

Once a Dream Did Weave (Excerpt)

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1

“Julia, Will you marry me?”

“Are you serious?” Julia Aimes asked, her brain seizing in surprise.

Or rather, her mouth said the words. Julia herself, barely even knew she was talking. Her head felt like it'd been shoved into a snow bank. She wasn't expecting this- wasn't ready for it. She'd only known Benito DeMorgan for three months.

He was being a tad hasty.

In lieu of a response to Julia's incredulousness, Benito conjured a ring box from his pocket. He flipped open the lid to reveal an enormous, almost obnoxiously big diamond sitting in an elegant white gold setting. The diamond was so big- Julia couldn't help considering the idea it was a fake.

A small army of miniature guys with little vacuums went to work in Julia's mouth- robbing it of all moisture. Everything in the room felt encased in a combination of lime Jello and Lucite. For some reason, she found her attention focused on a dull pink scar on Benito's wrist instead of on the massive rock affixed to the ring. The scar looked like an upside down number 4. For some reason, she'd never noticed it before.

She said, “That's a big diamond.”

Again, Julia's mouth did its thing without her consent or involvement. In her mind, Julia was thinking she should've seen the proposal coming. But it was so soon, so sudden- it was absurd. Wasn't it?

Even before he picked her up, Julia knew Benito had something special planned. There was a giddiness in the way he asked her out for this particular date. But, she thought he was going to suggest they live together- at the most- and when she considered the possibility- she'd decided to tell him it was too soon.

When they initially made their plans, Benito asked Julia to wear a dress because he was going to take her out to a nice dinner. This was a real treat for Julia who came from a lower middle class family- fancy dates were few and far between. So far, all of her dates with Benito had been the kind middle-class people go on- walks, picnics, movies- standard stuff. A 'night out' was going to the Riviera to see a band or to a bar.

Still, Julia wanted to look as elegant as possible, so she put on the nicest, most fashionable dress she owned, one she knew made her butt look fantastic. She plopped herself down in front of the make-up mirror and spent an inordinate amount of time skillfully applying it with the kind of care she hadn't bothered taking since she was 16. At that age, no matter who she was dating, he was the most awesome boy in the history of the world- that week.

Her cellphone beeped. Julia checked it and there was a text, from Benito. It said, “I'm here. Please meet me downstairs.”

At the time, Julia thought this was very strange- they were far enough along in their dating where he felt comfortable sitting around her apartment while she got ready. Besides, he always

came up. Thinking maybe he couldn't find parking, Julia hurried to get finished and rushed out the door.

When Julia came out onto the street, Benito was standing in front of a limousine. And not just any limo- the stretchiest limo she'd ever laid eyes on. It glimmered under the street lights. In a way, she was right about his not being able to find parking- the big car would need a quarter of a block and she couldn't imagine parallel parking the beast.

Benito came over and kissed her. He told her the night was going to be full of surprises. To Julia's experience, when a guy said a night was going to be full of surprises- it meant he was going to give her a box of chocolates- or- in the negative- try to stick it in her butt or something. In Benito's case, the proclamation turned out to be an understatement, not an exaggeration.

They climbed into the car. On the way to the restaurant, they drank from the bar and Benito watched with quiet bemusement as Julia took in all the car's amenities. It wasn't just a limo, it was the car of the future. There was a wi-fi connection and the ability to tap into her iTunes account so the music blaring over the stereo was from her personal collection. There was also a small radio station's worth of music stored in the car's memory. The entire divider wall between the back compartment and the driver was an LCD screen. Every seat had Shiatsu massage. This was a seriously tricked out limousine.

Julia had only driven in a limo once, at prom, her senior year in high school. The two cars couldn't be more different. That one was cheap and old and it smelled of long-ago smoked cigars and spilled beer. Additionally, she was crammed into the backseat with five other couples. It was the only way she could afford even the junky limo. To make matters worse, her date, Cliff Ryan, spent the ride to prom trying to slide his hand between her legs- in total disregard of the other eight people in the car. Clearly, he'd been watching too much porn on the internet.

While everyone else was watching Tommy Dolan and Lisa Penningworth get named Prom king and queen, Julia's friend Claire Bones got drunk in the bathroom on peppermint schnapps. On the way home, Claire threw up on the backseat and the only bright side of that situation for Julia was that none of it got on her. But some did get on Cliff- and that gave her a good excuse to stay away from him- by that point in the night he'd frittered away any chance he had to get into her knickers. Ironically, the worst part of prom was the one thing missing from her fancy date with Benito- he wasn't trying to slide his hand up her skirt- and she wished he would.

Julia Aimes was 22, a junior in college, going to school at the University of Chicago. Much to the chagrin of her parents, she still had 'general studies' listed as her major. When, at the beginning of every summer, Julia and her parents had the inevitable 'what do you want to do with your life' conversation, she would tell them, honestly, she wasn't remaining in general studies because of a lack of academic interest- quite the opposite. Every semester, Julia found herself completely wrapped up in history or art or philosophy (and once, for two months- she wanted to be an accountant) only to have it shift again by the time the next semester started. She was unable to narrow her interests- the more she learned- the more she wanted to learn.

Julia wasn't expecting the car to stop where it did. They were downtown- and she was expecting to have dinner at one of the trendy eateries they'd seen together on the restaurant review show 'Check Please.' Instead, they were at the Sears Tower, the tallest building in the Chicago skyline and one-time tallest building in the world.

"We're eating dinner here?" Julia asked- a bit confused. She'd never heard of any of the restaurants in the Sears Tower- it mainly functioned as an office building- although she supposed there were probably a few places to eat.

"I told you, this night will be full of surprises." Benito said, with a sly grin.

They walked arm in arm into the main entrance. Julia felt like a princess. Yet, the pampering had barely begun. They walked through the lobby towards the elevators. When they were twenty feet away, Julia noticed one of the elevators was roped off with a black velvet rope. A bored looking security guard stood next to the rope to make sure no one tried to ignore its quietly elegant authority.

To Julia's surprise they went straight up to the guard, who perked up at the sight of Benito.

“Mr. DeMorgan sir. Welcome.”

The man snapped the velvet rope open and let Julia and Benito through. Julia stared at Benito with wide eyes. He only grinned in response. They got on the elevator, and Julia tried not to feel the shot of nausea that accompanied the trip up. The elevators in hi-rises don't fuck around- they were rising fast. The elevator stopped about half way up the building, and they got out so they could transfer to the second elevator for the remainder of the trip to the top. This elevator was also roped off, just for them.

Julia was starting to wonder just what was going on.

When the doors opened at the top floor- Julia's mouth metaphorically dropped all 110 floors to the ground. The elevator opened onto a massive room that filled the entire floor of the building. Three of the four walls were floor-to-ceiling glass. It was a beautiful, clear night and the city stretched out beneath them in all directions like an electric web, pulsing with light and life. Set up near the window was a single table, with two place settings- a pair of candles flickering. Julia felt like she'd accidentally fallen into the set of a romantic comedy.

“What is all this?” Julia asked.

“Dinner.” Benito grinned. “We have the executive chef of *Bertrand* cooking for us exclusively tonight. I've given him some of your favorite ingredients and he's created a menu I pretty much guarantee you're going to love.”

“*Bertrand*? That fancy French place?”

Julia loved French food and *Bertrand* was the best place in the city. There were critics who considered it to be the best French food in America. One day, just out of curiosity, she called up to see if she could get a dinner reservation there. It turned out she could, three and a half months later. Then she made the mistake of looking at the menu online- it was too expensive. A single entrée would cost a quarter of her monthly rent. Reluctantly, she'd cancelled the reservation.

“The very one.” Benito agreed.

“But how did you get this to happen? How did you even know this place existed? I've lived in Chicago my whole life and I didn't know there was a one-table restaurant at the top of the Sears Tower. I must've been to the observation deck 20 times as a kid- I never even heard a rumor.”

“You mean like the rumor that Walt Disney's head is kept in cryogenic stasis inside Cinderella's castle in Disney Land?”

Julia laughed. “Exactly like that, yes.”

“This is different because we're not in a restaurant. Normally, this room is empty. I was told on windy days, the sway up here can be a little stomach churning- a building this big has to be designed with some give. Thankfully, we have a calm night forecast for tonight: winds at 1-2 miles an hour off the lake.”

That was Benito, even in the little things, he paid attention to details. It was annoying sometimes, but it was a definitive plus in bed.

“So what was your back-up plan? Wrigley Field?”

“Cubs are playing tonight.” He paused, grinned, “I did have one.”

“I know you did.”

“This must've cost a fortune.” Julia said, finally voicing the main thing on her mind since she'd seen the limo.

“It doesn't matter. I'm rich.” Benito said, his tone almost dismissive.

Julia laughed. “I'm being serious.”

Benito just smiled in a self-satisfied way Julia recognized. He didn't smile like that when he was lying. He smiled like that when he knew he'd just hit her with something she didn't expect. He said to her all the time...

“You know what I always say, if I ever stop surprising you, you have my permission to kick me out of your life.”

“So you're saying you're rich?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Julia looked Benito in the eye, still trying to see the joke he was playing.

“How rich?”

“Filthy rich.”

“Like covered in mud, haven’t taken a shower in months filthy rich?”

“Muddy Bonnaroo filthy.”

“Wow. Do you mind me asking how it is you’ve come to be rich?”

“Family money. We’ve been importing and exporting things for generations.”

“Okay, you’ve certainly surprised me. You’re rich. And you didn’t say anything about it until now.” Julia paused, considering, “I guess I can understand that- not wanting me to like you for your money and all that, but why are you telling me this now?”

“I wouldn’t be. Except that I love you Julia. And I want you to be my wife.”

Which was when Benito got out of his chair, knelt down on one knee and produced the ring from his pocket.

“Julia,” he asked, “will you marry me?”

2

Samuel Burgess started reading before he could talk. With good parents and a stable home life, he probably would've grown up to be a well-paid something- maybe an architect or a lawyer. But Samuel didn't have good parents. Samuel's parents fucking sucked.

The best thing one could say about them is that they died when Samuel was 15- and that's being acutely conscious of the fact no orphan has an easy time of it. Samuel's parents were abusive, petty people who had no place bringing a child into the world. His childhood was a revolving door of neglect followed by beatings and a constant disruption of any semblance of routine he managed to establish. By the time he hit puberty, Samuel had been through 5 "new beginnings" with his parents. Until the day he died, Samuel hated those two words put one after the other.

In the bizarre lexicon of Samuel's childhood, *new beginnings* meant his parents had, due to either extreme poverty or some middle of the night televangelist inspired bit of conscience, decided to stop screwing up their lives and the life of their child with the heroin and the pills or the alcohol- or whatever substance was screwing everything up this time. Then, for 3 months or so, they would sober up and utterly convince themselves everything was going to be better from then on. This absolute certainty was achieved by talking about nothing but the drugs they took all the time and how bad it was. These periods were also punctuated with beatings for Samuel- beatings inspired mainly by his insistence on 'being difficult' and 'driving them back towards drugs.'

In order to 'escape the temptation' of their old life, Samuel's parents would pack everything up and move to a new town, uprooting him without even bothering to ask his opinion on the matter. During these new beginnings, he would have to absorb endless amounts of verbal abuse from both parents. There is no one on earth more holier-than-thou than a recently clean drug addict. They constantly told him how stupid he was, how he was fat, how he'd never amount to anything, how if he was a better son they probably never would've gotten involved in drugs in the first place.

After maybe three months, maybe after six, one night, one of his parents wouldn't come home at all. Then, a night or two later- neither one of the hapless twits would come home. Once this happened, all Samuel could do was despair and wait for the other shoe to drop. He knew they'd once again begun the infuriatingly predictable slide back into one of their myriad addictions.

To escape the misery of his real life, Samuel escaped into books. Books were the universe where he spent the vast majority of his time. They were the source of his self-esteem- the vehicle he used to drive himself out of the crazytown of his real life. Samuel read everything he could get his hands on- no matter what it was. He re-read his favorite books over and over again, reveling in the predictability of the never-changing stories. Books were his parents. Books and the characters within them. He learned about sex from books, about what love was, about Hobbits and Buddhism and Miles Davis- all from books. Every once and a while there would be a TV in the house- and Samuel liked watching- but it was usually one of the first things his parents pawned when they were in need of some cash. Samuel's parents never messed with his books- assuming nobody would actually want to give money for the useless things- so they were relatively safe to collect.

Most children look at the early death of parents with sadness and remorse, but to Samuel, the day they died was the end of a 15 year nightmare. There was an elemental sadness at their passing. He didn't deny this sorrow, they were still his parents after all- and through his hatred, he loved them. But there was precious little to remember fondly- and over time, the sadness of the death receded- leaving only the relief. The fact their death brought him very little except a new set of problems, didn't come as a surprise. By 15, he'd developed a pretty solidly cynical attitude towards the world.

Samuel could remember the day his parent's died with a preternatural lucidity. He was home, reading a Douglas Adams novel. A half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich and a stale bag of corn chips sat next to him on the couch. It was summer, so it was still light out. There was a knock at the

door- pulling him out of the story. Glancing up, annoyed, Samuel's eyes went back to the book and he got up, thinking it might be James, a kid that lived down the street. But when he looked out the front window, he saw a squad car.

His heart sank. His parents had once again gotten picked up for drunk driving or buying drugs or whatever the hell they were doing illegally that day- which meant he was headed for foster care. It was occasionally okay when Samuel was 9- but at 15- it was too much. There was an unfair assumption that kids in foster care were 'bad.' Even with his shitty parents, Samuel was a good kid, earning fantastic grades- in spite of his circumstances- and it pissed him off when people judged him on the way his parents lived their lives.

He usually ended up running away.

Bracing himself for the inevitable, Samuel walked to the front door and looked out the peephole. Sure enough, two cops were standing on his front steps. They almost looked like twins. Both men clearly had a working knowledge of steroids. They both had shaved heads, wore those gloves with the fingers cut out even though it was 85 degrees outside, carried larger than police issue guns, and were sporting those idiotic wrap-around mirrored sunglasses.

They could've switched places and Samuel never would've been able to tell.

He opened the front door, but didn't move to unlock the screen. His parents had drilled it into him a million times that he should never, ever, never-never-never-ever open the door to the cops unless they had a search warrant.

"If they want to get in so bad- let 'em kick the door in." His Mom used to say, poking her ever present cigarette at him for emphasis.

Cop #1 looked at Samuel. "Hello son." He said. "Is your name," the cop paused and looked at his notepad, "Samuel Burgess?"

"It is."

Cop #2 said, "Son, we regret to inform you that your parents, Ira and Dave Burgess were killed today in a car accident."

This stunned Samuel.

He supposed a little part of him had been expecting this for a long time, but how could you ever really expect to hear such news?

"They're dead?" He asked, feeling more like a little kid than he had in years.

"I'm sorry son, yes."

"What happened?"

"They were killed by a drunk driver- a 47 year old man named Gerald Churls- he swerved out of his lane and clipped your parent's car. This spun them into the oncoming lane of traffic. Their car was hit head on by another car travelling 45 miles an hour. Then everything just went kablooe. Seven cars were involved- five fatalities."

"Was it my parents who were drunk? Did they cause it?"

"No. It wasn't their fault. Street camera footage verifies it was Mr. Churls who caused the accident. Your parents were travelling within their lane and slightly below the speed limit." Said Cop #2.

As Cop #2 was speaking, Cop #1 was writing a note in his pad to test the Burgess's blood alcohol levels ASAP. If the kid assumed his parents were drunk- they must be common drunk drivers. Later, toxicology reports verified that both of Samuel's parents were significantly more intoxicated than the man who hit them.

"Great. Irony. I really needed some of that today." Samuel chuffed- he was still just a little in shock. He looked at Cop #1 or #2- he forgot which was which, "So what happens to me now?"

"Do you have any family that might take you in? If you do, I would contact them as soon as possible. Maybe even a neighbor?"

Shit. Shit. Shit. Samuel didn't know anyone well enough to allow him to move into their house. He thought of just making up a story of who would come and get him, but he rejected the

idea. He couldn't just give the cop a name and send them on their way. They would have to take him to where he was going and make sure everything was squared away for their paperwork.

There were people the boy could've called, including 2 or 3 of his teachers. But he couldn't conceive of calling them- it never occurred to him to imagine they would do anything but sound annoyed and hang up if he tried.

"I can't think of anyone off the top of my head." Samuel said.

"Well try to think of someone son. I would prefer to put you in the hands of someone you know, especially after such hard news."

Samuel knew the cop was just trying to be sympathetic. Even jerk-ass steroid cops weren't so callous as to not feel for a boy whose parents had just died. But he knew he was screwed and he just didn't feel like dealing with the fucker's insincerely sincere empathy.

"Just take me to fucking foster care. I don't have any family- they just died. So I'm fucking screwed, so just take me to foster care and leave me the hell alone."

"Son, there's no reason to use that language. We understand you're upset, but we're police officers and you shouldn't speak that way to us."

Samuel looked at the cop with wide eyes. Seriously? He asked himself. Was this guy seriously going to criticize him for swearing right now? Samuel was a profoundly non-violent guy, but he wanted to reach through the screen door and pop the guy's eyeballs out like Uma Thurman did to Daryl Hannah in *Kill Bill*.

Instead, he just stood there and looked at the cops. They exchanged uncomfortable glances, not sure what to do.

"May we come in?" one asked.

The other cop brightened- he liked that idea.

"No." Samuel replied.

"Come on son, don't be like this. You are still a minor- you are not capable of being responsible for yourself."

"I've been responsible for myself since I was five. My mom and dad weren't ever going to get nominated for any parenting awards."

In spite of Samuel's angry words, tears fell freely from his eyes and down his cheeks. They were his parents, and they were gone.

"Be that as it may- we still have to ensure that you have been brought into the custody of a responsible adult."

Samuel sighed. What was he going to do?

He clicked open the lock on the door, and pretty much gave up on everything.

After Samuel's parents died, he was plunged into a very long five years of one bad thing after another. Foster homes, running away, turning 18 and dealing with the realization the state, far too interested him on one day, no longer cared if he lived or died the next. He worked stupid jobs at insulting pay. Finding it easier to just keep to himself, he read books during his breaks and didn't really talk to anyone about anything not directly related to work. The longest he stayed at the same job was 2 months- and by then he'd be ready to kill someone. It didn't matter. The Mcjobs were always in easy supply no matter what happened with the external economy. He kept to himself and read a lot. When he would get fed up and quit, barely anyone even noticed.

Then the letter arrived in the mail- 17 days after his 20th birthday. One piece of paper and poof- *everything* was different.

3

“That’s a big diamond.” Julia said, memorized by the sparkling jewel.

“So what do you say? Will you marry me?”

“Oh my god, you really are serious.” She said.

He frowned. “That wasn’t what I was hoping to hear- especially not twice.”

Julia put her hand on Benito’s. “Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. I just meant, I keep waiting for you to yell ‘April Fools’ or ‘you’re on candid camera’ or something. You have to understand you’ve just given me an awfully big bite to swallow.”

He paused, nodded.

“I guess you’re right. You need some time.”

“That’s it. I need some time to absorb, to wrap my head around all this.”

He looked hurt. Julia could see that. His eyes kept flickering down to his shoes. She looked around at the sparkling lights of the city spread out around her in every direction. She looked at the beautifully adorned table. She would have to be blind to not see how badly he wanted to impress. Julia appreciated the effort and found herself feeling guilty for not just falling into his arms with sexy whispers of ‘yes, yes of course I will marry you.’ Instead, she asked if he was fucking with her twice.

“I’m sorry Benito- it’s just, we’ve only known each other 3 months- we’ve only slept together like 10 times. It just feels a bit rushed.”

Again he nodded. “It is a bit rushed. My parents, they want me to have an arranged marriage. They are very old fashioned.”

“Were they arranged to be married too?”

“No, that’s the crazy thing. They met at a Rod Stewart concert in the 70’s. My Mom’s never been the type of lady to worry about things like consistency or hypocrisy. I think she feels like they’re beneath her. I have one semester to find someone I believe I can live with forever. I had to keep the wealth a secret until the proposal- that was part of the deal. I realize I’m being forward, that this is fast- but, you’re this amazing woman Julia- the better I get to know you the more I like you. I know this sounds stupid, but the other night, when you burped, and you just sorta laughed about it- you didn’t do that whole act some women do- where they pretend like they’ve never burped before in the history of their lives- and even if they have- once or twice- they surely have never farted. When that happened- for me- that was like seeing a bit of your soul- and you’re exactly the kind of soul I dreamed about when I insisted on being given this opportunity.”

Julia stared at Benito- he was weird- but in a way she found very endearing- she was a bit surprised to discover she didn’t at all desire to blow him off- she needed to do some of the most serious thinking she’d ever done in her life.

“I’ll tell you what. I promise to give you an answer within 48 hours. That’s plenty of time for me to figure out where I stand. Agreed?”

He looked a bit pouty- but it was clear from the look on his face, he knew she wasn’t being unreasonable.

“Agreed.” He agreed.

There was a long pause then. Their first glasses of wine arrived and Julia watched the ritual of the waiter opening the wine bottle, pouring a swallow into Benito’s glass and waiting for him to taste it. Benito made a bit of a show of the whole thing, swirling the wine around and sticking his nose into the glass before taking a drink and nodding his approval.

The waiter disappeared, promising their first course very shortly.

Desperate to break the uncomfortable silence sitting between them, Julia picked up her glass and offered it up in the universal sign for making a toast. For a moment Benito looked petulant, but then he picked up his glass.

“I would like to offer a toast to the fact you just pulled a *Coming to America* on me.”

There was a second when she thought he might’ve taken her joke as a jab.

Then she could literally see the reference click in his mind. Benito lit up and started laughing.

“Believe it.” He said, “With a *Pretty Woman* twist. Only I went super good French food instead of shopping.”

“Well my friend, I have to say, nicely played.”

They clinked glasses. Julia took a sip of the wine and was pleasantly surprised.

“This is delicious.” She said.

“In general, I don’t think the whole idea of things automatically being better because they’re more expensive is true. But wine is one of the exceptions. Good wine, really delicious wine, it costs a lot of money.”

“You’re a rich snob aren’t you?”

“Honestly I’m not. I don’t give a shit about labels or being a big show off- the only value I see in wealth is that it allows me to live the kind of life I want to live. I want to learn how to help others live better too. My parents say it’s easy for me to think the way I do because I’ve never really had to work for my money. They’re probably right. But that doesn’t mean I’m not right too.”

Julia agreed, and Benito topped off their glasses.

4

On the north side of Chicago, on the corner of Belmont and Sheridan, is a used bookstore. The dingiest of a long row of storefront small businesses, the bookstore is the kind of place most people walk past without noticing. The front window is perpetually dirty, and the most awful collection of books is on display- mostly pulp paperbacks no one wanted to read in the 70's. A small sign reading, "Samuel's Stories" is posted out front.

We will have to walk in ourselves. If we waited for a customer to come out, we might be sitting here all day without even a newspaper to pass the time.

When you open the door, a bell rings. Most people don't hear it because their full attention is on the ambient smell that wafts out of the store like an invisible fog. Everyone's first impression of the place was defined by their reaction to the smell. It's an odor people either love or hate- like patchouli. But instead of patchouli, Samuel's Stories smelled of paper, dust, nag champa incense and motionlessness- like an ancient library unearthed after 100 years.

Shadows are situated in every nook and cranny of the store- including the entrance hall, which was narrow. A wall of shelves filled with more bad paperbacks loomed over on either side. Walking into the Samuel's Stories is like wandering into a dank and creepy canyon at twilight. The first thing you see once you're inside- is a dead end. The books facing the entrance are like those in the window- old and mostly better forgotten- books with titles like "The Forest Floor" and "Interloper."

The floor to ceiling bookcase cuts off your view of the bulk of the store and forces you to turn either left or right down equally narrow aisles. In either direction the rows are dimly visible, at least 10 in each direction. If you stand there, at this nexus, and just listen, you encounter a tranquil quiet so complete, it's almost Zen.

No signs offer assistance to the casual shopper. Most people don't make it past this first intersection. They just turn around a couple of times, and give up. Then the bell rings again, a little sharper this second time, as the shopper's frustration imprints itself on the world.

The store, now empty except for its orphaned proprietor Samuel Burgess, descends back into its customary silence.

5

Whenever the customers walked away, spooked by the sheer lack of invitingness of the bookstore- Samuel watched them go with a smile on his face.

To Samuel, his bookstore was perfect. Every aspect of the entrance was carefully cultivated- every detail just as he wanted it. He wanted to serve a very specific clientele- and the entrance was the bait.

Samuel could be so choosy because, unlike your average business owner, Samuel didn't care if the bookstore ever made a single dollar. He owned the building outright and had all the money he could possibly want to spend.

It was the letter of course. The letter that told him one minute, he was Samuel Burgess, orphan, 20 years old with \$97 dollars in his bank account- and the next, he was Samuel Burgess, guy with six zeros after a two digit number in his bank account. All he had to do was open an envelope.

It was the kind of story that ended up on the Today show if they got wind of it- the kind of once in a billion shot most people aren't even naïve enough to hope for. But there it was. In literal black and white with a fancy embossed seal at the bottom.

Even 10 years later, Samuel would occasionally expect a lawyer to show up and explain about the terrible mistake made a decade earlier and only now discovered. And then, all at once, Samuel's life would contract back to the hell it'd been before.

But so far, that hadn't happened.

Unlike most people, Samuel had no questions about what he would do with his life if given the choice to do anything he wanted. He had no desire to fly around the country and see the world. Truth be told, the world frightened Samuel. It was loud, and full of anger and pettiness and greed. Besides, being rich made him a target and he didn't want to end up in some shack in the suburbs of Calcutta being held for ransom.

These were excuses, but the truth was, Samuel didn't travel because he held no desire to travel. Samuel wanted to open a bookstore- *this* bookstore. Books had always been at the center of him. Books were always his escape. So why shouldn't he build a business around the very things that brought him his greatest relief in life? And so he found the location- close to an El stop in Chicago, and set it up. It took time for the paper smell to really permeate the place and for the dust to reach the proper thickness, but after 10 years of diligent attention to detail, his environment was wholly perfect.

In the beginning, his choice of aesthetics was instinctual. He wanted the store to look the way it did because that's how the store looked in his imagination. But over time, he came to realize his subconscious was far ahead of him. Because he hadn't created a veneer to prevent customers- he created it to lure in a very specific *kind* of customer.

You see, to the eyes of the person Samuel was looking for, the very unfriendliness of the bookstore was like catnip to a cat. This person wouldn't be put off by the gargantuan amount of crap in the front window. This person was intrigued by the scattershot way the titles are organized because they know, if they are patient- they'll see there are a few gems hidden amongst the hundreds of crappy books. But even if this person doesn't notice them, they'll still come inside, curious how such a dump could even remain open. Drawn in, like bees to flowers.

This person has been in many, many bookstores- and rarely have they seen one in such shabby condition out front. Then, this person walked through the tunnel and discovered rows and rows of books- still under no readily apparent order.

This person won't be put off- they'll be excited. "There could be ANYTHING in here!" thinks Samuel's carefully culled customer. When this kind of customer walked into the store- there was no second ring of the bell. This person saw right through the disguises of the bookshop. This customer turned and walked down an aisle or two and examined the books on the shelves. Not always, but

usually, a book lover wouldn't get through more than 1 section before they realized 2 things: first, the bookstore was ordered into sections and organized alphabetically, just like a normal shop- the labels were just small. And second, this wasn't a crappy bookstore at all- this bookstore was phenomenal.

So what, you might ask, makes a bookstore phenomenal? This is not an arbitrary question because a truly great bookstore is a subjective thing- like a painting or a piece of sculpture. What is great to me- will not necessarily be great to you because the books you are hoping to find- they aren't the ones I would be excited to see. These things being noted, Samuel's was still a phenomenal shop for this one reason: when you found an author you liked, it was a guarantee the book you wanted to read was there. Or if there was some book you had in college and lost- a book you always wanted to get another copy of- but couldn't because it wasn't stocked in any normal bookstore because it was out of print. It was on Samuel's shelf.

This was what Samuel did- he chose the authors he brought into his shop very carefully, and when he chose one- he obtained copies of absolutely everything they ever published- regardless of cost or effort involved in collecting it. Every book, every magazine with a short story, he comprehensively collected a copy of every bit of work and didn't display the items until he had a whole set. As you walked through the stacks you would occasionally see open spaces in the otherwise packed shelves. These spaces belong to authors who have had a book purchased and the replacement has yet to arrive. If you can't have everything the author's written, Samuel won't let you have anything.

Samuel loved having the perfect book for a patron- and with his system- he always did- assuming he had the author at all. Ensuring his collections remained complete was a painstaking and needlessly exhaustive task- but for Samuel- it was just how things should be done. The fuck-you money meant he served no one but himself and only compromised when and what he wanted to compromise.

In the beginning, the bookstore was the point. In the beginning, all Samuel cared about was acquiring and painstakingly assembling his collections. It took nearly four years of working 6 days a week- 15 hours a day before he was satisfied with his inventory. For a year after that, Samuel was pretty satisfied with his life. He loved his store, he had a list of over 350 books he wanted to read, and more money than he could spend.

One night, while watching TV in the wee hours of the morning- Samuel came across an old rerun of the *Twilight Zone*. On it- he saw a version of his own life. The episode was called "Time Enough At Last" and it featured Burgess Meredith- the guy who played Mickey the Trainer in *Rocky*. All Burgess wanted to do was to read- but people kept bothering him. And then, one day, he was eating his lunch in the Bank vault where he worked- and some kind of attack happened- when he emerged- everything was destroyed and everyone was dead. Burgess is freaked out- until he happens across the remains of the library. Most of the books are still good- he stacks them up- rejoicing at the prospect of a life spent alone with the classics. Then, in proper *Twilight Zone* style- his glasses break. Except, Samuel wasn't living in the *Twilight Zone*- his glasses weren't broken- everything was normal- even idyllic.

And then, Bertrand Carver walked into his shop- and normal took a long holiday.

6

In spite of the rocky path to détente on the marriage proposal, the wine started to flow and Julia and Benito were able to relax into one another's company. By the time the main course arrived, they were both a tad drunk. The appetizers alone were so good, Julia was almost afraid to eat any more because whatever came next would have to be a letdown.

But it wasn't. The food just kept getting better- and as the food improved, so too did the taste and quality of the wine. By dessert, they were both ripped and their laughter bounced around the large empty room.

The ride down in the elevator was actually a bit of a stress on both their stomachs, but they recovered enough to manage to have a quickie in the back of the limo and then another less quickie when they got home. Instead of the apartment he'd used as a cover for his wealth, Benito took Julia to his real apartment, a beautifully furnished place maintained in the city by his parents. Although not as spectacular as the view from the Sears Tower, this apartment also had a fabulous view of the city.

Benito fell asleep before Julia, and she lay next to him trying to sort out her feelings. After the sex- she was feeling all gooey and full of love for Benito. Other than the uncomfortable part when she delayed answering his proposal, the night was the most fun, most romantic, and most remarkable night of her entire life. She fell asleep then, in the light of the moon through the window.

About 4:15 in the morning, long before the sun came up, Julia snapped violently awake. Her entire body was covered in a layer of sweat. Trying not to disturb Benito, she sat up and slid out of bed. Her mind raced and she felt very shaky- not quite bolted into her own head.

The air was chilly against her wet skin, and she picked up the comforter that she'd apparently kicked off onto the floor. She wrapped it around her shoulders. It didn't happen a lot, but occasionally, she'd be asleep- and something would happen- and she would feel this tremendous jolt- almost like her soul was slamming back into her body. That's how it felt. It was a terrible feeling- definitively unpleasant.

Julia went to the window and looked out at the city. The light was different now- stable- the great beast of illumination slept- only the most fundamental systems remained in motion. The cops, the junkies, the TV addled Ritalin kids with their driver's permits- they slid through the streets like stars.

What was she going to do about Benito? She looked over her shoulder- he was sleeping, a lump under the sheets. Was that lump really going to be her husband?

Even as she fretted about Benito, a part of her brain was trying to recollect a stray detail from the thoughts she'd been pondering just before falling asleep. There were seconds where her mind seemed to be bobbling one particular memory or another, but it slipped away, sand through her mental fingers.

When Julia was a little kid, she had normal dreams like everyone else- at least she thought she did. But then puberty hit and things changed. Julia's stopped dreaming. It was like a switch. One day she dreamt- the next she didn't. And then she didn't again. And again. Eventually, she forgot what it was like. Julia would listen, fascinated, as people described dreams they'd had recently- narratives sometimes five or even ten minutes long. Crazy surreal nightmares and crazy sexual exploits, and in the case of one ex-boyfriend, dream time spent working in a hardware store where the customers were almost all people he knew- except they were zombies.

Julia could relate to none of this. More than one person told her, "Well, some people just don't remember their dreams- it's no big deal."

But Julia didn't believe it was no big deal. She tried not to think about dreaming- and she was mostly successful. But when she did think about it- it was always with a strong sense of unease. She wasn't having dreams anymore- and if she was- they were being kept from her- and the latter idea didn't make any sense.

Eventually, after looking out the window for a long time, she lay back down and closed her eyes. After a moment or two, Benito rolled over and put his arm over her. She liked the weight of it. It felt solid, dependable. She tried not to think about how nice the 320 thread count sheets felt on her skin- how soft the custom made pillow-top mattress was. So thinking, she drifted off to sleep.

7

Samuel's Stories was celebrating its fifth anniversary when Bertrand Carver walked nonchalantly in the front door. The little bell rang just as it always did. Samuel heard it and rocked forward on the large, comfortable chair he privately thought of as his throne. He listened, waiting to see if the customer was going to stay or go.

Unlike most patrons, Samuel didn't hear this new customer pause at the uninviting nature of the doorway. Instead, the footsteps continued straight into the meat of the store. Samuel smiled at the sound- this one was going to buy something, he could tell just from the cadence of the footsteps. With a grunt, Samuel climbed to his feet, cracked his back, and went to meet his newest client. As he walked from behind his massive desk, covered in books, Samuel had no idea his very structured, very non-fuzzy world was about to get knocked far, far out of focus.

Bertrand Carver was in Samuel's shop because he was hoping to find a rare or first edition of anything written by George Orwell. His interest wasn't just casual. Bertrand was no mere fan. He taught literature at Rutgers University in New Jersey and his focus was on Orwell specifically. As a general rule, Bertrand loved going into bookstores. But, he was, to some degree, just going through the motions by walking into Samuel's shop.

At that moment, he didn't really want to be in a bookstore- he wanted to be in bed with the old girlfriend with whom he'd just had a disastrous luncheon. He wasn't trying to intimate she'd gotten fat- even if she did gain at least 20 pounds since the last time he'd seen her. With his plans dashed (he didn't consider going back to the conference he was in Chicago to attend- he'd already been long enough to pick up his badge and grab a few free pencils to prove he'd explored all the conference had to offer) he found he had nowhere to go. Bertrand just popped into Samuel's bookstore on a lark. He was intrigued by the half-hazard collection of books in the window. Samuel would be pleased his trap worked as designed.

Barely noticing the unwelcoming character of the entryway, Bertrand started casting about in the first row he came across. By a lucky coincidence, the Orwell section was practically right in front of him. As he took in the volume of the work available, Bertrand was a bit shocked. There weren't necessarily multiple printings of the same work, but all of Orwell's books were represented in one volume or another. Bertrand was impressed. As he began to examine each volume one at a time, he realized it wasn't just the major stuff- there were also collections of Orwell's unpublished work, his articles, as well as the novels.

Bertrand was so enraptured by what he found, he didn't hear Samuel approach. Samuel always talked to the customers who made it past the aesthetic defenses. The conversations were usually quite mundane.

"Do you enjoy Mr. Orwell's work?" Samuel asked, noting the man's intense interest.

Bertrand jumped. He stepped back and bumped into one of the shelves. Thankfully, it was solidly anchored into the floor. There was no danger the shelves were all going to fall down like dominoes. Still, it was a bit embarrassing.

"I beg your pardon- I didn't mean to startle you." Samuel said.

"It's quite all right." Bertrand assured the man, but his voice was a bit quivery.

"We have everything Orwell ever wrote. That's what we do here."

"Yes, I was just marveling at how complete your collection is." Bertrand paused, his eyebrows furrowing in surprise. "What's this?"

He reached out and plucked a book off of the shelf. He turned it over in his hands.

"What's this? A biography?"

"No, that's one of Mr. Orwell's books." Samuel assured him.

Samuel didn't include biographies in his collections- only autobiographies.

The frown on Bertrand's face grew more pronounced.

"I'm sorry sir, I don't want to be rude or argumentative, but I am a scholar of the man's work, I teach courses on Orwell at the undergraduate and graduate level. I think I would be aware of a..." He flipped through the pages, "245 page novel."

Samuel looked at the man in surprise. He honestly didn't know what to say.

He said, "I don't know what to say."

The man frowned again. He looked at the cover. There was only Orwell's name and a number.

"1984? What does that mean? Is that a year?"

Samuel shrugged. He'd read Orwell's major works, *Animal Farm* and *Homage to Catalonia*, he thought, maybe, he remembered the novel's existence, but the details were fuzzy. The memory was on the tip of his mental tongue, remaining elusive.

"Perhaps it was written by someone with the same name and I didn't realize?" Samuel hypothesized.

"Perhaps... nope, look here."

Bertrand was pointing at the back cover. Samuel stepped closer to look.

The information on the back of the book mentioned several of Orwell's other works- *Burmese Days*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and of course, *Animal Farm*. Bertrand shook his head at the book like it was something horrifying and dead he'd found stuck on the bottom of his shoe.

"There's just no possible way I've never heard of this book before."

Samuel felt a little queasy in his stomach.

"I want to buy this. How much does it cost?"

Even if he was in the practice of memorizing the price of every book in his store, Samuel couldn't answer this question for Bertrand because as far as he knew, he'd never seen it before. Not knowing what else to do, Samuel took the book and opened the cover. The price was written in pencil in his own handwriting- he recognized it immediately. The price was \$3000. Samuel's eyebrows went up in surprise. Surely he'd forgotten to put in a decimal point or something. But he didn't put decimal points in prices- he never had. He didn't even have change in the store, only bills. He hated change and religiously applied the "round up/round down to the nearest dollar" system in all his financial dealings.

The man looked at the price tag and his eyebrows narrowed, now not just in surprise, but in suspicion.

"You're kidding me right? \$3000? That's 2 months mortgage on my house! Is this some kind of scam you're running?"

Samuel was genuinely freaked out. He kept looking at the price written on the inside of the cover. He knew his own handwriting. He'd written this price. But if you would've asked him- he would've told you the most expensive book in the store cost about \$50. The truth was- he usually ended up giving away a lot of the books- especially to people who were struggling between purchases because they could only afford one. Those people often left the shop with both books- gratis.

One would think getting such deals and finding such treasures would mean a lot of repeat customers. But Samuel's Bookstore didn't get repeat customers. People came in, they found a book or two they'd always been looking for- and they left- never to be seen again. This bothered Samuel sometimes when he thought about it- but he didn't think about it very often.

That day, looking at the price tag in a book his customer insisted didn't exist- Samuel felt an existential terror unlike any he'd ever known. Because deep down- buried in the muck of what he thought of as his subconscious- he knew where the book came from- and he knew the customer was right- the book didn't belong in this world. He also knew just thinking such a thought was pure silliness.

Yet here it was. The undeniable fact of the book's existence meant things were not at all the way Samuel imagined they were.

“I’ll tell you what,” Samuel said, just wanting to get the man out of his store so he could be alone to think, “You can just have the book. For free. Just take it. Or if it’ll make you feel better- I’ll take 5 bucks for it. Okay? Is that fair?”

This took most of the fire out of Bertrand’s anger.

“Well, okay, that’s more reasonable.” Bertrand said, reluctantly. He took out a 5 and handed it to Samuel.

“Please come back or send me an email and let me know the deal with that book. I’m curious.” Samuel said, placing a store bookmark in the middle of the mysterious tome. He struggled to keep his face even.

He also handed Bertrand a business card.

“Sure thing.” Bertrand said, absent mindedly putting the card into his pocket.

Bertrand was barely aware of Samuel’s presence anymore. He turned and walked towards the door without another glimpse back. He already had the first page open and was reading the opening paragraph.

Samuel watched him go. He felt sweat all down the back of his neck. It felt cold. His whole body felt cold.

Why had he written such a high price tag on the book? And why didn’t he remember doing it? And what the hell was that book anyway? Samuel had the questions- what he didn’t have- were answers.