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Confessions
of a Scoundrel

Karen Hawkins

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*Many thanks to Barb Hoeter,
who designed my clever new website
(www.karenhawkins.com)
to help me launch the Talisman Ring Series.
Thanks, Barb!*

*And to my new and wonderful editor,
Lyssa Keusch,
for her endless patience and wonderful advice.*

Did ye hear the story of the St. John talisman ring? They say 'tis magic!

~~*Whichever of the brothers holds it in his possession will meet his one true love. At this moment, the ring 'tis hangin' from a ribbon on the coat of Brandon St. John, the handsomest of all.*~~

The Pemberleys' new maid, Anne, to her future mistress, Miss Liza Pritchard, while the two were addressing invitations for the wedding

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Chapter 1

Brandon St. John is a very sensual man. Whenever he looks at me, I get the most delicious shivers right down to my toes, just as if—Oh! Sorry. I forgot I was talking to you.

Miss Liza Pritchard to her fiancé, Sir Royce Pemberly, on Bond Street, while shopping for a present for Sir Royce's sister

“He's dead.”

From the depths of a brandy-fumed slumber, Brandon St. John heard every word, recognizing his younger brother's voice instantly.

Damn it, what is Devon doing in my dreams? Devon was an annoyance when Brandon was awake. During sleep, he was a positive menace.

“He cannot be dead,” someone else answered. “He's too stubborn to die in such a neat fashion, stretched out in his own bed.”

Brandon groaned at the new voice—it belonged to his half-brother, Anthony Elliot, the Earl of Greyley.

Just to make Brandon's dream a true nightmare, Marcus, his oldest brother, added in a deep voice, “Brandon is not dead; he was snoring when we came in.”

“A pity we can't set him afire,” Devon said cheerfully. “That would wake him.”

Someone grabbed Brand's foot, jerking him the rest of the way into wakefulness. “Go away,” he ordered, his voice muffled by his pillow.

Devon shook him again. “Rise, Brand! You've work to do.”

“I've sleep to sleep, first,” he muttered.

But there was no swaying Devon. “Get up!” he demanded.

Brandon started to lift his head, but the pounding behind his temples made him think better of it. “Poole!” he called in a rusty voice. Poole served as Brand's valet, butler, and general manservant. “Where is that man? I need my pistol.”

“Pistol?” Anthony's voice deepened with amusement. “Are you going hunting?”

“Yes,” Brand answered. “I’m going hunting for the damned rodents who’ve infested my chambers.”

“Poole cannot fetch your weapon now,” Devon said, always eager to spread bad news. “We told him we were famished and he’s gone to find us some breakfast.”

Bloody hell, what a horrid way to start the day. Brandon hated mornings. They were filled with annoyingly cheerful people who liked to aggravate other, more important individuals who needed extra sleep to make up for the fact that they had not slept the night before.

“Perhaps we should call for a nice cool pitcher of water,” Anthony said, his deep lazy voice filtering through the air. “That should get this slugabed on his feet.”

Brand pulled the pillow over his head. His throat felt like the bottom of a salt barrel—scratchy and dry. And that was just the beginning of his complaints; his head ached, his stomach roiled, and the inside of his mouth tasted like chalk.

He had a vague memory of the night before. Of a beautiful woman with reddish gold hair and a card game where the stakes had gone from guineas to articles of clothing to other, far more stimulating wagers. Celeste was perfect for him in every way—beautiful, intelligent, talented in bed, and married to someone else. No man could ask for more. Except Brandon.

Marcus’s dry voice came from the foot of the bed. “It appears our brother has had yet another difficult night.”

Brandon would have shrugged if it hadn’t meant he’d have to move. Marcus was wrong—it hadn’t been a difficult night at all. And that was the problem. No matter how much Brandon enjoyed dalliance, within two weeks he inevitably found himself looking for a new challenge.

The sad truth was that every amusement of late had seemed flat. Brandon was living beneath a horrible pall—a feeling that somehow, some way, he was missing out on something important.

What maudlin nonsense. Brandy apparently had the unfortunate side effect of making one mawkish. From now on, he’d stick to port. Brandon lifted his aching head and forced his lids to rise. Blinding light pierced his eyes. He groaned, and then groped blindly for the half-finished glass of brandy that rested beside his bed. He gulped it down, his throat stinging as he thumped the glass back on the stand.

“Hair of the dog?” Anthony said with amusement.

Brandon wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and turned to squint over his shoulder. “Just tell me what you want and then get the hell out of here.”

“How rude,” Devon said. “I expected a greeting, at least.”

“From Brandon?” Anthony appeared astonished. “Unless you wear skirts, have a full bosom *and* a husband, Brandon will not give you the time of day.”

Brandon tried to decide whether to glare or just ignore Anthony. Truthfully, of all his brothers,

Brand was closest to his half-brother. Anthony's sleepy air was a hoax—he had more energy and determination than any man half his size. And he had a sharp wit that always made Brandon grin.

Not now, of course. No one could smile at this time of the morning. Brand eyed his half-brother bleakly. "I thought you were still on your honeymoon."

"Anna and I returned last night, just in time for the meeting."

Oh bloody hell, the meeting. Brandon rubbed his temples. "I'd forgotten."

"We noticed," Marcus said, his blue gaze coolly reproachful. The oldest, he ruled the family fortune, his life and those of the younger members of the St. John family with an iron fist.

As the next oldest in line, Brandon should have been deeply involved in the family financial endeavors. But even at an early age, Marcus's unrelenting need to control everything and everyone around him—especially the family fortune—had set Brandon's teeth on edge.

Thus it was that at the genteel age of twenty-two, when most of his friends were drinking and whoring their way through London, Brandon had collected what money he could and purchased two ill-kempt estates outside of Shropshire. That had been many years ago and the estates were now merged into one, a very productive and profitable venture providing Brandon with an astonishing income. It had been years since he'd drawn on his St. John accounts, a fact that had infuriated Marcus even more.

Not that Brandon cared. He hadn't done it for Marcus, but rather to prove something to himself. When his estate had first turned a profit, he'd been overjoyed. But now, with the work complete and his fortune even more secure, Brandon found that he was a little...bored, a feeling that had lingered and grown over the ensuing months and years. He sighed restlessly and glanced at Marcus.

"If you must have a meeting, then have one." Brandon rolled onto his back, the sheets tangling about his hips as he stuffed the pillow beneath his head. "We're all here, so we might as well get it over with."

Devon's humor faded. "We cannot meet in your bedchamber. It smells of a French whorehouse."

Anthony tilted his head to one side, his gaze narrowing. "I recognize that perfume. Is it—"

"Get out," Brand interrupted. He should have known they would make things difficult. He lifted himself on his elbow and pointed to the door. "Give me a few moments to dress and I'll join you."

"You'd better," Marcus said. "We're through being nice."

"Nice? Is it nice to break into someone's house and rudely awaken them?"

"We didn't break in; we knocked. Poole answered. He informed us you were asleep. We informed him that we really didn't care. Then we came here."

From now on, Brand would see to it that his valet carried a weapon whenever he answered the door before noon.

“We’ll give you five minutes to dress,” Marcus said.

“Five minutes?”

“That’s more than I’d have given you,” Anthony said. He glanced at the door. “Sorry to disappoint you, Bridgeton. I know you wished to see us set Brandon afire.”

“Bridgeton?” Brand followed Anthony’s gaze to the doorway. There, lounging at his ease, was Brandon’s brother-in-law, Nicholas Montrose, the Earl of Bridgeton.

Nick grinned on catching Brand’s bleary gaze. “Lovely morning, isn’t it?”

“Go to hell,” Brand growled.

It was insulting that his brothers had brought Bridgeton, whom they all detested, although “detest” was too strong a word. They’d all detested him *before* he’d married their sister, Sara, but only after he’d compromised her so badly he’d been forced to wed her. Now though, to everyone’s surprise it seemed as if it was a love match.

A rakehell of the worst sort, Bridgeton had proven to be a doting husband and devoted father. It was difficult to maintain a healthy hatred for a man who treated your sister as if she were made of glass, but Brandon did his best.

He pushed himself into a sitting position and tossed the sheet aside.

Devon shook his head. “For the love of God, put on some clothes.”

Brand promptly stood. For good measure, he even stretched mightily though he had to keep one hand on the bedrail to remain upright. The whole world seemed to swirl before his eyes.

“Come, everyone,” Marcus directed. “We’ll wait in the outer room while Brandon dresses.” Marcus strode out the door, Anthony and Nick following.

Devon trailed behind, stopping when he reached the doorway. He tilted his head to one side, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “Was she worth the trouble?”

“Who?” Brandon asked.

“The delightful Celeste. She has been talking quite freely you know, hinting that the two of you might become more than friends.”

“She errs. We have nothing more than a brief dalliance.”

Devon shrugged, a curious look in his eyes. “Brand...why not? Everyone knows her husband has one foot in the grave—has for years. He’s at least twenty years older than Celeste and once he’s gone she’ll inherit a fortune. If you play your cards right, you could—”

“—get dressed before Marcus decides to drag me into a meeting with no clothes at all. Leave, Devon. Unless you want me lounging naked during the entire meeting.”

Devon started as if to say something else, then apparently thought better of it. “Oh very well. I was just trying to help.” He disappeared out the door, leaving Brand alone.

Brandon raked his hair from his face. Devon was a fool. Marriage was the furthest thing from Brand’s mind—from any sane man’s mind.

The St. Johns were targets for every matchmaking mama in town. Over the years, Brandon had watched as woman after woman had set their cap for either him or one of his brothers. At first, it had been an amusement. But then, after a while, it became an annoyance. Now Brandon found it a deadly bore. He wanted nothing to do with a needy woman, one who saw him merely as an end to a means. When he married, it would be to a woman of substance and breeding, one with as many funds to her name as he had to his.

That the two would come together as equals on all levels was, he’d decided, the only way such a union could work.

Poole entered the room, a letter and a tall glass with a yellow mixture resting atop a tray.

Brand eyed the glass sullenly. “I hate that stuff.”

“Yes, sir.” Poole removed the glass from the tray and held it out.

“I don’t want it.”

“Yes, sir.” Poole continued to hold out the glass.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Indeed, sir. It’s my duty.”

Brand sighed, took the glass, and threw back the contents, fighting a shudder as the thick liquid slid down his throat. “God, what’s in that?” he gasped.

Poole took the glass and replaced it on the tray. “Two raw eggs, a boiled kidn—”

“*Wait.* I don’t want to know.” Brand closed his eyes and tried to breathe through his nose to still the nausea.

Poole set the tray to one side and picked up the letter. “This came for you this morning, sir.” He turned away to open the wardrobe.

Brandon opened the letter.

St. John,

I must see you. I’ll be arriving tomorrow evening. Send me word when you’re free. Please. This is very important.

Roger Carrington, Viscount Wycham, was an old acquaintance of Brand's. They'd known each other since Eton, and while they hadn't been close friends since, they kept in touch. "I wonder what he wants."

"Sir?"

"Nothing." Brandon folded the letter and replaced it on the tray. "I hope my brothers didn't trouble you when they came in this morning."

"Trouble me? Oh no, sir. I was already awake when they arrived. However, I am sorry you were disturbed. I tried to stop them, but it was impossible."

"You cannot stop a St. John," Brand said, his stomach settling. He took a long breath, and then said in a stronger voice, "My buff breeches and the blue coat."

He washed and dressed in less than ten minutes, a true feat considering the intricacy of his neckcloth. Poole's magical concoction had wrought its usual miracle and Brandon was feeling better by the moment.

He smoothed the sleeve of his new coat with a faint appreciation. He felt far more human now and quite capable of dealing with his brothers. "Poole, my new watch fob, if you please. And—no, wait."

Poole halted by the dresser. "Sir?"

"Today's meeting calls for something more..." Brand smiled. "Something that might irritate my brothers as much as they have irritated me."

Poole raised his brows.

"The St. John talisman ring."

"The ring, sir? You told me to hide it and never admit where it was."

"Just get it. Find a pin and a ribbon, too."

Poole bowed, then opened a small silver cask in the far corner of the dresser. He dug among the watch fobs a moment then withdrew a small silver circlet. He handed it to Brandon, the morning light glinting off the etched runes that decorated the band.

Brandon held it in his palm, the metal strangely warm. Mother had believed that whomever possessed the ring would find their true love. It had worked for Anthony, who had married his Anna less than six months after he'd received the ring. But for Brandon...he'd had the blasted thing for almost two months and it hadn't done a damn thing.

Not that he wanted it to “work.” God knew he was perfectly happy as he was, no matter what his brothers thought. No, what he really wanted to do was trick one of his brothers—perhaps Devon—into taking the ridiculous thing.

Poole handed him a short red ribbon. Brand tied the ring to the end of it, then pinned it to his coat directly above his heart. The red ribbon stood out in stark relief against his dark blue coat, the ring gleamed brightly. “There,” he said with some satisfaction. “That should make them nervous.”

“Indeed,” Poole said, “it has the same effect on me.”

Brand grinned, then left to join his brothers and brother-in-law in the small outer apartment of his lodgings.

“There you are,” Anthony said from where he leaned against the mantel. “We were just—” His eyes widened. “The talisman ring.”

Devon’s head jerked up. Perched on the edge of Brandon’s writing desk, he had been idly twirling a brass paperweight. “God, no! Brandon, don’t think you can trick me into taking that blasted thing. I won’t have it.”

“It’s in my possession. I can wear it if I want.”

“You’re just trying to make me nervous,” Devon said.

“Am I?” Brandon walked past Bridgeton and Marcus, who were both seated in the matching chairs before the fireplace, and took a place on the settee.

“You are a devil,” Devon mumbled. “I have nightmares of finding that blasted thing under my pillow.”

“Don’t give him any ideas,” Anthony said with a twinkle.

Brand regarded his half-brother with a flat stare. “Unlike you, my dearest brother, I have no intentions of hiding the ring in someone’s cake. It’s a wonder I didn’t break a tooth.”

Anthony chuckled. “I just wanted to share the wealth.”

Brandon wondered what the ring was really worth. Probably not much, though it appeared to be of some antiquity. But to the St. Johns, it was as priceless as it was annoying. None of them really wanted to keep it because of the rumors of the ring’s mystical powers. Not that they believed such nonsense...it was just the *idea* of what it represented that made them cringe. But since it had been Mother’s, it was far too dear to simply lock away.

Brandon looked at the shimmering ring and tried to remember a day when she hadn’t worn it. They’d all taken turns fobbing off the blasted ring, especially his brother Chase, who always—

Brand glanced around the room. “Where is Chase? I thought we were all supposed to attend.”

Marcus’s frown deepened. “Chase is the reason for this little meeting.”

Devon hefted the brass paperweight in one hand as if trying to ascertain its weight. “Our beloved brother left town two days ago.”

Marcus nodded. “Of his own free will and in fairly good health. The problem is that I recently discovered he’s been residing in the pocket of Viscountess Westforth.”

Westforth. Brand tried to recall the name. “I’ve heard of her. A racy piece, is she not? Part of the demimonde.”

Marcus nodded. “That’s her.”

“Where is Viscount Westforth?”

Devon polished the paperweight with his sleeve. “He died four years ago, racing his curricle to Bristol.”

“A poor whipster?”

“A drunk one. He challenged young Oglethorpe on the Bristol Road. They were both deep in the cups; Westforth was a bit of a wild one.” Devon tossed the paperweight into the air and stretched out his hand to catch it.

Brandon leaned out and grabbed the paperweight in midair. He then carefully placed it on the table before him, out of Devon’s reach. “Let me guess the rest of the story. Since Westforth’s death, his widow has been living off his largesse.”

Devon shrugged. “Something like that. Westforth’s father, the Earl of Rutland, believes their daughter-in-law is to blame for Westforth’s death. He believes she encouraged her husband’s wild ways and was glad when he died. Rutland saw to it that she didn’t collect much when Westforth died, but she apparently has enough to exist. Or she did. I wonder if she’s suddenly found herself short of funds.”

“In a word,” Marcus said, “if this history is correct, Lady Westforth may very well be a fortune hunter.”

Brandon didn’t like the thought of his little brother in the coils of such a woman. Chase seemed vulnerable now.

At one time, Chase had been the most lighthearted of the St. Johns—forever playing pranks on one or the other of them. All that had changed sometime last year, though no one knew exactly what had happened.

It began rather gradually. Chase had transformed, thin layers of change at a time. Now he was bitter, seemingly filled with self-loathing and frequently drunk, even before noon.

It was painful watching blithe, happy-go-lucky Chase disintegrate before their very eyes. That was the reason Brandon and his brothers had begun intervening in Chase’s life—he was not himself. “How seriously is he involved?”

Marcus's expression darkened. "If we don't do something soon, he may marry the chit. He obtained a special license."

"Bloody hell! Why would the fool want to get married?"

Anthony raised a brow. "Some of us find the wedded state far from deplorable."

Brandon stifled a sigh. God save him from the cheery false happiness of a newly wedded couple. He wondered if perhaps he would ever feel that way...then decided it didn't matter. First he had to find a woman who managed to keep him interested longer than two weeks. "Where is Chase now?"

"Gone to make the final arrangements," Marcus said. "We should act while he is out of town."

Knowing Chase's volatile temper, that seemed to be the best way to proceed. "Something must be done at once."

"I'm so glad you agree," Marcus said, a slight edge to his voice. "That is why I called for a meeting this morning."

Brandon met his brother's gaze without flinching. "I overslept," he said softly. "I will not apologize again."

Marcus's mouth thinned, his jaw tightening.

Brand didn't back down. He met his brother's gaze solidly.

Anthony sighed. "Enough, you two. Brandon, you should know that we held the meeting this morning."

"And we made some excellent decisions." Devon's grin glinted.

Brandon didn't like the sound of that. "What decisions?"

"Someone has to visit this woman," Marcus said, "and ascertain her intentions. Then, if necessary, buy her off."

Bloody hell, surely they hadn't—"I am *not* visiting Chase's paramour. I paid off the last actress he was involved with and he nearly took my head off for it. I won't do it again."

Marcus crossed his arms, a satisfied smile touching the hard line of his mouth. "*You* missed the meeting."

Brand leaned his aching head against the high back of the settee. "I wish I could assist you, but I'm busy today. Too busy to irk Chase into challenging me to a duel."

"If you can't go," Marcus said, "then ask someone else. I just want it taken care of and quickly."

That was a thought. Brand looked at Devon.

“Can’t,” he said promptly. “I’m going out of town.”

“When?”

“As soon as possible.”

“And I,” Anthony volunteered, “am to meet Anna at the modiste’s.”

“Your wife can surely spare you for an hour or so,” Brand said in a surly tone.

“You obviously have never spoken to my wife.”

Brandon had spoken to Anna many times and he had to admit that Anthony probably had a point. Anna was just like Brandon’s sister, Sara—they possessed spines of pure steel. That was probably why they were such good friends.

At the thought of Sara, Brandon looked at his brother-in-law and wondered if Bridgeton might be willing to assist him. The man did seem determined to get involved in family matters.

As if he could read Brandon’s mind, Bridgeton shook his head. “It would be in bad form for someone other than a member of the family to attend to such a delicate situation.”

Brandon glowered. “Why did you even bother to come?”

Nick smiled gently. “To watch the festivities, of course.”

Brandon decided he really, *really* disliked his brother-in-law. “Blast you to hell.”

“On that note, we’ll leave.” Marcus stood. “Lady Westforth is not a milquetoast female like some of Chase’s past acquaintances. I advise you to approach her carefully.”

“She is also quite beautiful,” Devon said unexpectedly. “She has violet eyes, so pure they look a if—” He flushed when he realized everyone was looking his way. “Or so I’ve heard.”

Brandon sighed. “Actress, opera singer, or orange seller...what difference does it make? I will offer the chit money to leave town and she’ll accept. They always do.”

“It’s settled, then,” Anthony said. He glanced at Marcus. “Are we finished?”

“We are. Brandon, however, has just begun.” Marcus’s hard blue eyes gleamed with humor. “Come, everyone. Our brother has a busy day ahead of him.”

“I thought you were staying for breakfast.”

“We were,” Marcus replied coolly, “but we don’t wish to keep you from your duties. We’ll eat at White’s.”

They filed out, all in such good spirits that Brandon was hard put not to start a brawl right on the steps of his own establishment.

For several long moments after their merriment had faded, Brandon remained on the settee, resting his head against the pillowed back and wishing he was still asleep.

What a morning. He was ill, tired, and in a horrid mood. His neck ached too, as if he'd slept in the wrong position. He suddenly remembered the letter and sighed. Oh yes, he also had to worry about his friend, Wycham. Worst of all, he now had to rescue a brother who, when he finally returned to town, would be angry enough to split Brandon on the end of his sword.

It was not a good way to start the day.

Chapter 2

It is one of the more unpalatable facts of life that very few women gracing the ballrooms of London possess one-tenth the beauty and wit of those found in the most common gaming hell. Which is why I prize my Liza all the more.

Sir Royce Pemberley, trying to cheer up his friend, Mr. Scrope Davies, as that gentleman morosely examined the new crop of eligible females lined up against the wall at Almack's

“Play at least one game. It will help keep your fingers nimble.”

Lady Verena Westforth gazed at the cards her brother shuffled with such ease. A tiny itch rested in the palms of her hands. She curled her hand around the familiar feeling and forced her lips to curve into a faint smile. “Did you come all the way from Italy to tempt me into bad habits?”

James grinned, his golden hair glinting in the morning light. “What you have is talent, not ‘bad habits.’ Father says—”

“Spare me what Father says. He thinks any vice is a gift, so long as 'tis well done.”

James's grin widened. “There's none like him, is there?”

“No, thank the heavens. The world would end if two such beings existed on the same planet.”

“You sound like Mother.” James eyed her fondly. “It's good to see you, Ver. It has been too long.”

She returned his smile. There was a bond between her and James that went deeper than most. A bond that stretched across the distance she'd imposed between herself and her family.

Perhaps it was because James was her twin, though one wouldn't credit it to look at the two of them. It was true they both had blond hair, but hers was the fine gold of a new guinea, while his was dark blond streaked liberally with brown.

Even their eyes were different; Verena's were violet and James's were brown. Still, there were some similarities. They both possessed the faintly almond-shape eyes and the flyaway brows of some ancient Slavic ancestor.

Father always said they were descended from Russian royalty. But then Father would say that. She met James's quizzical gaze with a smile. “It's good to see you, too, even if you *did* arrive in the dead of night.”

“It wasn’t *that* late.”

“It was almost dawn. And since it’s been months since I last heard from you, I can’t help but wonder if you’re in trouble.”

His expression froze, but then he grinned at her, his brown eyes crinkling at the corners. “I am always in trouble. But don’t fret. The Lansdownes were born under a lucky star. No matter what, our paths are made.”

Though she didn’t believe his bravado for an instant, Verena had to smile back at him. She knew his faults too well—most of them mirrored her own. Impatience, an endless thirst for excitement, and a deeply rooted dislike of being ordered about. “I wish you’d at least stay in my guest bedchamber.”

“No one knows I’m your brother and I’d like to keep it that way. It’s for your own good.”

“If I had a reputation to protect, I might agree with you. But I don’t, thanks to Andrew’s father.”

James’s smile faded at the mention of the Earl of Rutland. “Is he still set on destroying your peace?”

“Every chance he gets,” she replied lightly, though the effort cost her. She’d always known that Andrew’s father hadn’t liked her, but she hadn’t realized the extent of the old man’s feelings until after Andrew’s death. Unknown to her, Andrew had been shielding her from bitter comments, vile rumors, and more.

Once he was gone, his father went unchecked, doing what he could to see to it that Verena became a social pariah, unwelcome except in the lowest levels of London society.

He’d thought to chase her from town, to remove her from Westforth House. But Verena had dug in her heels and instead of fleeing, had made a place for herself among the demimonde and turned Westforth House into the home she’d never had.

“Damn Rutland,” James said. “I’d skewer his gizzard on my sword if I thought it would help.” He absently dealt the cards into four hands on the small table. “Ver...are you happy?”

“Of course I am. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. It just seems that you’re...well, you’re far too much alone.” James sighed and set the cards on the table. “Do you still miss Andrew?”

“Every day.” She said the words simply and was pleased to note that she only felt the briefest twinge of sadness. Andrew’s life had been short and brilliant, a star flashing across the sky then disappearing from sight. He’d left her very little on his death except a heart full of memories and the deed to Westforth House. But those things were worth more than she could say. “I think I miss his laughter the most of all.”

“That’s one thing I’ll give your late husband,” James said, his voice touched with envy. “He enjoyed every minute of his life. I hope the same can be said about me once I’m gone.”

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