

The At-Your-Beck Felicity Conveyor

CHAPTER ONE

“**T**here she is again, up to her brazen little snarfings,” observed Justyce Dreadmiller, the neighborhood grocer. He followed this pouting young nymphet with his probing optics, unbeknownst to her, as she sauntered casually through the aisles, tossing seeming random staples into her shopping trolley whilst surreptitiously pocketing little luxury items from the pharmaceutical section—most likely (as per usual) sumptuous sex oils, fancy French perfumes, scented spermicidal lubricants, high-end beauty products and the like.

Mr. Dreadmiller considered himself a sensibly tolerant man and, more often than not, perfectly willing to “look the other way” rather than risk the bother of raising a big ruckus every time some wretched soul shoplifted an item or two from his food & drug library. After all, how many times was it, according to Jesus, that one should forgive one’s brother for sinning against one? Was it seventy-seven times...? Was it seventy times seven times...? Or was it seventy times seven *plus* seven times...? That would be respectively 77, 490, and 497 times.

At this point Justyce Dreadmiller had lost track of the number of occasions this mischievous little trollop had stolen high-end merchandise from his store. He had acquired sufficient security footage to prove beyond a doubt (in court if need be) that she had given herself a five-finger discount from his market no less than 77 times, albeit with the statistical probability (if one tallied individual items versus

the actual number of occasions she had trespassed against him) that it had been in excess of 497 times, over the past couple plus years.

This purse-proud entitlement princess sashayed into his business every couple days and never left without filching a fistful of high-ticket articles off his shelves. Where she stuffed her spoils was anybody's guess, what with the scandalously skimpy skirts she sported round the clock (even in the depths of winter on the face of it). Detaining her for a full body cavity strip search was absolutely out of the question, as it would like as not present formidable legal challenges, especially if it ended up being a non-consenting search that required cutting her clothing off with a scissors. He was concerned that such a scenario, were it to transpire, would potentially lead to all kinds of bureaucrappic rigamarole, not the least of which could land up being an extortionate lawsuit against his enterprise, wrongful or no.

He had neither the time nor energy to enter data into thousands of forms and questionnaires containing subparagraph after subparagraph of convoluted legalese, bureaucratese, technobabble and whatnot in barely legible fine print that would be, according to his lights, unintelligible gobbledygook. Nor had he access to the financial resources that were requisite for hiring civil litigation attorneys on retainer to do all the paperwork in his behalf.

No sirree, Bob. Not in *these* trousers...!

Justyce Dreadmiller was a man who valued simplicity and elegance. He believed, boots and all, in the virtue of solving his own problems in his own way, on his own initiative, and at his own convenience, in as straightforward a manner as was practicable by whatever the proximate exigencies of the situation under scrutiny called for.

This, of course, didn't mean that his methods for resolving such issues would be entirely without embellishment, nor would they be devoid of discretionary leeway for spur-of-the-moment resolutions to be made by his dedicated minions, most of whom were trustworthy and dependable, even to the extent that he would grant them the freedom and flexibility to extemporize as they saw fit, especially when unforeseen circumstances arose that required breakneck decisions to be made unburdened by any statutory mandates to consult one's superiors (say, for example, in writing) beforehand. In this sense, Mr. Dreadmiller's management style was not unakin to that of your run-of-the-kill crime lords. He encouraged his employees to live by the motto: "Shoot first, ask questions later." All he really had to say to his hirelings was, "take care of it," and they would know *ex officio* exactly what needed to be done and would proceed forthwith to handle each and every problematic scenario in accordance with whatever the unique and distinctive contextual nuances happened to be that presented themselves within their unerring field of vision. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time these little snags would be sorted out and set to rights with gentle nudges and friendly reminders, whilst in the other tenth of a percent of the time such setbacks and encumbrances would be

ameliorated with politely rendered post-labor abortions. Not unnaturally, that was more in theory than in practice. For, in actual terms, although such matters were usually relatively painless to deal with, they were inevitably a lot messier than one might expect. And the running sore of this pestiferous little shoplifting Lolita was no exception to that general principle.

He had first taken note of this young lass's illicit undertakings back in the summer of 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic had been raging out of control and he had found himself facing some serious challenges in his quest for qualified workers who could keep a proper eye on things. Let it suffice to recall that this particular epoch, in the recent collective memory of most American citizens, what with its bleach and toilet paper shortages and all, was a way far cry from what ordinary folk would fairly have considered as "golden times." Many of his workers had been hospitalized with this highly transmissible virus and a number of them had, regrettably, succumbed to it. Deeply saddened by the loss of some of his very best employees, Mr. Dreadmiller had felt it incumbent upon himself, in an effort to honor the memories of those who had given their lives to keep his business running, to strenuously take up the matter of rectifying the problem of this rapacious purloiner who kept on cabbaging his most valuable vendibles.

Although our enterprising entrepreneur had stumbled upon seeming insurmountable obstacles insofar as being able to clarify to himself, in explicitly rational terms, what the precise connection was between the tragic premature deaths of his employees from a murderous respiratory virus and the chronically persistent delinquencies of this thieving little thoroughbred, he knew in his heart of hearts that the season had now arisen for him to "extract the fly from the ointment," as they say. On the surface these traumatic and unpleasant episodes may have appeared to be naught but strokes of ill luck, namely: unfurthersome (albeit fortuitous) quinky-dinks. Still and all, if one dug a little deeper into such matters, as Mr. Dreadmiller had with the unflagging diligence and oh-so methodical painstakingness of a long-range precision-strike missile engineer, 'twas all but inevitable, according to each and every inference drawn from his deductive albeit fallacious logic, that one would become accreasingly and unqualifiedly convinced to the point that one would no longer be able to help but extrapolate the inescapable conclusion of the ultra high statistical probability that one would eventually uncover an underlying connection between the deaths of his employees and the rampant thefts of his merchandise by this licentious little snatcher.

Mr. Dreadmiller had planned to do some renovations and technical upgrades to his store but the coronavirus pandemic had landed so heavily on his business that he had found himself in a financial pinch for the very first time subsequent to the grand opening of his grocery boutique back in the fall of 1999, at the tail end of the Clinton-Lewinsky debacle. He named the store after his beloved late granny (from the Oinkbladder side of the tribe), whose given name was "Mildred." His grocery boutique was thence called "Mildred's Market," which Mr. Dreadmiller thought

had a nice homey, old-fashioned ring to it. Somehow or other the grandmotherly designation by itself lent to his enterprise a warm, welcoming, cozy, and comforting ambience.

Prior to the devastating onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, 2020, Mr. Dreadmiller had preserved just enough capital to invest in one of those fancy, high-end, high-tech, Japanese-manufactured belt conveying apparatuses, not dissimilar to the sushi trains in many Korean-owned Japanese eateries, though on a considerably more extravagant scale—something not unakin to an airport baggage carousel, albeit with a host of extra super-fancy accessories. It was a belting machine of sorts, called (in English) an “At-Your-Beck Felicity Conveyor,” that was designed and constructed to serve not just the fish and meat sections of a market but every other square inch thereof into the bargain. There were, for example, these nifty little automated multi-functional spoons, forks, and boning, paring, and carving knives that could apportion precise measurements of customized ingredients into bottles and bags according to the explicit specifications of each individual patron. This ingenious apparatus also included many pendulous and lateral accessories that could execute virtually any cogitable task and render thereby the subjectively mundane experience of grocery shopping immensely more enjoyable and convenient. And the nice thing about it was that most of these accessories were discretionary inasmuch as they could be ordered smack dab as our enterprising entrepreneur saw fit whensoever the need arose for a replacement or improvement.

The choices of accessories at one’s disposal were seeming without limit. They included, for example, miniature hanging hose-pipes and atomizers wherewith to spray specifically selected produce at meticulously timed intervals; meat pounders of all shapes and sizes for tenderizing beef, pork, and other ambrosial aliments; automated soap, water, and sanitizer dispensers to afford customers the option of wiping and/or washing their hands & feet (at no extra cost) when and whithersoever they desired; mechanized straps and robo-buckles that locked receptacles of any size, shape, and form to the belt until they were rubber-stamped and purchased with authorized platinum cards (a star feature that had already proved, upon undergoing tens of thousands of product tests, to be dramatically effective in reducing incidencies of latrocination and/or armed stickups); not to mention medium voltage electrical shocks that would be administered from invisible fences around certain perishable items (and confectionery goods in particular) to discourage unattended toddlers from touching or ingesting them.

So amazingly versatile was this apparatus, in fact, that it was possible to alter its overall function at the mere flick of a switch (or turn of a dial, as the case may be). By way of example, it could be transmogrified into a full-service gambling casino, replete with slot machines, big six wheels, video lottery terminals and suchlike, or it could be morphed into a funfair-style horror train ride with all the requisite holograms of boogeymen, gargoyles, science-fiction monsters and whatnot. With this in mind, Mr. Dreadmiller considered applying to the city for a license to

open his market on weekend nights to function as a family-friendly entertainment venue of sorts. Indeed, the possibilities for upgrading his business were seeming without end!

Consequently, it goes without saying that, in light of our resourceful and conscientious entrepreneur fostering a compelling desire to offer his devoted patrons the very best-of-the-best and most up-to-the-minute creature comforts, pleasurable diversions, and recreational amenities that were practicable within the constraints of his annual budget, Mr. Justyce Dreadmiller was dead set upon purchasing and installing this nifty new appliance into his grocery boutique. And it was, in particular, this hyper-sensitivity, on his part, to the needs and desires of his customers that kept them unswervingly loyal inasmuch as they would return to his store time and time again, notwithstanding the fact that there were some half-dozen larger and more impersonal mega-corporate supermarket wholesale houses just a few short blocks away from his boutique that offered many of the same items he did at competitively marked-down bargain-basement discount prices. The costs of such items at these superstores were so dirt cheap in comparison with those at his own store, in fact, that Mr. Dreadmiller himself ended up doing most of his personal household shopping at such chains, apart from the fact that he disrelished the very sight of them. To preclude the commissioning by our grocer of what would likely be perceived by his disciples as acts of high treason from being uncovered by potential anonymous (never mind non-anonymous) whistleblowers, he would either have to disguise himself with a pair of Groucho goggles (consisting of an oversize plastic nose, a big black caterpillar of a mustache, and eyebrows to match) or would simply dress up as a dignified old maid with rouged lips, powdered cheeks, navy blue mascara, and a dead bird on his head to avoid being caught red-handed violating his own highest principles (specifically, unwritten codes for members of the landed gentry eligible for inclusion in the Social Register) insofar as the class of establishments went to which he chose to bring his business. It was not unlike, say, the King of England dressed as Lady Gaga shopping at Walmart, or a sworn effete classical music snob in a MAGA hat shouting "USA! USA! USA!" in unison with thousands of others at a political rally booming with rockabilly band music (and/or other quasi paranormal phenomena along similar such lines).

Be that as it may, as sure as shit stinks, after closing shop later that evening, when Mr. Dreadmiller compiled a careful inventory of the female products lining the shelves in the pharmaceutical section of his store, the usual suspected cosmetic items, sex toys and whatnot turned up short. His computations revealed that he had lost over seven-hundred dollars worth of inventory on that very day, which was worse than usual whenever this delinquent little skirt walked off with his wares. He had calculated that, over the past two and a half years or so, he had either lost or misplaced some ninety-thousand dollars worth of inventory, and all this was on account of the artful machinations of this twinkle-toed little nightbird. He figured, therefore, that it was high time he took his Lord and Savior up on the more liberal

interpretation of that pesky little verse in Matthew that implied (at least, according to his own biblical exegesis thereof) that one should desist from forgiving one's brother (or, in this case, one's sister) if sinned against *more* than 77 times.

If this entitled little *Schulmädchen* had, alternatively, been a poor slovenly old bag lady pilfering from his shelves a cheap can of tuna, a low-grade jar of peanut butter or whatever, he would never have so much as even batted an eye, for he adjudged himself a man of profound empathy and deepfelt compassion for those less fortunate than he was, and perstood extremely well, from the difficult circumstances in which he himself had been raised as a child, how incredibly cutthroat the competition was when one had no choice but to drag oneself up by one's own bootstraps, as *he* most assuredly had—*yes sirree!*

Mr. Justyce Dreadmiller considered himself the quintessential self-made man and was proud and glad to have founded and managed a highly acclaimed grocery boutique (as indicated by its Yelp ratings) in the very heart of the upscale neighborhood of Pimpleton Heights, which was a comfortably affluent suburb of the greater Pimpleton retropolitan area, where he had grown up from early childhood and eventually come of age. His own unique rise from abject poverty (having been raised in a broken home with thirteen siblings) to upper middle-class prosperity had both affirmed the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches theory that hard work does indeed pay off and belied it insomuch as Mr. Dreadmiller himself had never sucked up to any wealthy benefactors to pave his way to financial well-being. (The trumped-up rags-to-riches narrative was symptomatic of an outmoded mindset that most Americans nowadays considered naught but romantic mythology of the most queasily saccharine sort.) On top of all that, he was pleased to count himself blissfully wed and abundantly blessed insomuch as he had managed, with his loving (and lovely) wife, to have raised two beautiful well-mannered children—a son and a daughter—both of whom had managed to grow up gracefully and get accepted into notable institutions of higher learning through naught but their own sweat & grit. It would thus be no oversell to say that Mr. Dreadmiller's vicarious pride in his children's achievements was in no way whatsoever delusional. Indeed, his son and daughter were both intrepid pioneers in their chosen areas of expertise and were fast gaining respect and recognition from not just their immediate peers but also from internationally acknowledged experts in their fields.

As for Justyce Dreadmiller himself, he was relatively well off and had, for many years, made a good solid upper-middle-class income from his honest hard work as a neighborhood merchant. Indeed, 'twould be no exaggeration to say that he represented the very embodiment of old-line upward mobility. He was its poster boy, no less.

Be all that as it might, no matter how one looked at it, \$90,000.00 wasn't exactly "chump change." He had two kids in college to support, a monthly mortgage to pay on his suburban-style McMansion, and, on top of everything else, there were

imminent health concerns in the family that required extensive medical attention and occasional emergency visits to the hospital that ate up huge chunks of his hard-earned income. Moreover, he had only recently finalized his decision to purchase the aforesaid Felicity Conveyor for his shop and, on account of being short on funds, had no choice but to buy it on a payment schedule that required monthly installments with extortionately high interest rates that were, for him (as things presently stood), barely sustainable, especially when taking under account his already massive overhead.

It had thus only recently occurred to Mr. Dreadmiller that if he had nipped things in the bud from the very start, with respect to this shameless young strumpet who purloined his inventory as if on cruise control, he would never have found himself in a situation where he'd be compelled to pay such usurious borrowing rates on this must-have appliance but instead would have been able to purchase it out of pocket, with zero interest payments and no questions asked, had he not found himself ninety-thousand dollars short on funds. Thus, what had started out as an annoying little inconvenience had now become, from his point of view, the proverbial "match in the powder keg."

Mr. Dreadmiller figured, for that reason, that the hour had now come for him to square his accounts with this opulent little klepto who kept taking from him and who, apart from everything else, didn't seem to have a care in the world, what with a certain *je ne sais quoi* and procacious air of nonchalance she exuded whensoever she awaited her turn at the checkout counter, which exasperated him no end. In despite of her outward show of mannerliness—"A good morrow to thee, sir!" "Thank you ever so much!" "Take good care, monsieur!" "Have a beautiful day!"—she was, to him, the omniperfect epitome of barefaced impudence. He reckoned that if he did nothing at all to address this ongoing issue, it might eventually escalate into something much worse, something he would no longer be able to manage or control, especially were he to gain a reputation neighborhoodwise (howsoever unintentionally) of being a humbuggable old poopbutt who simply turned a blind eye whenever some nefarious soul cavalierly ripped him off. The prospect of his store attracting flash mobs that would execute full-scale smash-and-grabs of his invaluable vendibles kept him broad awake most nights, tossing & turning, which accounted for the heavy bags under his optics that had formed in recent months.

What most individuals failed to realize, however, is that just because someone was nice didn't mean they were stupid. Even nice people were capable of committing cold-blooded murder if certain marks were overstepped. And Mr. Dreadmiller was sufficiently self-aware to know, beyond a doubt, that he was no exception to that fundamental principle of the human equation. What distinguished Mr. Dreadmiller from most other people was that, while he had the sufferance of a saint, he also had the temper of a wolverine, but, unlike wolverines, he was able to keep his temper in check, under a cloak of mild-mannered innoxiousness, until the right moment presented itself for the efficacious implementation of punitive reprisals

against his mortal enemies, which gave him time aplenty to plot his revengeances against anyone he perceived as having wronged or slighted him in any way whatsoever he adjudged to be signally excuseless, hence unforgivable.

Of course, it goes without saying that unprovoked acts of aggression would be rigorously reviewed by a non-partisan panel to determine if they exceeded a particular standard that would justify an appropriate redressal of aggrievances by agressees to ensure that all playing fields, as it were, would be properly re-leveled. A rigorous twelve-point questionnaire would needs must be filled out, signed, and reviewed by a committee that would determine if a complaint against a given unprovoked aggressor passed muster. *Intent* always played an important role in such cases to establish the appropriate recompense for an unprovoked act of aggression.

Mr. Dreadmiller had, by way of illustration (subsequent to having filled out all the convenient forms, having had them duly notarized at the point of appending his signature to them, dotting all his i's & crossing all his t's, fret cetera, sweat cetera) engineered a well-deserved comeuppance for an aggressive bully at his prep school who had once thrown his briefcase out of a second-story window onto a rooftop during his sophomore geometry class. In this case a boundary had been exceeded from which there was no turning back, as determined by a unanimous vote of the non-partisan panel that reviewed the case, especially given the fact that the bully in question had never even bothered to kneel down in abject submission with his schnozzle to the soil in a steaming pile of Herr Justyce Dreadmiller's pet mastiff's diarrhoea to mournfully beg his forgiveness, accompanied by a sincere offer to make unconditional restitution to him for having so belligerently trespassed against him, which clemency Herr Justyce Dreadmiller would (in theory, at least) have been more than happy and willing to vouchsafe, for he was a man of great empathy, tolerance, compassion, and good will. So just, good, and forgiving was he by nature that he was invariably inclined to give any soul suspected of having wronged him in the worst possible way the benefit of the doubt (i.e. *in dubio pro reo*).

Without needing to go into all the grisly details of how Mr. Dreadmiller had, in due course, gone about settling his score with said bully, let it suffice to recount that, exactly six years to the day following the aforetold briefcase disturbance, the bully in question awakened one morning, woozy from an elevated dose of Phenobarbital mixed with Rohypnol and Ketamine, to find himself naked as a maggot in a ditch hundreds of miles away from his home, in the middle of a pestilential, snake-infested swamp, in the most excruciating cogitable psychophysiological agony from having just undergone the crudest of all orchiectomies in conjunction with an even cruder penectomy that had been executed, as all the evidence had suggested, by an unlicensed surgeon who had used a rusty old dagger to make all the necessary (and unnecessary) cuts & incisions, together with a generous dose of sulphuric acid as a topical "anti-anaesthetic" (or pain-intensifier) that had left collateral third-degree chemical burns all over said bully's body, including his face, which is now

permanently disfigured and resistant to any known cosmetic surgical treatments. The remains of his penis and testicles were found near the ditch half-eaten by worms, snakes, and vultures. A fully charged traceable burner phone was left with the unseminared bully as a compassionate act of untold kindness & mercy (a supreme testament to the fundamental humanity of the bully's chosen prey). When the authorities found the capsized bully, he was immediately medevaced by whirly-bird (at his own expense, of course) to a nearby hospital, where he was treated for his wounds (without health insurance) for the next six and a half months. He survived (albeit barely) and is—so far as Mr. Dreadmiller was able to ascertain by means of the subterranean conduits of classified intelligence accessed by his close friends and allies on the city council (specifically: Herr Doktors Lobotocelli, Ampuković, and Sawitov, who currently preside over the psychosexual surgical wing of Mount Sade General Hospital in the heart of downtown Pimpleton)—still having his weekly paychecks garnished for the medical bills he owes the hospital some thirty-plus years after having been disciplined by Mr. Dreadmiller for his egregious misconduct.

The bully currently makes a "living" as a part-time cleaning attendant at a hog farm on the outskirts of the city, where he's paid a modest honorarium to sweep up and dispose of inedible offal as well as to process tons of swine manure into fertilizer by means of antiquated composting methods. The bully is permitted only to work night shifts on account of the deformed facial features he now possesses that were caused by the sulphuric acid therapy he'd received on the night of his penalization—a therapy that served to accentuate his already monstrous physical appearance. Upon being discharged from the hospital, the hog farm turned out to be the only establishment in town willing to take him on as a part-time employee, albeit with the strongest of reservations due to his repulsive physical appearance. He was given no choice but to sign a contract that obliged him to promise—under threat of facing solitary confinement at ADX Florence (otherwise known as the "Alcatraz of the Rockies") in the event that he failed to comply with said directive—that he would work only night shifts and never show his unsightly map to any of the hog farm's customers or employees during business hours, lest it curdle their blood and frighten them off to seek employment and/or take their business elsewhere.

Since the time of his release from the hospital the bully has managed to sustain himself on the only fringe benefit his employment at the hog farm provides him, namely: the scraps of quasi-edible offal he sweeps off the floors every night, which he takes home to his tenement studio in the skid-row section of Pimpleton's east-side ghetto to cook for himself in the weest hours of the morn, just prior to the peep of day.

In any case, as far as Mr. Dreadmiller was concerned, that was all water under the bridge, seeing as he had been able within minutes to recover his briefcase unblemished off the rooftop upon which it had been casually tossed. Had his briefcase

or its precious contents been harmed in any way whatsoever, the retributive consequences for said offendant would have been incrementally more severe.

Upon conjuring in his mind the three allegedly wise monkeys of the famous Japanese pictorial maxim who “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil,” Herr Justyce Dreadmiller’s soul case thrummed with a savage resentment that had seethed inside him for the past thirty-plus years. “Not on your Nelly!” thought he, harrumphing to himself in a low susurrant. “Enough of such ackamarackus!” He had come to be up to his ears in such hooley-balooley and decided then and there, on the spot, that he would never again permit himself ever to be duped by the philosophical creed expressed by this proverbial aphorism. It was time for him to open up his eyes, perk up his ears, and warm up his vocal cords, for he was fed up through and through with this facinorous little fly-by-night taking advantage of him and, by extension, his hard-working employees and dedicated patrons!

First of all, Mr. Dreadmiller had taken note from the very start that this (admittedly) stunningly attractive young *fille de joie* would strut into his store decked out in what appeared to be the type of ludicrously expensive designer duds that only the filthiest of the filthy rich could afford. One day it was a Balmain Women’s 2-Pocket Belted Leather Trapeze Miniskirt, which runs in most catalogues for no less than \$3,000.00. On another occasion she sashayed insouciantly into his boutique accoutered in a Grommet Embroidered Leather Mini Skater Skirt, which runs for \$8,500.00.

The reader may wonder how Mr. Dreadmiller could be so well-versed in such matters, especially for a man in his line of work. Well, it turned out that his daughter Celine was studying to become a fashion designer at the ultra prestigious Pimpleton Heights Academy of Art & Design, and was, for that reason, inclined to share with him her boundless—and, dare it be said, contagious—enthusiasm apropos of the field in which she was fast gaining professional expertise, a branch of knowledge that was totally at odds with Mr. Dreadmiller’s day-to-day business priorities. Wanting to please his beautiful daughter, nevertheless, by demonstrating an interest in her passions, he walked the extra mile that any loving progenitor would to conduct his own research on the fashion industry in his spare hours. That being said, he was proud of his little angel, as any parent would be, for Celine had turned out to be a perfectly lovely young lady. She was quick on the draw, smart as a whip, and up to the dodge, and, most importantly (at least from his fatherly perspective), she was a kind, faithful, loving, and dutiful daughter.

Well, to Mr. Dreadmiller’s way of thinking, the point, as it pertained to the cunning little hoister who kept returning to his store, revolved around the enigmatic mind-boggler as to why in the world such an exquisite looking adolescent lady (as this compulsive klepto unarguably was) would wish to squander her precious time and energy, and even risk her reputation (if she had one to defend), by boosting vendibles from the shelves of his enterprise when she was, by all manner of evidence, well-heeled enough to lawfully procure anything she desired without,

apparently, having to break the bank to do so. Could it be, peradventure, that the light-fingered proclivity of this debauched young seductress was entangled with some deep-seated, self-destructive psycho-emotional issues hearkening back to, say, a maladjusted, adversity-filled childhood? An abusive upbringing, belikes? Was she, by chance, stealing symbolically the unconditional love she never received from her wardens? Did this young demoiselle originate, haps, from one of those proverbial dysfunctional rich families one reads about *ad nauseam* in the supermarket tabloids...?

Now, these were questions he had already asked himself many months before, so it wasn't as though he hadn't already taken the time to do his homework in a conscious, rigorous, and determined effort to gather whatever intelligence he was able to coherently assemble on this little girl's sociocultural background, her family pedigree, her criminal records (if any), and other such things. "Yvette Cartier" was her moniker (quite a pretty one, he thought), as he had easily ascertained from the stacks of credit card receipts he had accrued over the years, which he stored for safe-keeping inside his walk-in freezer at home. Her curfew keepers, it turned out, were distinguished faculty members at Pimpleton State Luniversity, which Mr. Dreadmiller's son Eiden attended. Her father's area of expertise, apparently, was Dialectical Hermeneutics and her mother was a tenured Professor of Psychopathology (figures, he thought). Having researched their salaries, it was evident that, although the girl's parents were warm-pocketed, much as Mr. Dreadmiller himself was (most of the time, at least), they weren't exactly what one would call "rolling in it" (as neither was he), though he had fadged out from extensive investigations into their finances (largely with the assistance of certain casual acquaintances of his on the city council who recurrently got wind of all the regional high-society viceversations and clish-ma-claver) that there was a significant amount of cash flowing in via a trust fund from the girl's adoptive great uncle, who was a well-known war-profiteering oil tycoon from the Deep South called "Harmon Ebenoid Weaser," a man who had once run as a gubernatorial candidate in one of the low-lying southeastern states as well as for a Republican seat in the Senate. This man apparently had a special thing for his great niece insofar as most of the cabbage from the trust fund flowed directly into her private bank accounts (a good number of which were offshore in Singapore, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Panama, and the Cayman Islands). Interestingly, Mademoiselle Cartier had been adopted by her parents—let's call them her guardians then—when she was eleven years of age, which might account for certain aspects of her psycho-moral dysfunction that would have led to this otherwise inexplicable kleptomaniacal streak of hers. Whilst Mr. Dreadmiller considered it of paramount importance to gain credible insights into the motivating mechanisms underpinning this girl's psychopathological make-up, it had zero effect whatsoever in as far as persuading him to harbor even so much as an ounce of sympathy for her egregious criminal behavior.

Now, it's been said, according to the theory of Six Degrees of Separation, that all people are only six or fewer social connections away from one another. Well, as it turned out, Mr. Dreadmiller's son Eiden happened to be a close friend of a young man called Werther Nemesinovich who had once had the hots for Yvette Cartier when they were in prep school together, and had even dated her for several months until she dumped him like a hot potato after conning him out of his summer's earnings from a back-breaking day job at the local sewage treatment plant for a pair of Blue Nile diamond stud earrings from Tiffany's. The young man was so deeply traumatized by this rejection of his overtures—that is to say, “overtures” in the sense that she had never even allowed the poor fellow so much as a peck on her cheek (much less her netherlips)—that he had found himself on the verge of casting himself off a bridge tower, into the local river, until his good friend Eiden (bless his heart and soul!) had heroically dissuaded him from doing so.

After a day or two of thoughtful reflection, Mr. Dreadmiller decided to disclose to his son, and his unfurthersome buddy Werther, the left-handed feats he had witnessed (not to mention filmed and videographed) perpetrated by Ms. Cartier at Mildred's Market over the past couple-plus years. Although Eiden and Werther were shocked by the film and video footage he had shared with them, which included some high-resolution film tracks featuring scenes, in lush technicolor, of this unrepentant tart purloining upmarket items off his shelves in broad daylight, they were, at the same time, not the least bit surprised to learn that such unconscionable behavior would emanate from aforesaid source. The harrowing tragedy of scornful rejection and wallet humping to which Werther had been subjugated by this unapologetic prickteaser tallied well with Mr. Dreadmiller's comprehensive behavioral assessment of Ms. Cartier's overarching moral character.

As it turned out, both Werther and Eiden had, by sheer coincidence, already conducted their *own* detailed investigations of this presumptuous young winklot and had managed independently to dig up some powerful dirt apropos of certain other of this artful young lady's unadmonished misdoings. As it so happened, they had ascertained from reliable sources that Ms. Cartier had developed a pernicious habit of buying academic papers from a host of term paper mills online and elsewhere. In more recent years she had even gone so far as to hire a local ghostwriter on retainer to do most, if not all, of her school assignments in her behalf, the effectuation of which amounted to nothing short of full-fledged academic fraud, which, in and of itself, although no cause for imprisonment per se, had the inherent potential, all the same, to land this young lady in a world of trouble.

Justyce Dreadmiller, a beacon of positivity and protector of local traditions, who was unanimously beloved for his charitable acts of kindness and good works in the community, and who was thereby viewed as a highly valued denizen thereof, was eminently well-connected to the point of being on a first-name basis with many of the most powerful and influential personages in the region. He was, in point of fact, frequently invited to their cocktail and dinner parties as an honored guest. Well, as

it turned out, he happened to be a close friend of Ulrich Armstrong who was Dean & President of Pimpleton State Luniversity, a high-ranking educational institution attended not only by his son Eiden but also, providentially, by Yvette Cartier.

Justyce Dreadmiller decided then and there to give his old buddy a call to suggest a rendezvous with him and his wife Helga for a drink after work on Wednesday evening. Howbeit, instead of meeting at the Skunk & Barnacle Brewpub downtown, just catty-corner across from the Hall of Injustice (which had always been their favorite stomping ground), Professor Armstrong invited Herr Dreadmiller to the cordial intimacy of his stately old home on the hill overlooking the city.