



*Passion is a
Harsh Taskmaster*

Randy C. Finch

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by Randy C. Finch

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Three Chapter Sample

Chapter 1

Thomas Jefferson Shallot III awoke suddenly to a strange room. Splays of sunlight surrounded unfamiliar curtains covering a misplaced window. This was obviously not his bedroom. But where was he? The sheets covering his body were not as silky as he was used to. He also realized that his body was naked under the covers, which was unusual. He normally slept in his underwear and sometimes a T-shirt.

Tom flinched. A muffled feminine moan came from beside him. Ah, his wife Julie was with him. Were they in a hotel? Tom turned his head to his right and was startled to see a jet black mane streaming out from under the covers. That was *not* Julie. Julie had thick sandy blonde hair that was easily mottled. In fact, friends sometimes referred to them as Mot 'n Tom, enjoying the palindromic moniker.

In a flash, memories of the previous evening came flooding into Tom's brain. *Oh, please God, don't let this be happening!*, he thought. *I promised Julie—and myself—that I would never do this.* But apparently it was too late to be praying to God about this matter, especially given that Tom was not even sure if God existed. What good would it have done even if he had prayed before this mess? None, as far as Tom was concerned. His actions were his own doing.

Tom contemplated his past. His father, Thomas Shallot Jr., had cheated on his mother when Tom was a mere lad, five years of age. It had destroyed their marriage and sent Trey, as he was called by his parents, into a depression that took several years to get over. Even though Trey was told by both his father and his mother that the breakup had nothing to do with him, he had a hard time shaking the belief that his father had left because of something he had done. Even so, by the time Trey became a teenager and began going by the name "Tom," he was back on good terms with his father. Before his death—all too young at fifty—Tom's father told Tom that *his* father, Thomas Shallot Sr., had cheated on *his* mother, also. Inexplicably, it happened when he was sixty, after a full forty years of what seemed like an ideal marriage. The marriage survived, but their love for each other did not. Junior never fully understood why his father did what he did. He just knew that it was a tremendous shock to him, his mother, and the few relatives that were privy to the affair.

Now here I lie, thought Tom, *representing a third generation (or perhaps more?) of unfaithful Shallot men. What is wrong with us? Is it something in our genes? Were we destined to be cheaters?* Tom decided to turn his attention to the situation at hand and think through the previous night's events.

Chapter 2

It all started when Tom arrived home late from a very frustrating day at work to find that Julie had wrecked her new car. It was mostly just a fender bender, but the car didn't look very good. Tom knew that he was about to vent his frustrations from work on Julie and remembered something he had read. It's not good to hold in your anger and frustration. It's better to get it out and move on. With his anger at full force, he stepped into the kitchen. Julie was waiting for him.

"Did you see the car?" she asked sullenly.

"Of course I did! I'm not *blind*, you know! What the hell is *wrong* with you, wrecking your new car like that?" Tom's face was getting redder by the second.

Julie became defensive. "Well, I am *SO sorry*, Mr. *Per-fect!* I'm not sure why you assumed it was my fault, but for the record, *it WAS!* I took my eyes off the road for an instant, and the next thing I knew a car in front of me had stopped. I tried to veer, but I was already too close. Oh, and *thanks* for asking if I was hurt."

Tom realized that he had been coldhearted for not thinking of Julie's welfare, but he didn't intend to give in. "Well, you're here at home walking around, aren't you? How badly could you be hurt? *Huh?*"

"Well, it seems to me that you're more interested in the car's condition than in *my* condition. I don't appreciate that."

"And *I* don't appreciate what you did to your car. Don't you know how much that thing cost? And now our insurance premiums are going to go out the *roof!* Damn it all to hell, Julie! When are you going to learn how to drive? You're thirty years old, for Christ sake!"

Julie puffed up. "Don't you take that tone with *me*, Tom Shallot the *Third*. I don't appreciate your language and I especially don't appreciate you using my Lord's name in vain. If you can't speak without cursing, then kindly leave!"

"Your wish is my command!" Tom said as he stormed out of the house, slamming the door hard behind him. He hated it when Julie said "the *Third*" so derisively. It really grated on his nerves. Needing to walk off his anger, he headed west down the street, not really paying any attention to where he was going.

After walking—more like stomping—about 30 minutes, Tom regained some of his composure—enough to look around to see where he was—which was right back where he had come from earlier: the Watterson District. This was a small business district not too far from his house that featured clothing stores, antiques, artwork, apartments, and restaurants. The area had been zoned about fifteen years earlier by the city of Louisville, Kentucky. It, like an expressway in town, was named in honor of Henry

Watterson, who was the founder of the Louisville Courier-Journal newspaper and a US Representative in the nineteenth century.

Tom was a designer of men's clothing and owned a shop in the Watterson District. He had opened his shop soon after getting his business degree from the University of Louisville. His father had been involved with men's clothing, and Tom had taken an interest in that profession after they reconciled. It was while at U of L's business school that Tom had met his future wife, Julie.

Tom scanned the buildings surrounding him and saw The Eli dEli, one of his favorite dining establishments. He suddenly realized that he had not eaten since breakfast. Because he wasn't much in the mood to go back home, he decided to grab a bite at Eli's. Perhaps that would help calm him down.

The deli was a bit crowded, which was unusual for a Wednesday night. Fortunately, Tom only had to wait about fifteen minutes before a small table opened up in the back corner. Katy, a server whom Tom knew from his many visits to the restaurant, was quick to his table and asked, "The usual?"

Tom nodded. "Don't forget the extra sauce."

"Course not." Katy turned quickly and wrote his order on her pad as she walked back to the kitchen area. Customers had come to call this her signature twirl-walk-write routine.

Tom almost always ordered the Handwich, which was kind of like a Dagwood, but with Eli's special sauce. Eli had always advertised this delicacy with the phrase "You've never had a sandwich until you've had a Handwich." Corny, but so true. The sauce was so incredible Tom always asked for extra.

Just as Tom was soaking in his solitude, a voice to his left made him jerk. "May I join you?"

Tom looked up to see a young woman so beautiful it didn't seem she could exist without having been Photoshopped. Yet there she was. About 5-foot-7, slightly tanned perfectly smooth skin, large blue eyes, long silky jet black hair, and a slender face with a body to match. What was even more amazing was she looked very much like, if not *exactly* like, the fantasy girl Tom had imagined in his mid-teens and had carried with him through his pre-marriage years. Tom could not recall how he came up with her features, but it was most likely due to a dream or a magazine ad. But seeing her standing right there in person was almost too much. Tom was so stunned by how stunning she was, he could hardly speak. He finally muttered, "Do I know you?"

The beauty smiled widely. "No. I'm new to this neighborhood. I just saw you sitting here with one empty chair. I was kind of in a hurry and the place was packed, so I thought you might be willing to share your table. We don't have to talk or anything if you don't want."

Tom felt a sinking in his heart. Even though he knew he would never respond affirmatively to a pass, he always felt a bit put off when an attractive woman didn't at least try to make one. It was sort of an attack on his manhood. It wasn't as though Tom was a stud or anything, but a couple of people had said he reminded them of Sean Connery in his 007 days, but with a slightly bent nose, the result of a break by

a random elbow in a high school basketball game. Tom never stepped on the court again, but rather joined the high school marching band playing drums. Tom had kept in shape over the years, but not to the level of a Sylvester Stallone. Tom's six-pack consisted of six-ounce rather than twelve-ounce cans.

But at this point his looks, or lack thereof, didn't matter anyway. This girl just wanted to eat. He waved his hand towards the empty seat. "Be my guest."

Katy, being really good at her job, was quickly back at the table. Tom said, "This young lady is joining me since it's so crowded. Just put her meal on my ticket."

A distressed look came over the beauty's face. "Oh, no, I can't let you do that. I can pay for my own. You don't even know me."

Tom smiled. "Just call me old school. I don't like inviting someone to my table without offering to pay."

"As I recall, it was me who did the inviting."

"It's okay. Eli has reasonable prices, so it's not that big a deal." Tom looked at Katy. "I tell you what, just put her meal on my tab and we'll sort it out later." Tom turned to his table partner. "Is that acceptable?"

"I guess so. I don't really want to argue about who's paying right now. We can think about it while we eat."

Katy queried, "What can I get ya, ma'am?"

Beauty looked at Tom and asked, "What do you recommend? I've never been here before."

Tom brightened. "You've never had a sandwich until you've had a Handwich." He couldn't believe he just used that line. Corny, but so true. "I get mine with extra sauce, but you might want to skip that if you don't like things spicy."

Beauty countered, "I *love* spicy. I'll have what he just said and a Diet Coke to drink."

"You got it," Katy responded as she did her twirl-walk-write routine.

Tom held out his hand and said, "My name's Tom. What's yours?"

"Carla," she answered as she slipped her hand into Tom's.

Her hand was smooth, but her grip firm. *She must work out*, Tom thought. Suddenly, a slight ripple ran through Tom's body as he realized she had the same name as the fantasy girl of his youth. What were the chances of that?

Carla's face scrunched in puzzlement. "Are you okay, Tom?"

Tom regained his composure. He couldn't tell her about his teenage fantasies, so he blamed it on something else. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just had an argument with my wife and I guess I'm not quite over it." Tom pulled his hand back. "So, you say you're new here? What's your story?"

“I’m sorry to hear about your argument. I’m sure it will all work out.” Her face was downcast, showing genuine concern. Or was it something else?

Tom responded, “Yeah, I’m sure it will too. It always has. So, again, what’s your story?”

“Oh yeah, sorry. I just graduated from college with a degree in fashion design. One of my professors arranged a job for me at a men’s clothing store just a few blocks from here. The owner wants to start a women’s line of clothing, and that’s where I come in.”

Tom’s jaw dropped in shock. “You’re Carla Newport? From SUNY?”

Now Carla was shocked. “How did you know ... Wait! Are you Tom Shallot? The owner of Shallot Designs for Men?”

Tom responded enthusiastically, “Yes! That’s me!”

Both started laughing so loudly the customers nearby turned to look. Carla spoke. “I cannot *believe* it! What are the chances of us meeting like this? I wasn’t expecting to see you until Monday morning.”

“Nor I,” Tom said. “Well, I guess we are obligated to speak to each other over our meal now. You know, given that you are my new employee. It wouldn’t be polite for me to ignore you.”

“I guess so,” Carla countered just as Katy returned with their food and drinks.

Katy, always a curious one, said, “What-chu guys laughin’ about? I could hear you clear ‘cross the rest-rant. A funny joke? I lovvve funny jokes.”

Tom volunteered an answer. “No, we just found out that Carla here is my new employee. You remember me telling you how I was looking to find someone to start a women’s line?”

“Wow! I can’t believe you hired someone sight unseen.”

“Oh, an old college buddy of mine highly recommended her. He’s a professor at SUNY, where Carla just graduated, and knew I was looking for someone. He also knew I couldn’t afford to pay for a well-established designer, so he recommended Carla. From what he told me, Carla is tops.”

“I see,” Katy said. “I’m sure she’ll work out jus’ fine then.”

“I hope so,” Carla said. As Katy did a partial twirl-walk-write, not needing to write anything down this time, Carla’s face became sullen.

“Is there something wrong?” Tom asked.

Her smile reappeared. “Oh, no, Mr. Shallot, I’m fine.”

Tom scolded her, “I’ll not have any of this Mr. Shallot nonsense. All my employees call me Tom. I like to keep things informal.”

“That’s great, Mr. Sha—I mean Tom. Can you give me a heads up on what you have in mind for me?”

I’m not sure you want to know what I have in mind for you, Tom thought. Then he quickly cleared his head of the path he was going down. He would somehow have to start thinking of this young lady as

his employee rather than the fantasy girl that would do anything—and he did mean *anything*—for him. With mind shifted, Tom launched into a conversation about his ideas for a women’s clothing line. Carla had many ideas of her own. The two became so engrossed in their discussion that Tom, for the first time, did not savor the taste of his Handwich when he finished. He barely even remembered eating it.

As they were finishing their after dinner cappuccinos—French vanilla, the best in town—Carla suddenly asked, with a slight look of desire in her eyes, “Do you want to come back to my place for a bit? It’s not far from here.” When she realized how this sounded, she quickly turned on her business face. “I can show you some designs I’ve been working on. We can get a head start on Monday. That is, unless you need to get home.” Tom could see a hint of embarrassment.

Against his better judgment, Tom agreed. He was not yet ready to go home and face Julie.

Carla lived in a one room efficiency apartment, obviously the only thing she could afford in this neighborhood on the salary Tom would be paying her. Boxes were still stacked around the room, showing signs that she had just recently occupied it. As is common of efficiency apartments, the bed was right there in the room.

Carla led Tom to a small table in the corner of the room where photographs and drawings were strewn. As Tom looked over Carla’s shoulder to see her designs, their bodies lightly touched every now and again. Soon their mutual desire became all too obvious. They began to kiss passionately, running their fingers through each other’s hair and up and down each other’s backs. Soon clothes were shed and their bodies entangled for three hours of the best lovemaking Tom had ever experienced. It was as if Carla had the same gift Mel Gipson had in that movie “What Women Want.” She seemed to know exactly what he wanted and when he wanted it and delivered in spades. From Carla’s response, the feeling seemed mutual. Finally exhausted, both fell back on the bed and fell fast asleep.

Chapter 3

Just thinking about last night's sexual escapades caused Tom to become excited yet again, as evidenced by the rising bed sheet. *Get a grip Tom*, he commanded himself. *This is no time for becoming lost in passion like last night. This is the time to decide what you're going to do about this awful situation you've gotten yourself into.* There were really only two major paths to choose from: tell Julie what happened and beg profusely for her forgiveness, or hide the whole sorted affair from her. However, the thought of withholding something like this from Julie tore his heart in two. Julie was a good woman and deserved the truth, no matter how hurtful it might be initially. Their ten years together had been built on trust. He did not want to introduce lies into the relationship now. While he knew many men would disagree with him, especially those who were themselves hiding extramarital relationships from their wives, Tom knew there was only one path he could take and still be able to live with himself. *I must go immediately to Julie, tell her what happened, and ask if she is willing to forgive me.*

But what about Carla? Is she going to want some sort of long term relationship, either with or without Julie in the picture, or was she just looking for a one-night stand? Or—Tom shivered at the thought—perhaps Carla was a crazed “Basic Instinct” fox like Sharon Stone. Tom shook his head. *Don't go off the deep end with your speculations. Carla just graduated from SUNY with a fashion design degree. What are the chances she's a crazed lover killer?* But dispelling this speculation still didn't answer the question about how Carla would view their activities of the previous night.

Tom jerked as he felt the bed moving. Carla was turning over and moving her body towards his. He felt her firm breasts pressing up against his right arm. *Oh, great!* Tom thought. *Just what I need when I'm trying to think straight.*

“Hey, lover,” Carla said drowsily. “How long you been awake?”

“Oh, not long,” he said, looking away.

“What's wrong?” She reached her hand out to gently touch his face.

Tom turned sharply to give Carla a stern look. “What do *you* think? I've been married to a wonderful woman for ten years—in fact, if you can believe it, ten years as of today.” Tom thought, *Just how big a jerk does that make me?* He continued, “We have been faithful to each other all that time. And now, with this one night of passion, I may have thrown it all away.” Tom shook his head furiously.

Carla looked dejected. “Ten years *today*? I am *so* sorry Tom. It's all my fault. I didn't know. I mean I knew you were married, but your *anniversary*? I should've asked or something, but I just wasn't thinking, at least not with my head anyway.”

“What? Your fault? Oh no, you’re not to blame. It’s me. ALL ME! I’m the one that’s married and needed to guard myself.” Tom thought for a second, then turned to Carla. “I assume you’re not married.”

Carla sat upright with a jolt, exposing her naked body down to her crotch. “No, I’m not married. But I am still responsible for what happened. If I hadn’t invited myself to your table, and then invited you to my apartment, none of this would have happened.”

Tom countered, “Perhaps, but had I not let you join me or, more importantly, had I not accepted your invitation back here to your apartment...”

“Okay, okay! We can go on and on. Had I not. Had you not. I get it. We ultimately both share responsibility. But I believe I share a greater part.” Carla buried her face in her open palms. “God forgive me.” Carla began to softly weep.

Tom sat up, put an arm around Carla’s shoulder, and spoke softly in her ear, “It’s okay. There’s no need to cry. It won’t help anything. Let’s talk about this rationally. Okay?”

Carla answered through her hands, “I’ll try.”

Tom pulled his arm back, placed his hands into Carla’s, and gently pulled them away from her face. “Alright, so tell me why you’re blaming yourself for all this.”

Carla’s face twisted up and, being greatly concerned, she asked, “I can trust you, can’t I Tom? Tell me I can trust you. And promise you won’t be furious with me.”

“I will try, but I don’t guarantee it. It’s kind of hard to promise something like that not knowing what you are going to say. Also, keep in mind that you’re asking if you can trust a man that just blew wide open the trust his wife had in him. Otherwise, yeah, I guess you can trust me.” Tom managed a slight smile.

“I understand what you are saying, but sometimes passion is a harsh taskmaster, making us do things we wouldn’t otherwise do. Deep down you seem like a very good and honest person, the kind of person I would like to spend my life w... uh, well, you know, I like you and all.”

Tom let her slip of the tongue slide for the moment and waited her out.

Carla spoke again. “When I came into the deli last night, I wasn’t in a hurry at all. I lied about that.”

Tom interjected, “Yeah, I wondered about that given that you ended up having the whole night free.”

Carla continued, “You see, when I saw you sitting alone at that corner table looking all mature and debonair with your fitted tweed coat...”

“Me? Debonair? You’ve *got* to be kidding.” Tom chuckled.

“Hush. I’m trying to confess something here, and it’s not easy for me.”

Tom hushed. He put a gripped hand to his closed lips and twisted it like turning a key.

Carla smiled at the gesture. “Thanks. That’s better. Well, the point I am making is that after going through a number of immature boyfriends that didn’t have a clue how to treat a girl, I began fantasizing

about meeting a mature man. In my fantasy, I walk into a small restaurant and spot an attractive man sitting alone at a corner table. I go up to him and boldly ask if I can join him. He accepts and we eat dinner together while talking about anything and everything, laughing like school kids. I can tell he doesn't like me just for my body, but is truly interested in conversing with me. After dinner I invite him to my place and we end up making the most erotic love that a man and woman could ever have." Carla looked at Tom to see his response.

Tom just sat there totally dumbfounded, not saying a word.

Carla snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Hello? You still with me?"

Tom lowered his head slightly, then raised it back up. "Yes. I am with you." After a few seconds of hesitation he queried, "So, you are saying that everything you did last night was so you could live out some fantasy you have been having?"

"Yes, that *is* what I am saying." She spoke with confidence now. "So you see, it was predominantly my fault—what happened last night. I instigated and followed through with a plan that's been in the making for two years. Of course, the reality is more complicated than the fantasy. In my fantasy the man was *not* married and he was *not* my boss. When I found those things out, I knew that I shouldn't follow through, but I just couldn't help myself. How many chances does one have to actually live out a fantasy?"

"Wow! And double *WOW!* I would never have dreamed that I could be someone's fantasy. Now *you* on the other hand..."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, *you* could *easily* be a man's fantasy woman."

"Okay, I would be lying if I told you that men weren't interested in my body, but a fantasy woman? I'm not so sure about that." Carla's face turned a bit red.

Tom stated emphatically, "Let me *assure* you, you *are* fantasy material."

Carla was intrigued. "How can you say that with such certainty?"

Now it was Tom's turn to be a bit embarrassed. "From the time I was about sixteen years old I have had one special fantasy girl. She went away after I met Julie—that's my wife. But I still remember exactly what she looked like."

"Oh yeah, how?"

"Go look in your mirror!"

"No! You're lying to me, Tom Shallot. There is *no way* that we are each other's dream person. That's just *too* bizarre."

"I don't care how bizarre it is. IT IS TRUE! Every word. And there's more. Do you want to know the name I gave my girl?"

“*NO WAY!* Get out of this bed!” Carla said as she punched Tom on the arm. “You did *not* give her the name Carla.”

“Yeah, you are right. Her name was Bertha.” Tom laughed out loud.

Carla punched Tom again even harder. “This is the most absolutely crazy thing I have ever heard.”

“Yeah, I know. I recognized you the instant I saw you after your invite.”

Carla turned more serious as a thought struck her. “But wait a minute. All of this talk about our fantasy mates makes it seem as if we were destined to meet and be together. You know, fate and all. So, what about your wife? What are you going to do?”

Tom was crestfallen. “Yes, indeed, what about Julie? I was thinking about what I needed to do before you woke up. I had decided that I was going to tell her everything and beg her forgiveness. But now, after our conversation, I’m confused.”

Carla simply acknowledged Tom’s predicament by nodding her head.

Tom continued. “Whatever I do, I know I have to tell her the truth. After ten years of marriage, she deserves that much. Actually she deserves much more, but it’s kind of late for that. I can leave it up to her how she wants to go forward. However, since she is a Christian, I believe she will forgive me and try to make our marriage work.”

“So, I guess I need to find another job,” Carla said matter-of-factly.

“No, no. You can still work for me. We will just not be able to be together again, and let me tell you that is *not* an easy thing for me to say.”

Carla was incredulous. “Are you totally nuts? You don’t think your wife is going to stand for a woman working for you while you are trying to patch up a marriage that was messed up by that very woman, do you?”

Tom’s expression conveyed a palm to the forehead without him even moving a hand. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. Damn, what a mess this is. No offense to you. Last night was great. If only we had met twelve years ago.”

“Tom, twelve years ago I was only ten. If we had met then, it would be because you were my babysitter.”

They both laughed out loud.

After regaining their composure, Tom spoke first. “Okay, seriously. As much as I like you, I believe the right thing for me to do is tell Julie about us, ask for forgiveness, and tell her I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make our marriage work. If she does not want you working for me—which I expect will be the case—then I promise I will find you another designer to work for. I’ll pay any expenses you have incurred thus far and any you will incur to move to the new job. How does that sou...?”

All of a sudden Tom fell silent and his face froze solid.

About the Author

Randy C. Finch grew up in Louisville, KY, and received a Masters Degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Louisville in 1978. After graduation, he worked as an engineer for several years, but shifted to doing computer-related work when personal computers became popular in the early 1980's. As part of his job, he authored or co-authored a number of internal company reports as well as many papers presented at conferences. Apart from his job, he has written almost 40 articles for computer magazines and was a regular columnist for a computer journal for two years. Additionally, he has written over a dozen philosophical articles, three of which were published in a philosophy journal. He has authored a number of poems, some of which have been published, and he has written three unpublished fictional short stories. Finally, he has one published book entitled "[Beginnings to Endings: Philosophical Ramblings for Avoiding Global Destruction](#)," a humorous philosophy book. It is currently only available in print form, but should be available as an eBook soon. "Passion is a Harsh Taskmaster" is his first fiction novel.

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