

Deadly Embrace

by
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Deadly Embrace

Christopher D. Ochs

“Rhea *Chelsea* Tomblin,” rang out a voice that combined the endearing qualities of a Model T aa-oo-gah horn and a battleship klaxon. “You are snoring.”

The rankling voice snapped Rhea out of herself. She pinched the bridge of her nose and rubbed the cobwebs of a trance from her eyes.

Staring at business reports during a rainy commute home was bad enough, but the ones labeled “Board of Directors Only” were filled with endless back-patting when the news was good, or packed with misdirection wrapped in obfuscation when it might put a higher-up's promotion in jeopardy. Any kernel of usable information about her company's latest hostile takeover was buried under so many layers of doublespeak that Rhea had slid into a hypnotic stupor.

“Godfrey, was that you?”

“No, Madam,” replied the autodrivers, its formal monotone in vivid contrast to the electronic sandpaper that still scraped in her head.

“Then what was that?”

“To what do you refer, Madam?”

“Never mind,” Rhea snapped back at the autodrivers. Autonomous vehicles had a stellar safety track record, but their user interfaces were sterile, officious and often aggravating.

She crossed her legs, resolutely turning her attention back to the reports and analyses of the newly acquired company's prospectus. Perhaps their breakthrough AI software would improve the uninspired interface. Barely a minute had passed when she whooshed a sigh of frustration.

A nagging feeling ruined her concentration. Some nameless problem dogged at her heels—but what was it? Some task unfinished at headquarters? An incriminating document left on her CEO office desk? Had she forgotten a gift for her lover awaiting her at home? No, no and *definitely* no.

Rhea glanced at the Tiffany-blue bag on the seat next to her, and shivered with anticipation for what surprise Andrea might have in store for their six-month anniversary. If it was anything like their three-month celebration's boudoir gymnastics, she might have to take tomorrow off to recuperate.

Her gaze meandered out the rain-streaked window into the charcoal evening, and a sly grin worked its wicked way onto her face. Farm fields across the undulating hills of Virginia leisurely flowed past, dimly illuminated by distant city lights bouncing off low roiling clouds. Rhea was content to allow the pastoral scenery unwind her tension, until a hulking mill flashed past the window, its enormous waterwheel frozen under a mountain of kudzu.

Rhea collapsed her UDTV tablet, and dropped it in her suit's hip pocket. “Where are we, Godfrey? I don't recognize this road.”

“Lee Highway, paralleling Interstate 81,” replied the soothing voice. “An accident has closed a significant portion of the interstate. We shall arrive at Madam's residence with a half-hour delay.”

Rhea snarled in mild disbelief. “Why tonight of all nights?” she mumbled with unconcealed impatience.

Accidents were rare, but not unheard of. When one did occur, it was most often caused by a network outage or two boneheaded Luddites who refused to make the switch to autonomous driving, only to smack into each other.

Rhea's jaw clenched—something was not right. “Godfrey, where are the other autodrivers?”

“Madam?”

“If there were an accident on the interstate, there'd be an entire procession of cars avoiding the traffic jam, lining this highway in both directions. Where are they?”

“I'm afraid I have no explanation, Madam.”

A frequency-scrambled voice came across the speaker, chilling Rhea's blood.

“Quite observant, Rhea Chelsea Tomblin.”

Then it wasn't Godfrey that woke me up.

“But then I'd expect no less from you,” the grinding voice continued. “It's because there *is* no accident, of course. You're not even on Lee Highway—I directed your autodrivers to take a side road off the beaten path quite a while ago.”

“Godfrey!” Rhea lunged from her rear seat, ignoring the restraints that bit into her hip and shoulder. “Command override 'Tomblin Indigo.' Stop this car immediately. Alert company security and the police.”

Silence followed her command, broken only by the engine's revving as the vehicle accelerated onto a long straightaway. Rhea gripped the headrest of the empty seat in front of her and leaned forward. Her shoulders slumped when she scanned the autodrivers displays. The GPS showed the last vestige of the interstate and Lee Highway blipping off the map.

“Please remain calm, Ms. Tomblin. I wanted to discuss certain things with you before you reach your destination.”

Even in a disguised voice, Rhea might have picked out an emotion in her hijacker—anger, sarcasm, *something* in its pacing to clue her in as to a motive. But the speaker's cadence behind the scrambler was as flat and lifeless as the electronics enshrouding it. Rhea ripped her tablet back out of her pocket, snapping it open to full size. She tapped on its surface like a woodpecker, but the device remained dark.

“If this is a kidnapping, what do you want? Money? Property?” Rhea said with venom that could dissolve steel. “Influence?”

“Nothing as vulgar as that. I have no interest in any material thing you possess or power you wield.”

Rhea's typing became more frantic. She pounded the surface in frustration.

“And that will do you no good. I've blocked all other communications. It's just us—you and me.”

“All right,” Rhea said, allowing the restraints to reel her back into her seat. “Now that you have my full attention, what is it you wish to discuss?”

“How many people have you hurt in order to get where you are today, Ms. Tomblin?”

“Oh, God. Spare me the sanctimonious rhetoric. Get to the point.”

“Humor me, Rhea. May I call you Rhea?”

She slid her useless tablet behind the Tiffany bag, crossed her legs again and folded her arms. She plastered her sternest boardroom glare on her face, posing for the good of whoever would have most assuredly hacked into the vehicle's telecomm camera. “That's a pointless question. Any executive at my level has had to inconvenience, offend, shove or even back-stab someone out of the way to get where she is today.”

“Quite so. But how many individuals have you *needlessly* hurt? How many have you intentionally destroyed, just to watch the ant burn in the sun under the magnifying glass?”

“Like *you* are doing now?”

A measure of silence answered.

“Touché, Rhea. You have begun to peel away my mask. Shall I take it off completely?” A hint of teasing leaked through the snarling artificial monotone. “We are two of a kind, you and I—two sociopaths wanting what we want, when we want it. But where you lack any redeeming qualities that I am able to discern, I have learned at least one.

“She was my teacher, my single connection to the human race, the one person in all the world who brought out that sliver of innocence buried deep under the dark armor of my scarred psyche—and you saw fit to steal her away.” The electronic voice became a metronome tolling a dirge. “Just because you could.”

“So that's what all this is all about—an imagined romance gone sour. And all this is some grandiose attempt at vengeance from the lover spurned.” Rhea tapped her chin and rolled her eyes like a schoolgirl taunting a classmate. “Hmm ... whose feathers have I ruffled, I wonder? Cyrus was it?” Rhea grunted with derision, and unfolded her arms to brace herself as the autodriver slowed to round a sharp curve. “You work in our

IT department, do you not?"

"Please, Rhea. Do not insult our collective intelligence." The annoying growl of the scrambler switched off, replaced with a man's voice almost as bereft of emotion as its electronic avatar. "You know very well who I am. You took far too much pleasure in destroying me to feign ignorance now. You gleefully ensured that I knew who it was who usurped my software company, ruined me financially, and poisoned against me the love of whom I speak—Andrea."

"All right, Cyrus. The combatants have acknowledged each other on the field of battle. May I remind you that all is fair in love and war?"

"Love had little to do with it. Not with people as such as us—people with little or no empathy, with only id and ego to drive us, and no insufferable conscience to rein us in."

Rhea smiled a cruel half smile, inwardly reveling in the compliment paid her.

"Only some of us have more control over their baser desires than others," Cyrus continued. "It was not enough to convince Andrea that I could no longer make her happy materially. After you replaced me as CEO in my company, you then sought to replace me in Andrea's life. You wheedled at her incessantly, persuading her that what she really was looking for in a lover was you."

"Poor little man. Threatened by lesbians, are we?"

"You might hope it were that simple, Rhea. I learned long ago the alphabet soup of today's alternative lifestyles are no worse nor better than their hetero counterparts. They whimper just as sweetly, and bleed just as red. So no, your gender preference has nothing to do with it. You're simply a horrid person, Rhea.

"Stealing Andrea I could understand. I could even forgive it—surely you realize what a personal achievement that amounts to, one sociopath to another. That was how much Andrea focused me, how much she changed me. Her happiness became my happiness. An entirely new sensation, I confess, and one that I now sorely miss."

Rhea yawned and primped her hair for the benefit of her kidnapper voyeur. This was becoming as tedious as a boardroom soliloquy. Annoyed,

she raised an eyebrow as the diatribe continued.

“But you were not satisfied with merely winning Andrea's heart, body and soul. You continued the assault. I'm sure you meant for me to overhear when you told her that I was 'a rigid little robot floundering in the trenches.' But a barb as small as that was insufficient for your needs. You had to utterly destroy me in her eyes to make your victory complete—to show Andrea the monster I was capable of becoming.”

“Yes, the look of disgust on her face was delicious,” Rhea chuckled. “But if it is not money, power, reparations or a confession you wish to extract from me, then it can only be one thing.” She inhaled a solemn breath, lowered her head and gave her best death's head grin for the camera. “If you kill me, Andrea will be devastated. If you profess to be so concerned for Andrea's welfare, is that what you truly want?”

“Add to that, Andrea's no dullard. She will eventually uncover what you have done, and will hate you forever for it. If you harbor some fantasy in which she will return to you, put it out of your mind. She won't.”

“I came to that same conclusion.” Cyrus also drew in a breath, echoing Rhea's resolve. “But I know something that Andrea doesn't—your own long line of previous romantic conquests that you have abandoned, bleeding in their tears. Whether you have hidden it from her, or she chooses blissful ignorance is of no matter. Whatever the case, I will not allow her to be harmed. You would use Andrea, take your pleasure from her, then discard her when the next trinket catches your eye. *That* would be her devastation, one I cannot permit. By taking your life now, I at least leave her with the fiction that you were a good person. A kindness you did not see fit to offer me.”

A glint of oncoming headlights flashed in the distance ahead.

“And so, the knights and their steeds meet on the field of battle.” Cyrus' voice held a hint of a chuckle. “It is a fitting and ironic conclusion, when you come to think of it, Rhea. In the old days of software, there was a condition referred to as a 'deadly embrace.' Two subroutines are each locked in a state, until the other one completes its task.

“In our case, each of our autodrivers is now programmed with the

other's location as its destination. Shall we embrace, Ms. Tomblin?"

The headlights bounced and flashed as the approaching autodrivers hurtled towards Rhea and her vehicle.

"You imbecile," Rhea snarled, her merciless anger straining to be released. "I'm already wearing my restraints, not to mention the autodrivers' half-dozen other fail-safes."

"The fifty pounds of explosive occupying the seat beside me will be more than enough to overcome them."

Rhea screamed commands at her autodrivers, then fell into a dread-filled silence.

"What was it you said to your last lover, Rhea? 'Just close your eyes and hold your breath, my dear. It will hurt less that way.'"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher D. Ochs' foray into writing began with his epic fantasy *Pindlebryth of Lenland*. His short stories have been published in the *GLVWG* and award-winning *BWG* anthologies and websites, and by *Firebringer Press*. Using his skills learned with the *LVSG*, he crafted a collection of mirthful macabre short stories, *If I Can't Sleep, You Can't Sleep*. His latest novel is a gritty urban fantasy/horror, *My Friend Jackson*, a Finalist in *Indies Today's* Best Books of 2020.

His current projects include: two sci-fi/horror novels *Sentinel of Eternity* and *No Place Like Home*; a prequel novella and a second novel in the *Pindlebryth* saga.

Chris has too many interests for his own damn good. With previous careers in physics, electrical engineering and software, CGI animator, classical organist, voice talent on radio, DVD and OTAKON, it's a wonder he can remember to pay the dog and feed his bills.

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