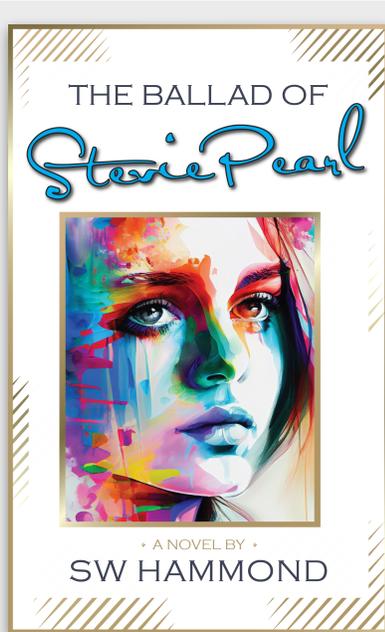


# THE BALLAD OF STEVIE PEARL

A NOVEL BY SW HAMMOND | EXCERPT



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## Track 7: The Ecstasy of Gold – Ennio Morricone

It was late in the afternoon. Alex worried himself while pacing around the gallery, making final preparations for his opening night.

He agonized over the track lighting—how the color smeared oddly across the canvases, his work reacting strangely beneath a foreign glow. He was accustomed to the cheap fluorescents of his workspace, their harshness providing the tenuto that illuminated his angst. He then tinkered with the sound system that pumped music overhead. He turned it on. He turned it off. He changed the playlist. An off-kilter smudge on the large window that faced the street sent him searching for paper towels and glass cleaner.

Celeste’s arrival was a welcome reprieve. He helped her lug in cheap beer and boxed wine from her car. The two arranged the social lubrication, working in silence until she mentioned the one thing on both of their minds.

“So, you never heard from her?” Celeste maintained her attention on filling a tin trough with bottled waters, getting the drinks ready to be put on ice.

Alex tore through the cardboard boxes that held the beer. “Nothing.”

“That’s pretty shitty...”

“She’s your friend.”

“I told you she asked for your number—figured she would have text or something?”

“Fuck, I dunno?” Alex stepped back and rubbed his face. “This last week has been a nightmare. I wouldn’t have anything nice to say to her anyway.”

Celeste read his posture—the dark rings under his eyes, and his pushed back hair was messier than usual.

“I loved the article about you in *Valley Jagg*.” She tried to lift him with sarcasm and a grin.

“So fucking stupid...” He rolled his eyes. “Like anything Ronnie Doll ever said matters. Fuckin’ hack... We danced—I can’t imagine actually dating her. *I can’t handle this shit!*” He emphasized the words by tossing a sack of red plastic cups at her.

Celeste’s fingernails ripped into the cellophane. With one motion she tore the bag and created a neat stack of party cups that piled high next to the beer. “You did sell everything though, didn’t you? Even your prints for tonight?”

“Yeah... Got a couple more commissions too.” He thought for a moment. “I don’t know how to feel about it. The money’s great—you have no idea how much that will help... Mom, Tita. But I always thought if my art ever sold, it would be because it resonated—it spoke to someone. Not because people are gambling on Stevie Pearl’s love life... She turned my career, these pieces I’ve been working on for years, into a carnival show.”

Celeste sighed and avoided his eyes. She understood the sentiment and was feeling guilty for how everything had worked out.

“I’m sorry, Alex. I didn’t know... She’s not a bad person—”

“There’s paparazzi outside right now hoping she shows up—even though her people made it *very clear* that she won’t be.” He glared out of the freshly cleaned glass window toward the creeps with cameras that were lurking in their cars as if it was an FBI stakeout. “This has been the most miserable week of my life.”

“Shit, man...” Celeste chewed her tongue, absorbing the bitterness in his tone. “I don’t know what’s going on with her—things are always difficult because she’s Stevie Pearl, but I never saw it going this way.”

“It’s not your fault...” Alex turned, relenting a *Walking Dead* themed daydream where he was bashing in the brains of paparazzi zombies. “There’s not much more to say.” He shrugged. “Yeah, maybe I read the whole thing wrong when I walked away—but she didn’t stop me. If she couldn’t come to the gallery tonight—if she wanted to see me again—she could have suggested something else. Said something, anything, else.”

“Well, you were just kind of... gone—weren’t you? I mean, you both said you just walked off—”

“She had her chance. I told her I just wanted to see her again. She left me standing there—twisting in the breeze... Nothing. Not a word. It doesn’t even really matter about her anymore...” The focus in Alex’s eyes fell upon Celeste and his snicker was poignant. “I mean, yeah, I felt like a total jackass for *you* letting me think that I *actually had a shot with the biggest pop star on the planet*. But now I just want my life back... I can’t even go the grocery store.”

“It’s fuckin’ stupid, dude—I don’t get it!” Celeste protested, her neck snapping toward the sky as she pleaded with Eros. “You both tell me the same story—you’re both clearly dumbasses—I thought you’d be

perfect for each other.”

Alex ignored her usual sass and instead sought insight. “You’re, like, her best friend—how’d you deal with it? All the media and drama?”

Not receiving her desired reaction, Celeste’s tone weakened. “I just don’t let it bother me, man. It’s not her doing it.”

“Well it’s certainly not me!”

“Alex, she didn’t plan this. The drama is this beast with a life of its own—she’s gotten better at controlling it, but she’s not a mastermind. She didn’t mean for any of this to happen to you. She doesn’t want those guys camped out in front of your house—getting in the way of your big night—prodding and harassing everyone who walks by.”

Alex struggled to find compassion, but he knew she was right. This wasn’t Stevie’s fault, but that wasn’t going to stop him from blaming her.

“It was hard at first—no one can prepare you for it. When we were kids and she was blowing up, it was exciting—seeing myself beside her, or in the background on TV—my name in magazines when she’d talk about her best friend in interviews... but then it all got really scary. Creepy dudes showin’ up at my house. Literally. My step-dad freaked.” She smirked. “You think one house party is bad—try a weekend in Vegas when you’re 19.”

Alex attempted to mask the thought by returning an uncomfortable smile. He couldn’t imagine the gossip escalating, or being 20 years old and trying to deal with the relentless attention.

“I eventually became old news.” Celeste continued. “I’ve been friends with her for, like, 10...15 years? There’s not much of a story with me anymore. They try to get me to comment on boyfriends or a breakup once in a while, but Stevie is pretty good about protecting us. She learned the hard way—we all did. She laid down a firm rule with the media to stay away from friends and family, anyone going against that is hardcore blacklisted. And of course, any reputable journalist does not want to be on Stevie’s blacklist.”

“So why me? I’m not protected?”

“The world’s just reacting right now—no one on her team was prepared for you, or your little dance number. You just dropped in that night and everyone was blindsided... including her.” She smiled. “She likes you, Alex. I don’t know what the fuck’s going on, but I know my friend.”

A loud thump startled their words. Rustling toward the back of the gallery sent their attention to make sense of the noise. The latch of the heavy metal door snapped open and the hinges squeaked.

“Alex?! You here?” A voice shouted. “Hello?”

“It’s just my mom.” He reassured. “Yup! Out front!”

Kadence cautiously poked her head in through the backdoor and then followed her son’s voice, Tita shuffling behind.

“You guys made it!” Alex greeted. “Good, and you’re early—I can put you to work!”

“Your brother’s trying to park the truck.” His mother leaned in for a hug. “We circled the block a couple of times—who are all of those people?”

“Tita!” Alex ignored the question and welcomed his grandmother. “This is Celeste. Celeste, this is my Mom, Kadence, and that’s Tita.”

“Tats, huh?” Tita lifted an eye at Celeste. “Got one on my inner thigh. Looks like melted putty now.”

Celeste burst into a cackle.

“Jesus, Ma...” Kadence glared down at her. “It’s nice to meet you, Celeste.” She extended her hand.

Celeste pushed the hand aside and wrapped Kadence in a warm hug. “It’s great to meet you too—you did a good job with this one. He gets me coffee at work.” She gestured toward Alex with her thumb. She then leaned down and held Tita extra long. “And I’ve heard quite a bit about you!”

“Shit...” Tita squinted through her cataracts.

“The place is lookin’ good, Alex.” Kadence complimented. “I haven’t seen some of these.” She moved around the room, examining his work.

“Gettin’ there. Still have to wipe down a few counters—get these beers on ice.” He patted the top of a box.

“You can give me one of them.” Tita flicked her finger.

“No—” Alex snapped. “I’m not giving you any beer—your meds. Don’t let her have any.” Alex eyed Celeste.

*Later.* Celeste mimed with her lips. *Once he’s gone.*

“I like this one.” Tita struggled forward, reaching toward the tower of cups. “Why don’t you date her instead of Miss Priss?”

“I’m not dating Stevie—for the *millionth time!*”

“That’s not what Mario says...”

“Tita, I don’t care what Mario says! I’m standing right here and I’m telling you that we’re not dating.”

“Pussy.”

Celeste beamed toward the old woman. “I call him that too! We’re gonna hangout tonight.” She grabbed Tita by the hand. “Maybe we can get you laid.”

“Psh—I don’t need your help.” Tita jerked her hand back and gave a gummy smile. She used her tongue to slide along the gaps in her missing teeth.

“Yup...” Alex imagined the train wreck that was about to unfold. “I’ve got shit to do.”

Alex's opening night was beyond a success. All of his close friends and family came to support him, some of the production crew from the movie showed up, and countless strangers that he could only attribute to the Stevie Pearl phenomenon. Eccentrics, a few minor celebrities, and a lot of climbers created only elbow room within the tiny Santa Monica art gallery.

He felt spread thin, rushing to shake hands and meet introductions. Naturally, everyone he talked to asked him to dance—a joke that quickly grew tired. However, he did secure several more commissions and obtained countless phone numbers and email addresses for future print runs.

The night was more than he could have hoped for, though it did lack one guest in particular—Stevie Pearl’s PR department remaining good on their word. There was no sign of the pop star, and he almost felt relieved. Perhaps, finally, the world would realize what he had known all along—that Stevie Pearl had no interest in him.

“Thanks for coming, Charlie—driving Mom and Tita.” Alex found a quiet moment off to the side with his brother.

“This place is a shit show.” Charlie looked around the room with a beer in his hand. “These the people you hang out with here in L.A.?”

“I don’t know most of them...”

Charlie nodded slowly, studying an art crowd he had only seen in movies. “Some babes here though.”

“That’s one thing L.A. doesn’t lack.”

“Where’s your girlfriend?” His brother’s gaze met him square. “You show her your tiny ding-a-ling and she split already?”

“Yeah. That’s exactly what happened.”

“You don’t actually like her, right? Stevie Pearl? Fuck, man—that’d be stupid.”

“It is stupid. It’s been about the worst week of my life, Charlie... Though today turned out pretty good.” Alex looked out across the room with him. Never had his own work brought so many people together, or made him as much money. “Just different worlds. Seems you’ve kicked me out of yours, and she won’t let me into hers.”

“Don’t even start that shit.” Charlie was gruff. “Look at you, Alex... You don’t think any one of us would trade places with you in a second? No one crowds around and claps when I unveil a new pump for the well.”

Alex remained silent.

“I know you gave Mom money.”

He turned and met Charlie’s eye but didn’t offer a response. The two stood still in silence.

“There’s my boys!” Kadence approached, putting her hands on both their shoulders. “Isn’t this great, Charlie? Can you believe your little brother pulled it off?!”

“Seems he always does.”

Alex shifted his weight and sought peace. “Charlie was just telling me how he got the well back up and running—fixed the fence. I’m sure it looks really nice.”

“It does.” Kadence agreed. “He keeps that place going. He’s been busy since... well, we came into *some money* when Tita got an increase in Social Security. I guess they messed up a long time ago...” She eyed Alex.

“I keep saying that we should seek back-payment,” Charlie interjected, “but Mom doesn’t seem to think we should. All these years with the government stiffing her—I want to go down there and raise some hell. What do you think, Alex?”

“I think you should just let some things go, Charlie.” Alex said. “Speaking of which, I’m gonna go find Celeste and Troy—make sure they haven’t gotten Tita too drunk.”

Alex nodded toward Charlie and then crossed the room, shaking off his brother’s disposition by shaking a few hands as he walked. The warm praise and compliments of his work quickly melted any animosity that was carried with him. He looked back toward his family and saw Kadence smiling. Charlie had his tongue in his cheek. He knew he eventually needed to talk to his brother, but tonight wasn’t going to be the night.

“You guys don’t have to stick around.” Alex said to Troy. “The cleaners will get most of it, I just don’t want to leave a disaster.” He walked around the room filling a trash bag with empties.

“You did good!” Celeste hung on her boyfriend for balance. “Good night. T’was a good night...”

“It sure was for someone!” Troy laughed, straining to hold on to her.

“She gonna be okay?”

“Looks like your grandma drank her under the table.”

“I love Tita!!!” Celeste slurred, dragging Troy as she staggered a few steps.

“Jesus.” Alex laughed. “Have fun with that.”

“Tita!!”

“Fuck!” Troy lunged as Celeste’s limp body flopped like a cadaver. He maneuvered and managed to avoid colliding into a floor display with Alex’s artwork.

“Alright—yeah, dude—I need to put her to bed...” Troy finally got her arm around his shoulder. “Congrats on the opening, it was great. You’re super talented, man—you deserve this.”

“Thanks, Troy. I’m glad you came.” He nodded. “You guys get home safe.”

Troy mustered his strength and propped Celeste for the walk back to the car. The two squished through the front door and then Troy raised Celeste’s arm like a puppet to wave goodbye. “Alex’s Grandma!!” She shouted. Alex laughed and watched the two sway down the sidewalk, Celeste pulling Troy out into the streetlights before they disappeared around the corner.

Alone in the gallery, Alex was a bit more deliberate while taking in the sights. On each wall, every angle that caught his vision stood a piece of his own creation. He almost didn’t recognize some of the work anymore. It no longer belonged to him, or he no longer identified with the younger man who had created it. There were a few pieces, or at least parts of pieces, that awed him. Several moments within a particular work that he was truly proud of. These glimmers fueled a bi-polar confidence, picking apart each notion of his talent while also giving him the courage to host a night like tonight.

He welled with satisfaction and relief, though not through a sense of accomplishment. Anyone can hang images on a wall and host a party. The relief came from acceptance. Whether people were there on the hopes of meeting Stevie Pearl or not, by the time they left they were consumed with his art. They saw what he had created and at least for a moment forgot about their motives, their problems, and their life. They became absorbed in his visual experience, and Alex witnessed their transformation. These people allowed him to contribute to their existence—his work had inspired contemplation, emotion, and conversation. These were the things that made him feel like he belonged. These are the things that gave Alex his place in the world.

He grabbed a couple of trash bags and carried them to the backdoor, propping it open with a cinderblock. The night air felt cool and damp, its scent mixing with the salty spray from the ocean that was only a couple of blocks away. He crossed the alley and approached a container that was tucked into the shadows. With a heave, he tossed the bags into the dumpster. The clashing of aluminum cans disturbed an eerie peacefulness, Santa Monica having gone to bed for the evening.

He went back inside, double checked that the front door was locked and then killed the lights. He slung his computer bag over his shoulder and twirled the Jeep keys around his index finger. Kicking the brick from the backdoor, he noticed that a car had stopped at the end of the alley. The headlights were out, but its parking lights remained dim. He looked down the other side of the alley, it was barren except for a puddle reflecting the moonlight.

He saw a flicker from the parked car and then heard a door shut. Alex looked back at the gallery, the heavy metal door now locked from the inside. He felt the steps getting closer, unable to make out the contours coming toward him. Alex locked his jaw and balled his keys inside his fist. With two long strides he stepped out into the middle of the alley and faced the footsteps like a gunslinger at high noon.

Alex stood like a weathered rock, waiting for the shadow to approach. With his eyes adjusting to the

darkness, he began to see the outline of a hoodie that was pulled up over a head. A long, thin frame with small steps carried the figure toward him, the gait soft and unsure. Alex looked back over his shoulder to see if a crew was trying to bait him, using the decoy's trepidation as their distraction. No one was there.

"How you doin' tonight?" Alex spoke into the darkness, testing for friend or foe.

The shadow continued toward him, unaffected by his words. "Could be better—looks like I missed the party?"

He eased as the soft voice hit his ear, strands of blonde hair catching the moon. Alex pushed the keys into his pocket.

The woman stopped about ten paces out, centering herself with Alex.

"Miss Pearl?"

"Mister Nopah."

The two continued to stare at each other, unsure of exactly what it was that they wanted to say.

"I don't like how you left things the other night... Storming off in the dark." Stevie shot first. "Is that the type of behavior I can come to expect from you?"

Alex was immediately struck and a gasp of air spilled between his clenched teeth.

"Probably wasn't my best moment..." He admitted. "But I didn't need your excuses."

"You feel I owe you somethin'?"

"That night I didn't. I just wanted to see you again... Now I do. An apology, perhaps?"

"You first."

Alex's weight eased to his hip and he bit his lip at the thought of saying sorry.

"Okay." He nodded and composed himself. "I've thought about that night over and over. Seems I can't get away from it. And you're right... our conversation... I wasn't listening to you. All I heard was *no* and it crushed me. I'm sorry."

Stevie moved in a few steps closer, her red lips and smoky eyes coming into focus in the ambient light. She was stunning. Once again Alex lost his footing and began to drown in her beauty.

"I'm sorry too." She said softly. "I'm sorry for all of the unwelcome attention. But I'm the most sorry about missing your night."

"I think you made it pretty clear that you weren't going to be here."

"Still didn't stop the cameras though, did it?"

"I'm not sure how you live like that."

Stevie paused, twirling the long white string that worked her hood. "It makes moments like this feel like they mean something."

"Yeah, but you still got people watching..." Alex nodded down to the car that was running at the end of the alley.

"That's how it'll be if you hang out with me. They're not going anywhere."

Alex studied her and the string wrapped around her finger. It made him smile. He knew from the moment the car door shut that it was her walking down the alley toward him. He also knew that the string she was playing with had a better chance of walking out of this relationship alive.

He was about to trade everything to be with her. And she, just by standing across from him, was proof that she was doing the same.

"It's not over, you know... My night, that is."

"I didn't miss it?"

"Not all of it."