

Chapter One

"How in God's name did you get my number?" the man screamed into the phone. "Why don't you give me your number so I can call you at your house while you're trying to have dinner with your family?"

"I'm sorry sir," Sarah said, "is there a better time to call you?"

Click.

Sarah pressed the auto-dial key on her computer again. The key was shiny with wear. When the next person answered, she didn't need to read the script.

"Hello Sir my name is Sarah and I'm calling on behalf of Ampucom Communications we are currently conducting a survey about the price of natural gas in your community and the services that you currently enjoy from your gas company the survey is sponsored by the provincial government and will only take fifteen minutes of your time the information gathered is strictly confidential and is merely used to analyze opinions about natural gas services and the privatization of the industry. As I've said, the survey will only take fifteen minutes of your time."

"Who this?" A man's voice said.

"This is Sarah from Ampucom Communications. We're conducting a survey." She rested her head in her hand and massaged her temples.

"What you call?"

"A survey. Would you be interested in participating in a survey sponsored by the provincial government?"

"Who this?"

Sarah straightened her neck and looked over the plain of her computer monitor. The air was muggy and the seat of her pants was saturated with sweat. The pleather armchair Ampucom had provided, which was guaranteed by the mass-manufacturer to provide unmatched lumbar support and maximum comfort, squeaked with the slightest movements, stuck to her legs when they were exposed and made her spine send throbs of pain to her brain toward the end of the day. She peered over the rows of computer stations, about forty in total, each containing one human reciting the script. She looked into her manager's office and found him pressing his headset against his ear as he eavesdropped on one of the forty operators. Quality control was always a crapshoot.

"Hello?" the man on the line said.

"Sir, would you like to take the survey or not. It's a simple question."

Her manager had no reaction.

"Who this?"

"Just answer the question," she said. "Do you want to take the damn survey or not? Just say yes or no."

"Who this?"

"This is Rod Stewart," she said, keeping her eyes on her manager. "I am currently taking a break from my Canadian tour, so I have decided to call random Canadians to find out if they want my body and think I'm sexy. Do you find me sexy, sir?"

"What you say?"

Sarah laughed and tossed her headset on the keyboard in front of her, leaving the

man on the line. Her manager remained in his office listening to calls. She wondered which job was worse, doing the talking or repeatedly monitoring the robotic employees in case one of them snapped and screamed their lungs out at a rude individual on the other end. She could hear the others in the room regurgitating the scripted greeting into their headsets with painfully cheerful voices.

Sarah looked at her watch, which was an oval of white gold surrounded by tiny diamonds. It had been a gift from a stranger a few years ago; the only gift that she had kept. The rest went to the pawnshop, or they were sold for cash. The watch read 2:30. Normally, I would be here for three more hours, she thought. Enough time to make around two hundred calls. That is, if none of them actually took the survey. It would be a good day to complete fifteen surveys in eight hours. Those who refused to participate were primarily citizens who would listen to the entire greeting and politely explain that they were busy living their lives. Then came what Sarah entitled 'sneak attacks'. If the person on the phone politely declined, the operators were trained to beg and plead with them, making it very clear that the surveys were short and the information received would be very helpful to the establishment conducting the research. For this current survey, Sarah gave up easily and was happy to contribute a bias in any way she could. She hated the government and their privatizations, but she wasn't exactly sure why. Everyone seemed to complain about them, so they couldn't be good.

Sarah walked to the office of her manager.

"Mark," she said.

Mark took off his headset, looking annoyed at the interruption.

"What are you doing away from your station?" he asked.

"Remember, I told you I have to leave at 2:30. I have an appointment at three."

"I remember," he said. "It was nice having you here. If you would like a letter of reference, or if you would like to use me as a reference, please feel free to do so."

Sarah grinned. "If I apply to be a telephone operator in the future, you will be the first reference on my list."

The smell. It brought back all of the memories in an instant. Memories of late nights, sore feet, blurred vision, one-night stands and, of course, the fights. The incessant arguments that sometimes ended up with a girl on the floor and a crowd of men either there to gawk at the scene of the crime or to try to help someone in a situation that should not have happened. Testosterone drifting throughout the air, screaming voices with pumping music and colored lights in the background; not a pretty sight for a battered mind to wake up to.

The smell. A mixture of all-purpose cleaner, body odor, a thousand ashtrays with a hint of shit. Sarah had not come across this smell since she had left. She stood outside the cramped office and stared at the back of the man's pink scalp. He was still trying to hide the polished skin with a greasy comb-over. Always pink, she thought. Just like a pig. His forefingers pecked at the keyboard that sat on the desk strewn with paperwork, several empty tumblers and a small bag of weed with a pack of Zig-Zag's beside it. She

knocked lightly on the doorframe.

The man's chair groaned as he spun around. His eyes said, I knew you'd be back. He grinned, hiding his teeth with his lips, always hiding the rotting blocks that were worn down from years of gnawing at the bones of T-bone steaks. His belly was large, round and firm.

Sarah was surprised that the new Kevin Blackwood looked more ghastly than the one in her memory.

"Back for another round I see," Kevin said. He motioned for her to sit on a kitchen chair opposite him. It had orange foam erupting from the clefts in the green vinyl.

"Don't worry, it won't pinch your ass," he said.

Sarah put her bag on the floor and unzipped her ski jacket before sitting. The smell became stronger, driving her toward nausea. "What did you need to see me about Kevin?" She asked. "I don't think you need an audition or an interview."

Kevin settled his arms underneath his B-cup breasts. "Don't worry," he said. "This will take five minutes at the most. I just want to go through the house rules with you before you start. Things have changed around here since you left."

Sarah looked at the bag of dope beside the computer. "Oh really," she said. "Doesn't look much different." Her eyes fell on his belly. "I guess you've gained a few pounds."

Kevin wheeled closer, his chair complaining along the way. "Lose the attitude. If you want to be a bitch and cause problems, you can take that snatch of yours, walk out

that door and crawl back into whatever hole in the earth you crawled out of. Clear?"

Sarah wrestled with her lips to curb her smile. "No need to get nasty Kevin."

Kevin opened a drawer and pulled some papers out and handed them to her.

"Normally I just give these to new employees, but I thought I would go over them with you, seeing that I know you've broken every single one of them."

"I'm just here to work, so save me the bullshit."

Kevin pulled a second set of papers from the desk and read out loud.

"No copulation in the building. That means no fucking on the premises."

He looked up from the paper and waited.

"Is copulation supposed to challenge my vocabulary? Give me a break Kevin.

I'm in a monogamous relationship."

He read on, "No getting so drunk that you need to be carried to a cab. No passing out in the back room and pissing yourself on the couch."

He looked up again.

"I rarely drink, and I would rather sleep in the alley," Sarah said. "And it is probably safer to piss on the couch than in the bathrooms, unless you've actually hired some cleaning staff. Can I go now?"

"I can recall opening up the bar to find you in the back sleeping in a puddle of your own piss. I can't have that shit anymore. I'm sick of the fucking headaches."

Sarah closed her eyes and waited.

"No blow on the premises."

Sarah's eyes bucked open.

Kevin glanced at the bag on the table, "but weed is still okay," his lips rose, lengthening his chin, "as long as you smoke it in the alley."

"I don't do drugs," Sarah said. "I've been clean for over two years."

Kevin leaned back and fanned himself, intensifying the thick smell in the room. His lazy eye made it hard for Sarah to return his stare. "You sure have turned into an angel since you left, haven't you? Virgin Mary reborn."

"Is that all?"

Kevin ignored the question. "So tell me what you've been up to. You just disappeared. I expected them to pull your body from the river. A psycho rapist or something. Maybe a drug dealer sick of you ripping him off. Junkies disappear all the time, and nobody seems to give a shit."

Sarah focused on the eye that seemed to be looking at her. "My personal life is none of your business. Are we done? Or are you going to pay me to sit in here and tell you to mind your own business over and over again?"

"Fine," Kevin said, "but one last thing. The most important rule of them all. No missing shows. No showing up late for shows. No leaving early if customers are paying for private shows. This is a job, not a fucking vacation. One no-show and you're gone."

Sarah stood.

"Oh, and Sarah," Kevin said, "if things don't work out with your, what did you call it, monogamous relationship? You know I've always had a soft spot for you."

Sarah's laugh was long and forced. "You? You couldn't fuck me when I was easy. Do us all a favor Kevin, have your next heart attack this afternoon. I'm sure no one

would be cruel enough to call for an ambulance."

Kevin chuckled. "See you Monday."

Sarah watched Mitzi's nose poke through the curtains of the front window after she closed the door of her car. Soon she could hear the whines and howls as the dog's claws slid down the door. She walked across the sidewalk, disappointed to hear the snow crunching under her feet. I guess I'll shovel it myself, she thought.

Sarah opened the door and rubbed the pudgy Rottweiler's head, speaking to her in baby talk. The dog's hair made her hands feel like they were covered in a light layer of candle wax. Time for a bath, she thought. She imagined Mitzi fighting to get out of the tub as soon as her fat paws hit the warm water. But when it was all over, with her hair still damp and smelling of mint and a strange flea pesticide, Mitzi would run through every room in the house doing figure eights. Sarah wondered if Kevin Blackwood would react the same way if someone forced him to have a shower.

Sarah fought off Mitzi and made her way into the house. She could smell tomato sauce and Italian spices. Carl's smiling face appeared from the kitchen. He had red sauce in his mustache.

"Hey sexy. Almost done," he said. "Picked up some fresh parm. The kind you really like. Hard and sandy, just like concrete."

Sarah leaned forward and gave him a kiss. His mustache stamped her upper lip

with tomato sauce.

"Can't make a decent sauce if you don't taste it," he said.

Sarah licked her lip. "Not bad. Maybe a little more oregano"

"I thought I had another half hour to finish cooking. How come you're home early?"

Mitzi nudged Sarah's leg just behind the knee. Sarah squatted and scratched her behind the ears, allowing the dog to lick her face. "They let us go early," she said. "It's about time too. They keep promising to let us go on Fridays, but it never happens. Hopefully it will become a ritual. By the end of the week I get tired of harassing people. You can only be called a bitch so many times in one week before you snap."

"So what time did they let you go?" Carl asked. "Did you go out after work?"

"No," Sarah said. "I came straight home. Why?"

"I talked to Murray again," Carl said, ignoring Sarah's question, "and he's pretty sure that I'll be taking over for Heinrich. That old kraut is trying to challenge his retirement and stay on."

The sauce on the stove released a small eruption, plopping a glob of sauce onto the stove top. Carl returned to stirring it and turned the temperature down. "All the guy does is spray floors all day. I can't believe he thinks they would want to keep him. Can't understand a word he says either. A foreman has to be able to communicate."

"Sounds like you have it in the bag," Sarah said.

After dinner Carl and Sarah did the dishes together and Carl moved to the living

room to watch the football game. Sarah waited until he was absorbed in the game before she gathered a small pile of laundry from the bedroom and went down to the basement. She tossed the clothes in the washer, threw a scoop of soap in, clicked the dial into place and pulled it.

As the old pipes screamed from the heat of the water, Sarah opened the door to the storage area under the stairwell. She found her gym bag behind boxes of Christmas ornaments and dragged it out into the middle of the room. As she pulled the zipper, vibrant dresses, gowns and lingerie of all colors bloomed from the bag. She took out her favorite costume, a cat suit of patent vinyl with snaps that ran up the left and right sides. She clicked open one side and climbed into the suit. She snapped it up and found that it fit tight, almost too tight. The few extra pounds could become problematic after all, she thought. Long sessions on treadmills and lifting weights and possibly a diet were going to have to become part of the equation. Makeup, she thought, returning her attention to the bag. She dug around until she found her plastic makeup bag. At one point it had been translucent, but now the inside was gummed with brown, red and black. She pulled out a tube of florescent pink lipstick and smiled at the idea of wearing such an extraordinarily energetic color. She found a stack of Magnets and an old Polaroid camera in a side compartment. A long cardboard tube filled with posters rested at the bottom of the bag. She leafed through the posters and remembered the amateur photographer who designed them. A friend had recommended him and guaranteed that he would photograph her and design the posters for free once he found out that the job didn't involve squeezing squeak toys at crying children in a department store studio. Sarah

refused to give him some of the poses he requested, so he did, in fact, charge her some cash for the session. She would have gone elsewhere had she known he was nothing more than a closet perv with a little experience in photography.

Sarah's daydream was interrupted by the sound of Carl calling to her.

"What's going on down in the dungeon?" He said. "Did the washing machine devour my gorgeous woman? That machine has good taste."

Sarah scrambled to get the posters back in the tube and the clothes back in the bag. She zipped it up and threw it back under the stairwell. She could hear Carl's heels thumping against the stairs above her. She pulled apart the flaps of a cardboard box and was relieved to see a photo album. She picked it up and sat on the box, her butt sinking into it, just before Carl appeared.

"I was rummaging," Sarah said. "Found my old photo album."

She held up a page that showcased her elementary school pictures, each boasting the rooster-tails and crooked bangs of a child whose parents either didn't know it was picture day or simply didn't care. Her grin in each picture was partial and as crooked as her bangs. Carl sat down on a box beside her, laughing at the photos.

"I forgot to burn this," she said. "If these ever got out."

"Oh come on," Carl said. "You can take the girl out of the trailer park, but you can't take the trailer park out of the girl."

Sarah slapped the album shut and playfully slapped Carl's shoulder with it. "It's not my fault my mother thought she could do a better job on my hair than a hairdresser. Maybe I should show her these to remind her that her talents reside elsewhere."

Sarah pulled an envelope out of the box below her and withdrew a stack of photos. The top photo was a Polaroid of her kneeling naked in front of a woman with breasts the size of volleyballs. The woman's cleavage was full of whipped cream, and Sarah wore a smeared white mask that was slowly oozing away. Her head was cocked back with her mouth wide open, spilling laughter into the room where other nude women, crouching to secure their spot in the frame, were also laughing. Sarah's teeth were whiter than the whipped cream, and her skin was golden-brown. The white rectangle below the picture had 'Tastiest tits in town - Love Cheryl' scrawled in black marker.

Sarah smiled to herself, thinking that it was the perfect opportunity to tell Carl.

Carl slowly pulled the photo from her hand.

"Man, it would sure screw up your back if you had to carry these melons around," he said. He slapped the picture across his fingers a few times. "You should really throw this kind of shit away. What's going to happen when we have kids?" He flicked the photo onto Sarah's lap like a Frisbee.

Sarah put the photo at the bottom of the pile. "What are you talking about?" she said. "There were a lot of good times. I am not getting rid of my old pictures. And when did you change your mind about kids?"

"I'm just saying that nude pictures shouldn't be lying around the house."

"And a box under the stairs is your idea of 'lying around the house'?"

Carl stared at the stack of images in her hand. The one under her thumb showed her and another woman topless and posing with two male dancers at a club.

"Fine," he said, "forget it."

Sarah stuffed the pictures back into the envelope. She rubbed Carl's arm and pulled him toward her. "They are completely harmless." She pecked him on the lips. "And I made more in an hour than I currently make in an entire day. Sometimes two." She dropped the photos into the box.

Carl stroked her smooth arm. "We'll be fine. Why don't you come to the plant? I can get you on the shaker table or in the freezer. Both pay pretty good."

"I don't think I could be happy cutting rotten chunks out of potatoes all day. And with my terrible circulation, I'd freeze working in a freezer for ten minutes, even if they pay me an extra buck an hour."

"Alright," he said. "Just give me some time."

Sarah could see that the frustration in Carl's face was slowly turning to anger. She pulled him downward until he fell on top of her. They tumbled backward into the storage area.

"This would be a new spot," she said. "Haven't thought of this one yet."

Carl tried to pull away momentarily, but Sarah, thinking about the nameless men in the clubs she had worked, used her perfectly honed gaze of seduction, which made his expression soften.

"Do you ever think about anyone else?" he asked.

"Of course not," she whispered.

Sarah pulled on the front of his shirt. "Kiss me," she said. She could feel the gym bag behind her head and wondered how she was going to tell him.

Chapter Two

Sarah could feel the bass from the speakers above the stage vibrate her ribs with each thump as she grinned at the man in front of her. He wore a suit and was leaning forward with immaculate posture. His thumb and forefinger gripped a dollar coin that was about to be tossed at a magnet Sarah had licked and slapped just below her belly button. The magnet depicted Sarah in a bubble bath with very little water. It had the name 'Daisy May' scrawled across it in a watery font. She gazed into the man's eyes the way she had to Carl's the night before. The man removed his eyes from hers only to aim and throw the coin, missing the magnet and hitting her just below. Sarah glanced between her legs and gave him a surprised look.

"I think it's the suit," she said. "It's constricting your movement. Maybe I could help you take it off."

The man nodded and smiled as his face reddened a little. He held up a coin for his next shot. Again, Sarah gave him the moment he was paying for: her beautiful face, body and undivided attention; her intense gaze created a bond that the man could not achieve anywhere else. On the street he was a nobody.

The next coin hit the magnet, but bounced and clinked onto the stage leaving its target glued to Sarah's body. She shrugged and slid closer to the edge of the stage. She urged him to keep trying, reminding him that the suit was the problem. He tossed the coin and hit her in the leg. This time she made a sour face, as if she were in pain. After a few more bouncing coins, she peeled the magnet off, kissed it, and tossed it to him.

Everyone in the building knew the secret behind the games played in this type of club: an armless man could win, provided he had the money. The man nodded his thanks as the song faded and threw a twenty on the stage. Sarah whispered her thanks.

"Bring those tits over here," a man who looked like he hadn't eaten or washed in months shouted from the other side of the stage. The friends who sat on either side of him laughed and cheered.

Sarah felt like a veteran on the stage when she heard the vulgarity. She remembered the countless times she had watched the muscle-bound bouncers pick up the assholes who let their mouths go a little too far. With appendages writhing like an overturned beetle, they would screech and yelp until the door was opened with their head and their knees and elbows smacked against the concrete of the sidewalk outside.

"That's no way to treat a lady," she said in a sweet voice. "Tone it down, or I'll have you thrown out."

The man's tongue slithered out between his concave cheeks and writhed, mimicking cunnilingus. "I got a roll of loonies over here with your name on them, baby."

A French manicure allowed Sarah to deliver an elongated, yet classy middle finger. She used her blanket to slide her knees across the stage. She moved like a cat creeping toward its prey as she scoured pervert's row, looking for anyone besides the screaming asshole who might be interested in earning a prize. It was early, and the few faces that were in front of her avoided eye contact. She circled the stage before she ended up in front of the arrogant patron.

"I'll be good, I promise." His dark eyes argued against his words.

Sarah turned sideways, licked another magnet and attached it to the top of her ass. She glanced off into the club that was clouded by stage lights and cigarette smoke. She felt a few coins hit near the magnet, then a sharp pain between her legs that felt like an insect bite. She sat up.

"Missed that one," the man said to one of his friends.

Sarah pulled the magnet off and threw it at his face.

He put his hands up to protect himself. "Hey, calm down. I'm out of practice."

Sarah leaned over the edge of the stage on her hands and knees and signaled to the DJ. He nodded and announced that a bouncer was needed at the front of the stage. The man pleaded with her, but Sarah ignored him and continued to move across the stage. The bouncer politely asked the man to leave, and when the man continued to plead his case, he was pulled out of his chair. The bouncer kept him off his feet until he was out of the club. His friends chugged their beers and retrieved their jackets from the backs of their chairs.

Sarah finished the final song dancing with her back against the pole with her eyes closed. She raised her arms above her head and held onto the pole as she slithered up and down. No crowd, no men, no seduction, just her body and the music. When she opened her eyes, the only man watching her was the man in the suit. He clapped and placed another twenty on the stage when the song ended. Sarah sat cross-legged in front of him.

"Thank you very much." She said and tossed him a rolled-up poster.

"You may not hear it very often," the man said, "but I appreciate your art. Not the games and the artificial talk, but the dancing. That last dance was the best dance I've ever

seen. In fact, I think you're the most talented dancer I've ever seen."

"Well, thank you very much," Sarah said while she tied her bikini top behind her neck. "I'm glad someone appreciates me around here."

Sarah crawled around the stage picking up the coins that were strewn about. She wished she hadn't given away her magnet when she retired. It was attached to a cord and she could hold it out like a metal detector as she scanned the stage, waiting for coins to click to it. It was a hell of a lot more classy than being on her hands and knees.

When she finished, she carefully put her platform heels through the lower half of the bikini and pulled them up. She exited through a door at the back of the stage, which had a silhouette of a big-busted woman tipping her cowboy hat with a six-gun. In large letters formed by bullet holes it said 'Cowgirls.'

Frank MacMillan sat on his couch bundled up like ten-year-old waiting to go tobogganing. His insulated hat had flaps to cover his ears and a button on top. The chinstrap was snug and made the lizard skin under his chin dangle when he moved his head. The years of cigarettes and alcohol had created a vineyard of red veins across his face, especially his nose.

He wiggled his hands in his mittens and peered over his thick glasses out the front window of his home. Cab 237 pulled up moments later, and Frank could see Floyd, the driver, leaning down toward the passenger side of the car to search for movement inside

the house. Frank unlatched both chains, unlocked the doorknob, turned the bolt and pulled open the oak door. He stretched his arm up and waved to Floyd. Floyd beeped the horn lightly. Frank closed the door and worked the key into the deadbolt.

"Up. Up, twist, wiggle, turn," he said.

When Frank was ten feet from the car, Floyd, a man who was almost seven feet tall with a thin head shaped like an egg, with the pointed end to the sky, opened the passenger door for him.

"Thought maybe you were staying home today Frank," Floyd said as he guarded Frank from a fall. Frank sunk into the seat and pulled his cane in after him, leaving the butt-end outside the car. Floyd pushed the cane in with his foot and closed the door. He ran around to the driver's side rubbing his hands together. Flurries floated through the air in random paths until they met the windshield, their remains discarded by a squeak of the wipers. Floyd pressed a button on the meter as he pulled away from the curb to radio head office.

"237."

A distorted woman's voice responded: "Go ahead 237."

"O.C.D. care of Frank."

"Check," the woman replied.

Floyd hung up the radio. "Need to go anywhere else Frank, or straight to Cowgirls?"

Frank shook his head. "Straight there. How's your day going Floyd?" He turned toward Floyd and lowered his chin to see over his glasses.

Floyd accelerated and swerved around a large truck that was parked half in his lane. "Oh, you know. Same old shit, different day."

"How are the wife and kids?"

"They're good. Trevor's not doing so good in school. Keeps kicking the shit out of the other kids. I told him to stand up for himself, but he thinks he's Bruce Lee or something. I think it's all the violence on T.V. or something. Even the cartoons are violent, you know?"

"He'll be a tough one later on," Frank said.

"You bet. But he better stay in school or he'll be driving a damn cab for the rest of his life just like his old man. I spend more time in this car than I do anywhere else. Twelve hour shifts are the shits man."

"Driving yourself nuts?" Frank said and grunted.

"You bet," Floyd said, missing the joke. "Money's tight. Real tight." He looked toward Frank, "everyone wants a piece, you know? I got people calling my house offering a new credit card or offering a phone service for a discount price. Then the mail. Don't get me started on the mail, Frank. They mail me so much shit, I could heat my house in the winter just by tossing bundles into the fireplace. Sure would be nice to have a fireplace."

Frank gripped the shoulder strap of his seat belt and pointed at the road. Floyd looked forward and eased on the breaks to avoid a car that was cutting into his lane.

"Trips to here or there to buy a condo," Floyd continued. "Lotteries for a hundred bucks a ticket and those sweepstakes that tell you you've already won a million. Like I

don't have enough debt. Someone's always wanting a piece. It's a scam. All of it. If I could get my hands on those assholes, I'd really give it to them."

"I doubt they'd listen," Frank said.

Floyd double parked in front of Cowgirls and flicked the hazard lights on. Frank reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. It was leather with a horse's head branded on the front with his name underneath. He handed Floyd a twenty and waved his hand. "That should do it."

"But the fare is only eight bucks."

Frank looked over his glasses at the meter and then to Floyd. "I can see the meter Floyd."

"Thanks," Floyd stuffed the money in his hip-belt, "times are real tough these days, but I still get by, you know?"

Floyd jumped out of the car and helped Frank to his feet.

"I can take it from here Floyd."

"You sure?"

Frank's glare made him look like he was ready to challenge Floyd to a scrap.

Floyd held his hands up in defense. "Alright, you have a good day. I'll see you tomorrow."

Frank stepped up the curb, and before he could focus on the door, he was on his back. His spine was a line of electrical pain that ended in a sharp pinch at the back of his head. His sight became framed in black haze. He winced and clinched his jaw as he waited for the pain and the black halos to dissipate. Floyd's voice arrived.

"Frank," he yelled, "you okay?"

Floyd slipped on the same piece of ice. He landed parallel to Frank.

"Jesus Christ," he said. He stood up and balanced himself, arms out at the sides.

Frank's eyelids closed and opened. "Just give me a minute," he said. He coughed and squeezed his eyes shut. "I just need a minute."

Frank watched Floyd unclip the cellular phone from his belt and dial 911.

Hearing Floyd speak about the ambulance and the emergency room made him think about the sweet and sour smell of the hospital and the mint green walls. All of the withered people sitting there with a lost look on their face as they were spoon-fed Jell-O. The look of someone who has discovered clarification about something that is stored at the back of the brain until the last possible moment. Frank didn't want to think about his wife lying in a hospital bed with needles stabbing her bruised arms and tubes stuffed up her nostrils.

Frank turned to his side and propped himself up. Floyd had finished on the phone and bent down to help him.

"Maybe you should stay down until the paramedics get here Frank. You want to be sure that your hip's not broken or something. You don't want to screw yourself up any more than you already have."

"Will you shut up and give me a hand," Frank said.

"Sure thing Frank." He grasped Frank's arm and slowly lifted him to his feet. "I just wanted to be sure that you're okay. The ambulance is coming."

"You can stay out here to meet it. I'm going inside to get myself a drink. Get me

my cane and help me inside. Cancel the goddamned ambulance. Call my grandson. He'll do a better job than those damn paramedics, and he won't charge me an arm and a leg for the ride.

"Sorry. You want that tip money?"

"I don't mean your prices, you damn idiot. I'm talking about the ambulance."

Floyd opened the door and Frank carefully made his way inside. Frank stopped and told Floyd his grandson's number. Floyd flipped open his phone.

"I'll take it from here Floyd," Frank said.

Floyd's face saddened. "You sure?"

Frank waved him away like a horsefly and walked toward the thumping music and stage lights. He turned around just before Floyd left the entrance of the club.

"Floyd, cancel that call. I'll be alright."

"You sure?"

Frank shook his head and turned away.

"Alright Frank, consider it cancelled," Floyd said as he exited into the brightness of the winter afternoon.

Frank took his usual seat in the front row on the right side of the stage, closest to the bar and washrooms. He stuffed his mittens into the pockets of his parka and pulled at the dangling strings of his chinstrap until one slid down and undid the knot. He laid his hat on the counter, licked his palm and slicked back his white locks. He massaged the back of his neck until a waitress's arm appeared and placed a scotch press in front of him. He sipped the drink and nodded to the waitress.

Sarah came from the back room with a black marker in hand.

"Irish," Frank called out as she walked by.

"Frankie," Sarah said, "you still come to this old place?"

She watched Frank's magnified eyes lower to her chest and bounce back up.

"Doing just fine Irish, just fine. And how are you?"

"Much better now that my favorite man is here. Did you miss me?"

Frank sipped his Glenfiddich and water while nodding. His eyes suddenly lit up.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said. He leaned forward and fumbled through his jacket pocket and produced a small, pink box wrapped with a purple bow. The box was malformed. "I picked up a present for you."

She held it up and wondered which girl the gift was originally intended for.

Frank said, "Slipped on some ice. It got a little squished."

"Ouch," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, fine Irish. Just fine."

She held the box to her ear and shook it.

"Open it," Frank said. His tongue wormed through his violet lips and licked white paste from the corners of his mouth.

"Right now?"

He nodded.

Sarah shook the box again. "Quite heavy. Could be a fishing weight. But no. You know I only fish the rivers. Maybe a really pretty rock. Oh, I know." She bobbed it on the palm of her hand. "It's one of those giant jawbreakers. You know how much I love candy."

Frank shook his head. "If you'd open the darn thing, you'd see what the heck it is. Or do you want me to come out and tell you?"

Sarah took the small box and tucked it in her cleavage and stood up. "I'll keep it warm for a while. I like suspense." She rustled his hair.

"That would be a good idea Irish," Frank said. He licked his palm and adjusted his stringy hair. "But then I wouldn't get to see your reaction. That's the beauty of giving a gift, don't you think?"

"You're absolutely right, Frankie," she pushed her chair back and stood. "But I have to give everyone a little time for a visit. I'll be back soon. Then we'll have more time to enjoy the surprise."

The man in the suit watched Sarah sway like cobra. Her body absorbed the rhythm created by her swaying hips as her platform heels crossed an imaginary tightrope. The tightrope led straight to his seat.

"Would you like me to sign your poster Mr. business man?"

He handed her the poster. She stroked the poster slowly, inching the elastic band off until it shot over his head.

"You haven't even looked at it," she said.

"I was going to. I mean, I wanted to. Of course I want to see it."

Sarah flattened the curled poster on the counter. It was a black and white picture of her nude on a bed with satin sheets.

"Excellent picture," the man said.

"What's your name?"

"Larry. Larry Smith."

"Okay, Larry Smith," she sat down beside him and wrote a message across the poster:

Larry,

When you play naughty games with naughty girls, you should wear your birthday suit.

XOXO

- Daisy May

Larry grinned at the message and rolled the poster back up.

"Thank you so much," he said. "I will cherish this forever. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure," Sarah said, "I'll have a tequila sunrise."

"That's quite exotic"

"I'm full of surprises, Larry."

Larry signaled to the waitress and ordered two tequila sunrises. The waitress

nodded to Sarah and immediately told the bartender the order.

"Copy cat," she said.

"Maybe I have a few surprises too. It was either that or beer, and your choice must taste better."

"So what do you do that keeps you in a suit?" Sarah said.

"I study human behavior and statistics," he said.

"So you're some sort of doctor or researcher?"

Larry thought for a moment. "I guess I'll just tell you. I'm a professional gambler. Mainly poker."

"I don't think I've ever met a professional gambler before," Sarah said. It sounds exciting. Risking all that money. I pegged you for a winner."

"The odds are quite good on the professional circuit, providing you know how to play the game. You have to be able to study and read each player. Mannerisms can tell you everything."

The waitress arrived with the drinks and Larry paid and left a substantial tip. He held up his glass. "To new friendships."

Sarah clinked his glass.

He sipped his drink. "Absolutely wonderful," he said.

Sarah sat up straight and looked down at her chest. "Would you like to study the behavior of these?"

"Well," he poked at his drink with his straw, "I think my answer would be quite obvious, but I would have to say, given the current situation, that my odds of winning the

prize are not very good."

Sarah stuck out her bottom lip like a pouting child. "Well, we could start by a private show."

"How much does a private show cost?" Larry said.

"Fifty bucks," Sarah said, "but seeing that you tipped me so well during my stage show, I'm sure I could swing you a deal."

Larry unbuttoned his blazer and reached into the inside pocket for his billfold. He leafed through a few bills until he found a fifty. He placed it on the table.

"I know that time is money, so what if I just give you that and we sit here and talk for while. How much time does fifty dollars buy with the most beautiful and talented woman in the world?"

Sarah looked at her watch. "Considering my new glamorous title, about ten minutes."

"That's a pretty steep price," Larry said, "How much would it cost to take you out for coffee?"

"A million dollars," Sarah said. "And that's only one cup. A refill costs another half million. I think we should stick to the sunrises."

"Okay," Larry said, "how much to watch the sun rise with you? My brother has a farm. We could climb up on the haystack and watch the sun illuminate the wheat fields. A breathtaking sight, trust me."

Sarah ignored the question.

Larry held up his drink. "To us," he said.

"To tasty drinks," Sarah said and clacked her glass against his.

"What about a Broadway play? I think Showboat is in town. The sets are amazing, so I'm told."

"Sorry hon," Sarah said, "but you missed me. I'm already taken. But that doesn't mean that we can't be good friends."

"Good friends go for coffee," he said.

"Come on Larry, you're a smart guy. You know our friendship stays in here. But as long as we're in here, we're good friends."

Larry's face went grim. The silence between them was blurred by the next girl's music blaring from the speakers above. A young girl, Sarah guessed around twenty, moved quickly into the middle of the stage. She was dressed in a top hat and slapped her hand with a cane while she glared at an audience member.

Larry leaned over and yelled into Sarah's ear. Her eardrum became itchy from the extreme vibrations.

"Can we move to the back and chat for a while?" he said.

Sarah took the fifty on the table and pulled away. She motioned around the room with her forefinger. "I have to work the room." She winked at him. "But I'll come and visit you later."

Larry's face lit up again, and he held up his drink. After their glasses collided once more, he found a table in the back of the bar and watched the girl on stage.

Sarah sat down with Frank. His magnified eyes seemed to glow a radioactive blue under the black light attached to the ceiling above him. He sipped his drink and

licked his lips.

"Did you open it?" Frank asked, seeing the box in her hand.

She couldn't hear what he said, but she read his lips. She shuffled her seat closer.

"I wouldn't do that. I waited for you." She sat the box down on the counter. "Now, what did we think it was?"

"Let's not go through this again," he said.

Sarah pulled the lid off the box and the square piece of cotton that was fitted inside. "Do you like it?" Frank said.

Sarah's faint smile heightened. "It's beautiful."

She held up a necklace with a large pear cut sapphire attached to it. Her eyes reflected the sharp bits of light that reflected off the small diamonds that surrounded the large stone.

She immediately gauged the retail price and the resale value, that is, if she could let it go, as she stared into the blue gem. She wondered if Frank would ask her to wear it while she was in the club.

"Try it on," Frank said.

Sarah unclasped the necklace and attached it behind her neck. She stood and looked in one of the many mirrors that hung on the walls of the club. The necklace was a perfect size for her neck and chest. The stone hung perfectly above her cleavage and accented the deep blue of her eyes.

"I love it Frankie. You didn't spend too much did you?" She didn't let him answer. "How did you know I was going to be here today, you crazy boy?"

Frank clasped his cold, soft hands on top of one of Sarah's.

"It's nothing," he said. "Humor an old man." He smiled and squeezed her hand.

The girl on stage was gathering her coins off the stage as a young man appeared behind Frank. He was in a shirt and tie and looked clean cut. Sarah could tell that he worked out, and his wake of cologne made the stale air of the club fresh for a moment. Sarah smiled to him, but he avoided her gaze. The young man shouted toward Frank, but the loud music, the sapphire, or the breasts that surrounded it, had put Frank into a trance.

Sarah pulled her hand away from him to break the spell. She pointed behind him, and Frank turned around.

"Paul!" Frank shouted. "Take a seat, young man." Frank grasped the pink box and stuffed it in his pocket, winking at Sarah with a magnified eyelid.

Paul sat with a stiff posture. He looked at his watch before gripping the armrests of his chair. He politely grinned to Sarah. "Let's get out of here, Gramps," he said to Frank.

"Paul," Frank said, "I'd like you to meet Daisy." He winked again. "Daisy, this is Paul."

Sarah shook his hand. His grip was firm, and his fingers long and slender.

"Must be great to have such a wonderful grandfather," Sarah said.

Paul nodded slowly as his eyes circled around the club. "Yes, it is," he said. He looked to the girl on stage. She walked in front of him and bent over, her vagina protruding outward. Paul returned his attention to the table. He leaned close to Frank.

"What happened?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" Frank said. "That son-of-a-bitch Floyd. Last time I tip that blabbermouth. Talk, talk, talk is all the guy knows how to do."

"He seemed pretty worried about you. What happened?"

"Oh, you know, I'm alright." Frank's eyes opened wide and he moved his head back. "I'm a MacMillan. We're tough as nails." He pounded himself once in the chest with his fist and turned to Sarah. "It was really nothing at all."

A waitress leaned over and gave Paul an enquiring stare.

Paul shook his head. "No thanks. I'm fine."

"Get a damn drink Paul," Frank said. He held up his tumbler. "I still have half to slug down before we hit the road."

Paul shook his head. "It's the middle of the afternoon. I rushed here because I thought you were hurt."

"One damn drink isn't going to kill either one of us." Frank said. "Consider it medication."

"Beer," Paul said to the waitress. "Anything light."

Frank sighed toward Sarah and shook his head. "I swear I'll turn him into a MacMillan one of these days. Better be sooner than later." He pulled up his sleeve and looked at his watch and the liver spots surrounding it, "We're running out of time."

An eighties heavy metal song filled the room as the next show began. The dancer was dressed in a police uniform and strutted across the stage with a billy-club. Paul watched until the dancer made eye contact.

Sarah leaned toward him. "So, Paul," she said, "Your hands don't feel like

construction."

"Computers," he said. "I sell computers."

Frank licked his lips. "He's got his own company. Makes more than I did before I retired."

"That's exciting," Sarah said.

She watched him glance at the woman on the stage. The girl was teasing the audience with her bra. It was undone, but the cups still formed to her breasts. The makeup on the woman's face was thick and obvious, even under the colored lights.

"How old is she?" Paul asked.

"She's almost forty," Sarah said.

Paul smiled lightly. "Interesting. I thought only young women did this sort of thing."

"Most of us are quite young." Sarah said. She rested her elbows on the table and smiled at him.

Paul couldn't keep eye contact and turned to Frank. Sarah sat up and spoke before he could.

"So will you sell me a computer? I need one."

Paul became serious and the eye contact Sarah was searching for was instantaneous. "What kind of system were you thinking about? I can get you a good deal on a top-of-the-line machine."

"I don't really know. I need something for book keeping, listening to music and using the Internet."

"Oh," Paul said. "You won't need much for that. I could get you something for around five hundred that would do everything you want."

"Maybe you could give me a few pointers on starting my own business as well. I want to open my own gym. Do personal training, aerobics, weight training, things like that. I spend a lot of my time staying in shape."

Sarah thought about the small roll that had formed on her stomach and sat up as straight as she could.

Paul shook his head. "I don't know anything about that market. But I could point you in the right direction." He handed Sarah a business card:

Central Computers

"Where quality and service come first"

Paul F. MacMillan

Owner/Operator

Frank finished his last sip of scotch and pounded the table with the glass. "I think we're going to need another round," he said.

Paul chuckled. "Not a chance, old man. I have a lot of work left to do this afternoon." He held out his hand to Sarah once more. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Daisy, is it? I must apologize. I am terrible with names unless I call a person by their name a few times."

Sarah nodded. "Well, you've learned mine right away," she said. "And it was a

pleasure to meet you." She held up his business card. "I'll get in touch with you."

"Excellent, Daisy. I look forward to your call, Daisy. And it was a pleasure to meet you, Daisy. There," he said smiling, "I think I have it."

"Will you two cut the crap and help me up?" Frank said.

Paul laughed and shrugged to Sarah. He helped Frank to his feet and handed the old man his cane before he had the chance to demand it.

"See you tomorrow, Frankie," Sarah said. "You're lucky to have such a handsome and helpful grandson like Paul."

Paul gave her a quick wave and helped Frank to the door.

Sarah danced two more shows before she was done for the evening. Larry stayed planted at his chosen table at the back of the room awaiting the promised visit. He switched to red wine, sipping it as he watched the girls perform. Sarah sat down beside him after she had visited all of her tippers following her last show. His face was nothing but a shadow. She had hoped he would go home after a few more drinks.

Larry looked at her with glazed eyes that were mixed with confusion and sadness. He swirled his wine and stuck his nose deep into the glass, took a deep breath, pulled the glass away and exhaled.

"You need to stock better wine. This isn't so good. In fact, the quality is on par with the dancing abilities of the women in this club."

Sarah raised her eyebrows.

"Not you, of course. You need to teach these other girls how to express themselves. You need to show them that they need to let go and be at one with the music and the stage."

"Sorry I didn't make it here sooner," Sarah said. "It's been busy as hell tonight. As for the wine, I don't really like wine."

"You're a true performer," he said, staring into the blood-red glass. "A professional. Someone that deserves to be up there."

"That's sweet of you," Sarah said. "What about Tina? The older dancer with black hair. She's really good."

Larry chortled at the wine glass while spinning it with his thumb and forefinger. "She knows a lot of fancy tricks, but I can tell she's not passionate. She just goes through the steps."

"When's your next poker game?" Sarah asked.

Larry looked up from the wine glass. His face looked as if he had woken from a restless sleep.

"Will you stay and talk with me for a while?"

Sarah smelled the opportunity, but hated the stench that came with it. A helpless sucker was the best score on the floor, and Larry was definitely the biggest one at that moment. She rubbed the top of his hand, feeling the gritty hair brush across her fingers.

"I'd love to hon, but I have to work." She looked up to Kevin, who was standing behind the bar, scanning the late crowd for troublemakers. "The boss doesn't let us just

sit and converse. Maybe a private show?"

Larry nodded to her and returned his gaze to the wine glass. Sarah pulled her hand away from him.

"Oh," he said. He pulled out his billfold and tossed a hundred and two fifties on the table. "Tell your boss that I'm paying for the company of the most beautiful woman in the world."

Sarah folded the bills and tucked them into her bra. "Well he won't argue with that sweetie." She glanced at her watch and was relieved that Larry would be getting kicked out in half an hour. \$200 for a half an hour of drunken bullshit, she thought.

"I'm divorced." Larry said. His head wobbled slightly as he stared at her.

"Okay," Sarah said. So this is how it's going to go, she thought. She'd spoken to a thousand Larrys over the years.

"Left me for another guy eight years ago." He shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it had happened.

"Sorry to hear that, hon," Sarah said.

"Oh, it's no big deal," Larry said. He drank the rest of his wine. He looked around for a waitress.

"Last call is over, hon. No more booze."

Larry glared toward the bar. "Just my luck."

"So tell me about your poker games," Sarah said.

Larry set down the wine glass and thought for a moment. "You know she brainwashed my kids so that they wouldn't talk to me? They still don't talk to me. Not a

word."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Sarah said. She tried to keep a high level of concern in her voice.

"Yeah, they send back my Christmas presents and hang up when I call."

Sarah wondered if Larry truly meant what he was saying, or if he was a dead-beat dad who wallowed in the depths of alcohol and depression. The older ones all had similar stories. Either their wives had left them, or the initial spark of their marriage never lit the fire needed for survival. Either way, they were in the club to replace a lost bond in their life, even if it was only for a few precious moments.

Sarah sat with Larry for another twenty minutes and was relieved when the bouncer urged him to make his way to the door. Larry stood and wobbled.

"Let's get something to eat," he said. "I'm starved."

Sarah shook her head. "Not tonight. I'm tired. I'm going home to bed."

"Take me with you," he said.

"My boyfriend wouldn't like that very much."

Larry nodded again. He pushed his chair back with his legs.

"Have a good night," Sarah said.

Larry ignored her and stomped to the door. He looked like an angry zombie as his arms flailed to hold his balance.

The lockers in the back room of Cowgirls were dirty, dented and smelled terrible. Sarah took her gym bag and street clothes out of a locker and inspected them. She slowly

pulled her feet out of her heels and bore the pain as she stretched her toes and massaged underneath them. She slipped on jeans, a sweater and her sneakers. The new footwear felt like clouds on her feet. She left the room and looked for the bouncer on the floor. He was in the DJ booth smoking and drinking with the DJ. The bartender was cleaning up and restocking the bar while Kevin sat and ate like an inmate, his elbows guarding his submarine sandwich.

"Walk me to my car?" Sarah asked.

Kevin spoke through the wad of dough, salami and processed cheese food.

"Get someone else," he said.

The bartender heard the discussion and disappeared into the back room.

"If I get jumped, I'm coming back from the dead to haunt you." She said.

Kevin lunged at his sandwich and returned a bulbous smile.

The street was abandoned with the exception of a few vehicles owned by staff and drunken patrons who had decided to take a cab. Many tested their luck with the blurry drive home over and over again.

Sarah crossed the street and pushed the button on her key chain to pop her trunk. She threw her bag inside. As she slammed the trunk, her keys flew out of her hands. Larry was there to catch them.

Chapter Three

Sarah froze when she saw Larry in front of her. Seeing his face made her feel as though she had narrowly evaded a car crash. The quiet street heightened her feeling of vulnerability. She wasn't sure if his eyes were showing signs of sorrow or psychosis. She looked at the door of the club and wondered if he could catch her if she ran. The street was wide, but Larry was dumb-drunk and would be slow. She imagined Kevin inside, a hippo piling food into his fat face.

"I know I'm not supposed to wait for you," Larry said. "And that you probably think I'm some sort of creep."

Sarah watched as he ran his hand through his hair.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to go get some food. I thought you might want to come along." He gripped a clump of his hair. "It's on me, of course."

"Sorry hon," Sarah said. "But you already invited me. I have to go home to bed. Some other time, I promise." She held out her hand. "Can I have my keys please?"

"I already did?" Larry said. He mumbled to himself about not recalling the invitation. "So you don't want to come?" He tucked the keys into the inside pocket of his suit.

Sarah shook her head. "You should go home and sleep. Eat in the morning." Sarah moved around the car. Larry followed her. Sarah froze beside the driver's door.

"I don't have a home. I have an empty room. I sit by myself. Can't you find it in your heart to dine with a guy that's down on his luck?"

"You're a poker player Larry. You're a lucky guy, and I have to get home to bed. I have a boyfriend waiting for me." Sarah slowly removed her cell phone from her purse and held it up.

Larry noticed her looking at the door of the club and stepped in front of her.

"Don't make me call the bouncers."

Larry dropped to his knees, looking as if he were praying for his life. "Please. I'm in love with you."

Sarah quickly backed away from Larry and selected the speed dial for the club. Larry moved toward her on his knees as he pleaded with her.

"Come on," Sarah said into the phone as it rang. After several rings, Kevin's deep voice thundered into her ear. It was the voice messaging for the club: the asshole couldn't get up from his meal to answer the phone.

Mitzi awoke before Carl did. The noise blended with his dream, or maybe it created his dream, it was impossible to tell. He stood in a hallway that seemed to go on forever in both directions. A man stood in the distance masked in black. Sarah was bound in ropes behind him. Flames jutted out of the open doors on either side of the hallway. The fire alarm blazed on and off and the sprinklers sprayed in full force. As Carl moved forward, the man and Sarah floated an equal distance away from him. He moved faster and faster until he was sprinting to the point that his feet had trouble

keeping up. The man's laugh was deep and it echoed. He picked up Sarah and walked into a flaming room. Carl had never smelled a living creature being burned until that moment.

Carl's eyes opened to Mitzi breathing on his face. She licked his cheek. The old rotary phone beside the bed was ringing. He sat up and mumbled a groggy hello into the receiver. Sarah's voice was on the other end.

"Thank God you answered. I need you to come pick me up right now."

"What?" Carl said. His mind was still on the hallway, but the memory of the dream was already leaving him. He looked at the clock. The red digital numbers read 3:24. "I have to work at seven," he said. "Take a cab." He hung up the phone.

Before he could lie down, the phone rang again, bringing back remnants of the dream.

"I am not getting out of bed," he said into the receiver.

"Carl, listen to me," she said. "I'm in front of Cowgirls and a creep followed me out to my car. I need you to come and pick me up."

Carl sat up and turned on the lamp beside the bed. He could hear Larry in the background protesting that he was not a creep.

"Where are your friends that you went out with?"

"It doesn't matter," Sarah said. "Just get here as quickly as you can."

"Who's with you?" Carl asked.

Carl could hear Larry's voice getting louder, and Sarah's voice became jittery.

"Carl, could you please come and get me and worry about this shit later?"

"There better be a damn good explanation when I get there." He slammed the receiver down and was dressed and out the door in minutes.

Carl arrived in front of the club and saw Sarah with Larry. He was leaning on her car and motioned with his hands in all directions.

Carl jumped out of the truck and stomped toward them. He could hear Larry sniffing.

"What the hell is this? You call me down here at three in the goddamned morning to give you and another guy a ride home?"

Larry looked at Carl through bloodshot eyes. He nestled up to Sarah like a child looking for protection from a mother.

"Sarah," he said, "that's such a beautiful name. Much more beautiful than Daisy."

"Daisy?" Carl said. "What the hell is going on?"

Sarah pushed at Larry, but he gripped her arm, his hand locked like the jaw of a pit bull. Carl jumped forward and pushed Larry. He almost brought Sarah down with him as he fell to the asphalt. Carl kicked Larry in the center of his back and Larry screeched in pain.

"He waited for me outside the club, Carl," Sarah said. She put her hands over her face. Carl moved her beside his truck. Larry remained on the ground, curled up and sobbing.

"This better not be what I think it is," Carl said.

Larry bellowed, "It's not. We didn't do anything, I promise."

Carl pointed to Larry. "Shut the fuck up asshole. I'll deal with you in a minute."

"We were just talking," Larry said.

"Shut. Up!" Carl shouted. "What are you doing here Sarah?"

Sarah kept her hands over her face. He pulled them forward.

"Daisy? Why did this suit call you Daisy?"

Larry sat up and brushed away the pebbles that had stuck to his hands. "You keep your grubby hands off her. She's an angel."

"That's it," Carl said. He ran toward Larry and Larry retracted into a ball, protecting his head with his arms. Carl stomped on his ribs. Sarah's yelling eventually made him stop. Carl was breathing heavily.

"No point in talking about this here is there, sweetheart? Maybe I should just leave you with your new boyfriend."

"Leave her," Larry said through the small space between his arms. His voice was cracked and soft. "Leave her with me."

Carl pointed a shaky finger at down at Larry. "Listen! One more word out of you and you're not waking up tomorrow."

Larry's elbows knocked together like a frightened clam's shell.

Carl walked around his truck. "Have her," he said. He jumped inside and backed away.

"Are you happy now?" Sarah screamed at Larry. "Give me my keys."

Larry reached into his suit pocket and threw the keys onto the asphalt. Sarah picked them up, unlocked the door to her car and jumped in. She locked the door and started the engine. She put the car in reverse and waited. She saw Larry use the car as

leverage to get to his feet through her rear-view mirror. He slid across the side of the car squeaking his hands along the windows and professing his love through sobs. Sarah pressed the gas pedal and the car whirred as it reversed. The car sent Larry back to the asphalt and into a protective ball once again.

Sarah gripped the steering wheel of her car as she made her way home. The icy streets were empty except for a few bundled people wandering the sidewalks. She edged up to the four-way stop at the entrance to her neighborhood and treated it as a yield. Bright lights appeared in her rear-view. She pulled to the side of the road and looked into her mirrors as the officer ran her plates. She could see that the illuminated cop was a young one. She thought that he would either be the best to deal with or the worst. Some could be charmed with the erotic gaze, but some were rookies with something to prove and could easily be offended by seduction.

Sarah rolled down her window and adjusted her hair as the officer approached. The slight breeze overpowered the warm air in the car instantly.

His breath puffed out of his mouth like smoke as he spoke. "In a hurry?" he asked. "You barely slowed down for that stop sign back there."

"Hello," Sarah said. Her tone was high and her voice soft.

"License and registration please," the officer said.

She dug the documents out of the console. The policeman shined his flashlight on

them.

"It's been one of those nights," Sarah said.

The officer didn't seem to hear her.

"From Calgary?" the officer said.

"Yes. That's my address." She pointed at her license that was in his hand.

"Out on the town tonight?"

"No, working."

"At three in the morning?"

"Yeah, I work at a club."

He shined his metal flashlight into the back of the car. Sarah looked back to see what he would find. A romance novel and some spare clothes. There were also a few CDs and furry dolphin that Carl had given her. It's blue color was almost faded to white from the sun.

"What kind of club did you say it was?"

"I didn't," she said.

The cop moved his face to her window.

"Where do you work, Miss . . ." he paused and looked at the license again,

"Dawson?"

"I work at Cowgirls. It's a club downtown."

The cop sounded out the name phonetically as he wrote it down.

"And what kind of club is this?"

"It's a dance club."

The cop leaned slightly into Sarah's window and shined his light into the front of the car. The flashlight made her face glow white before he shined it back to his notepad.

"Yeah, I know that club." The cold tone of his voice matched the hard features of his face. "Anything to drink tonight?"

"I had one after work."

"Could you step out of the vehicle, ma'am."

"You've got to be shitting me."

"No, ma'am. I can smell alcohol on your breath. You'd be surprised how easy it is for a non-drinker to smell. You're going to have to take a Breathalyzer. You can refuse, but then I'll have to take you to the station."

Sarah opened the door and stood in front of the cop. The flashing lights of the cruiser brightened the dark roadway.

"Where are your shoes?"

Sarah looked down at her socked, bent toes and wiggled them. "I wear heels at work. They make my feet really sore. I took my runners off in the car. Let's just say it's been a long night. Can't wait to crawl into my warm bed."

"Put your shoes on. It's not a good idea to stand on the frozen street in bare feet."

Sarah sat on the side of her driver's seat and put on her shoes.

The officer went to his car and returned with a small black box with a plastic cylinder sticking out of it. He held it in front of Sarah's face.

"Take the deepest breath you can and blow into the cylinder for as long as possible. If you don't blow long enough, we'll have to start over."

Sarah breathed in as deeply as she could and blew into the device. A green light lit up immediately and an orange light flickered every once in a while.

"I could issue you a twenty-four hour suspension," the cop said after the test was done.

"I'm really cold," Sarah said, "and I am not even close to impaired. So if you want to pull my license, can I sit in my car and call someone to come pick me up?"

The cop stared into her eyes until she looked away.

"Have a seat in your vehicle ma'am," he said.

Sarah returned to her car and the cop returned to his.

When he arrived back at her window he said, "Try to come to a complete stop when you see a stop sign ma'am. And if you find your present occupation stressful, I might suggest changing careers. Maybe something that has a more positive influence on the community."

He handed her the documents and a ticket. Sarah's cranked the window up as fast as her arm would allow. She turned on her interior light. One hundred and fifty dollars was written on the ticket.

I'm getting some poor sap at the club to pay for this, she thought. She wanted to crumple the ticket up and throw it at something.

The cop knocked lightly on the window with the butt of his flashlight. Sarah rolled her eyes at him and lowered the window. The cool breeze chilled her skin once again.

He had his note pad in front of him.

"How long have you been working at this club?"

"Is everyone who runs a stop sign in a residential zone investigated so thoroughly?"

"I'll ask the questions, ma'am."

The cop tapped his pen against his note pad waiting for an answer.

"Today was my first day at the club. It has been a terrible day. Can I please go home?"

"Do you have any drugs or alcohol in the vehicle?"

"I thought we already established that I am not drunk. If you'd like to search the car, can we do it quickly so I can get home?"

"A lot of drugs circle in clubs like Cowgirls, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Of course you wouldn't. Have a nice evening."

Sarah glared at the officer through her rearview mirror as he entered his vehicle. She thought about all the horror stories that had come true in clubs around the country. A night like tonight made it easy to remember why many of the girls relied on substances to keep their mind off who they were and what defined who they were. People like the young cop, who was currently pulling a U-turn, would always be there to harass them and treat them as if they were something less than the average working citizen. Sarah put her car into gear and pulled away from the curb. For the remainder of the drive she debated quitting. It was the first night, and getting out now would be the best time if she were to get out at all. She thought about telling Carl that she was just visiting old friends, and

that they had used her old stage name for fun. The cop's domineering, egotistical face appeared in her mind again, and she slammed the steering wheel with her hand.

"Any money I see that asshole in the club someday," she said. "A birthday party or a stag."

She imagined the cop sitting in the front row with a bundle of money; ready for all the action he could pack into one night with his equally hypocritical coworkers.

Private shows in the back room with tits in their faces. Trying to touch the girls where they're not supposed to, and offering more money to 'bend the rules'.

Sarah sat in her car, staring at the front of her house. A cool wind blew snow dust across the shoveled sidewalk in hypnotizing patterns. At one time she loved the house, but now it looked like nothing more than a cheap rental. The paint around the windows was chipping off and the siding was the greenish-yellow color popular in the '70s. The storm door at the front had been broken several times by the high west winds that blasted down the street. Carl had bolted it together, but when one joint was fixed, another would pop apart the next time it was slammed into the railing. The tinfoil covering the bedroom window was something that she swore she would never let happen to her own home. It reminded her of people who lived in trailer parks. Sympathy for Carl's need for sleep after a midnight shift changed her mind. It seemed like a sensible solution for the odd schedules that factory work imposed, even if it made their home look as if it could be relocated to a shantytown. She took a deep breath and exited the car into the freezing air.

Mitzi's claws clacked on the linoleum of the kitchen as Sarah entered the house. She petted the dog and quickly went into the bedroom, leaving Mitzi to return to her bed

by the back door. Carl was asleep, or pretending to be. She undressed and crawled into bed. She lay staring into the blackness of the room.

"Carl," she said. Her whisper sounded loud. Carl did not answer. She waited in the silence debating what she could and should say. She thought about coming clean with him. She thought about telling a lie. Before she decided which words would perfectly fill the silence, her eyelids closed and she entered the world of dreams.

Chapter Four

Carl slid his card into the punch clock and the stamp automatically slammed down to fill a white square with the time: 7:34. He went upstairs into the change room and slid on some clean coveralls. His name was sewn onto the right breast.

After he had changed and walked back down, Murray was waiting for him beside his forklift. Murray, who was less than five feet tall, was jotting down some information on a clipboard. Everyone at the plant nicknamed him The Runt, but no one had the guts to call him that to his face.

Carl tossed his cigarette and twisted it on the concrete flooring with his foot. Murray looked up from his clipboard and then to his watch. He shook his head and pulled on the string attached to his earplugs. A yellow plug popped out and rested on his chest.

"Better have a good excuse," Murray said. "We're trying to catch up for the Japan order."

Carl couldn't hear him, but he had learned to read lips inside the plant, especially Murray's.

"Truck wouldn't start again," Carl said.

"Sure it wouldn't," Murray said, returning his attention to his clipboard.

"Honest," Carl said. He mouthed the words "asshole" to the top of Murray's forehead. When Murray had finished writing something down, he started walking and waved his clipboard through the air, motioning for Carl to follow.

Behind the forklift, three identical rows of machinery squeaked, hissed and clanked as they filled bags with French fries, sealed the bags and loaded them into boxes ready for the freezer. An older man named Pete stood at the end of the lines, retrieving the boxes after metal rollers had guided them toward him with ear-splitting 'whish'. Pete stacked the boxes on a pallet in a special pattern to maximize stability. Two men in yellow hard hats and blue coveralls stood watching their assigned lines of machinery, and one woman, overweight with a hunched back, was changing the roll of plastic that formed the bags at the back of the third line. She looked at Carl and Murray as they walked by, compacting a billow of clear plastic. She glanced at the three full pallets sitting beside the forklift and shook her head.

Murray yelled over his shoulder to Carl, "You've had more warnings than anyone else that works here. So this time I have no choice but to write you up."

Murray led Carl down a hallway, opened the door to his office and motioned to the chair by the door. Carl slouched in the chair and massaged his eyes.

"Two more of these and you're history. Melanie has been bitching at me all morning, and Pete has to stack with a bunch of pallets in his way. Maybe you wouldn't mind stacking for a month or so?"

Murray slapped his hand on his desk. The metal sides of the desk resonated. "Are you listening to me?"

Carl dropped his hands into his lap. "Yeah, I hear you. I'm late. You're writing me up. Melanie's a bitch, and the retard has to work harder. I heard everything you said."

Murray opened the file in front of him and started filling out the form. "And you want to be a foreman. There is no way in hell I'm going to recommend you when Heinrich retires."

Murray slid the sheet of paper across the desk. "Read it, sign it and get to work. You better be caught up by the time the chemical truck shows up."

"Who else is in line for the job?" Carl asked. He signed the form without reading it and slid it toward Murray. It shot off the side of the desk and Murray grabbed at it several times as it floated awkwardly to the floor. Once the form was still, he snatched it and sat up again.

"Oh, we'll find someone. Don't you worry about that. Everyone's looking for a raise around here. Not just you, Carl. Once you think it through, you'll come crying to my office door like you always do. I'm sorry Murray. I didn't mean it Murray. I'm down on my luck Murray.' Well, don't bother."

"It was a family emergency," Carl said.

"Of course it was," Murray stood up and inserted the earplug he had removed. "Next time get your story straight. You just told me your truck wouldn't start two minutes ago."

"Asshole," Carl mumbled as he opened the door.

"What was that?" Murray called to him.

Carl was silent.

"That's what I thought," Murray said.

Melanie's eyes followed Carl as he walked back to his forklift. Her arms were

full of unfolded boxes that she was about to load into the boxing machine on her line. She squinted at him bitterly, causing the cheeks that hung from the sides of her face to rise. Carl held up his middle finger and mouthed the words owned by the gesture. Melanie kept shaking her head as she stuffed boxes into the machine.

Carl hopped onto the forklift, rolled his earplugs into slender cylinders and twisted them into his ear sockets. Pete ran up to the Forklift smiling.

"Late again, eh?" He kept nodding like his head was part of the machinery behind him. "Can you . . ." Pete said, struggling to finish his sentence.

"Spit it out Pete, I ain't got all day," Carl said as he started the engine of the forklift and revved it. The familiar scent of propane exhaust filled the air.

"Can you move these pallets?"

"Yeah," Carl said. "I'll get these out of your way before I load the trucks." Carl looked over Pete's head. "You're falling behind Pete."

Pete ran back to the line and continued stacking boxes. He waved to Carl in between boxes with a hand curled like a hook. Pete had more seniority than any other employee at Solanum Foods; he had been there for twenty-nine years and had not missed a single day of work. He was an exquisite stacking machine, and the tendons in his hands no longer allowed his fingers to straighten.

Carl worked at a double pace, racing the forklift through all the tight spaces in the plant. He slammed at the controls and smacked the forklift into the pallets before raising them and driving them into the freezer.

After an hour of madly moving pallets, Carl motored through the strips of plastic

that hung across the doorway of the freezer to find the man from the chemical company flagging him down, signaling that the chemical order was ready to be pulled from the truck. Carl changed his course and sped toward the front loading dock. He unloaded the first pallet, two blue barrels of chlorine, and raced it to the chemical room. A giant concrete pool that was used for disposal sat in the middle of the room. It made the room smell like an old house that had become victim to mildew. Carl set the chlorine beside the pool and returned for the final pallet, which had two white barrels of Dilac on it. Dilac was a red liquid and better known as phosphoric acid. It was labeled a 'descaler' and was used to eat away at the calcium that built up on machinery that was filled with hot water.

Carl cruised the forklift back into the chemical room thinking about how much work there was left inside the freezer. There were also the pallets of starch that needed to be moved and the garbage bins that needed to be dumped. Suddenly he felt his neck jar forward as he smashed the forklift into the barrels of chlorine. Both barrels kinked and shot forward, hitting the side of the concrete tank. The lids popped off and florescent green chemical splashed across the floor. The barrels of Dilac shot forward and rolled across the wet floor until they struck the wall of the concrete tank violently. One lid popped off. A dark pool of red spread away from the barrel. A white mist wavered up from the hissing floor. Carl jumped off the forklift and ran for the door. His forearm slammed into a vice attached to a counter as he made his way toward the exit. After he made it outside, he stared in at the cloud of chemical and kicked at the door in a fit of frustration.

Carl moved slowly through the plant in search of Murray. The old ladies on the shaker table, all immigrants who barely spoke English, looked up from the bouncing, wet potatoes to stare at Carl's stumbling walk. Each wore a hairnet and the type of tacky-colored clothing that was rejected by most after the '70s.

Murray was in a meeting with several Asian men wearing suits when Carl found him. The boardroom was the last place anyone would look for Murray, and Carl had been all over the plant. Carl let himself in.

"Murray," he said, gripping his forearm. "I need to talk to you for a minute."

"Carl, can you not see that we're in the middle of a meeting here?"

Murray turned to the men beside him. "Sorry about the interruption."

He turned back to Carl. "Give me a half hour, will you? And knock next time."

"There's a problem," Carl said.

"The problem will have to wait." Murray turned to the other men in the meeting.

"I'm sorry about this."

"I have a big problem," Carl said. "Going to need some help." The eyes of the men at the table darted from one another. One began to whisper in his native language.

Murray stood up. "This better be damn good."

Carl rubbed his arm and nodded.

"I'm really sorry about this," Murray said to the other men.

The men nodded in their confusion.

Carl led Murray to the loading ramp of the chemical room and pointed to the grey mist. The air flowing into the room dug a pocket in the center of the mist, revealing the

forklift and the barrels around it. Murray examined the cloud and sniffed the air.

"Dilac?" Murray said.

"Yeah. Someone left some shit lying around and I was in a hurry and tried to get around the bullshit."

"Don't get all huffy at me," Murray said. "You're the one who screwed up."

"I've been racing around all morning," Carl said. "The chemical truck came early."

"You were late!" Murray said. "And the chemical truck is usually late. Today they were on time."

Murray took a few steps closer to the chemical room and peered in. "How much?" he said.

"How much what?"

"Stop fucking around Carl. I'm supposed to be in a meeting. How much goddamned chemical did you spill?"

"Now who's getting huffy?"

Murray's glare dared Carl to make one more smart comment.

"Two of each, I think," Carl said. "Two Dilac and two chlorine. I was trying to get ahead."

"Get a mask from upstairs, lay down some ash and spray it into the grates," Murray said. "Open both doors at the back and leave them open for the rest of the day. I'll call and see if they can bring us some more chemical today. The clean-up shift tonight will be hell if they can't."

"I'm going to finish loading the trucks in the freezer," Carl said. "Get Pete to come out here and spray it down. The line workers can handle stacking for half an hour."

"Don't you even think about it," Murray said. "You're going to clean this mess up, and you're going to start right now. Then you're going to come down to my office, and we're going to fill out an accident report. Then we'll decide if you've earned two write-ups in one day."

"Bullshit," Carl said. "I'm not going back in there. My eyes are burnt out of my head. I can't barely breathe. I might even need some time off work. Some compensation."

Murray's face became vicious. "Clean it, or else," he said.

"Or else what?"

Murray turned and walked down the loading ramp. "I'll send Pete over to clean up the mess. You're right, the line operators can handle stacking for a half hour."

"Thanks Murray."

Murray stopped and turned. "I don't know why you're thanking me, Carl. You've just lost your job."

Sarah came home from her shift at Cowgirls and pushed the front door of the house open with her backside. It opened half way and stopped. The redolent smell of marijuana climbed over her shoulders. She tossed her dancing bag through the opening

and entered the house. A stack of blue coveralls, a box of earplugs and two hard hats were blocking the door.

Carl sat on the couch playing video games with someone she didn't recognize at first. Eventually the pudgy cheeks and thick, dark eyebrows, more like a single eyebrow that spanned his entire forehead, made it obvious that it was Brian. He was one of Carl's old friends from high school.

They took no note of Sarah's arrival and continued swearing at each other and moving to the rhythm of their characters as they tried to kill one another. Mitzi jumped up from her pile of blankets by the back door and ran to greet Sarah. She moved across the living room shaking her hind end and contorting her lips. Her legs caught the cords of both Carl and Brian's controllers, pulling them from their hands.

"Mitzi, you little bitch," Carl said, jumping up and grabbing the controllers. He tossed Brian one of them.

Sarah bent down and grasped Mitzi's ears, and pulled them forward until the dog's face became rolls of skin. She kissed her on the wet nose. Mitzi's tongue flapped across Sarah's face. Carl and Brian held their controllers high so Misty could run underneath the cords as she returned to the kitchen. The dog stared back and forth from Sarah to the back door.

"When was the last time she was outside?" Sarah asked. She moved in front of the television.

"What?" Carl said. He leaned around Sarah's waist to see the screen.

"When was the last time you let Mitzi outside?"

Brian also leaned around Sarah and continued to play the game.

"You bastard," Carl said to Brian.

Sarah let the dog outside and returned to her place in front of the television. She bent down and shut it off.

"What the hell?" Brian said.

Sarah stood and glared at Carl.

"Sarah, that was an important battle," Carl said. "I had the sniper rifle and the body armor."

"It's after three in the morning." She picked up a beer bottle from the coffee table. "What happened to your promise? And since when has it been okay to smoke dope in the house?"

Carl sat back on the couch and stared at Sarah in a daze.

"Brian, time to go," Sarah said.

Brian took a swig of his beer. "Too wasted to drive."

"Take a damn cab. Plan ahead."

"You're so damn sexy when you're angry," Brian said.

Carl laughed. "He's right, you sure are sexy when you're pissed."

"Brian," Sarah said, "look at yourself."

Brian's smile flattened. He looked down to his round belly that hung out of the bottom of his shirt.

Sarah followed his eyes and winced at the sight of his stretched belly button. "I guess I forgot that alcoholic slaughterhouse employees don't get out very often, do they?"

she said. "Maybe you should get a hobby, like long-distance running."

"Guess I forgot you're such a bitch," Brian said.

"Hey," Carl said, "settle down, Bri."

Sarah slammed the beer bottle down on the table. "Why the hell is he here? You promised. I thought I was supposed to be able to trust you."

"Uh oh," Carl said. "I think she's really pissed."

"Of course I'm upset." Sarah said. "How many sacrifices do I need to make before you'll make one for me?"

Carl stared at the coffee table. It was covered in beer bottles and a pop can converted into a pipe sat in front of Brian. Carl picked up a roach from the ashtray.

"Tell you what, we're just going to puff down this little roachie and have one more battle. I've been sniping Bri's ass all night. Then we'll get him a cab." Sparks scattered downward as he sucked fire into the roach.

"Bullshit," Brian said. "I've been sniping your ass."

"Fuck that," Carl said with smoke puffing from his mouth. He passed the roach to Brian.

Brian lifted his ass and farted into his hand. He threw the smell toward Carl's face as he grabbed the roach. Carl lunged over the edge of the couch coughing and waving his hand in front of his face.

"How you like them apples?" Brian said. "Fart flavored, just the way you like them."

Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath before answering Mitzi's intervals of

scratching at the back door. Mitzi ran into the house, bringing with her a draft of cold air. She ran up to Carl and sniffed at his leg. Carl bumped her in the nose with his knee.

"Get the hell out of here," Carl said. He raised his arm, threatening to backhand the animal.

Mitzi recoiled.

Carl stood and turned on the T.V. Brian took advantage of the time Carl took to make his way back to his seat to maneuver his character.

"You sneaky son of a bitch," Carl said, plunging back onto the couch.

"Carl, I'm going to bed," Sarah said.

Carl concentrated on the screen.

"We'll talk about this tomorrow when you're sober," she said.

Carl nodded as he played. "Sounds good. One more round."

Sarah went into the bedroom and locked the door behind her. She knew she didn't need to. When Carl and Brian got together, they drank all night until they fell asleep in their chairs.

Chapter Five

The dressing room at Cowgirls was a dumping ground for snapped g-strings, old wigs and shoes that had rejected their heels. The floor, being the only ashtray in the room, was heavily peppered with butts. Sarah leaned closely into a mirror and applied a heavy layer of foundation. The color of the liquid skin was a darker hue than her own. She hadn't started tanning yet. She blended it under her chin the best she could and applied an extra layer onto two pimples that had formed on her forehead.

Jane, the youngest dancer in Cowgirls' current lineup, walked through the door and ground yet another cigarette butt into the floor. She fell into the couch opposite the make-up tables, her coils of chestnut hair bouncing, and opened a magazine that featured celebrity news: which Hollywood couples were getting divorced, who was cheating on whom, who was becoming unattractive through neglect or age and who was facing criminal charges as a result of living life in the fast lane.

Sarah looked into the mirror and smiled at Jane's freckled face.

"Do you have any light foundation?"

Jane played with her hair and continued flipping through the magazine. "I use tanning cream." The dark freckles on her nose created a sharp contrast with the pale skin around them.

Sarah tilted her head upward. "Can you see a line under my chin?" she asked.

Jane looked up. "You totally can, but nobody will see it. It's way too dark out there."

Sarah used her foam applicator to smooth the transition more.

"Show cancelled?" Sarah said.

"Yeah, it sucks. There were only three old farts in this afternoon. My first show was cancelled yesterday, too. It's the snow outside."

Sarah stretched her mouth into a tight frown to pull the skin below her eyes tight as she applied a thick line of black eyeliner. "Yeah," she said in a half-mumble, "mine was too."

"So, I talked to Tina," Jane said. "She asked if she could come to Edmonton after this week with us. She takes the bus and would rather get a ride. I told her I'd ask you."

Sarah remembered all the times she had danced at the same club as Tina. She never liked Tina much. She was always staying late with the customers and getting high. She'd also been blacklisted from several clubs in the past for drugs and getting too fresh with men. There was a rumor back when Sarah first started dancing that Tina used to go into the men's washroom and offer blowjobs for twenty bucks or a line of coke. She was supposedly doing better these days.

Sarah lowered her pencil. "I don't know. What do you think? She used to be trouble."

"She's alright," Jane said. "She parties quite a bit, but who doesn't? I'm rooming with her and she's okay. She pays and barely comes to the room."

Sarah concentrated on her other eye as she applied another thick line of eyeliner.

"It would totally save us on gas," Jane said, "and the room rates."

Sarah put the cap on her eyeliner. "I suppose it would," she said. "Tell her she

can come as long as she doesn't have too many things. My car is pretty small."

"Where are you booked after Edmonton?" Jane asked. "It would be cool if we could stick together when we're done there. I don't really like bussing it, either."

"I'm coming back here to get my boobs done."

"Really? Who's doing them?"

"Dr. Carter," Sarah said. "I looked on the internet, and he's supposed to be the best in Western Canada. I don't think any of the girls who have had him as their surgeon have had to have their tits cut off yet."

Jane laughed. "That's a good sign. So how much is it going to cost? I totally want to get mine done."

Sarah applied gobs of inky mascara to her eyelids. "I went in and picked out my boobs and the whole package is going to cost seven grand. Plus tax, of course. So around seventy-five hundred. I want the cohesive gel ones. They don't ripple on the sides. Have you seen Tina's ripples?"

"Yeah," Jane said. "They're kind of gross."

"I can't stand them," Sarah said. "And mine won't leak if they burst."

Jane opened the magazine again, examining paparazzi images. "Sounds pretty expensive."

"I figure the higher show price I get will be worth it in the end," Sarah said. "I still want to save money to open a gym, so the boobs will help me get ahead. Plus they are a tax write-off."

Jane examined a picture of a celebrity wedding that was held in a remote,

mountainous location. The images were taken through a powerful telephoto lens by a paparazzi who had climbed one of the steep crags that walled the event.

"And your man will be happy," Jane said.

"Let's not talk about him today."

Sarah stood and undressed. She massaged the red lines that her jeans had left across her mid-section.

Jane looked up from her magazine. "I don't even think you need implants."

Sarah cupped her breasts with her hands. "Bs just don't cut it. I have to go up to at least a C or D. I'm thinking a large C. Plus some extra perk wouldn't hurt." She tilted her head and ran her fingers through her hair.

Steve, the head DJ at Cowgirls, poked his head through the small window in the wall that separated the dressing room from the DJ booth.

"How much time you need?" he asked.

Steve rested his chin on his hands that were on the ledge of the window. He stared with a look of satisfaction. "Looks like you're almost ready. Any particular songs you want?"

Sarah didn't answer.

"Type of song? Hip-hop? Rap? Metal?" he asked.

"Just give me something with a beat," Sarah said. "Techno. Chemical Brothers or something."

Sarah took a cloth from her bag and wet it in the sink at the back of the room. She placed her foot on a chair and pulled the skin of her stomach upward as she wiped

her vagina. The cloth brought back the slight redness that her razor had created earlier. She used a dab of foundation to mask the red skin before putting on her naughty nurse costume. It was one of the few theme costumes that she had kept.

"Steve," Sarah said through the window. Steve had one oversized headphone tucked between his ear and shoulder. He turned his torso and held up his index finger, motioning her to wait a minute. Sarah rolled her eyes.

"You ready?" he said.

Sarah ran her fingers through her hair and took one last glance at herself in the mirror before nodding.

Sarah's first song blared from the speakers above the stage as Steve spoke into the microphone. Sarah thought his DJ voice sounded like Darth Vader would if he was having trouble on the toilet. From the back room it was nothing but muffled garble, not that it was much better in the front half of the club. After an introduction that could only be described as long-winded and accented to the point of being ridiculous, Sarah finally heard her stage name being bellowed in a low monotonous drawl: "Put your hands together for Miss Nude Alberta, Calgary's own Daisy May!"

The lights and cigarette smoke made the room appear hazy. There were a few claps and whistles, but the crowd was generally calm. It was to be expected with such a small group.

Sarah strutted across the stage with a giant syringe filled with water. She squirted it in the air like a laboratory employee would before giving someone a shot, except the liquid fell onto her chest and ran into the depths of her cleavage. She bent forward and

rubbed her wet breasts together for the crowd of zombies sparsely situated within the club. As she moved toward the front of the stage, she found Larry sitting in the front row. He was the only one who had an energized appearance. Sarah stood in front of him.

"What are you doing here?" she shouted over the pumping bass above her head.

"I came to apologize," Larry shouted back. "My behavior has been unacceptable."

Sarah pointed toward the door. "You better get the hell out of here, or I'll call the bouncer. It won't be pretty."

Sarah squirted his face with the syringe, covering his glasses with water. He removed them, revealing dark kidney beans where they had dug into each side of his slender nose. He took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the lenses.

Sarah continued with her routine, but at a slow pace. She had learned that it was best to conserve energy for the evening shows when the bar was packed. Mobs always wanted a high-energy show. The small crowds were happy if a show happened at all. She squirted Frank as she walked by his usual seat.

During the second song, she took off her skirt and g-string before revealing her breasts. Many dancers took their tops off first, but Sarah had always had a better response with the opposite. Breasts were the most visual body part, so it was best to conceal them for as long as she could. The beginning of the third song signaled that it was time for the games to begin. Sarah paused her show for a moment as she retrieved several VHS tapes from a basket she had brought out onto the stage. She held a beer jug

and one of the movies up waiting for someone to signal that they were interested in winning the prize. Frank and Larry both raised their hands. Sarah feigned a deep consideration. Frank then held up a ten-dollar bill. Sarah moved toward him, staring at Larry. Larry flipped his thumb across the thick wad of bills in his billfold and smiled toward Sarah. He held up a fifty-dollar bill. Sarah stuck out her tongue toward Larry and continued her path toward Frank.

Sarah sat down on her blanket and gripped the beer jug with her knees. Frank threw eleven coins, missing the jug, and Sarah, for that matter, every time. Sarah handed him a movie and thanked him. She knew she would get the movie back in the end. Frank kept very few of the prizes he won. She slithered across the stage toward Larry.

"I thought I asked you to leave," she said.

Larry held up the fifty-dollar bill. "Just give me a chance to apologize." He put the fifty on the edge of the stage. "Then I'll leave forever if that is truly your wish." He casually tossed a coin, which landed inside the jug. He smiled and held out his hand to receive his prize.

"You have to make two in a row to win the videos," Sarah said. It was an old trick she often used when someone won too soon. Larry looked at the red bill on the stage with a look of disbelief.

"You have to play to win," Sarah said.

Larry threw a few more coins, missing his mark. The song ended and Sarah collected her tips and disappeared into the back room, leaving Larry empty-handed.

Sarah sat beside Larry after she returned to the floor. He shifted uneasily in his

seat.

"I've done it."

"You've done what?" Sarah said.

"I've quit drinking. Not another drop for the rest of my life. I now realize how much it can hurt the people I love."

"Not to mention yourself," Sarah said.

Larry held up his chin. "Myself? Not a mark." He held up his arms and flexed his biceps. He was clothed in a suit that appeared to be identical to the one he had worn the last time he was in the club. His arms revealed no bulges. "You cannot hurt steel."

"So what do you want?" Sarah asked. "I should have you thrown out."

"Please consider my previous behavior uncharacteristic of my true intentions. What I was attempting to express, Sarah, is that your allurements makes my mind run wild."

"My name is Daisy," Sarah said.

Larry moved closer and cleared his voice. "Daisy, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I know you probably hear these types of comments all the time, but I am completely serious. I have never felt the way I feel about you for another woman. It is like all of the energy in the universe is stored in you, and when I am around you, some of that energy is passed on to me. I could live eternally if you would give me the chance to get close to you. You are an angel sent from heaven."

Sarah sat back. Her laugh was dry. "Larry, I am flattered that you find me so beautiful, but I am attached. Remember the guy who was kicking the shit out of you the

other night?"

"Do you believe in soul mates?" Larry said.

Sarah immediately thought about Carl. If Carl was her soul mate, something was wrong with the way souls were constructed. "Yes," she said, "and I have already found mine."

Larry pulled a small box from his pocket and opened it in front of Sarah. It contained a platinum band lined with diamonds.

"Marry me," he said.

"What?"

"Marry me."

Sarah examined the ring and guessed its value at somewhere around three thousand dollars. She'd pawned jewelry from obsessive men in the past, but nothing like this. She took the box from Larry and closed it, rubbing the purple velvet as she stared into his eyes.

"We aren't soul mates," she said.

The eagerness in Larry's voice did not fade. "I think you're wrong," he said. "That man cannot possibly be your soul mate. The idea is absurd. There is no way he feels your energy the way I do."

"I'm in love with him." Sarah opened the box again and became mesmerized with the glittering diamonds. "Carl and I have been in love for years," she said. She took the ring out of the box.

"Longevity has no bearing. It's like I've known you my whole life."

Sarah slid the ring on her finger and found that it fit perfectly.

"See?" Larry said. "How else would I be able to guess your ring size?"

"I'm sure a crafty man such as yourself could find a way to figure it out," Sarah said. "What I should be doing is getting the bouncers to throw you out."

Larry shifted in his seat again. "I formally apologize for my behavior the other night. I guarantee it will never happen again. If you see me with a drink in my hand, please call the police or have a bouncer remove my head. From here on in, I am on my best behavior."

Larry slowly slid his hand under Sarah's and he lifted her ring finger. "Take it as a gift. I'm not going to return it, so you may as well have it. It practically jumped out of the jewelry case when I first saw it. You were obviously in the dreams of the man who crafted it."

"It's beautiful, but what will my man think when I come home with a ring on my finger?"

Larry looked nervous, as if the acceptance of the ring would decide his fate.

Sarah said, "But maybe I can put it on a necklace or something." She straightened her arm and examined the ring once more. "Thanks," she said. She stood and wrapped her arms around Larry's chest from behind. "You're a sweetheart," she whispered into his ear before sauntering away.

Tina was getting ready for her first show when Sarah returned to the back room. She was at a make-up counter putting concealer on the scars under her areolas. Her

breasts looked like two cantaloupes attached to her chest by a spot of glue. She nodded to Sarah through the mirror as Sarah unlocked her locker and placed her cash on the top shelf. She tucked the ring Larry had given her back into her bra.

Sarah stood behind Tina, watching her apply her makeup. Tina's thick smears of make-up reminded Sarah of an old porcelain doll her mother had given her. But unlike the doll, Tina's face looked old, no matter how much she reddened her cheeks and lips.

"Honey," Tina said, her voice rough as gravel, "got a spare razor?"

Sarah shook her head.

"So you don't mind me hitching a ride with you up to Edmonton?" Tina asked.

Tina's darkened stare made Sarah look away.

"No," Sarah said, "that sounds fine. But I'll be coming back to Calgary after that."

"Better than nothing," Tina said. "I hate the fucking bus." She smiled, revealing her grey teeth.

Tina stood and bent over to pick up her G-string.

"Tina," Sarah said. "You're, um, dangling,"

Tina stood up confused.

Sarah pointed between Tina's legs. Tina leaned forward and saw that her bright tampon string contrasted her dark outer labia.

"Thanks honey, but I'm sure there's some sick fuck in the crowd that would get turned on by it." She tucked the string inside without looking. "No spreading for me this week. I think I'm going to go on the fucking shot the next time I see a doctor. No rag would be the cat's ass. Plus I wouldn't have to get scraped every time I fuck up on my

pills."

The thought of Tina having multiple abortions made Sarah feel sick. She too had considered the birth control shot, but there was something about getting rid of the monthly cycle that made it seem unhealthy and too unnatural. She had also heard rumors of side effects such as weight gain, loss of sex drive and moodiness, three things every dancer could easily live without.

When Sarah turned to leave, she saw Tina's scrawl of hair slowly moving across the counter like a mop. A hissing sound came from within. Tina sniffed at the table until two lines of cocaine were safely embedded in her nasal cavity. She threw her hair back with bugged eyes and sniffed hard.

"You want a couple rips?" She asked. Her voice became so gritty that she now sounded more like a man than a woman.

Sarah had been into the drug scene, but it had been a while since she had seen the hard stuff. Most club managers were doing their damndest to weed out the junkies and the hookers. Sarah thought that relics like Tina were a thing of the past. Or at least she hoped they were.

"No thanks. But thanks for the offer." Sarah attempted a smile, but she looked as if she had smelled something horrible. She watched Tina examine the insides of her nostrils for stray clumps of powder. Tina seemed to be the same as the day Sarah left. The old crow would have to retire soon, Sarah thought. Sarah envisioned her on a street corner in the shady part of town turning tricks for a fix, a place to sleep and a maybe even a bite to eat in the morning. The black pockets would dig deep under her eyes,

advertising her imminent death. But what would she do with herself when she couldn't turn tricks anymore? There was nothing on this earth for prostitutes who could no longer attract even the most filthy men.

Tina used one of her prizes, a flat magnet covered with an image of her flashing in public, to arrange the small pile that was left into two thin lines, keeping a close eye on the door. "Are you sure?" She asked. "It's really fucking clean shit. From Kelowna. Bikers. Got it for free." She held out a rolled-up ten-dollar bill, "so don't worry."

Sarah shook her head. "I'm straight." Her previous thoughts made her feel sorry for Tina.

"You've got to be kidding me," Tina said. She bent forward and sniffed up the two lines in succession. White crystals fell from her nose as she sat up. Tina brushed off the counter with the edge of her hand. "You'll be back," she said. "Just a matter of time." She sniffed hard, and looked up her nostrils again in the mirror. She cleared the remaining crystals away with her long, red nails.

"Thanks anyway, but I'm straight."

Tina leaned on the makeup table and lit a cigarette. She flicked at the filter repeatedly with her thumb.

"I heard you the first time," She said. "So, the aardvark has retired."

Sarah smiled and walked past Tina to the door.

Tina said, "But she'll be back. Trust me on that one."

Sarah returned to Larry's table. She glanced at the bouncer beside the door and put her hand to her chin in deep thought. She watched him examine her uneasily and concluded that the guy was strange, that was for sure, but the only harm he could likely do was to cry on her shoulder. She hoped the absence of booze would help him stay calm and collected.

Sarah unbuttoned her bra and pulled it from under her top, gripping the ring inside the cup. She put it on the table in front of Larry. Taking her bra off at tables was an old trick she learned from a dancer in Vancouver. The girl taught her that she could sell cheap bras covered in perfume for big bucks. Larry's tension dwindled at the sight of the bra.

"Larry," she said. "I have a proposition for you."

Larry looked at the bra and wriggled in his chair. "I knew you'd come around," he said.

Sarah picked up the platinum ring from her bra. She stuck out her bottom lip like a pouting child. "I know you spent a lot of money on this," she said, "and I really like it. But what I really need is a new computer." She turned and waved at the bouncer by the door who looked as if he'd started weight training in the womb. The bouncer waved back with a look of confusion. Sarah turned back to Larry. "Seeing that I seem to forgive and forget."

"How much?" Larry asked.

This was the first time Sarah had seen him negotiate. He became serious and somewhat defensive.

"How much is all this going to cost me? Tell me now so we can get it out of the way and concentrate on more important things, like us."

Her voice remained as pouty as her lips. "Five hundred," she said. "Plus tax."

Larry pulled out his billfold. It was significantly thinner than the last time Sarah had seen it. He counted out five hundred in front of her. There wasn't much left to fold up.

"The ring will have to cover the tax," Larry said. "I hope you'll brandish it."

"Thank you so much, hon," Sarah said. She slid the bra toward Larry. This is a present for you."

Larry grasped the bra and positioned it on his face like an oxygen mask and inhaled deeply. He slid down in his chair, and Sarah wondered if the look on his face was created by a genuine orgasm.

She thought about bringing up the ticket the cop had given her, but Larry was likely tapped out for the moment. There would always be another time.

Paul arrived to pick up Frank at the time Floyd usually did. Sarah watched from Larry's table as Frank argued and motioned for him to sit down for a drink. Paul was motioning toward the door and seemed to be losing his patience.

Sarah left Larry alone with his bra and walked toward Paul. Paul caught her gaze, and his eyebrows softened into a straight line. He smiled and took a seat beside his

grandfather in a casual manner, as if he'd wanted to the entire time.

Sarah sat beside him.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," Paul said. "How are you?"

Sarah counted the money Larry had given her and handed the stack of bills to Paul. "I am just great," she said.

Paul slowly took the money.

"For the computer," Sarah said. "You said five hundred."

"Yes, I know," he said, "but I usually sell computers at the store."

Frank leaned across Paul's lap. "You should see his office," he said. "As big as my house. He's really done good for himself. You can tell he's a MacMillan. All hard workers and good soldiers."

"Except that I've never joined the armed forces," Paul said, grinning.

"But you would if you had to," Frank said. He looked away from Paul, not willing to accept a protest. "The MacMillans always answer the call, and this country won't send us anywhere we're not needed." He turned back with a concerned look, "but those Americans, I'd think twice about serving for them these days. Always poking their noses in other people's business."

Paul stood up and held the bills out in front of Sarah. "Alright, I think it's time we get going Gramps. If we start talking about Pearl Harbor and Vietnam, we'll never get out of here."

"Hold that money for me, will you?" Sarah said. "Put it on my credit."

"I barely know you," he said.

"I could hunt you down and pounce on you," Sarah said. "Who knows, it might be fun."

Paul produced a confused grin. He rubbed the pile of bills between his thumb and forefinger. "You sure you want me to take this?"

"Trust me," Sarah said, "It's not a big deal. I've been wanting to pick one up for a long time."

"I'll put it on credit for you Daisy," Paul said. "What's your last name?"

Sarah laughed. "Daisy is my stage name. My real name is Sarah Dawson." She looked around the bar. "But they all know me as Daisy."

Frank put on his hat and tied the chin strap. He leaned into his cane as he stood. He leaned close to Paul and whispered, "That's a secret name around here." He smiled to Sarah.

"Just when I thought I had your name in my head," Paul said. "Now you go and confuse me. Very well, Sarah Dawson, come in as soon as you can, and I'll see what I can set up for you."

"Oh, he'll give you a good deal," Frank said. "A good businessman, but a good man as well." He reached up and massaged one of Paul's shoulders. "Every MacMillan knows the first rule of business. The smartest man makes other people money first. Only then do personal riches become a reality."

"Sounds wonderful," Sarah said. "You can run me through all the technical stuff. I'm going to need a good teacher. I'm a rookie."

Sarah was the same height as Paul in her heels. He met her gaze and their eyes locked.

"Oh sure," Frank said. He bumped lightly into Paul and lifted his chin to speak around Paul's shoulder. "He's always at work. Irish, you can come there any time."

"Very well," Paul said, "I guess I'll see you soon?"

"Are you in tomorrow?" Sarah asked.

"For the entire day," he said. "Open till close."

"How is the morning? Seeing that you're the big boss, you might be too busy to see me."

Frank had hobbled half way to the door. He turned around with short penguin steps, being careful to position his cane. Just as he was about to shout to Paul, the loud music that signaled the next show filled the room. Two sprayers on either side of the stage coughed out artificial fog. Tina appeared from a cloud wearing a soccer uniform with pigtails. She blew into a metal whistle that was tied around her neck and pointed to a man slouching in the front row.

The whistle pulled Paul's eyes away from Sarah's. Tina turned around in front of the man she pointed at and squatted. She bounced her ass in front of him with her hands on the stage in front of her. She slapped herself over and over again.

Paul began to wince as the slaps became vicious spanks, reddening Tina's skin.

"She likes it," Sarah said. She tapped him on the shoulder before slowly backing away. "Never know, might be fun." She playfully slapped her own ass. "See you tomorrow."

The stage lights reflecting off of Larry's dark eyes made it look as if he had a glowing ghost trying to escape from within. He adjusted himself and cleared away the pieces of the cardboard beer coasters that he had shredded while Sarah was away from his table.

Sarah turned and caught Paul staring at her. He politely smiled and waved. He turned to Frank, who dramatically pointed to the door. Paul smiled to Sarah one last time before putting on his jacket and helping Frank to the door.

The ghost behind Larry's eyes had disappeared when Sarah turned back to him.

"I hope that guy brings computers into strip bars," Larry said.

Sarah sat down and signaled the waitress for a drink. The bra she had given him was now on his lap. She picked it up and examined it.

"Do you like my present?"

"I saw you give him the money." He straightened himself and interlocked his fingers on top of the table. "You walked right from this table to him. Did you think I wouldn't see?"

Sarah put the bra back on his lap. "Larry, you're my number one man, you know that." She poked him in the arm.

Larry shook his head. His expression said that a pep talk wasn't going to be enough this time.

Sarah thought that it might be the end: Larry may have finally figured it out, even though he knew everything, deep inside his scheming head, from the first time they had met.

"What am I supposed to think when you do something like that in front of me?
Right in plain view? That I'm your main man?"

The waitress placed a tequila sunrise in front of Sarah. "How are you?" the waitress said. She was under five feet and looked fifteen. Her voice was almost a squeak.

"Really good," Sarah said.

The waitress stood beside Sarah smiling and nodding.

Sarah looked at Larry. He stared at a cardboard coaster in his hand, pulling little pieces off of it and grinding them into fibrous dust between his fingers.

"It's five seventy-five," the waitress said.

Larry looked up from his pile. The waitress's smile faded as she stared from Larry to Sarah.

"Fine," Larry said. He pulled out his billfold and handed the waitress a ten.

"Keep it," he said. He wiggled his fingers to shoo away the waitress.

"Hey," Sarah said. "Don't be rude. Do you want me to have a drink with you or not?"

Larry took a deep breath. He stared into her eyes. "Of course I want you to stay." He shrugged. "He's probably a guy that sells computers in strip clubs."

"He is," Sarah said.

Larry shook his head slightly. Sarah could tell that he was fighting to resist an outburst.

"Well, good." His chuckle was dry. "At least you didn't have to go too far."

Chapter Six

Sarah opened the door to her house, and instead of the scent of marijuana she expected, she was greeted by the smell of the vanilla incense she had bought years before and had forgotten to burn. The house was dark except for two candles burning on the kitchen table. She jumped when she felt Carl's hands on her shoulders. After he removed her coat and kissed her on the hand, he led her to the table. She sat down and looked at the blue numbers glowing on the front of the microwave. Three thirty in the morning. The idea of eating made her feel bloated, for she had already eaten something at the club a couple hours before.

Carl came from the kitchen with oven mitts on, holding a large casserole dish filled with lasagna. He balanced it on two trivets in the center of the table and sat down across from Sarah.

"It's been keeping warm in the oven since seven," he said. "I didn't think you were coming home."

Sarah was silent.

"I've been thinking," he said. He cut the lasagna into squares and dug one out and placed it onto Sarah's plate.

Sarah tasted a small piece of the lasagna. "Yum, this is really good," she said, looking up and waiting for him to continue.

Carl slid a square of lasagna onto his plate. "I love you."

Sarah poked at the browned cheese on top of her cube of lasagna. "Okay," she

said, "what are you getting at?"

Carl used the edge of his fork to cut through the noodles and cheese. He chewed a mouthful of food before speaking. "What do you mean? I just wanted to surprise you with a late-night dinner."

"Okay," Sarah said, "but considering that you become a romantic every time you're in shit, I find it hard to believe that this is simply out of the goodness of your heart."

Carl uncorked a bottle of wine and poured himself a glass. He could see Sarah looking at her empty glass while he took a sip.

"Sorry," he said and filled her glass.

Sarah continued to eat.

"I really want you to know that I love you. Is that so bad?"

Sarah nodded and chewed. She finished swallowing her food. "Good," she said. "Then we can enjoy the meal and get a good night's sleep. Or did you want to talk about the fact that you've started drinking again? Or maybe that you've started hanging around Brian."

Carl stopped chewing for a moment. The candles reflected off his eyes making the pupils golden. "Well why were you with that guy in the middle of the night? What am I supposed to think?"

Sarah nodded. "See? I told you."

"Told me what?" Carl said

"That you wanted something. You want me to tell you about all the nasty things

I've been up to. That I went to the club to hang out with my old boyfriends." She slid her plate forward. "Is that what you want to hear? That I've been cheating on you since we've been together, and that I've been fucking all the guys from the club?"

"Course not," Carl said.

Sarah waited for him to continue, but he said nothing.

"Do we really need to go through this again?"

Carl cleared his throat. "So what's going on then?"

"Thank you for finally asking," Sarah said. "Maybe I can correct your assumptions."

Sarah took a sip of wine. Its bitter taste made her tongue feel gritty against her palate. She pulled her plate closer and took another bite of lasagna to buy some time. She finished chewing and took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She meditated for a moment to muster the courage to say what needed to be said.

"That guy followed me from the club. He appeared by my car. No one in the club answered my call, so naturally I called the first person that would come to protect me."

Carl leaned forward, his elbows on the table and his shoulders reaching for his ears. "He didn't seem too threatening to me," he said.

Sarah sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. She glared as she listened.

"Actually," Carl said, "it looked to me like he knew you pretty well." He paused for a minute. "He looked rich."

"First of all," Sarah said, "I had no idea if he was threatening or not, but I didn't

want to stay there all night to find out. Second, if he knew me so well, why didn't he know my real name? And third, who gives a shit if he's rich or not? Did he really look like my type?"

Sarah lowered her head in attempt to make eye contact with him.

"He was wearing a suit," Carl said. "Looked good to me. Fancy shoes."

"You are impossible," Sarah said. "If I was into fucking guys for money, you would have had blue balls since we met."

"I try my best," Carl said. "I do everything I can for you, and all you can do is sit here and tell me I'm some kind of bum. Why the hell were you outside of the club by yourself that late anyway? Where were all these friends you were supposed to be out with? Why are you home so late again? What the hell am I supposed to think?"

Sarah thought for a moment. She was happy that he couldn't see her expression clearly in the darkened room. She thought about which words to use, but everything was moving too fast inside her head.

"I think we should focus on the fact that you abandoned me on the street. That is the issue here."

Carl shook his head. "Why was that guy calling you Daisy?"

"He followed me out of the bar. He was a creep."

"Fine," Carl said. "Don't tell me." He stood up. "And you wonder why I get pissed off."

"Carl, sit down," Sarah said.

Carl remained standing. "I'm listening," he said.

"I started dancing again. That was my first night."

Carl's eyelids stretched open as wide as they could. The reflected candlelight in his pupils made his eyes a bottomless pit of fire.

"We need the money." Sarah said. "I'm sick of bills piling up. Look at your jeans."

Carl looked down at the pale stripes of skin that flickered in the candle light through the frayed threads that covered his right knee.

"How long are you going to let the brakes go on your truck?" she asked. "Until you crash?"

Carl threw his fork onto the table. It clinked loudly and bounced onto the carpet. "I knew it," he said. He shook his head, lifting his lips like a rabid dog. "All you seem to care about is money this and money that; I don't have enough shoes, I don't have this and that. Well I don't give a shit about the brakes on my truck. I don't care about the money."

"We agreed you would stop drinking, didn't we?"

Carl raked his fingers through his hair, stretching his forehead back until his eyes became small slits. He released his grip and calmed himself.

"I got my raise," he said. "The old kraut finally agreed to retire."

Sarah smiled, but Carl could detect the pity in her expression. "That's great," she said.

Carl walked over and picked up his fork. He picked off a few pieces of Mitzi's hair. "So now that I'm a foreman. We'll make enough to do whatever we need to. Bills

won't pile up, I'll fix the brakes, and you don't have to go back to." He paused, "You don't have to go back to your old job."

"I've already made up my mind," Sarah said. "This isn't something new. I've been thinking about it for a long time."

Carl placed the fork on the table and kneeled in front of her. "I've been thinking too," he said.

Sarah shook her head and tried to pull Carl to his feet. He ignored her.

"Don't," she whispered.

Carl reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, velvet jewelry case. He accidentally dropped the case under the table and crawled to retrieve it. He sat up and held the case out. Sarah closed her eyes. Twice in one day, she thought. She put both of her hands on top of the Carl's, covering the case. She could feel the soft, warm velvet on the palm of her hand. As she opened her eyes, the candles wavered and dimmed.

"I will always care for you," she said.

Carl stood up and took the ring out of the case. He threw the case onto the table and grasped her hand. He held the ring in front of her face. Even in the dim light, Sarah could tell that it was worth less than a grand. And that was if it was real. Sizing up the ring made her feel horrible, but it happened automatically.

"If you gave a shit about me," Carl said, "you'd let me put this on your finger."

"I love you," Sarah said. "You know that. But we need to work through some things before we take such a big step. I'm not saying no, I'm just saying that we should wait."

Carl stood and tucked the ring into the pocket of his jeans. He stared down at her. The corners of his mouth hung low, and his face became cold granite.

His voice was monotonous and low. "So you're leaving me, is that it?"

"No," Sarah said, "I never said anything about leaving you. Things will be fine as long as you can control your jealousy. I can't stand working with teenagers and harassing people on the phone all day long. This is temporary Carl."

"Just like last time," Carl said.

"Look," she said, "I plan to do this for a year. Then I'm going to open up the gym. Remember the gym? I haven't forgotten about it. It will never happen with the dead-end jobs I have had since I quit dancing."

Carl slouched into his chair. He looked as if his spine had been removed.

"One year," Sarah said. "Can you wait one year? For me?"

Carl prodded his cold lasagna with his fork. "So you're telling me that you won't marry me and that you want to go back to being a whore for a year so you can chase after some dream that's not even real."

"A whore?" Sarah said.

"Let me get this straight," Carl said. "I'm supposed to sit here and let you have men staring at your naked ass for a year and you won't agree to any sort of permanent commitment? What the hell does that say about you, Sarah? How the hell does that make me look?"

Sarah picked up her plate and fork.

"I guess dinner is over. Thanks for cooking."

"Damn right it's over," Carl said. "I bust my ass for you night and day, but it's just never enough for you, is it?"

"I'm sorry that you're not happy, but I do my best," Sarah said. She turned toward the kitchen.

Carl picked up the casserole and launched it across the room. The dish hit the wall and unloaded the top layer of lasagna onto the carpet. Sarah froze.

"I still have something to say."

Sarah lowered herself onto her chair. She nodded. "Alright, I'm listening."

Carl looked away from her and around the room. His eyes squinted as they passed by the mess on the floor. He shook his head.

"God damn it," he said to himself. "This is all fucked up."

He walked across the room and picked up the casserole dish and scooped the spilled lasagna up with his hands.

Sarah watched him pile strips of pasta into the dish.

Carl mumbled to himself, "Making better money at the plant." He turned to Sarah. "Maybe we can send you back to school. You've always wanted to do that, haven't you? Business school or something."

It never occurred to her that Carl might have an alternative. But the thought of the untaxable cash she would receive from people like Frank and Larry overpowered any alternative Carl could come up with.

"I know your raise is going to help," she said, "but we need the money. I don't want to go to school. I can learn the business side of things on my own in the library."

One year is all I'm asking for. You should be secure enough with our relationship to know that I would never cheat on you."

Carl clawed at the carpet in an attempt to scrape up red blotches of sauce. "Don't you think being naked around other men is cheating?" He whipped his fingers downward, dispelling sauce into the dish.

"No, I don't," Sarah said. "And I promise I will quit for good when I save enough money."

Carl wiped his wet, reddened fingers on his jeans. "I get it," he said. "You love me, but won't marry me. My raise is good, but not good enough. You won't cheat," he pulled the ring out from his pocket again, "but you won't let the world know that you're taken."

"That's not it at all," Sarah said.

"Oh, I think it is," he said. "I can't drink because I'm an asshole when I'm drunk, but you can be a peeler. I can't hang out with my old friends, but it's fine and dandy for you to strut your naked ass around a bar and hang out with rich businessmen because they have enough money to buy you."

Sarah was speechless.

Carl stood and raised his voice. "Now, to the best of my knowledge, and you know that I'm not very smart, this seems to be the textbook definition of a whore."

Sarah could feel one large teardrop race down her cheek, leaving a path of coolness.

Carl held up the ring and smiled evilly. Sarah could barely see it in the dark

lighting.

"I know this isn't big enough for you."

"It's fine," Sarah said. "It's beautiful."

"Not enough for you," Carl said. "Nothing is ever enough for you. I should have listened to myself when I met you. I knew it was a mistake."

He threw the ring at Sarah, hitting her just above her left eye. Sarah screeched and covered her eye with her hands. She looked through her fingers in disbelief.

Carl walked to the table and took the plate in front of Sarah and started to eat her piece of lasagna with his hands.

He spoke in a calm voice through a mouthful of food. "I'm not keeping with a whore," he pointed toward the front door with the handful of lasagna. "Best get your things and hit the road."

"Carl," Sarah said.

Carl shook his head. "Don't bother with all the sappy bullshit. You'll be single and can have as many men as you want." He laughed to himself. "Gang-bangs, lesbian orgies, whatever you want. Midgets. Throw in some midgets for me, will you? Put it all on the Internet. There's a business for you. Forget the gym."

Tears were now running down Sarah's neck. She looked at him in search of some sort of emotional connection. She needed him to hold her and protect her from the evil demon that had taken possession of his soul. But the demon remained, and Carl's glare did not change.

Sarah lowered her head and nodded. She stood and walked toward the bedroom.

"Where you going?" Carl asked.

Sarah stopped and faced him. "To bed," she said softly, trying to keep her voice clear. "Or do you want me to leave right now? But just remember that I won't be coming back."

Carl laughed. "She actually thinks I'm scared," he said. He walked to the front door and opened it. His hand left a red smudge beside the doorknob.

Sarah grabbed her overnight bag and put on her jacket. She sat on the floor in front of the door as she put on her shoes. Carl was still standing by the door.

"I guess this is it?" she said.

"Just hurry it up," he said. "You don't need to crank up the gas bill before you leave. I'm sure you're going to stick me with all the bills."

Sarah finished tying up her shoes and walked out the door.

"Goodbye, Carl," she said.

Carl slammed the door behind her.

Chapter Seven

The next morning Sarah loaded her overnight bag into the trunk of her car and slammed it. She had only slept a few hours at a Super 8 Motel. She looked at herself in the mirror under the visor in her car. She adjusted her hair a little and pulled a stray eyelash covered in black makeup off of her cheek. The makeup had done a decent job of covering up the darkness under her eyes.

She drove downtown and circled the block four times in search of a meter before breaking down and paying to park in a lot. It was just before eleven before she walked through the door of Central Computers. The store was a vast, square room carpeted and painted in shades of grey. The store smelled of the undistinguishable smell that comes with new electronics. Her mind associated it with days when she had big money to make big purchases. The giant flat screen monitors made her smile.

"See anything you like?" Paul asked from behind her. He stepped in front of her, smiling. His hair was heavily gelled and his cologne was slightly overwhelming. His dress shirt was a navy blue that had a violet hue to it, and his paisley tie matched the burgundy pinstripes in his pants. Sarah looked at his sharp features in the bright florescent lights. She didn't remember him looking this good. She could feel her face heating up, so she looked down at his polished shoes.

"Sorry I'm a little behind schedule," she said.

"Not a worry," Paul said. His warm voice caused her to raise her chin. "I was thinking we could talk about your computer system over lunch. Kill two birds with one

stone, as they say."

"I can always use some food," Sarah said.

Paul retrieved his jacket from his office and met Sarah at the door.

"I know a good place. It's about four blocks." Paul looked up at the overcast sky.

"Should we get a cab?"

Sarah could feel the winter breeze eating through the stretched denim of her jeans.

"Are you kidding?" she said. "I'm an Alberta girl."

"Very well," Paul said, "we shall tough it out then. I also have no fear of Mother Nature. Paul put on a pair of tight leather gloves and tucked his chin into the raised collar of his wool jacket. "I hope you like Ethiopian."

Sarah thought for a moment. The only thing she knew about Ethiopia was from the television coverage of a drought that happened there when she was young. The children with only tendons and bones for appendages looked as if they had survived Auschwitz. Their dry, leathery skin could pass as elephant. She remembered wondering how the little babies' big brown eyes could stay open with all of the flies crawling across their eyelashes. She always turned the channel as fast as she could to avoid the ghastly images being permanently burnt into her mind.

She dryly laughed to herself. "What are we going to eat at an Ethiopian restaurant? Twigs and dirt?"

"They have an excellent culture, and excellent food to match," Paul said.

"They're big on communal eating. Sharing with one another is a big part of eating."

"I was just kidding," Sarah said.

Paul chuckled. "Don't worry about it. Everyone assumes that all Ethiopians have never had a good meal."

The restaurant was in a long, slender room with brick walls on either side. There were a total of eight tables with four seats to each. A young Ethiopian waitress approached them smiling. Her large teeth were perfect and glistened. Sarah felt guilty when they made eye contact, not only because the girl didn't fit the description of what she considered an Ethiopian to look like, but also because she felt that she had personally betrayed her with some sort of discrimination minutes earlier. Sarah thought the girl was enchanting with her smooth midnight skin and tight puffs of hair.

"Hi, Paul," the girl said. "For the two of you?"

Sarah had expected a strong African accent of some sort, but the girl's accent was of the plain Canadian variety.

The girl sat them at the last available table.

"This place is cozy," Sarah said. She looked at the tables surrounding them. They were filled with a variety of people from different cultures.

"They serve the best lunch you can get downtown. I'll order us a good dish for two people."

Sarah leaned in, rubbing her hands on her jeans to fight the chill she was still feeling.

"I'm excited," she said.

"Good," he said, "you should be if you haven't been here before. I come here at least once a week."

The waitress placed a pot of tea and two small cups in the center of the table.

"What did you need today Paul?" the waitress asked. She smiled at Sarah and raised her eyebrows to Paul. "Something special for lunch?"

Paul nodded and handed her their menus. "Tsetse, this is Sarah."

Sarah shook the girl's slender hand.

"Hello, Sarah," Tsetse said, holding Sarah's fingers in her hand. "I really like your nails," she said.

"Thank you," Sarah said. "I really like your name. What does it mean?"

Tsetse laughed. She pointed toward the door to the kitchen. "I can blame my father for the name. He's from Ethiopia and my mom's from South Africa. I guess I used to be a bit of a pain when I was a little girl. I used to follow my dad around all day long and annoy him while he would try to work. My real name is Tsuana, but my dad thought I was such a bug that he started calling me Tsetse after the tsetse fly in Africa. It gives people sleeping sickness when it bites them. He says I could tire anyone out when I was being a pest."

Paul said, "How many times do you think you've told that story?"

"At least five hundred times." She turned to Sarah. "But don't worry, I like to talk about myself all day long if I get the chance."

"Can you tell your father that we want the special for two?"

"Special for two it is."

Tsetse walked to the back room and her soft voice became thunderous as she shouted out her food orders in the kitchen. The volume flashed from loud to soft as the

two-way door swung back and forth on its flopping hinges.

"You really do come here often," Sarah said.

"I like that this place is a family operation. Pretty soon these things are going to be a thing of the past. I would guess that the only reason this little restaurant is still going is because it is a novelty. Everyone has to try it at least once, and there are over a million people in the city. That's not counting visitors."

"So it's just Tsetse and her father?"

"No, her mother works in the back too. Sometimes she serves tables, but she's pretty bitchy with the general public."

"I really like it here," Sarah said. "Thank you for bringing me."

Paul filled Sarah's tea, then his own. He held up his small cup to propose a toast.

"To new and joyful experiences."

Sarah bumped his cup with hers and repeated his statement.

The food arrived and it was nothing that Sarah had expected. It was a large, flat basket with a thin layer of bread lining the inside. On top of the bread were piles of chickpeas and corn and some other mushy piles that Sarah couldn't identify.

"Just rip a piece of bread off the bottom and help yourself to whatever you'd like to put on it."

Sarah ripped off a piece and spread a brownish black mush that looked like some kind of beans. It was a bland flavor, but new to her.

"So what kind of computer do you need?" Paul said. "I can get it to you today if you know what you want."

"I'm going out of town for a week right away, so don't worry about it until I get back."

Paul pulled off a piece of bread and scooped some chickpeas onto it. He gave Sarah a suspicious look with the hint of a grin. "If you're going out of town, why did you want to meet me about the computer today?"

"I thought you could show me around your big store, maybe your office and all the little secret rooms in the back. Plus, you never know, I might have learned a few things about computers. I do actually need one. Everyone should have one these days."

"Agreed," Paul said.

"Yeah," Sarah said. She stuffed a large piece of plain bread into her mouth. She chewed quickly. "I wanted to see you outside the club. I think it has worked out pretty good so far."

"Yes, it has," Paul said. "But you could have just asked."

Sarah stuck another piece of bread into her mouth and shrugged.

"It's nice to call you Sarah," Paul said. "I must admit that I wasn't as fond of you as a Daisy."

"I always wanted to be a hippy when I was younger. I think that's where the name came from. But the name is now a club name. I associate it with work and the men who frequent strip clubs."

"What kind of men do you have to deal with on a day-to-day basis?" Paul asked.

Sarah took a sip of tea and squeezed the cup to warm her hands. She watched Tsetse rushing to clear a table. There was now a lineup at the door. She thought about

when she first started dancing. When she wasn't as skinny as the other girls, and when she was in the process of growing her hair out. She had cut her hair months earlier to get rid of the thick strands that felt like straw from being dyed so many times. She danced in front of two men who were cheering her on. They laughed and screamed for more, but she hadn't learned many dance moves. She moved her body and lay in front of them when it was time to play a game. She had cheap key chains made that showcased an amateur photo of her on her bed naked. Her boyfriend at the time had taken the picture. The bedspread was white and yellow, which disturbed the contrast and focus of the image.

She licked the smooth side of the key chain and placed it on the freshly shaved surface just above her vagina. The first coin was tossed, and it felt as though someone had pierced her inner thigh with a knife. She heard one of the men saying to the other, "Hurry up. Throw it."

Everything happened in an instant. Sarah looked at the man who held the coin and down to her leg. She found a flap of wrinkled skin covering a large bead of blood. The blood ran down her leg. The two men got up to leave, and Sarah began to cry. The DJ announced that there was a problem, and the bouncers were able to detain the men. Another dancer helped her off the stage and explained the problem: the man had heated up the coin with his lighter. This had happened to other girls in the past.

Sarah never did find out what happened to the two men for sure, but she was told they were taken into the back alley by Tank and Bull, two bouncers who were notorious for being ruthless brawlers and absolute racists, especially against the natives. Sarah

often heard them preaching that they would never let Cowgirls turn into an Indian bar.

Paul cautiously moved his hand in front of Sarah's eyes. "Are you still with me?"

"Sarah shook her head. "Yeah, sorry. The club. Yeah, the guys are dicks sometimes, but at other times they can be very sweet."

"Must be a hard job to get used to," Paul said.

"At first it is, but then it becomes like any other job. It becomes nothing more than a way to pay the bills, and you get better at it as time goes on. I'm just back dancing for a year to save money."

"You said something about starting a business," Paul said.

Sarah nodded and grabbed one of the last pieces of bread remaining. She had eaten a lot more than Paul and wondered if he was thinking she was a hog. "I might have it all together in less than a year. At the rate I'm going, it seems possible."

Tsetse dropped off the bill and thanked the two of them before rushing to clear another table.

"That's really good," Paul said. "I'm glad you think big. This world is full of people who go to their nine-to-fives like cattle."

"Yeah, I guess you could say that's part of the reason I took up dancing, but it's much more work than it looks like."

"I believe it," Paul said. "I couldn't get up there and swing my thing."

Sarah laughed. "I'd pay big bucks to see it."

"But seriously," Paul said, "I admire you for being such a hard worker, and I think your gym will do well. My computer store started off in an office space smaller than my

bedroom."

"I still have to have a tour of that computer store," Sarah said.

Paul slipped Tsetse his credit card as she raced by with a stack of dishes. She ran the card through the machine before rushing to the back room. She came back through the swinging door, ripped off the printout and dropped it off to Paul. The table next to them asked for some extra napkins. She assured them that she would bring them as soon as she could. She left a quick smile for Paul and Sarah, and then rushed to the front door to seat the next guests waiting for a table.

Sarah watched Paul tip the girl ten dollars on a twenty-four dollar bill.

"Best waitress in Calgary," he said. "I've never seen her make a mistake."

Tsetse, hearing Paul, said, "Sure Paul, but that's because you're only here for less than an hour a week. Ask my dad if I make any mistakes. You'll get an earful."

Sarah's cell phone rang as they were walking back to Central Computers. She answered it and heard Carl's voice on the other end. She could barely hear him over the traffic that whizzed down the busy street.

"You're going to have to speak up," she said. "I can't hear you."

Carl raised his voice slightly. "Can we talk?"

Sarah turned her head away from Paul. She pretended to look up at the high-rise buildings above.

"I really need to talk to you," Carl said.

"Right now?" Sarah said. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"I am," Carl said. He paused for a moment. "I'm on a break. You've been on my

mind."

Sarah chewed at the inside of her lower lip as she thought about his proposal. She vividly remembered his surging face as he spat insults at her the night before. She knew what he would have to say. He had become a parrot who struggled to learn a few statements. "Sorry" was his favorite word.

"Sorry," she said, "I'm busy at the moment. Maybe in a little while."

"Why can't we just talk?" Carl asked. "Are you with someone?"

"That's none of your business," Sarah said. There was another silence. "Are you there?"

Silence.

"I guess I'm going to hang up if you're not going to talk," she said. She listened to what sounded like a television program in the background before she hung up the phone.

Paul walked beside her silently. A bank in front of them had a digital clock that switched between the temperature and the time. She had to be at work in half an hour.

"Sorry about the call. Just a deranged ex."

Paul nodded and maintained his silence.

"Ordinarily I wouldn't talk about it, but it's quite new, so it's going to be on my mind a little."

"That's no issue with me," Paul said. "These things happen, and they are never that easy. I had something similar not too long ago."

"It's something in common I suppose," she said.

They both stopped at the doors in front of Central Computers.

"I'm going to have to skip the tour," Sarah said. She stuck out her bottom lip a little. "Unfortunately I have to be at work soon. But you know something," she moved closer, "I had a really nice time today. You're a great guy."

Paul pointed at himself with a clueless expression. He looked behind him and back to Sarah.

"Yes, I mean you, you dork."

"Well, thanks," he said. "I'm not very good at accepting compliments, but I am good at giving them when they are deserved."

"Oh yeah?" Sarah said.

"Yes," he said. "I think you are a gorgeous, intelligent and interesting woman. I enjoyed lunch thoroughly and would like to take you out again. Maybe next time we could do dinner?"

"I think that would be absolutely wonderful." Both of them programmed each other's cellular phone numbers into their own phones.

Sarah stared from Paul's eyes to his lips. She opened her mouth slightly and stepped forward. She was about to close her eyes when a breeze of cold air swirled snow around them. She sheltered her face with her hand. Paul pulled off his right glove and held out his hand.

Sarah, hiding her disappointment behind an exaggerated smile, shook his warm hand.

"I suppose I have to pick up Gramps soon as well," he said. "I'll see you at your place of work, Sarah Dawson."

Sarah squeezed his hand rhythmically.

"It will be a treat."

Sarah rushed to her car to get out of the cold breeze. She put a little dance into her walk and clenched her fists in excitement. She cranked the music in her car until the speakers crackled as she sped toward Cowgirls.

She hopped up the small flight of stairs that led to the main level of the bar and found Kevin shooting pool with the bartender. He leaned over the table and lined up his shot. He looked up, his chin almost touching the green felt, and stared at Sarah through his pointy eyebrows. He shot the ball and walked around the table, squeaking the end of his cue with chalk.

Sarah looked at her watch and back to Kevin quizzically. "What's the look for," she said. "I'm half an hour early."

Kevin moved to the side of the table and lined up another shot. He sunk the eight ball with loud crack.

"I put it all in the office for you."

"What are you talking about?" Sarah asked.

Kevin didn't answer the question. He cleared the drips of sweat that ran down his pink forehead with his forearm and poured himself a water behind the bar. He quaffed the water and refilled the glass. Sarah walked around to his office and found a dozen roses, a box of Swiss chocolates and a card. She sniffed deeply above the roses and could barely smell them over the dusty ashtray smell of the room. She ripped open the

envelope. Sparkles slid out and fell like snowflakes toward Kevin's desktop, eventually landing on small pieces of blackened tobacco. The card inside had a picture of a plump angel painted in sparkles. The inside of the card had a poem written in thin, angled handwriting:

You rise above the rest,
In the heavens you fly.
I see you in my dreams,
An angel in the sky.

I dreamt of you today,
Your wings so soft and white.
Your blinding beauty in my eyes,
Oh, what a beautiful sight!

There was a message under the poem scrawled in the same handwriting, which read:

My Dearest Sarah,

"This poem was written for you. I see you flying in my dreams often, and I hope to grow some wings of my own to fly beside you. I want you to know that I love you and

that I am here for you. Call me."

Your number one fan,

Larry

Sarah didn't bother reading the phone number at the bottom of the card. She looked at the front of the card once more, scratching at the glue that held the sparkles on the paper before throwing it in Kevin's garbage. She opened the chocolates and ate one. Kevin appeared at the doorway.

"This freak stalking you?"

"Who? Larry?" she said. She weighed the pros and cons of the situation in her head. "He's pathetically harmless."

She reached into the box and took out another chocolate. "But he sure seems to like me."

Kevin shook his head. "What a waste of fucking money."

"I think it's money well spent," Sarah said. She smiled and plopped the chocolate into her mouth and spoke through chomps and smacking lips. "I have him so wrapped that he would give me his left testicle if I asked for it."

Kevin's belly rippled as he laughed. "I guess you can't expect the smartest people to worship a peeler. Must be nice to have a snatch. Bait for all the suckers swimming at the bottom of the gene pool."

Grinning at Kevin, Sarah reached into the box of chocolates and handed one to

him.

"See? This is what it is like to be nice to someone, Kevin. You should try it once in a while."

Kevin ate the chocolate, advertising his little, round teeth and the jagged, amber crust of plaque near the gum-line. His smile was bitter. "Nice guys finish dead last," he said. "You should know that better than anyone."

Sarah put the lid on the chocolates and picked up her flowers, ignoring Kevin's comments. She peered over the red scrolls of petals. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Carl pacing outside of the office. Kevin noticed the alarm on her face and turned toward Carl. Carl stopped pacing. He held his chin high as he peered upward at Kevin's shiny, pink face. Kevin nonchalantly crossed his arms on top of his belly and spread his legs for stability.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Here to speak to Sarah," Carl said.

Kevin turned to Sarah. "You know this one?"

Sarah nodded. She paused in front of Carl before turning around and putting the chocolates and the roses back in the office. Kevin watched Carl's eyes dart repeatedly from the gifts to Sarah's face.

Sarah pushed at Kevin. "Move it," she said.

Kevin grinned toward Carl as Sarah shoved his massive body. "Only if you say please," he said. He shrugged to Carl. "No manners."

"Please get the hell out of my way."

Kevin moved aside and said, "Don't tell me you wasted a shitload of money on her too."

Sarah pushed past Kevin and grabbed Carl's hand and pulled him to the quiet corner of the bar near the pool tables. Carl adjusted his baseball cap after sitting down. He did his best to remove the anger from his eyes, but Sarah could still see it glistening and begging to be set free.

"What are you doing here?" Sarah asked.

Carl remained silent.

"Did you think you could come here and drag me out of the club?"

Carl shook his head. "No. Didn't think that. I just wanted to see you. I haven't slept since you left."

Sarah couldn't believe that his selective memory had already forgotten that he was the one who told her to get the hell out of the house. "This isn't the place to talk about this."

"Then come home tonight," he said. "I'll wait for you."

Sarah remembered the ring he had thrown at her. "I don't think so. I need some time. I'm going to Edmonton soon. We can talk when I get back."

Carl raised his head. His eyes could barely be seen under the bill of his hat.

"Are you with that fat piece of shit that gave you the roses? If you are, come out and say it because I want to clear this up right here and now. I won't hurt him."

Sarah laughed and could see that Carl's didn't find anything about his question funny.

"Kevin?" she said in a serious voice. "You have to be kidding. Carl, do you really think I would trade you in for someone so repulsive?"

Carl looked to the floor. "Just tell me the truth," he said, "that's all I want to know. Then I'll go."

"I am not with anyone. The flowers were from a guy from the club. If you're going to let the gifts and the men piss you off so much, why did you come here?"

"I came here to find out what the hell is going on, that's why!"

The small crowd waiting for the first show to begin became silent and turned their attention to the corner. Sarah glared at Carl, who didn't seem to care or notice that he had turned their table into a stage. Kevin peered from the bar, waiting for any excuse to club Carl down with his doughy arms.

Sarah stood up. "If you're going to yell at me and embarrass me at work, I don't think you're ready to have a serious talk."

"I'm sorry," Carl said. "Please come home tonight." His eyes became shiny. "I need to talk to you. I just need to talk."

Sarah pulled Carl to his feet and led him toward the front door. As they neared the front stairwell, Larry's head bobbed into view as he climbed the stairs. Sarah avoided eye contact as she led Carl around him.

"Did you get the flowers and the chocolates?" Larry said. "I picked out each rose myself to make sure you received the most exquisite arrangement available. They are from the a highly respected florist."

Carl pulled his fist from Sarah's grasp and Larry was on his way back down the

stairs before Sarah knew what had happened. Both of Larry's heels held onto the top stair while the rest of his body fell in slow motion, as if he were a tree being pushed over after being chopped by an axe. His body convulsed when his back slammed into the metal edging of the stairs. He screeched and his arms and legs flailed and bashed into the walls around him.

Sarah squeezed the back of Carl's t-shirt into a ball in her hand. He pulled Sarah like an untrained dog on a leash. Kevin, hearing Larry's cries, ran as quickly as his massive body would allow, his belly and breasts flapping, and gripped Carl's arm just before he started down the stairs. He pulled Carl to the side and threw him into the pinball machine beside the entrance. Carl's hand punctured the glass. Shiny cubes of glass slid down the ball ramps and filled the drop tunnels. Carl fell to his knees and pulled himself upright again. Blood dripped onto the grey carpet, speckling it with black dots.

Kevin leaned his head back, producing a bulge of fat on the back of his neck, and motioned toward the stairs. "That guy okay?"

Sarah ran behind the bar and came back with a rag. Carl didn't take his eyes off Kevin's face as Sarah wrapped the towel around his hand.

"Thanks for stopping by," Sarah said. "I'm really glad you took the time to pay me a visit. You should really stop by more often."

She tied the rag and cinched it as tight as she could, looking at Carl's face to gauge the tension of the knot. There was no reaction.

Sarah looked to the bottom of the stairs and found Larry in his protective ball sniffing.

She went to him and patted him on the shoulder.

"Larry, are you all right?" she asked.

Larry removed his hands and his face lit up. For the first time, Sarah actually pitied the scrawny creature.

"Can't hurt steel," he said softly. He held out his arm and pretended to flex his biceps.

"Is he okay, or what?" Kevin asked, still returning Carl's stare.

Sarah helped Larry to his feet. He winced and moaned, keeping the melodrama in full swing.

"He'll be fine," Sarah said. She left Larry once he was standing and returned to the two bulls at the top of the stairs.

"You have three choices," Kevin said, holding up three sausage fingers. "You can leave now, peacefully, with that single wound; I can remove you, which will result in several more wounds; or the cops can remove you and take you to a cold, dark cell out at the jail. You don't look like a smart guy, but you could surprise me."

Sarah wrapped a fresh rag around Carl's hand.

"I'll take him to the hospital," Sarah said.

"Bullshit," Kevin said, "you're up after Jane. If you're not here, don't bother coming back."

Sarah shook her head in disbelief.

"I fucking warned you," Kevin said. "I told you, no fucking around. And what do you bring? A bunch of cunts fighting over your ass. I don't need this shit. And you're

paying for the fucking glass on that machine."

Sarah guided Carl toward the stairs, keeping herself between the two men. Larry was still at the bottom of the stairs listening. When he saw Sarah appear, he grabbed his lower back and moaned softly.

Carl made a point of stepping on Larry's polished shoe on the way out the door.

"Thanks a lot," Sarah said once Carl was leaning on the front wall of Cowgirls. People gravitated to the far end of the busy sidewalk and slowed their pace to watch the young woman scream at the man with the bloody bulb on the end of his arm.

"You really know how to make a bad situation worse."

Carl glared at the sidewalk. Sarah could see his breaths come out of his nose in quick puffs.

Sarah ducked to stare into his eyes.

"This is a really good way to work things out," she said.

Carl picked at the stubble on his chin.

A drunken man in a brown tuque stopped to stare at the two of them. He squeezed a collection of cigarette butts in his hand, his black fingertips matching the butts that were visible.

"Mind your own business," Sarah said.

The man's eyes returned to the comfort of the blotched concrete below as he scanned for more abandoned tobacco. His eyebrows rose happily as he spotted a butt that was lodged in a crack. He hunched over and scratched his mangy finger along the crevice as he mumbled something in a language only his brain could decipher. Paul

appeared behind the man in the tuque with Frank attached to his arm.

"Is everything all right?" Paul asked.

"Everything is fine!" Sarah said. She closed her eyes to regain her composure. "I mean everything is going to be fine."

Sarah turned to Carl and wanted to slap the glare off his face.

"Pull yourself together. Drive yourself home and cool off. Why aren't you at work anyway?"

Carl didn't answer. He moved away from the wall and walked erratically toward his truck, kicking small rocks across the cold sidewalk. He stood beside the truck, leaning his body against the open door. "I'm on stress leave. That's why I'm not at work."

Sarah walked into the club with Paul and Frank. Larry nodded to her and smiled from the bar. She pretended she didn't see him. Kevin was leaning toward him behind the bar offering him free drinks and food. Anything to keep him from bringing the cops to the club, Sarah thought. The only time Kevin could be seen being nice to anyone in life is when he needed to kiss a little ass to save face in the eyes of the authorities. Sarah had seen him, a giant man, cry in front of a police officer to avoid an impaired driving charge. He made up a story about his sister dying of cancer and that her painful battle had ended in his parents' house that night. He even went into detail about how the nurse who cared for his sister had cried with the family when the young girl finally stopped fighting the slow but violent attack initiated by the terminal disease. The look on Kevin's face at this moment reminded her of that evening. She was high on coke and driving with Kevin in

his father's Porsche. She remembered being disgusted at the way he told the story. The tears looked so authentic to her, even though she knew that Kevin was the only child of a perverted businessman who made a fortune selling smut and a mother who took half of the profits and moved to Florida in 1988. As far as she knew, Kevin hadn't seen or heard from her since.

Kevin squinted at Sarah when she strolled by the bar. She knew she would be stuck in his closet of an office after her shift, the time when she least wanted to sit and listen to him blurt out a predictable reprimand.

Sarah could see that Frank's bulging eyes were focused on Jane's pale, perky breasts. She had covered them with piña colada scented massage oil and was dialing radio stations on her nipples in front of a big man in a cowboy hat. The cowboy sipped his drink keeping constant eye contact.

Frank smiled as if he were daydreaming and stumbled over the leg of a chair. Paul helped him sit down in pervert's row.

Frank waited for Sarah to sit before he spoke. "Who was that outside?"

"No one important," she said. "Just an ex."

Frank's eyes turned toward his bushy eyebrows as he thought. "Yes," he nodded, "I recall you mentioning him."

Paul cleared his throat. "I guess I should be getting back to work."

Frank tilted his head back. "Okay young man, thanks for the ride. I'll see you in a bit."

Paul mouthed the words "see you later" to Sarah. He walked backwards, smiling

to her. Sarah returned a smile of her own.

"So," Frank said, "tell me what all the commotion was about out there. I saw you screaming at, what was his name, Kyle?"

"Carl," Sarah said. "Long story, Frankie, but how have you been?"

"I've been just fine, Irish, but I'm a little worried. Is everything alright?"

Sarah's faced warmed at the sight of Frank's saddened eyes and thin, wrinkled frown. "Of course," Sarah said. "I'm a big girl."

"I know that," Frank said. "I just didn't like the look in his eyes. I've seen guys with that look before."

"Let's talk about your day," Sarah said. "What has the most handsome man in Calgary been up to? Chasing the ladies, or being chased?"

Frank's bulging eyes became serious as he looked over his glasses and placed his cold hand on Sarah's arm. "And they eventually snap. They do. They snap and go crazy. You'll never see it coming, and you won't know what he'll do."

Sarah sighed. "He's harmless. He's not happy that I'm back." She twisted a piece of her hair in her hand. "I'm not going to quit. I'm sick of renting. Why rent when you can buy?"

"Do you need some help?" Frank said. He lifted his leg to pull out his wallet. "I have some cash on me, but I could go to the bank if you need some serious help."

Sarah grabbed his arm and shook her head. "I think I'll be fine. At least I hope so."

"Well," Frank said, "you let me know if you need anything." Frank attempted to

wink at her, but both of his magnified eyes closed.

The afternoon at Cowgirls went by the way most did: a couple of shows danced by each of the three women working that week to a small crowd of older men sipping on beer bottles and smoking too many cigarettes. Sarah thought the club was a haven for the stagnant lives that had no direction during the day, Frank being the only exception. Lunch hour brought some average customers, mostly blue-collar workers and a few businessmen, but then the elderly misfits took over once again.

Frank started off throwing coins onto the stage while Sarah danced her second show, occasionally setting a bill on the edge of the stage.

Sarah finished the show and could only thank Frank for tipping her. He had paid enough to buy her attention for the entire show. She sat down at his table and nudged him on the arm. Frank gripped his arm, feigning to be hurt.

"These old bones are fragile."

"Oh bullshit," Sarah said, nudging him again.

"Oh it's not bullshit." Frank's magnified eyes reflected the lights of the stage, enhancing the false bitterness they projected. "Can't drive. Can barely walk. Sure as hell can't fuck." His face softened and he leaned toward Sarah. "Oh, you would have loved me, Irish. Strong as an ox and handsome as a white stallion."

"You're still a ladies' man," Sarah said.

"Well, I did have my time. You see, I didn't marry Norma until I was thirty-six. She was twenty-two. Fresh face, big eyes. You should have seen her."

"I see you still like them young," Sarah said.

Frank licked his lips and chuckled. "You should have seen her father. He was built like a brick shithouse. He tried to kill me the first time I met him. Good thing I learned to scale a fence in the military, or that son-of-a-bitch would have caught me and snapped me in two. I was thin as a rail back then."

"I didn't know you were in the army," Sarah said.

Frank straightened in his chair. "Helped liberate the Dutch when I was still a kid. 1945. I was twenty years old."

Sarah leaned forward and kissed Frank's cold cheek. "A war hero."

"Just did what had to be done," Frank said. "Like all the other kids that were over there."

"Did you meet any pretty girls during the war?" Sarah asked.

"Not during the war, but when it was all over I did. After the winter of '45, a lot of the Dutch were starving. The Germans were stopping us from getting any food to them. Me and about eight other guys found a nice little spot outside of a small town in the southern Netherlands to eat lunch when a little girl approached us and asked us something in Dutch. None of us spoke Dutch, you see, but we could tell the poor little thing needed something to eat. I tried to give her what was left of my lunch, but she wouldn't take it. Was a pretty good lunch too, but I wasn't near as hungry as she looked." Frank held up his right index finger. "She grasped this finger and tugged at me until I stood up and followed her. She led me to a house that was in shambles about a ten-minute walk away. She led me to the cellar where a young woman in a ripped dress was tending to an older woman on a bed made of old bricks covered with soiled rags. I think

the older woman was the mother of the two girls."

Frank cleared his throat and sipped at his drink before continuing. "The old woman looked like she was dying, and the girl in the dress stood up and tried to make herself look presentable, which was, of course, impossible. But, I tell you; she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She looked about the same age as me, and even though she was skin and bones, grubbier than a hobo and dressed in shambles, there was something about her warm smile and the strength in her eyes that made my mind go blank. I stood there staring at her like a blubbering idiot. She said something to me in a voice that was so soothing that I almost started to cry. I offered her my food and canteen. She nodded her thanks and quickly held up the old woman's head and started feeding her."

Sarah moved her chair closer. "That is so sweet. So what happened to them?"

"Well," Frank said, "I went back to the guys and asked what they could donate for food. They gave almost everything they had. Universal suffering makes some men behave the way all human beings should. I went back to the cellar and gave the girl in the dress what I had rounded up. The little girl hugged my leg, and the girl in the dress nodded her thanks and placed the food on the ground beside her mother. When I left the cellar, I heard that soft voice from behind me. When I turned around, I saw the girl in the dress walking toward me. She walked bare-foot across the long, green grass that waved in the wind. Her little sister stood in the doorway of the house watching. She walked up to me and placed her hands on my cheeks and kissed me."

"That's so romantic," Sarah said.

"She wouldn't let go," Frank said. "We kissed for about ten minutes."

"I bet that's the best kiss you've ever had," Sarah said.

Frank nodded. "I can tell you that I forgot where I was and who I was. I kept my eyes closed the whole time, and I'm sure she did the same. I could feel the sun hot on my back, and I could feel her breath blowing on my cheek through her nose. The death and destruction that the war had brought disappeared. When she finally let go, we both looked at each other and understood that we both needed that kiss. We stood smiling at each other until she nodded and said "vrede." That's peace in Dutch. I had to keep saying the word over and over to memorize it. I had to know what it meant."

"Did you ever see the girl again? Sarah asked.

"I didn't. But if she's still alive, I'm sure she remembers that kiss like it was yesterday. I never had to fight another human being after that kiss."

Frank rubbed the loose skin on his face with his hands.

"Where did you go after that?" Sarah asked.

"We moved on to the other towns and cities. Most of the Germans were gone, and those who stayed surrendered. I heard that some of them fought, but I didn't see any that did. The towns and cities were in rough shape, but the way the Dutch received us was wonderful. You should have seen the look in their eyes, Irish. We were wet, tired, many of us wounded, but those Dutch girls tried to kiss every damn one of us. But I didn't let any of them kiss me. It felt like I would be letting that young girl down if I let anyone else kiss me. I guess it's kind of silly."

"Not at all," Sarah said. "It's romantic. It's just too bad you never got to see her

again."

"It is, and it isn't," he said. He looked up at Sarah with an evil grin. "If I would have fallen in love with her, I wouldn't have had so much darn fun getting into trouble when I got back home."

"How many girlfriends did you have after the war?" Sarah said.

Frank laughed. "I was a hellion before I met Norma. Lots of whiskey and women. I'm not ashamed to admit it one bit. I had a lot of fun and even spent some time locked up in the clink. I'm a better person for all of it. No regrets here."

Sarah moved closer, almost as if she were snuggling up to a warm fire. "So what made Norma that special girl?"

Frank took a sip of his drink and thought for a moment. "For starters, Norma was the most beautiful woman I had seen since the Dutch girl during the war. She wasn't movie star pretty. No, she was much better than that. She was cute beyond the definition of cuteness. So much character she made me abandon the most important moments of my life at the time to sit and talk with her. I used to tell her that I wanted to lunge at her and eat her whole, and I would have if it were possible. A woman that looks that way is so tempting it's just plain dangerous to the mind."

Sarah laughed. "So how did you go from being a drunken, womanizing criminal to a sweet husband?"

"I told you," Frank said, "Norma was the most amazing woman I had ever seen or met. It was instant. But there were problems, you see. She was engaged to a really rich man who was going to give her a life I could never give. Back then I was just writing a

few stories for the newspaper and doing some construction. Pipelining. Nasty work, Irish. Nasty work."

Frank dozed into a daydream again until his eyes jerked him back to reality.

"Where was I?" he said.

"Engaged, rich guy, pipelining," Sarah said.

"Oh yes, well, to make short of it, I stole her." Frank looked upward and he seemed to be concentrating. He slowly grinned and looked back to Sarah. "Her father wanted to kill me for it. He was a good friend of her fiancé. They rebuilt vehicles together or something manly like that. It all started while I was covering an event for the newspaper. It was, ironically, about a car show, and she happened to be sitting right beside me. We talked throughout the show about how silly we thought all the men were that spent so much time customizing engines and waxing paint jobs. I convinced her to leave the show and get some lunch. She never went back to her fiancé and we slept in the same bed every single night after that until the end of her life." He lightly slapped his hand on the table. "End of story."

"So that must be where his good looks came from." She winked toward Paul, who had just arrived. Paul returned the wink, but he had to scrunch half of his face to do so. He pretended to scratch his scrunched face as Frank turned and squinted.

"He's a watered-down version," Frank said, "but Norma and I are responsible for all the good qualities."

"Sure, sure, Gramps," Paul said. He took a seat next to Sarah. "We all know you were the Casanova of your time. Not all of us can live up to your reputation."

Frank leaned closer to Sarah. "His reserved, anti-social behavior is not from the MacMillan side of the family. We have always been a sociable bunch." He crossed his arms across his chest and raised his chin. "If a MacMillan was at a party, you damn well knew he was there. Always yapping away, and causing a ruckus." He raised his eyebrows, "my cousin burned down his own house by lighting 100-proof whisky on fire before shooting it back. I was told that after about fifteen shots, the drunken fool fell over with a flaming glass in his hand." He grinned and pointed behind himself at Paul. "But not this one."

Paul shrugged to Sarah. "How can I argue with a man full of such wisdom? Teach me, oh wise one."

Frank stretched his lips before running his tongue around them. "Get a strong drink you little shit," Frank said. "That's your first step to aspire to be a respectful MacMillan." His face softened as he turned to Sarah. "This lovely lady has been taking care of me all afternoon."

Sarah rubbed Frank's shoulder. "I think it's the other way around," she said.

Paul took off his jacket and hung it off the back of his chair. "Alright," he said, "Gramps, you can order for me so that I can learn what a MacMillan should drink."

When the waitress came around, Frank ordered two of his usual drink. Paul sipped it, and Sarah could tell by the sour look on his face that his throat and stomach were fighting to reject the high concentration of scotch.

"So did you kick Carl out of the house?" Frank asked.

Sarah stared at Paul for a moment before answering. "I left the house. I'm

staying in a motel. It's not too far from downtown." She smiled weakly to Paul.

There was a silence for a minute while Frank's attention was drawn to Tina's aristocratic costume, which included a black tux, cane and top hat. Sarah and Paul both turned their attention to the show as well. The age in Tina's face was evident even from where they were sitting, but her confidence and talent as a dancer made up for it. She moved wildly around the stage, flipping her cane and dropping to the splits to catch it. Sarah hoped she'd get to see her act during the second song. She enjoyed watching Tina's amazing pole work. Tina could climb effortlessly to the top of the pole and keep herself stationary with one arm and a hip. She would then rotate her body, spiraling to the floor. It looked dangerous and amazed the crowd.

Frank shouted over the music. "How is your house?"

Paul looked confused.

"Your home. You still live in your house, don't you?"

Paul nodded, "Yes, it's fine."

"What do you say that you let this fine little lady stay at your place for a little while? That was her boyfriend outside." He turned to Sarah, "I hope you don't mind me bringing this up, Irish."

Sarah smiled, slightly embarrassed. "It's no big deal, Frankie. I'll be fine. And that's my ex-boyfriend."

"Nonsense," Frank said. "I know you're living in a motel room. That's expensive and a terrible atmosphere to be in when you're trying to get through some rough times.

Paul's got a four bedroom house all to himself. Come on Paul. Since Laura's been gone,

you've had lots of unused space."

Paul sipped his scotch and wiped the wet ring it left on the table with the edge of his hand. "I can rent you a room if you need one," he said.

"No, don't worry about it," Sarah said.

"Like Gramps says, it would be cheaper than a hotel. It would be in the basement, but the basement is finished."

"Thanks," Sarah said. When Frank turned his attention to the stage, Sarah mouthed the words, "are you serious?"

Paul shrugged and smiled.

"I could put the money you gave me for the computer toward rent. And you'd have a computer to use at the house. Plus there is a hot tub, your own bathroom, living room and a pool table."

Sarah grinned. "With all of those fun things in your house, it sounds like you might need someone to room with you."

Paul half-grinned. "Well, not just anyone," he said. "But if you need a place."

"So, five hundred a month?" Sarah asked.

"You can stay for two months on that if you like."

"When can I cancel my motel room?"

"Whenever you like," Paul said. He knocked back his scotch and cringed. "I have a client that I have to see before dinner, so call me."

"I'll call you tonight," she said.

Frank had no problem leaving his drink. He nudged Sarah as he exited his seat

and took his grandson's arm.

Sarah thought about the offer for the rest of the night, imagining how nice Paul's house would be. She guessed it would be immaculately clean with perfectly moisturized air and a comfortable and evenly distributed temperature. It would be an excellent change.

Chapter Eight

Paul's house didn't look like much from the outside to Sarah. It was in a neighborhood full of houses that were all exactly the same: each had an earthy pastel color, a double garage that dominated the front of the house and a tiny patch of grass that received more water in the summer than some plants do in rain forests. The giant signs on both entrances to the neighborhood said 'Welcome to Mayberry' in letters that resembled calligraphy made Sarah think it was a place where the Partridge Family could live. Sarah noticed that there were likely about ten blueprints for the houses that were reused with slight modifications such as color or a small decoration above the garage. Some were reversed, having the door on the opposite side of the garage. Everything was the same, but at least it was new.

Paul was dressed in a suit, and his dark hair was spiked and frosted lightly with a reddish blonde. Sarah could smell pungent cologne when he opened the door. He looked rushed as he invited her in.

The ceiling was quite high, and on the floor she could see the marks from the vacuum cleaner, which were in a parallel pattern that ran diagonally across the carpet. The kitchen was furnished with stainless steel appliances and slate flooring. Sarah thought she had walked into a show-home.

She followed Paul downstairs. The basement was much the same as the main level, except that it would be hers for a mere two hundred fifty dollars a month. She peered into the long, wide bathroom.

"I've always wanted to have a jet-tub," she said.

Paul looked into the deep, plastic tub. "I have one upstairs as well, but it has served as a laundry hamper. I guess I should try it out."

Sarah shook her head. "Why do you have it if you don't use it?"

Paul shrugged. "It came with the house."

Paul showed her the bedroom she would be staying in. It had two single beds in it, and it reminded Sarah of a small hotel room.

"Very nice," Sarah said. "You must hire a really good maid."

Paul looked at the carpet and at the walls of her new bedroom. "No, I just like to keep things tidy. It takes half an hour a day. If I keep on it, it stays like this all the time." He punched his fist forward to expose his watch, a silver Omega. "Unfortunately, I must get to work. I have a company that might buy three hundred full computers from my store. That is, if the price is right." He reached into his inside pocket and produced a gold key with a base surrounded in pink rubber. "Here is your key. Feel free to use the furniture that is here. If you have items of your own, feel free to load them in." He smoothed a small chunk of paint on the wall with his thumbnail. "I just ask that you watch the walls."

Sarah raised her eyebrows, putting on her sad little girl routine. It usually made the men at the club bow to her and give her whatever she wanted. She held up the key. "Thanks for the key. Pink is my favorite color. You wouldn't happen to have a truck would you?"

"I do," Paul said. "I can get it later today and we can pick up your things tonight

if you like."

"I work," Sarah said. "But I could leave for a little while in between shows."

"Okay," Paul said, looking at his watch again. "Call me and let me know what time you'd like to go. I have a pot of coffee on upstairs. Feel free to help yourself. Please, make yourself at home. I'm sure there will be plenty of time for us to get better acquainted in the near future."

Sarah looked at a pile of boxes in her closet.

"Can I move these boxes?" she asked.

"Sure thing," he said. "They are just Christmas junk. You can just put them in the rumpus room. I will likely see you at Cowgirls later this afternoon." Paul waved and disappeared up the stairs.

Paul arrived at Cowgirls at just after two in the afternoon. Sarah changed into her street clothes and the two of them left the club. Outside was a 1978 Ford pickup that was beige with a thick chestnut stripe. It had rusty edges that looked like jagged, rotten teeth.

Sarah and Paul drove to Carl's and Paul backed the pickup into the driveway. Sarah could hear Mitzi barking from the backyard.

"Sorry for leaving you, baby," she said to the dog. "We'll get you out of here as soon as we can."

Paul stood behind her listening. He didn't like the 'we' in her statement. He was

afraid that she would want to bring the animal along. He thought about it roaming the house, leaving a tornado of thick, black hair swirling in the air behind it and turning the lush, deep-green lawn into a mess of cancerous, yellow craters.

As Sarah pushed her key into the deadbolt, the door gave way. Inside she found Brian sitting on the couch. His head slowly turned toward the door, and his heavy eyelids and bloodshot eyes announced that he would not be communicating anything more than grunts and groans. Paul stood behind Sarah looking quizzically from her to Brian.

"Maybe I should wait in the truck," he said.

Sarah took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Don't worry. He looks scary, but he's completely out of it."

"Brian," Sarah said, "what the hell are you doing here?" She looked at her watch and shook her head.

Brian smiled and reached toward the coffee table with a wobbly hand. He picked up an empty beer bottle and tilted it toward his lips. He slithered the few drops around his mouth with his dry tongue and placed the bottle on an imaginary extension of the table. It fell to the floor.

Sarah turned to Paul. "I'm sorry about this. I'm so embarrassed."

Paul examined Brian and did not answer.

Brian looked at them with a blank stare. He looked as if his head weighed a hundred pounds.

"You better not be living here," Sarah said. "That's the last thing Carl needs."

Brian managed a crooked smile. He stretched his eyelids open to focus on the

bottles in front of him. He then closed one eye and considered each bottle before he finally located the one that was full.

Paul followed closely behind Sarah as she went into her bedroom. It was a mess of clothes on the floor and crammed with electronics. She became conscious of Carl's mess of wiring that spanned the entire room. She put the luggage that she had bought with the gift certificate Carl had given her the year before on her bed and pulled dresses, sweaters and shirts from the closet and tossed them onto the bed.

Paul crossed his arms and watched as she made the pile of clothes. "Interesting situation out there," he said.

Sarah sighed and stopped stacking. "Yeah, I really am sorry. It wasn't like this when I lived here, I promise."

Paul tried to laugh. "It's fine. At least he appears to be harmless."

Sarah then pulled the drawers out of her dresser and put them beside the luggage. Paul stacked her pants in the luggage first and Sarah stuffed underwear and bras around them. When all the underwear was out of the drawer, she felt the skin of her cheeks heat up. She looked into the drawer tiled with condoms. A large latex vibrator, several bottles of lubricant and massage oils sat on top of the condoms.

"I'll leave these for Carl," she said and quickly moved the drawer out of Paul's sight. She could feel he was watching her as she quickly wrapped the vibrator in a shirt and stuffed it into the side of the luggage.

Paul looked away from her when she raised her head. He was grinning and examining the room. His grin was contagious.

"If we're going to be roommates," Sarah said. "We're probably going to see some things about each other that we normally wouldn't. And you'll find that I'm very open about myself. But I guess you probably know that from my line of work."

"Fair enough," he said. "I'm pretty open about things myself, so I'm sure we'll get along just fine."

Sarah cocked her ear toward the door when she heard Mitzi barking and howling to the sound of a gurgling engine. She could hear Brian in the next room attempting to say something. It sounded as if he were vomiting and speaking at the same time. He ended the pukey statement with a fit of coughing that could summon the Grim Reaper.

"What is it?" Paul asked, noticing the alarm on Sarah's face.

Sarah ignored the question, still listening.

The front door banged open.

"Whose truck is in the driveway, Bri?" Carl yelled. Sarah could hear beer bottles jingling.

Sarah looked at Paul and held her index finger to her lips before leaving the bedroom. As she entered the living room, Carl was throwing a jumbo bag of potato chips at Brian.

"There you go shithead, eat'em while they're hot."

Without sleep for an entire day, Brian's reaction timing was like a corpse. The bag smashed loudly into his face and fell to his lap. He smiled and blinked as his head wobbled. He tried to speak, but his words were infantile gibberish. Finally, he pointed behind Carl.

Carl's eyes softened when he saw Sarah. He stopped moving and stared at her, focusing his eyes on her face.

"Why aren't you at work?" Sarah asked. "And why are you driving under the influence? I thought two D.U.I.'s taught you your lesson."

Carl's eyes went from soft to mean. He lifted his baseball cap, revealing the balding swirl on top of his head, and repositioned it so that it almost covered his eyes.

"What the hell do you care?" he said. "It's none of your business."

"You're right, Carl. It is none of my business. I'm sorry. I'm just here to pick up my things, then I'll be out of your way. Then you and Brian can get back to whatever important events you have scheduled for the afternoon."

Sarah walked toward the bedroom.

"Don't be taking the T.V.," Carl said. "Paid for it with my holiday pay, remember?"

Sarah didn't reply.

"And the phone. Don't touch the fucking phone. That was a gift from my dad."

Brian leaned off the couch and pried his fingers into the cardboard that encased the bottles of beer Carl had brought. Carl kicked the case, sending it sliding across the floor.

Sarah froze for a moment. She turned around and could see beer slowly pulsating from the bottom of the case onto the carpet.

"And the bed, and the dresser. That's my dresser."

Brian mumbled questioningly at Carl.

"Shut the fuck up Brian," Carl said. "Or I'm going to kick the shit out of you." He turned back toward Sarah. "And the alarm clock. Whores don't have to get up for anybody."

Sarah continued her path toward the bedroom.

Carl was right behind her. He pushed open the door as Sarah tried to close it behind her. He stopped once he noticed Paul, who was rigidly tense. His eyes begged Sarah to explain what was going on.

"Who the fuck are you?" Carl said.

"Carl," Sarah said, "this is my friend Paul. He owns a computer store, and he's helping me move."

"Is that right?" Carl said.

Paul passively nodded.

"I was going to ask you," Sarah said, "but I thought you would be at work. You still work, don't you?"

Carl lifted his hat and scratched at his scalp. "Of course. I took some time off." He twisted his index finger into his temple. "This shit's got me all fucked up." He looked at Paul. "This your new boyfriend?"

"No," Paul said. He tried to smile. "We're just friends."

"Did I ask you, Mr. computers?" Carl said. He took a step forward.

Sarah moved in front of Carl. Carl tried to look around her head at Paul, but Sarah kept her face in front of his, her neck jutting to the side like an owl's.

Paul moved to the far corner of the room. "Sarah," he said.

"Don't worry," she said. "Carl, you're drunk. Go back to the living room and

make sure Brian doesn't choke on his own vomit. Lord knows he'd be doing the world a favor."

Carl gripped Sarah's arms.

Paul cautiously moved forward.

"Step the fuck back," Carl said. "Tell him to step back baby, or this is going to get ugly."

"Don't worry Paul," Sarah said. "He's just having a fit." Sarah thought about Carl throwing the ring at her face and hoped she was right.

Carl glared at Paul. "Alright suit," he said. "Come right up here, and we'll see who's having a fit." Carl snorted like a pig and pursed his lips. A yellow ball of beer-phlegm coated in tobacco resin gobbled onto Paul's paisley tie. It blended with the color scheme well.

Paul's chin jutted forward several times as if he were about to throw up. He loosened his tie and pulled it over his head and threw it on the floor. He tried to smile. "Not my favorite tie anyway."

"Carl," Sarah said, "if you don't leave this room right now, not only am I going to call the cops, I'm never going to speak to you again. You're drunk, and you're going to regret what you're doing."

"Just fine," Carl said. "Real fine. You take your whore. You take your whore and get the fuck out." He pointed at Sarah, his finger inches from her face. "And you. You touch any of my shit and I'll be coming to get it."

Carl spotted the reflective pink surface of the vibrator sticking of the shirt

wrapped around it. He moved calmly toward it and pulled it out in front of Sarah. He shook his head at her in disgust before throwing it against the wall. It left a small dent in the drywall and the plastic base shattered.

"Get out!" Sarah shouted.

"I payed for the damned thing," Carl said. "You think I'm going to let you take something that I spent my hard-earned cash on to stick up your pretty little boyfriend's ass?" He laughed. "You've got to be joking."

Carl lunged forward, faking an attack on Paul. Paul jumped backward and tried to ready himself for combat. He held his fists high above his head and his feet close together.

"That's right," Carl said. "You won't be so lucky next time suit."

"Out!" Sarah shouted.

"I'm not leaving until I get a word with you alone," Carl said. He adjusted his cap, grinning at Paul as he bobbed back and forth on the balls of his feet. He juggled his own hands like a dramatic boxer.

Sarah sighed. "Fine," she said. "Paul, would you give us a minute?"

"Of course," Paul said. "Will he be civil?"

Sarah nodded.

Paul walked around her and past Carl who faked a swipe at him.

Carl said, "You've got to be kidding me. Where'd you pick this asshole up, at the fucking strip club?"

"So what if I did?" she said. "If that's all you have to say Carl, I'm in a hurry. I

have to get back to work."

Carl gripped her hand and rubbed it with his strong, calloused fingers. The rough feeling of his hands reminded her of the few times he had caressed her. She had always loved the way he massaged her hands. His hands displayed that worked hard. He was a man who could fix her car and build a deck in the same day. But the smell of old booze on his breath brought her back to the moment.

"I've been thinking," Carl said. "I think some time apart might be a good thing for us."

Sarah looked around the room at the scattered pieces of her life. She realized that none of her things belonged in this room anymore.

"I still want this to work," he said, "I love you. Some time apart might be something that will help us. Might make things better for us in the end."

"You've already said that," Sarah said. She pulled her hand out of his rough tentacles. "This may not be a temporary separation, and that is something you'll have to come to terms with." She looked at the sharp pieces of plastic scattered across the floor. "You've really screwed things up this time."

Carl's tone became venomous. "I've given you everything that you've ever wanted. What do you want? I'll quit drinking again right now. I'll kick Bri out on the damn lawn. Is that what you want?" He glared at Sarah through glazed eyes and lowered his voice. "What if I said you can't leave? What then?"

The hurt in his voice made Sarah step back.

"What if I said I won't let you go?" A deep breath brought on a quivering in his

lower lip. "What if I said that you couldn't leave, and that if you did, I would find you and put a bullet in your head?"

Carl held up his finger like a gun and made a childish gunshot sound as he dropped his thumb.

Sarah slowly lowered herself onto the bed. "Carl, don't act crazy. I still care about you, and you know that. Maybe later on we can work things out."

"Bullshit," Carl said.

"And I know you're not crazy," Sarah said. "You wouldn't hurt me or yourself, so stop pretending."

"Go ahead and tell me you're gone for good, and we'll see who's pretending."

Sarah stood up and opened the door. "Get a grip," she said. "I have to get back to work. Maybe we can talk more when you're sober."

Chapter Nine

Sarah pulled her Civic up in front of a small motel five minutes away from Cowgirls. Jane was out front with a large piece of luggage trailing behind her. She pulled it down the curb and stood waiting as Sarah pulled up slow so that the slush in the gutter wouldn't splash her. Sarah could see Tina inside rushing to and from the bathroom with a handful of makeup and shower supplies. She jammed them into her duffle bag and shoved a few articles of clothes on top before zipping it up. She threw the bag over her shoulder, swinging to one side, and wobbled out the door. Her bag was a dull green and ratty from years of traveling. Frayed holes showed colorful previews of her stage costumes.

"You're a hell of a lot shorter than me, honey," Tina said to Jane with a cigarette bobbing in her mouth. She fought with the thick, metal zipper on her bag before tossing it into the hatch. "Why don't you ride in the back?"

"I called it," Jane said. "You should have been out here earlier."

Tina bent forward, "Sarah, you know I'm way too fucking tall to sit in the back of this thing."

Sarah shrugged. "I'm staying out of this. But I am leaving, so figure it out."

Tina crossed her arms and thrust her hip out to the side. "I got all day."

"You're totally like a little kid," Jane said.

Tina puffed heavily on her cigarette, suddenly unaware of Jane's existence.

Jane sighed. "Fine," she said. "I guess I can sleep easier in the back." She

climbed into the car and slammed her back against the seat.

"Exactly," Tina said.

Sarah watched Jane cross her eyes and mimic Tina to the back of Tina's head. She grinned to her in the rearview mirror as she pulled away from the curb.

Sarah took the freeway heading north, and the car was soon on the highway toward Alberta's capital city. Tina began to randomly push buttons on the stereo.

"How do I change the station?" She asked.

"Why?" Sarah said.

"You weren't actually listening to that classical shit, were you?" Tina said, still pushing buttons and turning knobs.

Jane said, "This isn't your car, Tina."

Tina turned her head slightly. "Put a sock in it. I'm not listening to some bitch with a squeaky-assed voice sing to a bunch of fucking trumpets. I have a headache and I'm on my rag, so don't fuck with me."

The speaker balance moved from left to right and the bass disappeared. Sarah took over and found a Calgary rock station and corrected the balancing.

Tina nodded her head to a classic oldie and reclined her chair almost onto Jane's lap. Jane moved over and sat behind Sarah.

"I guess we'll listen to this," Sarah said. She looked in her rear-view mirror, but Jane was now out of her sight.

Jane stretched out across the back seat, her legs tucked under Tina's reclined seat, and fell asleep just after they exited the city, and Tina looked in her hand mirror and

adjusted her makeup. Sarah hadn't seen Tina without makeup. She never washed it off at night, and she had a fresh layer on after a shower. Sarah glanced over at her and examined the numerous craters in her cheek where her makeup resembled wood-filler.

"Pretty soon I'm going to have to wear a fucking mask," Tina said.

Sarah returned her eyes to the road.

Tina closed her mirror, sat up and tucked it into her purse. "When I looked younger, I used to have guys following me across the country and they would buy me whatever I wanted."

"I remember. The guy with the foot fetish."

Tina cackled. "Heels. Yeah, now that guy was a fucking nut job. I remember he paid me four hundred dollars for twenty minutes alone with my feet."

"How did that go over?" Sarah asked.

"He paid me, I went out into his creepy van, probably a stupid thing to do, and he rubbed his cock on my feet and almost choked himself trying to deep throat my entire foot. Sure was an easy four hundred."

"Didn't he end up following you after that?"

Tina fluffed her coat into a pillow. "Yeah, kept asking to date me. Said he wanted to marry my fucking feet. I thought the sick fuck was going to cut them off and leave me in a fucking ditch somewhere."

"How did you get rid of him?" Sarah asked.

"Simple. I just started telling the bouncers. They will make anyone's life rough for you if you bat your eyes at them and throw them a tip. The loser tough-guy types are

always like that. So the guy got so sick of getting the piss kicked out of him that I never saw his ugly ass again. Sick bastard."

Tina placed her head on her jacket and, after a few adjustments, joined Jane in the world of dreams.

The grey sky above the open prairie was letting large flakes of snow fall, which turned into small balls of slush on the windshield. The afternoon was warm enough to melt each flake on the highway, but the ditches filled quickly. The hiss of the tires was hypnotizing to Sarah. She relaxed completely as she watched white lines disappear under the front corner of the car. She began to think about Carl, and how he had been when she and Paul had gone to the house. She wondered if he would go downhill completely and fold all of his cards in the game of life the way his father had. She had only met his father twice. Once was at his Aunt Peggy's funeral, and the other was when Carl thought he was dead. He had locked himself in his room at the boarding house for over a week. The owner used his key to open the door and found that the door had been sealed shut by something inside. Carl scaled the side of the building and climbed through his father's window to find him sitting on his bed. The headboard of his bed was in front of the door and he had a case of whiskey in front of him on the floor. Half of the bottles were empty. The smell was worse than a sewage treatment plant. His father had been shitting and pissing in the pedestal sink in the corner of the room. It was a good thing the alcohol helped suppress his appetite.

Carl pulled the bed away and let Sarah in, and the two of them sat and questioned the old man for over an hour. He never spoke a single word. Carl, with Sarah's help,

decided it was best to move him to a home where someone could clean the sink if he decided to shit in it.

Sarah's cell phone buzzed and beeped in her pocket. Tina stirred and awoke as Sarah raised her hips to the steering wheel and dug out the phone. Her old phone number appeared in the call display. She pressed a button to silence it and sat the phone down beside the emergency brake.

"Screening your calls already?" Tina said, her raspy voice sounding almost like a man. "I don't even bother carrying one of those anymore. I usually lose them anyway, you know? I leave them in hotel rooms, in clubs, get pissed and drop them on the street or some stupid shit like that."

The phone buzzed and beeped again.

Tina continued: ". . . Plus if a guy from the club gets a hold of your number, they never stop calling.

Sarah turned down the radio, already sick of listening to Tina, and picked up the phone and flipped it open.

"Hello," she said. There was a long silence on the other end of the phone.

"Hello?" Sarah said for the second time.

"Hi," Carl said.

"Hi," Sarah said.

A long silence followed. Sarah hung up the phone.

Sarah heard a click beside her and a cloud of marijuana flooded the car. She looked over and found Tina sucking on a glass pipe. She handed the pipe toward Sarah,

holding the smoke in her lungs. She suppressed coughs, letting small rings of smoke escape her nostrils until she released a thick cloud out of her mouth and hacked uncontrollably.

"Tina!" Sarah said. "I don't allow that in my car."

Sarah's phone started ringing again. She flipped it open.

Tina raised her hand in defense and nodded as she coughed. She held up her index finger, waiting for the coughing to subside. She spoke in choppy, short sentences, which made her raspy voice sound like debarked dog.

"Sorry," She said, concentrating on her pronunciation. Tears filled her eyes as another fit of coughing consumed her. She laughed as she coughed, pointing at the smoldering bowl of marijuana in her hand. "Good shit," she said.

"Where the hell are you," Carl said into the phone.

"You'll have to speak up," Sarah said, "I can barely hear you." She leaned away from Tina. Carl repeated what he had said. Sarah could hear some slurring in his voice.

"I'm on my way to Edmonton." Sarah said.

Tina opened her window and the inside of the car sounded like a jet engine. Tina dumped the pipe out the window and half of the glowing buds flew into the back seat of the car. Jane jumped up from her seat, gripping her neck.

"What the hell was that?" Jane said. "Something just bit me in the neck."

Tina laughed, still moderately coughing.

Sarah clacked her phone shut and pulled over to the shoulder of the highway. She searched the back seat to make sure that the coals from the pipe were out. Jane was still

frisking her hair and jumping around the seat. Sarah found a small hole in the back seat. She glared at Tina.

"No more smoking shit in the damn car," she said.

Tina's smile reversed. She held her hand on her chest and took a few breaths before speaking. "Sorry, honey. I was just trying to get rid of it." She looked at the black hole surrounded by a black ring of burnt material. "Should be easy to fix. I'll fix it for you in Edmonton."

Sarah imagined Tina spreading some Wal-Mart upholstery paint across her seat.

"Don't worry about it," Sarah said as she sped back onto the highway. Her phone rang again.

"Hello," She spat into the receiver.

"Hi," Carl said.

Sarah took a deep breath. "What can I do for you?"

Carl was silent.

"I'm going to hang up and turn my phone off," Sarah said, "so if you have something to say to me, you better say it now."

"Come home," Carl said in almost a whisper.

Sarah leaned toward her window.

"Call me when you're sober."

Sarah hung up the phone and turned it off.

"Crazy stalker from the club or something?" Tina said. "Is he rich?"

"It's not like that," Sarah said.

Tina's tone became devilish. "Need any help getting rid of him?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Sarah said. She turned up the windshield wipers to full speed. They squeaked and thumped across dry spots on the windshield.

"I could help you," Tina said. "I've dealt with a ton of the fuckers. All shapes and sizes."

Sarah shook her head. "No, you couldn't, so drop it."

"Pull your panties out of your ass," Tina said. She turned and placed her head on her jacket again. "Be nice and this is what you get in return."

Sarah wanted to apologize for snapping, but she knew Tina would sit up, accept the apology and continue yapping. The strict rotation of top-40 music on the radio suddenly became soothing to Sarah's ears.

They arrived at the hotel in Edmonton just after dark. Sarah couldn't tell for sure, but she guessed the man behind the counter was from China. He had a large mole on his left cheek that was shaped almost perfectly like a five-pointed star. Sarah tried not to stare at the star as they checked in, but she couldn't help but examine the symmetrical blemish.

The man grinned at her, as if every guest, large and small, had taken a moment of their lives to examine the brown marshmallow star stamped on his cheek.

"Your room, number 237. Floor two, up elevator." He held out three credit card keys with holes punched in them and motioned toward the elevator.

Sarah thanked the man and turned in the direction he instructed. Tina stood looking at the man's cheek, her eyes hypnotized by the mole. Sarah nudged her out of her

trance and led the three of them up to their room.

Sarah asked Jane to share a bed with her so there was no chance of having to sleep with Tina. Sarah was repulsed at the idea.

Tina pushed her hands on her bed. "A little springy," she said. "I kind of like being bounced around." She cackled and disappeared into the washroom. Jane sprawled across the other bed on her stomach with her feet dangling above her lower back. She chewed on a piece of her curly hair.

"Is she really alright to room with?" Sarah whispered to Jane.

Jane looked up from her magazine and pulled the hair from her mouth. "Tina? We'll barely see her, trust me."

Jane returned to her magazine and put the wet lock of hair back in her mouth. Sarah looked at herself in the large mirror on the wall across from the bed. She could see Jane behind her, flipping pages and snapping her gum every once in a while. She began to wonder why the hell she had come back, and that maybe a room to herself, whatever the cost, might be a better idea. The toilet flushed and the bathroom door opened.

"Not a bad room," Tina said. "Don't know if it's worth the price, but not bad." She closed the door behind her. "The bathtub and towels look clean. And the soaps don't look like that cheap shit you usually get."

The talk about the washroom reminded Sarah the discomfort her full bladder was giving her.

"Don't go in there," Tina said. "I just took a raunchy shit." Tina lifted her shirt and rubbed her tanned stomach. Her belly-button was framed with a curlicue of light

stretch marks.

"Sick!" Jane said, not taking her eyes off her magazine.

"A lot of beer last night," Tina said. "Nachos and pepperoni pizza." She cackled and smacked the loose skin hiding part of her washboard abs.

The creeping smell, like an aroma seeping from a rotting corpse, edged its way into Sarah's nostrils. She backed away.

"No air freshener spray," Tina said. "I guess that's the one thing that could use some improvement. Go ahead and enter, but don't say that I didn't warn you. It's fucking horrendous."

The Club they were booked to dance at was owned by a man with silver sideburns down to his chin. He looked like he should drive a hog in a long line of Hell's Angels. Sarah had never met the man, and he didn't seem to notice any of them as they walked in. He was busy talking to a man on a stepladder replacing a colored bulb above the dance floor.

Tina lit a cigarette. "Can we get a drink?" she asked.

The man turned, looking annoyed until he recognized Tina's face.

"You sure can." His laugh was more of a muffled grumble. He cracked four beers and placed them on the bar. "The first one's on the house. After that, it's all up to you."

"This is Smitty," Tina said. Sarah shook the man's hand and immediately noticed tattoos that had become thick and diffused. He had a lightning bolt under each knuckle and the name 'Sue' across his fingers, each letter on a separate finger starting with the pinky and followed by a crude-looking heart on his index finger.

"Ex wife," he said.

Sarah's eyes darted upward. "Pardon me?" she said.

Smitty raised his hand, putting the tattoos in Sarah's view once more. "They always tell you not to tattoo names on yourself, but there's always a few idiots who seem to believe that love lasts forever. I guess I'll never forget that it doesn't." He turned his wrist and stared at the crooked lettering. "I'm sure you girls know all the rules, so I won't get too involved. Shows don't start until there are six people drinking in the bar." He pointed to Tina. "I have her booked as the feature, and you two can decide who takes the other shows."

The first two shows of the night were cancelled. The light snowfall outside had turned into a blizzard. The men who did come in had white, flaky hair and red faces. The stage was much lower than the one in Cowgirls, and the crowd was of a lower order. Mangy bums that came in off the street were allowed to sit and watch several shows for the price of a small glass of draft beer. Sarah had to get used to ignoring almost half of the crowd as she did her rounds after each show. Toothless vagrants would call her over, mumbling in tongues, always smiling bigger than the people with a full set of bleached whites. Smelling bad, looking worse, but always smiling and always broke as a joke.

Sarah had made good money in bars like this, but some of the men were a

different breed than usual. She found that they didn't want to see beautiful women faking orgasmic pleasures, they needed to see them. Each misfit had his own reason to be there, but most were either too ugly or lacked the intelligence and social skills to interact with even the most ghastly and mentally challenged females. Tina called them 'spankers,' or those who were likely to leave something other than a wad of gum on the underside of the table.

Sarah's last show of the evening went rather well. Two men, one young and one old, wanted to continue bouncing coins off of her outer labia after the third song ended. She was on all-fours and had a poster wedged between her buttocks. The idea was that the men had to knock the poster free with coins. Sarah found that it was one of the most profitable of the games: it was highly sexual as most men loved sex in this position, she could still turn her head and cheer them on, and there was no chance that a supposed wild shot could hit her in the face. But both men aimed under the lower edge of the poster. Their target was the vagina, or, better yet, the clitoris. With small clinches as the men shot, Sarah endured two more songs and walked with \$150 in tips after the show. She ended the night by thanking the men for their patronage. She signed posters and sat with them for a few minutes.

A man spoke openly to her breasts. "We really liked your show."

Sarah ducked in her chair to draw his eyes to hers. The man's eyebrows dropped as if his friends had left him at a party full of strangers.

"Thank you," Sarah said. "I'm really glad you enjoyed it."

"This is my son," the man said, motioning to the young man beside him. Sarah

smiled to the young man.

"I was," the old man said, "I mean we were wondering how much it would dent the wallet to have you come with us when the bar closes up."

The thought of closing reminded Sarah that her back and neck ached, and her feet were begging to be released from the straps of her platform heels. The man's eyes lowered to her breasts again. His friends hadn't abandoned him after all, and his expression reflected his relief.

"A million dollars," Sarah said. She looked to the man's son, whose eyes met hers. "Each," she said.

"Oh, come on. What's a pretty girl like you really worth? How does five hundred sound?"

Sarah shook her head. "One million."

"Eight hundred. That's four hundred each. Me and the boy get you for a couple hours."

The loud voice of the DJ filled the room and music pumped from the speakers as Tina's show began. Sarah stood up and pushed her chair in. "Sorry boys," she said, "but we don't do that around here. If that's what you're looking for, I would suggest skid row or an escort."

The man shook his head. "Cut the shit," he said. "How much?"

Sarah sauntered away, disgusted at the thought of a threesome with a father and son. They were already calling to Tina and waving money in the air. After a few steps, she noticed Larry standing in front of her. He had a tan colored parka draped over his

arm, and he wore his classic dark suit. He had a rose in his hand and held it up and said, "I tried to make it in time for your show, but the roads slowed me down."

"Larry," she said, "what the hell are you doing here?"

Larry's grin did not fade. "I'm sorry," he said, "I just had to see you. Hear me out." He tucked a shiny lock of black hair behind his ear. "Then you can have me killed or whatever you see fit."

Sarah crossed her arms under her chest. "This better be damn good."

"I have a tournament here in Edmonton. I'm here on business, not pleasure." His eyes dodged her glare as he offered her the rose. "But it doesn't hurt to mix the two a little."

"Do I look that stupid?" Sarah said. "I really do like you Larry. I'm sure you're a hell of a guy, but you can't follow me around the province. You just can't."

"Wait," Larry said. "Of course you're not stupid. Your beauty not only radiates from your body, but it radiates from your mind like your thoughts are beams of soft and warm light. You're the most beautiful and intelligent woman on this planet. I'd bet my life on it." He raised the rose higher, hoping she would take it. "I have proof." He nodded triumphantly. "I didn't think you would believe me." He rummaged through several pockets in his suit and then dug into his parka and produced a pamphlet from a local casino. He showed Sarah that there was a Texas hold'em tournament the next day that had a cash prize of twenty thousand dollars.

"I'll win," he said. "Then we can go to Hawaii, Mexico, Spain, wherever you want."

Sarah looked at the rose. The snow had melted on the petals, making them look fresh and clean.

"How did you know that I would be here?" Sarah asked. "And I bet if I called that casino, I would find out that they have these poker games all the time."

Larry handed her the pamphlet. "I assure you that that is not the case at all. I overheard you speaking with your coworkers about traveling to Edmonton. It worked out splendidly, don't you think? I think it's fate." He retracted the rose and rubbed the soft petals between his fingers. "You do believe in fate, don't you?"

Sarah looked Larry over from head to toe. If he didn't throw away money like toilet paper, she thought, he'd be completely worthless.

"I'm not bluffing," Larry said.

Sarah took the rose out of Larry's hand and sniffed it. A cool drop of water spread across the peach fuzz on her upper lip. She smiled and walked around him. Larry stood still as he watched her put on her coat and leave.

Sarah arrived to an empty hotel room. She showered and felt like a crippled, old lady as she lay in bed. Every joint in her body, especially her hips, felt as if the bones were ground to powder. She felt as if she had growing pains in her legs, and her feet throbbed. She fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

Jane arrived at the room just before six in the morning. Sarah heard her come in and awoke from a comforting dream. She wanted to remember the dream, but could only recall the warm, emotional feeling that it gave her. The room was a dim hue of violet. The sun hadn't touched the horizon yet, and the clouds outside the window stretched

across the sky in ruffled patterns. A bright pink line defined where the sun would appear.

Jane didn't notice Sarah roll over and whispered to herself after losing her balance as she took off her jeans. She bumped into the television and the noise made her freeze.

"After bar party?" Sarah asked. Jane pulled her jeans off and sat on the bed. Her eyes were bloodshot and she kept pulsing her eyelids as open as they could possibly go.

"Yeah," She said. She looked around the room. "Me and Tina went to this guy's house. Crazy party." She filled her lungs as much as possible and slowly let the air out. She looked around the room again. "Bright in here."

Sarah sat up, wondering what she might be looking for. "Are you alright?" she asked. She could see the muscles in Jane's jaw bulge as she ground her teeth.

"Yeah," Jane said. "Of course. I'm all right. I'm perfectly fine. Just a late night. I don't know how I ended up staying so late. Cool party. Really cool. Tons of people. I should get some sleep."

"What about Tina?" Sarah asked.

"She stayed." Jane sniffed and rubbed at the pink rings around her nostrils. "She ditched me early. Disappeared with some guy."

Chapter Ten

Sarah was almost done on the treadmill when Jane came into the small fitness center supplied by the hotel. Jane was in a baggy pair of shorts and a sports bra, and her coils of hair were tied up in a tight pony-tail. Her eyes fought to stay open, and there were bright white bags under them. She filled her water bottle at the fountain by the door.

Sarah spoke through heavy breaths. "Didn't think you were going to make it."

"If I ditch my workout, I totally feel like shit for the rest of the day," Jane said. "I hate dancing with a hangover. The sight and smell of booze makes me want to hurl on the customers."

Jane slowly pulled herself onto the treadmill beside Sarah. She started at a speed-walk and slowly moved up to a jog.

"Was the party worth it?" Sarah asked while wiping her face with a bright towel.

"It was fun," Jane said. "But I don't know if anything is worth feeling like this. Going out after work is always a mistake. Like I don't party enough in between shows."

"It catches up to you, trust me. I had to quit drinking for a while. It was either that or go to Alcoholics Anonymous. It was getting pretty bad."

Jane chugged at her water bottle repeatedly until it was empty. She jumped off the treadmill and walked back to the fountain. "I totally know what you mean," she said. "It's weird not to drink on my days off. When I go out, I feel like I need a drink in my hand. Staying away from the blow would help too. I swear it gives me a hangover for

two days. Unless I get more," she grinned.

"It's tough," Sarah said. "The party never stops at the clubs. But your body will eventually stop it."

"Being dead's got to be better than feeling like this," Jane said. She pulled her body back onto the treadmill.

"Greasy food always makes me feel better," Sarah said. "And orange juice." Her treadmill beeped and slowed down to a walk. She turned it off and moved to the mats in the corner. "I'll treat you to McRott's before work. It'll cancel out this workout, but you only live once."

Sarah worked her abs before doing some pushups and squats. Jane ended her slow jog when Sarah was ready to head back to the room.

Both women showered and relaxed on their beds. Sarah jumped when she heard the telephone ring. She answered it and heard a man who sounded like the man with the star mole. He spoke so quickly that his broken English turned into a garbled mess of sounds.

"Pardon me?" Sarah said.

The man repeated himself several times before Sarah discerned that she was needed at the front desk.

Tina was sitting in one of the chairs in the front lobby with her head between her legs and her bare toes pointing inward. The handle of her purse was wrapped around her hand several times and her black heels were next to her on the tiled floor. Her bare feet were pink and looked like they may have been frostbitten.

The man with the mole came from behind the front desk to greet her. He smiled and motioned toward Tina.

"Your friend," he said, "she no feel good?"

Sarah sighed and shook her head. "I'm so sorry. I'll get her up to our room and put her to bed."

"Sick," the man said.

Sarah nodded again. "She's sick alright."

Sarah could see Tina's breasts clearly through her shirt. She had obviously lost her bra at some point during the night.

"I no touch," the man said, motioning toward Tina's chest.

Sarah shook her head. "Don't worry about that. Believe it or not, she's always like this."

The man nodded, although Sarah could tell that he didn't quite understand what she had said.

Sarah picked up Tina's shoes, and the man helped her get Tina to her feet. She moaned as they lifted her. She tried to swing her purse at Sarah, but Sarah easily dodged it. Tina screeched in tongues as they helped her stumble toward the elevator. The man kept nodding and smiling as they waited for the elevator.

"Thank you very much for calling me," Sarah said. "I really appreciate it."

The man smiled and nodded. "It no problem." He nodded toward Tina. "Sick."

The silence in the elevator made it seem longer than usual to Sarah. The man smiled and nodded to Sarah each time Tina grunted or shifted her stance. Even when Tina let a drooling line of spit escape her mouth and drip onto the carpet of the elevator,

the only thing the man had to say was 'sick.'

The man released his grip on Tina when she was inside the room and started his journey to the front desk. Tina stumbled and wobbled toward the bed in front of her and fell face-first onto it. The hair on the back of her head was a bouncing tumbleweed. Jane looked from Tina's motionless body to Sarah.

"Looks like she's not going to make it to work," Jane said. "I bet she didn't sleep last night at all."

Sarah pointed to the ball of messed hair.

Jane giggled. "You don't get hair like that from sleeping."

Sarah tried to comb the hair straight with her fingers, but it was nothing but clusters of entanglements. "You might be onto something there," she said. She looked at her watch. Tina had two hours to shake it off and get up for work.

Sarah checked the messages on her phone just before it was time to leave for the club. There was a message from Paul. He said that he was going to have to go into her room to install a closet rack and that he might have to make some alterations to the shower before she returned. He asked her to call him if she had a problem with it. There were also three blank messages in a row and the final message:

Hello Hon, I was thinking about you all day today. Sitting around the house staring at everything that reminds me of you. You still have a lot of shit here. Just thought I'd let you know that I'm going to burn it out back in the fire pit. And if you don't come and pick up your bitch in the back yard, she'll be going up in flames too.

Click.

Sarah saved the message and snapped the phone shut. Jane came out of the bathroom with her hair held back in a ponytail and white, foaming lips puckered around her toothbrush.

Sarah couldn't decide if Jane's features were attractive without the enhancement of makeup: her skin was a bluish-white, even after all the tanning sessions. The contrast of her skin with her blotchy freckles made her face appear whitewashed and speckled with mud. But her pretty brown eyes dominated her face. Shiny white spheres with a large accent of amber around wide pupils.

"Should we bother trying to wake her up?" Jane asked. She opened her mouth wide and scrubbed at her molars.

Sarah stared at Jane without answering.

Jane stopped brushing. "What's the matter?" she said, spitting tiny globes of foam onto Tina as she slept.

Sarah opened her phone and began dialing. "Nothing," she said. "Tina can stay in her coma forever for all I care."

Paul walked into Central Computers and was pleased. It was clean and quiet, and all employees were being productive in some way: the three salesman on the floor were yakking and smiling at customers, the manager, Jeremy, was on the phone with the wholesaler and he could see the three techs in the back room assembling computers.

Only a few salesmen noticed his entrance, which was the way he liked it.

He went behind the front desk and took a box of pens from the stationary cupboard. He stood and watched a young redheaded salesman. Paul had not seen the young man before. The young man had large patches of acne that were conducting a full-scale assault on his tight, red skin. He was in the process of selling a computer to an elderly man.

"Well," said the young man, "If you don't think you need the flat-screen, we can go with a regular monitor. We have a seventeen-inch on sale."

The young man's face went a darker hue of red when he noticed Paul watching him.

"The uh, system does come with a free printer as well," he continued. "Everyone needs a printer. Well, most people do anyway."

"I need just enough for schoolwork," the old man said.

Paul came from around the counter. "Hi there," he said, shaking the old man's hand. "I'm Paul, owner of Central Computers."

The old man's eyes lit up and he left the young salesman standing by himself. "Why hello Paul, nice to meet you. I'm looking for a computer for my granddaughter. She's moving into the basement while she studies biology over at the university. I don't want anything too fancy, just something for her to use for school.

Paul smiled and nodded in agreement.

"I have a niece that is close to the same age and getting ready to do the same thing. She wants to study psychology," Paul said.

The old man broke out a picture of his granddaughter and flashed it like a police badge to Paul. Paul examined the cute blonde girl in the picture. She stood on a beach with the owner of the photo. Paul pegged the picture as Hawaii. The old man became excited and nodded.

"She's going to work with dolphins some day." He held out his flattened hand parallel to the floor and against his leg. "She's dreamt about it since she was yea high. She'll start here, then transfer to James Cook University in Australia. Did you know that they have a highly prestigious marine biology program over there?"

"You know," Paul said, "I had no idea."

The old man looked back at the computer system in front of him. "So the computer is a gift for her to encourage her to study hard and get the good grades she needs."

Paul leaned inward and clasped his hands, readying them for body language.

"First of all," he said, "I'd like to say that you should be proud of your granddaughter. Not many have the motivation to pursue success."

The old man stood proud.

"As for a computer," Paul said, "your granddaughter is going to need a processor that can handle the newest educational programs. Essentially, the processor is the engine in the computer. It sends messages through the motherboard, to the memory and to the hard drive."

Paul guided him toward the upscale computers. The old man followed and nodded with empty eyes.

"She's also going to need a bigger hard drive. The hard drive is like the closet space of the computer. I'm sure your granddaughter is like most women," he smiled and raised his eyebrows, "they all love a lot of closet space."

The old man's eyes grew warm with understanding.

"She's going to need to store not only assignments and projects for school, but she's going to want to keep music, movies, digital pictures and possibly video assignments. Trust me, my niece is already into all of this stuff, and she hasn't finished high school."

The old man pursed his lips in deep thought as he nodded.

"She'll likely want a bigger screen to watch movies on the computer, as all of them play DVDs these days. You may think this might be bulky, but there is a solution for every technological problem these days: a flat screen would save a lot of space on the desk."

Paul showed the old man the flat screen monitors Central had in stock, offering him a discount he claimed no salesman on the floor could touch.

"Does she own a digital camera? How about a web cam? Everyone is using web cams these days. Everyone communicates over computers. Long distance telephone calls are a thing of the past. You'll save a lot of money if she wants to call home all the time."

The old man crossed his arms and took a firm stance, his feet wide apart and his legs as stiff as stilts.

"You might not know much about all of this technical jargon, but your

granddaughter surely does." Paul said. "If she doesn't, she'll have to learn it or her ship is going to get cannon balled by the competition."

The old man thought for a moment, chewing on the skin under his thumbnail. He looked over the system and reviewed the prices.

"What about the computer our young friend was showing me?" the old man said. "I think it seemed like it would work for a student."

Paul read the young salesman's nametag and put his arm around him. The young man was about a foot shorter than Paul. Paul pulled him tightly to his side and the young man's neck conformed to Paul's shoulder.

"Darren here is used to selling systems to home owners that do not have special needs like your granddaughter. I trust his sales experience in that area as much as any other employee here at Central." He bumped Darren with his hip and messed his hair. Darren forced a grin like a child being harassed by a long-forgotten relative. "I jumped in because your sale is of a special caliber," Paul said. "University isn't something you want to go cheap on. This thing will last her for the entire time she is there. No upgrades, no breakdowns. And compared to tuition, this cost is quite low for the utility value. A full three-year warranty and a full customer support package are included with the system. You won't find a price anywhere that will beat this price. You have my personal guarantee on that one."

By the end of the discussion, the man agreed to spend just under four grand on his granddaughter's computer, her digital camera, her web cam and a computer for himself. The one for himself was the bare-bones system that Darren attempted to sell him earlier:

Paul had thrown in a couple of disposable printers, and he knocked three hundred dollars off the most expensive flat screen they sold.

Paul went to one of the computer stations and typed in the order, making sure all the discounts and promos were in place. He looked at the adolescent salesman and winked.

The young man's twisted expression made it seem as if he was about to cry.

As Paul double-checked the purchase order, his cellular phone rang. He handed the papers to Darren.

"Darren, could you ring this through and make sure they get it in the back?"

Darren's rough face brightened a little. His nod was more of a vibration.

"You'll have to excuse me Sir," Paul said to the old man. Paul's handshake was so firm that the old man thought his hand had been caught in a piece of machinery.

"Darren will be able to finish up everything for you," Paul said. He took a business card out of a card display on the desk and handed it to the old man. The man nodded and thanked Paul for all of his help.

Paul saw Sarah's number on the call display. He pressed the phone tight against his ear as he moved toward the office in the back. Sarah was talking so fast he couldn't understand a word she was saying.

"Is everything alright?" he whispered into the phone.

Paul watched Darren through a two-way mirror in the office. Whatever Darren was saying, it was pissing the old man off and ruining the sale. The old man put his hands on his waist and shook his head. Paul couldn't read the old man's lips, but he didn't

like what he was seeing.

"Paul?" Sarah said.

"Sorry," he said. "My phone cut out. What's wrong?"

"I need you to do a big favor for me. My dog is stuck with Carl."

Paul immediately imagined the hairy animal jumping up off the slushy lawn and leaving prints of mud and grass on his pants. Then there was the car. Transporting a filthy dog across the city in his car was out of the question. Animals stunk and left a trail of hair and mucus wherever they went. Paul clenched his jaw as he watched the old man throw his arms in the air. He would walk soon.

Sarah's voice cracked as she spoke into the phone. "I really need to get her out of there. Carl isn't trustworthy anymore."

"Alright," Paul said. "What's the address again?" He wrote the address down.

"Okay, I'll get there as soon as I can."

"Thank you so much. I owe you one."

"Sure thing. It's really no problem. I'll call you after it's done."

Paul clacked his phone shut and floated out of the office.

"Sorry, Sir," Paul said to the old man. "I really had to take that call. Is everything alright?"

"Well, no one told me about this Microsafe stuff."

"Oh, you mean an operating system. It's essentially what runs the whole shebang, and it does cost extra on a custom system." He turned to Darren. "What's the software cost on this system?"

Darren looked at the paper in front of him and scanned it several times. Paul looked over his shoulder.

"Two hundred and eighteen dollars," Paul said. "Well, Sir, it's lucky that I'm here today. We're just going to give it to you for nothing. But could you pay the tax on it so we don't lose money on the sale?"

The old man frowned as he thought about it.

Paul smiled. "Alright. It's all yours. But remember to tell everyone about Central. We're going to have to make up for this sale. We'll have your system ready for you later this afternoon."

The old man took his purchase order and left the store. Darren stood frozen in front of Paul.

Paul poked his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, kid. It takes some practice. Relate to the customer as much as possible and you'll be fine. I've never had a niece until today."

The sun was sitting on the horizon when Paul disengaged the alarm on his Lexus. Traffic was quick before rush hour, so he pulled up in front of Carl's neighbor's house while the orange sun still reflected off the windows of the skyscrapers downtown. Carl's truck was parked in the driveway, and Paul could see the random blue flashes of the television inside the living room window.

Paul crept up the far side of the driveway and peered through the hole in the fence that allowed access to the gate latch. He could see Mitzi lying in the far corner of the yard. She had ripped open a garbage bag and strewn garbage across the lawn and had

now settled on chewing on a plastic milk jug.

Paul reached into the hole and lifted the latch. It clinked and Mitzi's head rose. Paul pulled the gate open and it scraped against the sidewalk below. Mitzi stared for a moment before she stood and sprinted for the gate, her fat body bounced as her straining legs pushed her forward. She barked and slobbered.

Paul stood his ground, and Mitzi stopped a few feet away barking madly. Paul held out his hand in hopes of befriending the animal, and eventually she did sniff it through low growls and shaky legs.

"What the hell you think you're doing?" Carl said from behind Paul. He was standing on his driveway in wool socks, jogging pants and a muscle shirt. He had an orange crowbar in his hand.

"I came to pick up the dog," Paul said. "Sarah said that she usually looks after the dog and that she wouldn't want to burden you with all the responsibility. I told her I would stop by and pick it up."

Carl nodded. "Seems like a good idea." His smile betrayed his words. "I don't want to be stuck with all that responsibility." He leaned and looked into the backyard. "And I sure as hell don't want that bitch shitting and dragging garbage all over the lawn."

Paul smiled the best that he could. "Well, then I guess I'll be going."

"Hold up just a minute," Carl said. "Put the dog back in the yard."

"Pardon me?" Paul said.

"You heard me Mr. Computers," Carl said. He repeated his previous sentence slowly. "Put the dog back in the yard." Carl let the crowbar rest on his shoulder.

Paul led the dog back into the yard, and Carl waited as he closed the gate. Paul could see Mitzi's wet nose between two fence boards.

"I just have one question to ask you," Carl said. "And I want you to tell me the truth."

"Fine," Paul said, "what would you like to know?"

Carl looked at Mitzi's snorting nose as he spoke. "I just want to know if you're fucking my wife."

Paul opened his mouth, but Carl interrupted.

"I won't do anything to you or anything like that, but I want to know the truth."

"The truth is," Paul said, "that I don't know Sarah very well at all. We're more acquaintances than friends. I have never slept with her and I have no intentions of doing so in the future."

"Bullshit," Carl said. He lowered the crowbar and tapped the front of his house with it. "Distant friends don't sneak around and try to steal dogs for each other."

Paul looked at the sharp end of the crowbar and envisioned Carl attacking him with it. He could see himself taking the crowbar away and planting it into Carl's skull. He won every fight in his dreams, but he always wondered how easily he would be defeated if he ever had to defend himself.

"I assure you," he said, "Sarah and I are nothing more than friends. And I really must be going."

"Just a couple minutes of your time," Carl said. "That's all I ask. Then you can take my dog and steal my woman."

Paul could feel his body shaking slightly from the cold. Carl was not shivering at all, even though he wore very little.

A beat-up truck pulled up to the curb in front of the house. Brian climbed out and bottles clinked as he retrieved a case of beer from the box of the truck.

"Who do we got here?" Brian said as he wobbled his weight toward them.

"He was just about to leave," Carl said. "What's your name?"

"Paul," Paul said.

"Ok," Carl said, "Paul here was just about to leave, weren't you Paul?"

Paul nodded. "Yes, I was."

Brian opened his case and cracked a beer before using the case as a stool. His thick legs could barely bend.

"He came to steal the dog," Carl said.

Brian shook his head. "Dog napper. That's no good. What do you want to do?"

Carl shrugged and looked at Paul. "I don't know."

"Call the cops?" Brian said.

"I don't know," Carl repeated. "Maybe we should ask Paul what he thinks. What do you think Mr. Computers?"

Paul shrugged. "I guess I think that I wasn't stealing the dog at all, and therefore deserve no punishment."

"How much money and jewelry does he have?" Brian asked.

"Good thinking Bri," Carl said. "How much money and jewelry do you have?"

Paul did not answer. He turned away. "Keep the dog," he said. "I agree that this

is not my business. I'm sorry for taking up your time gentlemen.

As Paul turned, Carl was behind him instantly. Paul felt a slight itch at the back of his head before hearing a crackling in his ears. His eyes and mind drifted into blackness.

Chapter Eleven

Mother Nature is relentless in Edmonton during the winter. Her cold breath lingers in the air and the sidewalks become empty with the exception of those who either have nowhere else to go or those who have destinations that are imperative. People scurry with faces buried in frosty scarves, bobbing along, stiff as corpses. Buildings exhale lines of bubbling, grey mist, and furnaces work overtime, ingesting millions of dollars in natural gas. Ambulances scream around town in the cold air, stopping to revive those who have tried to survive the cold with a bottle of wine as their furnace. Tow trucks drag frozen cars behind them or travel to homes to revive cars that have decided to join the ranks of the hypothermic hobos. Life outside comes to a crisp halt if movement ceases.

Sarah's first two shows were cancelled. The bar was empty except for three old men who sat at separate tables sipping draft beer. One man had a bloated nose that looked like it was made of meatloaf. The nose was so large and cratered that it looked painful, like cracked, sun burnt skin. He spoke across the table as if there were a person listening attentively. The other two men read the captioning below a sitcom on the television. None of them smiled, with the exception of the man with the nose. Sometimes his illusionary companion would have a witty reply to his statements about the condition of the planet or the diseased minds that he believed responsible for the government's current mismanagement.

Sarah sat at the bar and played a video trivia game. Each time she answered a

question correctly, a digital puzzle piece covering a picture was removed. The image, taken in what looked to be the eighties, was of a nude woman on a beach.

Tina came into the bar in the late afternoon looking as if she had been beaten. Her eyes were sunk into her skull. They appeared blackened by blows, and her skin was olive despite the piercing chill outside. Some of the tangled mess in her hair remained. She sat next to Sarah and bummed a smoke.

"I still feel pissed," she said, lighting the cigarette. She flexed her fingers back and forth. "I feel all tingly and tight inside." She shook her hand as if she'd touched something hot. "Smitty around?"

Sarah shook her head while pressed the buttons on the screen in front of her to submit the answer of 'David Lee Roth' as the previous lead singer of Van Halen. A large puzzle piece disappeared, revealing a slender thigh. "No one's been in," she said. "No one's had a show yet. It's so damn cold out, I'm starting to wonder if anyone is going to come in."

Tina leaned on the bar. "Good. Glad I slept. My fucking head is killing me. Do you have any headache shit?"

Sarah shook her head. "I doubt you'll get a show, so don't worry too much."

"There'll be shows tonight," Tina said. "They always come. No one forgets about tits and ass. If the world was about to blow the fuck up, they'd still show."

There were shows later in the evening, but it remained slow. There were one or two groups sitting at the front and the depressed regulars who sat away from the stage and stared with lost looks on their faces. Sarah glanced at them occasionally from the

stage, noting their consistent looks of despair. She had met countless men like this: they drank enough beer to forget about love and companionship, yet they still needed to see a woman in the same light as most men do every day in the comfort of their own home. Sarah watched as a bulky bouncer escorted the man with the large nose to the front doors. He had tripped coming up the single step on his way back from the restroom. People watched as he struggled like a turtle on its back as he tried to get to his feet. Sarah watched him swing back and forth for momentum for an entire song before she pointed him out to the bouncer. She was rooting for the old guy to get up and make it to his seat. She hated it when the seniors were kicked out, even if they had serious drinking problems. She felt that they had a right to get as drunk as they wanted in this screwed up world that had probably forgotten about them now that they were of little use.

The night seemed twice as long and for half the pay due to the small number of customers. Sarah counted her tips, rolled all the dollar coins and sold them to the bartender. She watched Tina and Jane, who were sitting at a table full of young men. All of the men seemed interested in Jane's youthful face, but Tina fought for her share of attention by bouncing her perfectly round breasts as close to their faces as possible. Every now and then one would almost fall out of the low shirt. The men would make sour faces to her back when Tina's attention drifted from the table.

The bartender was counting out bills to Sarah when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see Larry's face embedded in the fur that lined the hood of his parka.

"I'm off work," Sarah said.

"I have a great surprise for you," he said.

Sarah shook her head, straightening the small stack of bills on the counter like a deck of cards. "Not now." She rolled the bills and stuffed them into her purse. She pulled off one of her heels and massaged under her bent toes. The bartender glanced at Larry and gave Sarah a quizzical look. She nodded to assure him that everything was okay.

"I think you'll definitely want to hear what I have to say," Larry said.

"Larry, the only thing I want to hear right now is the sound of my ear sinking into my pillow."

"That's what I love about you," he said. "You have such a great sense of humor."

Sarah's glare made Larry back up a little.

"Alright," he said. "If you insist on waiting, I can tell you tomorrow." His smile didn't fade. "But you must remember that you are missing out on news that is very good for both of us. In fact, it may be the best news you've heard in a very long time. Maybe even in your entire life. Think about the reaction of unlimited joy that you are trading in for that pillow noise you wish to hear. But I do understand if you're tired. We all get tired."

"If I listen to the news, will you leave me alone?"

"I knew you'd come around," he said, sitting down on the stool beside her.

"We've won."

He placed a check on the bar and slid it in front of her eyes. It was made out to Larry Smith, and it was for twenty thousand dollars. Sarah leaned over the cheque, massaging her forehead. "Congratulations," she said. "That's great."

"I'm going to keep my promise and take you to the destination of your dreams," he said. He held his chin up high, smiling like a victorious child. "Where would you like to go? France? Spain? How about Hawaii? I'm sure the weather is almost as gorgeous as you are."

Sarah slid the cheque back in front of him. "I can't go anywhere with you Hon. I told you before that I'm attached. And besides, even if I wasn't, I don't go out with people I meet at work. If you haven't noticed, this place isn't full of winners."

Larry held the check above his head with both hands. "Except one! I don't have to work for the rest of the year if I don't want to."

Sarah took off her other shoe and concentrated on massaging her foot.

Larry leaned closer. "But I will work," he said. "C'mon, let's have some fun. Take some time off and rest those sore feet in the ocean or a hot tub with a bottle of champagne. Think about it: the fancy hotels, the dinners and all the shopping you could ask for. You name it, we'll do it. We'll paint the planet red!"

"You can buy me a drink and some food if you like." She turned to him and mustered a strained grin. "You can tip me if you like my shows too," she said.

Larry put the check back in his pocket and slouched. He pulled the hood off of his head and reslicked his hair with a comb. "How can you refuse such a generous offer? Am I really that awful?" his voice was almost a hum, "that you would refuse to accept this gift from me?"

Sarah considered the trip for a moment. She had always wanted to go to Italy and Greece. To see all the magnificent history, artwork and scenery would be breathtaking.

And the timing couldn't be better.

Sarah placed her hand on his leg, and his face brightened.

"I'll make you a deal," Larry said.

Sarah sighed. The pathetic yet eager look on his face made her easily remember that traveling with Larry would require more money than he could ever come up with. No historical buildings or famous pieces of art could make him seem attractive, charming or even bearable.

"How about I make you a deal," Sarah said.

"I'm all ears," he said.

"We made a deal that you would leave me alone if I listened to your news. I have to get some sleep. I'm exhausted."

Larry drummed a beat on the counter. "I have one quick proposition to make before you depart for your beauty rest."

Sarah put her bare feet on the floor and pressed her hands onto the barstool. She surrounded her breasts with her arms and pressed them until the buttons of her top held on for their lives. "Not now." She looked down at her breasts and back to him. "Come and see me dance."

Larry's breathing increased. "Geez, you know how to make a man melt. I bet you could make the snow outside turn into morning dew."

"Not now," Sarah said.

Larry pulled out his billfold. "What if I offered you two hundred dollars for an hour of your time?"

Sarah stood up straight. "You've got to be kidding me," she said.

"Oh no," Larry said. "No no. I didn't mean that. I just want to take you out for coffee. Maybe a late night snack. To make up for the shows that I had to miss tonight. We'll take separate vehicles, and you can pick the spot." He flipped through the bills in his billfold and tossed two hundred on the counter. "I'd give you more, but I need to cash this check first."

Sarah thought of the lousy amount that the bartender had handed her. Her tips were the lowest she had ever seen.

"Three hundred," Sarah said, "and we leave both locations at separate times. And no expectations. Coffee. One hour."

Larry counted out another hundred and added it to the pile. "I would have paid a thousand," he said with a triumphant smile.

Sarah forced the bouncer to stand outside of her car in the freezing weather while she started her car and again when she was ready to drive it to the twenty-four hour restaurant she had chosen. It was on the way to her accommodations. Larry was inside waiting when she arrived. He stood when he saw her enter and waited for her to be seated. His hair looked neat and wet. Sarah supposed that he had styled it in the washroom. Four empty sugar packets and two empty creamers sat beside his empty coffee cup. Sarah opened the menu.

A large woman in a beige uniform and a white apron walked to the table with a coffee pot in her hand. Her breathing sounded emphysemic and her voice sounded like she had a deep cold. She filled Larry's cup and flipped over a cup in front of Sarah and started filling it.

"Actually," Sarah said softly, "do you have decaf?"

The woman rolled her eyes and pulled the saucer and cup toward herself.

"No, we don't have any made." She glared down at Sarah. "But I could make a fresh pot if you really want it."

"Thank you," Sarah said. "That would be nice."

"I'm sure it will be," the woman said. Her hips struggled to move her massive legs as she walked away.

Larry peeked over his menu with raised eyebrows. He raised his fingers like claws and scratched at the air. "To the outside world, she's known as the grease beast." He growled. "She can eat an entire human being in one gulp."

Sarah laughed and hushed Larry. She looked over her shoulder to make sure the woman hadn't heard him.

Larry pointed to the menu. "The Grease Beast is known to graze on cheap pork sausages and low grade eggs. Unless an innocent human strays from their path in the night." He grasped his own throat with his claws, gargling and gasping.

Sarah hushed him again as the woman came back to take their order. Sarah wondered if the woman heard him. She looked even more pissed off. Sarah ordered a fruit salad and Larry ordered a steak with mashed potatoes. The woman nodded and

walked away.

"How could you order a steak at three in the morning?" Sarah asked.

"Because it's absolutely wonderful that you can. It's purely for novelty. And she didn't even ask how I wanted it done! How magical the world can be." He leaned close to whisper. "I would put a hundred on medium-well. No one gets pissed off about medium well."

"I suppose so," Sarah said, "but it sounds like such a heavy meal before bed."

Larry lifted his watch. "I will be up for a few more hours. My sleeping patterns are backwards lately. This will be my dinner." He grinned, clasping his hands under the table. "Once again, what a coincidence. My current dinner schedule coincides with your work schedule. It's fate, I'm telling you."

Sarah rubbed at the itch on the edges of her eyelids until it burned away. "Larry," she said, "should we just cut the shit and get married?"

Larry sat up and craned his neck toward Sarah. "I know you well enough to know that you are not being serious. And you know for a fact I would say yes before you even asked the question." His voice softened. "You give off a warmth like the sun."

The waitress slid Sarah's decaf across the table, shaking her head as she walked away.

"Your poetics are nice," Sarah said, "But can we talk about something else? I can't listen to you talk about us being soul mates for an hour. We're just friends."

"Good friends," Larry said confidently.

"Decent friends." Sarah took a standup dessert menu from the side of the table

and flipped through it. Each dish looked deliciously fattening. She looked up and saw that Larry was fighting against a shaky frown.

Larry took the liberty of clasping his hands around hers. Sarah pulled away.

"You are a sophisticated and intelligent woman," Larry said. "I am sorry if my drivel bores you. From now on I will treat you like the queen you are."

Sarah had to fight her eyes from rolling. "Great," she said.

"So tell me about your boyfriend. He is, after all, my primary competition."

Sarah fought her eyes no longer. "And this is your idea of intelligent and sophisticated conversation?"

Larry pounded the table lightly. "Damn it. You're absolutely right." He scratched through his shiny hair. "I have it. How did you get into dancing?"

Sarah pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Larry watched closely, a smile itching on his lips.

"I'm saving for school," Sarah said, "but let's talk about you, shall we?"

The waitress arrived at the table with their food. She placed a small fruit salad in front of Sarah. It consisted of mostly honeydew melon. Larry's steak glittered like ammonite and sat in a pool of brownish blood. The liquid was slowly melting the ice cream scoop of potatoes.

"Thank you so much," Larry said.

Sarah couldn't believe his genuine enthusiasm for such a sickly looking slab of beef.

The woman's permanent frown, engraved under cheeks that hung like flat water

balloons, was undisturbed.

"Can't win them all," Larry said. He searched for a steak knife, laughing at the absence. He wrestled the steak using his butter knife. "Looks like medium rare. I suppose you could classify it as rare." He cut off a small bite and hummed as he chewed it. "Delicious. There's not much to say about me."

"Have you always been a big time gambler?"

Larry shook his head. "No, I used to be in sales." He squashed his scoop of potatoes into the soupy mixture of blood and spices. "Vacuum cleaners."

Sarah laughed. "You used to be a vacuum cleaner salesman?"

Larry nodded and scooped a pile of slime into his mouth. "Yes," he said, smacking his lips, "that is what I used to do for a living. I was one of those tricksters who could convince a broke housewife on welfare to buy a two thousand dollar vacuum cleaner. But they were good vacuums. And selling them helped my poker game."

Sarah poked at her fruit. Larry's meal had made her appetite questionable. "So you had to go door to door carrying a vacuum cleaner around?"

"No, that's not how they work it at all. The company would send out scratch-and-win cards in the mail. Every single one is a winner. We offer a free gift, like some crappy knife set or something, and when people call in, they send me to their door, vacuum cleaner and knife set in hand. But you have to see the vacuum before you get the knives."

"So how would that help your poker game?"

"You learn how to read people. That's the skill that I took from the job. I could

tell what it would take to make any personality type buy a vacuum cleaner. Old, young, rich, poor, I could sell those machines more often and for more money than any other salesman. The money is much better than you would ever believe."

Sarah finished her last piece of fruit and slid her dish to the side. "So you used your earnings to gamble?"

Larry nodded, smiling. "It took some practice to win though. I figured I could read the people at the table, and I was right. Even if they sit there like a stone statue, I can usually have a good idea of where they stand."

"Sounds like you're somewhat of a con-man Larry," Sarah said. "It makes me wonder what kind of con you have planned for me. What would your approach be to sell me a vacuum cleaner?"

"That's the beauty of it all," Larry shifted in his seat. "You're one of the few people I would never be able to sell one to. I can't read you at all. You're so magnificent that you blind the inquiring mind. You're perfectly unique and uniquely perfect. I need to get to know you the old fashioned way."

Sarah looked at the clock on the wall behind Larry. Fifteen minutes were left.

"Time for me to get going," she said. "It's four in the morning."

"Dessert," Larry said. He picked up the dessert menu and flipped through the laminated cards. He turned it toward her. "A nice slice of chocolate ice cream cake. Whipped cream and two spoons."

"It's four in the morning," Sarah said.

Larry pulled out his billfold. He pulled out a pile of bills and tossed them onto the

table.

"How much would it take to make you stay for another hour."

The waitress wobbled her way to them. She creased the bill and held it above the table.

"Anything else?" she asked in her pissed-at-the-world fashion.

Larry ignored her. "Five hundred for one hour," he said.

The waitress dropped the bill. "I'd appreciate it if you did your business when I'm away from the table," she said. She scrunched her face into a wrinkled ball of flesh.

Sarah pushed Larry's money onto his lap. The woman waddled away.

"You just made me look like a whore."

Larry collected the bills off of his lap and ducked under the table to pick up a few that had fallen to the floor. When he arose, Sarah was standing and putting on her jacket. He stood as well.

"I'm very sorry that I have offended you," he said. "Let me make it up to you."

He held out a pile of bills toward her.

Sarah slapped his hand. Colored denominations drifted to the floor like autumn leaves.

"I can't believe I'm so stupid," Larry said. "I must be tired. Absolutely exhausted. I must say, this has been one of those nights."

He raised his clawed fingers again. "At least it was only the grease beast."

Sarah didn't laugh. Instead, she turned to walk away, and Larry grasped her arm.

Sarah pulled away. "Don't touch me!" she said.

Larry lowered his knees to the carpet that was strewn with nacho chips and

spaghetti noodles. "Please forgive me, my love. I will never offend you again as long as I live."

The waitress turned and walked back toward them. "Everything all right?" she asked Sarah.

"It's fine," Sarah said. "He was just about to pay the bill."

Larry picked up the bills around him and stuffed them in his pocket. He pointed under the table. "There's more than enough under there."

The woman motioned to her round body. "Look like I crawl under tables very often? I would prefer if you handed the money to me or left it on the table like a normal human being."

"Fine," Larry shouted. He lunged under the table, crawling through scraps of food, and collected the bills. He stood up and adjusted his suit with twitching fingers. He could see that Sarah was turning to leave.

"Thanks a lot lady, you've really screwed things up."

For the first time the woman's engraved frown broke. "Don't worry little man," she said, "seems you got enough money to buy whatever you need."

Sarah smiled at the desk clerk with the star mole as she waited for the elevator. He grinned and nodded.

"Late night. Your friend feel better?" He asked.

She couldn't believe the man could be so hospitable after seeing Tina junked out on the lobby furniture. He would have had to know that Tina was nothing more than a washed-up whore. He was lucky she hadn't pissed all over the lobby furniture.

"Everything is fine," Sarah said and entered the elevator.

Sarah could hear giggling inside the room as she slid her key card into the slot. Upon opening the door, she could see Tina and Jane and a man, whose hyperbolic mustache and eyebrows made him look a caricature, crowded around the small table in the corner of the room. Tina wore only her underwear and was bent over snorting a line of cocaine. She paused to wave at Sarah before finishing the line.

Tina pulled the rolled bill from her nose and handed it to the man and walked to Sarah. Sarah looked away and tried to move toward the washroom.

"Honey," Tina said, motioning toward the table. "This is Tiny. Tiny, this is Sarah."

The man waved and said, "Yo," before returning his attention to Jane and the line of coke in front of him.

Tina leaned on Sarah's shoulder and whispered into her ear. Her breath reeked of cigarettes and booze. Sarah winced as tiny globes of cold spit stuck to her cheek and entered her ear. "Tiny's got a lot of fucking blow. You can help yourself. He won't give a shit."

Tina turned to Tiny. "Tiny, can my girlfriend join in?"

Tiny nodded.

"Thanks," Sarah said, pulling away from Tina, "but I'm not really in the mood."

It's late."

She escaped to the washroom with a bath in mind. She closed the door, stopping Tina's pursuit and turned to find that the bathtub was full of ice and beer. Sarah lowered the seat of the toilet and sat down. She put her face in her hands and gently massaged her eyelids.

I could blaze out the door, she thought, and kick Tiny out and insist that Tina and Jane go with him if they don't want to sleep. But Tina will start bitching or even get physical. Jane would likely agree to whatever I said. Or I could try to sleep through the noise. Doubtful that any sleep would be possible, and Tina would probably wake me up every five minutes, offering me a drink or some blow.

Sarah filled her bathroom bag and pulled open the door hard enough to slam it against the doorstop. She filled her gym bag with clothes and any other articles she had around the room. The three at the table became silent and watched her.

Tina approached her and put her arms on Sarah's shoulders. "Honey, what's wrong? What are you doing?"

Sarah smashed Tina's arms away from her. "I'm getting the hell out of here. I didn't sign up for this bullshit."

She zipped up her bag and threw it over her shoulder. She looked to Jane. "You told me that there would be no bullshit. I've had a long night, and I have to come back to this?"

Jane looked down at the table.

Tiny stood up. "You want me to go?"

Tina wobbled toward Sarah, arms outstretched. "Honey, sit down and have a beer. You need to calm down." Her eyes were glazed and clueless. She grabbed onto Sarah's arm to hold herself up. Sarah pushed her onto the bed.

"Get the hell away from me Tina," Sarah said. "I'm out of here. You two owe me my share of the hotel for tonight and tomorrow. I'll get my own room."

Sarah could hear Tina's muffled swears until she entered the elevator.

Chapter Twelve

Paul awoke to a loud, high-pitched noise. He opened his eyes to a room lit by a television that had been left on until the channel went to a test pattern. He was on a futon and had a pillow under his head and a thin blanket covering him. He sat up and looked around the room. He wasn't sure if it was dream or if he was really in Carl's living room. He could hear Brian's snores blend with the incessant beep from the television as his glistening belly raised with each breath.

He felt as if he had a sinus cold. The back of his head hurt, and he carefully poked his fingers through his hair to feel the lump that he knew was there. The lump was the size of an almond, but it hurt like hell. Paul was happy that it was a fist rather than the crowbar that struck him.

He stood up and scanned the room, wondering what time it was. He looked for the glowing arms of his Omega, but it had been removed. A clock on the wall said that it was almost six in the morning. His keys were still in his pocket, so he crept out the door and started up his Lexus. He rubbed his hands together as he waited for the engine to warm up. He looked toward the house to make sure no one had woken up. Then it hit him: the dog was likely still in the back yard. He didn't feel like getting out of the car, but he also didn't want to consider coming back.

The gate scraped the sidewalk again and Mitzi came out from under a large pine tree. This time she did not bark. Instead, she trotted slowly toward Paul whining lightly. Paul grasped her collar and led her to the Lexus. The plush interior in the back of the car

begged him not to let the dog in. Mitzi's feet looked wet and filled with mud and pine needles.

Paul opened the back door and guided Mitzi onto the floor. Once the door was shut she jumped onto the seat, leaving brown prints on the grey upholstery. Paul screamed at the dog when it tried to lick his cheek as he pulled away from the curb. Mitzi recoiled to the opposite corner of the car and looked out the window.

Paul arrived at work a few hours later. He felt as if he hadn't slept at all, and he couldn't focus his eyes properly. Darren, the young red-headed salesman, dodged out of his way as he strode to the back office. Jeremy was just hanging up the phone as Paul entered. Paul considered ordering Jeremy to go home. He knew Jeremy was cheating on his wife and used the office as a place to communicate with his slut of a mistress. Paul thought she was ugly as hell anyway. Not that Jeremy's wife was a prize.

"Out," Paul said.

"Pardon me?" Jeremy asked with a quizzical look.

"Get the hell out of the office. I need to use the phone."

Jeremy stood up cautiously and gathered his clipboard and some papers.

"That is," Paul said, "if you're done talking to your little friend."

"Little friend?" Jeremy said.

"Go ahead and play dumb then," Paul motioned to the door and raised his voice.

"Get the hell out of my office."

Jeremy dropped the papers and left, closing the door as quietly as possible. Paul watched Jeremy's face through the glass of the door, which had his name and Jeremy's

name printed across it in gold letters.

Paul flipped open his cellular phone and dialed Sarah's number. It rang several times before her voicemail service answered. He hung up and waited a minute before redialing the number. This time she answered in a groggy voice.

"Good morning," he said.

Paul could hear that Sarah was moving around on the other end.

"Hold on," she said.

Paul watched the store through the two-way mirror. Jeremy was using his artificial laugh on a customer and Darren was struggling with another sale. He wanted to call the kid into the office and fire him. Sarah returned to the phone.

"Hey, Paul. Sorry, I just woke up. How are you?"

"Horrible," he said. "I went to pick up your dog and your ex attacked me and stole my watch and wallet. He left me to sleep off the beating on his futon. I have no idea why. He even provided me with a blanket."

"Oh my god," she said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Paul said. "Small bump on the head."

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"I was able to get your dog."

"That's wonderful."

"She's living in the back yard right now. She has quite a bit of room. So how do you want to handle this? I think I should call the police."

Sarah was silent for a moment. "That sounds like the best thing to do."

Paul rubbed the back of his head. "I think so too." He laughed lightly.

"Alright," Sarah said. "But can you let me talk to him first?"

"I think he'd be better off in jail," Paul said. "You could visit him."

"I just want to make sure that he is stable before you call the police," Sarah said.

"I don't want him to hurt you, the cops or himself. We were together for a long time and he has some serious jealousy issues."

"I really need my wallet." Paul said. "I have enough cash to get by, but my driver's license, birth certificate, health care card and credit cards are in there."

"I can have it to you tomorrow afternoon. I will be back in town. I'll get it once I get in, I promise."

Paul clenched his jaw. He thought about handing her the ticket he would get for driving without a license and the bill for the maxed credit cards.

"It's my wallet, Sarah," he said. "And that watch was really expensive."

"I know," Sarah said, "but I don't know what he'll do. Please. Just one day. I'll pay for whatever is missing."

"Fine," he said. "One day."

"Thank you," she said. "I owe you."

"You owe me dinner," Paul said.

Sarah managed to laugh. "That's not much of a punishment. Deal."

Paul hung up the phone and lowered his head onto the back of the chair. He thought about how hectic his day was going to be and how awful it was going to be to deal with the dog when he got home and the police the next day. Sarah's voice was a nice

thing to hear, but what it communicated made his head throb.

He saw Jeremy standing at the front desk waiting for the office. Paul went to the door and called him in.

"I'm sorry for my outburst," Paul said. "I just had a horrible night last night. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

Jeremy nodded, but he still looked nervous. "No problem. We all have our days. And I'll lay off on the personal calls, but that call was to Micron. They are correcting that shipment of memory."

"Call whoever you want," Paul said. "This should be a relaxing place for you to work Jer. Thanks for running such a tight ship."

Paul saw Darren through the two-way mirror and wanted to apologize to him for thinking about humiliating him in front of his coworkers and any customers that might have been in the store by publicly firing him.

"You're my best man," he said and swatted Jeremy's arm with some rolled up papers. "Without you, Central would be a sinking ship."

Paul pulled up in front of his grandfather's house and could see him watching out the front window. Frank rose from the couch in his snow gear and made his way to the front door. Paul jumped out of the car and did a half-assed job of shoveling the sidewalk before he helped Frank down the front steps and into the car.

Frank looked over his thick glasses as Paul accelerated the Lexus. "You look like you got in a fight with Jack Daniels last night."

"Don't ask," Paul said, concentrating on the road.

Frank chuckled. "By the looks of things, Jack has won the battle yet again. Never seen that man lose. I guess that would explain why you're late today. You young people have to learn how to drink." Frank moistened his grey lips. "I used to be able to drink all night and wake up for work feeling like Arnold Schwarzenegger." He flexed his arm and felt the boney appendage under the thick layer of synthetic stuffing. "But not so much anymore." He nudged Paul. "How is living with Irish?" Frank asked.

"I haven't seen her since she moved in," Paul said. "She's working in Edmonton." Paul looked over at Frank who was grinning and staring inquiringly.

"What?" Paul said.

Frank looked forward. "Oh, nothing. I was just wondering if you're going to try to get fresh with the beauty I set you up with."

"Get fresh?" Paul said, laughing. "I don't think so, Gramps."

"You're not queer, are you Paul?"

Paul laughed harder. He punched his chest to avoid choking. "Absolutely not. You must be joking. Why on earth would you think I'm gay?"

Frank nudged him again. "You know it's okay if you are. A lot of older people think there's something wrong with it. But not me. It's been around since the beginning of time."

"For the record," Paul said, "I am not a homosexual. I am not gay. I am not queer."

"Alright, alright," Frank said. "But if you are, I just want you to know that I'm alright with it and you can tell me. Then I can stop trying to set you up with beautiful

women. It would be such a waste of time." He pointed his thumb at his own chest.

"Something this old man has very little of."

Paul pulled the Lexus in front of Cowgirls and undid his seatbelt. "I thank you for your effort, Gramps, and I agree that Sarah is a nice looking woman. But I could never take a stripper seriously. Maybe when I'm your age."

"Oh she'd be a wild one in the sack," Frank said. "Probably kill a man my age." He licked his lips again. He closed his eyes and shook his head. "But what a way to go. What a way to go."

Paul got out of the car and walked around it. He opened Frank's door. "I do not wish to speak about the sack with my grandfather, thank you very much."

He helped Frank into the club and the waitress had a drink in front of him before he could sit down. It was the usual plan: Paul would return to Central for a couple hours before picking Frank up to take him back home. That would be the end of both of their work days.

Paul wondered if Darren's fear of him would ever stop. Darren was helping a young couple, and Paul didn't bother listening to his sales pitch. Paul knew it would be terrible, and he couldn't be bothered with patching it up at the moment. He decided that he would talk to Jeremy and see if he could get the boy some extra training.

At the back office Jeremy, as always, was just getting off the phone.

"Sorry about that. A few orders are coming late."

"No worries," Paul said. "I think Darren needs a little extra training."

"Done," Jeremy said, pulling out a notebook. "What exactly does he need?"

"Not much. No need for notes. Just teach him to sell up instead of down."

Jeremy wrote down the instructions in the notebook.

"Speaking of Darren," Paul said. Darren was outside the office door looking through the glass. He kept glancing away and shifting his weight. Paul motioned him to come in.

Darren stood for several second before he spoke. He sounded as if he were delivering a speech in front of a large audience for the first time. Paul wondered how Jeremy could hire someone like this to work the floor. He felt sorry for the kid, and thought that the job must be a horror to go to everyday, seeing that it was based purely on public relations skills.

Darren pointed toward the front of the store. "There's a guy, I mean a customer, out here that would like to see the owner. He wants to see Paul, I mean you." Darren smiled an embarrassed and defeated smile. The speech had gone terribly, and he was sure the tomatoes would be flying.

"Thanks very much, Darren. Lead me to this chap you speak of." Paul winked at him as he stood.

Darren led him out of the office and immediately Paul could see that the man he was leading him to was Carl.

Chapter Thirteen

The crowd screamed and chanted the word 'shower' over and over again. Sarah stared at the little glass fountain built into the stage. A shivering current buzzed across her skin leaving a thick collection of goose bumps.

The DJ was good enough to help her out with the tipping situation: "All right gentlemen, you want to see this pretty little lady get wet, put your money where your mouth is."

Sarah pointed to the stage and encouraged the crowd to back up their cheers with hard currency. When she felt she had enough, she signaled the DJ and he flicked the switch. The crowd went wild as Sarah walked over to the fountain. She squatted over it and the streaming water sprayed her like a bidet. She smoothed the sparkling water all over her body, closing her eyes while imitating orgasmic pleasure. The screaming men lowered their voices to enjoy this element of the show inside their minds where their imaginations were going berserk.

Sarah stepped out of the shower and dried herself with her robe. The men snapped out of their fantasies and cheered for another song. Some threw money onto the stage to coax her back into the water.

Sarah shook her head at the DJ. He shrugged at her and covered the mike, questioning what the problem was. Sarah looked at all the money on the stage and at the streams of water. Her body was chilled and she felt tired. Larry had been giving her at least twenty dollars a show while he tried to convince her that he was sorry for his behavior the night before. Sarah began collecting her money off the stage and a few

members of the audience booed and hissed at her.

Sarah entered the back room and found Jane reading another celebrity magazine. Jane looked up when she heard the negative reaction from the crowd blast through the door and fade as it closed.

"Wow," Jane said, "must be a totally shitty crowd."

"Good crowd," Sarah said, "I'm just not in the mood to do everything they tell me to do. Some days I want to rip the faces off of every creep in the bar and slap them with them."

"I totally know what you mean," Jane said. "I need a vacation."

Sarah took off her robe and squeezed her damp body into a white mini skirt and a neon pink top. "If you keep hanging out with Tina, you won't be going anywhere except jail or the morgue."

Jane looked back to her magazine and snapped her gum. "Yeah, I've decided not to hook up with her after this club. I'm going to get booked elsewhere. Sorry for last night. Guess I need to mellow out on the party scene. Today is the first day I can remember being sober in over a month. It's so hard to refuse free booze."

Sarah touched up her makeup in the mirror. "I know. It's really hard. I limit myself to two an hour. That seems to work well. It's also a good idea to drink a lot of water. I try to drink one glass of water for every drink I have. But it does wear me down when I drink a steady amount all the time."

"Ever tried drinking pop instead?"

Sarah put her makeup away and opened the door to the floor. "Yeah," she said,

"but the guys get turned off if you drink pop. You're not an easy fuck if they think you're sober."

Sarah stumbled around, pretending to be drunk.

Sarah made her way around the club signing posters and chatting with patrons who might be willing to stick around for her next show or possibly up the cash for a private show. Larry had been inviting her to sit with him all night, but she held out in hopes that he would up his ante. She decided to see what his offer was at the end of the night.

"I have another proposition for you," Larry said. He pulled a chair out for her and she sat down.

Sarah ordered a drink from the waitress. "If you are thinking about taking me out for coffee again, forget it."

"I'm very sorry about last night. I will never let something so horrific happen again. My own ignorance surprises me to no end. So I will not invite you out for coffee until we are on better terms and I have earned your trust once again."

"Trust?" Sarah said. "I barely know you."

"Nonsense," Larry said. "We are at least acquaintances, and I would venture to say that we have become more than that. I know a little about you, and I'm willing to work at learning everything about you. I want to become a scholar with you as my subject."

Sarah received her drink. Larry paid for it and tipped the waitress.

"How did you like my show?" Sarah asked.

Larry adjusted his suit. "It was absolutely wonderful, as always." He paused and stared at her for a moment. "The proposition," he said. "I have a good one for you. I think I've realized why you won't go on the trip with me."

"Good boy," Sarah said. "You've realized that I have a boyfriend."

Larry nodded and laughed. "Yes, I realize that you have a boyfriend. But we both know that he is not worthy of your angelic presence. But what I have also realized is that I am being somewhat greedy with my offer."

Sarah lowered her eyebrows. "Greedy by offering me a free trip anywhere in the world?"

"Yes," Larry said. He straightened in his chair. "You see, with the trip, the only thing you really get out of it is a few souvenirs, pictures and memories. Most of what you receive involves me. Therefore, everything, in a way, is for me. Nothing is exclusively for you."

Sarah looked confused. Larry pulled a small booklet out of his pocket and placed it in front of her. It was a brochure about Mexico and all of its fabulous vacation spots.

"For the money that I have," he said, "we can go down to Mexico for as long as we like. It is dirt cheap down there. Plus we can go on a shopping spree. You can send home a crate full of Mexican artifacts. Everything is hand-made down there. Full of blood and sweat, the true sign of authenticity."

Larry crossed his arms across his chest, assured and proud. "And whatever is left over when we get back will be spent on a glamorous gift for you, I promise."

Sarah slid the brochure back toward Larry. "You're a sweet guy for offering me

this, but I think we should stick to the club for now."

Larry put the brochure back in his pocket. He nodded and adjusted himself in his seat, apparently agreeing with Sarah's resolution. "I'm sorry, yet again," he said. "I will hit the drawing board once again. The world is full of perfect ideas, it just takes men a little longer than women to find them."

Sarah stood up. "I've already found the perfect idea," Sarah said. "We have a blast in this club and enjoy ourselves for the short amount of time we have together. You're a great guy, but we really have to keep it in the club."

Larry stood up. "I will come up with a master plan," he said.

Sarah shook her head. "I have other things to do, so you're going to have to excuse me. I know you love to watch me dance, and it's people like you that make my job so much fun. So keep watching my shows." Sarah stood and sauntered toward the back room.

Larry looked at some men sitting beside him who were now watching him. "We're working some things out," he said. The men chuckled at him.

Jane's show started with a blast of loud music blended with the incessant drawl of the DJ. The men behind Larry ordered him to sit down. Larry paused, still staring at Sarah's sauntering figure. He finally listened to the loud voices and lowered himself into his seat.

Sarah came through the back door and changed into her street clothes. She started to clean out her locker when Tina walked in. She was dressed in ripped jeans that were

so tight that the flesh of her thighs bubbled out of the holes like tanned Play-Doh. She looked in the mirror and adjusted her bangs. They were puffed high above her forehead. Moisture collected from snowflakes were threatening the hard, scribbled structure. Sarah knew that Tina was still stuck in the eighties, but this was proof that there wasn't a chance in hell that she was ever going to dig her way out and join those in the present.

"Still pouting?" Tina asked, turning from the mirror and flashing her grey teeth.

Sarah didn't answer and continued to clean out her locker.

"Well, I hope I can trust that you won't fucking open your fat mouth to anyone," Tina said. She sat on the makeup table and dangled her legs back and forth. The jeans looked as if they would explode at any moment. The deep crotch created by the seam looked painful.

"I am leaving tomorrow morning," Sarah said, "and all I care about is having a good sleep tonight."

Tina stepped down and stood in front of Sarah. "I don't need to get blackballed because of people spreading shit about me."

Sarah stuffed a pair of red platform heels into her bag and zipped it up. She closed the locker and held her combination lock in her hand. "Let's just stay out of each other's way."

She walked around Tina and reached for the door.

"You're no fucking angel," Tina yelled. "I've seen you with blow all over your face. Sucking dick like a fucking whore fresh off the fucking corner. Dropping acid and drinking booze till you piss yourself."

Sarah stood holding the doorknob with her eyes closed. She wanted to scream as loud as she could to block out Tina's raspy voice. She didn't want to remember waking up beside someone she didn't know and never would. Being tired all the time, but still thinking that life would go on and on and on. The blurry days, clouded by a consistent supply of free alcohol, drugs and whatever else the predators offered, were long gone. But Tina was there to remind her that that blurred world still existed, and some were still pushing onward through the fog, always hoping to find a familiar face to latch onto and pull down into the underworld.

Sarah turned for a moment and grinned at Tina. She opened the door. "I'm surprised you remember anything at all Tina. I barely do. But I've changed. I can remember everything since I quit being a fuckup. I remember every time I see you junked out, and I remember exactly why I am here. This time it is for different reasons."

Tina picked up a lipstick and threw it at Sarah as she closed the door behind her. "Bitch," Tina screamed. The lipstick left a red glob on the door.

Sarah felt like she was a new woman when she dried herself after a shower. The numbness in her feet and the aches and pains in her joints disappeared. She turned on the television for background noise and brushed her hair in front of the mirror. She closely examined her face and lifted her pajama shirt to see if her figure had improved since she had started dancing. She couldn't see much of a difference. The small potbelly, two

pinches of fat, was still holding strong.

After a long search through the hundred channels that were available, she found that there were only dramas with dime-store plots and reruns of sitcoms with heavily recycled jokes available. She shut it off and relaxed on the bed. The shower had replenished her energy. The quiet room reminded her of the times she was on the road for long periods. Every room was the same: a hard bed, coarse sheets and a decor that was full of earth tones. The art prints were framed and screwed to the walls. They were so neutral that it was doubtful that human eyes of any kind had given them more consideration than the walls that surrounded them. This room had two prints of dogs, one of two Brittany Spaniels and one of two Cocker Spaniels. Both sets of canines were running through water after easily spooked mallards.

Sarah thought about Carl and where he would be at that moment. Probably at home with Brian. She cringed at the image of Brian that appeared in her mind. His shit-eating grin, always vicious and genuine. She wondered how someone so unattractive and poor, both in finance and social skills, could be so happy all the time. It would only be a matter of time before Carl morphed into a clone of Brian.

Sarah flipped open her cell phone and called her old number. The phone rang several times before she heard her own voice and Carl's voice together:

Hello, you've reached Carl and Sarah, we're not here right now, so leave a message after the beep.

Sarah hung up the phone before the message finished playing. It reminded her of the day it was created. They had been living together for a few months and decided to record the new message after eating dinner and drinking a bottle of cheap red wine. Carl contorted his face while he spoke to the machine and Sarah could remember bursting into laughter at the end of the message. It was a happy ending to a conventional message recording.

Sarah thought about calling Paul, but she knew he would be asleep. She imagined he slept on his back with the blankets pulled tightly around his body. He could crawl out of them like he would a cocoon, leaving the bed looking as if it were for sale. Then he would enter a sparkling shower equipped with the newest men's bathroom products. She imagined that his shaver would be worth more than some people's rusted vehicles and that his imported soap would be made from some sort of strange organically grown mountain cabbage. She grinned at his somewhat compulsive behavior.

Sarah put her phone beside the bed and crawled under the covers. She picked up the book she had been reading, the newest romance novel from her favorite author, and snuggled into a tight ball. Soon the words on the page, however engaging and steamy, melted into dreams.

Sarah and Larry were on a plane to Mexico. Larry was wearing a bright yellow Hawaiian shirt and his pale legs stuck out of his matching shorts like the legs of a hairy insect. He was counting a pile of money on his lap and explaining how he was going to purchase the entire country for her. He had already bought her the plane. Larry tapped on the glass of the window and pointed to the earth below.

"The world is mine. And what's mine is yours." He pointed between his legs.

"All it takes is a little cooperation."

Sarah shook her head at him. "It's not worth all the money in the world," she said. After she spoke, the plane shifted suddenly and began to shake violently. The nose curved toward the ground, and the cart in the middle of the aisle rolled toward the front, bouncing and bumping into arm rests and the elbows that were resting on them.

Sarah could see the oil wells of Texas out the window pumping and driving at the same speed that her body pumped her veins full of adrenalin. She grabbed Larry. His skin became cold, and his face aged and began to slowly suck inward until his skin was vacuum-sealed to his skull. The creature tapped on the glass again and laughed. The plane was nearly perpendicular to the ground below. A stewardess bounced down the aisle screaming and grabbing whatever she could. She eventually slammed into the wall that divided the passengers from the captain's cabin and became still. Sarah looked upward and saw the twisted faces of the passengers. They looked as if they were somehow tricked into riding the world's biggest roller coaster. Oxygen masks popped out in separate intervals. Pop, pop, pop. Sarah looked out the window again. The plane would hit at any moment. She could feel the seat belt digging into midsection. Her bladder begged for a release of pressure. It wouldn't hold for much longer, but it wouldn't matter if she just let it go. She closed her eyes and gripped the back of the seat in front of her.

As the plane struck the earth, fire enveloped the cabin. The burst blew Sarah's hair back and her eyes opened to the dark hotel room. She was sweating and breathing

heavily. She released her tight grip on the pillow beside her and concentrated on clearing the memory of Larry's disfigured face from her mind. The thought made her imagination run free in the dark room as it used to when she was a little girl. Every shadowed object became a haunting face.

She stood up and walked toward the washroom. The dream was accurate about her bladder. She jumped when she heard three soft knocks on the door. She put her eye to the peephole. Larry was looking toward her, his face looking convex and cartoon-like. Clumps of hair stood up like black bear grass on his head. His dress shirt was half untucked.

Sarah turned on the bathroom light and sat on the toilet. She looked at her watch and found that it was just after four in the morning. She put her hands on her face and prayed that Larry would go away.

Larry rapped his knuckles three times again after she flushed the toilet.

"Get lost," Sarah said. She watched the bubbled figure fidget with a red box in his hands. It was accented by a white bow.

"I need," he cleared his voice and raised it slightly. "I need to talk to you. Could you let me in for just a moment?"

"Absolutely not," she said. "It's four in the morning. How the hell did you find my hotel room?"

Larry smiled at himself and nodded. He ran his fingers through his shiny hair, laying some awry locks to rest. "I thought you'd ask that. Your friend, Tina. Hell of a girl. She said that you have broken up with your boyfriend and that you were lonely."

Sarah rested her forehead on the door, absorbing its coolness.

"She also said," Larry continued, "that she was worried about you." Larry laughed nervously. "And when I hear something like that, I'm sure you can imagine that it would make me twice as concerned. Could you open up so we can talk for a little while?"

Sarah was silent. She watched him nervously pace in front of the door and whisper to himself. He stopped and walked close to the peephole. His nose grew to an immense size.

"I have a gift for you. It will surely cheer you up." He held up the present to the peephole. "And I've given up on the idea that we are soul mates. I do not wish to escort you on the vacation of a lifetime."

Sarah kept the chain lock attached and opened the door an inch. The corners of his lips seemed to push up his lolling eyelids. Pungent alcohol that smelled like aging sauerkraut seeped into the room. "I don't need your consolation," she said.

"Is it true?" Larry asked. He slowly approached the crack in the door.

"If you are referring to my personal relationship with my boyfriend, it is none of your business."

Larry slid his fingers into the door. Sarah slammed it lightly to let him know that the next time he might lose them. Larry screeched in pain, but held his fingers in place. He positioned his lips against the thin crack.

"I will take any punishment for your company, but please don't hurt me. I just want to talk to you. I have a gift."

"Get your hand out of the door, or I'll break every god-damned bone in your finger."

Larry's hand slid down the doorframe as he dropped to his knees. "I know," he said. "I've failed you yet again. I just need to talk to you."

Sarah pushed on the door. Larry squealed and withdrew his hand. Sarah closed the door and watched him through the peephole. He leaned against the far wall of the hallway holding his hand and massaging the red line left by the sharp edge of the door. He whispered to himself in a high-pitched voice.

Sarah sat down on her bed and looked at the telephone. It would only take a quick call to the police. The police would pick him up, whining and crying, and throw him into a van full of other drunks they had collected throughout the city. The van, after raking all the vagrants from between the tall buildings, would eventually end up at the jail. It would be a full house on Saturday night: wall-to-wall with every type of freak, drunk and bum. Larry in the middle of them all, a suit surrounded by archaic beasts with a passion for manipulation and physical violence.

Sarah could still hear him mumbling out in the hallway.

She peeked through the peephole again and found that he hadn't changed his position. He was still rubbing his hand and talking to himself. She opened the door again. He leaned forward, held out the present and wiped his eyes on his jacket.

"I just wanted to give you this." He sniffled. "And I only wanted to see that you were okay." He pointed down the hallway, "Tina . . .," he said.

Sarah interrupted him. "Larry, it's late. Some people need to sleep."

Larry put his hand over his eyes. His shoulders hopped along with the sounds of his light cries.

"Pathetic," Sarah said and turned toward the room.

Larry lifted his head. "Things have been so crazy lately." He took a break to breath a shaky breath of air. "I've been so lonely."

He slid up the wall to a standing position. "I just wanted to let you know," he said, "that I have been considering all possibilities and following the odds very critically. I am seriously considering ending it all. I bought a gun yesterday."

Sarah looked into the empty room in front of her. She thought for a moment that it could be the place where everything could end. It instantly became a crime scene in her mind: Larry would be dead by suicide in the bathroom, and her blood would be all over the homely bedspreads. They were a white and brown leaf pattern, and she imagined the blood turning the white leaves a crimson red. It was not a good way to go.

Sarah slammed the door and locked it. She peered through the peephole. Larry waited for a moment before he stumbled down the hallway.

Chapter Fourteen

Carl was bent over looking into the screen of a computer that was running a demo of a new video game. His fingers were tucked into the pockets of his jeans. Paul could smell that Carl had just finished a cigarette before he came into the store. He stood behind Carl and waited for him to finish examining the video game. Carl turned energetically and adjusted his baseball cap.

"Good day," he said. "I'm looking for a computer that I can hook up to the porno on the Internet." He pointed at the machine behind him. "How much?"

Paul crossed his arms and spread his stance. "If you don't leave the store, I'll call the police."

Carl brushed his beard, nodding a little. "Do you have a payment plan? I doubt I can pay for it all at once. I'm not rich. Sure wish I was. I'd be getting a lot more pussy, if you know what I mean."

Paul stepped forward and bitterly whispered, "I could have you arrested for assault and trespassing."

"Sounds pricey," Carl said, walking to the side of the computer and examining the keyboard. "What's the interest rate if I do decide to go with payments?"

"Very well," Paul said. He pulled his cellular phone out of his pocket and began dialing.

Carl laughed. "I was just shitting you," he said. He slapped Paul on the shoulder. "You really got to learn how to take a joke man. Relax." He reached in his back pocket

and pulled out a black wallet. He handed it to Paul.

Paul hung up the phone.

"Your wallet," Carl said. "Must have fell out of your pants when you were asleep."

Paul opened the wallet. The cash pocket was empty except for a small, ripped piece of loose-leaf paper. Paul unfolded the paper and read the message:

I.O.U. \$70

- Carl

"I'll get you back for the cash," Carl said, shrugging his shoulders, "Me and Bri needed some supplies. We were running a little short."

Paul flipped the wallet shut. "And the watch?"

"Oh yeah," Carl said. "Almost forgot." He pulled the Omega out of his back pocket and handed it to Paul. "Too heavy for me."

Paul put on his watch and examined it for damages. It looked fine. "What can I do for you?" he asked. He raised his hand, motioning to his surroundings. "I'm at work. If you have something to say to me, you better make it quick."

Carl mimicked Paul's stance and lowered his voice. "Well, Mr. Computers, it seems what we have here is a Mexican standoff."

"I'm not sure I follow what you mean," Paul said.

"My wife, dimwit. You want her, and so do I."

Paul leaned on the desk. He looked up to Carl smiling. "Is that why you've come? You came all the way down here to propose some sort of physical settlement between us?" He shook his head, chuckling softly. "Well, I can tell you that you're wasting your time." He whispered to himself, "Looks more like a case of brains against brawn."

Carl squinted and readjusted his stance. He looked like an abused dog that needed just one more strike before he was pushed to the level where he would lunge and use the shiny teeth visible under quivering lips.

"I care about my girl," Carl said.

Paul looked around him. No employees or customers were around. "You're creating what you want to see," he said. "I have no interest in Sarah. She rents my basement and lives primarily out of town. I don't see how you think that I am trying to start some sort of relationship with her. I have already told you that I have no intention to do so."

Jeremy walked toward them with a clipboard in his hand. "Sorry to disturb you," he said, "but Micron corrected their mistake on that shipment of memory, but they raised the price on us. They've been a huge pain lately. Do you want me to cancel the order before they ship it out?"

"No," Paul said. "They sell reliable memory for cheap, even if they raised the price. Keep the order, and I'll look over it later."

Jeremy nodded and turned around.

"So, are we done here?" Paul asked Carl.

"No," Carl said. He kicked the chair in front of him and it bumped loudly into a desk.

Paul looked around the store again and saw that Jeremy had turned around and stood wondering what was going on. Paul's voice became cautious. "Then what do you want? A truce?" He held out his hand. "Fine, here is your truce. I will not touch Sarah under any circumstance."

Carl spit on Paul's hand. Paul recoiled his hand as if it had been bitten and rubbed it on the backside of his slacks.

"Get out or I'll call the police."

Paul watched Carl's thin lips curve into a wicked smile. He opened his cellular phone.

"Go ahead," Carl said. He looked at the front counter where Jeremy was helping a man fill out a purchase order for a monitor. Carl punched the flat screen monitor in front of him. It shot back until its electrical cord straightened and guided the screen to the back of the desk like a pendulum. The screen blinked and turned black. Everyone stood still, waiting for Carl to continue.

"May as well make it worth it." He kicked over the computer terminal that sat beside the screen. "Call the fucking cops."

Paul backed away and his fingers tightened around the phone. Carl looked around for something else to destroy.

"Wait," Paul said. "I'll tell her she can't stay. How does that sound?"

"Now you're talking," Carl said.

"I'll tell you what," Paul said. He placed his phone down on the counter that was now free of computer equipment. "I'm not going to call anyone, and I think you're right. I will tell Sarah that she cannot rent from me, and I'll tell her that I think it's a good idea if she works things out with you. I'll help her move her things back over to your house. Really, I don't want anything to do with her, and I certainly do not want to intensify the problems you are having."

Even though Carl was drunk, he wondered if this was just another sales trick by a slick-talking businessman.

Paul did not wait for Carl's answer. He stuffed his phone in his pocket and held out his hand to Carl. Carl's eyes displayed that he hadn't finished processing what was happening. He held out his limp hand. Paul shook it vigorously.

"Thank you for coming in and clearing this up, Carl. I'll get in touch with Sarah immediately, and when she is in town again, we'll get things straightened out as soon as we can."

Paul turned around and walked into his office. He could see Carl still staring at him through the reflection in the two-way mirror. He didn't make eye contact and prayed that Carl would leave peacefully. He could see that Jeremy reacted perfectly; he continued helping the man with the purchase order like nothing had happened. The other salesman followed suit. Carl watched Paul walk away until he reached the hallway to his office before he started to follow. Paul entered his office and closed the door behind him. Carl watched him for a moment through the glass door.

"Mr. Computers," Carl said, knocking on the door.

Paul entered the number for the police into his phone and pressed the send button.

"Mr. Computers," Carl said, "if you don't leave my girl alone, I'm going to be coming for you. I won't just kick the shit out of your computers next time. Are we understood?"

Carl tried to open the door, but Paul had locked it. The doorknob clicked back and forth several times before he gave up.

"Mr. Computers, if I catch you with my girl again, I'll kill you. There you have it. Take me to court; I don't have nothing to lose. I know where you live."

Carl kicked the door before storming out of the building.

It took the police over half an hour to arrive. Paul stood by the damaged merchandise waiting. He left it untouched so they could see the damage.

An officer wearing a bicycle helmet and reflective sunglasses entered the store. He removed his glasses and helmet and made eye contact with Paul immediately. A stubby officer followed behind him. The man's hair was buzzed short and his neck was long. His arms swung wide to dodge his weapon and the many other items attached to his belt. He cocked his head and looked at the hanging screen and toppled computer case on the floor.

"Were you the gentleman that called?" the buzzed cop asked. He pulled out a black pad and flipped it open. He dabbed the tip of his ballpoint pen on his tongue.

"Yes," Paul said.

The cop took Paul's driver's license and copied down his identification

information.

"A man came in and destroyed this merchandise," Paul said.

"Okay," the cop said. He pointed around the room with his pen. "Did any customers or employees see it take place?"

Paul examined the store. Everyone was continuing with their day as if nothing had happened.

"I think my manager, Jeremy, saw it all happen," Paul said.

The cop nodded and took down Jeremy's name.

"He assaulted me as well."

"Where did he assault you?" The cop looked at Paul's face for signs of battery.

Paul caught himself scratching his head and stopped. He had a fear that he would go bald if he scratched it too much. "Not here," Paul said.

"Pardon me?"

"He assaulted me at his house."

The cop looked at his pad without writing. He finally looked back up. "So are you calling about a previous assault or the damage to the merchandise or both?"

"Both, I suppose," Paul said. He scratched his head again.

The cop started writing.

"I mean just the merchandise," Paul said. He remembered his conversation with Sarah.

The cop tapped his pen against his notepad. "Let me see if I have this straight. You want us to find this guy and arrest him for destroying your merchandise, but you're

fine with him assaulting you?"

Paul nodded. "Yes," he said. "I mean no, but I don't care about the assault right now. It was a misunderstanding. But I do care about the computer he destroyed."

"This guy your buddy?" the cop said.

"No," Paul said, "absolutely not."

"And the reason you were at his house?"

Paul could see where the conversation was going. The bastard had turned the situation around in a matter of minutes. Paul had had nothing but good experiences with cops in the past. They usually let him off on tickets, waved to him when he glanced into their cruisers and he even got stumbling drunk with a group of them while he was camping last Labour Day weekend.

"I was there to help his ex-girlfriend pick up some things. She moved out of his house and wanted some help."

The cop nodded and pursed his lips. "So is this some sort of dispute over the girl?"

Paul noticed small snowflakes of skin floating downward in front of his eyes. He clinched his fists and buried them in pockets of his slacks to keep them from his scalp. "No, of course not." He shook his head in frustration then nodded. "I mean yes." He rocked toe to heel in sync with his nodding. "Yes it was, but not because of me. I had nothing to do with it."

The cop's chest jolted with a single puff of laughter. He shook his head and looked back to his short companion.

"This is a good one," the short cop said.

"He assaulted you," the buzzed cop said, turning back to Paul, "but you had nothing to do with it."

Paul closed his eyes to calm his nerves. "Can you find this guy, or what? He's also drinking and driving as we speak. He might hit some kid on a bike. He walked in here and went nuts for Christ's sake." Paul pointed at the hanging monitor.

"I just need to know all the facts," the cop said. "So what's this guy's name."

"Carl," Paul said. "But I don't know his last name off hand."

"Okay," the cop said. "So we have a guy named Carl." The cop tapped the pen on his lips while he examined the ceiling of the store. Paul looked up, wondering what the cop was looking for.

"You have video surveillance?" the cop asked.

Paul thought about the man who had come into the store shortly after he had opened Central. The man had greasy hair and wore a ratty jean jacket. Paul didn't trust him. He offered a full video surveillance system for a reasonable price, and apparently he had been in the surveillance business longer than any other Calgarian. But a reasonable price for video equipment was not reasonable to Paul. It was excessive and expensive. He figured that with the technology today and the improved policing, armed robberies were pretty much a thing of the past. Statistically, especially in the downtown core, he was correct. He trusted Jeremy to keep employee theft to a minimum, so there wasn't much point in spending the extra money. After all, the sprinkler system installed in the roof was worth almost as much as the computer equipment below that it would

drench when some smoke or heat hit one of the sensors. But Paul did buy some fake cameras and screwed them to the ceiling in a pattern that displayed the best illusionary security system money could buy. He supposed if he were a criminal, they would thwart him from running into the place with a gun or from trying to walk out the front door with an expensive piece of hardware.

"They're fake," Paul said.

The cop looked around the store at all the cameras.

"Convincing," he said, still tapping the pen on his lips.

"Thanks," Paul said.

"Did you see the perpetrator pull away?" the cop said.

"No, but I know he wouldn't have walked here. The guy is a drunk."

"A license plate number?"

Paul shook his head.

"Well, you must know where he lives."

Paul's eyes lit up. "Yes, I do. I know exactly where he lives." His smile faded slightly. "But I'll have to explain where it is. I don't remember the exact address." His hands escaped his pockets.

The radio mounted on the cop's uniform, just below his right shoulder, blared a woman's garbled voice across the store. The cop replied something that was also indistinguishable. He sighed and flipped his notepad shut. He tucked it inside his breast pocket and buttoned it up.

"I can draw you a map and give you a perfect description of the house," Paul said.

The cop put on his helmet and adjusted the chinstrap. "We'll have to go to the station and then we'll go to this guy's house. We can't do much from here."

The short cop nodded. "Especially when we're on bikes," he said.

"Do I really have to come down?" Paul asked. "I'm pretty busy around here."

The cop softened his tone, as if he were talking to a child. "Sir, it sounds like you and this guy have some issues that need to be straightened out. When you figure out what you want us to do, come down to the station. But make sure you know what you want to do before you contact us. We are very busy."

Paul glared at himself in the reflection of the cop's sunglasses. He thought the cop looked like a bug.

"I would suggest heading down to the station to make a statement. If you don't want to do it today, I suggest you do it tomorrow. The sooner, the better."

The cops strode out of the store, waving to people who looked their way. Paul ordered a salesman to clean up the mess and replace the demo that had been destroyed. He got his jacket and keys out of his office and stormed out of the store.

Chapter Fifteen

Sarah awoke early and energized even though she was short on sleep. She did what little packing she had to do and called Jane and Tina's room. Jane said she wasn't quite ready, but she assured Sarah that she was working on it. Sarah walked to her room to let Jane know that she wouldn't be waiting around too long.

She stopped by the room, and Jane answered the door wearing a towel around her body like a dress and another around her head like an oversized turban. The bedspread on Tina's bed was smooth and straight.

"Tina?"

Jane bent over and pulled the towel off of her head. She ran her fingers through her damp, wavering curls.

"Don't ask," she said. "All I can say is that I'm glad that we're getting the hell out of here today. This place is going to give me nothing but bad memories."

She stood and whipped her hair back. She dressed and tried to pack her things at the same time. Sarah watched with envy as Jane squeezed into a pair of jeans that would have fit her five years earlier. She felt guilty when she predicted that Jane's ass would explode when her metabolism dropped.

The man with the star mole came around from the counter and shook the women's hands before they departed. He bowed and smiled graciously and repeatedly said, "You come back. Give you good price on room."

The man took their smiles as an agreement. Every time he bowed, his glance

went down with his head.

The sky was overcast and dense flakes of snow blew around on the asphalt of the parking lot. Sarah zipped up her coat around her neck and tucked her nose inside to ready herself for the cold. Jane followed her as she rushed out to the car and started it. Sarah scraped the windows and brushed the small amount of snow away from the headlights and taillights.

The air blown into the car by the fan inside the dash slowly became warmer as they drove toward the highway. Sarah pulled into a gas station just outside of Edmonton.

"We'll fuel up here," she said.

Sarah's fingers stung as she squeezed the gas nozzle. The grey digital numbers on the pump could not keep up to the speed at which the fuel was pumping into the car on account of the temperature.

"Come on," she said to the pump. "She gripped her left ear with her free hand, then her right, to keep them warm. She closed her eyes and waited until the pump clunked to a stop. She didn't bother pumping small bits of gas until the price reached a round dollar value.

Jane was in line to pay for her copy of the newest Cosmopolitan and two packages of gum when Sarah came in. She shook her hair to get rid of the snow that had blown into it. She bought a hot chocolate, paid for the gas and met Jane in the car.

As Sarah turned off the road that led to the station and onto the highway, she noticed a large dark figure out of her peripheral vision. Before she could discern what the object was, her window and the windshield flashed and blew cubes of glass into the

car. She could feel strong g-forces as the car spun twice and quickly came to a halt.

Time stopped. The pungent smell of gasoline and steaming antifreeze blended with the icy air. Sarah's mind was swimming in distant confusion, and she could feel tiny flakes of snow hitting her face and neck.

Her distorted thoughts slowly became clear, and Sarah turned immediately to Jane. Jane's head turned in all directions with her eyes wildly circulating in their sockets. There was glass all over her.

"Are you okay?" Sarah shouted.

Jane nodded.

Sarah looked out the window and saw that the traffic in the distance was still moving. They had stopped in the middle of the road, perpendicular to the flow of vehicles. A large S.U.V. was about twenty feet away. Steam flowed out of its grill.

"Jane, get out of the car right now!"

Jane undid her seatbelt and exited the car. She ran to the side of the road.

Sarah undid her seatbelt and reached for her door handle. Before she could pull it, her door opened on its own.

"Are you alright?" a voice shouted.

Sarah nodded as she was suddenly yanked from the car. Her head bumped the edge of car's roof.

"I'm so sorry," the voice said.

"It's alright," Sarah said in the confusion. She rubbed the sore spot on her head and looked up.

"Larry?" she said. Her voice became venomous. "What the hell are you doing here?" She pulled her arm away from him.

Larry held out his gloved hands as if her struggle would cause her to fall.

"Sarah, are you alright?" he asked.

Sarah ignored him and stomped toward the truck that had smashed her car.

Whoever the driver of the truck was, they had changed lanes in an intersection.

Larry followed close behind.

A woman in her early forties was holding her hands over her face. Sarah opened the door and the woman lowered her hands.

"I'm so sorry," the woman said.

Any anger Sarah felt melted away at the sight of the distraught woman.

The woman shook like her dying engine as she gasped for air. She pointed at the crumpled civic in the middle of the road. "I didn't see you. The car is so little. And the snow." She looked out her window at the whitened city around her. "I was on my way to pick my son up from hockey practice."

Sarah gently grasped her hand. "Everything's going to be fine. No one was hurt. But you have to come out of the truck. We're in the middle of the road."

Larry's voice appeared behind them. He was on his cellular with the police. His serious tone caused the woman in the truck to burst out crying once again.

Sarah guided the woman out of the truck and led her to the side of the road where Jane was clutching herself to keep warm. They watched as Larry pulled the smoking truck to the side of the road. The crumpled civic remained in the middle of the road

surrounded by cubes of glass.

"Toyotas," Larry shouted over the traffic and wind as he approached the shivering women, "they sure can take a beating." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the smoking truck. "Just antifreeze," he said to the woman. "Definitely going to need a new radiator."

Sarah glared at him.

Larry's eyebrows, ears and mouth dropped. "I was just driving by on my way home."

"Bullshit," Sarah said.

The weeping woman's eyes fought to understand the conversation.

Larry pulled back the hood of his parka, revealing a tight, black tuque on his head. Coupled with his stubble, he looked like a criminal. "It's a complete coincidence," he said.

"Coincidence that you're going home at exactly the same time as I am?" Sarah said. "You look like you haven't slept in days."

Larry adjusted his tuque so that it almost covered his eyes. "I haven't," he said. He looked up to the overcast sky and smiled. "You've been on my mind. I think we need to talk."

Sarah moved so that the owner of the truck was between her and Larry. As Larry opened his mouth to protest, he could see flashing lights in the distance.

A cruiser arrived just after the ambulance. The paramedics made sure everyone was okay and the police officer directed traffic around the civic as they waited for a tow

truck. Another police car arrived, and the rookie who was inside took over the traffic direction while the other officer took a report of the accident and helped the women exchange contact information. The woman from the truck was barely able to speak through her tears, and the sadness in her face made Sarah feel just as terrible.

"Everyone makes mistakes," Sarah said.

The woman nodded and rubbed her eyes with her thumb and forefinger.

The tow-truck arrived, and Sarah and Jane unloaded as many of their possessions as they could before it pulled the civic away.

Sarah examined the truck. It had suffered very little in the crash: the front bumper was pushed in on one side, the grill was shattered and the radiator had finished spraying its florescent green liquid onto the road. She was relieved that it was the woman's fault, and not hers.

The woman rode away with the senior officer when he was done speaking to her in his cruiser.

The other officer offered Sarah and Jane a ride.

"I'll take care of them, sir," Larry said. "We are all from Calgary."

Sarah looked at Larry in disbelief.

"I'll give you a lift back to Calgary," Larry said.

The officer gave Sarah a questioning glance. Sarah smiled back to him.

"We would appreciate it if you could give us a ride to the bus depot." She grinned at Larry. "Thank you, sir, but I don't ride with strangers."

The officer shifted his questioning glance to Larry.

Larry avoided the officer's eyes. "I suppose I'll be getting back on the road then," he said. He waved in their general direction, raised the hood of his jacket and hugged his chest as he turned and shuffled to his car.

The Greyhound stopped at a few barren locations on the trip from Edmonton to Calgary. The passengers sat in the bus and waited while the driver delivered parcels and accepted tickets from passengers who populated desolate prairie towns.

Jane fell asleep with a magazine on her lap, which was opened to a page that showcased celebrity faults. Sarah browsed the pictures. There was a close-up of the cottage cheese on a model's ass with the title, "Should she have adopted a baby instead?" Next to that image was a picture of a woman with a dried piece of snot hanging out of her nose with the title, "Why a two-second checkup in the mirror can save face." Below these two images was a picture of a celebrity with high cheekbones and eyelids stretched like a painted balloon. The title below the image said, "How many face lifts is too many?"

Jane's mouth hung open as she slept. She awoke for a short moment now and then when she felt drool sliding down her lip or when a sharp snore would gnaw at her sinuses. She would smack her lips a few times before gravity would pull her jaw open and the process would be repeated.

Sarah thought about the car and how much frustration the insurance company was going to cause the woman who had hit her. She had dealt with the insurance company when her car was broken into shortly after she purchased it. The thieves had scratched the paint around the door lock on the driver's side and eventually smashed the window

when they couldn't force the lock open. They stole a few CDs and less than twenty bucks in change from the ashtray. The insurance company had no problems taking her monthly payments out of her account, but when she wanted to use the service she was paying for, it was nothing but a hassle. Estimates needed to be processed and a large deductible needed to be paid. To top it all off, her insurance rates were raised.

She was going to have to face them as well. If the civic was a write-off, which it definitely looked to be, she would get a payout that would be far less than the value of the car. She thought it would be a good sob story for Larry the next time he magically appeared.

Sarah looked out the window as the landscape scrolled by. The whitened prairies, which had tufts of yellow grass poking through in spots, were contrasted by clusters of darkened elms and pines. High drifts had formed against old, grey fences that had been fighting the elements for years. She searched for the bluish Rocky Mountains on the horizon, but they were concealed by the grey air that swirled snow in all directions. She watched a scrawny coyote tread across crusted drifts toward a valley filled with black brush. The shaggy animal kept its head low as it disappeared from view.

Sarah closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but the bus's seats were stiff and uncomfortable and tilted less than the seats of an airplane. After several failed attempts at finding a comfortable position, she took her phone out of her purse and dialed Paul's number. The phone beeped twice to notify her that the battery was about to die. She hung up and put it back in her purse. She leaned her head against the cool window.

Jane grunted and opened her eyes.

"Don't eat it," she said in a gargled voice. She cleared her throat.

Sarah laughed. "What don't you want me to eat?"

Jane stared blankly for a moment as her eyes came into focus. "Shit," she said. "I was dreaming."

"What were you dreaming about?" Sarah said.

Jane thought for a moment. "About the car crash. It was totally gross. That woman from the truck died and that stalker guy of yours was going to eat her guts."

A woman across the aisle who was knitting looked up from her project for a moment. Sarah smiled to her and turned back to Jane, making a sour face. "I don't know which is more disturbing, the fact that he was going to eat her guts or the fact that your mind was able to create such a horrible dream."

Jane looked out the window at the Prairie. "Where are we?"

"We'll be home in about half an hour," Sarah said. "You must have been tired."

Jane nodded. She dug a package of gum out of her purse.

"So what are you going to do about the car?" Jane said.

Sarah shrugged. "I don't know. I think it's totaled for sure. But we'll see."

"You could totally sue for whiplash if you go see a doctor," Jane said. "I hear those accident lawyers are awesome. They suck the blood out of insurance companies like vampires."

"It would be nice," Sarah said, "But I'm not hurt, and I don't think I could lie like that. Especially when the insurance company would be watching over my shoulder. It would feel like dirty money."

Jane grinned evilly.

"What?" Sarah said.

"I was just thinking that the money that gets thrown on stage is pretty sick."

Sarah elbowed her. "Hey, we earn that money the hard way. Have you seen the bunions on my feet?" She kicked off her shoe and produced a foot dressed in a tight, pink sock. Her toes bent to one side like the end of a worn corn-stalk broom, and the front ball of her foot stuck out to the side.

"I would rather sue someone for these feet," she said. "I'd have no problem with that. Maybe I should sue the male gender for adding platform heels to their long list of fetishes."

Jane stared at the large bump protruding from the base of Sarah's big toe. "Damn," she said, "how long did it take for your foot," she paused, "to get so screwed up?"

Sarah massaged the underside of her foot, just under her toes. "I'd say it took about a year of dancing three weeks a month. Somewhere around there. This bunion came right away, but the other one took a bit longer. I could get surgery, but they can come back again."

"Do they hurt," Jane asked.

"Yeah, they're quite painful. Especially when I'm working. I forgot how irritated they get from wearing heels all day."

"Damn," Jane said. "I totally need to get an office job."

Sarah pulled her foot closer to Jane. "There's no compensation for witch feet in

this industry." She wiggled her toes one last time before putting them back in her shoe.

"That should be enough to send you back to school.

"No shit," Jane said.

"But if you keep yourself straight and save your money, dancing can pay off big time. Hopefully my feet won't interfere with my aerobics instruction. It would really suck to have to hire someone."

"How much is this gym going to cost?" Jane said.

Sarah shifted herself in her seat so that she faced Jane. "It's really not as much as you think. Well, it is and it isn't. I am going to come up with a large down payment, around thirty thousand, I hope. Then the bank is going to take care of the rest. That is, if they give me the money. I've started putting together a business plan."

"That's so cool. I'll totally buy a membership," Jane said.

"Yours is free," Sarah said. Her smile suddenly turned into a cringe for a moment. She pointed in front of her to the back of an old man's head. His ears were half the size of his liver-spotted head. Jane was confused until the smell hit her.

"I think it's coming from him," Sarah whispered. "He's been smelling up the bus every fifteen minutes since we left."

"Sick," Jane said. "Good thing I was sleeping the whole time."

Jane turned her attention to the magazine on her lap with her nose tucked inside her shirt.

The smell spread around the bus until it dissipated into the stuffy air. Sarah looked out the window again, longing to stretch her legs. Her knees ached, and the space

between her and the window was just wide enough to eliminate the chance of creating a comfortable place to rest her head.

Just over four hours after their departure, the two women exited the bus, collected their bags and entered the depot. Sarah called Paul's cellular from a payphone.

"Hello," Paul said. He was still at his store, and there were the sounds of music and the garble of public speech in the background.

"Paul," Sarah said. "You will not believe the story I have for you."

"Oh really?" Paul said. "I think my story will trump yours. Carl paid me a visit at work today. It was absolutely wonderful. He was interested in buying a computer. Hell of a guy."

Sarah watched some young siblings kicking a ball back and forth through the maze of legs created by travelers walking through the depot. She had no idea how to respond to Paul.

"Your story sounds almost as horrid as mine," she said. "You can fill me in with all the details later."

"Yes, it will have to wait," he said. "Hold on a second."

Sarah could hear the muffled noise of Paul's hand covering the receiver of his phone. She watched one of the children bump into a traveler's leg and bounce backward. The little boy stared up at the man as if it were his fault and then searched through the maze of legs for his parents. Sarah could tell that he wanted to cry, but there were no witnesses who would offer sympathy. He settled on glaring at the man who seemed gravely sorry for something that was no fault of his own. The man picked up the ball and

handed it to the boy who snatched it and ran back toward his sister. He bumped into a woman along the way and screeched and gyrated in frustration. Sarah smiled at Jane who was sitting on a bench across the walkway laughing at the scene.

"Sarah, I am so sorry, but I really have to go," Paul said into the phone. "Is there any way that you could call me later on when I'm off work."

Sarah sighed. "I would love to Paul, but I'm stuck at the bus depot. My car was totaled today in Edmonton. Is there any way you can come and pick me up?"

Paul spoke to someone in the store, "I'll be one minute." He returned to the phone and paused for a moment. "Are you okay? Was anyone hurt?"

"We were a bit shook up earlier," she said, "but we're fine now."

"That's good to hear," he said. "I'm glad no one was hurt. I would love to come and get you. I'd really like to see you, and please don't think that I don't want to, but there's just no way I can get out of here. After I take care of everything here, I have to go to the grocery store and pick up a few things and then pick up my grandfather. Can you find any other way?"

"Okay," Sarah said, "I understand. There's a lineup of cabs outside. We'll snag one of them."

"I'm really sorry," Paul said. "I can pay for the cab."

"Don't worry about that. I will need your address again though. I must have misplaced it."

Sarah wrote down the address and said goodbye. She led Jane outside to the short row of cabs with their drivers standing and talking. Their breath was visible in the cold

air and by the cigarettes they smoked.

The cab dropped them off at Paul's. Sarah paid the cabbie and led Jane into the house.

"Make yourself at home," Sarah said.

"This house kicks ass," Jane said. She walked under the skylight in the living room and looked up. "Must be totally new. Smells new."

Sarah started down the stairs with her gym bag over her shoulder. "It's nice," She said, "but it feels cold with nothing on the walls. I think I'm going to do some interior decorating."

Sarah tossed her bag onto her bed and went back upstairs. Jane was sitting at the kitchen table flipping through a computer magazine she had found.

"So who is this guy?" she asked.

Sarah opened several cupboards and found that Paul had what looked to be expensive dishes, pots and pans, almost none of which had been used. She found the cupboard, which housed a set of plastic glasses. "You've seen him," she said, "in the club. He's Frank's grandson."

Jane closed the magazine. "Oh yeah, he's cute." She looked around the room. "What does he do?"

"Sells computers. Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure," Jane said.

Sarah opened the fridge. A plastic jug of milk sat alone in the center of the top shelf. Inside, bacterial culture fought to escape, causing the jug to bloat. The rest of the

fridge was empty with the exception of the door compartment. It held an unopened bottle of ketchup and a bottle of mustard. She filled two glasses with water and handed one to Jane.

After several minutes of pressing rubber buttons in multiple combinations, Sarah figured out how to use the remote control that operated Paul's home theater system. The plastic device had at least fifty buttons of all shapes, colors and sizes. The system was equipped with a big-screen T.V., surround sound speakers and every add-on that one could find in an electronics store. Sarah flipped through the channels, finally deciding on a new reality show about a beautiful model who went out at night and attempted to pick up married men. All of the men who were approached had to meet the following criteria: they had to be American citizens, they had to have been married for at least five years, they had to have children and they had to make more than fifty thousand dollars per year. Distraught wives could call into the show, entitled Test My Man, to apply to have their husband's loyalty to the institution of marriage tested.

Sarah and Jane watched the woman who defined perfection: she had long, blonde hair, breasts that were as round as full moons, long, slender legs that had been baked to a perfect bronze in a tanning booth, a stomach with a tractor print and a face that looked thin and symmetrical.

"She would make a good dancer," Jane said.

Sarah cringed as the woman approached her first unsuspecting victim. "Yeah, but I sure wouldn't want to be her friend. This is such a mean thing to do to your husband."

Sarah didn't find the first man attractive. His facial hair reminded her of the

scruff she had been trying to convince Carl to get rid of for over a year.

The two women watched as a camera behind the bar and a hidden camera placed conveniently in the woman's cleavage captured the man's response to her advance. The man was sitting at the bar by himself and immediately offered the woman the stool beside him. The camera behind the bar zoomed in and paused on his left ring finger. Sarah and Jane watched in slow motion as the man removed his wedding band. The camera then zoomed out again as he tucked it safely into his pocket. The man bought her several drinks as the night went on.

"What are you doing after this place shuts down?" she asked the man.

"This is absolutely awful," Sarah said. "It's entrapment. Look at the guy. There's no way a chick this hot would ever go for him."

Jane shook her head. "No way. He deserves everything he's going to get. I hope his wife nails his balls to the wall. He's totally like the guys in the clubs that try for a little extra. I don't feel sorry for him at all."

The man stroked his beard, smiling directly at the hidden camera. "I don't have any plans. How about you?"

"I'd like to get out of here," she said.

"She doesn't waste any time," Sarah said.

The man looked around the bar and back to the woman. "This place is a bit of a drag, isn't it?" he said.

The woman seductively licked the straw in her drink before inserting it into her mouth. "Where do you want to go? And what do you want to do?"

"I have a few ideas," the man said.

"Like what?" the woman said. "What do you want to do to me?"

"Everything," the man said. He shifted in his seat and put his hand on the woman's knee. "Let's go."

The woman pulled his hand slowly up her leg. "You don't want to have sex with a pretty little girl like me, do you?"

"Poor woman," Sarah said. "Everyone gets to see how much of an ass her husband is."

"That's what she probably wants," Jane said. "He's not going to be able to show his face anywhere."

The man closed his eyes momentarily and whispered, "I want to" (bleep) "you right now." He opened his eyes and motioned between his legs. "Want to feel how hard I am?"

"Oh my god," Jane said excitedly. "What a total pig."

The woman guided the man off of his stool. When the man was standing in front of her with a lump in his pants, the beautiful woman revealed her ugly secret.

"I'm Natalie Johnson of Test My Man," she said. "And you've just been busted."

The man looked confused.

Natalie produced a detective badge fabricated by the network. "You should be ashamed of yourself Mr.," (bleep), "you were going to cheat on your wife of fourteen years."

The man became upset. "What are you talking about? What is this?"

The woman pointed to the camera between her breasts, and the bartender moved some bottles aside with a wry smile on his face.

The man stood in disbelief. "You're not serious," he said.

The woman stood with her arms crossed under her breasts and left the spotlight on the man.

"Please," the man said, "don't do this. I wasn't seriously going to do anything. I've had too much to drink."

The model said, "You've been tested, and you've screwed yourself by trying to screw me."

The program then returned to the studio, and the woman stood in front of the camera with her arms crossed and a mean squint to her eyes.

"Sixty five percent of the married men I approach want to cheat on their wives," she said. "It's been proven time and time again on Test My Man that suspicious wives usually have something to be suspicious about. Want to test your man? Find out at the end of the show how you can get me working for you. Coming up next, we'll talk to this man's wife and hear what she thinks about her man failing the test."

"I still think it's entrapment," Sarah said. "I bet Carl would go for her in a second. But no woman that hot would be trying to take Carl home."

"Why did you go for him then?" Jane asked. "You're just as hot as this Natalie bitch. Probably hotter."

Sarah thought about the question for a moment. "For starters, he looked a lot

better than he does now when I first met him."

She remembered the moments when she first dated Carl. He styled his hair, they did so much together, the camping, the hiking and going out on the town, but, as with every other relationship she had been in, everything slowed to a halt.

"I think he just became too comfortable with our relationship," she said. "He took everything for granted. But I know that a hot chick like her would never approach him. He would have to do the work."

"So you'd take him back if he fell for it."

"I think it's irresponsible to put him through the test in the first place."

"My man better be ready for the test," Jane said. "He better be able to turn down the most hottest chick in the world."

"Trust me," Sarah said, "your fairy tale will end in a nightmare."

Sarah heard an odd thumping on the front door as a commercial for cotton swabs began. The door opened and the butt of Frank's cane struck the white linoleum that covered the entryway. Paul helped him until he was inside and his feet were sturdily anchored.

Sarah could see that Frank was trying to keep his smile as a grin, but his thin lips were stretched to their maximum.

"Hello Irish," he said. He motioned to Paul. "I thought I'd come by and see if this one can cook." He winked to her and handed her a paper bag contoured to a bottle.

Sarah pulled a bottle of red wine out of the bag. She didn't recognize the label. The only thing she knew about wine was that it tasted like sour grapes.

"We need to have a housewarming celebration," Frank said. "And I have to make sure that Paul treats you like a true MacMillan should." He lowered his voice. "These young kids these days have a lot of learning to do." He winked to Sarah. "Except you, of course."

Paul loosened his tie and tossed it on the chair by the door. The chair had a mound of ties on it, all paisley, and some of them had slid onto the floor.

"The one thing I do know about the MacMillans," Paul said, "is that they are always on the lookout for a free meal."

Frank's magnified eyes bulged. "See what I mean?" he said. "I risked my life for his freedom, and what do I get in return? These youngsters have no idea what they have."

"Here we go again," Paul said. He smiled to Sarah. "I do respect the fact that he fought to keep this country free. He is a war hero, even if he refuses to admit it."

"Now he's patronizing me!" Frank said.

Paul rolled his eyes and laughed. "I can never win," he said. He walked down the hall toward the bathroom. Sarah heard the initial blast of water as it hit the shower curtain. It reminded her of rain hitting a tent.

"Irish, they really have no idea."

Sarah bent down and untied Frank's boots. He stepped out of them and slowly made his way to the couch.

"Hello there," he said to Jane.

Jane nodded and smiled and returned her attention to the television. The

interview with the adulterous man's wife was about to begin.

"I remember you," Frank said to her. He lowered himself beside her on the couch. Frank squinted at the screen. He could see the replay of the model from Test my Man putting the moves on the man she had busted before the commercial. The camera repeatedly focused on the man's gaze and the woman's bronze breasts that were contrasted by her yellow tank top. "And what do we have here?" he said under his breath.

Sarah sat down beside Frank and watched as the model tried to get the wife of the man to speak through her tears and tightened voice.

Paul walked through the living room dressed in jogging pants and a t-shirt. His face was flush and he smelled of musky deodorant. He moved into the kitchen and sat at the dinner table, fighting to pull socks over his moist feet. Sarah left the show and took a seat next to him.

"So what is your news?" Sarah said. "I probably shouldn't ask."

Paul pulled at the end of his sock, adjusting the clumps within the seams so that they were perfectly aligned under his toes. He looked out the back window. He stared for a few moments before his mouth slowly opened.

"I guess maybe you shouldn't," he said and stood. He walked to the large window on the far side of the kitchen that looked out onto the back yard.

Sarah stood behind him and followed the path of his stare. The corpse of Mitzy, her shiny black coat surrounded by a red, slushy mess, was sprawled out in the middle of the yard.

Chapter Sixteen

Carl pulled up to Brian's apartment complex and parked behind his half-ton truck just as Brian was getting out. Brian reached into the box of the truck and lifted out a small cooler that contained his lunch every workday. He smiled to Carl. The red cooler and its muddy surface matched his plaid jacket. Carl unrolled his window and he held out a brown beer bottle.

"You sure don't waste time," Brian said.

"Get in the truck. I need you to help me with something."

Brian cracked the beer and took a drink. He rested his arms inside the truck, hiding his beer from a passing motorist.

"Just got home," Brian said. "Need to go in and have a shower. Smell like entrails."

Carl backed away from the window. "No shit. Why don't you shower at work for Christ's sake?"

Brian looked down the road and stood straight. "Shower with a bunch of fags checking me out? No thanks. I like my own shower. You can come up if you like. Only takes me ten minutes."

Carl gripped at the sides of the large steering wheel and pulled himself up to see through the rearview mirror. He saw nothing behind him, but he could see that his bloodshot eyes were at half-mast. "It's got to be now, Bri. I ain't got ten minutes."

Brian shrugged his shoulders. "You want to take my truck? I could drive."

Carl glared at Brian. "Fuck Bri, you know I'm alright. Don't you start on me. Dammit, just when I need you most."

"Where you aiming on going Carl? I can't go out into public smelling like guts. I went to the bank on payday once without showering. Back before direct deposit. Damn banks close so damn early. There was a Friday lineup longer than a horse cock, and I stood in it for fifteen minutes with women and kids and shit looking at me like I'm some kind of asshole bum." He pulled off his leather baseball cap and brushed his stout fingers through his greased hair. He looked up to the chipped paint on the balcony of his one-bedroom apartment. "Only takes me ten minutes."

"No place public," Carl said. "I promise."

Brian shook his head and leaned in the windowsill of the truck again. "Come on, man. Ten minutes."

Carl glared at Brian. "How many beers have I bought you? How many times when you weren't working did I take you out and get you shit-faced?"

"I know," Brian said. "I remember."

"Good, then you'll get in the goddamned truck. For a friend."

Brian walked slowly across the ice around the truck, balancing his top-heavy body on his small feet that were garbed in cheap, dilapidated shoes. He concentrated on the ground until he reached the handle of the truck and climbed in.

Carl put the truck in gear and pulled around Brian's truck fast enough to make the ass-end of his truck fishtail across the road.

Brian gripped the handle above the door to keep his round body steady. Carl's

neck supported a bobble-head that drooped forward with one eye squinted shut. Brian pulled the shoulder belt across his big, bulbous belly and struggled to latch it into its plug. He sipped his beer, keeping his eyes on the road.

"So," Brian said. "Where we off to?"

Carl threw an empty onto the road, which smashed into tiny pieces. Brian looked behind them to see if motorists or pedestrians around them noticed. Carl gripped the steering wheel, moving it back and forth with the excitement of a child in a parking lot.

"When's the last time you had yourself a woman? I mean one that you really gave a shit about."

Brian looked down to the label pasted to his beer bottle and picked at it. "Where are we going?"

Carl took his eyes off the road. "Serious. When's the last time?"

Brian looked out his window. "Long time," he said.

Carl nodded. He nudged Brian and held out his hand. Brian reached into the case on the floor and cracked a fresh beer and handed it to Carl.

Carl immediately took a chug from the bottle. "You know something," he said, "I used to think I was lucky to have a full-time woman. You know, a piece of pussy whenever you want it. Guys that don't have one, they're always checking out your goods. Wishing that they got what you got. But not no more. Now I think those guys are the losers."

He turned to Brian, and Brian held up his hand, ready to grab the wheel if need be.

"All women are bitches. They're all out to suck you dry."

The truck slowly veered toward the lane to the left. Brian pulled lightly on the wheel and straightened the truck. "That's true," he said.

Carl returned his attention to the road and pushed Brian's hand away. He pressed the gas pedal closer to the floor. "Damn right it is. You're a lucky fucker, Bri. Bitches suck you dry. Then they move up and up and up until they find a richer guy. You know, he might have a better body, might be younger or even smarter. Might even have his own business."

Brian now had one hand on the dash and the other near the wheel. "Can't trust a woman," he said.

"Well, I was stupid enough to think you could," Carl said. "Invested a lot of my time and money into one. Quit drinking. Stopped stealing shit and got a good job. At least I think it was a good job. But I doubt it's good enough for most women. They want the big money." He laughed to himself. "I even tried to quit fucking swearing. What a joke. Stick to hookers. That's the way to go. No hassle."

"No hassle at all," Brian said.

"Thought I had it all. Thought I had the right one. The one that you think that you are going to have for the rest of your life. Then you find out she's like all the rest of them. A lying, cheating bitch. I knew it when I met her. Should have learned my damned lesson."

"It's tough," Brian said.

"And just how the hell would you know how tough it is?" Carl asked. "You just

told me you haven't been with a woman in a long time. And you smell like shit. Jesus, how can you stand that?"

Brian watched the road, ignoring Carl.

"When was the last time you got a piece of pussy? A year? Two years? Ten years? I'd bet ten years. So I don't think you really know how tough it is."

Brian took in a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak, but only his breath escaped.

Carl leaned back and began chugging his beer. Brian grasped the wheel and steered the truck as Carl pushed on the gas pedal. Carl unrolled his window, still leaving the wheel to Brian, and threw out his empty bottle, hitting a sign that said "Welcome to Mayberry." The bottle pissed beer all over the sign before it popped into a few large pieces. Carl nodded his thanks to Brian. He drove the truck down a street that meandered through a newly developed residential zone. After several turns, he parked the truck two houses down from Paul's and turned off the engine. Brian looked at the houses on either side of the truck.

"How about another beer, Bri?" Carl said.

Brian, with a questioning look on his face, handed Carl another bottle of beer.

"Who the hell lives out here?" Brian said. He took a sip of his beer. His bottle was almost full.

Carl raised his knee onto the seat of the truck and faced Brian. "I have to talk to Sarah for just a minute."

Brian sighed and looked out his window.

"Just hear me out, Bri. I just need you here for backup. In case her new pal Mr. Computers tries to get tough. He might have a few friends in there or something."

Brian was staring out the window. The house beside the truck was beige with brown accents around the windows. The flower garden in the front had a duck with wings that rotated like a windmill. A hand-painted sign beside the duck said 'Welcome to Our Humble Home.'

"I'll wait in the truck," Brian said. "You get into any trouble, just come outside and I'll be there to back you."

Carl lifted his beer and dumped some of it on his shirt before the bottle met his lips. "You aren't going to do any good out here. I need you to come up to the fucking door."

Brian shook his head, still staring at the duck's wings that wobbled in the light breeze.

"Just the fucking door," Carl said. "Come on, you know I'd back you anytime you needed me to. You owe me for buying your beer for fucking ever."

Brian spoke softly at the window, "You know I'm good for it. You're not working right now."

Carl popped the truck door open. "Give me five minutes. That's all it will take to deal with this guy. I just want to talk to Sarah."

Brian opened the door of the truck and slammed it behind him. Carl limped in front of him like a pirate with a wooden leg.

"What the hell happened to you?" Brian said.

Carl hobbled onward, holding his leg and speaking over his shoulder. "Fell down on the fucking ice. So damn slick. Bashed my knee pretty bad. Big scrape."

Carl made his way up the walkway of Paul's house ducking low and limping. He turned to Brian and whispered, "You ready?"

Brian stopped at the bottom of the stairwell, standing straight and hugging himself to keep warm. He nodded. He glanced at the neighbors' houses and the road to make sure no one was watching or listening to the hobbling drunk ahead of him.

"Doesn't look like anyone's here," Brian said. "Let's come back tomorrow."

Carl tried to peer through the blurred window beside the front door. He could see silhouetted movements against the light coming from the back window.

He undid his pants and reached into his pant leg.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Brian said, slowly backing away.

"I can see them inside," Carl said.

Carl pulled a long orange crowbar from his pant leg and smiled to Brian.

Chapter Seventeen

Sarah covered her face with her hands and sat down at the table. Jane stood by the back window in awe at the sight of the mangled dog. Frank slowly appeared beside Jane and looked over his glasses, concentrating on the black mound.

"That's awful," Frank said. "What kind of a person would do such a senseless thing?"

"We have to contact the police," Paul said. "This is getting out of control."

He opened his phone. The room was silent enough that everyone could hear the high trebled voice answer on the other end.

"911 emergency," a woman said, "Fire, ambulance or police?"

"Police," Paul said. After a few clicks a different woman answered. "Calgary police service."

"Hello," Paul said. He looked out the window at the black fur surrounded by a pink halo. "I am calling to report the death of a dog."

"Pardon me, sir?" the woman said.

"I guess you would call it more of a murder," Paul said. "A man trespassed into my backyard and killed a dog." Paul could hear the keys of the woman's computer clacking. "He's obviously dangerous," Paul said.

"All right, sir," the woman said. "Sir, are you in any immediate danger?"

"Not as far as I can tell." He glanced out the window, searching the backyard for any signs of Carl. "But he could still be here, or he could be back at any moment. The

man is violent."

Paul waited as more keys clacked in the background.

"The police have been notified, sir," the woman said, "and they will arrive as soon as they can."

"Does this mean right away?" Paul said. "I do have a dead animal in my backyard."

"I cannot tell you how long they will be, sir," the woman said. "All I can tell you is that the officers will respond to your call as soon as they can."

Paul hung up the phone before the woman finished speaking. "They're sending a car," he said. "But I haven't the slightest clue when they will arrive. We may have been put on the low priority list. I should have told them that there was a dead child in the backyard. Then we would see how fast they would move."

Paul gripped Sarah's shoulders. She removed her hands from her face and looked up to him.

"He came to my work today," Paul said, "and trashed one of my demo computers."

Sarah closed her eyes, shaking her head and breathing deeply.

"Don't worry about it," Paul said. "I'll go out back and see if he's still around."

Sarah put her elbows on the table and supported her chin with her hands. She looked out the window with a dreamy stare.

Paul put on his jacket. "Don't worry," he said, "everything will be fine."

Frank moved toward the door.

"Stay here, gramps," Paul said.

"I was just going to see you to the door," he said. "You think an old man like me can handle a serial killer like this psycho? No sir. But back in my day."

Paul managed a slight smile. "You never do stop, do you?"

"I'm a MacMillan," Frank said. "We never stop. Now go get that crazy bastard and bring his head back on a stake." Frank looked up at Paul through his thick lenses with the smile of an excited child.

Paul pulled out a chair from the kitchen table, motioning his grandfather to sit down. "I'm just going out there to see that everything is okay. I'm not going to fight or kill anyone."

"You will if you have to. Trust me on that one," Frank said.

"Fine, have it your way," Paul said. "You can envision a battle to the death in the backyard. But until that happens, have a seat and relax. I doubt the guy is stupid enough to stick around." He paused for a moment. "Well, let's hope not."

Sarah, Frank and Jane watched Paul approach the dead animal through the back window. The lawn was white as chicken feathers except for the pink wreath. As he disappeared out the back gate, three light taps came from the front door. Sarah, Frank and Jane stared at one another, each wondering if they had heard the noise. They listened in silence. Soon afterward, a small scraping noise was heard. The door began to wiggle and slide in its frame. The wood of the frame produced a loud crack.

Sarah jumped to her feet.

"Don't," Jane said. She stood and watched Sarah.

Sarah didn't break her stride. She turned the deadbolt and opened the door to find Carl holding his crowbar against the strike plate of the lock. Sarah could smell digesting liquor mixed with the faint odor of Brian who was standing at the base of the stairwell looking away from her.

Sarah's voice was demanding. "What the hell are you doing?"

Carl leaned back and drunkenly hid the crowbar behind his leg. "Thought I'd come by and check out the new place."

"The police are on their way," Sarah said. She stared into Carl's eyes until he looked down at the concrete step and scratched his beard.

"You had to go and kill the only thing that I gave a shit about."

"That's what I came here for," Carl said. He burped under his breath.

Sarah backed away from the smell.

"I came here to tell you that I'm sorry and that it was an accident," he said. "Isn't that right, Bri?"

Brian cleared his throat. "Um, yeah," he said. "Whatever you say, Carl." Brian shrugged to Sarah.

Carl grimaced.

"What do you want," Sarah hissed.

Carl ran his finger across the crack in the doorframe. The blonde wood looked like a bolt of jagged lightning against the dark paint.

"Sorry about that. I'll go down to the hardware store and get a new slat. Your buddy got that color of paint?"

"Why didn't you ring the damn doorbell?"

Carl adjusted his hat and nodded. "Well, how was I supposed to know you would let me in?"

"I'm not going to let you in, but I would have told you that if you would have rang the doorbell."

Carl patted his pockets and looked around him. "Bri, where the hell's my beer?"

"You didn't bring one," Brian said.

"Run get me one," Carl said. "Out in the truck." Carl pointed with the crowbar in the opposite direction of where the truck was parked.

"On the way home," Brian said. "And give me that damn thing."

"Bri!" Carl pleaded. "Can you just get me a fucking beer? I just need," he closed his eyes and turned back to Sarah, "one goddamned beer."

"Driving drunk again. That's good to see. Maybe you'll luck out and get your fifth impaired. When was the last time you slept?"

"I've slept." Carl said, smiling. "Doing perfectly fine."

Sarah pushed the door half closed and leaned her head around its edge.

"Whatever you do now is none of my business."

"That's right," Carl said, interrupting her. "What I do is not your business."

"Just remember that you won't have anyone to taxi your ass to work and around town this time."

Sarah pulled her head into the house and Carl stuck his foot in the doorway and forced his way inside.

Carl looked past Sarah and into the house. "Looks like you've moved up in the world. This sure beats our dump now doesn't it?"

"Please leave," Sarah said. "There's no point in starting a fight here. The cops will be here right away."

Carl wiggled his fingers at Jane and Frank who were seated at the kitchen table. "Howdy folks," he said. "Looks like you got the whole gang here. Little girlfriend and grandpa." He stood up straight. "Where's Mr. Computers? Is he on vacation? Off in Hawaii baking in the sun?"

Sarah turned her glare to Brian. "Why are you letting him be like this? I thought you were supposed to be his friend."

Brian shrugged and looked away.

"Come up here and get him out of here," Sarah said.

Brian backed away from the stairs holding his hands up in protest. "I just got off work. He didn't tell me anything about coming here."

Sarah opened her eyes wide and gave the stern look of a mother demanding conformity from a child. "Get your ass up here."

Brian sighed and pulled at the rail to lift his thick body and thin feet up the stairs. He entered the house and the potent stench of the slaughterhouse mixed with the smell of rotten alcohol. Sarah winced and backed away from Brian. She pulled her shirt up and covered her nose.

"I told you I just got off work," he said. "Let's get out of here Carl, we'll come back some other time."

Carl strode into the living room before Brian could reach him. He sat down on the couch in front of the big-screen television.

The second episode of the back-to-back episodes of Test My Man was on. Carl put his work boots on the coffee table and writhed around on the couch until he felt that he had proved that he had maximized his comfort.

"Isn't this nice, Bri?" He said. "Imagine the battles we could have on this screen. What is that, a fifty-two you figure?"

The super-model on the screen was sitting with a young businessman in a futuristic club with tables that glowed red and made the milky liquid of the neon drinks look rubberized and toxic. Everything glowed, including the businessman's dandruff scattered across his shoulders.

"Probably about that," Brian said. "But we should get going. Sarah says the cops are on their way. I can drive."

Carl stretched his arms across the back of the couch and cocked his head toward Frank. "How about a beer gramps?"

Jane stood frozen with a frown that looked exaggerated.

"My father named me Frank."

"Well, how about it, gramps?" Carl said. "You got a cold one in the fridge, or what?"

"Let's get out of here," Brian said.

"Shut the hell up and sit down, Bri. Make yourself comfortable. Furniture like this probably never gets used much. So how about that beer gramps?"

Frank slowly stood from the table and grasped his cane. "I don't think the young lady would like to entertain you at this time."

Carl laughed and his expression quickly cleared. "What do you mean? Right here? He motioned to the open floor of the living room. "She's taking it off right here in the house?"

Frank slammed his cane down onto the linoleum and raised his voice as loud as his vocal cords would allow. "No, you idiot. She does not want to be in the same room with you, and neither do I. Now get up off your ass and get the hell out of this house."

Carl didn't move. He shook his head at Frank with a wry smile. As he was about to speak, he saw Paul's head bobbing up and down as he came up the stairs of the back deck. Paul came through the back door with red cheeks.

"Nothing out there," he said. His face became sour. "What is that smell?"

The room was silent except for the television.

"What's the matter?" he asked. Then he noticed Brian standing by the door, and he saw Carl sprawled out on the couch.

Carl jumped to his feet and bumped his shin into the coffee table. He stood up straight, ignoring the pain. "If it isn't my good buddy Mr. Computers," he said. "Did you pick out a new computer for me yet? That one that I was interested in, I don't think I'm going to take it after all."

Paul glanced from Carl to Sarah.

"He came to the door just after you went into the backyard," Sarah said.

Frank slowly turned around and faced Paul. "We just started discussing his

untimely arrival and his timely departure."

"Have a seat, gramps," Paul said.

"Yeah," Carl said as walked toward Paul, "take a load off, gramps." Carl removed his hat and scratched at the borders of his creeping baldness. "You got a beer in the fridge, Mr. Computers."

"No," Paul said. He eyed the crowbar in Carl's right hand.

Carl clinched the iron bar tightly, the bloodshot whites of his eyes growing as he glared at Paul. His rib cage jerked as he held in a hiccup.

"See you took a trip to the back yard. Find anything interesting back there? If you need help cleaning anything up, you should talk to my buddy Bri."

Paul's eyes bounced back and forth from Brian to Carl.

"Hey Bri," Carl said, "Mr. Computers might need some of your expertise. He's got a job slinging guts too."

"Let's go get you a beer," Brian said. "We got cold ones on the truck. Ice cold."

"Mr. Computers, you're a real comedian," Carl said. "And you're really stupid. Did you know that?"

"I don't know what you mean," Paul said.

"Of course you don't," Carl said, "because you're so damn stupid."

"Alright," Paul said. "I think this has gone on long enough."

He took a step toward Carl, and Carl raised the crowbar above his head. Sarah envisioned Carl dropping the crowbar and sinking it deep into Paul's skull.

"Carl," she yelled.

"You shut the hell up," he said calmly. "Sit down Mr. Computers. I want to have a few words with my wife."

Paul slowly backed away with his hands in the air like a man under arrest. He sat down at the table silently.

Carl pointed the crowbar at Paul and turned to Brian. "Keep an eye on that one Bri. Troublemaker. You should have seen the shit he caused when I went to buy a computer from him. Fucker nearly killed me."

Frank leaned on his cane and propped himself to a standing position. He wobbled a little less than Carl.

"Gramps," Paul said.

Frank ignored Paul and moved toward Carl, his cane making a hollow thump on the linoleum.

Carl turned and laughed. He held up the crowbar. "Sit the hell down gramps, or I'm going to smash you."

"I know you," Frank said. "I know exactly who you are. You've got a big mouth and not much more."

"Frankie, don't," Sarah said.

She could tell that the alcohol pumping through Carl's blood was starting to dissipate. She remembered the many late night arguments when Carl would come home from the bar. For the first half hour he would make no sense at all. Then, slowly, he would come around. At first he would be less problematic, and eventually he would be emotional to the point of tears. She was not looking forward to the emotional stage.

Frank's voice became calm, and he smiled toward Sarah. "Don't worry about me Irish," he said. "I've handled wilder beasts than this one."

"Irish?" Carl said. "She's not even Irish, gramps. Looks like I'm not the only one she's been lying to."

"What did you come here for?" Frank asked. "What do want?"

"I came here to talk to my wife," Carl said. He took a step toward Frank.

Paul stood up, but Frank gave Paul a look of warning that made him stay still.

"Good," Frank said. "So talk to her." He pointed to Sarah. "She's standing right there."

Carl looked at Sarah for a moment and returned his attention to Frank. "I'm not going to talk to her in front of everyone." Carl hiccupped and pounded at his chest.

"How about a little privacy."

"I don't think you need privacy at all," Frank said. "You know why? Because I don't think you have anything to say to that young lady that she doesn't already know."

"You don't know me, old man," Carl said.

"I think I do," Frank said. "I think I know you better than you think. You see, I've been all over the world and I've met every type of person there is." Frank pointed to Sarah with his cane. "I don't think you have anything to offer this girl, and you're angry that she sees it."

"I'm not rich," Carl said. "I don't drive a fancy car." He looked at the kitchen. "I don't own a brand new house." His beady eyes scanned Paul from head to toe. "And I can't afford fancy suits."

Frank slammed his cane down on the linoleum. "I'm not talking about money, you damn fool. I'm talking about who you are. What did you come here for? To tell her that you wish that you had enough money to buy her back? Well, let me be the one to tell you that she never wanted your damn money in the first place."

Carl's eyes began to glaze and his grip on the crowbar strengthened. "You don't know a damn thing," he said. "This is between me and her, not you," he pointed to Paul, "or him."

"When you come into a MacMillan's house uninvited, it becomes our business. And I happen to know Sarah well enough to make it my business." Frank pointed toward the door. "You blew it. It's over now. Now go home and deal with it like a man." He took a step toward Carl with a raised chin.

Carl held the crowbar in front of him. "I'm not going anywhere," he said.

"You're not going to hit anyone," Frank said. He leaned on his cane and reached with his free hand and grasped the crowbar. Carl released his tight grip.

"I could tell the moment you walked into the room," Frank said. "I've seen guys like you before. All bent up, looking for attention like a whining child. Well, you'll get no sympathy here."

Carl turned to Sarah. "I'm sorry baby. I'm really sorry."

Frank swung the crowbar and hit Carl's leg. Carl jumped back.

"Jesus," he said in a fretful voice. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Because you're still whining like a bumbling fool, that's why. I had to serve with little babies like you. A man like you gets decent people killed."

Paul stepped forward.

"Stay where you are, boy," he said.

Paul edged forward slowly.

Carl adjusted his baseball cap. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone," he said.

"Sure you didn't," Frank said. "That's why your girl's dog has its guts strewn all over the back yard. You're one of the good guys. I know all about it." Frank pointed to the door with the crowbar. "Time to hit the road. You can talk to her when you haven't been drinking."

Brian placed his hand on the doorknob. "Let's get out of here," he said. "He's right. You can talk to Sarah later on."

"Listen to your friend," Frank said.

"Yeah," Brian said. "Listen to me."

"Unless, of course, you want to stick around for the police."

"Yeah," Brian said, "you don't want to talk to the cops."

"Take some time," Frank said, "And think about things."

"You should think about it," Brian said.

"Will you shut up?" Frank yelled.

Brian glanced around the room nervously. "Sorry," he said in a solemn voice.

Movement outside the front window attracted Sarah's attention. Out of the corner of her eye she saw something dart behind an oversized S.U.V. across the street. A large, round object appeared behind the back taillight of the truck and disappeared behind it once again.

"I knew a man named Heath Brimes," Frank said. "Served with the man for over a year. Did nothing but piss and moan the entire year."

Sarah watched the figure appear again, but this time through the windows of the vehicle. The figure snuck around the truck again before making a mad dash across the street toward the house.

"Good thing I brought gramps along today," Paul whispered, keeping half of his mouth closed. "For once I'm thankful to hear one of his stories for the fiftieth time."

Sarah took her eyes away from the window and shook her head.

"What is it?" Paul said. "The story about Heath is pretty good."

"It's not the stories," Sarah whispered. She gestured her head toward the front window.

Paul looked out the window and saw Larry approaching at full speed, the furry hood of his parka looking like a satellite dish.

As Larry made it to the curb, he slipped on a patch of ice and fell backward. He put his mittened hands out and landed on his backside. He sat still for a moment, like a rabbit trusting its camouflage, and stared at the front window of the house. He then slowly picked himself up and crept toward the garage and out of sight.

"We were sitting in one of our fox-holes," Frank said, "and Heath was complaining that there wasn't enough food, or that he was too cold. We were all hungry and cold, but he probably thought that if he whined enough, the C.O. might recommend that it was a good idea to send the little whiner home to his mother where he belonged."

Sarah spotted Larry peaking around the corner of the garage and into the front

window of the house. She couldn't believe that he thought he was hidden: to look around the corner, he had to expose a thick mane of fur. He might as well have been dressed in pink.

"My good buddy George," Frank said, "who was my best friend until the end of the war," he turned to Sarah, "just before I met that pretty Dutch girl."

Sarah stopped watching Larry for a moment and smiled in acknowledgment.

"George," Frank continued, "was the best soldier I had ever met. He was strong, experienced, and, more importantly, he really cared about those around him."

Sarah watched as Larry came from behind the garage and slowly made his way toward the wooden steps that led to the front deck. He slid his back against the wall of the house, keeping his eyes on the window and door. He crept up the hollow stairs until he was standing in front of the front door. His giant, furry head appeared in the front window. He cupped his hands at the sides of his temples and peered inside the house.

"Who is that?" Paul whispered.

"Don't ask," Sarah said.

"What is he doing?"

"I have no idea."

Sarah could see the brass knob on the door wiggle slightly. The door opened a crack. She could see Larry peeking in through the crack of the door.

"So Heath was in the foxhole with me and George," Frank said, "and the little bastard wouldn't shut up about his stomach and frostbitten feet. We all had frostbite. George, who was actually one of the more temperate soldiers, finally had had enough of

Heath's bullshit. They started yelling at one another until George decided to leave the foxhole. Once he stood up, still yelling at Heath, a German bullet went straight through the side of his head."

Sarah saw Larry through the window as he backed away from the door. He disappeared from view as he jumped forward and kicked open the door. The door flew open and the knob hit the center of Brian's back, pushing him into the shoe closet. Larry's body crashed into the door as it rebounded. He dropped to his knees and quickly stood back up. A drop of blood made a trail down his upper lip.

"Freeze!" Larry yelled. He held a black canister of pepper-spray meant to thwart off bear attacks in his hand. He watched as Brian pulled his flabby body out of the closet. He moved forward and pointed the pepper spray at Carl.

"Larry," Sarah said, "what the hell are you doing?"

"Citizen's arrest!" he yelled, keeping the pepper-spray aligned with Carl's eyes.

Larry tried to pull back the hood of his parka, but he had pulled the drawstrings too tight. His eyes stretched open as he struggled with it.

"Don't worry," he said, giving up on the hood and nodding to Sarah. "Everything's under control."

Frank held up the crowbar. "Another one," he said. "Get out of here!" He moved forward and swung the crowbar at the pepper spray.

Larry pounced backward, releasing a high-pitched scream, and squeezed the canister. As he squeezed, he closed his eyes and cringed.

A thick spray of amber liquid covered Frank's face. Frank bent over trying to

catch his breath before he collapsed sideways onto the floor. He moaned like a hog about to be slaughtered while he clawed at his glasses and his burning eyes.

An over-spray of mist drifted past Frank to Carl. He moved away quickly, coughing and rubbing his face with his shirt.

Paul lunged forward, pushing Carl over the corner of the couch and onto the floor, and knelt down beside Frank. He started coughing as well.

Larry screeched again and released another burst of pepper spray. It covered Paul's hair and forehead. Paul buckled backwards. He rubbed his eyes and tried to clear away the thick layer of fire running down his forehead.

The air in the room was now completely contaminated with pepper-spray. Everyone began coughing. Larry's cheeks had lines of tears streaming down them.

"Nobody move," he said between coughs. "Citizen's arrest." He blinked repeatedly.

Sarah, who had retreated to the far corner of the kitchen with Jane, was relieved to watch Brian grab Larry from behind and put him in a headlock. Larry bounced around like an animal caught in a trap. He sprayed the pepper spray in the air until Brian's chokehold slowed the blood to his brain. His squeaks became less frequent, and he concentrated on pointing the canister at Brian's face. Brian ducked his head behind Larry's shoulder to avoid the spray. When Larry's body went limp, Brian dropped him to the floor. Brian, with his eyes closed and the sleeve of his coat over his eyes, ran out the front door into the cool, fresh air.

Sarah tried walking toward Frank and Paul, but the air made her feel as though

salt had been vigorously rubbed against her eyeballs. Her throat burned as if she had been eating habanero peppers, and it swelled as if she had come down with an instantaneous case of strep.

She followed Jane out the back door, and the two women walked around to the front of the house. As they approached the front of the house, they saw two police officers walking toward them. The one in front was a lanky, red-haired officer. His upper body looked stocky because of his uniform jacket, but his legs seemed as thin as the vertical red stripes on his pants. The officer behind him was a woman. Her thick, brown hair was braided down her back, and her bitter stare and upright posture reminded Sarah of her grade two teacher, a woman who never smiled and went out of her way to be nasty to small children by calling them names and threatening to beat them with her yard stick.

"Is there a problem here?" the male officer asked Brian, who was now on the lawn holding balls of snow to his eyes.

The female officer sighed and shook her head at the sight of Brian's hairy butt-crack that protruded out of his wet jogging pants.

Brian nodded and pointed toward the house.

"It's all over now," Sarah said to the officer. She hoped Carl hadn't picked up the crowbar. "But an old man has been sprayed in the face with pepper-spray. He probably needs help."

The male officer looked through the front window while the other spoke into her radio.

"He should be alright," the male officer said. "It's not fatal." He looked to his partner. "We've been sprayed before."

His partner smiled to Sarah and nodded, still speaking into her radio. She requested an ambulance.

The male officer pulled out his flashlight and pushed the door open with its butt-end. He backed away for a moment.

"You weren't kidding," he said. "It's going to take some time to air this house out."

Sarah followed the two officers back in the house. The contrast with the fresh air outside was profound. The itching, burning sensation was instantly re-enhanced in Sarah's throat. She saw that Paul was helping Frank to his feet: a blind man leading a blind man. Frank's eyes were closed and he pawed at the air until he located the edge of the couch. He coughed uncontrollably, and gasped for air. The wrinkles on his face were canals of tears.

"We have to get him outside," Paul said.

Sarah directed them to the door and sat them down on the patio chairs on the front deck. She retrieved rags soaked with cool water for them and returned to the house.

Besides clearing their throats occasionally, the officers seemed unaffected by the dreadful mist.

"Who did the spraying?" the male officer asked as he picked up the compressed bottle off the carpet.

Carl pointed to Larry. "The crazy Eskimo," he said.

Larry, who was now kneeling, rubbing his eyes and coughing, held up his hand as if he were about to speak.

"This one," the male cop said, pointing to Larry.

The woman was swift. Her cuffs were out of their holster as fast as Buffalo Bill's revolver would have been drawn. She pushed Larry forward onto his belly and kneeled on his shoulders until his halo of fur was pressed tightly into the carpet. The canvas of his tan parka stretched tightly across his back. She grasped Larry's wrists one at a time and slammed the cuffs against them. The urban calf-roper stood up once her prey was secure; she had roped him in record time. She looked to her partner who nodded his approval.

Larry bounced back to an upright position. He tried to rub his eyes on his coat.

"I need my hands," he said through a hoarse fit of coughing. "I'm going blind." He hacked hoarsely. "I'll sue."

The female officer smirked down at him. "You should have thought about that before you started pepper-spraying people." She bent down and picked up the pepper-spray canister and stepped behind her partner.

"Who wants to tell me what's going on?" the male officer asked. He looked to Sarah.

Sarah looked from Larry to Brian to Carl and to Paul, who was just entering the house. She wasn't sure where to start.

Paul held out his hand and introduced himself as the owner of the house to the policeman as he wiped his forehead repeatedly.

"How's he holding up?" the officer asked.

"He's a tough old man. He'll pull through."

Paul pointed to Carl. "This is the man who we initially called you about," Paul said. "We believe that he killed the dog in the back yard."

"Okay," the officer said.

The female officer raised her chin slightly and looked at her partner with eagerness in her eyes.

The male officer nodded to Carl. "Stay put," he said. "We'll deal with you in a minute." He pointed to Larry who was still vigorously trying to rub his eyes on the shoulders of his parka.

"And what about this guy?" the officer said, pointing to Larry.

Paul shook his head. "You know, I have no idea who that guy is. He came from nowhere."

"My stalker," Sarah said. "He follows me around sometimes. But he's usually quite harmless."

The policeman nodded and glanced at his partner with an expression of deep thought. "And him?" he said, pointing through the window at Brian's hairy butt-crack.

"His friend," Sarah said, pointing to Carl. "But Brian's one of the good guys this time."

"Where's the dog?" the officer said.

Sarah walked to the back window with the officer following behind. The female officer waited where she stood, keeping her wide stance and her cold, static eyes on Carl.

"Right out there," Sarah said. She looked out the window and found that a magpie was pecking and pulling at one of the dog's eyeballs. She turned away. "She was just a puppy."

"Big dog for a puppy," the officer said.

He opened the back door and walked out onto the deck to get a better look at the carcass of the dog. After a short observation, he came back inside.

"Looks like he did a real number on the animal." He nodded to the female officer. She moved forward.

Carl squinted and held out his hands as if he accepted the woman's challenge.

The woman stopped a few feet away, still keeping her eyes fixed on his.

"Oh no," Sarah said. "You better help her."

The officer chuckled. "Watch this," he said.

The female officer reached out and grasped Carl's hand. She yanked it toward herself, causing Carl to spin around. Before he knew what had happened, Carl was on his knees with an arm stretched behind his back like a pretzel. She left him on the floor, cuffed and coughing, and resumed her stance.

The male officer nodded to her. "So many people try to resist arrest with her, but she never gives them a chance." He raised his voice: "You want to take them two out?"

The woman nodded.

"One in the front, one in the back. We don't want them chewing each other's ears off."

"Of course," the woman said.

Sarah winced as she watched the woman grasp the short chain between Carl's cuffs and pull him to his feet. His arms looked like they were going to pop out of their sockets.

Carl cried out in pain as he lost his balance and fell back to his knees. He stood up again and turned to Sarah.

"Baby," he said. "I'm sorry."

The female officer ignored the plea of desperation. She pulled up on his cuffs and turned him toward the front door.

Carl jumped up and was able to flip around. "I love you!" he screamed.

Larry stopped rubbing his eyes on his parka. He leaned forward, his face red as an untreated diaper rash. He screamed, "Shut up you asshole. You don't deserve her. She hates your guts."

Carl jumped madly while the female officer leaned back. He pulled on the handcuffs until the officer's grip slipped. Carl ran at Larry and stomped and kicked at him.

The female officer gripped Carl's arms tightly and spun him toward the door again.

Carl snarled and spit a wad of phlegm at Larry. It landed on the fur of his hood and dripped down like a single line of spider web.

Sarah could hear Frank and Carl exchanging words as Carl was led past him. She could see Carl through the front window, and he stopped resisting the officer's grip half way down the driveway. He voluntarily let her push his head down into the police

cruiser.

The male officer cleared his throat and spoke loudly. "I'll need all of you to come down to the station to make statements."

The female officer returned and tugged on Larry's handcuffs to get his attention.

"I didn't do anything wrong," Larry said. He looked to Sarah in a fit of desperation. "Tell them that I was here to help. Tell them it was an accident."

The female officer looked to Sarah, raising her eyelids inquisitively.

"Do I need to take him?" she asked. She looked from Sarah to the other officer.

"Take him," the officer said. "If he's innocent, we'll find out at the station." He turned to Sarah. "If the old fellow could make it down there, it would be helpful. He seems to be the primary victim here."

The female officer picked up Larry in the same fashion that she picked up Carl, and, to Sarah's surprise, he fought harder than Carl. He leaned forward and pulled like an untrained Mastiff seeing Brian as a possible mate.

The officer resisted his pulling and jumping until he bounced back for just a moment. The second headlock began.

"Alright, alright," Larry shouted. He walked slowly toward the door. Sarah could hear Frank yelling at Larry as Larry was escorted to the other cruiser.

Chapter Eighteen

Sarah opened her eyes to blackness and cool, dry air. She felt exhausted and wanted to return to sleep. The soft blankets and the firm mattress reminded her that she was at Paul's. It was too soon to consider it home.

The small window that was located high on the wall behind her bed was blocked with a piece of plywood. Paul had told her it was to keep the criminals out. She stretched her arms to her sides and flexed her fingers. As she sat up, she could see a blinking glow from the pocket of her jeans as her cell phone rang. She rummaged through the pair of jeans to locate the entrance to the pocket. The bright screen of the phone made her squint as she brought it toward her face.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was deep.

"Hey," Paul said. "Did you just wake up?"

Sarah pulled the phone away from her ear and squinted as she looked at the digital clock on the screen. She sighed at the time.

"Yeah," she said.

"You sure know how to sleep," he said. "Would you like to meet me for dinner at five?"

Sarah stood up in the darkness and walked toward the door with her hand in front of her. When she found the wall, she slid her hand across it to locate the light switch. Her eyes recoiled as the room became illuminated.

"Sure," Sarah said. "Where would you like to go?"

"It's a surprise," he said.

"I love surprises," Sarah said.

"Then it's a date," Paul said. "See you in an hour."

Sarah took a shower and sorted through her boxes of clothes for something to wear. She thought she would wear something slightly conservative, yet still revealing. She figured Paul would stay in his dress shirt and tie.

Sarah tried on several combinations of clothes before she realized she owned very few outfits that could be considered dress clothes. The closest thing she found was a one-piece suit with a collar. It was still too risqué.

She could probably get away with wearing it for a show, she thought.

She finally settled on wearing a striped turtleneck with a pair of dark jeans. She did her makeup in a '70s style with thick eye shadow in a light green. She thought she looked like a model from a 1975 issue of *Chatelaine* with her thin thighs, tight jeans, tight top and straight, shiny hair that was parted down the middle. She twisted and turned in the mirror and kissed toward herself, examining her burgundy lipstick for smudges.

After another look, she decided that she looked terrible. Her jeans didn't do justice to her ass. They weren't cut low enough. She had thought about that in the store, but the price was right. The turtleneck was tight enough that she could see her belt line and the seams of the pockets in her jeans. The wrinkles it suffered from the move wouldn't stretch straight. The outline of her bra was also clearly visible. She thought it might be sexy to some, but Paul didn't seem like the type to get turned on by bra lines. She thought about wearing a thinner bra, but then her nipples would be a problem. They

always made bumps through thinner bras, especially in the winter. Her mind converted her stylish, retro hair into flat and homely locks that needed some oomph. The makeup now looked trashy and cheap.

Women who don't know how to do their makeup end up with a face like this, she thought.

She looked at her watch. Paul would arrive any minute.

"Fuck it," she said. She put her brush and makeup away and went upstairs.

Her timing was perfect, for Paul's front tires were just bumping over the rounded curb that led to the driveway as she walked upstairs.

"Hi," Paul said as she entered the car. "You look stunning."

"Thanks," Sarah said. She brushed her hair behind her ear and carefully put on her seatbelt.

"I feel underdressed," Paul said.

Sarah disagreed but didn't voice her opinion.

They drove five minutes from the house. Sarah felt a little uncomfortable when Paul pulled into a pot-holed parking lot. A thin, lone building built of dark bricks sat in the corner of the lot. A row of vehicles were parked below the canopy sign, which had "Bonsai Sushi Co." written across it with some Asian symbols in the corner. It looked as if it were white at one time, but the sun, rain and dirt had made it a creamy yellow with veins of dark brown branching throughout. There were a few holes in it that let clean florescent light beam through. The front windows of the restaurant were lined with wide strips of brown paper, which hung vertically like giant shades. The windows were

blurred by what looked like grease. In giant letters pasted on the inside of one of the windows it said "Lunch Buffet \$5.99."

"Hope you like Sushi," Paul said.

Sarah had expected Paul to take her somewhere where a famous chef worked in the kitchen. Maybe a cozy fireplace in the corner with some relaxing classical music, or a musician making a piano reverberate softly around them. Seafood was the usual fancy choice, but a steakhouse would have been sufficient. She expected that there would be a doorman to take her jacket. To her, this place looked like there might be a homeless man inside the door ready to steal her jacket. She thought about the time she spent getting ready and wondered if her seat would be clean enough to sit on.

"So this is the place," Sarah said. She could hear the disappointment in her own voice.

Paul pulled his emergency brake and ducked to look up to the restaurant. "This is it," he said. "I know it doesn't look like much, but they make the best sushi in town, hands down."

Paul's reassurance didn't improve Sarah's lack of composure. She followed him to the door, trying to get a peek inside through the seams between the strips of brown paper.

A loud buzzer sounded as they walked in, and a small brass bell on the door smacked against the glass. A heater that was mounted above the door made an incessant buzz accompanied by an occasional click that made it sound as if it could explode at any moment.

A Japanese woman in a colorful kimono approached them. Her hair was curled

so tight that it looked painful. Behind her, the restaurant was full of couples eating dinner. Sarah could barely hear the twanging Japanese music over the heater and the chatter throughout the restaurant.

"Hi," the woman said with a bright smile. "For two?"

"Please," Paul said.

The woman frowned slightly. "All we have available is this," she said, pointing to a small table beside them.

Paul turned to Sarah. "Did you want to wait for a better table?"

The woman held out her hand and touched Paul's, "Just to warn you that it does get a little chilly at this table." She pointed behind them and sighed. "The door never seems to stay closed. I guess it's good for us that it doesn't, but it's not good for those who sit here."

Sarah looked at the frosty door behind her and thought about the possibility of having to wear her coat for dinner. It didn't sound enticing.

"It'll be fine," Sarah said, with a false smile and a nod. "As long as it is for you," she said.

Paul nodded to the woman, and she backed away from the table to allow them to take off their jackets and be seated. Sarah could see blonde crumbs of tempura on her seat and a flat, black, elliptical piece of gum that had turned smooth and shiny from the many backsides that had polished it. Sarah tried to position the gum in the center of her backside as she sat down so that there was as little pressure on it as possible.

The woman pretended to shiver. She whispered to Sarah, "I'll bring you a free pot

of green tea. I can never warm up in the winter without it. Tea for you sir?" she asked Paul. Paul nodded and the woman briskly departed.

Sarah looked at the cheap, white tiles of linoleum on the floor. Some of the tiles were missing corners, and others had corners that were curling upward. Dirt filled the missing corners and under the curls.

"Do they serve cooked food here?" she asked Paul, who was concentrating on his menu.

"Sure," Paul said. "Why? Don't you like sushi?"

"I've had it before," she said. "It's not bad, but I don't feel like it tonight." She concentrated on keeping eye contact with Paul.

"Well," Paul said, "they have different beef, pork and fish dishes." He opened her menu to the second page. "Right here. This is a good place to start."

Sarah browsed the menu and chose what she considered the safest dish: the organic garden salad.

"Have you heard from Carl yet?" Paul asked, still browsing the menu.

"Yes," Sarah said. "The police charged him with cruelty to animals. He'll get a slap on the wrist."

"I think they should lock him up for good."

The waitress arrived and placed a pot of tea in the center of the table and placed two small cups without handles in front of them.

"Have you decided what you would like this evening?" she asked, looking to Sarah.

"I'll have number twenty-two," Sarah said.

"A garden salad?" Paul said. "Is that it?"

"Have to stay thin," Sarah said. "And I really like salad."

She handed her menu to the woman. "And greens are so good for you."

The woman smiled to her. "You are so thin, you'd blow away in the wind. Sushi is really good for you as well, and it doesn't make you fat."

"I'll have a forty-one," Paul said, "and I think we'll start with an order of California rolls and an order of unagi please."

The woman wrote down the numbers and information and hurried away to the table beside them.

"You'll have to try the unagi," Paul said. "It's absolutely delicious."

Sarah sipped her tea and burnt her lip and the tip of her tongue. She hoped that whatever unagi was, her burnt tongue would help her get it down.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's eel."

"I've always been one to try new foods," Sarah said. She thought about the patch of gum under her ass. "I'll have to see what it looks like first."

Paul smiled. "Don't worry. It doesn't resemble eel in the least." He sipped his tea and pulled away as quickly as Sarah had.

The buzzer and bell sounded and the door opened behind them. A draft of icy air crawled up Sarah's turtleneck. She could feel the goose bumps forming in a tingling wave up her back. She held her teacup in her hands to keep warm. She could see that

snow had started to fall by the thick flakes that stuck to the toques of the couple that had come inside.

"She wasn't kidding about the door," Sarah said.

The couple, now aware that the restaurant was at capacity, turned and left, leaving another bitter draft to circulate.

The heater above the door was still farting along with its occasional clicks and pops. Sarah wondered if it produced any heat at all.

"So do you think Carl is going to stop?" Paul asked.

"Yes," Sarah said. "I think so. I have filed for a restraining order, but it might take some time to get. He called me and apologized. I told him about the restraining order. He took it pretty hard. He assured me he would leave me alone if that's what I truly wanted."

"Do you think he's serious?" Paul asked. "Or is this just until he gets drunk again?"

"I don't know. He said that he'd quit drinking again and that he started working."

The woman appeared with their appetizers and left them on the side of the table.

"Looks good," Sarah said. She pointed to the California rolls. "Are these the eel?"

"Well I hope you're safe from him." Paul said with a concerned smile.

Sarah, still pointing at the California rolls said, "Eel?"

"No, those are cod disguised as crab and avocado. Really good." He unpackaged his disposable chopsticks, broke them apart and pointed at the other sliced roll. "These,"

he picked up a slice and stuffed it into his mouth. He chewed the wad of rice and eel, rolling his eyes in ecstasy, "are the eel. Oh man, you have to try one."

Sarah unpackaged her chopsticks. She fumbled with them and gripped a slice of unagi. She tried to get it to her mouth, but it fell onto the plastic tablecloth. She scooped it off the table with her fingers and popped the slice into her mouth. "Not bad," she said after she had swallowed the mouthful.

Before they could finish their appetizers, the woman returned with their main courses. Sarah had feared that the salad would be small on account that it was so cheap, and she was right. There was one small piece of broccoli, two snow peas, some shredded carrots and the rest was iceberg lettuce.

"Heard from Larry?" Paul asked.

Sarah sighed. "No, but I'm sure I'll probably hear from him the next time I dance."

Paul picked a piece of shrimp tempura from his bento box with his chopsticks and put all of it except the tail into his mouth. He pulled the tail out and placed it in the tempura section of the box.

"And this doesn't bother you?" he asked.

The waitress approached the table. "Is everything okay here?"

Paul's nod was more of a vibration.

"I'd like a beer," Sarah said.

"Would you like to try Japanese beer?" the woman asked. "We also have a new Chinese Ginseng beer."

"That sounds neat," she said, "I'll try that."

The woman nodded. "And you?" she asked Paul.

"I'll have one too," Paul said.

The woman disappeared again.

"I wonder what Ginseng beer tastes like," Sarah said.

"So it doesn't bother you that Larry might come near you again?" Paul asked.

"I thought we were going out to relax and forget about the whole incident."

"Of course," Paul said. He picked up a piece of smoked salmon from his bento box and ate it. He concentrated on his food while Sarah concentrated on the sound of the heater behind her and the distant music. Her salad could have been eaten in three or four bites, so she nibbled at it like a hamster.

They didn't speak until shortly after the waitress dropped off the two Ginseng beers.

Paul chuckled to himself.

"What?" Sarah asked, giving in to his contagious grin.

Paul grasped a ball of sticky rice and mixed it into the salmon sauce. He laughed again.

"What's so funny?" Sarah asked.

"I know you don't want to talk about it, but I was just remembering the look on Larry's face when gramps turned on him with that crowbar."

"Complete fear and desperation," Sarah said. "And the noises he made."

"You mean the screams," Paul said. "They were more ear-splitting than a child

having a tantrum."

"And what about Carl?" Sarah said. "Frank smacked him right in the leg."

"He's a tough son-of-a-bitch," Paul said. "No offense to my great grandmother, may she rest in peace, but gramps probably gave him a charley horse that he won't forget about any time soon."

"I just wish Larry would have sprayed Carl with the pepper-spray. He only sprayed the MacMillans. That must have driven Frank through the roof."

Paul took a swig of his beer and examined the label. "Tastes pretty good," he said. "And yes, he wanted a piece of both of those guys. He may be tough, but he is over eighty years old. Hopefully he won't see Larry again."

Sarah could tell from Paul's tone that the statement was more of a question.

"I guess he probably will if he keeps going to Cowgirls," Sarah said. "Larry will likely turn up there. I'm sure they can kiss and make up. After all, Larry did come there with the intention of spraying Carl."

"Why do you let that crazy guy follow you around like that?"

Sarah laughed until it was clear that Paul was not going to smile about the subject. "He's not really crazy," she said. "Maybe a little neurotic, but not completely off his rocker. He has some strange sense of duty to protect me from the evils of the universe. I think he read too many comic books as a child."

"I think there's more to it than that," Paul said.

"Are you worried about me?"

"Maybe."

Sarah took a long drink of beer and let out a small burp. "Don't worry about me. I'm a big girl."

"I guess you know more about people like him than I do," Paul said.

"Exactly," Sarah said. "So tell me about the rest of your family," she said. "What do your parents do?"

Paul tapped his chopsticks against the bento box before stirring the saturated rice around in the golden sauce. He leaned back and stretched.

"Where do I begin," he said. "My father worked odd jobs on account of all the traveling he did. He was much like my grandfather I suppose, but he didn't stop womanizing after he married." Paul's awkward smile defined his discomfort. "Not that I know that my grandfather ever stopped, but I like to think that he did. My father was married several times and had several children. I can't even guess how many half-brothers and sisters I have."

Sarah's soft features reflected that she was sorry.

"It's not a big deal," Paul said, stirring figure eights into his sauce. "My mom didn't take it so well when he disappeared. I was six. She became silent after he left. She lives in a little house out in High River. She likes it quiet."

"I'm glad she likes it out there," Sarah said.

Paul nodded. "And what about you?"

"Religious. Both of them."

Paul's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Trust me, everyone reacts the same way. How did you come from the house of

the Lord and become a stripper? I chalk it up to repression. My mother was a housewife who believed that God needed to be worshiped all day, every day. I was kicked out of the house at fourteen for cutting my hair short. It was down to my ass. My mom loved that hair more than the rest of me I'm sure. My dad goes along with everything she says or wants. He's the quiet, submissive type that lives inside of a picture tube. I wonder what a person like him would do without one in front of his face all day. When he's not watching T.V., he works as a specialized mechanic. He fixes machines and things like that."

"Interesting line of work," Paul said.

"To tell you the truth," Sarah said, "I don't even know if he does that anymore. He may have retired early. I don't speak to them anymore. My mom has gone nuts in the last while. Last time I saw her she was claiming that she was receiving messages from God about me. It creeped me out."

The waitress cleared their plates and Paul ordered two more beers.

"Did she tell you what the messages were?" Paul asked.

Sarah giggled. "Yes, but I'm not going to tell you."

"Oh, come on," Paul said. "If there are messages coming from God, I think I, as a human being, have the right to know them. Plus I told you that my dad is a man-whore."

Sarah could feel her face grow warm. "Fine," she said, "but if you tease me about it."

"I promise," Paul said.

Sarah waited for the waitress to move a safe distance from the table.

"Apparently I am some sort of angel, chosen by God to help all of humanity find their true path to heaven. I argued that the Bible says that we are all supposed to help those around us find their true path. That's when she lost it. She started yelling that she knew the truth and the facts straight from God's mouth."

"Sounds intense," Paul said.

"It gets worse," Sarah said. "So I tried to agree with her and told her I would try to come to church. She argued that it wasn't good enough and that I needed to be at the church and with her all the time. I explained that it was impossible for that to happen. Then she asked me if I was turning down the great honor bestowed upon me from almighty God."

Paul's grin heightened. "Don't tell me you turned it down." He motioned to the crowd of people in the restaurant. "You'd be putting all of us in jeopardy."

"Hey," Sarah said, sticking out her bottom lip. "You said you weren't going to tease me."

Paul laughed. "Hey yourself," he said. "I'm just looking out for number one here. So what happened?"

Sarah took a deep breath and spoke quickly. "I told her no and she freaked out and called me a Satan-child and kicked me out of her house and that's the last time we ever spoke. It was about three years ago."

"It seems we both have some interesting parents."

Sarah nodded and finished her first beer. She slid it to the edge of the table and took a sip from the fresh bottle.

"Here's to strange roots," Sarah said, holding her bottle up.

Paul clinked her bottle and nodded in agreement.

"I have a proposition for you," Paul said.

A couple opened the door to leave. The brass bell clicked against the glass, and the buzzer sounded again.

"Does it involve you and I going somewhere else for an adventure?"

Paul's face did not mirror the excitement in Sarah's. "Not exactly, but that doesn't mean I'm not up for some high adventure." He slid his bottle of beer to the side and tried his best to make a pirate growl. Sarah laughed at how pathetic it was.

"I wanted to offer you a position at my store," he said.

Sarah sighed and let her smile wilt.

"You could work at the front desk until you're trained to do the books. I could pay you well. I'm about ready to stop doing most of the accounting myself anyway."

"I already have a job," she said. "And it pays well. And I happen to like my job."

Even though the statement came from her mouth, she didn't know if she believed it.

"I understand that," Paul said. "It's just that then you wouldn't have to worry about people like Larry or Carl harassing you all the time. You wouldn't have to travel either. You said you're interested in running a business."

"I am, but that's not going to happen for a while."

Sarah could tell that Paul had finally tuned his radio into her frequency.

"All right. I was just offering," he said.

"Thanks for the offer," Sarah said. She chugged at her beer until the bottle was empty. She wiped her mouth and allowed a wisp of air to escape her throat. "But I'm going to stay where I'm at. I'm doing just fine."

"But what if I offered you the same pay as the clubs?"

Sarah felt the conversation topple backwards.

"Now," she said, "about that high adventure. Why don't we get a bottle of booze and head home?" she asked.

"Wine?" Paul asked.

"I'm more of a tequila girl," she said.

"I would be hugging the toilet if we bought tequila."

Sarah stood up and reached for her jacket. "How would you ever survive a trip to Mexico?"

Paul stood and waited for the waitress to bring the bill.

"Will you at least consider my offer?" Paul asked.

"No," Sarah said.

Paul became restless as he waited for the bill. He turned and half whispered, "I'm giving you an offer that will allow you to get out of being a stripper and get into the workforce. It will prepare you to run a business. I'd usually require some education in accounting for this position."

Sarah's laugh reflected how shocked she was. "I am in the workforce, thank you very much. Is that what you want me to be? An accountant?" She raised her voice. "Do you want me to get a pretty little business suit and bounce around your office while you

teach me how fun it is to add up your sales and subtract your expenses?"

"There's more to it than that," Paul said. He looked around the restaurant nervously.

"Of course there is," she said. "But it doesn't change the fact that I am not interested in it. And maybe without my formal education, I'd be too stupid to handle it. Maybe I'm only good at taking my clothes off."

"I never meant that," Paul said. "It's just that . . ." he paused.

"It's just that you don't want to get close to a woman in my line of work," she said. She nodded, accepting his silence as his agreement.

Sarah decided to give up on the high adventure. A pirate that couldn't handle a stiff drink wasn't a pirate at all.

Chapter Nineteen

Sarah's first Monday back at Cowgirls looked bleak from the beginning. It was June and it was hot outside. No one wanted to be in a stuffy strip club. As she suspected, her first show was cancelled. Her second show was barely a go-ahead.

Sarah pulled out her blanket and posters for the third song of her show and found no volunteers. She had danced many shows that were similar: it was early, and those that were there were the types who sipped draft beer in the shelter of darkness at the back tables, usually drunk enough that they couldn't speak or walk. They were there to watch naked women from a distance through one eye with hopes they wouldn't be thrown onto the street when they passed out at their table.

Sarah danced for the remainder of the song. She climbed to the top of the pole and wrapped her legs around it. It was a waste of valuable energy, but she figured she might as well practice some of her pole routine while she had an almost empty bar. She released her hands and let her weight rest on her legs. She arched her back and let her body slowly slide down the pole. She could see the lights blinking through her eyelids and let the music relax her mind into a state of meditation. Her fingers softly came to rest on the stage, followed by her head and back. The song ended when her body was at rest. A perfect ending to a dance, she thought, but not a soul with an ounce of respectability to notice.

She sat up and saw a tall, bald man leading Frank into the bar. She could tell that Frank was bickering at the man as the man tried to hold onto his arm. Frank pulled it

away repeatedly.

"Take it easy Frank," Floyd said when they arrived at the side of the stage.

Sarah put on her robe and stood above them on the stage.

Frank tugged his arm away from Floyd again and swung at his chest like a slapping child. He looked up to Sarah for a second and back to Floyd. "Irish, will you tell this man that I'm able?" he shouted.

Floyd sat a small, wooden box on the counter in front of Frank and backed away. He checked to see that his phone clip and ear-bud were secure.

"Okay, Frank, have it your way. But you got to be careful these days." He looked up to Sarah. "He's got to be careful."

Sarah squatted in front of them, her robe opening like the curtains of a theatre.

Floyd took another step back and half smiled. "I'm double-parked," he said, not taking his eyes off of Sarah. He pointed behind him with his thumb, not moving.

"Don't worry," Sarah said. She winked at Floyd. "I'll take care of him."

Floyd's words came out slowly. "Good to see that he's in such good hands. Lucky man. Got to go."

Floyd turned and coasted toward the door at top speed, not looking back.

Frank's attention was on the big-screen T.V. when Sarah approached him wearing white stretch-pants and a matching halter-top. She edged closer and closer until Frank sensed her presence and almost slammed his face into her mid-section.

"Irish," he said, grinning, "don't scare an old man like that. I'm liable to have a heart-attack."

"You're strong enough, Frankie. You're a war hero."

"Nonsense," Frank said.

"You did it because you had to," Sarah said.

Frank pointed at her, his grey teeth trying to shine. "Damn right. No medal's going to make me feel that I'm any better than anybody else. The guys who are in the ground, now they deserve a medal.

"They sure do," Sarah said. "So how have you been?"

"Have you seen the cenotaph downtown?"

Sarah nodded, not knowing what a cenotaph is.

"I hear the bums piss all over the damn thing. Drunk out of their minds, drinking hair-spray and sniffing glue. All those young men that gave their lives so that people could piss in the street," he gripped at the air between them, "I'd rip their peckers right off."

"And they would deserve it," Sarah said.

"Damn right they would," Frank said.

"What's in the box?" Sarah asked.

"Oh that's nothing. Just some errands I have to run. So where have you been Irish? I've been waiting quite a while for you to come back."

"I went out to the coast," she said. "Vancouver and Victoria and every little town in-between. I'm thinking about moving to Vancouver Island. It's so beautiful out there."

Frank nodded. "Good people out there too." He sipped his drink with a shaky hand. "A lot of Asians, but they won't bother you. Quiet. Mind their own business. Not

like everyone else in this country. We're going to be as bad as the Americans soon, you watch."

"How have you been holding up?" Sarah asked. "Did you get out of the hospital quickly after the pepper-spray?"

Frank waved his hand and made a sour face. "Oh, Irish, that was nothing. They wouldn't let me leave. Wanted to do tests on my lungs and eyes and whatever else. A guy came in tried to get me to go to the washroom in a bedpan. Like I'm already on my way to the grave. Sheesh. I told him that I would rather explode." Frank laughed to himself. "Then the bastard tried to convince me to let him give me a sponge bath. I told him to send in the nurse, and he told me he was the nurse."

"He probably was," Sarah said.

"Nonsense," Frank said. "Why would a man want to be a nurse? What kind of sense does that make?"

"I see you haven't changed a bit," Sarah said.

"Well, I made sure I got a real nurse for my sponge bath, I'll tell you that much."

"Was she sexy?"

"No," he said. "But she looked better than my first option."

"I should hope so," Sarah said. "So do you to appear in court against Larry?"

"No," he said. "He apologized to me. I've talked to him in here before. He sure has a thing for you."

"He must have got the hint. I haven't seen him since."

"He's around," Frank said. "He's been in and out of this place since you've been

gone."

"I see you took a cab today," Sarah said.

"Yeah," Frank said. "I made arrangements. I didn't want any problems if the young one gave me a ride. He told me some things."

"It would have been okay."

"He's an asshole. End of story." Frank rubbed Sarah's hand. "You're just as precious as gold."

"Thanks Frankie," she said. "But I really wouldn't have minded." She stood up. "Well, I'm going to get something to eat."

Sarah walked only a few steps when she saw Larry coming into the building hiding behind a dozen roses.

"Hello Sarah," he said in a deep, casual voice. "How are you?"

"I thought you'd come back," she said. "What kind of proposition do you have for me today?"

Larry stuck up his chin dramatically and walked past her. He sat beside a blonde girl at the bar. She was a new dancer named Rose. She looked about twenty or so, and her voice was so high-pitched and soft that Sarah thought she could be a mouse in human form. Sarah thought she was nice but a bit slow in the head.

Larry handed her the flowers, occasionally glancing at Sarah. He pulled Rose's barstool away from the bar so that they were able to hug in full view of the bar. Rose kissed him on the cheek and left a red stamp.

Thank God, Sarah thought. I'll miss the money, but not the hassles.

Larry tried to kiss Rose back, but she backed away. He smiled as if nothing had happened and placed his hand on her shoulder, which she tossed aside. Larry waited in between shows in the far corner of the bar and followed Rose around when she wasn't dancing. Sarah watched his billfold come out often, but Rose was a rookie: she was only getting twenties.

Just before Sarah's third show of the afternoon, Frank was ready to go home. He put the wooden box under his arm and Sarah helped him to the door with his arm locked tightly with hers. She was suddenly overwhelmed with sadness at the thought that someday Frank would not be at Cowgirls.

"Frank," she said, "I just want you to know that if there was anyone from any club in the world that I would date, it would be you."

Frank nodded, "I know," he said.

Sarah opened the front door to a blinding, busy day. Cars screamed by at high speeds and businessmen and businesswomen hurried by with immaculate posture in their colorful, yet conservative attire.

"And it's a shame," Frank said.

"Why?" Sarah said.

"Because I'm like the rest of them. I've lived a good, long life. Yes, I've had many good times and some of the roughest. During this last, long stretch, I've had a lot of time to think about the way I've lived. I've been able to look back at everything to try to sort it out."

"You still have a lot of life left in you, Frankie," she said. She could see Floyd's

cab down the street at a red light.

"I'm out of gas and a tune-up isn't going to do much good. To the scrap yard I go. But don't say that I'm the one for you because it's not true."

Floyd drove toward them and stopped in the middle of the road. He did a U-turn to pull in front of the club. A man crossing the street had to dodge the car to avoid being hit. He held out his hands, questioning Floyd's driving.

Floyd jumped out of the car, his figure towering over everyone on the street, "I have a senior who needs help here," he shouted, pointing to Frank. "Sorry about that."

The pedestrian continued walking. "Call my cab and I'll give you discount," Floyd shouted.

Frank grimaced toward Floyd. He handed Sarah the brown box in his hand. "This is a gift for you."

Sarah shook it and listened to the side of the box. "Thank you Frankie," she said. "Another surprise box."

"How about a kiss for an old man?" he said.

Sarah leaned over and gave him a slow kiss on his cool, thin lips.

His grin was the old, grin Sarah knew well.

"I guess I should use the sympathy ploy more often," Frank said excitedly. "What would it take to get some more of that candy?" He licked his violet lips and turned toward Floyd.

"You'll always be my man," Sarah said.

Frank stopped and turned back. "Irish, you're beautiful, imaginative and

generous. I would drain all of that from you so slowly that you would never know what happened. Your skin would turn pale, and I would leave you alone, and you would feel like I feel right now, but much too early in your life. I'm still here because someone's teaching me a lesson." His thin lips curled up and increased the depths of the wrinkles on his face. "Plus I could never handle another man looking at that incredible body of yours. It would eat me alive faster than a school of piranha. I would want you all to myself. Knowing that I'm the only man in the world that gets to see your perfection would make me feel like a king." He turned toward Floyd. "Only in a perfect world," he said.

Floyd came around the car putting something in his fanny-pack. "You ready to go Frank?" he asked.

Floyd had the cab door open and his legs spread wide apart. He positioned his hands around Frank carefully like a basketball guard.

"Let me know when you want me to take your cane, Frank," Floyd said.

"Shut up, Floyd." Frank grumbled. "I can take it from here."

Floyd kept his arms close to Frank until Frank was inside the cab. He smiled to Sarah. "He's just kidding around," he said.

Sarah smiled politely and nodded.

"I say what I mean," Frank said, "and you don't seem to listen, Floyd."

Floyd closed the door, nodded to Sarah and ran around to the other side of the car.

Sarah watched the side of Frank's head disappear as Floyd pulled away from the curb. He didn't look back. His last comments left her feeling like an empty shell.

Sarah opened the wooden box and found a war medal and an old black and white

image of Frank while he was in the war. Under the image was a stack of hundreds. She closed the box and walked back into the club.