

What Matters Most

A Novel by

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To Denis and Jenny

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1 The Pearls

"I'm so scared. It's hard to believe this is my reality, but this is the way it's got to be. I must get them back." She glanced over at the passenger seat; it wasn't funny, but her pistol was riding shotgun. The deadly, cold, black steel was her partner in the crime she was about to commit. A quick glance in the rear-view mirror confirmed her thoughts; she was unrecognizable. Her shoulder length silky blonde hair was completely covered, and no one would ever guess she had perfectly flawless skin under the layers of cheap Halloween makeup. She was certain that even her gender would be in question in the clothes she chose.

Her quest to bring her loved ones back, piece by piece, began when she was robbed. After the shock of the theft abated, anger filled her; enough to provoke her to hunt. She marched into Ace's pawnshop, not expecting to drain her checking account to buy back her own guns; a pistol and two rifles. Her indignation swelled to outrage over the transaction. Having her precious possessions stolen from her, and then having to buy them back, felt like choosing to lie down on a bed of nails. But, it had to be done. She and Paxton had purchased those guns. He'd taken her to gun ranges numerous times and she always looked forward to it. After he was assigned overseas, Meagan continued shooting frequently. Successfully recouping the weapons, empowered her. She was physically strong, but a gun changed the equation; it added to her bravado and propelled her to King's Pawnshop that evening.

The East Valley shopping center buzzed with activity. A popular Italian restaurant was the biggest draw. She rolled to a stop several shops away from King's Pawn and hopped out of Paxton's unremarkable, brown, Dodge Ram truck.

There was no room for doubt. She was running on instinct, which told her that if she looked for her belongings, she would find them. As she approached the building, she fully expected to encounter another vestige of her life. The anticipation of the reunion was making her jittery.

She was in luck; the door wasn't locked. The sign on the door of King's Pawn stated they closed three minutes ago; Meagan took a deep breath and pushed the door open with authority. Surprised, the shopkeeper quickly muted the country music blaring from his cell phone. "We're closed," he stated.

When she devised her crucial scheme for justice, she knew it would require the diligence of a soldier to conceal her identity. She accomplished it. Meagan wore Paxton's army fatigues, tucked into the black, well worn, army issued boots he had died in. They felt good on her feet. His leather jacket hung awkwardly on her slim figure, revealing his AC/DC rock band t-shirt.



His curiosity was piqued as he expertly wrapped up counting the till and zipped the cash bag shut. He checked his Breitling wristwatch and sucked in a deep breath while the pseudo-military hobo surveyed the guitars for sale. Ordinarily, King would have gladly assisted a late pawn customer, but tonight he had planned to talk to Gayla. It was a long overdue conversation.

King raced back to his office to toss the cash bag in the vault. Storm's growl caused him to hurry back to his customer in the front of the store.

He couldn't see the eyes; the aviator sunglasses were too dark. The hair was obscured and concealed under a black knit cap. Brown lipstick and fake, blue plastic dentures masked her lips and teeth.

King noticed every detail about the tall vagabond as she paced his shop. Her makeup was severe and overdone—almost comical. He knew she was protecting her identity with someone else's wardrobe. Without much history or understanding of women, King Pullman's insight into people emanated from his eight years in the pawn business. If he were a betting man, he would have laid odds she wasn't shopping, she was prowling; doing recon. His stomach flipped at the thought.

She stood erect; shoulders squared and met King's calm hazel eyes. "I'm looking for some jewelry."

"What we have is all here." He gestured to the long display case before him.

Meagan noted the minor differences between this shop and the shop she visited several days before. The other store was a bit smaller than King's Pawn and didn't smell as good. As she neared the bearded gentleman behind the counter, she recognized the pleasant, woodsy scent was coming from him. He smelled inviting and familiar, like green tea and spice cake in a forest. A distant memory of her uncle Abe's tobacco pipe floated to mind.

"Would you like to see something in here?" the broad-chested man inquired, causing her to snap back to the present.

Her eyes darted to the imposing German Shepherd lying on the floor behind the pleasant-smelling man. His growl escalated as she drew near.

"Storm! Hush!" the man commanded, silencing the dog. He kept his eye on the suspiciously costumed person as she examined a photo in her hand. Even upside down, King could identify the gems in the snap-shot. She was undeniably doing reconnaissance. Nothing good had ever come from a customer's discovery of their former possessions in his store.

Things were not going well.

It was a rotten time for King to recall asking Marty to fix the silent alarm button. Screws had loosened, and the button—once attached to the back of the counter—lay inconveniently on the floor, in the corner, under the cabinet.

"They have to be here," she muttered under her breath, although there was no sign of the amber ring. The white gold band with four prongs grasping the solitary, stunning amber stone, was given to her by her father upon his mother's death. She studied the assortment of jewelry inside the sizeable glass case. Meagan hoped her Grandmother Pearl's signature necklace would be there too.

"Could I see those?" She pointed to the tray containing a string of pearls, and then tucked her hand back in her jacket pocket.

King took the cabinet key from his jeans' pocket, unlocked the sliding glass panels, and then set the tray of jewels on the counter while assessing her body language. The moment she examined them, he knew she was locked on the pearls.

"If you haven't been in here before," he coached, "how it works is, you tell me a price you are willing to pay, and we negotiate."

She was momentarily paralyzed by her emotions; elated by the discovery of the pearls and disgusted there was only one Morris family heirloom in the shop. No ruby rose brooch or cameo; no amber ring, opal choker, or pocket-watch; and clearly, no painting or pheasant, speed bag or guitar. She would have to hunt harder.

The moment of peril arrived.

"Hands up! Right, now!" she ordered, extracting the 9-mm handgun from the pocket of Pax's leather jacket. "I will shoot you, so don't do anything stupid."

As Storm sailed over the counter like a track hurdler, King shouted, "Stand down!" Storm's toenails skidded across the smooth cement floor before he froze in his tracks—watching Meagan like prey. King worried his nervous assailant might panic and shoot his dog. Meagan flashed the gun from King to the dog and back to King. The thought of anyone injuring Storm made King's heart race.

"Shooting me would be stupid, don't you think?" he said, lifting his hands in the air. He eyed the alarm button and stretched his leg out as far as he could without falling, and then stretched... just a bit ... more.

"What are you doing?" Meagan demanded in her deepest voice. As she lurched forward to see what he was doing behind the counter, Storm grabbed the seat of her baggy pants and jerked her backward. As she stumbled, she accidentally fired the gun, leaving a new hole in the ceiling.

"Shit," King growled and hit the small round alarm button with the toe of his cowboy boot. He would discuss shop repairs with Marty, later, and point out the new hole in the roof. The triggered alarm was linked to the police station; they were likely already on their way. "Stand down, Storm."

The second she was free of the dog's grip, Meagan scrambled to the counter; her gloved fingers still wrapped around the pistol. She resumed pointing the gun at King's chest and he re-hoisted his hands into the air.

With her free hand, Meagan felt the back of the old camo pants, looking for holes. King tried to hide a smirk and was on the verge of snickering at her. This had to be a woman, the way she yelped when Storm jerked her back and then the way she checked

her clothing. "Now, where were we?" he asked her. "Oh, yes, I think you were robbing me."

Meagan glared at the dark-haired, handsome man and was not amused. She pulled the plastic grocery store sack out of her back pocket. With the gun leveled on him, she plucked the long strand of pearls off the tray, and with a gentle hand, dropped it into her flimsy bag. The almost-botched plan was now back on track. She was elated.

Then she wasn't.

"I'm outta here," Meagan announced and slung the bag off the counter with a cocky fling of her head, sending the pearls flying across the shop. "No!" she yelled. "No!" Storm's teeth had punctured the flimsy sack.



Officer Dell and the Pullman family were well acquainted and had maintained a good working relationship over the years... one that included 'no light bar warning lights.' Dell stealthily swung the cruiser into the parking lot near King's Pawn. It amazed him that King and his family were still in the pawn business after all these years. "Those Pullman men must be made of grit to put up with all the nonsense," he mused. A reality television show filmed in their shops would have made them millionaires because most people love a good crime drama.

The parking lot was still teeming with cars, which made seeking out King's robber more difficult. As far as Dell was concerned, the most suspicious vehicle was a brown truck with a mud-obsured license plate. "Par for the course," he muttered as he checked to ensure he had all the equipment he might need.

The evening was cool and overcast when Dell closed the cruiser door and glanced over once more at the brown truck; a reflective sticker on the back window read, 'Girls love trucks too!' "Hmm," Dell mumbled. The brilliant LED headlights of the cruiser flooded the shop, reflecting off the hanging brass musical instruments. Dell had inadvertently announced his arrival.

Meagan froze like a deer in headlights. She was positive she was going to jail. Feeling like she had nothing to lose, she threatened through clenched teeth, "I want my pearls. You get them, or I'll shoot your hand!"

"You'll... what?" King wondered if he understood her correctly. He glanced at his currently intact palms and fingers. Why someone would target one of his hands was a mystery to him. He could swear he heard her heart pounding. The only people he had ever seen sweat like this criminal were drug addicts. Suddenly, he felt like there was going to be a fatality in his shop.

"Storm, fetch!" King commanded. His dog obeyed and bolted for the pearls that dangled from the handlebar of a racing bike.

Dell had handcuffed his fair share of women in his career. He recalled yanking two hookers out of King's Pawn not too long ago. That had been a rough one for Dell. Those women were so nice to him; absolutely the most pleasant and flirtatious criminals he had ever met. Maybe this wouldn't go so badly—if it were a woman—again. He smiled, sometimes his job was a piece of cake.

The moment the door flew open and Dell entered, pointing his gun toward Meagan, she shoved hers back in her pocket.

"Officer Delbert Wims! Put your hands up!" he bellowed.

"Hi, Dell," King greeted the friendly, black officer. "You just missed him. Black truck, Hispanic or Brazilian, I couldn't tell. He took off with an iPhone," King lied smoothly and gently took the pearls from Storm's mouth; patting his head. "Good boy."

Meagan's heart dropped to her stomach and pounded harder than ever, as she imagined she was about to be taken into custody. Her head felt like it was on fire and sweat trickled down her neck from under the knit cap. Her armpits were swimming. She thought about running but imagined getting shot in the back. Grandma Pearl would have hated that. She would have given Meagan a sweet, but stern, lecture on the pitfalls of stealing and running from the police. Her breathing was shallow as she listened to the two men and concentrated on not fainting.

The man behind the counter picked up Meagan's pearls, casually wiped off the dog slobber and deposited them into a King's Pawn bag; as though she purchased them. "Doubt you'll catch him, he had friends waiting," he told the officer.

Meagan was dumbfounded as she watched him toss in a jewelry case for the pearls.

Dell knew it only took him five minutes to get to the shop. "Oh, so everything is fine?" he checked; baffled that he missed the culprit. He scratched his chin and stared at the lanky customer, suspiciously.

"Here you go. Come back and see me," King instructed, handing the bag to Meagan.

She hoped that no one could see the humiliation heating her cheeks under all her makeup. "Thank you. Excuse me," she whispered, averting her Halloween face and gratefully slipping past the officer at the door.

"Hmm," Dell mumbled and stepped aside, holding the door open for her.

King glanced down and hastily grabbed the photo the robber left behind. He would study it later. For the time being, it fit nicely in the breast pocket of his buttoned-down shirt.

"These kids, Dell, they think we owe them everything. It makes me want to retire."

"I know what you mean." Dell poured himself a cup of coffee and turned the pot off. "How much did that punk get away with?"

"About two hundred dollars."

Officer Dell slurped his coffee and strolled toward the exit. "Sorry I didn't make it in time, King. That man, the one who just left, has he been in here before?"

"Do you mean 'him'?" King asked pointing to the shop door. "No. I thought it was a woman. Strange person, but I try not to let that influence the deal."

Dell laughed when he realized he had jumped to conclusions about the truck and the customer. He was positive the alarm call had been for the bum in King's shop. "Strange fella."

King agreed, "Yes, strange."

"Yeah but ignoring the way someone looks would be hard though," Dell commented. "Why'd you get into this business, King? Seems like there are better, I mean, safer things you could do."

"I appreciate your concern, Dell. This business gives me the freedom I need to do other things. Besides, you know that I carry a gun and I know how to use it if I ever needed to." His lips formed a thin smile at his trusty friend. He was anxious for Dell to leave so he could examine the photo more carefully. The decision to blow off a potentially ugly talk with Gayla was simple considering his near-death robbery experience.

"Okay, then," Officer Dell conceded, "I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks, Dell."

King bolted the glass and iron door after Officer Dell and killed the lights on his way to the back office to study the picture.

Only the hum of the air filter motor could be heard. The shop was eerily quiet as he settled into his rustic wooden banker's chair and put on a pair of his dad's old, round, reading glasses. King refused to let on to anyone that his vision was not perfect anymore. He knew it was silly, but he didn't read anything small if other people were around. Thankfully, his manager, Marty hadn't noticed the increased font size on his cell phone, he would have been the butt of Marty's jokes forever.

"Hmm," King muttered. If he had to guess, he'd say the people in the photo were likely relatives of the robber. A little girl, about four years old in the photo, wore a fancy amber ring on her thumb; it was mounted high and appeared expensive. Peering through the large magnifying glass vice-gripped to his desk, he confirmed the thief took the pearls worn by the eldest woman. If the thief was after anything else in this photo, King concluded it would have been a ruby rose brooch, two necklaces, and that amber ring. He knew he should check the inventory at his brother's shop and his dad's as well. With his mother in the hospital, the last thing the Pullman family needed was a homicide because of a deranged person in military dress-up.



Meagan struggled with her emotions. Twenty-four miles to the B and B passed in a blur after the shock of her robbery-turned-gift. Tears threatened to spill over because of the kindness the big man exhibited. She wished she understood his reasoning. He had every right to hand her over to the cop. She groped around in the sack and... no photo.

Luckily, the thieves who ruined her life had not destroyed her family photo album, the only place her loved ones still resided. She had plenty of other pictures.

Dragging herself up the creaking stairs to her third-floor room in the lovely Victorian home, she recalled two weeks earlier. It had been a stressful day at work and she was looking forward to changing clothes and working out in the gym. When she rounded the corner to her apartment, she knew something horrible had happened. She pushed aside the destroyed front door to the shock and horror of being robbed. Strange, how radically her life changed at that moment.

Since Paxton's death, Meagan had not felt comfortable in their home. That was odd, because while he was alive, she spent most of her time alone in the house. Knowing

she was 'manning the homestead' while her husband fought had been her mission throughout their ten-year marriage. After he died, it worked for a year—then she went broke.

Massaging her temples with her thumbs, she tried to erase the image of her trashed apartment and the zeros in her bank account. Tomorrow, after work, she would hunt again. Since her job at the Appliance Warehouse did not allow her time to surf the Internet for her belongings, she planned to use the computers in the city library.

End of Chapter 1. The author encourages you to purchase a copy of this delightful book so you can follow King and Meagan's trials. https://www.amazon.com/What-Matters-Most-Helen-Kirk-ebook/dp/B07B9W61YT/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1528567478&sr=8-1&keywords=helen+bea+kirk

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