



strange
attractors

Ana K. Wrenn



Chapter 1

Rose Red

PROFESSOR SONJA J. STOREY LOOKED at her watch. The Gucci bracelet usually glowed, but it looked dull under the fluorescent light of the dingy corridor. That was precisely what Western Highlands State University did: it took the shine off everything.

She had arrived on campus early that morning, as was her practice, and ignoring the rigid two-cup rule she had on teaching days, she had foolishly permitted herself a third cup of jasmine tea. Even more foolishly, she had neglected to use the department restroom before walking across campus to her classroom.

With only minutes to go before her lecture started, Sonja needed to use the restroom—very likely a filthy restroom and one of the many reasons she rarely visited any but the ones in her building.

Last night's dream is to blame for this disruption.

Images flashed across her brain, drawing her into a mental chase, but the images wouldn't settle long enough for her to make sense of them, leaving her uneasy. *What did I even dream?*

Shit! Sonja stood in the doorway of the restroom, her shoulder against the door, her mouth hanging open. A full-bodied statuesque woman held what looked like a pose from the *Kama Sutra*: standing at the sink, folding over the rusty porcelain, lips close to kissing the murky mirror, and maintaining a reverse leg lift.

"Sorry. I'm in your way," the woman said, glancing in Sonja's direction while blotting a tear-stained face with a paper towel. "Come in, come in." She straightened and lowered her leg, giving Sonja space to get by.

“I’ll be quick.” Sonja’s bladder pressed her forward, past the weeping stranger and toward the line of metal stalls. Her tone was cool. The last thing she needed was to get sucked into a whirlpool of human drama.

At the door of the end stall, she glanced back at the younger woman. Under different circumstances, she might have complimented the smart outfit on display: silky red blouse paired with fitted gingham slacks and the quirky but attractive bourbon leather boots. The ensemble complemented the woman’s golden-brown skin. But there wasn’t time, and she slipped inside.

“Sorry if I frightened you,” the woman’s voice cracked out just as Sonja lifted her skirt, pulled down her body shaper, and hovered over the toilet to relieve herself. “I’m Crystal. Crystal Byrd. That’s Byrd with a Y, by the way. People misspell— Never mind.”

“Department?” Sonja asked perfunctorily after flushing. She lifted her Coach tote off the door hook, stepped out of the stall, and approached the sink next to where the woman stood. “Your answer, I did not catch it,” she said surreptitiously taking in the stranger’s long legs, rounded hips, and broad back, deciding that the outfit wouldn’t flatter her own slight frame, particularly her flat buttocks.

“You didn’t catch what?” the woman asked, lowering the paper towel to reveal puffy eyes.

“Your department.”

“Gender Studies.”

“Faculty?” *Too fresh to be an administrator.* Sonja quickly washed her hands and, standing on her tiptoes, pushed the towel lever with her elbow, producing a puddle of cheap, mud-colored paper towels. She snatched the towels and crab-walked toward the door.

“Assistant professor. One of those baby PhDs.” The woman chuckled and fixed her amber eyes on Sonja and leaned against the sink. “Came here to develop my department’s online curriculum.”

Sonja nodded and waved her hand in the air as she left, severing the interaction.

She looked at her watch again and realized she would be on time for class, but her lecture would be delayed as she set up her presentation slides and took attendance.

“Sorry about the public weeping.”

Strange Attractors

Rubber soles squeaked against the flooring behind her, and Sonja realized that the woman had followed her out.

“I thought getting the doctorate was the hardest part of becoming a professor.”

“It will get easier.” Sonja tossed the lie over her shoulder but kept walking.

The leggy woman easily caught up and matched her stride with Sonja’s.

“Will it really get easier? This first semester is kicking my ass, and we’re not even—what?—a month in.”

Sonja turned the corner and saw her classroom, the door open. The seated students chattered and fidgeted with nervous energy.

Sonja pivoted toward her unwanted companion. “Not to be rude, Kirsten—”

“Crystal. And your name?”

Sonja overlooked the unexpected sparkle in Crystal’s swollen eyes and the faint smile. The stranger was poking fun at her. And few poked at Sonja without consequences.

“I am Dr. Sonja J. Storey,” she said, stating her name as if reading it off her CV “This is my classroom. You are delaying my lecture.” And with that, she turned and walked into the room and shut the door behind her.

* * *

Sonja passed the front row seat where Jacob Randalls had once sat and an image from last night’s dream flashed into her mind.

Jacob diving into the ocean, disappearing under crashing waves.

As suddenly as the dreamy images appeared, they dissipated, releasing her to face rows of students, their eyes filled with fear and resentment.

These students hate you already. And they have yet to take the first exam. You will never have another student like Jacob. He wanted to learn, wanted to improve his station in life.

Overcome by unexpected longing, she missed her step but managed to grasp the raised edge of the media console and twisted to face the class, striking a pose akin to a stork sunning with its wings splayed. Since the class seemed unaware of her blunder, she righted herself and stepped up beside the console.

“A meeting detained me,” she said crisply, each word snapping like an icy branch. “While I record attendance, review your syllabus. Ensure you are aware of upcoming deadlines.”

She retrieved the seating chart and reached for the media control pad to wake up the computer and overhead projector. Her hands knew the classroom’s technology better than any lover’s body—not that she’d had that many lovers or classrooms. So, when she touched a slip of paper instead of the cool control pad, she paused. She looked down at the sticky note that was a red-rose hue—a dead rose, that is.

Let’s Play a Game!

Sonja ripped the sticky paper off the control pad and stared at the four words, the black, skeletal letters stirring something in her. Queasiness, perhaps, or something deeper, darker.

“To whom does this belong?” she asked the class, holding up the note. She kept her voice steady, her enunciation precise, to cover the emotional debris threatening to surface.

She studied the students’ faces in the harsh lighting, assessing their blank catfish eyes and grouper mouths. Only mid-September, and already she couldn’t wait to be done with this batch. Again, she thought of Jacob. She hadn’t allowed herself to think about him for some time, but after last night’s dream, he seemed to be haunting her.

Because you destroyed him.

“This note,” she said, shaking the red square as if that would help her shake off the voice clinging to her brain like a barnacle. “Is anyone here capable of speech?”

“Don’t know.”

Sonja leveled her gaze at the disheveled student wearing a worn hooded sweatshirt. “Pardon?”

“Don’t know.” The student cringed under Sonja’s glare.

“Well, thank you, Ms.— Your name?”

“Ronnie.”

“Your *full* name.”

“Staller, ma’am. Ronnie Staller.”

Strange Attractors

Sonja stepped out from behind the console, a synthetic black block out from which emerged various cables that drove to the floor and swam across it like silvery eels. She stood before the class. The sand-colored walls curling around rows of tan chairs reminded her of a conch shell filled with rotting meat.

“Class, a brief reminder on this Tuesday morning: I am not ma’am or missus. Address me as Dr. Storey or Professor Storey.”

She bit back the urge to add, “I earned every bit of my Ph.D.” There would be another opportunity. There always was.

Sonja crumpled the sticky note and dropped it in the trash can, releasing it from her thoughts at the same time. Returning to the console, she finished attendance, then squared her shoulders and prepared to reclaim her day.

“If you did not read the article, do not speak. Listen. Take notes. I do not repeat myself.”

Someone snickered in the back of the room, perhaps the boy with the baseball cap pulled low over his face or the girl wearing the childish pink shirt spattered with purple unicorns. The snickering was familiar commentary on her professorial style and reminded her of her mother’s derision.

Sonja held the class in a cold gaze. “*If you graduate,*” she said, launching into her lecture, “you may gain employment. Therefore, keep this in mind: chaos. As your reading contends, collapses in an organization’s order often originate from a small, unknown variance. Over time, that variance produces large, dramatic, and unanticipated outcomes.”

She paused. Most of the students were slumping in their seats, their eyes not on her. Sonja narrowed her stance and placed her hands across her lower belly, feathering her fingers. She liked to imagine that her long, red-coated nails made her hands look like the blood-tipped wings of a snowy owl after a kill. When she had the class’s attention again, she continued.

“The fundamental challenge of organizational leaders, then, is to adapt in the face of chaos. Leaders must adapt or risk being obliterated.”

Staller threw up her hand.

“Ma’am!”

Sonja glared at the student to silence the interruption, but Staller blundered ahead.

“I’m thinking... You mean to say that when things go bad at work, you don’t really know why. That the thing that caused things to go bad might be real tiny. Then POW!” Staller punched her fist into her other hand. “Everything goes wonky. All ‘cause of that small thing.”

“Class, this is an important lesson. Utilize the language of your reading. Let the experts inform how you speak. You will be tested on your understanding of that language. Additionally, you will not be taken seriously in this world unless you speak properly,” Sonja said, then turned toward Staller without really seeing the student’s face. “Your answer contained minor accuracies. Reread the material. Refine your knowledge, and reconsider how you express yourself.”

She dimmed the lights and returned to the media console, her private island in a hostile sea. She brought up her slides and clicked the remote. Large scarlet letters lit up the screen, making student faces appear to have been bloodied.

CHAOS THEORY

“This semester is about chaos. You will master chaos theory, or you will fail. Now for a review of key terms.”

An hour later, the students filed out. She logged off the computer, collected her personal items, and exited the classroom, confident that she had left the morning’s messiness behind her.

* * *

Sonja knew the route from Walker Hall to Terrell Center so well that she could take her eyes off the sidewalk and survey the campus, her body programmed to avoid crumbling sections. With each step, she grew more determined. Soon, she would visit President Maxwell Knowles and deliver her second unsolicited report about the pathetic state of WHSU. The campus consisted of outdated buildings and uninspired green spaces.

Just as she had last November, on her next unannounced visit, she would sweep past the open-mouthed secretary, and, uninvited, enter the President’s office to rebuke him for his lack of leadership. During that previous meeting with him, she had been escorted out of his office, him murmuring promises about placing her on a planning committee. But before

her compulsory exit, she had berated him over the numerous beautification awards given to peer institutions. Their campus had never earned a single award.

She hadn't heard from the president since, and the committee seat had never materialized. But another assignment had, an assignment that put her in the crosshairs of a certain lunatic professor, Dr. Horace Watson. Sonja knew from the start that the Faculty Termination Inquiry Committee—a committee that considered stripping a professor's tenure—would have consequences, and not the kind she relished.

“Hiya!”

Sonja jumped at the loud greeting behind her, and she stepped up her pace as quickly as her three-inch red Fluevog pumps would let her, but it was to no avail. The junior professor from this morning's encounter jogged up next to her, grinning.

“Sorry for startling you, Sonja.” The peals of laughter further vexed Sonja. “I thought you heard me call you.” The Assistant Professor smiled down like they were on friendly terms.

“Look, Kristen,” Sonja began, prepared to deliver a lecture about etiquette in academia.

“Crystal. As in crystal clear. And Byrd. As in flapping wings, but spelled with a Y.” Crystal laughed, her delight unrestrained. “You're awful with names, huh?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued. “I wanted to apologize for crying in the bathroom, then keeping you from your class. And now for scaring you. Sorry.”

“You did not scare me,” Sonja said sharply.

“If I were in your shoes, I'd be irritated. I've stepped all over your boundaries, and in such a short time,” Crystal said. “So please accept my apology for annoying you.”

“Which time?” Sonja switched her tote to her other shoulder, as if that could keep Byrd out of her personal space.

Crystal snorted. “That's funny. You have a funny streak. You would get along with my mom. On second thought—” She laughed again, then trailed off. “When you came into the bathroom... Well, I had just had an upsetting experience. I'm still reeling.”

Finally, Terrell Center came into view. The square brick building housed unpopular departments away from the rest of the campus, but at least Sonja could take refuge in her office.

“What you said earlier, Sonja...”

“It is Dr. St—”

“I hope you’re right about things getting easier. Because I just got threatened. Anonymously, of course. Bastard left it on my campus voicemail.”

“It happens.” Sonja was approaching the rear entrance of her building, the unsightly path to her office through the bowels of Terrell Center, but, today, it would be her route to freedom.

“Wait! Sonja, are you serious?” Byrd tugged on Sonja’s designer bag. “Have you been threatened?”

“Of course,” Sonja replied. She pointedly raised her forearm and looked at her watch. “Look, this must end. I am pressed for time.”

“You walk, I’ll keep up. Do you ever get used to the threats, the harassment?”

“How you react is entirely up to you.” Sonja bumped her tote into her unwanted companion without effect.

“That call... It was horrible.” Byrd shuddered. “And I’ve had nasty crap hurled at me all my life. But this asshole says, ‘Let’s you and me play a game. I rape you. You scream and—’”

Sonja halted abruptly and faced Crystal. “What did you say?”

“He threatened to rape—”

“No, not that. The other part.”

“What other part?” Crystal knit her eyebrows and stared down at Sonja.

“The game,” Sonja said, suddenly distracted by how the morning sun played against the streaks of auburn and gold in Crystal’s hair. “The game,” she said again, urgently needing to get the information and get away.

“‘Let’s you and me play a game.’ Is that what you mean?”

“Yes,” Sonja said dispassionately, though her stomach was roiling. “Threats are an unfortunate consequence of our profession, particularly for females. Now I must go.” Sonja hurried to the heavy door and opened it with trembling fingers.

“Okay. Well, bye. Maybe we’ll run into one another again soon—” The door closed, cutting off Professor Byrd’s words.

Chapter 2

Bends Head

SAFELY INSIDE TERRELL CENTER, SONJA stared at the grungy floor, slowly inhaling and exhaling, trying to push down the image of the red sticky note.

It's happening again, girlie. This time—

“Shut up,” she told the voice in her head. “It is a coincidence. Do not see a pattern where there is none.”

She ordered herself to move, but her pumps remained frozen to the floor. “You’re running out of time,” she muttered to herself, but her words sounded more prophetic than chastising, so she added, “Go. Prepare for class. No time to dawdle.”

The ancient cooling system blasted her with air, reminding her that this was a problem she could solve. Fired up with fresh indignation, she headed for the department office.

“It’s September, Harmony,” Sonja peered at the department secretary over the wooden privacy panel.

The secretary looked up. “Oh. Dr. Storey. What is it now?” Harmony Singh looked like a fifty-something pixie in both size and hairstyle. Her sunny disposition matched her bright floral cardigan. But Sonja knew there was a stinger under the cheeriness.

“It’s September,” Sonja repeated. “And yet the AC blasts cold air. I have asked you to address this with Facilities.”

Harmony pressed her lips together. “Dr. Storey, I’ve told you before, I don’t control Facilities Management. I report your concerns. What happens

after that..." She shrugged and adjusted her cardigan, the fat woolen blooms wilted over bony shoulders. "Maybe they should hear it from you."

"It seems I have two jobs, yours and mine." Without waiting for a response, Sonja stormed off in the direction of her office.

But then she slipped, barely catching herself on the doorjamb. One pump sailed across the floor. The other lay on its side, a single toe still inside.

As she regained her balance, she felt something cold and slippery seep through her pantyhose to the bottom of her foot. She retrieved her flyaway pump but didn't put it back on. Instead, she limped back toward her office. That's when she saw the oily puddle on the floor.

"What the hell is that?" she yelled.

Harmony called out from the other end of the lobby, "You okay, Dr. Storey?"

"Come here," Sonja demanded.

The secretary made her way toward Sonja. "Dr. Storey, I'm going to have to insist on you not talking like—"

"Look there. Outside my door. What is that?" Her index finger formed an exclamation point for her barked exasperation.

Harmony squatted to get a closer look. Sonja studied the older woman's sculpted thighs, which made Sonja only too aware of the way her own muscles sagged beneath her expensive clothes.

You're above such pettiness, Sonja reminded herself, and returned her gaze to the puddle.

"Smells...fishy." Harmony stood up. "How did it get here?"

"How am I supposed to know? I've been in class."

"I'll call down to Bob. He'll be here lickety-split."

"Well, tell this Bill person that I want the mess gone before I leave for my next class in an hour." Then she hobbled off to clean up.

"His name's Bob," Harmony called after her. "Our hardworking custodian. A good soul too."

Sonja didn't reply, her mind on bringing to heel the morning's disorder before her day got completely out of hand.

* * *

Strange Attractors

Sonja sank into her Italian leather chair, a gift she had given herself following her promotion to full professor a few years earlier. She had found the masterpiece in a high-end Manhattan showroom. When she gave her Foxboro shipping address to the well-dressed sales associate with long, glossy hair, it was like an embarrassing public confession that she lived in North Carolina's hillbilly country.

Today, though, the soft leather cushioned her aching back and absorbed her anxieties.

With a sigh, Sonja sat up and reached for her mouse. She entered her password and watched the background image of her published books materialize: *Crisis and Conflict: Elevating Your Game; Fighting Emotional Ninjas in the Workplace and Beyond*; and *Stop Whining—Win!* All three had been released by a small independent publisher. None had earned much in the way of sales or accolades.

Unlike Ashley's book, girlie.

She swatted away the stinging taunt about her half-sister who deserved not a second more of her life.

Bitch has already stolen so much.

"Enough. I will never see her again. She is behind me."

Putting aside her resentment, Sonja began going through her inbox. As she deleted spam and university updates, she was soothed by the monotonous clicking of her mouse. It made her feel like she was accomplishing something, no matter how insignificant.

She stopped scrolling when she saw the next subject line.

Something Big Headed Your Way

Sonja opened the email. It contained only white space that framed a blue link.

She immediately deleted it, as instructed by the campus IT nerds, then emptied her trash folder. Next, she checked her voicemail. Three missed calls, no messages. By then it was time to leave for her afternoon class.

She stood up and smoothed her sheath dress and matching blazer, taking pleasure in the feel of the expensive onyx fabric that she had lucked into at Nordstrom Rack. She winced as she forced her swollen feet into her

suede pumps. The feet of her pantyhose were still damp from trying to rinse out the foul scent of fish oil.

As she combed her hair, she reminded herself to check for any gray strands later. She liked wearing her black hair like a helmet; it caused people to give her a wide berth. Besides, only the Gray Hairs—the older male professors—got more respect as they grew older. Sonja's student evaluations would suffer if she allowed her hair to silver. *Hag. Ugly bitch.* Those were only a few of the names that students had called her over the years. The insults were trite, but they reminded her that male and female professors might work on the same campus, but they taught in different worlds.

Smoothing her hair and suit one last time, Sonja grabbed her tote and opened the door. She jumped at the sight of an old man leaning over a mop in the doorway, his baggy jeans hanging low to reveal what his T-shirt did not cover.

“What the hell—”

He stood up and turned around, smiling broadly. “Sorry if I gave you a fright. Just cleaning up this here mess, ma'am.”

“Dr. Storey,” she corrected automatically. “Good to see you are sorting this out. It has been an inconvenience.”

“Yes, ma'am. Looks like Dr.—”

“You will need to move. I must pass,” she said, shouldering her bag.

“All rightie-tightie,” he said agreeably. Returning the mop to the large yellow bucket, he rolled it out of the way. Gray water sloshed in her direction.

“Easy! You're splashing my Fluevogs. They cost a fortune.” She hadn't clawed her way out of the black mold of her childhood to have her achievements ruined.

“Sorry, ma'am. Did I get your flu dogs wet?”

“No, Flue—never mind.” She hurried down the hall, intent on reaching her classroom before the students did.

“You have a good day, ma'am,” the janitor called after her.

For a moment, Sonja regretted her hostility. He seemed genuinely kind. *Enough sentimentality. You must be tough as nails. You know what happens when you're not.*

She threw back her shoulders and headed to the main office.

Strange Attractors

“Where’s Harmony?” Sonja asked a student worker sitting at the desk and scrolling on his phone. An open can of tuna balanced on the edge.

The young man didn’t look up. “Don’t know,” he mumbled.

“Repeat that,” Sonja said with enough command in her voice that he finally looked up, pushed his unkempt hair off his forehead, and stared at her vacantly.

“Don’t know where Harm is,” he said.

If that head bends over that phone one more time, I’ll scream.

He returned his eyes to the screen, his hair falling over his brow as he bent his head and ignored her.

Seething with anger over the rude and incompetent treatment, Sonja slammed the door shut, and strode out of Terrell Center.

Five minutes later, mounting the stairs of Walker Hall, each click of her heels a rebuke of WHSU and everyone associated with it, she entered her dark classroom and looked up to see the projector hanging from the ceiling like an albino bat.

“Only the best at Western Hillbilly State University,” she grumbled, flipping on the lights. The projector would need to be rebooted, wasting precious preparation time.

Still looking at the hovering projector, she set her Coach on the chair adjacent to the media console. Then feeling for the control pad, she looked down in disbelief at another sticky, same faded-rose color, same scrawled message.

Let’s Play a Game!

The words practically squeaked in her head like the disembodied voice of a half-sister she hadn’t seen in person for decades.

For the second time that day, Sonja ripped off the sticky note and marched to the trash can to retrieve the matching one she had discarded that morning. She tucked both notes inside her attendance folder and set the matter aside.

For now.

* * *

Sonja had a pretty good idea about how today's office hours would go as soon as the student entered through the open door without knocking and collapsed into the chair next to her desk.

"I'm freaking out."

"Good afternoon. Do come in," Sonja said coldly, her freshly painted lips curling into a tight smile.

"Yeah, sure," the student mumbled, and stuffed her hands into the pockets of her WHSU hoodie. The front was stained with what looked like dribbles of coffee—or maybe it was dried blood.

Sonja looked at the student, noting the nervous tics, the labored breathing. "Your name and the reason for your visit?"

"Ronnie Staller. Told you in class. And I just told you why I'm here. I'm freaking out."

"What is the exact nature of your concern, Ms. Staller?"

"You're making no sense in class. I thought I knew what you was saying at first. Then you started in on that other stuff, and I'm back to what the hell?"

Sonja swallowed the harsh retort on her tongue, and, instead, she said, "You mean, 'I knew what you *were* saying, Dr. Storey.'" More than ever, Sonja missed the loss of intellectually curious students like Jacob.

Before he fell apart. Or more accurately, before you tore him apart.

She crossed her arms and secretly pinched the tender flesh of her elbow creases, a technique that helped her keep her emotions in check.

"Whatever," Staller mumbled. "Like I was saying, I try, but I'm not getting it."

"Ms. Staller, what is your goal in coming here?"

The young woman shrank into the chair as if wordlessly asking permission to exist. "Already told you. I'm freaking out."

"I am neither a counselor nor do I have an EdD."

"A what?" came more of a bray than a question.

"An EdD. A doctorate in education. Meaning I am not a specialist in *how* people learn. If you need that kind of help, I recommend visiting our university learning center—"

"I've already been there. Lots of times. Them people don't know what the fuck they're doing."

Strange Attractors

“If you cannot conduct yourself in a professional manner, this meeting will end.” Sonja glared.

Staller balled up in the chair, legs up, head down on her knees. “Yes, ma’am,” she mumbled.

“Ms. Staller, sit so that I can see your face.”

The student’s body unspooled.

“That’s better. Now, we have only had a handful of lectures so far. This morning, you demonstrated a small degree of understanding, but you must acquire a more sophisticated vocabulary. Nevertheless, you were the only student who contributed to the discussion. So I am not sure why you are freaking out, as you call it.”

Staller opened her mouth to respond, but Sonja held up her hand. “I will finish my point. Uninterrupted. Without graded assignments, it is too soon to assess your academic progress.” She picked up a slip of blue paper from the desk. “Here is the number to the learning center. On the back is contact information for Student Health Services. They have counselors. Call them.”

“But this chaotic thing, I get bits. But then it’s gone. I read lots too!” Staller slapped the side of her head. “I remember something ‘bout butterflies...and fact...fact talks—”

“Fractals.”

“Yeah, that. The patterns. And how no one sees ’em. That makes no sense. I see patterns everywhere, sometimes so much I want to scream.”

Sonja responded evenly, though her pulse was pounding in her neck. “Those core concepts are in your readings. Review them. Once you have done that, come to me with specific questions. Do you?”

“What?” Staller looked blankly at Sonja.

“Do you have specific questions?”

“How am I supposed to ask questions if I don’t remember enough to ask?”

Sonja crossed and recrossed her legs. It was time to conclude this fruitless interaction. “If you are that concerned, withdraw from the class.”

“I can’t. I’m needing it to graduate. I don’t have no one to help.”

“Then review your course material, take notes, attend class. Bring specific questions to me during office hours. And call those numbers on

the card.” Sonja waited for Staller to respond, then rolled her chair closer to her computer. “Is that it, Ms. Staller?”

“Yes, ma’am.” With a heavy sigh, Staller stood up and moved to the doorway. “Door open or closed?” she asked.

Sonja flashed on another day. A hulking male body stood over her, her face pressed against the rough carpet.

She blinked away the memory. “Open,” she said. “And Ms. Staller.”

The young woman turned, hope rising in her eyes. “Yes?”

“It is Dr. Storey, not ma’am.”

“Yeah, sure,” Staller said, then lowered her head and mumbled something.

“What did you say?” Sonja barked.

“I said, see you on Thursday.” Staller slung her backpack over her shoulder and left.

Sonja could have sworn that Staller had spelled out, “C.U.N.T.” Of course, it wouldn’t be the first time someone called her that. Her own mother had that honor.

Thirty minutes later, Sonja uploaded her latest edits to the termination inquiry report to the cloud and prepared to go home.

A glass of pinot, an evening with my laptop. Sounds perfect.

She closed down her computer, picked up her tote, and locked her office door. On her way out, she stopped at the main office.

“Harmony.”

“Yes?” the secretary responded with a honeysuckle smile and wasp eyes that stung.

“Have that janitor—”

“Bob.”

Sonja waved her hand dismissively. “Have *Bob* go back over that spot. It still smells fishy.”

Instead of responding, Harmony turned toward the female student worker sitting nearby. “Sarah, do me a favor,” she said, her voice tinkling like windchimes. “See the book on the copier? Would you please run it over to Dr. Waters? Looks like he forgot it again.”

“Sure thing, Harm.” The student worker hopped up, grabbed the book, and turned to the doorway, stopping in front of Sonja.

“Yes?” Sonja asked.

Strange Attractors

The young woman glowered in silence.

“You’re blocking the door, Dr. Storey,” Harmony said. “Go on, Sarah. Dr. Storey will let you by now.”

Sonja stepped aside and watched the young woman walk away, noting the bargain basement sweatshirt and worn jeans, the same kind of cheap, ill-fitting clothing she had once worn.

She turned back to the secretary. “Harmony, the janitor,” she nudged insistently. “I am relying on you to handle matters with...Bob.”

“Sure,” Harmony replied. The tinkle of windchimes was gone.

Her directive delivered, Sonja left the building and headed toward her BMW, affectionately dubbed Bimmer. She was looking forward to that glass of pinot.

But when she reached home, her mood darkened again.

She blamed it on the mangled carcass in her driveway.

Chapter 3

Hellish Thing

AS HER CAR IDLED, SONJA studied the carcass, mentally spitting out scenarios about how such a hellish thing came to be there.

Do not be tempted by faulty logic. This incident is unrelated to the notes or the fish oil. A predator probably dragged it here. Maybe that skinny fox that skulks around.

But that conclusion failed to satisfy her need for certainty. She screamed with fury and frustration, the sound filling Bimmer's interior. Her beautiful house spoiled, as if some force was trying to pull her back into the chaos of her youth.

She tried to regain her slipping composure by tethering it to her well-maintained property. The walkway of 747 Summit Street was like a spotless beige ribbon winding from the road's edge, through the front yard, and ending at the curved steps. A package awaited her on the top step, likely the Yves Saint Laurent tote she had recently ordered from a designer goods reseller. The door, navy with vanilla trim, was covered with a wrought iron security door, its steel embellishments swirling like thick *crème pâtissière*.

"Everything is in order," she announced to no one in particular.

She could have sworn her house smiled in response, the wide windows twinkling, the brick blushing a reddish hue.

"Everything is in order," she repeated, then looked again at the thing in her driveway that disputed her confident statement.

You sure? Things seem to be falling apart. Or getting back to normal, girlie. She heard her mother's voice followed by grotesque laughter, a mix of hoggish snorting and phlegmy coughing.

Strange Attractors

Sonja cut the engine and climbed out of her BMW to investigate this latest mess.

* * *

Bloody clumps of fur dotted the smushed carcass. “What were you?” Sonja asked it. “Rabbit? Raccoon? Well, you’re dead now, and I don’t have time for this.”

She returned to her car and sat, pondering the best way to deal with this latest episode. Suddenly, she regretted hiding the key to her locked security door in her bedside nightstand, a habit she had picked up after her nasty ex. This situation could be more easily resolved if she entered through the front and changed clothes before taking the interior stairs down to the garage; there was no way she was going to deal with a dead animal in her expensive attire. She could drive down her steep driveway into the garage one story below street level as she normally did, but that ran the risk of running over the carcass, making cleanup even messier. On the other hand, the driveway was too steep to walk down in her heels, and she wasn’t about to ruin her pantyhose by taking her shoes off.

She slammed her hand onto Bimmer’s horn in an automotive protest, releasing her frustration. The sharp honk gave her a moment of satisfaction, and with a smug smile, she drove forward, avoiding the carcass as best she could but swearing she heard the crunch of tiny bones.

She rushed upstairs and changed into her expensive designer leggings—LNDR, to be exact—and the matching jacket. Silently, she reprimanded herself for not having kept at least one or two sets of casual clothes when she overhauled her wardrobe after her last promotion. Now she had nothing suitable to wear, not even a cheap pair of shoes. Her spotless Gucci sneakers would have to do.

Returning to the garage, Sonja grabbed a shovel, hiked up the driveway, and scraped up the fleshy mound. Without looking for oncoming traffic, she crossed the deserted street to the vacant lot and dumped the mess in the withered leaves and twisted vines. The faded *For Sale by Owner* sign nailed to a scrawny tree caught her eye, and she hoped the lot would never sell, thus preserving her solitude atop Summit Street.

As she trotted back to her house, she looked for any witnesses to how this latest mess might’ve come to be. She thought she saw movement in one

window of the hermit's house, but she decided she had imagined it. When she inspected her driveway, she was pleased to see that there was barely a trace of the carcass. But what pleased her more was opening the package that waited for her on the porch.

* * *

An hour later, Sonja had inspected her new tote and stored it with her voluminous collection of bags and purses, poured herself a glass of pinot, and retreated to her office. She opened her laptop and clicked on the committee report she had coauthored with Mary Ann Russel, a professor out of Health Sciences who Sonja did not detest.

Sonja started her latest—and hopefully last—review, determined to cross this work off her to-do list.

During the period beginning November 16 of the last academic year, Dr. Horace Watson, Full Professor in the Department of Economics, pursued a sexual relationship with Ms. Cindy Franklin, an undergraduate major in his department. Ms. Franklin alleges that she declined Watson's requests for dates. When she enrolled in his Macroeconomics Theory course, Franklin alleges that Watson again pursued her for a romantic relationship and that she agreed to go on a date with him on January 18. They were romantically involved until February 17.

A second Economics major, Ms. Wanda Dobbs, alleges that Watson began pursuing her for a sexual relationship on February 8 while she, too, was enrolled in his Macroeconomics Theory course. His relationship with her continued until March 16.

Both Franklin and Dodd allege that after Watson ended his relationships with them, Watson created a hostile environment in the department by sharing defamatory information about them with students, faculty, and staff, referring to the two students as "sluts" and "deranged feminazis."

Franklin and Dodd reported Watson's behavior to the chair of the Economics Department on April 19 (See timeline, Appendix A.),

Strange Attractors

alleging that Watson began a campaign of retaliation. According to the plaintiffs, Watson posted to social media false information about them under the name "Professor Chaos."

Sonja's heart began pounding; her eye twitched. She whipped her head toward the door, half expecting to see her ex, his lips curled into a cruel smile.

Avery is gone. Out of your life for good.

Yet the images continued. She still saw Avery Bruce rounding the corner, the cuffs of his white dress shirt neatly turned up, the silvery hair on his forearms catching the light.

"Pillows." That's what he used to call her in that rich baritone that he used when gaslighting her, back when bruises still mapped his possession of her body.

She forced herself to turn back to her laptop. "Put that matter behind you. Writing about Watson's behavior is provoking you to dwell on the past," she said out loud, sounding stronger than she felt.

The members of the committee, headed by University Assistant Counsel Jodi Jenkins, had been reviewing the allegations against Dr. Watson for weeks, a review that necessitated Sonja's repeated reading of unpleasant details. For one, there was the report by Title IX investigators with hundreds of pages of evidence, including social media posts by someone called "Professor Chaos."

It was when she had first read Professor Chaos's posts that her eye spasms returned, a relentless twitching that had dissipated years ago when she rid herself of her ex. Every word in those foul posts reminded her of the wounds she kept hidden under her designer clothes.

A chill ran up her arms, and she rubbed them vigorously, wondering if her effort to create a safe fortress for herself would turn out to be futile.

"Stop sabotaging your progress. Finalize revisions. End this pathetically unproductive day on a productive note."

She gritted her teeth and tightened her face into a painful scowl. But as she returned her fingers to the keyboard, she found that she enjoyed the ache. It felt like a fitting price to pay for accomplishing such a noxious task.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

STRANGE ATTRACTORS

BY ANA K. WRENN

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com