

**Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.**

~Shakespeare

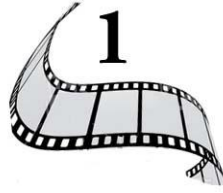


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The blond woman at the front desk wore a smile, but her voice grew brisk at Lindsey's worried questions.

"I'm sure he'll get here just fine," she said. "Perhaps he had to take a later flight. Here's Karl to carry up your luggage."

Lindsey wanted to say, "He would have phoned me!" but she picked up her camera case and followed young Karl through the elegant lobby to the elevator.

Well . . . maybe Vance would have phoned. But it wasn't like him to miss a flight.

Karl was saying something upbeat about the traffic and the weather and the local market, but the elevator ride soon ended, and he stopped talking to escort her down a long yellow hall.

The room was as luxurious as Vance had promised, with a downy coverlet on the bed, potted plants in a corner, and Native American carvings on the wall.

Good thing she had decided to pay for it herself. She would have felt guilty charging the company for such magnificence.

Karl put down her bags, grinned, and surveyed the room with a proprietary air. "Welcome to Seattle!"

He pulled the draperies fully open with a flourish. "Well, whaddya know," he said. "Looks like a bit of blue sky out there."

He gestured across the rippled gray-blue water that Vance had called Elliott Bay. "You can laugh, ma'am, but when we see blue sky, it's like *wow!*"

Lindsey didn't feel like laughing. "That's what I hear." Had he seen the dismay on her face, or was he always so cheerful?

He moved back towards the door and paused at her camera case. "Nikon, huh? Digital! I bet it's one of those hot new models."

"Fairly new."

Please, let him not be another one of those photo fanatics.

Karl nodded, his grin widening. "Something told me you're not just my average tourist. Had you pegged right away for a professional. What's your company?"

"A small magazine."

And for these three days she wasn't going to even think about work. That was the plan, anyway. What had happened to Vance?

"Magazine? What's it called?"

They always asked this. Maybe someday she could get the name changed, and she could answer without a faint sense of embarrassment: "*DogTales Magazine.*"

Karl's gaze didn't falter. "Dogs, huh? Stories?"

"More like in-depth articles about dogs, with lots of photos."

He leaned back against the open door. "Sounds great!"

She'd already given him his tip. Why didn't he go away?

"Bet you can take great photos with that Nikon," he said. "Color, though. I'm a black-and-white man myself. What d'you think about digital?"

Better to ask her partner—Edric—that question. Karl and the old guy could talk all day about digital versus film.

She shrugged. "It's okay."

He straightened up, as if remembering his duties, and stepped into the hall. "Have a great time in Seattle, ma'am," he said. "It's the Emerald City, ya know." He closed the door and was gone at last.

She moved to the window, staring at the streak of blue sky, hoping it would widen. If Vance got here soon, they could still go out to eat. A special place, he'd said, like Maximilien's.

Yes, Elliott Bay was beautiful, even under a fretted gray sky. And look at that backdrop of shining white-veined peaks—the Olympic Mountains. Vance would tell her more about them.

If he ever got here.

The first doubts crept into her mind, like the wisps of cloud that were edging up from the horizon. Had he decided not to come? She should phone and find out.

But after she opened her cell phone, she paused. Did she really want to do this? He didn't like her phoning him, and anyway, her rule was, "Don't pursue." At least, "Don't look like you're pursuing."

Yes, phone him. This was important. She tapped in his number and tried not to hold her breath.

"Hey, this is Vance! Leave me a message, and I'll get right back to you."

She frowned at the phone. No message. Maybe he was on the plane. He would notice that she had phoned and call back.

Meanwhile, she could make sure she was ready. She unzipped a suitcase and began to unpack, quickly and efficiently. After so many trips, it was almost automatic.

Put the small items in this drawer. Take the cosmetic bag to the bathroom. Hang up the things she'd need for the weekend. Here was the moss-green sweater she'd bought for the trip. A good color with her dark hair, Vance would say. He always commented on what she wore.

She yawned. Only three hours difference from the East coast, and she was used to jet lag, but somehow . . .

She emptied her carry-on suitcase and put the Nikon into it, along with her favorite film camera, the Mamiya. Better keep them out of sight. From the small suitcase—her portable office—she took a folder of notes about the South Carolina dogs and zipped everything else shut.

How about that shower she'd been promising herself? Then she'd check out the rooftop garden they had read about on the Inn's website. Half the fun of this trip had been planning it together.

She had known Vance was going to Seattle for a conference, and she'd scheduled her research trip for the same time. Vance had taken it from there, suggesting that they both come a few days early. "The Inn is the best place downtown," he'd assured her.

He had made reservations for adjoining rooms, which made her think twice, but she'd hurried to assure herself that she could trust him.

In the huge bathroom mirror she caught sight of her frown and rubbed her forehead smooth. They'd never done much besides talk and eat lunch together. He'd kissed her a few times, and he

was good at it.

Her face grew warm. She pushed the memory away, picked up one of the oversize fluffy towels, and unzipped her cosmetic bag.

Vance was such a private person, she never quite knew what to expect from him, but she would manage. She had her boundaries, and she could take care of herself.

* * *

By morning light, everything looked worse instead of better, the way it was supposed to.

She didn't feel like eating, so she took her coffee out to the Inn's little rooftop garden and lowered herself into a deck chair.

The mountains had disappeared, and Elliott Bay had become an expanse of choppy gray. A cruise ship slid past, its lighted decks speaking of warmth and laughter.

She tried another sip of her coffee. It tasted fine but did nothing to dispel the effects of a wakeful night.

Often, when she couldn't sleep, she would amuse herself by attaching captions to the day's events, as if they were a series of photographic images, and last night she couldn't picture anything except his face.

Caption: *Vance grinning.*

Caption: *Vance talking.*

Caption: *Vance teasing.*

But she'd heard nothing from him—not by text or phone or email.

To her left stood a tub of bronze chrysanthemums, and beside it, a pair of equally round women leaned over the rail. They exclaimed at the sights below, reading to each other from a tour book. That incandescent orange sign? It was the Pike Place Market. World famous. Seven acres of Northwest arts, flower stalls, fresh produce, antique shops, and cafés.

Their voices shrilled through her gloom. Vance had told her that the Market was a great place. They could explore it and have breakfast there.

Her neck twinged of its own accord, and she stood to her feet with a jerk. She wasn't going to sit here all day and wait for him. Besides, it was too late for breakfast.

On the map that came with her Seattle Sights brochure, she'd noticed a camera shop. It was just up the street and would be a diverting place to browse. Might as well get some exercise.

She gathered up her purse, decided against taking a camera, and left through the Inn's courtyard, a place that had delighted her at first sight. It was like an enclosed garden, complete with flowering plants and a tiny pool.

She looked away from the Market's neon sign, turned left and strolled up the hill, watching the people who hurried past. While she stood waiting for the light to change at First and Pine, she realized that she'd forgotten the map.

First Street? Wasn't she supposed to turn here?

She joined the office workers and tourists who were crossing the street and continued on past the colorful window displays.

In front of a coffee shop that called itself the First Hill Bakery, she paused. The windows were hung with antique baking implements and old-fashioned coffee pots. Trays of enticing breads and cookies invited her to stop in.

More coffee? She had to figure out what to do about Vance. Maybe another cup would help. She hesitated, annoyed by her own indecision, and, carried in the wake of a chattering family, let herself be swept in through the open door.

The fragrance of cinnamon greeted her, lifting her spirits. At her elbow was a glass case filled with pastries and scones, and along the side and back walls, small round tables jostled each other for space.

The family ahead of her laid claim to three tables, and rather than push past them, she chose a seat near the door.

The coffee was good, but after a few minutes her blueberry scone began to taste like dust, and she found herself crumpling one paper napkin after another.

She scolded herself. This is Seattle. You've always wanted to come here. Look around.

Two men at a back table caught her eye. They were discussing something, but their voices weren't particularly loud. Perhaps it was their intensity that made her watch.

One was just a boy—no more than twenty—hunched stiffly over the table, as if to protect himself.

His profile was a study in black: black hair falling into his eyes, oversized black nylon jacket, black jeans.

What a shot he'd make! She should have brought her Mamiya, after all.

The sharp angle of the boy's chin was belligerent as he listened to the dark-haired man across from him. The man said something emphatic and paused.

The boy snapped out a reply. The man, with a quiet smile, spoke again. From the way they held their heads, the two of them seemed to be sparring, locked in mental combat.

She pushed her napkins into a pile at the edge of the table. Should she go back to the Inn? Stay here and drink more coffee? Check around for that camera shop?

The boy leaped to his feet with a cry, overturning his chair. He clattered a knife onto the table, whirled, and ran down the aisle. The edge of his jacket brushed her napkins to the floor, but he ducked through the entrance without a backward glance.

The dark-haired man, looking much like a troubled father, swiftly pocketed the knife, set right the chair, and started after the boy.

He paused by her table to snatch up the napkins and murmur an apology, his attention on the street beyond. She glimpsed shadowed blue eyes and a taut face, and then he disappeared.

The family next to her continued to eat and talk and laugh, as if such scenes were not worth more than a glance, and before long, Vance's face reappeared in her mind, superimposing itself over that of the dark-haired man. Once again she began the weary round of questions. What had happened? Where was he?

At the very least, he could have phoned.

An unwelcome memory came to mind. Two or three times during the past few months, Vance had "forgotten" one of their private lunches. He was always apologetic, charmingly so, but his explanations never quite rang true.

Someone must know where he was. His conference trip had been duly scheduled through Darlene, their receptionist-secretary.

The cool, reasonable part of her spoke up: why not call the office and nonchalantly ask a few questions? If he'd been run over by a truck or something, Darlene would know.

What day was this? Friday. Early afternoon in New York. Yes, Darlene would be there, and

she'd know. Darlene made it her business to know everything.

Lindsey took out her phone and tapped in the number.

"Good afternoon!" Darlene said. "*DogTales Magazine*. How may I assist you today?"

"This is Lindsey," she said. "Just checking in."

"Hi, Lin! I thought you'd be calling us one of these days. How was the sunny south?"

"Hot and humid. Not so great for tramping the Savannah River with a bunch of dogs."

Darlene made sympathetic noises, and finally Lindsey asked, "Everything going okay? Is Edric still his sweet old self?"

"Until yesterday," Darlene said. "He's been a bear ever since."

Darlene liked to give out information in tidbits.

Lindsey smoothed a wrinkled napkin onto the table. "What's got into him now?"

"It's our golden boy, Vance. He didn't come in to wrap up things like he was supposed to."

She paused.

Lindsey snatched up a handful of napkins. What was this about Vance?

"After a while we found out," Darlene said.

Lindsey waited.

"His wife had emergency surgery. A perforated ulcer."

Something inside her turned to ice. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe.

Darlene was still talking, but she couldn't seem to hear. Was it the rushing in her ears, or the noisy family standing up to leave?

She looked at the napkins, still clutched in her hand.

Should get rid of those. Should say something.

"Okay, Darlene, got to run." Her voice rasped, and she smoothed it with an effort. "Tell Edric I'll call him."

Slowly she set down her phone.

His wife? Vance had a wife?

She stood up from the table, moving carefully because her bones seemed brittle enough to break. She edged out onto the sidewalk and turned back the way she had come.

In front of the toy shop she had to pause for breath, had to choke back the great gasping sobs that sucked up all her air. She stared at the cheery red cars on display, waiting for her brain to shift into gear.

What was she going to do?

It seemed a long way back to the Inn, and by the time she reached the little courtyard, she had made up her mind. She was going to hit DELETE and move on.

Lindsey marched across the lobby to the desk. "I'll be checking out in half an hour," she said. "Please have the valet bring my car around."