

Splendid Chaos (Excerpt)

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SPLENDID CHAOS (EXCERPT)

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Every flower is a soul blossoming in nature.

~ Gerard de Nerval ~



1

Drew

The stale scent of coffee is revolting, but I drink it anyway. I should be sipping a double mocha latte from the makeshift kiosk outside our county's courtroom. But this is what I have at my disposal, a cesspool of grime and grease at the closest repair shop to my roadside mishap. I might have less experience than seasoned attorneys in my field, but my education has taught me to adapt in the face of unfortunate circumstances. And caffeine, in all its forms, always helps. Even this sludge that could be mistaken for motor oil has its redeeming qualities.

I place the paper cup between my feet and switch back to operating my phone with both hands. A redhead on my left smacks her gum. An elderly gentleman on my right is more interested than he should be with what's on my screen.

The final case file I should be delivering in person is on its way to Jacob, the lead counsel. Watching the progress bar crawl slowly toward completion only heightens my anxiety. Apparently everything is bigger in Texas except for the Wi-Fi signal. That and my father's tolerance level for mediocrity. This debacle will do nothing to help me. The high-profile assignment I've been begging him for over the past year now seems further away than ever.

Right on cue, a bead of sweat forms on my forehead. I wipe it with the sleeve of my white oxford shirt. I'm careful not to scrape myself on the monogrammed cuff links. The expensive accoutrements showcase my distinction as an associate at Stratton Law. A mix of road grime and brake dust has stained my prestigious attire. I harrumph at the fresh battle scar added to my already dismal day. And it's barely ten o'clock.

"Those are some confusing contraptions, them *smart*-phones. Smarter than me, that's for sure." The meddlesome man beside me is now trying to start a conversation. I have neither the time nor the patience. I nod toward him, offer a curt smile, and return focus to my professional predicament.

"My name's Elmer, like the glue." He offers a handshake as I stare at his varicose veins. "Don't worry. No glue on these hands. Just washed them after using the restroom. Wasn't expecting the effects from that prune juice so soon."

I chuckle at the old man's comment and glance down at my screen. Seventy-seven percent complete. His hand remains outstretched, fingers shaking, waiting for me to take it. Perhaps a quick introduction will put a stop to this unnecessary interruption. "Drew, like . . . what you'd do with a pencil." I have more important things to consider than silly quips about my given name. It's the best I can come up with as I reach out, only half looking at him, and accept Elmer's greeting. His firm grip surprises me.

"I don't know how you young folk keep up with all that technobabble mumbo jumbo." He nods toward my phone. At thirty-one years old, I'm no longer a spring chicken, but I suppose it's all relative. And I hesitate to consider how much worse this situation might be if I didn't have my electronic lifeline. That and

a strong cup of coffee have fixed more than their share of problems.

“Mr. Marbach.” The mechanic’s call pierces the air with feigned authority. He has less grease on his clothes than I do and stands with his foot propping open the door. The revving sound of a torque gun leaks into the waiting area.

“That’s me.” Elmer rises to his feet and lumbers toward the mechanic holding his paperwork. My phone shows a successful file transfer to Jacob. I should text him straightaway to make sure he received it, but intuition intervenes. The conversation taking place at the front desk diverts my attention.

“Your tread depth is approaching critical stage.” The technician makes eye contact with Elmer to assess his reaction. The old man twitches his lips with what appears to be concern. “They’re okay for now. But you should consider a few other service items to avoid more serious problems down the road.” This has happened too many times to count. Professionals take advantage of those less knowledgeable, scaring them into unnecessary repairs. “We recommend a coolant flush. And an alignment will prolong the remaining life of your tires. We have a special bundle available, if you’re interested.”

“Elmer, there’s a call for you.” I raise my phone and signal to him. He shuffles over with surprise etched on his face. I should devote my attention elsewhere, but I can’t stand by and watch this happen. I get to my feet and whisper in his ear. “How old is your car?”

“Two years . . . I had no idea all this stuff was so important.”

“It’s not. Stick with the oil change. That is what you came in for, correct?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I’ve seen this more than a few times.”

He playfully punches my shoulder. “Did you pick that up from the internet? If so, I might have to get me one of those smartphone thingies. That’s how you learn this stuff, right?”

“Something like that.” I forget about my own problems for a moment. It’s the reason I enjoy being a lawyer. I’m able to help others when they need it most. Elmer marches back toward the technician with confidence as I take my seat and text Jacob.

“That was nice. What you did for him.” The redhead beside me has stopped smacking her gum. A smile replaces the annoying sound. And while I’m pleased with the change, it’s even more gratifying to know her expression is because of something I did.

“Thanks, but it’s no big deal. Anyone else would have done the same.”

“Maybe that’s true, but no one did.” Her eyes wander around the room. Most heads remain buried in tabloid magazines. Others are staring at the television screen showing an outdated home-repair show. She winks at me and returns to chewing noisily. For some reason, it bothers me less now.

I glance at my phone. Jacob has confirmed receipt of all the necessary files. He’s thankful for my ability to think quick on my feet. With everything needed to deliver a closing argument in his possession, I exhale a sigh of relief. One catastrophe averted.

Elmer sets himself down on his seat. “Thank you, Drew. I would have paid more than I wanted for stuff I didn’t need.” I find it ironic that he trusts me, a stranger, over the supposed professional. But sometimes you just know. You’re able to read someone’s body language, look them straight in the eye, and recognize the truth.

“No problem. It’s what I do.”

“You remind me of someone I knew in my younger days. She was always doing nice stuff for me. Simple things, like offering a smile or holding my hand.” I sense him drifting off into a dreamy state. “She’s my best friend now. My wife too.”

With my immediate professional crisis handled, I allow my thoughts to wander. How much would I have missed if I’d ignored Elmer when he first started talking to me? “She sounds like a special woman.”

“Indeed. Those simple kindnesses from a bygone time get lost in the chaos of today, don’t you think?” When I fail to offer an audible response, he continues. “You’re a lawyer, aren’t you?” He doesn’t need a smartphone. Elmer’s one of those people who has an intuitive sixth sense. I can relate.

“I am. Working for my father’s firm is . . .” What is it? Frustrating? Stressful? “It can be challenging.”

“I bet, but it must be nice to work with family, right?” *Family*. It’s a foreign word to me. I’m not sure the traditional definition aligns with my reality.

“My father is—”

“Mr. Marbach? Your vehicle is ready.”

I can’t believe I was about to spew my emotional mess to a stranger. He settles the bill and stops at my seat on his way toward the exit.

“It was nice meeting you, Drew. Thanks again, for helping me. And for bringing back some fond memories from the past.” His toothy smile is infectious. “Keep being you.” He shakes my hand and walks out the door with a bounce in his step. An unfamiliar feeling of worth and belonging works its way beneath my skin. It almost makes me appreciate the unfortunate circumstances that brought me here today.



IT SHOULDN'T TAKE THIS long to repair a tire, or two in this case. I glance down at my watch. It's been an hour since Elmer left. Being so preoccupied with my wandering thoughts, I've completely lost track of time.

"Mr. Stratton?" A different technician scans the room, searching for the person he doesn't know is me. I allow his eyes to linger on one customer after another, reading his body language before I engage with him. There's already something about him I don't trust. I raise my hand to acknowledge my identity.

He walks toward me, rattling two objects like a pair of dice in his right hand. "These are the culprit." He opens his palm to reveal a nail and a screw. "One was in the left rear tire. The other in the front right. You're going to need two new tires."

He rocks back and forth between his two feet and chews on the inside of his cheek. My instincts kick into action. Just as I could tell Elmer was an honest man, everything about this worker screams deceit. "Can I see them? The tires?"

"The puncture holes were too close to the sidewall. A patch won't work." He avoids the question, raising my suspicions even further.

"Yes, but I'd like to check them out for myself, if you don't mind." I'm remaining civil, but I already suspect I've caught him in a lie. If there's one thing I will not tolerate, it's dishonesty. I press him farther into a figurative corner as I close the physical distance between us. "If you need to get approval, I can wait."

Beads of sweat form on his forehead. He stops chewing on his cheek and swallows long and hard, becoming rigid in stature.

“Look, I may not have been . . . The place where the punctures occurred *is* borderline.”

“Jon . . .” I notice his name tag for the first time. “I’d like to speak with your manager.”

“Do you think we could work this out between the two of us, man to man?” There’s a sense of desperation etched on his face, and I’m ready to bury him like I’m trained to do in the courtroom.

I haven’t had many opportunities to do so in a trial, so this is good practice. I will find my way toward the truth in a compelling fashion. “And why would I choose to do that?”

“Your convertible is my dream car. It costs a fortune, so I figured . . .”

“Yes?” Another leading question, pushing him further. Will he fess up?

He sighs with what I suspect is resignation. “I thought you’d be willing and able to throw any amount of money at a problem to fix it. Without ever asking any questions.” His gaze drops toward the floor, a sure sign of remorse. He fidgets with the nail and screw in the palm of his hand.

“Can I speak with your manager now?” One last tactic to confirm my intuition.

“I’ll pay for the repairs out of my own pocket if you’ll keep this misunderstanding from finding a way to my boss’s desk. I need this job, even if I might lose it anyway.”

“Why would that happen?” Each logical inquiry leads to the next. My situation alongside Elmer’s guides my line of questioning toward the truth.

“We’ve been given an unrealistic sales quota and an ultimatum to meet it . . . or else.” And there it is.

“Why don’t you patch those two tires? I’ll leave a positive word with your manager.” His eyes widen in disbelief. It’s not how most people would handle it, especially me. I would never condone Jon’s behavior, but I appreciate the stress he’s under. I know how it feels to have someone scrutinize your every move. It’s unnerving, waiting for that person to eagerly point out exactly what you’ve done wrong.

“Yes, sir.” He swivels about-face and marches back toward my car. As he opens the door, Jon pauses, turns around, and offers a slight bow of his head. *Thank you.* I offer him a small curl to my lip and nod. *You’re welcome.*

I willingly pay for the repairs. That technician was right about one thing. Most people with my affluence would buy those new tires without ever questioning it. And while I might be searching for approval from my father, it doesn’t mean I have to handle every situation like he would.

I leave the repair shop and sink into the cushy leather seat of my sports coupe. Elmer’s words replay in my mind. *Those simple kindnesses from a bygone time get lost in the chaos of today, don’t you think?* I suppose they do. And while disorder can complicate things, I perform well under those conditions. It’s what continues to provide me the opportunity to prove myself on the professional stage.

My phone buzzes as an incoming call arrives through the car’s Bluetooth connection. I glance at the number and wrap my fingers tightly around the steering wheel. It’s a good thing I thrive on chaos because I have a feeling it’s about to run rampant.



2

Maria

The same bumble bee buzzes across the movie playing on the back of my eyelids. Left to right, it hums with too much assertion and immediacy. It raises my suspicion levels. Where is the boundary between what's real and imaginary? The backdrop of blooming wildflowers tries to guide me toward a more optimistic view, but reality grabs hold of me. It always does. The cherished and fleeting upward curl to my lips disappears as I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling of my childhood bedroom. I hear the throaty rumble of a sports car racing down Main Street. Its revving engine is like an audible chest pump. It belongs in our quiet town as much as a skyscraper does.

It's transition day, when tourists flock toward Pigeon Grove Country Club to escape the chaos of city life. At least that's what PGCC promises its urban guests. To me, its stuffy atmosphere encourages the opposite. It bolsters rigid societal rules that feel contrived.

The swell in traffic *is* good for business. But the attitude that leaks into and disrupts the harmony of our community is worrisome. I try to close my eyes, willing myself back toward those greener pastures in my dreams, but it's not working.

I let a forced breath escape my lungs as gentle motivation. The familiar plastic stars overhead ease my stressful mood. The fluorescent glow coming from my ceiling has faded over time. I still remember creating that virtual night sky years ago. My mom glued each decal in place while I directed her where they should go. I never doubted those imaginary constellations and dreams as an adolescent girl. My hopeful thoughts connected those dots with such certainty. Now those straight lines have become a tangled mess.

You are a star, Maria. You can be or do anything you put your mind to.

I don't remember all the stories my mom read to me as a child. But I recall the words she shared with me each evening before her tender kiss good night. I tucked them into my memory, reciting them silently as my head sank into the soft, feathery pillow. I promised myself I'd never forget them, and I didn't. But her message repeats in my mind, too many times to count, mocking my inability to honor it.

That carefree dreaminess of youth has disappeared. Where has it gone? To Florida, I suppose, along with my parents after their retirement. That *anything* my mom promised has become *something*, even if it's not the something I imagined as a child.

I should be happier, content with the blessings bestowed upon me. I have a home with no mortgage, and I run a much-loved coffee shop that leaves me financially stable, for now at least. I appreciate my parents' good intentions. They've invested so much energy to plant a seed and nurture its growth over the years. A healthy flower blooms above the ground for everyone to see. But crumbling roots hide beneath the surface. It's only a matter of

time before those unseen effects become visible. The same thing seems to be happening on a larger scale in Pigeon Grove.

I'm not one to embrace numbers and plans. I use intuition to help me recognize when something is going well, or not. I can't explain it, but my hunches about the important stuff seem to work out more often than not. The memory of that chat with Mason, nestled high in the branches of our town's landmark tree, prompts a smile. It might have been difficult for me to accept, but I knew in my heart that he and Sophie belonged with each other.

The parallels between my unsettled past and the current mood in Pigeon Grove trouble me. Is it my intuition on high alert? The town blindly accepts everything happening around us. What started as an occasional disruption to our daily lives has become a commonplace occurrence. PGCC staff members frequent our businesses and ask all these questions. No one seems to notice how additions to their club keep popping up. First it was the restaurant, and now there are rumors about a new resort hotel with a spa attached to it. Their influence is like scorching lava from a volcanic eruption. It sneaks up with devastating consequences.

I put on a brave face and confident exterior in the name of promoting solidarity. And perhaps to avoid confronting the truth. Being the real me has terrifying repercussions I'm not willing to endure.

I peel the soft comforter off me and roll toward the edge of my bed. Blinking away sleep, my eyes fall upon the decades-old trophy still standing tall on my bureau. The only girl on our pee-wee baseball team, I was unafraid to don the heavy catching gear. I kept those errant pitches from Tommy in front of me. It was

my way of protecting my teammates. I'm trying my best to do the same thing for Pigeon Grove now, without a mask or shin guards to hide behind.

I swing my legs over the edge of the mattress, its signature squeak ever present after all these years. My heels thud onto the hardwood floor. Reminiscing about my childhood makes me wonder. Can I hold on to the hopes of that innocent and naïve girl? The answer is depressingly clear. My limbs have grown over the years, but my confidence has gone in the opposite direction. I pad across the room, into the adjoining bathroom. Everything is exactly as it was when I was younger, but I see things with a fresh set of eyes now.

After mindlessly applying makeup I'm reminded is unnecessary, I stare in the mirror. My hand stops midway to my right cheek. Ready to apply another layer of foundation, I instead toss the cosmetic pad in the sink. I turn the faucet handle and rinse the concealer from my face. Watching everything fake disappear should be an encouraging reminder. But the slow gurgle of water down the drain complements my groan of despair. The slippery slope I walk upon may be steeper than I realize, but I must keep doing my best to navigate it.

Cheerful chirps beckon me from the backyard. This town and its residents have an uncanny way of nudging me toward a positive outlook when I need it most. I slide the curtain aside, careful not to frighten my avian friends, and smile as the sun warms my skin. A pair of cardinals perch on the wooden birdhouse built by Mason and Mack. Watching those two birds sing to each other is a soulful reminder of what makes Pigeon Grove my home. It refocuses my attention on a day filled with new-

found opportunities. Ones I promise myself I will embrace. Someday.



I ENJOY WALKING TO work each morning, as much for the time outdoors as the opportunity to greet others in town. It's a bonus that Claire's garden at Fly Away Home is along my route.

I step through its entrance, immersing myself in a plethora of textures, colors, scents, and sounds. I'm immediately transported to an extraordinary world. All my cares disappear, and lofty dreams float down from the sky to enchant me.

The towering foxglove blooms are like trumpets welcoming me into a royal palace. Mourning doves coo softly, adding a delicate melody to the idyllic scent of blooming jasmine in this lush landscape. Every time I mention its intoxicating influence, the same beautiful thing happens. Claire wanders into a daydreaming recollection of her garden's humble beginnings. Thoughts about Jack and a secret lavender lemonade recipe escape from her lips. A warm smile accompanies the soft glow in her eyes.

"I don't see why our room isn't ready. There are no other cars here, and it's the beginning of the weekend. No one actually stays here during the week, do they?"

The man's caustic rhetoric disrupts my blissful mood. The doves follow suit as they flee their haven beneath the pink phlox in search of a quieter spot. I don't hear Claire's response, undoubtedly because she's exhibiting the patience and grace I admire in her.

"This dress costs more than you charge for an entire week's stay. I can't toss it in a suitcase. I must hang it, and properly." It's

a woman's voice this time. Her tirade adds another layer of noxious verbal pollution to her companion's rant.

"I don't care if it's seven in the morning. We paid for this room with the expectation of superior service. This isn't the way the club treats its guests." The man retorts with escalating aggravation. The mention of PGCC leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Located less than five miles from the center of Pigeon Grove, it might as well be a world away. Its hospitality is only superficial. The ugly sense of entitlement and immediate gratification it encourages sours my once-positive mood. I take a courageous step forward, ready to defend this heartbeat of our town, but then I retreat. I'm not one to deal with confrontation. I prefer to handle things with tact and quiet separation. Even if I can't stand tall with a boisterous display, I won't let an unruly and irate couple spoil the sanctity of this haven for me. Or Claire.

I run my hand over the varying plant heights, leaves tickling my palm, until it rests upon the red bloom of the bee balm. The symmetrical blossom looks like a floral firework, aglow with energy and inspiration. It symbolizes empathy, which feels like an appropriate sentiment to embrace right now. Claire shouldn't have to deal with these unfortunate circumstances and ungrateful guests. I snip a small bud with my fingernails and place it on the side porch. I know Claire will pass by here while taking her morning walk through the garden. I smile, appreciating how flowers speak with depth, in a way that words often fail to achieve.

Making my way down Main Street, I notice how the town comes alive earlier on transition mornings. That's what we call them in Pigeon Grove, because things change so much on these

days. “Good morning, Hank. What’s the special catch for today?”

We speak as though we’re fishermen on the coast. The closest thing we have in this quaint mountain town is a creek with a few catfish. Hank’s produce shop is a landmark in Pigeon Grove. It has been a fixture for decades.

He holds a blueberry between his thumb and index finger. “Perfect day for a freshly baked tart, don’t you think? Did you know these guys freeze in as little as four minutes? It makes you wonder what they’re made of inside, huh?”

He places one in the palm of my hand I didn’t realize was open. He has a way of communicating through fruit like I do with flowers. I pop the small blueberry in my mouth and taste the delicious explosion of flavor. “Heavenly as always, Hank. Good luck today.”

Transition days are the only ones where we pass well-wishes between each other. There’s an unspoken awareness coupled with a shared uneasiness about our clientele. Everyone knows each other in Pigeon Grove. But no one is sure who might walk through our doors when so many urban folks are migrating through town.

I continue my stroll down the tree-lined corridor. More posh vehicles zip by, faster than the strongest gust of wind we’ve ever experienced. And well beyond the posted speed limit. I stifle the urge to yell at the oncoming car when the sign in front of Turner’s Hardware catches my attention. *Free coffee at Caldwell’s with the purchase of any tool.*

I enjoy the opportunity to help local businesses, even if no one has come in to fulfill Stanley’s offer. I suspect tools are as foreign to our town’s visitors as the empathy I offered to Claire earli-

er. Mr. Turner waves from beneath his store's awning. I smile and return his silent greeting. I have kept the situation with Travis under wraps since he skipped town, hopefully for the last time. Only Mason, Sophie, and I know the complete truth. And none of us feel it right for Stanley Turner to suffer the consequences for his son's misguided choices.

As I arrive at the front door to my shop, I pull the keys from my pocket and recognize familiar laughter behind me. I turn around and spot my two best friends setting up a tall easel on the sidewalk. Sophie places a painted advertisement on it for their Wine & Wonder event later this evening. Both take a step back, admiring what I know was a team effort. Mason's building skills complement Sophie's artistic talent.

"Looking great, you two," I shout across the street, commenting on more than their marketing display. I unlock the door, slip through it, and flip my makeshift placard to read *Open*. I should learn to let go of my lofty expectations and be grateful for the simple things like everyone else in town. As much as I try, it's the word staring back at me on the other side of the cardboard sign that taunts me: *Closed*.

My present circumstances don't provide me with a way out. I'm trapped. The lingering tartness of Hank's blueberry remains on my taste buds. And the message he shared looms large in my doubting mind. Thoughts of my past invade my consciousness, pushing me to draw parallels between that tiny piece of fruit and myself. *It makes you wonder what they're made of inside.*

Unfortunately, I already know. And that may be my biggest problem.



3

Drew

“Stratton.” The clipped syllables escape my lips. Lingering on them too long amplifies a confusing sense of guilt. The fear that I’m not worthy to possess that hallowed surname.

Despite the road noise and the loud blast of cool air flowing through the vents, I discern an exasperated sigh. It triggers an uncomfortable defense mechanism, reminding me of that wool sweater I had to wear while visiting my grandmother as a child. I would break out in hives the moment I pulled it over my head. It was an involuntary but predictable response, similar to the one I’m experiencing now.

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel. I understand the accepted protocol: no words. I must wait in patient silence.

“Andrew . . .” His tone is curt, like mine. But I recognize the familiar disappointment in those two syllables. “*That’s* how you’re supposed to answer the phone. We reserve our last name for partners, but you already know that.” I never thought for a moment that my father’s initial word was a greeting. Not during business hours. And there’s no misunderstanding his underlying message. My elevation to partner status has slipped further into the future.

“Yes, sir.” I’m an eleven-year-old again, punished for coming home late. It didn’t matter that I knocked in the winning run during our sandlot game. Three minutes past my curfew was three too many in my father’s book. The opportunity to experience the jubilation of that brief childhood victory escaped me, like it has again and again. But the stakes are higher now. I’m not fighting for some small sliver of appreciation from the only parent in my life. No, my future as an attorney hinges on my ability to convince Lyle Stratton that I have what it takes to become an esteemed partner of his firm.

“So, what happened *exactly*?” His use of that word at the end means he wants every detail. He will dissect each one, leaving my argument like a mutilated frog in a biology lab, finding the fault in my process that is surely there.

“I left an hour and a half early, to be safe.” I didn’t realize my habitual calculation of travel time occurred on autopilot. I was up before the sun, jogging at a predictable pace along my regular route. But I doubt that information has any relevance to what my father wants to know. He’s concerned only with what directly affects him and his reputation. “I checked the traffic. It showed the interstate would be fine, so I took it instead—”

“Cut to the chase. Why is it you missed showing up in court for the most important day of the case?” It’s unlike him to forgo all the supporting data. He logs every detail in his memory, using it without fail to analyze my shortcomings. I understand his question is rhetorical. I’m sure Jacob has already shared the reason I wasn’t there. What my father wants to know is why I failed to prepare for every conceivable outcome.

My stalled progress as a Boy Scout, never being fully prepared, is coming back to haunt me. I only enjoyed the camping

and long hikes in the woods. The rest of that experience was a forced and failed attempt to instill discipline during my rebellious teenage years.

“Two flat tires. And I only had one spare.” My attorney thought process kicks into overdrive. It’s the safest and best-positioned response. He won’t suggest that I should have carried two extra tires with me. Even Lyle Stratton would find that excessive.

“I don’t understand . . .” Another sigh from him. This one is shorter, but it seems to reveal an opening. I sense an opportunity to defend myself even if we work on the plaintiff’s side of the aisle.

“Jacob got all the files he needed in time for his closing arguments. I feel that—”

“There’s no *feeling* involved as a part of our routine. We plan. We execute. We account for every obstruction, distraction, or pain point before it happens.” So much for that perceived window of opportunity. He slams it closed on my fingers that are trying to hold it open. I honestly believe I adapted to the circumstances in the best way possible. But that isn’t good enough. It never is.

“Did we win the case?” It’s a dangerous tactic. If we lost, I’m at fault. If we came out on top, well, that’s the expectation. I question the sanity of my tactics, but the words are already out there. I’ve forgotten I’m dealing with the skilled senior partner of a prestigious law firm.

“Yes, we won.” He pauses. There’s almost enough time for me to respond with a positive affirmation of our combined team effort. The careful deliberation of my planned response takes too long. “But this is an example of how not to handle a situation. You should have thought ahead to anticipate every possible out-

come. Why didn't you send the data to Jacob last night?" It's not a question I'm supposed to answer, so I remain silent, waiting for the rest of his verbal lashing. "Only that type of foresight will propel you to partner status. *Someday.*"

Someday is a mirage in the desert. Whenever I get close, it disappears. No matter what I do and regardless of how adept I am at handling adversity, there will always have been a better way.

Now there's silence on the other end of the line. I know he hasn't hung up. I understand the purpose of this quiet space. He waits for my expected response: acceptance of his well-meaning advice.

Wandering thoughts distract me as perspiration beads on my forehead again. It all happens so fast. A myriad of ideas race through my mind in a nanosecond. I'm able to process information quickly, but I'm still not so sure about the benefits of this skill outside the professional environment.

Why do I own a convertible? I can't remember the last time this Texas heat subsided enough for me to put the top down. Even with the full blast of air-conditioning blowing on my face, I'm overheated and parched. I reach down toward the center console and grab my bottle of lukewarm water. It *was* cold. But now these extreme temperatures have caused condensation to pool in the cup holder. Chaos rears its ugly head, mocking me. That same thing I thrive upon in my daily regime now showcases its ability to put me in my place. It shows me who's in control. I'm beaten down. Despite my personal pride and Jacob's gratitude, everything changes in a single moment. It only takes a few chosen words from Lyle Stratton to wash my fleeting sense of satisfaction away.

I catch sight of the folders lying in the passenger seat. There are smears of grease on them. The corners flutter up and down in the stream of air, like an index finger wagging at me with disapproval. Could I have been more proactive? Maybe my father is right.

My gaze transitions toward the windshield. A pair of illuminated brake lights grows closer by the second. My mental acuity shifts to the back burner while its physical counterpart takes control. I slam on the brakes and feel the seat belt pull tight against my torso. The breath remaining in my lungs gets sucked out from the sudden deceleration. My instincts for collision avoidance respond quicker than the car's built-in system. I veer onto the shoulder and barely avoid the stopped traffic.

"Geez . . ." The word slips out under my breath. All at once, three thoughts race through my mind. First, I'm thankful for my quick reaction. Second, the microphone in my car is quite sensitive. And third, that word, *geez*, is the first syllable uttered in response to my father's implied question. It's the furthest thing from me being receptive to his message.

I brace for a stronger and more impassioned backlash.

"I know you have a passionate streak in you. It has always been there." Those words? Do they hint at some level of understanding? From anyone else, they might roll off my back like rain from an umbrella, falling to the ground and pooling at my feet. But coming from my father? I want to grab my empty bottle of water and collect each droplet of perceived empathy. They'd satisfy a deeper parched feeling that no amount of liquid could relieve.

What do I do? Respond? Stay quiet? This isn't a situation I'm accustomed to handling. Is this a test? Is he trying to show

me how to prepare for every conceivable outcome? This is one I've hoped might materialize, eventually. But I never really expected it.

There's no sigh, but he clears his throat, as if struggling to utter the words lodged inside him. "I suggest you keep your car in the center lane. As far as your demeanor goes. That's the only way you'll make it in this field." It's curious that my father's metaphorical advice finds me on the shoulder of the road, literally.

The irony continues as more and more vehicles speed past me. No one seems willing to let me back into the flow of traffic, so I do what makes the most sense at the moment. Speeding up, I take the exit off the interstate a few hundred yards ahead. I chuckle, more carefully this time, when I notice the road's name: Prospect Drive.

"I'll be more aware of all the opportunities, and possibilities, the next time around." Carefully wording my response, I accept his message while also challenging it. Am I presumptuous to assume there will be a next time?

"Speaking of next time . . ." And there it is. What else could I do with my life? Being let go from your family's firm is a nail in the coffin of your professional legal career. Maybe I could take up mountaineering and become a Sherpa in the Himalayan mountains. Developing a spiritual connection to nature sounds intriguing. But I doubt I could find many double-mocha-latte-making baristas there like the ones I'd find here at home.

"We've added a case to our growing pile of diamond dusters . . ." Diamond dusters? That's our firm's code name for lawsuits assigned to senior partners. Where is this going? "Thomas will be the lead . . ." There's anxious hesitancy in my father's voice that

I haven't heard before. "It's a workplace discrimination claim. I was thinking about having you serve as co-counsel."

I stare at my fingers, wrapped even tighter around the steering wheel. I am blinking, trying to make sense of the situation, when a terrifying thought consumes me. I'm about to slam into the back of a vehicle. Again. My eyes flit toward the speedometer, but the needle rests on zero. Reality seems to evade me. I look out the windshield, then at my rearview mirror. A line of cars waits for me to move. A few horn blasts encourage a gentle step on the accelerator as I turn right onto Prospect Drive.

"Thank you for, um, giving me this chance." I trip over my words. "I won't let you down." It's always the first thing that comes to mind. Failing. Falling short. Doing things *wrong*, even when it results in the desirable outcome.

"Thomas will call to coordinate the pretrial research. Be ready." That's it. The opportunity I've been waiting over a year for him to offer me now sits in my lap. After I dropped the ball on the most important day of my latest case.

The line is quiet. The phone disconnects. There was no goodbye, no good luck, no *see you later*. Just those words that continue to echo in my mind: *Be ready*.



I'M SITTING ON THE couch in my apartment. My loosened tie hides the same soiled shirt from earlier today. I keep it on as a reminder that every odd happening over the last several hours wasn't a figment of my imagination.

I stare at the ceiling. The recessed lights shine down on me, too bright for my tired eyes. They feel like a blinding interrogation tactic, but I have no answers. I swivel my head to the right

and see the bonsai tree on my desk. It's not nearly as artistic as others I've seen, but I don't have it for aesthetic purposes. Growing them indoors helps fight sore throats, coughing, and fatigue.

If I thought my days were long before, they will, I know, stretch even further into the depths of darkness now. Both early in the morning and late at night. The bonsai will help, and coffee too. I have to do everything right, handle things properly, and make the correct choices.

I don't get it. My father has harped on me having room for improvement. Why has he entrusted me with this position? I'm someone who usually believes in himself. Why does any thought of Lyle Stratton immediately cause me to doubt my abilities?

He always doles out these assignments during the staff meeting on Monday mornings. Why did he feel compelled to share this with me on a Friday evening? Is it that important? Is he going to pull this opportunity out from under me in front of everyone else? Make an example out of me? It raises my insecurity levels further, and it frustrates the heck out of me. I need positive vibes, not this negative self-talk.

The phone resting on the table vibrates toward the edge. I grab hold of it and check the number. Private. It must be Thomas. I hope it is. I'm ready for this, exhaling doubt and inhaling optimism as I prepare to answer the call.

As I accept the call, the last thought passing through my mind is that familiar phrase, *Be ready*. I recall a longer rendition of that message shared by my father. I hear his voice echoing in my head: *The secret of success in life is for a man to be ready for his opportunity when it comes.*

This is my opportunity, and I'm ready.



4

Maria

Every chair remains tucked neatly beneath a table, exactly where I left them after closing the shop last night. I wander around the space now, compelled to shift them back and forth, intent on finding the proper place for each one.

Their wooden legs scrape across the smooth floor with tired and angry growls. The same heavy sound was soothing not that long ago. The soft halo of artificial light bathing my shop during the evening hours cast a romantic glow over everything. Now the bright sunlight of morning delivers an altered perspective. What felt like a cozy atmosphere now appears as a rigid alignment of tables and chairs. It's one reason I enjoy the enveloping shelter of nighttime. It keeps things I want close to me, while pushing those I'd rather forget into the shadows.

I exhale and prepare to greet the uncertainty of another day. The rotating dial on the shop's safe ticks softly, reminding me how quietly but quickly time slips away. Swinging the heavy door open, I grab my laptop and the till that should have fifty dollars in it each morning. That hasn't happened since my parents left for Florida in their RV. It's as if they packed up their stuff and carried all the financial sunshine with them. All I have left are

layered clouds and overcast skies. I need the uptick in traffic on these transition days more than most in Pigeon Grove.

I pull the chalkboard easel from beside the display of exotic teas and place it flat on the counter. Staring at the blank slate, I settle on pink and yellow today. Whimsical colors represent the mood I'd like to convey in this space. Even if patrons prefer it to be orderly and straight. Predictable.

I let my hand float through the words: *Today's special: large coffee and a sunflower crumb muffin*. After sampling one of Ginny Shaw's delectable creations, I know they will be a hit. Everything she bakes is made with love and passion you can taste.

The simple act of allowing my fingers to dance in cursive script calms my nerves. These easels sprinkled around town are Pigeon Grove's version of billboards. To me, though, they're also an escape to a simpler time when things weren't so complicated. A sunflower sketch emerges from my fingertips in yellow chalk. It lands beside my words, like a gentle butterfly. I welcome the subtle upward curl to my lips.

After propping the easel up outside my front door, I inhale the fresh scent of summer. The whisper of a breeze tickles my skin and carries delicate scents down Main Street. Everyone is on the sidewalk, waving to potential patrons as they speed through town. It's like they wear blinders. Their tee times and spa treatments are more important than a friendly greeting. Where has the simple enjoyment of human interaction gone? I need it. We all do. But still, it scares me. The promise of something delightful always gets swallowed up by the unpleasant possibilities.

I slip back inside, shuffling the chairs again to make sure they're in perfect alignment. I sneak behind the counter. It's where I best hide my nervous anxiety. Will my first customer of

the day be an overbearing and demanding executive? Wearing too much cologne? Showcasing his influential powers to the woman who follows him like a puppy dog? These are the kind that toss a hundred-dollar bill in front of me to pay for a two-buck coffee.

I can't play this game. It does nothing but add to my uneasiness. I flip open my laptop and escape to a background image that changes every five minutes. The sea of purple blooms on a thyme bush, greeting my eyes in digital form, arrives at the perfect moment. It's a symbol of courage and strength that I breathe in through the screen.

The bell above the front entrance steals my attention. It draws me away from the buzzing bees and fragrant scents in my mind. I shift my gaze toward this morning's first customer, rife with apprehension.

"Sam!" I almost shout my greeting, exhaling worry and giving her a wide smile.

"Hey, Maria! How are you this morning?" Sam's dyed-red curls are as vibrant as her cheerful mood. She floats through the door, as sunshine would atop a layer of fluffy clouds.

"I'm doing okay," I fib a little. "What brings you into town so early?" With her job as a bartender at the country club, this is one of the busiest days for Sam. The stories she's shared are unbelievable. I never imagined how much alcohol an average PGCC member could consume before noon.

"Just helping my grandfather stock the shelves. He'll never admit it, but he could use more help with the manual labor." She runs her hand over my tea display, lost in thought, before looking back up at me. "But he still has the most gentle and sincere demeanor of anyone in town. Not that I'm biased or anything."

She smiles at me sheepishly. Grinning, I can't argue with Sam's thoughts. I recall my blueberry exchange with Hank earlier this morning.

"How's life on the posher side of Pigeon Grove?" As worrisome as the answer to my question makes me, I lean casually against the counter. Sam has that immediate effect on people.

"The money's good. The attitude, not so much. I miss spending more time in town. But there aren't exactly a lot of jobs, so . . ." Her eyes linger on the wall I share with Luca's restaurant. She appears to land on my abstract painting of a flower hanging there.

"I painted it when I was younger," I tell her. "An artist I am not. But my mom made me promise I'd always keep it up there. She said it's a reminder that this place is family." The weight of responsibility presses down on my shoulders as I set my palms on the counter to brace me.

Sam focuses a bit more, tilting her head to the side as she studies my earliest attempt at art. "I've only been living in Pigeon Grove for a year. But the people in this town, they feel like my tribe." I couldn't agree with her more. "Speaking of, I'll take two coffees."

I begin brewing the first cup and turn toward Sam. "I thought your grandfather preferred a leafier source of caffeine."

"You could never separate Hank Charles from his freshly brewed sun tea. He believes the Georgia sunshine has magical powers, and who am I to tell him otherwise?" She chuckles, as if recalling a memory, before pulling a few crumpled bills from her pocket. "This is actually for Mr. Turner."

Sam's act of kindness is endearing. I push the money across the counter toward her and offer a smile. "Your show of kinship and support for other folks in town is payment enough for me."

"I insist." She shoves it back at me and smirks. "And I promise to buy a screwdriver from him." It's nice that someone notices our boutique billboards. "I might even use it as a prop, to mix a cocktail by the same name. I'm sure I'll be making plenty of them later."

One last slide of the money into Sam's hands. "Then the coffee is free." I pick two of Ginny's delectable creations from the display case on the counter. "And just because, here are two muffins to go along with Mr. Turner's offer."

Sam finally concedes and gathers both cups. She pinches the bag of sunflower goodness between her ring and pinkie finger.

"Do you want some help? I can run across the street with you, if you'd like."

"No worries, I got it. I'm used to juggling more things than this without spilling them." She winks before walking toward the door with that same uplifting gait. She pauses before opening it and turns around. "Hey, what are you doing tomorrow night?"

Other than tidying up the shop more than what's needed, I was only planning on an evening at home with a movie. Or Rex. Maybe both. "Nothing special."

"A bunch of friends are getting together at Luca's place. You should come along and join us. Bring Rex with you. It'll be fun."

My idea of enjoyment is decidedly different. I'd prefer to steer myself away from unfamiliar people and the risk of embarrassment. But Sam's bubbly voice makes it sound . . . enjoyable. "I'll try my best to make it."

She smiles wide, twirls like a sundress in a summer breeze, and knocks a chair out from beneath the table. “Oops, sorry about that.” She moves to slide it back into its proper position.

“Leave it. It’s perfect right where it is.” Everything being slightly off-kilter is calming in a confusing way. And I don’t need a good reason to appreciate it. Those are some of the most special moments in life.



I HAVE A PRECONCEIVED notion about city folk. I won’t deny it. And while I see evidence supporting my opinion every weekend, Sam is different. She moved from Atlanta not that long ago, and she’s a sweet mix of kind and courageous. It’s refreshing to know people who defy the urban norm.

The bell over my door rings with an alarming insistence, loud and aggressive. Is that even possible? A middle-aged couple, presumably married, stomps into the shop. A teenage boy trails behind them, scrolling through his phone one-handed.

The man looks disapprovingly at the chair knocked askew by Sam. He slides it back into what he feels is its proper place. That awful scraping sound makes my skin crawl, along with the irritation written on his face.

The woman clicks her heels with decided emphasis as she approaches the front counter. “Two lattes with soy milk and a sprinkle of cardamom. Not too much. It doesn’t agree with my stomach when it’s overstated.”

“Sorry, ma’am, but we don’t have soy milk. Or cardamom. We have caramel and hazelnut flavoring, if you’re interested.”

She wags her head and scowls at me. Her judgmental thoughts creep into my personal space. “Those artificial sweet-

eners are so last year. And they're terrible for you." She redirects her laser eyes toward me and scrunches up her face. You'd think I asked her to ingest bubble gum stuck to the bottom of her designer shoes. "Give me two Americanos. That will have to hold us over until we reach the club and get what we really want."

I wish this were the same couple who argued with Claire earlier, but sadly, it isn't. My preconceived notions about city folk may not be that far off base.

My single espresso machine makes only one shot at a time. The woman taps her heel, accompanied by numerous belabored exhalations. I suspect that calling attention to the superior quality of their coffees won't help her impatient mood. I finish their order as quickly as possible and place the two steaming cups on the counter.

"Would you like tops for them?"

"And insulator wraps too." Her eyes bore through the space between us. And the man towers in his position next to her, looking down on me with disdain. The boy, who I presume is their son, sits in a seat behind them, still focused on his phone.

"Sorry, we're all out of those right now." Truth is, I don't even stock them. The cups already have an insulated barrier, but I think it's best to leave that detail unspoken. Another aggravated harrumph escapes the woman as her husband pulls out a twenty. Thank goodness it's not a bigger bill. I wouldn't be able to break it. I'm not sure how many more inconveniences this couple could handle. I hand the change back to him, and nary a word escapes his lips. Sometimes silence can be more damaging than words. He glances at the tip jar, glares at me, and shoves the money into his pocket.

The woman mumbles on her way toward the exit. Something about the worst coffee shop in existence. And vowing to leave a negative online review. It doesn't surprise me. I doubt anything positive could have come from this experience.

Moments later, the bell rings again, announcing another visitor. I hesitate to look up, but the sound is softer and less hostile. I peek up to find the same teenage boy staring blankly at me. It's the first time I've seen him not looking at his phone, and there's something . . .

"I'm here to get the muffin we ordered. My mom forgot to pick it up." As flustered as I was by the couple's demands, I'm certain they only bought two coffees.

"I don't remember—" About to call his bluff, I notice a familiar emotion in his eyes. Pain. "What's your name?"

"Why do you need that?" His voice straddles defensiveness and guilt.

"I put customer names on the bags, to keep the orders from getting mixed up." I know there's sarcasm laced in my words. With no other person in the shop, my routine is unnecessary. But the shared smirk between us proves my response appeals to this teenager.

"Austin." It comes out effortlessly, like an exhalation of suppressed emotion. I write it on the bag in my same calming and loopy cursive script, dotting the *i* in his name with a sunflower.

"Did you know the sunflower is a sign of longevity, based on the sun itself? Many believe the warmth it supplies, just by being around it, can be nourishing." I offer him a warm smile. I hope my kind thoughts reach that pain buried beneath his hardened exterior.

I hand him the paper bag that contains not one muffin but two. He moves toward the exit with a slow but deliberate gait. He's offered me little more than his first name. I fear I've pushed him away with my eccentric floral knowledge.

He stops before exiting, turns around, and holds up the bag. "Thanks." It's a single word, but the tiny curl at the corner of his lips lets me know my message has reached him. He slips through the door before I can respond. Our exchange, initially bursting with negativity, warms my heart more than any sunflower ever could.

I pull the pad of paper from beside my register and make four marks in the free-inventory column. Two for Sam and another couple for Austin. It's not helping my profits for the day, but that feeling it provides? It's more valuable than any amount of money in my pocket.

Before placing the notepad back in its place, I add one more vertical line, grabbing a muffin for myself. Everyone could use a bit of warm nourishment from time to time.



If you'd like to read Drew & Maria's story in its entirety, I invite you to visit www.davecenker.com/splendid-chaos, where you can order your copy from all major retailers in both e-book and paperback. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share the magic and charm of Pigeon Grove with you!



About the Author



DAVE CENKER is a romantic fiction author, writing stories infused with a kaleidoscope of emotions that nurture the heart while exploring elements of the human condition. He appreciates the opportunity to connect with readers through a shared emotional chord and the enchanted sentiments of a timeless love story.

Like coffee provides caffeine for the physical body, Dave's stories supply caffeine for the soul.

Visit him online at www.davecenker.com¹



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