

Myriad of Smiles
Tag Cavello
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Myriad of Smiles
By
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Everyone at the food-court screamed as the man fled through. He was a scary thing to look at, his beard black, his muscles broad. His arms swung like a wild gorilla's as he smashed tables and chairs. But at least the little boy with him did not seem hurt. At least, not yet.

Detective Caitlin Smiles felt confident about saving that boy. Yet the thought was but a distant, dim beacon in her mind. Right now, it was all she could do to keep pace with the gorilla.

Her legs pumped across the balcony overlooking the court. A robot waiter stepped in front of her; she dodged left, barely hearing its mechanical apology. From the awning of another restaurant floated a holographic menu.

"Come inside!" it welcomed. "Your lunch is waiting!"

Caitlin ran through it. Below she saw the gorilla—dragging the boy under one of its meaty arms—cut left towards the escalators. At the top of those escalators, she knew, were the trains. Depending on her luck, he would either be caught on the waiting platform there...or escape in one of the coaches.

Lungs heaving for breath, she reached the end of the balcony. The gorilla's flight had caused a great deal of chaos. People everywhere ran and screamed. Amidst all of it, Caitlin could see the boy's legs swinging as his captor spun off down the exit corridor. Not having much choice, she vaulted the rail.

More screaming from the civilians, more tipped over tables and flying food. Her boot slipped on a glob of red pasta. A robot lost its balance and spilled Coke all over her vest.

"Oh dear! Madame, I am terribly sorry!"

But Caitlin was already back to running. She bounced off a man, knocking a flexiphone out of his hand, jumped over a child's new bicycle, and made for the escalators. By the time she reached the bottom, the gorilla was just disappearing from the top. The boy's face, smeared with terror, looked down at her for an instant. Then it was gone.

Caitlin took the stairs two at a time. She thought she would faint soon. Her chest wheezed, her legs ached. Physical confrontations like this one normally went to the bigger, stronger cops on the force. Today, however, there'd not been time to call in backup.

"Police!" she gasped at the people in her way. "Move! *Move!*"

"Let us move you," a pleasant female hologram sang from the top of the escalator's handrail. "Cleveland's RTA is here to eliminate all of your transportation worries."

Caitlin reached the highest step in time to see the gorilla rough-house the boy through a line of commuters at one of the scanning arcs. The gorilla did not have a ticket. Also, he was carrying a weapon. Both of these facts were registered by the scanner the instant he passed through. Red lights flashed, alarms sounded.

Finally, thought Caitlin, a break.

Cries of FREEZE! FREEZE! broke out over the platform. Two other cops—men—had joined the pursuit. Caitlin fumbled under her vest, found her badge, flashed it as she ran through the scanner. More good fortune awaited on the other side. The gorilla either failed to understand the principles of that old law about things going wrong whenever they could, or he had never been tutored on it in the first place. Whichever, he was now

standing at the edge of the platform with desperate eyes, in search of a train that had yet to appear.

With the male cops flanking her, Caitlin stepped closer to her suspect.

“Let the boy go,” she plumed, grabbing a stun ray from her belt.

The gorilla bared his teeth. “Let him go? He’s my responsibility.”

“I am with the Cleveland Detective Bureau and you are being placed under arrest. Release the boy now.”

“Save it, Detective. You don’t have a clear shot.” His head tilted. “Unless you want to hit the boy, too. No? Smart girl.”

With that, he began to step sideways along the edge of the platform. His hostage was dressed in a green V-necked shirt and dark blue pants. Caitlin made a mental note of this in case she should lose sight of him later. Then her eyes returned to the gorilla, who was glancing over his shoulder like a nervous driver in heavy traffic.

“No way out,” Caitlin told him. “Come on, fella. You keep walking like that you’re going to fall right onto the tracks.”

“Ma’am?” one of the cops next to her said under his breath. “There’s a service ladder at the end of the platform. If he reaches it he could get down to the street.”

“Get some of your boys down there,” she nodded. “And in the meantime remember: no shooting unless you’re sure the hostage comes away clean.”

The cop began talking into the Blur-Band on his wrist as all five of them—police, boy, and gorilla—edged along the open pit of the tracks. Then the gorilla’s eyes widened at something over Caitlin’s shoulder. She knew better than to look—and after a loud blast from the approaching train horn there was no need anyway.

Ten coaches blew into the station on a heavy breeze that lifted coat collars and ruffled dresses. Caitlin’s hair fell in front of her eyes. When she brushed it aside, she saw the gorilla bolting for the ladder.

“You!” she looked at one of the cops. “Cover the exit! The other one come with me!”

After that she was back in pursuit. This time the civilians let her be; in fact, all of them had moved to a safe distance not long after the gorilla’s arrival on the platform. As she ran down to the ladder, it seemed to Caitlin like the entire station was holding its breath. Later, when the boy was dead, she would believe that even more.

The gorilla reached the ladder about fifty paces ahead of her. Without hesitating, he flung one of his legs over the side.

“No!” Caitlin hollered. “You’re three stories up! At least give me the boy first!”

“This boy doesn’t belong to you!” the gorilla shouted back.

His hand plunged into his coat, came out with a gun, and fired it at her.

Screams from all around, like a million frantic scissor-blades cutting the air. But Caitlin had been shot at before. Throwing her arms over her head, she dropped to the platform in a slide. The projectile flew over her head and struck the cop she’d moments ago commanded backup from.

Caitlin came to a stop on her butt. Something over her shoulder had distracted the gorilla: He was leaning to his left, with the boy’s wrist locked in his grip almost a full arm-length away on the right. Knowing this was the best chance she was going to get, Caitlin aimed her weapon at the gorilla and fired.

Three things happened. Two of them were bad.

The pulse struck the gorilla's left shoulder, and that whole side of his body convulsed as he spun backward over the ledge. On instinct, his right hand let go of the boy (later, Caitlin would blame instinct for everything that went wrong that day on the platform), but it was too late to regain his balance, and he fell off the ledge to his death.

Realizing her error, Caitlin let out a scream and jumped to her feet. The boy screamed back as he fell sideways on top of the ledge. Almost immediately, gravity began to pull him in the wrong direction. Panic filled his eyes. His arms writhed like snakes for something to entwine. All they could find was Caitlin's hand, which got there just as both of his legs slipped all the way over the high drop.

"Got you!" she said through gritting teeth. "Hold on! Hold on!"

His fingers clawed into her wrist. Looking at his face, which was dark and smooth, Caitlin judged his age to be no more than ten. Ten years old, average height, average build, with legs that were kicking like mad for purchase over a three story drop onto concrete construction. Caitlin would later tell herself these things, over and over, whenever the voices in her head—the voices which usually helped her with research on a case, or documenting evidence at a crime scene, or questioning a murder suspect, or just shopping for next week's groceries—asked to know why the boy was dead. He was just too heavy, she told them, and he wouldn't stop squirming. I screamed for help. Honest I did. I screamed, but nobody came.

"Help!" she screamed. "Over here! Somebody!"

Her arm seethed like a pair of lungs on a held breath. Her boots slipped. The side of the ledge bit into her belly. The boy's fingers slipped, scratched, and slipped some more.

"No!" Caitlin begged. "Hold on! You can do it! *Hold on! WAIT!*"

"Help me," the boy whimpered—his last words ever. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

And then he was gone.

Caitlin could not believe her eyes. No, she *refused* to believe them. She stood at the ledge, empty hand still dangling, and waited for a different truth to come along. It never did. And upon realizing that it never would, Caitlin slumped back onto the platform, curled into a ball, and wept.

Hands touched her, tried to pull her to her feet. She jerked away, snapping at them to let her go. But they were as insistent with being there for her as they'd been at not being there for the boy. Whereas moments ago all the begging in the world couldn't bring them, they were here, now, offering compassion in abundance.

"Go to hell!" she told them, hating their belated concern. "Go to hell!"

In the following day's e-news, it was reported that through the effort of three unnamed heroes, Detective Smiles was pulled away from the ledge before she herself could jump. Caitlin did not remember that part. All she remembered, after hearing the boy's head crack open on the concrete, were the hands. The hypocritical, sycophantic, self-congratulatory hands, touching her, squeezing her, pulling her to her feet.

"So you felt no compulsion to inflict harm upon yourself after the event?"

"I don't remember," Caitlin told the doctor again. "I was in shock. There were a lot of voices. Bad smells."

"Bad smells?"

"Yeah," Caitlin said, waving her arm. "You know. Body odor. Reheated food." She paused. "Dead bugs."

“Interesting. I have always known the RTA as being very clean. Do you still smell those things?”

“No.”

The doctor made a note in his pamphlet. The pamphlet wasn't digital, Caitlin took in. Just the plain old paper and pen kind.

“Have your feelings of self-worth been stable of late?” he then wanted to know.

Caitlin leaned back a little in her chair and let out a breath. It was two weeks since the train station—nowhere near long enough to understand or even identify whatever consequences were forthcoming.

“I don't think about it much,” she admitted. “The case is still what's important. This man they're calling Madnishnue.”

The doctor's brow went up. “As I understand it, Detective, you've been asked to take a leave of absence. Is the case still your responsibility?”

“Not asked. Told.”

“I see. And were you agreeable to that instruction?”

“Do I sound like I was agreeable, Doctor?”

The other paused to scribble something into the pamphlet.

“Tell me about the case, Detective.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Just the basics will do for now. Give me an outline. And when you're done,” he pressed on, before she could begin, “I want you to think of one word to describe how the case makes you feel. Just one. Okay?”

She shrugged. “Okay. There's a man living in Cleveland. A kingpin, I guess you could call him. His acolytes, his henchmen, refer to him as Madnishnue. His criminal network is huge. We've got him tied to narcotics trafficking, insider trading, extortion, prostitution.” She looked at the doctor. “Prescription medication.”

“You sound very frustrated.”

“Maybe that's the word I'll use later on. The one I'll write down,” she added, when the doctor looked puzzled. “Anyway, we were doing what's called a flank investigation on him. Or on one of his acolytes, I should say. No one in law enforcement has actually had a chance to see Madnishnue, so we don't know what he looks like.

“The flank job involves a team of cops—a very visual team of cops—dogging a suspect. Collecting data. Where he lives, what he eats, who his wife is, who his girlfriend is, what his garbage looks like. That kind of stuff. All of this goes on while another, smaller team does surveillance on a far more covert basis.”

“And that was the team you were on,” the doctor said.

“That's right. The whole idea behind the thing is to give the suspect false confidence.”

“So when he manages to evade the visual team he thinks he's in the clear for...criminal engagement.”

“Yes. When in reality the covert team is there. Has been there all along.”

Her mind went back to the bearded gorilla. She sighed; she shook her head. They had almost gotten their man.

“This guy we were after,” she went on, “the one with the boy, he was under a lot of false confidence. The visual team ‘lost’ him. On purpose. They'd already radioed my boys about it.”

“I’ve noticed during this session you seem to be fond of antiquated vocabulary,” the doctor cut in. “*Radios. Henchmen. Cops.* Are you fond of old movies? Television?”

Caitlin looked up from her hands. “Not especially. But my mother...she used to watch.”

The doctor’s pen went back to the pamphlet.

“Pamphlet,” Caitlin said, watching him scratch away. “You’ve got some old habits yourself, Doctor.”

His head tilted. “Sometimes. But today I’m without my Dicta-Tab. Dead battery.”

“Oh.”

“Go on with your story, please.”

“Well,” she sighed, “he had the boy with him. We still don’t know why. It appeared he was playing babysitter. They went to lunch. They went to the park.” She paused. “Then they went to a garage in the flats to pick up a shipment of stolen CPUs. Android CPUs. Expensive. From there, it...” Her head shook; her eyes wandered. “All turned to shit,” she finished.

Except that she wasn’t finished—not quite. The case on Madnishnue remained open. Word at the bureau had him still doing business in Cleveland, despite their near miss at the RTA. Also—

“He spotted you,” the doctor said. “The man with the beard.”

“Yes,” Caitlin allowed. “We were careless. He shuffled the boy into his car and made a run for it. We followed. My team got separated.” Her mouth twisted. “The rest you know. Don’t ask me to recount.”

Silence fell over the office. The pen dashed away. When it stopped, the doctor looked up and asked Caitlin what, if anything, she wished she could do to rectify what had happened.

The question made her pull a face. Whatever *could* be done—undone—about that day? The first answer, the most obvious one, was also the most ridiculous.

“Invent a time machine,” she drawled. “Go back. Keep the boy away from ledges and platforms.”

“So your remorse is for him. The child.”

“Of course.”

Again, obvious. And ridiculous. What more appropriate place was there for her pain to reside?

But the doctor apparently had his motives for wanting to know. His next question concerned alternatives.

“You’re a police detective,” he pointed out. “Your problem solving skills are exemplary. Can there be another, more practical way?”

Caitlin looked back down at her hands. Between them, somewhere, was the soul of a little boy who had died because of her...

Her what?

“My problem solving skills,” she muttered.

The doctor heard. “Yes. There are always solutions, Detective. Always. Some of them fix everything. Others simply help to alleviate our pain. I feel you should search for something in that latter category.”

She nodded. “Okay. But what if I can’t find it?”

“Don’t tell yourself that. It’s there, Detective. And what exists can always be found.” He placed his pamphlet on the desk. “Let’s stop here for now. When you come back next week you will know what to do. I’m certain of that. But before you go”—he opened the pamphlet—“please write down that one word we talked about earlier. The word that best describes your feelings towards the case.”

Caitlin picked up the pen. She knew the word. It had come to her while contemplating the problem solving skills she was supposed to have. Oh yes. It had popped right into her head.

Mad, she wrote.

Then she closed the pamphlet, thanked her doctor, and went back out into the world.

Two weeks later she was feeding her ID card into a computer at the Cleveland Clinic. From that card came all the basic information there was to know about her life: name, sex, height, weight, address, occupation. Other tidbits included her marital status, birth certificate, and driver’s license number. Even her blood type came up on the screen.

That last one was important for the clinic. In order for her to conceive the healthiest baby possible, the father’s blood type had to be a good match for her own.

The card slid back out. Caitlin took it and looked around for the nurse she had spoken with earlier. She—the nurse—seemed to have vanished into thin air. Just down the glossy-tiled hall was an emergency room, where people of all sizes, shapes, and colors were rushing about like traffic around an overpass. Most of them wore nurse’s uniforms.

“Miss Smiles?”

Caitlin spun around. Her nurse stood by the door. Like Caitlin, she was short; unlike Caitlin, her frame was plump, her expression perfectly content.

“We’ve received your data,” she said. “A list of subjects should be available for you in about ten minutes.”

Caitlin swallowed hard. Of the few men she had been with in her life, none of them could rightly be referred to as subjects. Subjects was a word for tests. Experiments. It had no business being used to describe a sex partner.

“All right,” she answered, wondering all over again whether she was doing the right thing.

The nurse smiled. “Have a seat in the lobby. Your name will be called.”

Her estimate turned out to be spot on. In ten minutes Caitlin found herself in front of another computer screen, this one larger and in ultra-amazing resolution. Handsome faces floated in neat rows over the desk. They were of all styles and colors. Square, round, chiseled, smooth; white, tan, dark, black; blonds, browns, ravens, red-heads.

Caitlin’s head swam with confusion. She had no idea where to begin. After five minutes she decided to eliminate all of the ones that were smiling. She’d never fully trusted a man who smiled, and there was nothing remotely funny about what would happen later with one of these men.

But now she was stumped...and stayed that way. Thirty minutes passed with no progress. When the nurse returned to ask how she was doing, Caitlin told her the truth.

“I can’t decide,” she said. “Aside from hair and skin color they’re all described the same way.”

“Indeed,” the nurse nodded. “That’s because every applicant must meet the same list of requirements the hospital poses. Those requirements are very strict.”

“I understand. I’m glad they are.” Caitlin looked back at the screen. “Maybe I should just close my eyes and point.”

“You may also wish to fall back on the tried and true method of artificial insemination. Many women do.”

But Caitlin was already shaking her head. She still didn’t feel right about that, and told the nurse as much. She’d come here a week ago after deciding that bringing another child into the world might be the only way to cope with the pictures her mind’s eye would not stop looking at. The hospital had promised to help her by one of two methods: personal or impersonal. And after thinking about it for a couple of days, Caitlin had settled on the former. In order to create the healthiest baby possible, feelings needed to be involved. Intimacy. An exchange of some form of love, however precarious, between two people. So she believed.

If only romance was still alive. Courtships. Flowers and chocolate. Valentine’s Day dinners. Weddings. Alas, it had all been mostly forgotten, even by Caitlin herself until recent times. After all, sex was easy to come by. She’d seen dolls on the market (indeed, had played with a few) that looked so real you’d swear at any moment they were going to sit up and blink. And now androids were starting to catch on. They were pricey, but Caitlin didn’t doubt that time and technology would broaden their appeal. Sex without side-effects. Bliss without baggage. If it kept going the world’s population could be cut by a third before the century was out, and maybe that was a good thing. Caitlin hadn’t made up her mind yet. Until the boy’s death at the platform, she’d never contemplated such things at all. It hadn’t mattered. Men hadn’t mattered. Getting married, starting a family. Bah.

Even the war brewing with China and Korea, which had been all over the news of late, came in behind what mattered most to her: work. Or more to the point, work on the Madnishue case.

“This one,” Caitlin said, hovering her finger over a man with dirty blond hair, the same color as her own.

“Very well,” the nurse replied, looking pleased. “Let’s try for this Tuesday at 2PM. If anything changes the hospital will contact you.”

Caitlin thanked her and left. On the way home she hardly thought about her choice. She’d done pretty much what she’d suggested to the nurse: closed her eyes and pointed. As long as everyone was healthy it didn’t matter. A man was a man.

But she almost cancelled the appointment. On Monday night, Madnishue was apprehended. She drove to the station after receiving an emotionally detached call from her captain, telling herself that it couldn’t be real, that there had to be a mistake.

It took time for things to become clear. A colleague led her to a room next door to where the interrogation took place. Here she would be allowed to watch a video of it.

“How did they get him?” she asked, looking at the screen, which for the moment showed nothing but an empty room.

“Apprehended at a charging station in the flats,” the colleague—a pup of around twenty with dark hair—said.

“What was the make and model of his vehicle?”

“I don’t know that. It’s in the police report.”

“So you didn’t make the arrest?”

“No, ma’am.”

The door came open as he answered. In it stood a black woman of Caitlin’s height. Her eyes looked bitter and disappointed.

“Caitlin,” Captain Sherri Jacobs said before putting her coffee down on the table. “I was wondering when you’d arrive. Have you seen the video yet?”

“We were just—“

“Never mind. You still look curious so I’m guessing that to mean no. Officer?”

The pup turned on his heel. Caitlin thought for a moment that he meant to salute, which she would have found grotesque.

“Ma’am?” he asked instead.

“Detective Smiles would like some coffee.” She raised a brow at Caitlin. “Wouldn’t she?”

“It’s all right. I—“

“Cream and sugar,” Jacobs told the officer.

The pup nodded and left the room. Caitlin’s eyes followed him out. An awkward silence arose in which she could sense Captain Jacobs’ stare, resting on her like a spider. Their previous exchange had been volatile, with Caitlin defending herself as best she could in between accusations of recklessness, negligence, and bad decision-making. At the end of it all, of course, had come the suspension. One month. Not long but still too long. Being alone with her thoughts was not what Caitlin wanted.

“Your new gofer seems eager to please,” she said, not knowing how else to break the ice.

“No. He’s just trained to do as he’s told.”

The message in this remark did not go lost on Caitlin, but rather than rise to it she asked to see the interrogation video.

Looking at Madnishnue’s face after snapping at his heels for so long fascinated her. She watched the screen as a large black man strode into the camera’s field of view. He sat down at a table and waited. Soon two other people—one of them Jacobs—appeared in the room.

“When was this recorded?” Caitlin asked.

“Couple hours ago,” Jacobs said. “We have more than enough evidence to hold him.”

“And you know for sure that it’s Madnishnue?”

“A pusher, a pimp, and two prostitutes from East Cleveland identified him. Plus we got a confession.”

More fascinated than ever, Caitlin watched on. Despite the lore of bloodshed that surrounded him, Madnishnue did not seem like an unstable man. He answered the bureau’s myriad of questions in a low, even tone of voice, never once appearing irritated, even when the same question was asked over and over. Towards the end of the session, he did as Captain Jacobs had promised:

“I am Madnishnue,” he said.

Caitlin’s hand squeezed her now empty coffee mug. She could hardly believe her senses.

“I wanted you to see this,” Captain Jacobs said, “because I know how important the case is to you. You’ve sacrificed a lot. But Caitlin?”

Their eyes met over the screen, in which Madnishnue was now rising from the table.

“You can stop now. It’s over.”

She looked at the screen again. The room had been abandoned. Regardless, Caitlin could almost see herself sitting in Madnishnue’s chair. The questioned. The accused.

How did the boy die? Why didn’t you help him?

“Caitlin?” Jacobs said from somewhere near. “You all right?”

Her mind snapped back to the present—and then on to the future. To the clinic. Tomorrow promised to be an important day.

“Almost,” she said to her captain. “Almost.”

Ten hours later Caitlin was standing in front of her closet wondering what the hell she was going to wear on this trip. Solutions were elusive. Her wardrobe was small, the pickings slim. Would the blond-haired man like her better in a dress or a skirt? Did it matter either way?

Frustrated, Caitlin spoke to a small, pink box mounted on the mirror. “Select-O-Suit,” she said.

The box came alight. “Good morning, Miss Smiles,” it purred. “Please describe the event or circumstances for which you need to be attired.”

“Sex.”

“Thank you. For sex you may remove all clothing. Good day!”

The box turned off.

Caitlin stared at it. “Thanks for the tip.”

She showed up at the clinic an hour later dressed in a black sleeveless top and skirt—the best she could do with what little she had. The same nurse as before greeted her, wearing the same smile. But the plan had changed.

“The man we were expecting cancelled,” the nurse said.

“Oh. So we need to reschedule?” Caitlin’s face wrinkled with bitterness. She’d been stood up. Left in the lurch. A lot of things changed in the world, but men were constant.

“Not at all,” the nurse continued. “Another gentleman has agreed to fill in.”

Her choice of words made Caitlin laugh. “All right. I take it he’s been tested by the clinic?”

Everything was explained to her as they made their way to what the nurse referred to as an interaction area. Her substitute was six feet, two inches tall, two hundred pounds, of Indian-American descent.

“Native American?” Caitlin asked, curious.

“No. India as in the country. Here we are!”

They entered a plain white room. A plain white bed covered with plain white sheets was pushed against the wall. Caitlin didn’t know what to think about any of it. Her mind suddenly felt white too.

“What’s his name?” she asked, as if it mattered.

“Daniel Newman.”

“Nice. Common.”

“They’re giving him sperm stimulants at the moment. It doesn’t take long,” she added, in case Caitlin had some objection to waiting. “Once he arrives take everything off and lie in the position assigned to you by the clinic.” A sweet little shrug touched her shoulders. “After that it’s all up to nature, dear.”

It took almost thirty minutes for her partner to arrive. During that time Caitlin could do little but mull about in the expressionless room. She looked at the bed. It had nothing to say for the time being. The door was also closed and silent. She checked the ceiling next, for electric eyes. No soap. Everything gleamed with truthfulness and cheap paint. Still, Caitlin suspected she was being watched. Documented. The clinic would want to know if their instructions were being followed. They would study the video of her and this Mr. Newman making love, take notes for future improvement of their methods. Much to her surprise, her body seemed to like the idea. Her chest tightened and became hot. Her pelvis tingled. This was not the Caitlin Smiles she knew, the one she had grown up with. It had nothing to do with keeping her room clean, or getting good grades at school, or going to college. Or closing cases for the Cleveland Detective Bureau. This was a desire more primitive and vital than any other. And apparently it had been dormant for too long, for Caitlin felt no shame.

The nurse returned. Next to her stood a tall, dark man with black hair. It could only be Daniel Newman. Caitlin was introduced. She shook his hand, like a business colleague. Then the nurse left, and they were alone.

“I understand you’re a police detective,” Newman said after a few seconds.

Caitlin thought she could hear the faintest warble of an Indian accent in his voice.

“That’s right,” she replied.

“You look like one. It’s in your eyes. Accusatory. I feel guilty.”

“Sorry.” She looked away.

“Don’t be. It’s exciting. I want to be searched.” His head tilted. “What do you see? A man you can trust?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Newman.”

He smiled. “Daniel. Please.”

“I don’t—“

“The more we treat each other like real lovers, the healthier the baby will be.”

Caitlin’s mouth closed. Her eyes blinked. Newman—Daniel—was right, of course. Her mind and body were already part of this. But the baby, if there was to be one, needed more. It needed her heart as well.

“All right,” she agreed. “*Daniel*. And if it pleases you, Daniel, I’ll tell you what I see.”

“Yes.”

“I see a man about forty years old. Dark complexion.” Her eyes narrowed. “You’re a thinker. You enjoy outsmarting others. Do you play chess?”

“As a matter of fact I do. Go on.”

“There’s an air of pretentiousness about you. You seldom lose.”

“I never lose.”

“I don’t know your occupation, but I’m guessing big business. Corporate. You make deals from long distances, give orders.”

“And do dominant men arouse you?”

Caitlin’s brow went up. She had to admit they did.

“Good,” Daniel said, stepping closer, “that’s good.”

His hand, large and warm, touched her neck. Caitlin closed her eyes. A breath filled her lungs. Their first kiss came. A small one. Delicate, cautious.

“You call me Daniel,” he whispered, kissing her again, “and I’ll call you Caitlin. We’ll love each other like we were young again. Kept apart for a very long time, against our will, and this—“he ran his fingers through her hair—“this is our reunion.”

At that moment the lights in the room went down. Shadows emerged from every crevice, every corner. They were watching all right; this was proof. Caitlin still didn’t care. She let Daniel undress her. It had been too long, far too long. Let this chapter end, she told herself. Let the fast be broken.

She gasped in as they fell onto the bed, a woman on the deepest, most treacherous dive of her life. Yet it seemed the better she understood the risks, the more zealous she was to face them, knowing that the next breath, when at last it came, would be all the sweeter for the waiting it forced.

“Let’s stop here,” the police psychiatrist said, the way he did at the end of every session.

He handed Caitlin the pamphlet. At her request, they continued to use pen and paper. Why change anything? Who knew what alterations would derail the happy train she’d been on since meeting Daniel Newman?

Her feelings were right there in his surname. She picked up the pen and wrote: *New*. “Good,” the doctor said. “Very good. You’re almost healed, Detective.”

It wasn’t perfect, of course. Did such a state even exist? Perhaps, but not in law enforcement, a line of work whose very existence depended upon the imperfect. Daniel’s profession, real estate, had its demands as well. Thus, they were not able to see each other often after a series of dinner dates—dinner dates which Caitlin had agreed to for the singular purpose of giving the baby at least a chance, however gossamer, to grow up with a connection between its parents.

Today, almost a year after they’d met at the clinic, that chance was better than gossamer. It was like steel. Though she’d never realized it before, there was not any one time in her life that Caitlin could think of as happy. There’d been moments, to be certain. Brief periods of joy. But nothing she could call halcyon. Nothing that sprawled on the calendar to be reminisced upon during lonely nights. No. Until the baby—until Bridgette—her chest of memories to keep had been empty.

This morning they were watching cartoons together. It was the usual routine. Up at six, Daniel off to work by eight. Breakfast for the baby, then cartoons and toys for an hour or two before following up with life downtown through the bureau’s intranet.

Her maternity leave was still a month from expiring, but Caitlin already felt reluctant about going back. She was going to miss the extra time spent with this chubby-cheeked girl sitting in her lap. Pine away selfishly for all of the gurgling smiles she was certain to miss.

The cartoon went into commercial. Caitlin picked Bridgette’s Holo-Puppy off the table and turned it on. In seconds a fuzzy-furred briard, Bridgette’s favorite, was prancing around the room. Bridgette laughed. She pointed a stubby finger at the dog, then looked at Caitlin as if to say, *I just love it when that guy comes around.*

“I know,” Caitlin cooed, tickling the baby’s belly. “It’s cute, right? Right?”

Not long afterward her Blurt-Band began to vibrate.

“Hello, Caitlin. This is Captain Jacobs. I need you to come down to the station right away.”

“All right,” Caitlin replied, frowning. The dog jumped onto the table and began to bark. “What’s wrong, Captain?”

“Maybe nothing.” The Blurt-Band hesitated. “Probably nothing. But Caitlin...your husband’s been arrested.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Please come down here so we can talk face to face.”

“On my way.”

She got Bridgette dressed, wondering what on earth Daniel could have done to get himself arrested. *Probably nothing*, Jacobs had said. But her tone had been edgy. Twitchy. So it couldn’t be nothing. Weird, maybe. Maybe even silly. Maybe he’d ripped his trousers somewhere and they’d gotten him for indecent exposure. But it couldn’t be nothing.

“We’re going to Mommy’s office,” she said, when Bridgette gave her a curious look.

Minutes later they were cruising over Veterans Memorial Bridge. Traffic was light, but Caitlin still didn’t feel like driving. *Silly*, she kept telling herself, *it’ll be something silly, you’ll see*.

As if to reassure her, Bridgette giggled from her car seat in the back. Caitlin gave her a smile through the rear-view mirror and drove on.

But the story kept getting stranger.

Captain Jacobs met her at the bureau. She led Caitlin into her office, flashing a brief smile at the baby before closing the door.

“Would you care for some coffee, Madame?” a steaming pot asked from the edge of Jacobs’ cluttered desk.

“Yes, please,” Caitlin said.

“*Yes, please*, is not a flavor I am familiar with. Would you care for some coffee, Madame?”

“Cream and sugar.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s your coffee pot all right,” Caitlin told the captain, who frowned before taking a seat behind the desk.

“Funny how I’m always hearing that. And wonderful to be so well-loved around here.”

“Well apparently my husband’s been arrested, so I’m looking for excuses to lighten the mood.”

“Your husband is no longer being detained. He’s been released under his own recognizance.”

Caitlin stared over the desk. She had no clue how to proceed; her powers of speech had utterly flown. The baby touched her face, asking for something—a toy, a bottle. When Caitlin didn’t respond the touch turned into a slap.

Captain Jacobs explained everything while Caitlin attended to Bridgette’s needs. Sometime during the previous night, a man had been shot to death just off Eagle Avenue

near the lake. He had been driving a vanload of high quality android parts to a housing project in Garfield Heights, most of which were stolen by whomever had perpetrated the crime.

“What makes you think they were stolen?” Caitlin asked at this point.

“Well, the back of the van was open and there were a few limbs scattered on the street. The hit seemed rushed. Unprofessional.”

“Daniel was with me last night,” Caitlin said, knowing how ridiculous that sounded but unable to help herself.

Jacobs shot her a look of sympathy for the stupid. “Yes, we’re fairly certain your husband didn’t commit murder. It’s just that the housing project in question is one of Daniel Newman’s. Also...” Jacobs paused to retrieve a small, white slate—a Dicta-Tab—from inside her desk. She activated it without removing it from the evidence bag it was in, and they both listened.

“Delivery for Mr. Newman,” a gruff voice said from the device’s speaker. *“To be made between midnight and dawn of April the fourteenth. Android parts. Some accessories. All under the table. No paperwork. No dialogue. Not even a handshake.”* The recording paused. Then: *“Authorities closing in on Cuyahoga Valley. Warn Madnishnue. Carter out.”*

Caitlin’s spine went cold. She stared at the Dicta-Tab, then at Captain Jacobs.

“Warn Madnishnue? What does that mean?”

Jacobs put the evidence bag back into her desk. “That’s what I’d like you to find out, Caitlin. I want you to take a little drive down to Mansfield CF and have a talk with our friend Madnishnue. He’s doing thirty years so there should still be time.” The drawer slammed shut. “Are you up for it?”

“Of course.”

“Good. I figure he’ll be willing to talk to you. After his arrest he found out you’re the one who’d been snapping at his heels.”

Caitlin nodded. Mansfield would certainly do for a start. But the Dicta-Tab had mentioned someplace else.

“What’s going on in Cuyahoga Valley?” she asked. “I’ve been on maternity leave, so—“

“It has to do with the restoration project.”

Caitlin’s eyes narrowed. “The steam train?”

“Correct. We have evidence that...not everything is as it seems there.”

“But—“

“Evidence that I am not prepared to discuss at this time.”

“But my husband is spear-heading that project!”

“I know that, Caitlin. And right now he’s clean. He has you as an alibi for what happened last night. He showed me a receipt for the android parts and it checked out. The information we have out of Cuyahoga Valley comes from an unreliable source. It has to do with using the train to transport...” The captain trailed off, closing her eyes for a moment. “More illegal goods,” she finished, looking pained.

It was signal enough for Caitlin not to press the matter further. But that evening at the dinner table, she *did* press Daniel, who insisted his bewilderment matched that of the police, punctuating his testimony with proclamations of shame and apology in equal measure.

“Do they need me back at the bureau?” he then asked, holding a spoonful of tapioca to Bridgette’s lips. “I’m happy to go. Anything I can do to assist with the investigation is fine.”

Caitlin told him they weren’t asking the Newman Corporation for anything just yet. She also told him she would be driving to Mansfield in the morning to question a suspect, and would he mind looking after Bridgette at the office? Not at all, Daniel assured her; in fact, did she know that his company ran a daycare center on the thirtieth floor? No, of course she didn’t. It was brand new. Something to make life easier for the mothers under his employ. Not that he had a lot. No, no. Not in this day and age. But empathy still served a purpose in the trenches of corporate battle, yes?

“Yes,” Caitlin replied, bemused. “So we’re all set?”

“We are,” Daniel told her.

She watched Bridgette take another bite of pudding. “Be a good girl for Mommy tomorrow, okay? Okay?”

Bridgette smiled. Tapioca was smeared all over her face. Caitlin smiled back.

“I love seeing you two do that,” Daniel said fondly. “Smiles from the ladies of my life. I could have a million. It still wouldn’t be enough.”

“It’s not enough!” Madnishnue barked from the other end of the intercom. The glass separating him from Caitlin was filthy with fingerprints and smeared kisses. She wished somebody would clean it. “It’s not enough that I’m locked in here for a year without payment for what I did! It’s not enough that for six months these other niggahs be tryin’ to *kill* me! Now you wanna turn me into a rat! A pigeon! Pick your animal, Detective!”

“At the moment I can’t think of any that reflect honesty, but that’s what I’d like from you more than anything.”

Madnishnue leered. “You want honest, sweetie-cake? Come on over here to my side of the glass and I’ll be *real* honest with you. Oh yeah.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline the offer. Listen, Madnishnue—“

“Don’t call me that!”

“Why not? Doesn’t the name intimidate people? If they knew who you were maybe they’d stop trying to kill you.”

“They know who I am, Detective. You’re the one who’s confused.”

“So enlighten me. Tell me what that delivery man meant about Cuyahoga Valley.”

Madnishnue blinked at her for several moments before answering. Dialogue from other visitors floated through the air. Sobs. Nervous chatter.

--I want a divorce—

--officer is there any water—

--Kim is old enough to know her daddy is bad—

--baby I can’t sneak condoms in here! Who’s been raping you anyway?—

“Fine,” Madnishnue said under his breath. “What do I care?” He looked at Caitlin. “I’m a dead man, right?”

“Only if you give up trying.”

This made him throw back his head and laugh. “Girl! I can’t decide whether I like you or not! So pretty yet so dumb!”

We caught you, didn’t we? Caitlin almost retorted. But no, that would be bad. She needed this man.

"It's just a train," Madnishnue told her, shaking his head. "A train he's building to transport goods."

"Who's building it?"

"Madnishnue, girl. Come on, you can't have forgotten a name you just used five minutes ago."

"I used it on you."

"Because that's who I am?" He laughed again. "No, girl. 'Fraid not. I am a pretender. A patsy."

"Then who is he?" Caitlin demanded. Her blood was suddenly running cold. A tingle raced up her spine.

"I ain't never seen him," the other said, as if this were the stupidest question in the world. "But I just told you he's building that train. I even helped on it some. Then you pigs got nosey. Not that you ever ain't. I was chosen to play a role to divert your attention."

"The role of Madnishnue," Caitlin said, almost to herself.

It earned her a wink from the other side of the glass.

"Pretty sweet gig, right? Shoulda been anyway. I'm workin' at the railyard when two guys tap me on the shoulder. Not long after that I'm standin' on the train with the biggest black man you ever saw. He called himself Mr. Durgeon. Told me if I could pose as his boss and take a fall I'd see big money. A promotion, a house." He shrugged. "All the stuff bad guys promise, I guess. I took the offer. Durgeon, he was lookin' at me like I sorta didn't have a choice."

"But you never saw Madnishnue."

The man opposite Caitlin shook his head. Suddenly he looked spent. Defeated. "No, ma'am. But I did see his son once."

Caitlin started. "His son?"

"Yes, ma'am. This was a couple three years ago. I had to drive a buyer out to Berea Airport. What he was buyin' I don't know, and it don't matter. I worked for the Val Bernadino gang in those days." He looked up from his hands with a little smile. "Remember him, Detective?"

"I remember the bureau running him out of town with his tail between his legs."

"Not the bureau, ma'am. Madnishnue. Madnishnue ran *all* the Italians outta Cleveland. Anyway, my boss says to drive this skinny bald-headed dude out to the airport, so I did. It was a quiet ride. Dude never said a word—at least not to me. Talked plenty to himself though, all the while starin' out the window in the back seat. Talked and answered. Dude was friggin' nuts. It scared me a little."

"When did you see the boy?"

"I'm comin' to that. We pull into a garage not far from where all the planes land. Waitin' for us inside is a tall man with black hair. Dark skin. You know what Indians look like, Detective? Not American Indians, mind you. I'm talkin' about the ones from Asia."

"I know what they look like."

"Well this man was Indian all the way. And so was the boy standin' next to him. Yes, ma'am. Both with black hair and dark skin. And black eyes. Big, black eyes. I grabbed the door handle, and that's when the bald guy in the back seat goes: *That's his son.*"

“Okay,” Caitlin said.

Not that it actually was. Her eyes, like those of the man speaking, had dropped...and now, she was fighting to keep them from tears.

“I told the bald guy, I says *yeah, they do look like father and son*. And he was like, *that’s Madnishnue’s son*.”

“Is the boy still alive?” Caitlin managed, already knowing the answer.

The man gave her an odd look. “Come to think of it, ma’am, I don’t believe he is. Not long before I wound up in here there was word that Madnishnue’s son had died in an accident. He fell from...somewhere.”

Caitlin’s eyes dropped again. Seconds later, a single tear fell onto her wedding ring.

“Can I go now, Detective?” someone requested, from far away.

“Yes,” she heard herself answer. “I suppose we’re done here.”

Minutes later, as she was getting into her car, a colossal explosion overtook the entire parking lot. Having no idea what it could be about, Caitlin dove to the ground and lay there. For what seemed like a long, long time, she lay there.

And then people were screaming.

And then there came a bright, flickering light.

And then a boy, smiling, asked: “Can we go now, Detective?”

Caitlin took his hand. Beneath her, a puddle of blood grew larger and larger. “Yes,” she said, “we can go. I suppose we’re done here.”

Captain Sherri Jacobs stared across the table in the interrogation room—the same interrogation room, in fact, where she had questioned Madnishnue after his arrest last year. Opposite her was a man named Daniel Newman. Daniel Newman had his head in his hands. He was sobbing. Crying like a baby. This stood to reason, considering the recent murder of his wife. Jacobs felt terrible about it too. But for her the crying would have to wait. Today, she wanted answers.

“Before she was killed your wife put out an all points bulletin for your arrest,” she said to Newman in a quiet voice. “Can you tell me why she would—“

“That’s INSANE!” Newman snarled. “My wife is dead—*dead*—and you’re making up stories to get me arrested! For what? A stupid *train*?”

“No, sir. For the time being at least, your train checks out.” She rifled through a stack of papers on the table. “Restoration project. Wildlife preservation. Tourism. Scenic escape.”

“We both talked about that train,” Newman said, wiping his eyes. “We both loved the idea of protecting Cuyahoga Valley from development.”

“You and your wife?”

“Yes. Please forgive my outburst just now, Captain. Losing Caitlin...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “I don’t know what Bridgette and I are going to do without her.”

Suddenly Newman’s red eyes glared at her. Slowly, like a snake slithering out of its lair, a grin surfaced on his face. And for just a few moments Jacobs became certain that here, now, was the real Daniel Newman. Here was the man Caitlin had married—cunning, calculating, cautious.

Then he took a breath...and the moment passed. His smile faded. The shrewdness fell away from his eyes. Newman became a grieving husband all over again.

“Captain,” he said, not looking at her, “if my wife wished for me to be arrested...then you should arrest me. I want nothing more than to get to the bottom of what’s going on.”

Jacobs found that she could not reply, so instead, she turned off her Dicta-Tab, which had been between them on the table the whole time. There was no way she could arrest Newman at present. The evidence simply wasn’t there, and he probably knew it.

“Don’t leave town,” was she at last had to be content with.

It seemed to suit the business tycoon just fine.

“Oh no, no,” he said. “I could never leave Cleveland. There’s so much work to do here.”

It rained the next day.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park turned colorless. Its trees dripped water onto empty nature trails strewn with balsa wood and kite string. No one was out playing today. No one seemed interested in leisurely strolls away from the city.

Cursing her luck, Sherri Jacobs did her best to look casual as she slipped through a copse of trees and towards the construction zone on the far side. Here groups of men wearing yellow helmets walked to and fro, some carrying machinery, others Dicta-Tabs.

Jacobs paused to put on her own helmet before setting out across the yard. She was considerably smaller than those around her, but no one contested her presence. She walked to the end of a rusty trailer and turned left.

The locomotive was huge. It dozed under a lullaby of soft rain and sticky grease, its chimney larger than Jacobs was tall, its headlamp an immense, accusing eye. Shaking off its gaze, the police captain cut over to the station, which was still under construction, and down a flight of steps.

Now hidden from the rest of the zone, she could plot her next move. Only one option seemed sensible: find something—anything—to pin on Daniel Newman. The bureau needed it to orchestrate an arrest. Their suspect in Mansfield had already hanged himself in his cell, and the recording of his interview with Caitlin had been “misplaced” by a “malfunctioning documentation unit”.

Jacobs took off her helmet and surveyed the surroundings. They described a storage room of some kind. Rows of crates flickered under old, weak lighting. Jacobs knelt and lifted the lid off one. She reached inside and pulled out a can of pasta. Reaching in again, she came back this time with a bag of dried banana chips.

“Okay,” she muttered, utterly flummoxed.

Further investigation of the room uncovered more of the same. Canned vegetables, coffee beans, dry cereal, rice. Other foods with long expiration dates. Daniel Newman’s railroad was—for whatever reason—stockpiling consumable goods.

In back of the room, Jacobs found three crates full of antiques. The antiques were automatic weapons. Assault rifles, shotguns, machine pistols. Newman wanted to arm his troops as well as feed them. Why?

It didn’t matter why, at least not right now. What mattered to Jacobs was notifying *her* troops. She reached for her Blurt-Band...and ducked down as a heavy, hollow sound emanated from the stairs. Not, not *from* the stairs. The entire flight had risen to the ceiling to reveal a second passage leading down.

Jacobs peered from her hiding spot as a man entered the room from below, locked the stairs back into place using a very simple newel post, and ascended to the station. She waited for another minute. When it was clear she was alone again, Jacobs broke cover. Her feet moved silently. Her eyes and ears were sharp. The door at the top of the stairs stood open, but empty. Seizing on her chance, Jacobs turned the newel post.

With another heavy click, the flight of steps rose. Beneath was a short passage made of concrete. At the bottom of the passage was a door. The door did not appear to be locked.

Nor was it. What lay on the other side, however, stopped Jacobs in her tracks.

There were about thirty kids in all, ranging in age from ten to fifteen years. Some of them lay in beds. Others sat on the floor. All looked tired and lost.

“Hey,” Jacobs, in almost total shock at what she was seeing, whispered to one of the boys.

The boy, black, stood up. He was shorter than the others but his eyes looked more rested, more alert.

“What’s going on down here?” Jacobs asked him.

“Madnishnue,” the boy replied.

“Where?”

There was an open door in back of the room. The boy turned his head towards it. And as Jacobs watched, a shadow passed by on the inside.

Her gun came out of her holster. “All right,” she told the children, “sit still.”

She took two silent, cautious steps forward—

And then the boy had a knife at her throat. He drew it across before she could react. Blood splashed. The room tipped. Jacobs felt herself pitch over. She tried to speak—to ask the boy what he was doing—but her throat was gone. Obliterated. Now she couldn’t even breathe. Her own blood was drowning her to death.

But before it happened she saw Madnishnue. A pair of dress shoes walked up to her sprawled hand and stopped. Jacobs moved her eyes...and there he was, Caitlin’s husband, smiling down. The baby in his arms was smiling too. So was the boy. In fact, everyone in the room seemed to really like what they were seeing.

Too bad for them, it didn’t last long.

The next morning found Daniel Newman back in his downtown office. The Cleveland cityscape had cleared since yesterday. Today it looked almost pretty, except that it was Cleveland.

His face wore no expression. Nothing beyond the glass moved him. Why should it? War loomed on the horizon. According to his agents in the east, the conflict between China and Korea was worsening by the day. That fact by itself didn’t distress him. That the U.S. was beginning to get involved didn’t distress him.

It was the U.S. siding with Korea that made him want to plan ahead, to prepare for grimness.

A knock came at the door. Newman stood as a large, dark man was brought into the room. His android escort, pink with a silver skirt and mock perky breasts, asked if there would be anything else.

“Sex,” Newman said, grinning.

“I am not designed for that activity, Sir,” the android replied.

“You sound like my wife.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“You may go now, Lucy.”

“Good day, Sir.”

“Is your skirt removable?” Newman called as the android reached the door.

Lucy turned her head. “Why, yes, Sir.”

“Take it off. Now.”

The android dutifully unfastened its skirt from its sleek metal frame.

“Good girl. Now we can really see those legs. Goodbye, Lucy. Oh one more thing. Please offer Mr. Durgeon a blowjob.”

“Would you like me to give you a blowjob, Mr. Durgeon?”

Newman’s guest, who had been watching this entire exchange in pure confusion, declined the offer, and at last Lucy was allowed to leave.

“Good news,” Newman told Durgeon. “Madnishnue has decided to put you in charge of the train. Once it’s finished, of course.”

“Thank you,” Durgeon said. “I’m certain Mr. Madnishnue will be very happy with how I conduct things.”

“Conduct things,” Newman repeated, letting out a laugh. “Is that a pun?”

“A pun? No, not at all.”

Durgeon was built like a house...a haunted house. Tall, black, expressionless. In one word, Newman probably would describe him as regal. His only issue was his temper, which tended to blow up from time to time.

“Anyway,” Newman continued, “I think you’re right. I think you’ll conduct things just fine.”

“Will I meet Madnishnue?”

“Mr. Durgeon, nobody meets Madnishnue. Ever. But I can tell you that he admires your leadership and organizational skills. Hence the train.”

Durgeon looked pleased.

“I’ll be sure to thank him for you,” Newman said, “should I get the chance.”

He called Lucy back into the room after Durgeon had gone. The android stood shyly in front of his desk, fluttering its eyes.

“On your knees,” Madnishnue ordered.

“Please, Sir,” Lucy said, looking down. “I am not designed for this activity.”

“We’ll see about that. Down on your knees. *Now.*”

Lucy obeyed.

“Good girl. Open your mouth.”

“Sir, this will damage my components.”

“*Open your mouth.*”

Again, Lucy had no choice but to comply. Madnishnue’s eyes returned to the window. To the city—*his* city. Minutes later a thrill raced through his bones as the android cried *Oh no!* before collapsing in a heap.

“Oh yes,” Madnishnue said softly, without even looking at what he had done.

Why bother to look? When you lost something, you replaced it. It was that simple. Things came and went. Robots, wives. Cities...even whole countries. The trick was not to let the losses hurt too much, to know when to move on. It didn’t solve his problems entirely but it did help alleviate the pain. One other trick helped as well.

“Keep smiling,” he said to himself “Always keep smiling.”