HEAD’S LAW

By

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DEDICATION

I find dedications difficult, but this time it was easy.

To my mom.
She waited years for me to write a novel,
so I thought it fitting she received my first on the anniversary of her birth.

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About the Author
A Gear
SALLY wanted to belong. She wanted to be rich. She wanted to have enough money to never worry about having enough money.

The carpeted corridor sported crystal chandeliers spaced every dozen feet, but most were unlit for a reason. Beneath one of those lights, a circular shimmer of gold caught Sally’s eyes.

As she neared the disk, the corners of her mouth turned up and her heart beat faster. She guessed right. She leaned over to grab the gold coin but stopped midway. Was this a test given by the wealthy? Those snatching the coin proved they didn’t belong in the exclusive suites lining the north ridge of the amphitheater.

She knew what it felt like to be poor. Her family died so that she might live. That was twenty years ago, but the pain still lingered. And it was all because of money.

She looked for hidden cameras and listened for the telltale sound of spinning sprockets or muffled breathing. She sniffed the air for the faintest wisp of fragrance.

Nothing.

Sally felt like an outsider, someone pretending to be rich. A fraud. To fight her unease, she snatched the coin and flipped it into the air as if she didn’t have a care in the world. The tinkle
of it landing on her black iron sprocket echoed like an alarm bell ringing in the predawn stillness.

She gasped and looked around. “Calm down,” she told herself. “There’s no one here.”

She looked at the coin and considered putting it back. “No. It’s mine now.” She let it slide off her sprocket and snatched it in her gear teeth with a move that would make any athlete proud. She gripped the coin a little tighter, as if it meant more to her than she cared to admit.

That’s when she heard it, a reply, the sound of a squeaky metal gate opening, the same one she passed through minutes earlier.

“Oh, gosh.” Someone was coming for her. A trap.

Sweat beaded on her shaft. Adrenaline gushed. *Run!*

Sally raced down the corridor, stopping at each door, testing each lock, looking for an escape, hoping for a miracle.

Someone switched on the corridor lights. They flickered to life, ready for the day to begin.

She yelped. It felt like a thousand suns beamed into her eyes. She squinted and continued searching, testing each door handle as she rushed down the curved hallway. They locked even the emergency exits.

At the last suite, she skidded to a stop, looked up, and said a quick prayer. She tried the door handle.

Locked. Of course it was locked. “I can’t catch a break.” She looked up the corridor. The curved line of suites followed the amphitheater ridge as the corridor bowed to the left.

Someone was coming, of that she was sure. Probably a posse. They would want witnesses to the theft of the gold coin. It was a cleaver trap, probably created by family members from one of
the gears ensnared by Head’s Law. Retaliation. Payback. They couldn’t get to Mayor Head so they chose her instead. And why not? She was the face of Head’s Law. She was only doing her job, a job she hated, but she was the one enforcing the law.

She heard a whirling sound like bees in a hive, growing stronger, louder, clearer. She cocked her hearing holes to the side. *That’s not right.* She expected a group of gears to arrest her, not just one.

She paced in tight little circles, knowing there was nowhere to go. They had her boxed in. All because of her greed. All because of a stupid gold coin. She looked down at it wedged between two sprocket teeth. She spun up and the coin became a blur, a ribbon of gold. It blended nicely with the red and purple rings painted on her sprocket.

Maybe no one would notice.

She was so focused on the coin that she didn’t see the gear round the bend and come into view.

When Idler saw her, he slowed, stood straighter, inhaled deeply, and puffed out his sprocket. She was hot. Red-hot. Delicious.

He rolled up to her. “I'm Idler. I’ll be serving you.”

She blinked. *Isn’t he here to arrest me?* She just stood there, feeling confused and disoriented.

“You look nervous. Is there a problem?” He tried the door handle. “That’s strange. I unlocked it earlier.”

He unlocked the door and moved aside. “Please,” he said and motioned for her to enter the suite first.

“May I offer you a glass of our best kerosene? It’s thirty years old, but there’s not enough o’s in smooth to describe it.” He winked, hoping his offer made a suitable impression. Only
the wealthiest received such treatment, but for a pretty gear, he made an exception.

She heard the words, but it took a moment for them to penetrate and make sense. Maybe a drink would calm her down, she decided. “Please.” She looked into his eyes.

His upper shaft blushed. He bowed and left the room.

She took a dozen deep breaths and exhaled each one slowly. *This is where I’m supposed to be, suite 113 as luck would have it. I was invited. Now calm down and act filthy rich.*

Sally looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows, at the gears milling around the open-air amphitheater below. In the center was a wooden stage surrounded on all sides by a concrete ribbon several feet wide and beyond that by thousands of metal cups, called sockets, pounded into the clay. Some gears stood plugged into those sockets, their eyes shut, sprockets spinning, others raced around the grounds, playing, rolling up and down the ramps that lead to the nosebleed sockets.

Her hearing holes caught the sound of movement behind her. “Just put it on the bar,” she said without looking.

“Excuse me?” said a baritone voice.

She whipped around, her heartbeat skyrocketing. “I’m sorry. I thought you were Idler.”

“Who are you?”

“My name’s Sally. And you are…?”

He glared at her. His beady eyes narrowed into slits of black iron fury. Beauty didn’t sway him as it did other gears. Instead, it made him angry. Pretty gears got all the breaks. Not with him. Never with him. “My name's First. I'm Chief of Security.”
Her deep blue eyes opened wide with surprise. She spun her sprocket faster to blur the gold coin, and wondered if he’d try to take it. Maybe he was here to arrest her.

“Only approved gears are allowed in here,” he said. Few gears ever gained admittance to the best sockets in the amphitheater. It was his job, and those of a dozen subordinates, to keep out the riffraff. Today’s event was too important.

“What’s your name again?”

“Sally.”

“Uh-huh.” He glanced at the guest list attached to the clipboard he carried. “Can’t find you.”

“Try looking under the Black Gear Collection Agency.”

His cold stare turned icy, and he rolled a foot closer, a threatening move, an intimidating gesture. “You're not on the list, are you?” He tilted his hearing holes to the side. “Shhh. Listen…. Hear that?”

He raced behind the bar. Reached down. Grabbed Pinion. Yanked the foot tall gear off the floor. “Gotcha!” His wide grin looked as if he was going to bite the child in half.

“Let go!” Pinion wobbled back and forth, linkages clanking, trying to break free.

First carried him toward the door.

Sally raced forward, blocked his path. “Put him down!”

First towered two feet over her five-foot frame and looked down at her. “You’re pretty.”

“Thank you.”

“I hate pretty.”

Her mouth swung open then her eyes narrowed with anger.
"I’m taking him to jail where he belongs. Get out of my way. Now.” He raised his sprocket so that its teeth spun a foot from her eyeballs.

Both knew what the threat meant: A wrong move and her eyes would become sawdust.

“He’s my guest.” She stood her ground, but her eyes focused on his sprocket whizzing by. Her heartbeat quickened. Sweat beaded on her shaft. Her insides felt as if they were melting. She held her breath.

He inched closer. His sprocket hissed a warning as it spun up.

“Touch me,” she said in a quiet but stern voice, “and provision five, subsection C, of Head’s Law will guarantee you’ll be dropped off the Black Gear River Bridge.”

There was no such provision, but First didn’t know that. Yet her bluff wasn’t an empty threat, either. She was the top producer at the agency, not only for her intelligence, but also for her beauty. Her job depended on both, and anyone harming her would risk certain death.

She asked in her most seductive voice, a voice trained to make male gears bubble with sexual excitement, “You can swim, can’t you First?”

No gear could swim. A splash of water could kill a gear. Being dropped off the bridge meant death by drowning. That’s what happened to Bevel. That’s what happened to victims of Head’s Law.

Her blue eyes darkened. Her sprocket spun up so that it hissed a warning like a rattler about to strike. Her voice hardened. “Let Pinion go.”

He moved back.
He lowered his sprocket. It slowed, but he wasn’t about to let a pretty gear push him around. No freaking way. He was top dog, the chief of security.

An uncomfortable silence followed.

Pinion’s brown eyes opened wide. Tears gathered. His shaft rattled against his sprocket. Little nervous squeaks leaked out between a mouth drawn tight. His whirling sprocket chirped like a bird. A terrified bird.

“He’s your guest,” First said, one eye cocked open, the other narrowed with skepticism. “Pinion’s your guest. Is that your story?”

“I’ll give you five seconds to release him.
One…two…three…”

First opened his breathing tube jaw.

Pinion dropped six feet to the floor, bounced once, and then toppled over in a slagheap of faded black iron. “Ouch! Me hurt, me hurt!”

“Shut up Pinion, or I’ll give you something to cry about.” First grabbed his clipboard and scanned down the list, flipping page after page until he came to the Black Gear Collection Agency. “Right. Uh-huh. Sure.”

Sally rolled out of the way, positioning herself between the two gears and clearing a path to the door. Pinion hid behind her lower shaft, peeking out now and again, still trembling, still squeaking, tears spilling.

Idler rolled into the suite balancing her drink and a tray of appetizers on his sprocket. He braked to a stop. “What’s going on?”
She turned to face Idler. “Pinion’s my guest,” she blurted out too forcefully, too quickly. “He’ll tell you.” She caught Idler’s attention and winked at him, mouthing the word, *please*.

“She’s right,” he said without hesitation, sounding almost believable. He worked for the customer, not security, and the customer was always right. Besides, she was cute. Way cute. He cleared his throat. “Pinion’s her guest.”

“Uh-huh. Right. Sure he is. No doubt about it.” First slapped the pages down on the clipboard then headed for the door, his beady eyes glaring at Sally and then at Pinion. “One of these days, Pinion...”

Pinion’s golf ball sized brown eyes peered out from behind her lower shaft. He trembled, rattling his linkages.

First rolled out of the suite, slamming the door behind him.

“Thanks,” she said to Idler and exhaled in a long, drawn out breath.

“Tanks,” Pinion said. He hopped up and down with delight, his breathing-tube jaw clapping, oily tears of relief sliding down his shaft. Those tears led to a sprocket covered with grease, one in need of a good polishing. The lad was filthy, but that was not surprising for a gear so little, so energetic, and so inquisitive.

Sally looked at the tyke. She knew that Pinion was a sweetheart caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, facing obstacles each day that would fell lesser gears.

She liked him.

Idler dropped down to Pinion’s height. “I warned you about this.”

“Me knows.” He sniffled once and then beamed his most innocent smile.
Idler stood and shook his shaft in disbelief then put down the refreshments.

“That will be all, Idler,” Sally said. “Thanks.”

He lingered for a moment, disappointment showing in his eyes because he wanted to do so much more for her. He left, knowing he would check back later. Then, he might even ask her for a date. Doing so might risk his job, but he sensed something unusual about her, something intriguing. He felt drawn to her like a magnet to iron, and wanted to know her better.

The door clicked closed behind him.

“Why is First after you?” she asked.

“He no like me. He mean.”

“You’re not supposed to be in here. Where’s your dad?”

He gestured toward the window.

She looked outside. A thousand black iron gears stood plugged into sockets, waiting for the event to begin.

“Are you Mom?” He stared at her with sad, brown eyes.

“Am I a mom?”

He moved closer and curled his shaft around her, hugging.

“Are you Mom?”

“Am I your mom?”

He rolled out from underneath her sprocket until he could see her eyes and then nodded, beaming a smile that lit up the room.

Pinion was such a sweetheart. “No, I’m not your mom. What happened to your mom?”

His puppy dog eyes tunneled into her heart. “She go on long trip. She not come back. You be new mom?”

She sighed. She didn’t like breaking his heart, but she had no choice. She shook her shaft.
Sally moved to the tray of appetizers and then sucked through a silver straw dipped into a glass of kerosene. “Wow!” Her vocal cords stung from the corrosive taste of the bubbling nectar. She could feel the drink blazing a path of frothing excitement down her shaft. Her raspy voice sounded hoarse. “That’s good stuff!”

Pinion stared at the tray of appetizers. His tongue flicked out and licked his chops. He hopped up and down with excitement. His stomach growled. He spun in tight little circles of desire, just itching to grab a quick snack.

“Go ahead, just don’t make a mess.”

He squealed with delight, reached over, and popped into his mouth a strip of fire-coated lithium. When he bit down, it ignited, and his eyes teared. He swallowed it whole and felt the fire’s warmth spreading throughout his body, burning the chill from his linkages. “That goodly.”

He rolled his eyes with pleasure and blew smoke rings. He giggled.

She winked at him then looked at the tray. “Molybdenum muffins! My favorite.” She grabbed one and started munching, crunchy on the outside, chewy on the inside. Delicious.

“You bestest, Sally.”

“You’re such a sweet thing.”

“Me stay here?”

She shook her shaft. “Others will be coming, and they paid a lot of money to get in here. You can’t stay. In fact, you should be going.”

He frowned then stared at the tray, his tongue flicking in and out like a snake’s, tasting the air.

“Go ahead. Take another.”
“Tanks.” He grabbed a cookie from the tray and downed it in one gulp.

“Why are you so hungry?”

“We not eat. Dad says no got money.”

She tightened her grip on the coin.

“Me go now.”

“Wait.” She looked at the tray then at the starving gear.

“Take the rest with you.”

He lunged forward and bumped into her lower shaft, hugging her again. “You bestest, Sally.”

“You’re so precious.”

Reluctantly, he broke the embrace and backed away. He gobbled another appetizer then looked at her, feeling guilty. He wanted to share. It was the right thing to do.

“It’s okay. Take them all. I can always get more.”

He nodded then pushed the remaining appetizers onto his sprocket, making sure to catch every...last...crumb. He rolled to the door and poked his shaft out, looked left, and then turned back to her. He whispered, “Bye, Sally.”

“Wait.” She looked down at her spinning sprocket, at the circle of gold and knew the coin could buy food for a week—longer if they were careful. She hopped out of her socket and rolled over to him. “Here.” She passed him the coin.

His puppy dog eyes lit up and a huge smile appeared. Then his hearing holes caught an unusual sound. He checked the hallway, and then disappeared. His squeaking sprocket was a fading echo as he rolled away.

“The poor thing is starving.” She shook her shaft and wondered when Pinion last had a proper meal. Then she thought of all the gears starving in the city.
She thought of Head’s Law.
“I hate that law. Someone should do something about it.”