

## FIRST PLACE

### TOUCHED

As to how I fell upon that ramshackle inn, the blame is solely mine. Believing I could manage the journey from Sussex to Kent in a single day, I found myself instead on a barren road, with dusk fast approaching, and a good forty miles still to go. Finally spying a distant light, I realized it was a traveler's house, and while there was something in its sagging eaves that bid me to move on, the thought of rest and a hot meal was by then too strong to resist.

I tethered my horse to the rail out front, then tried the rough plank door. Discovered that it opened onto a dimly-lit common room. There were perhaps a dozen tables and a rude assortment of chairs, yet I noted that most of those tables were empty, with the few patrons who inhabited the place appearing to be local folk, not travelers like myself. Still, the only light in that room was coming from a smoldering hearth fire, and a few candles guttering away, and I felt more than saw eight or ten heads turn my way, wondering at my arrival.

And then one of those figures rose to its feet and slowly shambled over. It was a man of middling age, balding pate and a few crooked teeth, and seeing me, he tried to smile, thus convincing me he was the owner. We exchanged a few words as the others watched on, dim assessments of the weather, and then I confessed my humble needs: a mattress for myself, a stable for my horse, and whatever he could offer in the way of food and drink.

Five minutes later I was seated by the fire, nursing a mug of warm ale and still feeling the saddle beneath me. By then the others were ignoring me, deciding that, as diversions went, I had proved poor fare. Yet with every sip a feeling grew, a feeling of being watched, one I attributed at first to the howls of the wind, pawing at the windows. And then I noticed him. A solitary figure, off in one corner, barely limned by tallow and flame. Staring at me like a raven, a raven regarding a worm.

Scarcely had I time to wonder at this before that same figure had risen up, crossed the room and sought out my table. Without word or permission he pulled out a chair. Lowered himself down. Studied me with a keen, cold gaze that seemed to measure my very soul.

At a loss, I merely stared back. Met the gentleman's gaze head on. And this word, gentleman, I do not use lightly, for such he clearly was, though one who had obviously fallen on hard times. His waistcoat was fine cotton twill, the shirt appeared to be silk. Clothes so fine that their current state, the stains, the frays, that ugly tear at the collar, seemed all the more distressing. That feeling one gets when viewing a ruin. A thing that's gone to waste.

And then the man spoke.

"I trust I'm not intruding."

Of course he was intruding. He knew it, I knew it, everyone in the room knew it.

"No, of course not," I told him.

"It is just so rarely we have visitors here."

His voice was calm, his cadence measured, with an accent I couldn't quite place. The erudite tone of a professional man, a barrister or clerk.

"I am Dr. Samuel Potter," he said, correcting my misapprehension. "And you are...?"

"Coates. Frank Coates."

At that point, most men would have reached out, shaken hands. Only he and I didn't.

"And what brings you here, Mr. Coates, on such an inhospitable night?"

“Business,” I replied. “I represent a milliner, one of the better houses in the West End. As such, I service a number of local accounts.”

The paunches there beneath his eyes; his hair, more grey than black. All signs of a man with decades behind him, and yet he didn’t seem that old.

“No, Mr. Coates I’m afraid you’re wrong.”

I suppose I might have blinked.

“Your accounts. Your business. That’s not why you’re here.”

“Really,” I rejoindered. “And I suppose you’ll correct me then.”

“Certainly. You are here to attend my tale.”

Judged by my appearance, you’d never guess I once had a bright future. Top of my class at Surgeons and Physicians. Interned with both Wilson and Clarke. Showed, in short, all the spark, the promise, of a young man bound for greatness.

But along with my talent, I had a need. A need to be selfless, to do good. Despite a number of secure, well-paying offers, I decided that tending the ills of the common man would constitute a much higher calling. And so some five years back I purchased a small practice in the mid-sized town of Banford, a few miles north of here.

At first I engaged my tenure with zeal. No wound was too great, no diagnosis too grim, but that I could meet it head on, wrestle it into submission. Plus there was no shortage of prospects for honing my craft; the copper mine at Hadsley, the numerous smiths and forges, places where men were sacrificed daily at the hands of commerce. And then there were the women. The young ones, barely more than girls, the old ones, broke and hobbled, all of them mere brood sows, the means to a son, able-bodied.

So I cut, and sewed, and handed out powders, and learned how to tell the kind lie, never dreaming that with each patient, I was in fact wounding myself. That of all the diseases one could encounter, the worst—despair—was easily passed hand-to-hand. What once had seemed like a mission, a calling, became a mockery instead. Yes, I saved limbs, saved lives. All so that they, those poor, dumb fools, could go back to the same squalid shacks, the same dank tunnels, the same endless days of toil.

And then through that doubt, that doorway, true darkness entered my life.

She was young, willow thin, more child than woman, except for the burden she bore, a belly so taut, so distended, the skin was as tight as a drum. She had no clue as to the father, or when she had conceived, merely a constant, nagging fear that something was wrong inside her. Of course, I already knew that. Knew it from the moment she spoke. Knew it by the foul, putrid breath that escaped her, like the stench of some charnel house.

I had a woman, a nurse, in attendance, but I told her to go home. Noted the way she didn’t argue, was all too eager to flee. Once she had departed, it was just the two of us. I bid the girl to lie down on my table. Dimmed the gaslight to mere flicker. Found her a cotton wrap against the cold, though her face was flush with fever. She claimed to have felt no contractions as yet, and I knew our wait might be a long one. From my study I secured a stiff-backed chair that would keep me from dozing off.

The sound of her breathing, shallow and labored. Outside, a late-day wind. And from my study, each quarter-hour, the chiming of the clock. When the hour struck, I told myself, I would

give her a bit more laudanum. Check her fever and her pulse. Maybe step outside, grant myself a lungful of clean air.

Only then, all at once, I could sense a change. A quickening of her blood. And she had begun to speak out as well, a tumult of words, incoherent. I caught a bit of Latin there. Then an older, darker tongue. Watched in dismay as her head began rocking, as if in desperate denial. How many births had I overseen? Thirty? Forty? But this was clearly something different. I stumbled over to the cabinet, the vials waiting there, their labels all but illegible in the gaslight's feeble flame. Finally found the laudanum. But before I could grasp the bottle, a sharp cry brought me around.

Turning, I saw she'd raised her head. Was staring at her own bloated belly. A look of horror, of *knowing*, twisting her face like a rag. Crossing the room, I reached out. Not as a physician, a man of science, but as she was, a terrified child. She met my offer halfway. Clamped her hand around my forearm. Locked on me with a grip of iron, stronger than flesh or bone. Wincing, I followed her gaze on down to that dome of pallid flesh. Convulsing as the thing inside her tried to fight its way out.

To call it a birth would be a lie. A betrayal of the word. Even to pronounce it slaughter falls far short of the mark. I am told certain species of wasp, after mating, will find a nearby spider, then inject those eggs deep within its body, allowing the offspring to slowly consume their living host from within. And so it was with her. It started with claws, or more like talons, lancing through her abdomen, bringing with them a torrent of blood. The sour tang of amniotic fluid. A sulfurous stink like the devil's. By then she was writhing, screaming, her back arched in agony, which only drove whatever it was to an even greater frenzy. And was it? Yes, it was. Eating her. Tiny fangs in a slit of a mouth, consuming her very flesh.

I stood there, paralyzed, unable to move, watching as this creature, this thing, chewed its way through her uterine wall. All at once a delicate head poked out. Surveyed its surroundings with cunning. Until finally, those beady eyes, they settled at last on me. In an instant the chains that bound me were gone. I ran to my cabinet. Snatched up the vial of laudanum and quickly filled a syringe. Turning to confront my foe, I realized it was still but an infant. But before I could falter, I sprang forward, stabbing blindly, praying that God would guide my hand.

The obvious course would have been a burial. But the idea of shoveling cold earth over a thing still living was more than I could stomach. So instead I chose the river. Pausing by the banks, I studied the child, almost beautiful now, with its gently tapered ears and sinuous tail. At the water's frigid touch, it seemed to revive a bit, and for an awful minute it fought me, struggling for life.

Until, at last, it was still.

Back at my office, there was much to attend to. A pool of blood, now clotting. And it wasn't until I was almost finished that I finally noticed it there. A band on my forearm, marking the flesh, the ghostly outline of her fingers. I recalled the way she'd held onto me. A grip too strong for a woman. Leaving a scar that wasn't a bruise, more like a burn instead. It was clear the woman had been touched by something, something not of this world. And apparently I'd been touched as well.

A few weeks passed, feeling more like years. My dreams were troubled and dark. And then began a winnowing of all the good things in my life. Anne, my nurse, she was the first, after a fall from her horse. Then our boy, Charlie, taken by a fever that I could neither diagnosis nor cure. Our neighbor, Mr. Forsythe, like a father to me. Our daughter, Lily Claire. And then, finally, my wife, dearest Clara, lost to consumption. If up until then I'd pretended at blindness, that tore aside the veil. Convinced me in no uncertain terms that the scar I now bore was in fact the mark of death.

Soon my patients abandoned me. It was plain I was no healer. Merely a man who'd become his own shadow, a rend in the fabric of life. I hung on for a few more months and then, finally, sought out the same vial that had served so well before. At half a dram it would bring me sleep. At a full dram a kind of stupor. Which meant the five drams I'd just given myself could only assure one outcome.

My own demise.

Blinking my eyes, I came around. Glanced across the table. Was amazed to see my visitor gone, that he'd somehow slipped away.

And those words: *my own demise*. Turning, I surveyed the room, saw that nothing had changed. Saw the same handful of men huddled there at their tables, hands on mugs, voices hushed, forestalling the moment when they would return to their homes, their wives.

But apparently my gesture did not go unnoticed. A moment later I watched as the proprietor emerged from behind the counter. Approached my table with a cautious gait, and a hint of trepidation.

"Sorry about the wait," he offered. "A quiet night like this, the Missus let the stove grow cold." Pausing, he gestured towards my mug. "Care for another?"

"No thanks."

He'd already started to turn away, but my next words caught him up.

"Excuse me. I know this sounds odd, but did you happen to notice what happened to him? The man who shared my table?"

He was clutching a towel in his calloused hands, and he gave it a good wringing.

"Pardon, sir?"

"The man. The Doctor. Surely you saw him here."

With that he glanced away.

"Sir, I make it a practice not to bother my patrons, or make any judgments upon them. Not as long as their coin is good."

I suppose my face hinted at my confusion. He reluctantly continued.

"So I see a man just sitting there, talking to himself. And I figure, well, so what if the man's a bit touched. Aren't we all, in our own way."

The fire crackled, then threw out a spark. Wet wood, not fully cured.

"I'll go check on your supper then."

I watched, dumbstruck, as the man walked off. Felt the others watching me. Hid my consternation behind a sip of ale, almost gagging at the taste. Just as a test, I closed my eyes, summoning up the Doctor's face, recalling each wrinkle, each blemish, still vivid in my mind. And that voice. Surely one couldn't conjure up a voice like that out of only silence. And then, lastly, I remembered how at one point in his tale, he had reached out, found my arm, laying his hand upon it. A face perhaps, or even a voice, but surely something as firm as a touch could not be made up, or imagined.

Only then did I feel it. Someone walking on my grave.

I reached down.

Loosened my sleeve.

Pulled the cloth up to my elbow.

Saw the mark there on my arm, the trace of someone's fingers. And yes, the good Doctor, he'd been right. They didn't look at all like a bruise. More like a burn instead.

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## Second Place

### JuJu

The sudden hush of voices and the muffled echo of Max's honeyed voice, let her know that he was retelling the story of their meeting. It would begin with a detailing of his first night in New Orleans. How he stepped from the sterile, airconditioned, sanctuary of his hotel into a sticky hot sea of sin. He would explain how the French Quarter would be lined with bodies, both alive and half dead. The alive ones, he would explain, were gyrating and drinking up the jazzy siren call of young boys with hand me down instruments attempting to play away poverty with each tinny blow of their horns. Each inch of the cobbled streets was lined with such boys, grown up quick, but still young in face. She then would hear a pause in his voice, and know that this was the moment Max would pass around the videos he had taken. She knew he wouldn't dare to mention that he left their tip jars untouched, as he captured the images of these boys.

After he finished proudly passing around his phone, he would add that the sound of the competing music, mixed with the primal drunken hollers from the crowd, was deafening at times. He talked about how easily one could become lost in it all; how a well-dressed man was left unnoticed lying in his own vomit, while his friend scrambled to call for help on his phone, unable to raise his voice above the din of the street.

He would talk about how women freely encouraged a grope for a gift of a five-cent trinket, only made valuable by their own naïve visions of freedom. And, he would lead his audience to imagining the one preacher who took up pulpit and sign in the midst of this sin, to share God's word and warning against such evil doing. The tiny bull horn the preacher had used to share the gospel was no match for the blaring sounds of the tangled and discordant melodies that hung heavy in the street beyond. Yet, as Max would explain, he kept preaching with as much fervor as if he had a voice that could be heard.

She knew he would now lead into his discussion of the dark underbelly of New Orleans. The one that is rolled upward and visible for all to see, enhanced with the unearthly glow of neon lighting. He would take comfort in the simple acknowledgment of the underbelly, and his refusal to scratch it. It was at this point, that his words would fill with a righteous, yet removed, understanding of the scenes he would describe.

He talked of how "insane it was" that this level of revelry was taking place just above the half dead bodies of black men. Riddled with drugs and the salvos of society, these bodies would be found huddled under discarded cardboard boxes, and signs that read "night depository," "creole pralines," "house of blues," and "the big easy." All the while, the Victorian mansions surrounding the quarter were emblazoned with flimsy paper signs that read "Black Lives Matter." He had taken pictures of all.

It was during this observation, and a quick trip down one of the adjacent and less traveled side streets, that he managed to encounter one of the very same half dead bodies, sans the cardboard armor, sitting in shadow. Upon his approach, the body had quickly shot him a stalactite smile, forcing a welcoming air with a curve of lip. It wasn't until he was about to step onto the street that he would notice the body was of a man. Bones under thin skin, with eyes that held the soul entire. It was the eyes, Max would say, that led him into the shadow with the man, to peer at the fanned-out rainbow of worn brochures between them. She imagined the crowd in rapt attention, comfortably sharing the worry on their faces.

Max continued explaining that these were the very same brochures that had been offered freely in his hotel lobby; but Max felt, and now shared with the group, that these were the only means of support for this man. She now imagined the worry, marking the thoughtfully sculpted faces of those listening to his tale, quickly transitioning to feigned sorrow, and then false pride. As Max's voice boomed, "So, when he set the price at one dollar, I raised it to five." She had heard that line said exact, over and over again. He would then proudly admit that he left a crisp twenty in the man's skeletal hand, and went on his way with four of his brochures, one being for a \$40 plantation tour. It was at this moment, that the crowd would usually break into a chorus about the size of his heart, the way he was "raised up right," and how he was "a chip off" of a certain shoulder. Listening, she wondered if any ever knew Max.

Once the ritual of uplifting had subsided, Max would describe how he had experienced a restless night, following his excursion into the French Quarter. And, he would describe how it was during that night that he had been led to read the brochures, and eventually decide on the plantation tour for his next day's doings. He always took this time to explain his belief in "fate." She always made sure not to listen.

Max then launched into a detailing of his plantation tour, focusing his retelling on the slave quarters and jail house. He would quiet his voice and force a somber tone as he would tell of the emotions that twisted up inside his body, as he stood inside the roughened red steel cage, and felt the New Orleans heat brand his skin, as his hands traced the metal loops that once held jailed slaves in place for months at a time. Following that, he would still the breath of all those in rapt attention, as he relayed the warning he received. Being the only one brave enough to step foot in that metal box, the only one thus likely to carry with him the JuJu that the tour guide still claimed was heavy within the thickness of its metal walls. She knew it was at that moment, that he would assuredly turn the heaviness of the moment light, when he would make a joke about hunting all over for an authentic voodoo doll, only to find the Voodoo he sought in a giant metal box. "Unfortunately," he would say, "Couldn't bring that back with me in my carry-on!"

She imagined him proudly showing the jagged white line coursing around the curve of his pinky knuckle, like a snake constricting. She could see his mouth curving around the words as he explained how he earned this scar from entering that space; the roughened metal connecting with his finger, taking an ounce of flesh upon entry. Always the story teller, he relayed how the tour guide went instant ash when he saw the contract of blood written on Max's hand. How the tour guide would hurriedly rush him to the plantation office, all the while keeping a distance from him as he guided him toward the squat modern building. He admitted that he had allowed some worry to seep into his mind at that moment. The tour guide's fear was convincing and real. Max quietly explained how it was hard not to feel it too.

And, again, he would bring in a lightness to his tale, when he would describe the office manager. A heavysset woman with “full African garb.” He always likened her to an “Aunt Jamima on steroids.” She could hear the audience now snickering at the image. After their laughter quieted down, she could hear Max’s voice start up again, explaining how the woman had used a small square of cloth to blot up the blood still slowly rising from his wound, how she would clean that wound, and place a bandage on it, all the while mumbling some “incomprehensible words under her breath.” He would then tell of how he asked where he could find an “authentic Southern backwoods kind of diner.” And, how she held his hand in hers as she described a place that had been there as long as she could remember. An old wooden shack of a place, at the end of a long dusty road in the middle of the swamp.

On his way out to the diner, he found himself winding down straightedge asphalt roadways cut into the wild of the swamp. The smoothness of the asphalt juxtaposed by the moss hung trees was almost as surreal as the crocodile roadkill that marked every ten miles of his trip. It was on this trip, that he would discover a bag made of his own blood-soaked cloth, filled with dust, chili powder, and what he thought were bird bones, hidden deep in his pocket. He would then explain how we would throw it out into the swamp water that hugged the edge of the road out to the diner. He would not look back, although he still could feel the hair rising on his skin. He was worried then, and almost thought to turn back around, when he saw the image of the diner rising before him. It was a shack as the woman had described, but a shack that stood proudly on three story stilts, and was surrounded by a wide wooden porch that looked out over a hidden body of water.

He had easily mounted the steps and taken up a seat on the porch, watching the sun set on the water, as the dragonflies began to crowd the metal light above him. He looked down to find a dragonfly eating another who had flown too close to the light. He sat and watched as it buried its head inside the skin of the other, almost looking itself beheaded in the process. He rose to leave, having finished his meal. But, the sounds of the blues band playing inside the bar had lured him in for one more round of drinks.

It was there, he would explain, that he would encounter her, dancing freely to the music. The only one on the dance floor. The only one, save for the bartender and the band, that was in the bar. The woman they would all be meeting tonight. She knew that that was her cue to emerge from her upstairs hiding place. She knew she would soon hear Max’s voice calling to her from below, filling the awkward minutes with stories of how little they had spoken that night, how she had followed him to his hotel, and how she agreed to follow him home.

Yet, she now sat silently still, watching a moth make tracks along the shower edge. She was mesmerized by its wings, the papery velvet lightness, the way it commanded the unresponsive space of porcelain, glass, and light. Commanded, despite its exposed position. She watched as its marked wings flirted with flying while it tripped along the sharpened edge of the shower door frame. The metal of the frame all the harsher against the feathered softness of the moth’s almost invisible legs. As she watched, her lips curved into a comfortable calmness. For a moment, the muffled sound of Max’s voice had died down, and she was left with only a shrouded stillness filling her ears. The only sound rising above that stillness was her measured breath, and the moth’s light humming. An old tune, she thought. A lamented love song perhaps. Perhaps the song she had danced to the night she had captured Max’s attention.

As she sat there, the stunted space closed in around her, cocoon like, making her suddenly wish she had the space to flex her own flabby, fleshy wings. She was under a jar for now, caught

in the gaze of a curious, naïve child. Soon, though, that jar would break, cutting the hand that held it, deeper than before. The snake consuming what it earlier had constricted.

Suddenly, a soft knock came at the door, causing her to slowly rise from her seat, and move closer to the moth. Keeping a distance wide enough to not startle the moth from its position. A knock came again. So, she looked toward the door, smiled, then caught the moth up in her hand and crushed it. First, allowing it to suffer against the slow pressure of her palm. She closed her eyes and could feel the life leave its body through the tensed lines of her palms. She then crammed its crumpled papery wings and limp light body between her drawn tight lips. She sat back to quietly feel them dissolve against the salivary folds of her stomach.

“Del, is everything okay? You have been up here for a while. Our guests are asking for you? They are getting worried.” She coolly swallowed the moth and replied, “I am fine, Max. Just have a little fluttering in my stomach is all. You know how I get around crowds.” When the door opened, Max softened his face and grabbed up her hand. “Everything will be fine, Del. They are all just going to love you.” Delphine didn’t know why Max always felt the need to assure her that people were going to like her. She wondered why he never questioned why they were drawn to her like moths to the false ambience of a bathroom light. On the first step downward, she imagined the plastic smiles gathering below, and felt the moth beginning to regurgitate upward into her mouth, the saturated lump uncomfortably sticking to the side of her throat. She swallowed hard against it, having to force it free with a guttural cough. She then smiled assuredly at Max, “Got something caught in my throat is all,” and smoothed her dress with a quick sweep of her hands as she walked down the stairs toward the gathering below.

“You devil.” Delphine was suddenly stunned at the greeting. “I cannot believe how amazing you look in that dress.” Now knowing, she allowed herself to relax. “Doesn’t she look amazing? Well, you always look amazing. But, seriously, tonight, you have out done yourself.” Delphine gripped Max’s hand tightly and, with everything she could muster, shot a quick “Thanks” to the spandex clad woman Max called “cousin.” Delphine was sure, the way the woman seemed to now cat around Max, that family relations were just a formality for her. The woman reached out and smoothed the shirt sleeve on Max’s arm, bending slightly inward to display the slight humps of freckled flesh peeking above her spandex skin suit. Delphine suddenly wished the woman were a consumable size. She told herself that the time would come soon enough. Max politely patted his cousin on the shoulder and moved Delphine further into the awaiting mass of smiling and anxious bodies. She kept repeating, soon enough. Soon enough. Soon enough.

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## Third Place

### Igor’s Climb

The rough walls scrape my hand as I dash up the steps of the church tower. The trumpet, I clutch in my fist, falls from my sweaty grip clanging as it tumbles away. I turn, take three steps from whence I came, retrieve it and bolt forward. My breath is ragged as I ascend higher and higher. I



must reach the top. Just moments ago, a kinsman runner entered the city warning of ten thousand Huns nearing the walls. Only minutes away. Jan, the gate sentry, thrust the gates closed, but the citizens must be warned. The Huns burned the Polish city of Chmielnil, in the year of our Lord 1241, and now they have advanced on to Krakow to sack our city again.

I stumble, damage my knee, rip my leggings, it is to be ignored. I feel a flash of pride in being the youngest tower sentry. No matter of this now, it is my duty. As I climb, I look out the portals stationed in the stone along the rising steps. I can see the gate, the walls, the square. Each time I check for the hoard. I can't see them, but the deep throaty sound of men's voices yelling in unison vibrates the air ahead of their advance.

As I pass each portal, the street noise is deafening; the shrill screams of women and children, the sharp tones of men ordering their retreat to Wawel Castle and the bellowing of horses as they are whipped into action. I hesitate, only for an instant, at the last opening. The Hun, dressed in their leather scale armor their bows slung across their backs are jumping from the top of the wall into the square.

I sprint up into the cupola to warn the rest of the city, raise the trumpet and step to the opening. With barely a breath left, I blow sounding the alarm. For many minutes, I am victorious in finding the strength to continue.

I never see the arrow as it comes through the portal. I do not feel the piercing of my throat as I drop or hear the clang of the trumpet as it clatters to the stone floor. A widening pool of blood shows of my demise.

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It wasn't the noise that woke me up this morning, it was the quiet. Oh, it wasn't like everyone had dropped off the face of the earth or anything, but more like a jackhammer that had been tearing up the street below my window had suddenly stopped. It is the absence of a noise that has always been repeating itself over and over. A noise my brain hears again and again, but discounts as insignificant. I had lain awake for the longest time, trying to figure out what was missing, what in my world had changed. I pulled myself up in bed, not an easy feat I'll tell you. It's the trumpet, the church trumpet, the deep throaty reverberation of that horn high up in the tower of St. Mary's Basilica. I've heard that trumpeting every hour on the hour for my eighty-two years. In some ways, it has been a comfort like an old friend who comes by to check on how I'm doing every day. On the other hand, it's like a dripping faucet pecking away at my life day in and day out. Now it is silent.

I grunt as I swing my legs out of bed and my feet hit the floor. My bent toes try to find some warmth to flatten them and hold me up. I grab my mid-back give a shove and straighten up ready for my first step.

*Where's that cell phone?* Finding it on the kitchen table, I perch my glasses on my nose and call my nephew, Ivan. As usual, there is no answer. Since the church elders installed a computer to

sound the alarm with a trumpet call, he has been my technical expert, that is when he answers. I roll my eyes, dress quickly and step out of the house.

The walk is a mere mile to the Market Square just enough time to smile remembering the times my father would take me with him to ascend the long circular stone steps the 262 feet to the top of the tower to blow the trumpet. He always stopped blowing halfway through the song to recreate the long ago trumpeter's death. My father talked of when his father and his father's father before him had all been part of the long line of hourly trumpet blowers.

As we climbed he also regaled me with his favorite legend. It has been told that every one hundred years a trumpeter, in the act of blowing, vanishes with only a seeping pool of blood to mark his passage. They are never to be seen again. I shake my head at the memory. Because now, I, Igor Vincenc, have been the trumpeter since my father's natural death thirty-eight years ago.

The unevenness of the cobblestones can be felt through my shoes as I pass through the open gate of the stone wall surrounding the square. The Basilica Tower looms over all it surveys. Small portals, in the rock, snake around the tower following the steps to the top.

The carved wooden doors of the church fly open as the Mass ends and parishioners exit nearly knocking me to the side.

A flowered hat sitting slightly askew on the head of a frowning woman bobbles back and forth as she steps towards me, "Well, Igor, what's the problem? I almost missed Mass this morning because of you not blowing that horn."

I take a deep breath, "Now, Helena, you can see that's why I'm here. I have to check the computer."

"That's good, you know we all depend on you taking care of such things. It should've been corrected before this happened."

I nod my head, smile and hasten my step inside.

With his flying robes trailing behind him, Father Korik hurries towards me squinting through his glasses, "Igor, I was just going to call you. The Parishioners are up in arms, the trumpet has not sounded at all this Sabbath. You know how disgruntled they can be if we break even the slightest traditions. Do you have any idea what the problem is?"

"Well, Father, my thought is the program has somehow gone offline. I'm no technician, but I'll give it a try."

"Where's Ivan? He'd know."

Your guess is as good as mine. He's not answering the phone, probably with that new girlfriend of his. You know the one with the bright red hair. Her father has the Last Chance pub, the one with the outdoor restaurant, across from the fountain."

"Ah, yes, I know him. She's a pretty one. Well, do your best my friend."

I pull back the tapestry and open the door. The computer seems to be doing its job. The program is running on the screen and the correct lights are flickering. I check the connections. The dreaded red line slashes through the link to the loudspeaker up in the bell tower.

Great, I guess the problem is up there, 262 feet above my head. Maybe, I can get one of the altar boys to check it? They probably know this computer stuff better than me anyway.

The church is dark and the filtered light through the stained glass windows shows only the Father standing at the altar.

“Father have you seen the altar boys? I need one of them to check the loudspeaker in the tower cupola.”

“I’m sorry Igor, but I have sent them on several errands and they won’t return until much later.”

“Well, I guess I’m going to have to go up there. The hour is approaching and I can’t delay. Can you try to find Ivan and send him up after me?”

*A little bit of fear at my future exertion trickles through me. Maybe Ivan will arrive before I have to climb all the way to the top.*

Tools in hand, I take the first step on the staircase. My hand searches the wall for a jagged stone to steady myself and to help pull my bulk to the next level. After several minutes, I place my hand on my bent knee trying to catch my breath. I rest looking out the first portal, only 252 steps to go.

The Market Square is teeming with passersby, some mingling by the fountain halfway across. Small mopeds dart here and there. Their tinney motors cause a great racket. They’re noisy, but it’s good cars have been banned.

I realize I have been dawdling too long trying to find a diversion not to continue. *Okay, Igor, get on with it.*

Mounting the next several steps, I pass the next two portals. My breathing is not so strained, this exercise must be helping me. But, I need to rest. Leaning out of the fourth portal, I can see over the fountain to the Last Chance pub. The sign is almost too grand for the building. I suppose Ivan is reclining inside not caring of my plight. The noise from the square is barely audible. I lean further out. There are cars down there, zooming in and around the pedestrians. Where are the mopeds? The City Fathers are going to have a fit about the automobiles.

Shaking my head, I must trudge on. I climb freely at least another hundred steps. My rock handholds are unnecessary. My legs no longer stiff and painful. I stop at the next opening, lifting my leg and flexing my ankle. Huh? There are no twinges of pain from my arthritis.

A loud bang from the square below draws my attention. Arching my back so I can see better, I gaze out in confusion. The fountain is laying on its side water spewing out over the cobblestones. A large hay wagon lays overturned at its base. Other horse-drawn wagons filled with various goods dot the area and a crowd has gathered. I can plainly see the Last Chance sign is missing and no tables grace the store’s entrance. The cars, where are the cars? Some calamity must have hit the square.

I need a better look. I sprint towards the bell tower taking the steps two at time and passing all the portals.

Finally, reaching the bell tower, I push open the wooden door with a hand no longer wrinkled and clawed. I shake my head to understand. A sharp cry of confusion escapes my lips. I fall into the room. Just beyond my reach lays a battered brass trumpet. I grab for it as a thundering noise like a wail of a thousand voice fills the air.

Scrambling, tripping over my feet, I reach the tower window.

I keep blinking trying to believe what my ears hear and my eyes see. The street noise is deafening; the shrill screams of women and children, the sharp tones of men ordering their retreat to Wawel Castle and the bellowing of horses as they are whipped into action. Men dressed in ancient leather scale armor their bows slung across their backs are dropping from the top of the wall by the hundreds into the square.

I step back shaking my head. *What's happening? What's happening? This can't be real.* But, the noise is true and present. I look again. The wave of men are washing into the square. The terrified screams are louder. An arrow arcs high into the air hitting its mark. A man atop a wagon falls and lays still in death.

The trumpet in my hand weighs heavy. My gaze moves back to the window then to the trumpet. I must warn the rest of the city.

I step to the window, raise the trumpet and blow my alarm. I never see the arrow as it comes through the portal and pierces my throat. I do not feel the blood gush as I drop or hear the clang of the trumpet as it clatters to the stone floor.

Ivan's thudding steps can be heard entering the bell tower.

"Uncle, where are you?"

He looks to the far wall, around the old bell hanging in the middle, and steps to the window peering below. He turns, a frown shadows his face.

Looking down, a battered trumpet lays at his feet and beyond an expanding pool of blood.