could leave a genuine review for my book.”

“Ha, I guess I could.” She laughed.

When the waitress brought them the bill Scott reached for it but stopped short when he saw the figure. They had a glass of wine and a fake coke and apparently it cost more than three days worth of groceries. It was certainly more than Scott had in his wallet.

Emily noticed his discomfort.

“No, let me get this one,” she said and gave the waitress her card. “But when you become a bestselling author I will expect some favors, exclusive interviews and such.”

#

Back at home Scott called Jack and arranged to meet him at the bar, Joe’s or Dick’s, whatever it was called. For a non-drinker, Scott thought he was well on his way to becoming a regular there.

He crossed the street and was about to walk in when he saw Tony, his ex-boss, coming towards him.

“Off for an early start of the evening, are we?” Tony said and passed Scott without stopping, shaking his head.

Scott smiled. Well, Tony was welcome to think him a crackhead and a drunk. And when Scott became a bestselling author Tony wouldn’t even know, and that was quite alright too. Scott imagined the moment when he was signing a movie deal with some big-shot Hollywood producer, and he imagined mentioning Tony as an anecdote and everyone laughing. Yes, the future was bright, and all the Tonys of the world would not spoil it now.

He joined Jack at the bar.

“Hey man, what’s up? Want a beer?”

“No, I’m alright,” Scott said, remembering how little cash he had left. “It’s actually too early for me.”

“Nonsense, man,” Jack disagreed. He called out to the bartender, “Hey, how about you get him one of those cute little beer glasses, on me.”

Then he turned back to Scott.

“So what’s the deal, man?”

“Well, I met with her, you know, the woman you followed.”

“Rookie move, man.”

“No, no, Jack. She’s okay. She didn’t do anything terrible that summer, just a stupid thing, like you said, like everyone has at some point.”

“Is that what she told you, eh?”

“She did, and you can trust me, it’s nothing worth your trouble.”

“There could have been good money in it.”

Scott shook his head.

“No, let it go. There would have been no money and you would have only done harm.”

Jack shrugged.

“Whatever, man.” He took a big gulp of his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I wouldn’t do it anyway. That wouldn’t be PI, that would be extortion, pure and simple.”

He stared into his empty glass.

“I talk about money ‘cause, you know, it’s important, man. You got to make a living somehow. But it’s not that important.”

He waved at the barman to get another beer.

“I didn’t go into PI for the money, I always knew that this wasn’t where one made the big bucks. But I thought I’d be doing something important, you know, something big. Silly,

but I guess I thought I'd be a hero or something.”

Jack took a swig and shrugged.

“And then it turns out that it's all mostly spying on unfaithful wives and husbands and other shit like that. No glamour, no recognition,” he shook his head.

“Hey, but you are a hero,” Scott protested.

Jack snorted into his beer.

“I'm serious, Jack. It's just like in my books! The protagonists have to make choices that define them as characters. They're neither simply good or bad, that would be poor writing, paper characters. But the one that makes the difficult but right choice is always the ultimate hero.”

Jack looked up from his beer.

“That's books, man.”

“No, no, that's just how it is. And you have to make these choices all the time, like in that case you told me about. You chose not to tell the guy where his wife was, even though it meant you wouldn't get paid. So you are a hero. Only it's not in a story but for real.”

Jack shrugged.

“But you know what?” Scott smacked the counter with his hand, “I could write a book about you. Based on this story. Wow, that might be actually great. Don't worry, I'd change the setting and details, not to impose on your client confidentiality and all. I could make it, say, a historical crime, nineteenth-century England or something.”

“Could you make it sci-fi?”

“Sci-fi?”

“Yeah, I always liked Clark and Heinlein and that kind of stuff.”

“You bet I could! That's what I specialize in anyway. Yeah, that might be even better.”



“Man, you think?”

“Oh yes! And you know what? If that book turns out good, maybe we could make it into a series. Like, you would tell me about your jobs, and then we’d change some details, and I’d write the story. And we’d create this hero, an interstellar investigator with a soul, who not only has to solve the puzzles but struggle with moral dilemmas. That could really be a hit.”

Jack’s eyes became all dreamy as he looked somewhere beyond the bar shelves, beyond the pint glasses and bourbon bottles. He pictured himself a secret hero of a bestselling book series. He imagined sitting on the subway some day, seeing this girl reading about his adventures, and she wouldn’t even know that the real man was right next to her.

“Yes, you could be the new Rick Deckard, or the new Malcolm Reynolds!” Scott was excited with the thrill of his project. “That will be an awesome series, I’m telling you.”

“Malcolm Reynolds,” Jack nodded.

He imagined the space ship he’d command. The worlds he’d investigate.

“I like that.”

A blush of sunset was coming through the dirty window of the bar and stretching on the tabletop and empty glasses, and creeping on the two dreamers. Had either of them looked out they might have seen the town almost pretty in this evening attire, powdered with setting sun, blemishes hidden in deepening shadows. But they were both far away, in a better world, where heroes made the right choices and tales had happy, if somewhat sentimental, endings.

I hope you have enjoyed this short story.

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