

Finished

by Robert Reed

Robert Reed's most recent novel, *The Well of Stars*, came out from Tor in April and his new short story collection, *The Cuckoo's Boys*, was published around the same time by Golden Gryphon Press. In his latest story, he reveals what it takes to survive.

* * * *

What did I plan? Very little, in truth. An evening walk accompanied by the scent of flowers and dampened earth, the lingering heat of the day taken as a reassurance, ancient and holy. I was genuinely happy, as usual. Like a hundred other contented walkers, I wandered through the linear woods, past lovers' groves and pocket-sized sanctuaries and ornamental ponds jammed full of golden orfes and platinum lungfish. When I felt as if I should be tired, I sat on a hard steel bench to rest. People smiled as they passed, or they didn't smile. But I showed everyone a wide grin, and sometimes I offered a pleasant word, and one or two of the strangers paused long enough to begin a brief conversation.

One man—a rather old man, and I remember little else—asked, “And how are you today?”

Ignoring the implication, I said, “Fine.”

I observed, “It's a very pleasant evening.”

“Very pleasant,” he agreed.

My bench was near a busy avenue, and sometimes I would study one of the sleek little cars rushing past.

“The end of a wonderful day,” he continued.

I looked again at his soft face, committing none of it to memory. But I kept smiling, and, with a tone that was nothing but polite, I remarked, “The sun's setting earlier now. Isn't it?”

The banal recognition of a season's progression—that was my only intent. But the face colored, and then with a stiff, easy anger, the man said, “What does it matter to *you*? It's always the same day, after all.”

Hardly. Yet I said nothing.

He eventually grew tired of my silence and wandered off. With a memory as selective as it is graceful, I tried to forget him. But since I'm talking about him now, I plainly didn't succeed. And looking back on the incident, I have to admit that the stranger perhaps had some little role in what happened next.

I planned nothing.

But a keen little anger grabbed me, and I rose up from the bench, and, like every pedestrian before me, I followed the path to the edge of the avenue. Later, I was told that I looked like someone lost in deep thought, and I suppose I was. Yet I have no memory of the moment. According to witnesses, I took a long look up the road before stepping forward with my right foot. The traffic AI stabbed my eyes with its brightest beam, shouting, “Go back!” But I stepped forward again, without hesitation, plunging directly into the oncoming traffic.

A little pink Cheetah slammed on its brakes. But it was an old car with worn pads—a little detail that couldn’t have found its way into my calculations—and despite the heroic efforts of its AI pilot, the car was still moving at better than eighty kilometers an hour when it shattered my hip and threw my limp body across the hood, my chest and then my astonished face slamming into the windshield’s flexing glass.

Again, I tumbled.

Then I found myself sprawled in a heap on the hot pavement.

For a thousand years, I lay alone. Then a single face appeared, scared and sorry and pale and beautiful. Gazing down through the mayhem, she said, “Oh, God. Oh, shit!”

With my battered mouth, I said, “Hello.”

Leaking a sloppy laugh, I told her, “No, really, I’ll be fine.”

Then I asked, “What’s your name?”

“Careless,” she said. “Stupid,” she said. And then she said, “Or Bonnie. Take your pick.”

* * * *

I picked Bonnie.

A beautiful young woman, she had short dark hair arranged in a fetching fish-scale pattern and a sweet face made with bright brown eyes and skin that looked too smooth and clear to be skin. On most occasions, her smile came easily, but it could be a crooked smile, laced with weariness and a gentle sadness. There was a girlish lightness to her voice, but in difficult circumstances, that voice and the pretty face were capable of surprising strength. “What should I do?” she asked the crumpled figure at her feet. “What do you need?”

“Help,” I muttered, answering both questions.

Others had gathered on the curb, observing the two of us. Yet she noticed nothing but me, kneeling beside me, grasping a hand without a second thought. “Do you need a hospital? Should I call somebody—?”

“There’s a clinic up the road,” I mentioned.

“An ambulance,” one of our spectators recommended.

“Just help me to your car and take me there,” I suggested. Then I made a joke, promising, “I won’t bleed on your seat.”

Bless her, she recognized my humor and flashed a little smile. Realizing that my shattered legs couldn’t hold themselves upright, much less carry the wreckage on top of them, Bonnie grabbed me under the arms and pulled. But I was too heavy, and after a few hard tugs, she carefully set me down again, asking our audience, “Could somebody lend a hand?”

A pair of finished people stood among the others. But it was a teenage boy, big and raw, who leaped forward. He seemed thrilled by the chance to drag me across the pavement, practically throwing me into the waiting vehicle. Then with a cleansing brush of the hands, he asked, “Anything hurt?”

“Everything hurts,” I admitted.

He didn’t believe me. He laughed and stared at the beautiful woman, relishing the chance to be part of this little drama. I was nothing now. I was a sack of dislocated parts and bottled memories, and he thoroughly ignored me, asking the only one who mattered, “Do you need me to ride along?”

But Bonnie had already climbed inside, telling her car, “Now. Hurry.”

The ride took just long enough for me to thank her once more and absorb a few more apologies. Then as we pulled up in front of the nondescript clinic, I offered my name. She repeated, “Justin,” and dabbed at a tear. Once again, I told her, “Thank you.” Then I said, “Bonnie,” for the first time, and she seemed to notice the emotions wrapped inside my sloppy voice.

Her AI must have called ahead; an attendant had already rolled out into the parking lot to wait for us.

“I’ll pay for everything,” Bonnie told the machine.

She couldn’t afford the first two minutes. Her old car proved that she was a person of modest means.

“This was my fault entirely,” I confessed. Then I lied, claiming, “Besides, my insurance covers everything imaginable.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Dinner,” I said. “If you want, buy me a little dinner.”

The attendant was carrying me through the clinic door, an army of fingers already assessing the damage.

Bonnie repeated, "Dinner," before asking, "When?"

"Tonight," I suggested.

Then I asked, "Have you eaten?"

She shook her head. "No."

To the machines gathering around me, I asked, "How long will this take?"

The damage was severe but ordinary. Nothing too exceptional had to be fabricated. Thirty-five minutes was the verdict, and, with an intentionally pitiful voice, I asked, "Will you wait for me?"

As the door closed, Bonnie rubbed her hands together, tilted her head to one side and smiled in her sad, sweet fashion. "I guess I am waiting," she muttered. "Yes."

* * * *

Men instantly took notice of Bonnie. Perhaps her body was too meaty to belong to a model, but that was no failure. She was taller than most females, and she had an inviting walk that any man younger than ninety would notice from the Moon. Twice I saw wives or girlfriends chastising their men for gawking, and a pair of women sitting in the front of the restaurant mouthed the word, "Sweet," as my date innocently passed by their table.

I was feeling happy and sick, and very wicked, and I felt a little awful for what I had done, and a little thrilled by what I dreamed of doing.

"I've never been here," she confessed, watching the robot staff skitter from table to table, serving people like myself. "This seems like a nice place."

"It is nice," I promised. "And thank you for joining me."

Of course, I'd given her no choice. But during that thirty-five minute wait, Bonnie had driven home and changed clothes, returning to the clinic smelling of perfume and youth. She let me pat the top of a hand, just for a moment, and then, before either one of us could gauge her response, I pulled my hand back again. And smiled. And, with a quiet but thoroughly fascinated voice, I invited her to tell me about herself.

Some details were memorable. Others slipped from my grasp before I could decide whether or not to keep them. But who doesn't experience the world in such a sloppily selective way? Even with a precious someone, not every facet can be embraced inside a single evening.

What I learned was that Bonnie worked at the university as a technician, in a DNA paleontologist's lab. She had been married once, briefly. Then she lived with the wrong man for several years; that relationship mercifully had ended the previous

winter. She was raised Christian, but I don't remember which species. Plainly, she wasn't swayed by the recent reactionary noise against people like me. Watching my eyes, she touched my hand, admitting, "I'm going to be thirty in another three months."

"Thirty," I repeated.

"That can be an ominous age," I said.

Her hand withdrew as she nodded in agreement.

Our meals came and were consumed, and the bill arrived along with a pair of sweet mints. The final tally took her by surprise. But one of us had left the table a few minutes ago, and, of course, I had purged myself, putting my food back into the restaurant's common pot, the lamb and buttery potatoes destined to be knitted back together again, the next shepherd's pie indistinguishable from the last.

Bonnie paid for her meal and for renting my food, and then graciously allowed me to tip the restaurant's owner. A finished woman, as it happened.

"Good night, you two kittens," the woman told us as we left.

Bonnie drove me to my house.

I knew she didn't want to come inside. For a multitude of fine reasons—old heartaches, her Christian upbringing, and my own odd nature—Bonnie pulled away while we sat on my long driveway.

There were several ways to attack the moment.

What I decided to do, and what worked better than I hoped: I turned to my new friend, mentioning, "You haven't asked about me."

She seemed embarrassed.

"Anything," I said. "Ask anything."

Bonnie was wearing the sort of clinging blouse and slacks that a modern woman wears on a first date. Everything was revealed, yet nothing was. While a hand nervously played with an old-fashioned button, she asked, "How long ago ... did you do it...?"

"Ten years and two months, approximately."

The early days of this business, in other words.

"Okay," she whispered. Then, "How old were you—?"

"Forty-nine years, eleven months."

She couldn't decide what bothered her more, my being finished or my

apparent age. “So you’re twenty years older than me,” she muttered, speaking mostly to herself. “Or thirty, including the last ten. I don’t think I’ve ever gone out with anyone quite that—”

“Why?” I said, interrupting her.

She fell silent, nervous for every reason.

Looking into the wide brown eyes, I said, “That’s what you want to know. Why did I do it? So find the breath and ask me.”

“Why did you?”

I intended to tell the story, but the intuition of a middle-aged man took hold. The better course was to take her hand and lift it to my mouth, kissing a warm knuckle and then the knuckle beside it, and, with my tongue, tasting the salty heat between those two trembling fingers.

“Not tonight,” I told her.

I said, “Another time, perhaps.”

Then I climbed out of her old pink Cheetah, smiling with all the warmth I could manage, asking, “Do you believe in Fate, Bonnie?”

* * * *

We taste food. Our bodies feel heat and fatigue. Urges older than our species still rule us, and every finished person is grateful for that continuity. Yet even the intelligent unfinished person, informed and utterly modern, has to be reminded of essentials that everyone should know: We are not machines, and we are not dead. Today, for the first time in human history, there happens to be a third state of existence: Alive, dead, and finished. And, like the living, we have the capacity to learn and gradually improve our nature, and then, should circumstances shift, we possess a substantial, almost human capacity for change.

Another evening found us enjoying an intimate embrace. Bonnie’s salty sweat mingled with my sweet, lightly scented sweat, and her nervousness collapsed into a girlish joy. What we had just done was wicked, and fun. What we would do next was something she never imagined possible. “Not in my life,” she admitted. And then in the next instant, with a laughing apology, she exclaimed, “That was a sloppy choice of words. Sorry.”

But I laughed too. Louder than her, in fact.

After the next pause, she asked, “Is it the same?”

“Is what the same?”

“The *feel* of it,” she said. Her pretty face floated above me, hands digging beneath the moistened sheets. “When you climax—”

“Better.”

“Really?”

“But that’s because of you,” I told her. “Otherwise, no. It’s pretty much the same old bliss.”

She was suspicious, but what soul wouldn’t wish such a compliment? Against her better instincts, Bonnie smiled, and then, after some more digging beneath the sheets, she remarked, “You don’t act like a middle-aged man.”

“Hydraulics are an old science,” I replied.

She considered my body and my face. I have a handsome face, I’d like to believe. Not old but proud of its maturity, enough gray in the illusionary hair to let the casual eye pin down my finishing age. With her free hand, she swept the hair out of my eyes, and then, in a quiet, almost embarrassed tone, she asked, “Is it like they say?”

“Is what like what?”

But she realized that she was mangling the question. “People claim it feels like living the same day, without end. If you’re finished. You don’t have the same sense of time—”

“In one sense,” I agreed.

But after my next mock-breath, I explained, “Time announces itself in many ways. I have biorhythms. My mind still demands sleep on a regular schedule. And I can still read a clock. For instance, I know it’s half past midnight, which means that according to an utterly arbitrary system, a new day has begun. Dawn would be the more natural beginning point, I’ve always thought. But I’m not going to be the one to tear down everybody else’s conventions.”

She nodded. Sighed.

I pulled her up on top of me, hips rubbing. “Something else,” I said. “Ask.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Why did I allow myself to be finished?”

“Were you—?”

“Sick? No.”

Another nod was followed by a deeper, almost tattered sigh.

“I was almost fifty years old,” I explained. “Which is a good age to be a man, I think. Experience. A measure of wisdom. But the body has already failed noticeably, and the sharpest mind at sixty—if you are a man—is never as keen as it

was ten years before.”

She said nothing, moving her body, trying to match my rhythm.

“Women are different,” I allowed. “They seem to have two popular ages for finishing. Older, post-menopausal women can enjoy it greatly. And vibrant youngsters still in their twenties or thirties. But there aren’t many in their forties. Studies show. Even if the woman picks a good day to be finished ... a moment when her mood is even, her hormones in check ... well, not as many of you seem to love that age, I’ve noticed....”

She nodded, seemingly agreeing with me. Then she shuddered, sobbing and pressing her body flush against my mine. And with a low, throaty voice, she asked, “Were you talking? I wasn’t listening.”

I gave a low grunt.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

Then she touched my face, and, with a genuinely mystified voice, asked, “Why are you crying...?”

* * * *

Bonnie’s closest friend was the same age but less pretty—a proper woman, well-dressed and infinitely suspicious. The three of us shared an uncomfortable dinner in Bonnie’s little apartment, and then some mysterious errand sent my girlfriend out the door. The two women had come up with this glaringly obvious plan. Suddenly alone with me, the friend used a cutting stare, announcing, “My father is finished.”

I nodded, trying to appear attentive.

“In fact, he was one of the first. Four years before you did it, about.”

“Interesting,” I offered.

She shrugged, unimpressed by interest. Her expression hardened to just short of a glare. “Dad was dying. Pancreatic cancer.”

“Awful stuff,” I said.

“I got out of school for the day. I went with him and Mom to the clinic.” Suspicious eyes looked past me. “He was weak and dying, and I was thankful this new technology could save him ... and I was very hopeful....”

I gave a nod. Nothing more.

“The machines rolled him away,” she reported. Then, with a barely contained anger, she asked, “How long does the process take?”

“Minutes,” I offered.

“Boiling him down to nothing.”

To be replicated, the brain had to be dismantled. A sophisticated holo of the original was implanted inside a nearly indestructible crystal. Experience and new technologies have accelerated the process somewhat, but there is no means, proven or theoretical, that allows a person to be finished without the total eradication of the original body and its resident mind.

“He was a sick old man,” she reported. “Then he was this crystal lump as big as a walnut, and then he had this entirely different body. It was supposed to look like him, and feel pretty much the same ... but they still haven’t learned how to make a realistic chassis....”

“It’s a nagging problem,” I agreed. “Unless you embrace your new existence, of course. Then it isn’t a problem, but a kind of blessing. An emblem, and a treasured part of your finished identity—”

“It costs,” she complained.

There were some stiff maintenance fees, true.

“Between the finishing and all the troubles with his new body—”

“Death would have been cheaper,” I interrupted. “That’s what you realized, isn’t it?”

The woman shuddered, a cold and familiar pain working its way down her back. But as awful as that sounded, she couldn’t argue with me. “It ate up most of their savings,” she complained.

What could I say?

“Of course, Dad eventually wanted my mother to get finished, too.”

“I see.”

“But their finances were a mess.”

“Loans are available,” I mentioned. “Because the finished person can live for another thousand years, or longer, the clinics offer some very charitable terms.”

“Except Mom didn’t want any part of that.” She was her mother’s child, and she still agreed with the scared old woman. “If you’re finished, you’re finished. You stop learning.”

“Not true.”

“Yes it is!”

“No,” I snapped back. “The new mind’s design doesn’t let fresh synapses form. But that’s why it’s so durable. Instead, you use subsidiary memory sinks and plenty of them, and as you learn all of the tricks—”

“He stopped changing.”

I fell silent.

“My father went into the clinic as a sick man,” she reported. “And the machine that came out ... it was a *sick* machine, exhausted and feeling all these phantom pains running through it....”

“The doctors take precautions now,” I told her. “They can limit certain sensations beforehand—”

“He’s always going to be dying ... forever....”

The apartment door began to open.

“I don’t approve of you,” the friend blurted. “I just wanted to tell you, and tell you why not.”

I nodded as if I had learned something. As if I respected her honesty. Then as Bonnie stepped into the room—a wary attitude on her face and in her body—I said to no one in particular, “That’s why if you’re going to be finished, it’s best to do it before you get sick. On a good day, if you can manage it.”

I sighed.

To the floor, I said, “On your very best day, hopefully.”

* * * *

My best day was a sunny, gloriously warm Thursday. High-pressure centers have this way of causing rushes at the clinics, but I’d set up my appointment well in advance. The weather was nothing but good fortune. Arriving fifteen minutes early, I wore casual clothes and an easy smile. I was rested and well fed, and since I had sworn off sex for the last few days, I felt pleasantly horny—a good quality to lock into your soul. If any doubt had whispered to me, I would have postponed the event until the doubt died. If a cloud had drifted across the sun, I would have waited in the parking lot for the shadow to pass. But the sky was a steely blue, glorious and eternal, and my only little doubt was in entering the clinic alone.

“But alone is best,” somebody had warned me. “Anyone else would be a distraction for you. An imposition. Trust me about this.”

I did trust her, and, of course, she was entirely correct.

“Justin Gable,” I told the man at the counter. “I’m at—”

“Two fifteen. Yes, sir. Right this way, Mr. Gable.”

An honored guest, I felt like. I felt as if I was walking toward an elaborate celebration, or, at the very least, a tidy but significant ceremony. Every stereotypic image of looming gallows or tunnels leading to bright lights was left at the front door. I felt thrilled, even giddy. For the first time in years, I whistled as I walked. Without a gram of shame, I flirted with my female nurse, and then my female doctor—finished souls, both of them. With a haste born of practice and experience, they quickly placed me inside a warm bath of benign fluids, and, before my mood could dip, even slightly, they slipped a cocktail of neurotoxins into my happy red blood.

During the next furious minutes, microchines invaded and mapped my brain, consuming my neurons as they moved.

Inside a second room, a standard crystal was configured along lines defined by my delicate wiring, and, inside a third room, entirely different machines fashioned a body worthy of any paying customer. Then I found myself sitting on a soft couch, inside a fourth room, wearing my original clothes and with barely fifty minutes lost. And exactly as they had promised, I needed just another few moments to adapt to my very new circumstances.

The smiling staff congratulated me.

Alone, I walked outside. A little patch of clouds had covered the sun, but it didn't matter. In some deep way, I could still feel the sun's bright glare, just as I feel it today, warming me to my ceramic bones.

She was waiting where I had left her, sitting inside my car.

I drove us to my house—a smaller, more modest abode in those days—and she made a convincing show of treating me exactly as she had before. Not once did she ask if I felt different. Never did she comment on my new body. Our sex was scrupulously ordinary, pleasant but nothing more. Then I woke that next morning, and because I couldn't help myself, I said, "I know the time. And I can see that it's raining. But you know, I feel pretty much the same as I did yesterday afternoon."

Pretty much isn't the same as perfect. Even a mind composed of hard frozen synapses contains a certain play of mood, of emotions and alertness. The soul remains flexible enough that when your lover smiles in a grim fashion, you worry. When she says, "I'm leaving you, Justin," it hurts. It hurts badly, and even after the surprise fades, you continue to ache. For months, and for years, even. Forever, if you would allow it.

But I won't allow it.

"What about all your promises?" I blurted.

"Oh, those were lies," she admitted calmly.

"And what about helping with my medical bills?"

“I’m not giving you any money, darling.”

“But I can’t afford this body,” I complained, “and I still owe hundreds of thousands for this brain. And you told me ... you claimed you’d help me—”

“And I will help,” she said, glancing down at her twice-eaten eggs. “But you’re a bright enough man, and if you think about this problem, just for a moment or two, you’ll see for yourself what I was going to suggest.”

* * * *

“Do you remember?” Bonnie would ask. “What happened ten weeks ago? Ten days ago? Or how about ten minutes ago? I’m just curious, Justin. What do you remember?”

At first, she was simply curious. The questions were offered in passing, and I was entirely responsible for my answers. But as her interest sharpened, her ear became more critical, and she tested me, pressing for salient details. Mentioning a specific date, she asked, “What was I wearing? Where did we eat? And what did the man in the green suit say to me?”

“You were wearing a wonderful little holo-dress, flowers changing to seeds and then back to flowers again.” I dipped into an assortment of memory sinks, my eyes staring off into the foggy distance. “We ate in that Sudanese restaurant, and you had the eland, and you had shoes. Yes. Black leather with brass buckles.”

“Go on.”

“But the man wasn’t wearing green,” I reported. “It was more gold, his suit was. I don’t remember his shoes, sorry. But he had this square face and a gold ring through his cheek, and he stared at you. I remember that very well. We walked into the place, and he watched you constantly. I made a joke, or you did—”

“Playing with himself—”

“Under the table, yes. I said, ‘You’re making that poor gentleman crazy, darling.’ And then all at once he stood up and came over to us ... in his gold-green suit ... and he told you, ‘When you get tired of that dildo, why don’t you try a real man?’”

“You remember,” she said happily.

“And I remember what you asked him. ‘Why? Do you know a real man?’”

She was embarrassed, and pleased, laughing at the shared memory.

Like anyone in her position, Bonnie wanted to know what I could do, and what I could not do. Yes, I explained, I had limits in personal growth. For better or worse, my nature was essentially changeless. In another hundred years, if someone gave me a personality inventory, I would test out as a man still just shy of fifty: A

middle-aged outlook; neatness at home; a mature man's patience, and, hopefully, a measure of wisdom. Plus my present level of smoldering passion, freed from the vagaries of hormones, would hold rock solid.

"I'll be better in bed than most hundred and fifty year-old men," I joked.

A smile widened, but there was no laughter. Then, with a serious voice—a thoughtful and worried but distinctly determined voice—Bonnie announced, "I want to have children."

"I've got half a dozen vials filled up with my frozen sperm," I promised. "For when the time comes."

But she hadn't mentioned my participation, and she didn't mention it now. Instead, she took a deep breath before saying, "They can harvest a woman's eggs too. After the brain's gone, I mean."

"And they're making spectacular progress with artificial wombs," I added. "In a year or two, or ten at the most—"

"What about work?" she interrupted. "Learning new jobs and the like ... you didn't know much about cybernetics before this, but now you're some kind of consultant—"

"I lobby for the rights of the finished," I said, not for the first time. "My work earns me a small stipend."

True enough.

"If we're going to live for another century," she said, "and for a thousand centuries after that ... can these little memory sinks keep adapting us to all the coming changes...?"

With an open, patient face, I reminded her, "Technologies only grow stronger."

"Yet if we want ... draining whatever's inside those sinks ... we can *forget* what we want to forget, too. Right?"

"Which is a great gift, if you think about it."

She heard something ominous in the words. But she was a brave soul looking hard at things she wouldn't have considered just a few months ago. "Well, even if I *was* thinking about it," she finally admitted. "I can barely pay my rent, much less make the down payment."

We were spending the night at my substantial house—a telling detail. Bonnie was sitting in my bed, her young body illuminated by a waning moon. Not quite looking at me, she said, "I don't know what I'm thinking. Because I could never afford it."

I waited, letting the silence frighten her.

And then with a calm, warm tone, I asked, “But imagine, darling. What if some good heart was able to *help* you?”

* * * *

More weeks passed, but I remember little about them. Bonnie had a spectacular fight with her best friend, centering on issues she wouldn't discuss with me, and two attempts at reconciliation went for naught. Which left me as her closest friend as well as her lover, and, with that new power, I did very little. Just the occasional word of advice; a slight coaxing masked as praise. In glowing terms, I spoke about her body and beauty, and when we were in public, I practically reveled at the lustful stares of strangers. But the telling event was elsewhere, and inevitable. Bonnie was twenty-nine years and eleven months old, and with that birthday looming, she said, “Okay, my mind's made up.”

I smiled, just enough.

Then I set out to prepare her, legally and emotionally.

My attorney was only too happy to help. A jolly fat man in life, he remained that way today—a comfortable bulk wrapped around an immortal smile. “You've picked a great moment,” he promised. A wide hand offered itself to my lover. “This is the new-generation skin. Study it. Isn't it natural? Touch it now. Prick it. If you want, lick it. No? Well, believe me. You're going to look like an angel beside this clunky old automaton.”

“Hey,” I complained. “I'm counting my pennies for an upgrade.”

Everyone laughed, although Bonnie felt ill at ease. Yet she never lost her will, never needed so much as a soft word of encouragement. Then, later, once the appropriate forms and declarations had been signed and witnessed, my jolly attorney said, “A word with you, Justin?”

Bonnie waited for me in the lobby.

Straight away, my attorney asked, “Do you know how beautiful that woman is?”

“No,” I kidded.

He laughed, winked knowingly, and then said, “Seriously. This is not like the others that you've introduced me to. No elegant silver in the hair. No false teeth or bothersome grandkids. And that face isn't another bag of good and botched plastic surgeries, either.”

“But she is rather poor—” I began.

“Fuck money. So long as it's just her money.” He laughed until he looked

red-faced and breathless. “Poor is perfect, in fact. Like it was with you. It helps the soul come to terms with the world’s realities.”

Pride flickering, I asked, “Will she be as successful as I am?”

“And then some!” His laughter filled the room. “I mean it, Justin. She’s going to have a great time. I’ve seen this new skin stretched over a woman’s frame, and I’ve felt it, and I think she’s going to be pleased. You’re going to be very pleased. Frankly, she’s going to be fighting off the potential suitors. And for each one that she doesn’t fight off—”

“Yeah.”

“Of course, you’ll earn just the standard commission for bringing her in,” he admitted. “Until Bonnie can work off her own debts—”

“I realize.”

“But for every CEO-type that she captures,” he continued, “I’ll make sure that you get your 5 percent out of her windfall.”

I still owed a tidy fortune to my makers. But I was immortal, and they could afford to be patient. All of their clients were immortal, and they could take an extraordinarily long view when it came to their business.

“More pennies for the saving,” he sang out.

“Sure,” I said, nodding amiably. “I’ll never forget that.”

* * * *

An appointment was made at my clinic, but Bonnie woke the day before with a smile. “Look at it out there,” she said. It was a cold but utterly bright morning, three days shy of her thirtieth birthday. “Do you think we could get in? If we went down there this minute—?”

“Now?”

“I really feel in the mood,” she promised.

Somehow, I wasn’t ready. But I took Bonnie at her word and carefully hid my own nervousness. Accompanying her to the clinic, I repeated the old advice. “You should go in alone. Really, I’d be a—”

“Distraction. I agree.”

Why did that hurt? And why, even after I used every reliable trick, did those three words continue to gnaw at me?

“No, this is best,” she assured me. “Going in early like this, I mean. I think some of my colleagues and friends are planning an intervention, which has to come

tonight, of course..." She laughed softly, asking, "Wouldn't that be something if we let them...? If I get a good enough body, and if we kept the lights in the room down low enough so they couldn't tell—?"

"Are you happy?"

"Completely."

"You're certain?"

Bonnie didn't quite look at me. Then she wasn't speaking just to me, explaining, "Until a few weeks ago, I wasn't happy. Not like I thought I should be in my life. But I kept telling myself that if I just kept plugging along, eventually, maybe I'd run into somebody..."

Neither of us laughed.

Pulling into the half-filled parking lot, she said, "Maybe they won't have a slot for me now."

For her, they would make a slot.

"Kiss me. For luck."

I did what she wanted. I kissed her on the lips and told her, "I'll see you soon," with a voice that sounded perfectly genuine. I even managed to smile, and Bonnie gave me a distracted smile and wink in return, and then she walked alone up to the front door and stepped out of sight.

I waited.

For maybe twenty seconds, I managed to do nothing.

But I have this ungraceful habit. This inclination—a reflex—that remains fixed in my nature. Preyed upon by doubts, I always try to follow. And afterward, I always make myself forget that I followed. What was different this time was that my reflex struck earlier than normal. I took the clinic by surprise, which makes me feel a little better. Stepping out of the Cheetah, I started to chase after Bonnie, a quick walk becoming a near-sprint, and because another patron had stopped inside the open door, thanking one of the doctors or one of the machines, I managed to slip into the lobby before any locks could be secured.

A nurse was leading Bonnie into the back rooms.

"Wait!" I cried out.

A young man, finished and fit, vaulted over the counter. I was tackled and rudely shoved to the floor, but I managed to say, "You don't need to! I seduced you to do this! They *pay* me—!"

A hand covered my mouth, choking off my voice.

Bonnie's hand, I realized.

Just like that first time, the pretty face hovered above me. But on this cold morning, she smiled with a certain fetching melancholy, and a calm, hard, and almost disappointed voice said, "I'm not an idiot, Justin. I figured it out for myself, almost from the first day."

Her hand lifted, and she rose to her feet.

"Don't go back there," I called out. "Not now, darling. Not while you're angry like this, because you'll *always* be—!"

"Except I'm not angry," she replied. And with a hard, wise smile, she added, "In fact, darling, this is better. I'm happy enough, but I also feel suspicious right now. Toward you, and everybody. And really, if you try and think about it, isn't that the best way to travel through the next hundred thousand years...?"

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