



# ***The Weekly Man***

## **Episode 1: Surprise**

Death loves an expensive cigar.

But there were so many to choose from—a maze of flavors, sizes, and brands, some in glass tubes, metal tubes, plastic wrap, cedar boxes, plastic boxes and metal containers. She would have felt confusion if she had been able to feel more than just the passing of one pointless moment into the next.

*Just get the most expensive one.*

The woman with the streaky gray hair was patient but Natalie was beyond caring how anyone treated her. There was a time when for no reason she would have been condescending to this woman who looked so matronly dignified with her grandmother looks, the gold chain dangling from her glasses, the neat black sweater over white blouse—professional looking in a grandmotherly way but working in a tobacco shop attached to a supermarket. There was a time when she would have pointed that out, rubbed it in with snide remarks. But not now, not anymore.

“What’s the most expensive one you have?” Voice flat, uncaring. The woman nodded, opened the lid on a wooden box and gently lifted out a chocolate brown shape that reminded Natalie of a penis from a long-ago lover whose face she couldn’t remember.

“It’s a Cohiba Robusto. Cuban. The most expensive we have.” There was reverence in the woman’s voice. For a cigar. But it was the most expensive. It could have been a thousand dollars. She had plenty of room on her card.

It was \$170.

She had a hundred and seventy dollar cigar. Now for the wine.

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How simple the world becomes when you're no longer a part of its color and noise with no roller-coasting between joy and pain. Decisions become easier because they don't matter, decisions like selecting the wine for this special occasion.

Simple. The most expensive.

Forget labels with dates and wineries and logos. Forget Chardonnay, Merlot, Shiraz and all that crap. Forget red, white, rose, sparkling or dry. Forget body and aroma.

Go for the most expensive.

\$49.99

Some bald asshole in a black turtleneck eyeballed her as he leaned against a kayak propped up in a display pushing a new line of wines called Nature Hound. There was a time when she would have been mildly offended by a wine called Nature Hound and perhaps slightly more offended by the crass commercialism of the brightly lit display in a wine store with subdued lighting, teak and rosewood walls, tasteful art and muted music. But not today, not anymore.

\$52.79

Today, not even the asshole by the kayak with the cocky eye slant could offend Natalie. She was beyond that, long and far beyond. But he did look a little like Roger, the shape of his skull. Poor Roger.

\$79.98

By the time she'd met Roger she'd been so far gone she'd long forgotten what it was to feel anything. Like his cock inside her. And his weight bearing down on her body. Things like passion and excitement, joy and exuberance. Pain.

\$137.99

It had all seemed so mundane, acted out to a boring script. So boring that she hadn't even tried to fake an orgasm—just lay under him like a plastic doll with an artificial vagina. Not that he'd noticed. None of them ever noticed. Why would they? Maybe they'd been looking for a plastic doll, a place to release their sperm where it had no consequence or meaning.

\$419.77

She couldn't remember their names. Except Roger's. He'd been the last. After him she'd stopped having sex, about a month ago. She went for long walks, day and night, but not because she enjoyed walking. She just walked. She stood outside store windows gazing in and seeing nothing. She went to movies and stared at screens that might well have been blank. She drifted in and out of bars, floated through clothing stores and past perfume counters. Nothing caught her attention. Nothing interested her.

\$6,106.29.

A 2009 Petrus. From Bordeaux, France. Six thousand bucks. She bought it.

Now for the hardware.

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The smell of oil-soaked burlap and machinery with a vague undertow of saw-burned lumber lapped at her nostrils. She faced a botched attempt at re-creating the outdoors through volume and wide walkways that were more like dark alleys leading off from the domed atrium at the store's entrance. She barely noticed the screech of a deck saw aisles away under a dizzying high ceiling with shelves stretching into heights beyond reach and casting shadows on the concrete floor and dark shapes in the empty spaces of out-of-stock goods, and everywhere a sense of the

subterranean, of life in the catacombs and caves of home improvement. The balding man with the round head and frog eyes was trying to impress her with his practical manly knowledge.

“Nope...” All authority and conviction, holding the yellow rope in his hands like it was a living thing, a rare and exotic snake, holding it like a gift. “...not the kind of rope you’d want to bungee jump with. Would be like falling on a steel cable. It’s...”

“I’ll take twenty feet.”

More than enough.

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She remembered her father’s expensive cigars and her mother’s hatred of them: “All my dresses, my evening gowns for God’s sake, smell like your goddamn cigars!” The whole house smelled of cigar, even the guest rooms. It was the scent of Natalie’s childhood. Wisps of cigar smoke drifted through the room like velvet clouds. Not a bad cigar, but the wine wasn’t all that great for six thousand bucks a bottle. On the other hand, nothing had the full body of life for her anymore—that bouquet of interest in the next moment. But the wine had given her a decent buzz, enough to finish this. *Just finish it.* She reached over her head and tugged the rope. Taut. Strong. No give.

*Wouldn’t want to bungee jump with this.*

It was clear to her now why she’d bought this condo, the room, with its wooden beams in the ceiling, strong enough with the steel eye hook to hold her weight.

No note. Why bother? Who’d read it?

None of the men she’d fucked would read it. Not even the women she’d fucked and definitely not her parents if they had still been alive. If she’d had a sense of humor she would have cracked a smile when she thought about how she’d buried them in separate graveyards so they couldn’t argue in death. She had their money and their house with five guest rooms that had never been used. She’d sold it.

For her it was nothing more than an echo chamber of her parents’ endless arguments and the smell of cigar smoke permeating her and her mother’s lives. Outside, the two acres of manicured lawns were seen by few others than the grounds keepers. She wasn’t surprised when she couldn’t remember the address when she sold the house.

Her parents were gone. The house was gone. Any shred of life she’d ever had in her was gone. She was ice with blood vessels.

It was time.

She steadied herself on the stool. She found it interesting that she wasn’t nervous or fearful. Her body was still and her mind was calm. She might have been in a meditation class. She’d tried that years ago but she’d been more interested in the instructor than learning how to meditate. It didn’t occur to her to look up at some deity that might save her or welcome her after the plunge away from her life, but this wasn’t something she’d ever think about. The only thing that caught her attention now as a churning feeling in her stomach. She tried to ignore it but the movement of things in her stomach was getting loud with strange digestive noises.

And now it was more than noise.

She was going to vomit.

Of all times: standing on a ladder, noose around her neck, thinking her last pointless thoughts, and she was going to throw up. The warning taste moved up into her esophagus, into her mouth—bile, acid, the shitty wine. No...she wasn’t going to die with a mouth full of puke.

No...not that way. She lifted the rope from around her neck, stepped carefully down the metal ladder, walked unsteadily to the bathroom and fell to her knees over the toilet. It started instantly and violently and it was accompanied by a feeling she'd never known before, a warm feeling, a feeling. Something was growing inside her. She thought: *This is a surprise.*