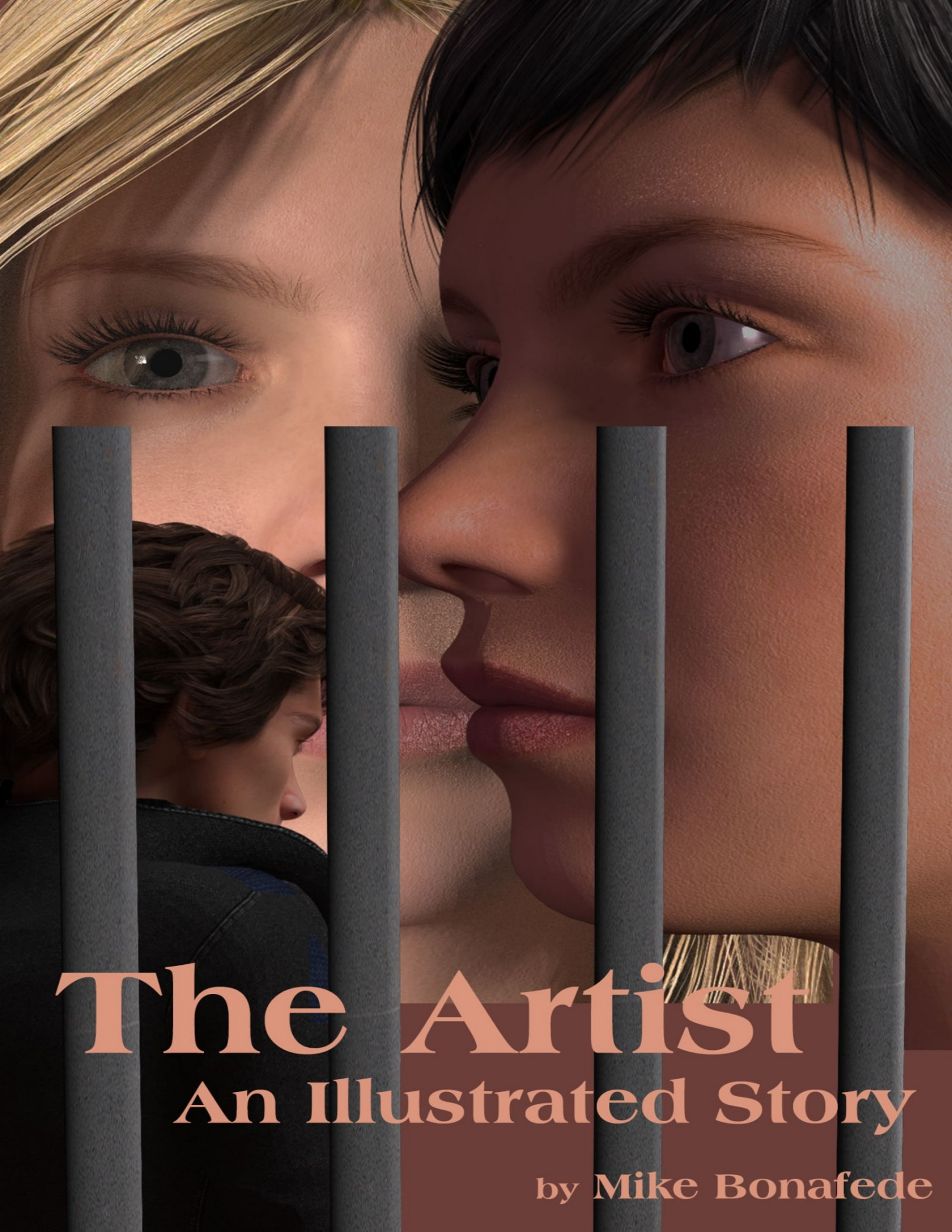




The Artist

An Illustrated Story

by Mike Bonafede

The Artist — An Illustrated Story

How do you convince a basically good guy to kill for you?

Mike Bonafede

The Artist — An Illustrated Story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), locales, or events, is entirely coincidental.

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Prologue

Slowly, cautiously, Robert, along with the other creatures that slither, crawl, and kill in the night, crept toward the cottage.

Frogs, crickets, and others to be eaten raised a chorus of protest as loud as in a rainforest. "Go back." "Go back." "Go back."

At the door, he rehearsed the mnemonic she had taught him. "Cross my heart and hope to die." It played in his mind to the tune of "Mary had a Little Lamb." *Cross my heart and hope to die. Hope to die. Hope to ...*

The door clicked and opened.

The house was cold as stone.

He remembered the way to the kitchen.

"Use the one you used this Summer," she had told him.

It was too dark for him to see into the drawer. He fumbled around, the contents clanging like off-key church bells summoning the living to follow the dead. Then he pulled one out.

He climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

The figures were sleeping, covered with a white comforter.

He went to them and raised the knife.

Then Robert paused.



She had directed everything, what to wear, how to get to the cottage, how to disarm the alarm — even what knife to use. But she had not told him about this. She had not told him how to kill someone with a knife.

Chapter 1. A Foolish Life

One year earlier.

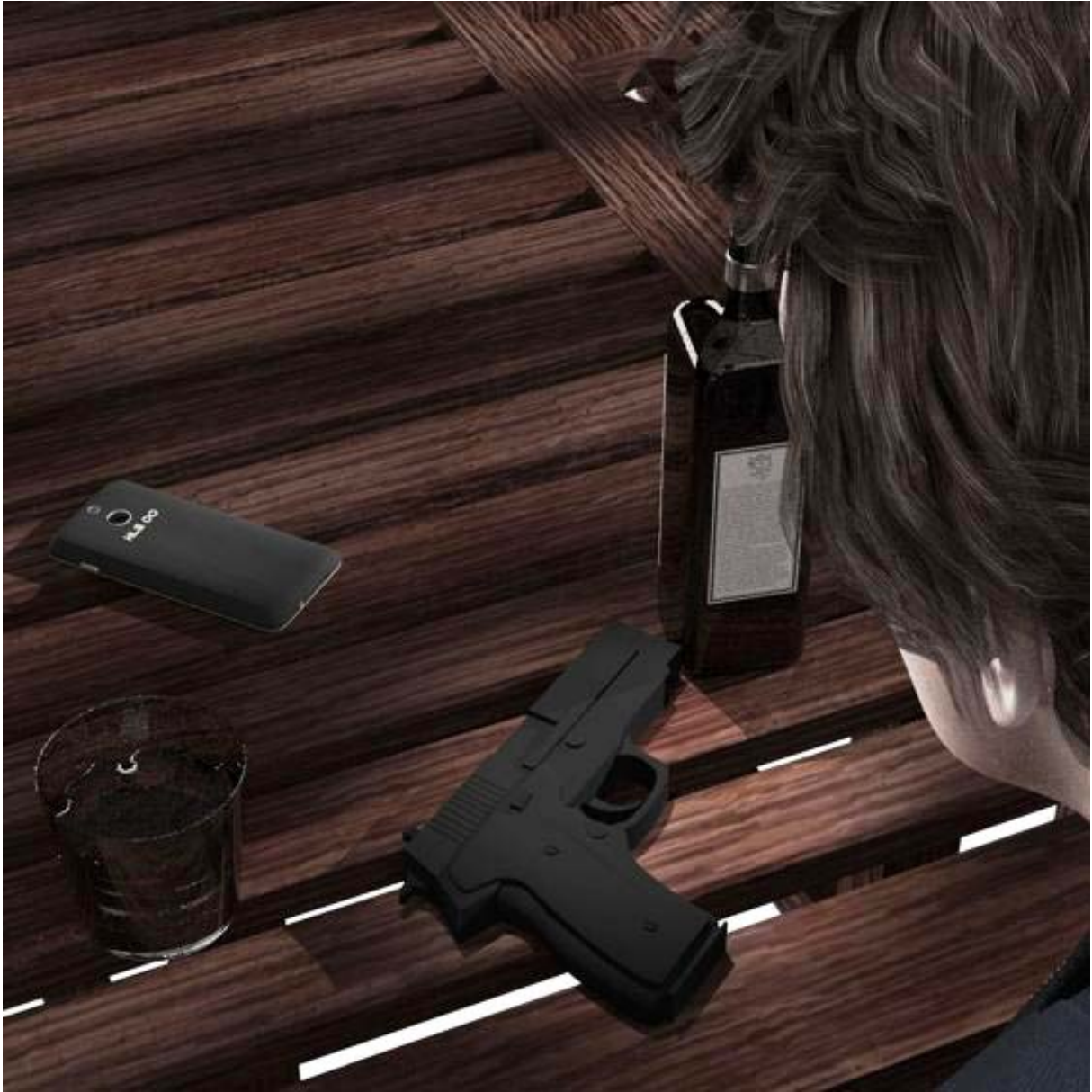
Youth, where did it go? During his childhood, he had tried to give it away. After he succeeded, he couldn't get it back.



He was 25, alive, and had lived a foolish life. He was introspective enough to see the foolishness of someone who was only 25, thinking they had already lived a foolish life. But today, that wasn't a foolish thought. It was a final thought.



A late summer cold front had come through the Chicago area, and with it, rain, which temporarily cooled off the region. He put on his jacket to protect against the cold and the rain and went out to sit in the gazebo.



He brought three things with him: his phone, a bottle of scotch, and a gun. The phone was always with him. The scotch, to help him through this cold, rainy day. And the gun, well, the gun was for today as well.

Rain drummed on the roof and the patio, saturating the surrounding grounds. A musty smell of earthworms rose from the earth and filled his nostrils. Occasionally a breeze blew mist onto his face, and he huddled deeper into his jacket. Rain and fog all but hid his view of Lake Michigan. The mansion, which he had never been in, was nearly invisible. The carriage house, where he did live, was

hidden behind him. The weather closed in, and his world became small. He started drinking the scotch.



He was a college graduate, an artist, and a photographer, and today he was going to kill himself.

He had started off searching for the soul of America — somewhere between Wichita and the Bighorn Mountains. He ended up in Chicago.

He was going to capture that soul in his photographs and paintings. Instead, he was producing images for a porn dealer. (He preferred calling it “exotic artwork”) The “artwork” was displayed in Gallo’s Galleria. “Galleria.” He snorted. In this case, a polite name for “Porn Shop.”

At first, the dealer had him do pictures of pretty, young, naked girls. He thought that a cosmic joke. I’m a disaster around girls. He invented a set of rules when working with the models. A shield he could hide behind.

The internet is full of free pictures of pretty, young, naked girls. There weren't many sales of his artwork. He needed to earn a living, so the dealer gave him erotic stories to illustrate.

He had wanted to capture men's souls. Now his art was grabbing their cocks.

This wasn't the life he dreamed of when he was a little boy, when he imagined the glorious adventure his life was to be. His mother would take him out at night, and he would sit on her lap in a rocking chair. The two would look up at the stars. His mother pointed out the big and little dippers and how to find the North Star. "Find that," she told him, "and you will always know where you are. You could be an astronomer." That was a big word. He couldn't pronounce it. He asked her if he could drink from the Milky Way. She laughed and hugged him to her chest, and the two looked up and danced among the stars. His father did not dance.

Arianna. Arianna. Oh yes. Once upon a time there had been Arianna in his life. He left her when he had set off on his soul search.

Did she try to find me?

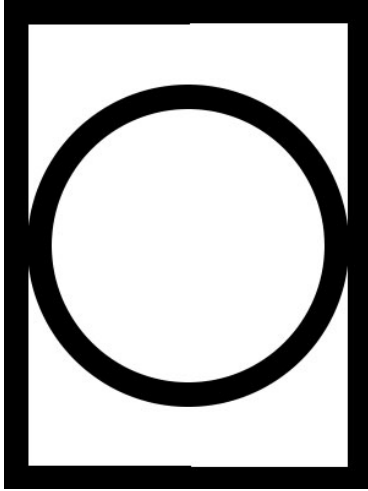
Did she look for me?

He called her in the year after he left. Her phone had been disconnected. Click. He called a friend of hers. "She quit school and left soon after you did. And screw you if you think I'll tell you anything more." Click. He called her parent's house. They lived in Chicago. Click.

Even in his alcohol muddled mind, he could see more clearly now than he did then that she had loved him.

The young think if something comes easily, it will come again. Love had found him when he wasn't looking, but he left it to chase the wild wind across the American Great Plains. Love was not going to find him again.

He was living on the estate of a wealthy family, north of the City, where the high-rises end and houses begin. He had moved in early in the summer when the family was on vacation. They were at a place their agent called "The Cottage." He never met them. All communication was through the agent. He was told that only the owner, Sam Gallo, his wife, Elaine, and their daughter lived on the



estate. The agent didn't remember the daughter's name. He thought she was about twenty.

The owner of the estate was the self-same owner of where he worked, Gallo's Galleria. Still, he was told the owner liked to support the arts, and from time to time, made the carriage house available to a promising artist where the artist lived for a while, developing and creating — all expenses paid.

He was told he was being given this opportunity because he was considered somewhat "up and coming." He had even been featured in one of the City's small arts magazines.

He did not feel "up and coming." What he did feel was his life leaving him, oozing from his entrails, up his chest, down his arm, trickling through his fingers and out the brush like the paint that dripped onto his easel.

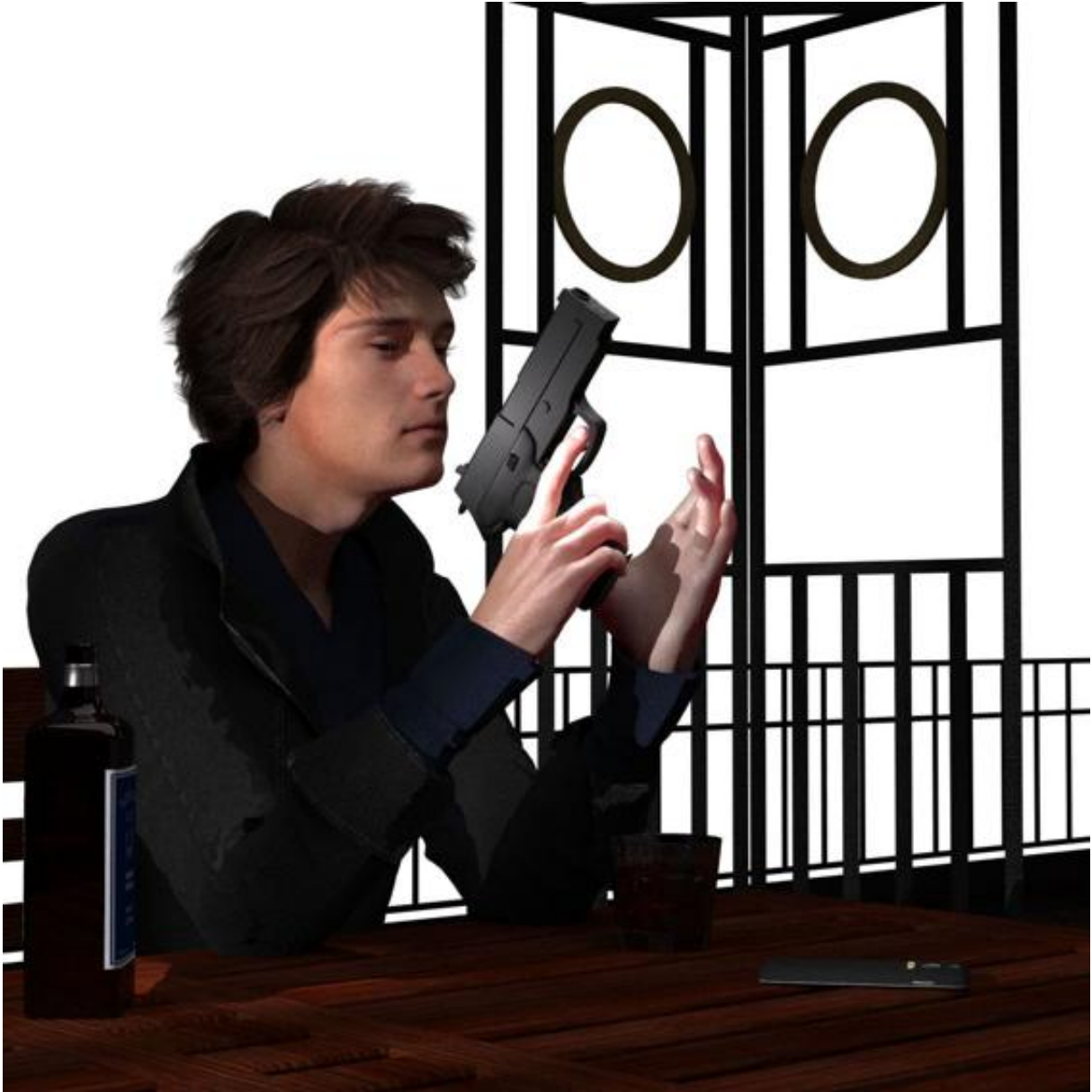
When he was young, his canvas was blank and white, waiting for him to paint on it with all the colors of the rainbow. But he had done it wrong and smeared his canvas with the same gray that he was sitting in now.

To say he was going to kill himself infers purpose. That is not entirely accurate. His life had no purpose — nor did today. He would stumble into his death with the same bumbling, blundering, and fumbling he lived life. His soul search had bogged down in the back room of a porn shop. He had neither the inclination nor wherewithal to do differently. To move forward seemed too hard, and going back — futile. Go back to what? His mother gone, his father dead, and Arianna, yes, she was gone too.

The phone was always with him. The scotch, often enough, but the gun, the gun was unfamiliar. It had been his father's. Unlike the phone, and even the scotch, he kept it hidden in a drawer under his socks and the photograph.

He tried to pull back the gun's slide. His fingers, wet from the mist the wind blew at him, slipped. He startled when the slide clanged

against the barrel. He tried again, holding tighter this time, and saw the cartridge load into the chamber. He held on tight and let the slide back slowly. He did not know if the gun would go off if he just let go. He didn't want it to go off by mistake. *That would be really dumb — accidentally killing myself.*



Throughout the cold afternoon, he took turns drinking the scotch and handling the gun, sometimes placing it to his head, once even putting the muzzle in his mouth, tasting metal and oil that several drinks of scotch were needed to take away.

Looking at the muzzle. Such a small hole, really. Could so much damage come out of it?

So much blood.

It should be easy. He would be hard to miss. Put gun in mouth, pull trigger.

Had it been this way for his father? The only sin from which one can not repent.

It scared him he had come to this.

Who made you?

God made me.

Why did God make you?

He was bored?

NO. FOR HIS GLORY!

Well, there was no glory in this. What would Sister Agnus say? "Thou shall not kill."

Oh, shit. That was supposed to be the easy one. Let's see, what were those?

Now you're boring.

No. This is important. I need to think this through.

Come on, come on, get on with the killing.

This won't take long — there's only ten. The first five are about God.

No problem, "God's in His Heaven, and all's right with the World." Next.

There's the one about honoring your mother and father, so they may have a long life.

Irrelevant. Your father's dead, and who cares about your mother? Not you. Go on.

"You shall not commit adultery." He paused. Let me get back to you on that.

"You shall not steal." He prided himself on that one — never have — never will.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

Time's a-wasting.

Almost done.

Don't covet your neighbor's stuff. I'm good with that. I'm an artist. I'm supposed to be poor and starving.

He took a drink of his scotch and looked out over the patio and the pool. He smiled. If you're going to kill yourself, why not in a mansion rather than a shack? He had tried shack, mansion was better.

So get on with it. What about the killing?

"Thou shall not kill." It said.

Well, it can't mean that. God has people kill other people. God kills all kinds of people all the time.

But to kill one's self — does that count?

What d'ya think, He had his fingers crossed? It counts. Killing is killing. Soldiers at war, capital punishment, self-defense. Yep. All killing.

"You will go to Hell if you break a Commandment," Sister warned.

What if it's just a matter of interpretation? What if it read, "Thou shall not murder," instead of "Thou shall not kill?" Now that could be a different thing.

That might work. "Murder" sounds like there's some assent, some purpose, some evil intent.

That's not in you. Is it?

No. That wasn't him. He was just weary of life.

So let's go with "murder." "Murder" is definitely the better way to go. "Thou shall not murder." You can't murder yourself. You can only kill yourself.

OK. I can live with—

Time's up.

He was an observer of life, not a doer in life. Even now, he was watching from about three feet to his left and two feet above his head.

So, this is what it's like to commit suicide.

It's now or never.

He use to think his life should have some reason. It wasn't supposed to end like this.

There's no time like the present.

But in a moment, it would.

Do it. Do it. Do it.

He reached for the gun.



Now.

A car door slammed. Then, voices.

He put the gun in his pocket, picked up the phone and the scotch, and went back to the carriage house.

The family had returned.

Chapter 2. I'll Call You Robert

Scene 1. The Two Girls in His Life

He was in the carriage house the next morning, sitting at a table that looked out on to the patio and the pool area, staring at the gazebo where yesterday he had sat with the gun to his head.



It was a place he now and would forevermore call, “My Spot.” The cold front had passed, the storm clouds were clearing, and the hot Midwestern summer returned, now even muggier because of the recent rain.



“Carriage House,” is what the agent said the owner’s wife called it, hadn’t been used for horses for the last 100 years. A “stable” is what the original owners thought they had built. There were two sections. The front was a large space with token, functional furniture. The agent told him its primary use was for party spillovers from the pool area and accommodating a sleep-over partier who had too

much to drink. On one side stood a bar that also provided the essentials of a kitchen. On the other side were a bathroom and a room with a bed and a small closet. Occasionally an artist was allowed to live here — that would be him for now.



The second part of the Carriage House was a room in the back, as large as the front, but unlike the front, was full of an eclectic collection of chairs, couches, boxes, mirrors, lamps, tables, and numerous paintings and pieces of art. He could see it had been used as a studio, for there was lighting, an easel next to a small table to hold paints and art supplies, and another, large table, on which a model could sit or lay and pose.

When he moved in, he brought nothing to add to the place: no furniture, no nicknacks, decorations, and, except for the gun and the photograph, no mementos. Two suitcases of clothing, his camera equipment, and a used Jeep were all he possessed. When he looked about the place, there was nothing of him in it. When he would ultimately leave, there would be nothing of him left to show that he had ever been here.

He hadn't committed suicide. He wondered if he even wanted to. He played yesterday over in his mind, and the voice taunting and

goaded him. That voice had been with him during his childhood, sitting inside the top of his head, criticizing him when he would make a mistake. “**Idiot.**” Chiding him for his dreams. “**Fool.**” It was with him when he had found his father. “**Guilty.**” If the family returning hadn’t interrupted him, would he have finished it? In that last second, would he have pulled the trigger? He could have ended his misery by ending his life. Did he want to live? He thought about that. The voice was mute. Live? He didn’t know. But die? No. He didn’t want to die. He couldn’t kill himself. Then he became more depressed because now he realized his misery could never end.

The extent of that thought slipped over him and smothered him like a second skin. He was grieving. Why? His father? Perhaps, but that was two years ago. That should be enough time for grieving. His mother? No. He was over her. Yes. He certainly was. He cried when she left, terribly. He had vowed that would never happen again. Arianna? Sweet, pure, chaste, well no longer chaste thanks to him, Arianna. If ever he had sinned, it’s what he did to her. He remembered her first words to him, “You look lost.” Yes, he was.

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“Hi. You look lost.”

It was the start of his fourth year at the college. In his first years, he focused on science classes and rarely went to the Fine Arts Building. Now he was taking a drawing class and only had a vague idea of the location of his classroom.

“I’m in that class too,” She said. “C’mon, I’ll walk with you.”



Her name was Arianna.

They sat next to each other, their only class together that semester. He was studying visual arts. Arianna was more performing arts. He was not into that. He lectured her.

“Dance, acting art forms are not permanent, unlike painting and sculpture. Someone rehearses hard for a dance recital, performs it, and it’s over. Even a play is over after each performance, and certainly after the final curtain. But a painting. A painting lives on even after the artist is gone. A written song is permanent, but the playing of that music is over with the last note.”



They spent the next days discussing what else they were not into, what they were into, their interests, their not interests, likes, dislikes. Arianna wanted to be a dancer. He wasn't sure what he wanted, only sure that whatever he did had to be great. Who they knew, why so-and-so acted that way, why the World was the way it was, how it could be — should be — would be better, what each wanted to do during their lifetime in it, and all that was wrong with pineapple on pizza were topics they pondered and probed.

Whispering during class, hurrying between classes, lunch together, strolling to her dorm, they found whatever time they could to be with each other. She was from Chicago. He thought that made her sophisticated. Still, it was cute she blushed during the “drawing the male nude” part of the class.

“Would you like to go see a movie?”

She would.

They became a couple and climbed the first few steps of intimacy. He held her hand during the movie and even put his arm

around her shoulder when he walked her back to her dorm. Through the following days, that arm massaged her back while the couple walked about and pulled her waist or hip playfully to him whenever she would say something silly. And Arianna was sure to frequently say something silly.



The first kiss — that took a little while. Their dates always ended with their saying goodnight at the steps of her dorm, where other couples were busy making out. He left her there several nights without the kiss and kicked himself each time. She wanted to be kissed — didn't she? **Get some nerve, Pal.** Then there was that

night they stood with their arms around the other. Everything there was to talk about said. "Well, good night." "Night." "I probably better get going." "K." "Night." "Night." He moved his head toward her. She closed her eyes, their lips touched, and then there was no more talking.

Kissing now took place pretty much anytime they were together, serious kissing when they were alone. Arianna held his face while their tongues explored each other's mouths. He mussed and tangled her long hair during their sessions, and she would need to comb it out when she got back to her room. He had mentioned how he liked her legs and how smooth they were. So, even as the days grew shorter and the evenings colder, she wore skirts and shorts for him.

Their favorite spot was on the bandstand in the park by Arianna's dorm. Sometimes other couples used this place, but as it got colder, he and Arianna were usually alone. Here he explored the limits of their intimacy. His hand ran up and down on the outside of her legs at will, but on the inside, when it climbed too far, Arianna would press her legs together to signal, "far enough." And a gentle, firm hand from her stopped his whenever it tried to get inside her blouse.

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There was a flash of light as the patio door of the mansion opened and caught the sunlight. For the two months he lived in the carriage house, he had never seen that door open.



Then she came out. Later in life, he would reflect, and she walked into my life. Then he would smile. Did that sound too much like Humphrey Bogart? He guessed she was the owner's daughter. The agent had told him she was about 20 — he hadn't mentioned she could stop his heart. She had a long, slim body and blond hair, her breasts thrust against her bikini top, and her bikini bottom clung on her swaying hips. She was barefoot. He saw the muscles in her legs and calves flex as she walked. Her breasts were small, like a girl's. He liked that. The models he photographed for the porn were

all large breasted, “Give the customer what they want.” He couldn’t make out the color of her eyes at this distance. He thought blue.



She moved with the grace of a dancer to “My Spot” and tossed a towel on it. Then she stretched and pulled at her suit and did those other things a girl does when she thinks she is not being watched. He felt dizzy, his head larger, then he took a breath. She spread out the towel, put on some lotion, and laid down.

He stepped away from the window while he examined her so she wouldn’t be able to see him. He studied her, assessing her as he did with the models during a photo shoot. There they knew they were on stage, to be posed, evaluated, and critiqued. That’s what they were paid for, after all. When people are face-to-face, one or the other will occasionally avert their eyes, turn the head, not stare too long at the other. It isn’t polite. But this girl was unaware of the intensity with which his eyes were probing her, and there was nothing polite about it.

He coolly photographed nude models nearly every day without even the hint of an erection. Perhaps the fact that this was improper, his observing her without her knowing, intimate with her on his terms, maybe the secrecy of it that aroused him.

She was a distance from him. He wanted to see her closer, so he got his camera and telephoto lens from the back room and pointed it at her. He adjusted the zoom to bring her in. There, that was better. He filled his camera's frame with her face, her breasts, her legs, her bare feet. — It was just second nature that he started clicking the shutter.

Occasionally she got up and stretched a bit or paraded around swinging her arms. Once, she had skipped over to the pool and threw water on her face. He caught her as she turned around, laughing. It was almost like he was next to her.

After she left, he brought his computer to the table and loaded the photos into it. A good half were unusable. He had not held the camera still enough for the extreme telephoto close-up shots. Some were blurred, and some the gazebo or a chair blocked her when she had changed positions. Most were because he had been so damn nervous. He deleted these.

He devoted the rest of the day to studying the remaining photos. She was not perfect, he decided. Her left eye was a little narrower than her right. The right side of her lip curved up slightly, so it looked like she was thinking of some secret joke. When she pulled her hair back, he noticed her ears stuck out. Deformities, he thought, that if a little more pronounced would make her ugly. As they were, they made her beautiful. Her legs were perfect. He saw her eyes were blue.

He picked the best twenty photos and transferred these to a separate folder in his computer.



That night he went to bed and held the computer on his knee so he could see the screen. He opened the “Twenty Favorites” folder, set it to view as a slide show, and masturbated.

He spent the next morning with his computer, scrolling through the folders that held the several thousand photographs he had, many of which he had taken himself at the studio in the porn shop. So many girls, in various stages of undress, in various interesting poses, doing so many provocative things. He had access to gigabytes more photos with his link to the computer at the Shop. The folder with the twenty he spent last night with was the one he kept going back to.

His favorite was of the girl after tossing water in her face. It was a wonderful picture, the best of them all. Funny he found it so appealing. It didn’t show any of her except her face. She wore no makeup, water dripped off her nose, wet strands of hair caught across her face and half-closed eyes. It revealed the innocence of a girl laughing at her silliness and the beauty of a woman who could still do that. It was charming and seductive, innocent and sensual, and he fell in love with it. He made it the background on his computer so it would always be available to him.

All the photos, including his favorite, were slightly blurred. He had held his camera as steady as he could, but at a high telephoto close-up, some jiggle was unavoidable. He got his tripod, secured the camera to it, set it on the table next to the window, and waited for her.



He waited the entire day. She never came out, nor the next. But the next day, she did, following the same ritual as the first day. He watched her lying there and took pictures, watched her breathing, and took pictures, watched as she stretched and moved, and took pictures.

The next day she also came out. He was waiting. He followed her through his camera, observing her close up. He had a lot of photos of her by now, but those were frozen and lifeless. He wanted to follow her as she moved. Watch her skin glistening with the sun and lotion, her breasts moving up and down as she breathed in, then out, then in. He breathed with her. He could make out the tiny blond hairs on her chest, the peach fuzz that covered her body, and imagined skimming his fingers over them, giving her goosebumps, causing her to giggle, teasing her, arousing her. Up, down, up, down, she breathed. He tried to discern the beating of her heart.



Her breasts pressed against the fabric of her bathing suit. Her nipples poked at the material. Why didn't she sunbathe topless? — Nobody was around. He took off her top, and his eyes roamed over the mounds of her breasts. His tongue circled her nipples, kissing them, sucking them in, out, in, out, making them hard. He turned the camera back to her face.



Shit. She was staring at him.
She stood up and walked toward the carriage house.



His leg hit the table, causing it to scrape on the hard floor and the camera and tripod to fall over. His face froze. His heart skittered. He ducked down and peered over the windowsill. Shit. Shit. Shit. Caught.

No, I wasn't. Really, you must be mistaken. Shit. Shit. Shit. Oh damn.

She strode in without knocking. There was no time to hide the camera.

"Hi, my name's Kellie."

He sucked in his breath and could only blurt, "Bob ... Bob Doran."



She strolled up to him, her skin tan and glistening, the heat of Summer washing up behind her. “Bob. Hmm. No, I think I’ll call you Robert.”

Kellie handed him the pink jar with the lotion she used when she was sunbathing. “Here, Robert, help me out, put some lotion on my back. It’s a special one I have made for me. It’s a sunblock, a moisturizer, it doesn’t absorb into the skin, so it stays slippery, and it smells good too.”

“Is it good for arthritis?” Robert asked.

Kellie tilted her head and looked at him. "I don't have arthritis. Why would you ask that?"

"Oh, no reason. Just kidding."

"Do you always make fun of what people are saying?"

"No, sorry ... Maybe when I'm nervous."

"Oh, so do I make you nervous?"

"Yeah, a little." "Amazed" and "dazzled" were two other words Robert thought of, but to his credit, did not say.

Kellie grinned and placed one hand on her chest to hold her bikini top and reached behind her with the other and pulled at the straps. Then she turned, exposing her bare back to him.

Kellie's skin was warm. She smelled like the summer sun. Robert parted her hair and put the lotion on her neck. Then he worked his way down her shoulders and back. Her bikini bottom did not cover much. Robert hesitated.

"Do all of me. I don't want to get burned."

Robert flushed and finished spreading the lotion.

"Thanks. Would you tie me up?"

"Do what?"

"What are you thinking? Tie my top back up, Silly."

Robert did, then Kellie bounced around. "Where's your phone?"

Before he could answer, Kellie was halfway across the room.

"Oh, I see it on the table."

Robert panicked. The prostrate camera and tripod were there too.

Kellie picked up the phone. "Here's my number. Maybe you can call me sometime, and I'll return the favor." She headed toward the door, then turned. "Robert, it's OK if you take pictures of me."

Robert's face turned feverish, his ears burned, he stammered. "I didn't—"

"Robert, don't lie to me."

"No, I didn't."

"I hate liars. Always tell me the truth. OK?"

"OK."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

“Do you promise to always tell me the truth?”

“Yes.”

“Robert, you can take pictures of me. OK?”

“Kellie, I ...”

“Robert?”

“OK.”

Scene 2. Phone Sex

For the rest of the day, Kellie filled Robert's head — right to the brim. He tried to do other things to get his mind off her, but he kept sneaking back to his computer and its images of her.

She was his angel, his temptress.

He wanted to inhale her in and devour her.

Own her, and surrender to her.

Ravish her, then love her.

That night he got ready for bed. He took off his clothes and underwear and laid down. Kellie had not taken her jar of lotion when she left. Robert opened it, inhaled her perfume, and rubbed it on.

He fantasized about what he wished he had done to her. Kiss the back of her neck when he moved the strands of her hair. Massage the lotion onto her soft skin, warm from the sun, her body awakening, reacting to his caresses. Nibble on her ear, then take her hands that were holding her bikini top to her chest and pull them away. Then massage the lotion onto her soft breasts and firm body. — Her breathing quickens from his fondling, her nipples harden. His left arm presses against her breasts, pulling her tight to him. She moves her hips on him. His right hand coolly picks a gob of lotion from the jar and smears it down her stomach, mixing it with the wet of her perspiration. His fingers stretch out and push under her bikini bottom. She sighs and rises on her tiptoes to meet them—

Robert's phone rang. He jumped. It was Kellie, on Facetime.

Oh, crap! How to explain this? Robert didn't move while the phone rang and waited until it stopped, then took a breath. His face was flushed. He was still holding his erection when the phone rang again.

She's not going to stop, is she. He had wanted to see her again, talk to her, hell, have anything to do with her. OK. OK. She can only see my face. He answered the phone.

Kellie's voice was soft, like she was just awakening from a sweet dream. "Hi, were you thinking of me?"

"Yes."

"Were you masturbating?"

"Kellie... "

"Don't lie to me. You promised to always tell me the truth." Warmly, "Are you pleasuring yourself?"

"Kellie... "

"Robert."

"Yes."

"Good. I'm glad you're thinking of me while you're masturbating. Let me watch. Turn your phone around so I can see."

"Kellie, really what—"

"C'mon, let me see."

Teasingly, "C'mon. C'mon."

"Kellie."

Purring, "Pleeeeeeease."

"Oh, hell."

Robert turned the phone and propped it with his pillow.

Kellie giggled. "Don't let me stop you."

Robert lay his head on the pillow, careful so as to not disturb the phone, and returned to what he had been doing.

Kellie's voice whispered through the phone. "I liked what you did to me today."

"I liked that too."

"I came so hard."

"I just put lotion on your back."



"Is that what you were thinking when I called?"

Robert nuzzled the phone. "No."

"Were you thinking of what happened between us today?"

Robert nodded.



"You were so shy. I had to prompt you. 'Put some on my front.' You did, on my chest, being so careful not to touch my breasts. I took off my top. 'All of me,' I said and closed my eyes. And you did. 'Lower.' You moved your hand down and brushed along the top of my bikini bottom. 'Lower,' I whispered. You shot fire through me. It's a good thing you held your arm around me while I was climaxing, or I would have collapsed on the floor."

Robert's hand was pumping up and down on his cock, moving faster, as was his breathing. Kellie's bedroom voice was whispering through the phone next to his ear. His legs pressed against the

mattress. His hips lifted. His free hand clutched the bed sheet, stretching it toward him. Her fantasy was working for him as well as his had.

"Would you like to cum?"

Robert groaned.

"Close your eyes and let me help you out with that.

"My hands are on you now.

"Can you feel me?"

Robert's head lifted off the pillow, his face scrunched.

"You feel so strong."

His stomach muscles tightened as hard as a drum.

"I'm not going to stop."

Robert's legs stiffened.

"I want you to cum. Are you going to cum?"

Robert grunted through clenched teeth.

"You can pretend I'm a boy if you want to."

His head jerked back against his pillow. The phone bounced onto the bed.

Kellie giggled as Robert climaxed, "Bye, Robert," and she hung up.

Chapter 3. The Perch

In the mansion, next to Kellie's bedroom, was another windowless room, not much more than a large-sized closet, which held electronic, computer, and sophisticated surveillance equipment. The owner of the mansion, Sam Gallo, wanted a hub from where he could supervise and control his various properties and assets.

Sam wanted his hub to have the best money could buy. He was assured that's what he got. Sam wanted the surveillance part of the system to be first class. "I don't want a son-of-a-bitch mouse to move without my knowing it." And so it was done. Kellie never learned if the company that did the installation was afraid Sam might see a mouse, or that the company was "connected," and Sam was the mouse. In either event, Sam got so much more than he had bargained for.

Sam didn't understand how intrusive the system was. He didn't know that cameras followed the housekeeper as she cooked and cleaned the mansion; Elaine, his wife, as she drank and dressed for a party she would never go to; himself, as he fumed and boiled over documents and accounts in his office. He didn't know that microphones listened as he issued instructions to visitors to the mansion, and commands through his phone system. Sam didn't know that there was no communication he had, with associates, politicians, bankers, or concubines, made in person, by phone, or internet that was not recorded, analyzed — and remembered.



But Kellie did.

Sam's vision when he had the equipment installed was to sit in this room, "The Perch," he called it, and leisurely push buttons from which he could do his banking and investments, supervise and

control his properties and businesses, and swoop down on an errant associate or employee with a phone call, or text message. That was Sam's dream. He tried it. He didn't like it. Sam was a "hands-on" kind of guy. He preferred to do his swooping in person, to summon associates, politicians, bankers, and concubines to genuflect before his desk in his office. Besides, there were two things wrong with the room. There was only one door to get in or out. Sam never went anywhere where there was not another way out. Also, his back was to the door when sitting at the computer table. Sam never sat anywhere with his back to a door. After he tried his Perch, Sam never went back.



But Kellie did.

From her Perch, Kellie studied Sam's businesses and learned.

One of Sam's busiest businesses, "Gallo's Galleria" (Sam renamed it after he purchased it), "The Largest Porn Store in the Midwest," is what the advertisements said. "The Shop," is what the

employees called it in polite company and wanted to be subtle. “Gallo’s Sex Store” is how everyone thought of it, and there was nothing subtle about that.

But it was much more than a shop. Located in a renovated three-story warehouse on the north, central edge of Chicago, there were rooms where live models catered to requests from clients, and studios for photographing and creating pornographic books, magazines, and posters. There were production and printing facilities for the distribution of the porn. It had a fully equipped sound stage that would make even Hollywood blush, for the production of innovative pornographic videos that would have also caused Hollywood to blush. Other businesses Sam owned were in construction and trash. Kellie thought this one the most interesting.

Kellie had discovered the Perch the day she and her mother moved in with Sam. Ignored all but occasionally by Sam, and all the time by her mother, she spent more time in this room than in her own.



Alone during the days and nights in the room, the only light on her face from the monitors, she entered the virtual world of the machine, melded with it, and became one with it — and let no one man put asunder.

It came naturally for Kellie. A “savant,” it would have been said — if anyone had been watching. At first, it was computer games. She was soon beating all the boys. That became tiresome. She turned to programming, creating her own games. Where did the code come

from? It flew through her fingers onto the keyboard. No one could beat those games, not even her.

Kellie never went to college, almost didn't make it through middle school. It was all so boring. She got such poor grades she was told she might have to repeat 7th grade. She learned to crack the school's computer system. Then Kellie started getting A's.

Hacking into other systems she found was what she liked best. It was more fun than beating the boys at their games. Here she beat big boys in real-time. If such designations were given in hacker's school, she would be a "Black Belt." It wasn't malicious, and she didn't cause damage. It was just fun. Well, except for the bank where Sam kept some deposits. Here she got a little spending money — a little spending money here, a little spending money there. For now, she didn't take much, minimal, unnoticed, untraceable.

One day her little code was blocked from making a small withdrawal. At first, she thought the bank may have caught her. Then she examined the bank's system. Someone else's code had latched on to the amount before hers. It took her two days to trace the source of that code. It belonged to Thaddeus Reminski Tinkerton. "Brains," for short, at least that's what everyone in his computer user group called him.



Lawyer's families don't have Wills, Doctor's families don't get regular check-ups, Plumbers have leaky houses. Hackers don't protect their systems from being hacked. At least that was true of Brains. Chalk it up to arrogance, perhaps. In any event, Kellie found Brain's backdoor and penetrated him.

She learned Brains was living in his parent's basement in the small Wisconsin town near the cottage. That was curious. She pulled up pictures of him. "How interesting is that?" She remembered him. She examined his code in the bank. For now, it was like hers, removing small amounts from accounts as it tested the waters. But when let loose, it was poised to empty every account in the bank in a millisecond and sail away with Brains to a tropical Island.

That would not do at all.

Kellie left an artifact in the bank's system. Small enough that an arrogant Brains should not notice, but a beacon bright enough to alert the authorities. Then she deleted her code so no one could follow her.

Well. That was a close call.

Kellie wasn't interested in protecting the bank, nor the few accounts Sam kept there. She had another reason, a plan that Brains' scheme could have ruined if he had acted first. It was a wonderful plan. A plan not even an interfering God could prevent. A plan spent many years in the making. She was going to take everything Sam had. — She was going to take his life.

Brain's scheme was a warning. She had stopped him, but there could be others out there about to pounce. It was time to implement the plan. But to find the right person. An artist who was young and pliable, poor and pliable, no family, and pliable. She searched through the internet.

She was not having much luck.

It was a gift from the gods, she felt. Or, perhaps just an accident, when her third bestest friend, Arianna, quit college and came back home. The two spent hours together, with the crying Arianna telling Kellie about her boyfriend, Bob, who had jilted her. They were going to get married, Arianna had thought.



Kellie followed Bob through his Midwest travels, gasoline charges, motel receipts, ATM records where he would pull cash from his dwindling bank account. It was a twisted path that ended in North Platte, Nebraska. She needed him in Chicago.

She sent her second bestest friend, Sydney, to fetch him. Then she paid a Chicago arts magazine to write a story about Bob. She felt she paid too much to get them to print it, but then again, Bob was not a very good artist.

Once she had him in Chicago, there was the matter of getting him to the carriage house. The article in the magazine and Bob's picture she showed her mother sufficed to get the invitation sent. Bob would be the fourth artist in residence. Though each artist was unique in their own way, they all had three similar characteristics: young, good looking, and male. — Funny, Sam never figured that one out.

The first artist was when she was ten, just a couple of years after she and her mother had moved in with Sam. Her mother did not spend much time with that artist. But Kellie did. He offered her candy and small gifts to pose nude for him. Kellie would have done it for free. She thought it funny how nervous she could make him. Once, she had to suppress a giggle when he dropped and damaged his camera.

The second was when she was fifteen. That artist was not nervous at all. No, he wasn't. He had her pose on the table by his easel. 'You need to hold real still,' he told her. He tied her to the post behind the table to help her do that.

The third was only a couple of years ago. When Sam left for the day, her mother would go over to the carriage house, and Kellie would watch through the cameras from her perch. He sure taught her experienced mother some things. Oh yes, he did. And when Sam and her mother were both gone, Kellie went to the carriage house, and he taught Kellie some things as well. Oh yes, he sure did.

It was a wonderful plan. She and her very bestest friend, Janie, spent long sessions concocting it. Well, really, she had to admit; it was Janie's plan. "You be the 'sexy' one, and I'll be the 'smart' one," Janie told her. Kellie was OK with that. They laughed, "We'll make a great team," Janie said.

Sometimes, she was a little afraid of Janie.

From her perch, Kellie watched Robert watch for her to come out to the pool. From her Perch, she recorded Robert as he recorded her prancing and posing around the pool as if unaware of him.



From her perch, she observed Robert when, on his bed at night, he sought release from his frustrations.

Relieve yourself, Robert. Relieve yourself all you want, she mused. But you'll never be satisfied until I'm done with you.

From her perch, she studied Robert and learned.



Robert didn't know of these observations, of the plan he was now a part of, of the snare he was now in.



But Kellie did.

Chapter 4. Getting into Deep Water

She never touched him; that was the crazy part. Last night, she made him ejaculate all over himself and never even touched him. He had his phone cradled near his head while she instructed him, 'reach here,' 'put your fingers there,' 'now slow,' 'now hard,' she had prompted him, aroused him, brought him to the edge, then surprised him. She took control of him as no creature ever had. "Creature" is what came to his mind when he thought of her — a nimble, lithe creature of arms, strong legs, and long hair, an animal that would wrap itself around him and ravage him.

The image excited him, and his penis twitched when he thought about it. But what Kellie had urged him to do also embarrassed him. Masturbation was something he did quite often, but it was a word he kept in the back of his head. 'You're not supposed to touch yourself down there,' he was taught. It was dirty. 'And you're a dirty little boy.' Yet Kellie made him do it. Can you imagine? — while she watched. She was an amused conductor, making him play with his body like a musical instrument. He liked it and loathed it. And what did she say? Her voice, a soft whisper, "You can pretend I'm a boy if you want to." Had she really said that? Is that what sent him over the edge? Robert didn't believe so ... He was pretty sure about that.

Kellie had come out to sunbathe around eleven o'clock on other days. It was now nine-thirty, Robert was waiting at the window — but this time, not to take pictures.

How to do this? She'll come out, throw her towel on my spot, stretch, she always does that, then she'll use some of her lotion, for sure. I should go out then and offer to help her put it on. He smiled. After the lotion, she'll lay the towel on the patio and stretch out on it. That could be a good time. Wait till she's laying down, then ... 'Hi, can I join you?' and lay down beside her. No. That might scare her. Maybe I should go out there now and pretend I'm reading or something. Yeah ... but what if she sees me and decides not to come out?

Robert was still debating with himself when Kellie came out at eleven-thirty. She was wearing her white bikini, Robert's favorite. Robert went to the door. His hand stayed suspended above the handle while he watched Kellie stretch, put on her lotion, and lay down. Shit, it's too late. I missed my chance. Maybe wait till tomorrow. No. This has got to happen. Robert opened the door, then looked down. Shit. Shit. Shit. Should have thought of it before. He shut the door and ran back to his bedroom. Robert didn't own a swimsuit, so he took his clothes off and put on some cutoffs.

Kellie was lying on her back as Robert gingerly approached, wondering what he was going to say to her.

Kellie turned and lifted on an elbow and looked at him. "Hi, want to join me?" Robert lay down next to her.

Kellie picked up her jar with the lotion. "I was hoping you'd come out earlier and help me put this on." Kellie shrugged. "But now I already have." She put the jar down. "Oh well, maybe next time."

The voice reminded him of what a dummy he was.

"I'm glad you came out to be with me," she said.

"Yeah, me too."

Kellie looked hard at him. "Isn't this better than staring at me from your window?"

Robert's face felt hot. "I'm sorry about all that. I guess I felt you being the owner's daughter and all, I wouldn't stand a chance."

"So you hid and took pictures of me instead."

Robert hung his head. There was nothing he could think of to respond to that.

"What's changed your mind about me?" Kellie asked.

"Yesterday, getting to meet you. That was nice."

Kellie smiled. "How about last night?"

Robert's face was burning. "That was pretty ..."

"Adventuresome?"

"Yes. It was that."

"Are you an adventuresome boy, Robert? I like adventuresome boys."



Strings tied into bows were all that were keeping Kellie's swimsuit on. Robert's hand reached out and fiddled with one of the strings on her bikini bottom.

"Pull that string, and my panties will fall off," Kellie said, although she did nothing to stop him. Still, Robert moved his hand away.

Kellie looked him over. "You need some lotion, you'll burn to a toast. Lay back."

Robert did, and Kellie worked the lotion on to him — his arms first, then his chest, fingering it on to his nipples, then his stomach. She slowed at the top of his pants. Robert wondered if she'd see the

bulge. Then Kellie slid down, massaging his legs as she advanced, and even stroked the underside of his feet, making him flinch and Kellie giggle. "I'm going to cover every inch of you." Kellie stretched back to lie next to him. "I got all of you except your face." Kellie put lotion on Robert's cheek, he leaned over and kissed her. Kellie snuggled into him. Robert's arms wrapped around her. Their bodies rolled together, sliding and slippery from the hot sun and the lotion, while their tongues invaded each other's mouths. Robert's hand moved onto Kellie's bottom, kneading her bare skin. He pulled her to him and pushed his hardness against her.

"Miss Kellie, I fixed some lemonade for you."

Robert jerked away. Kellie looked up. "Mary, I don't believe I asked for any."

"No, Miss Kellie. I thought it might be nice for you and your friend on such a hot day. I'll just put it on the table over here for you where you can come and sit and enjoy it."

Robert watched Mary put a tray with glasses and a pitcher of lemonade on the table in the gazebo, then go back into the mansion.

"We might as well have some," Kellie said. "Or she'll come back out to ask why not."

"Who's that?"

Kellie bounced up and stepped to the table. "Our housekeeper, Mary, she's taken care of me ever since I've lived here."

Robert was slower to get up. When Kellie glanced away, he adjusted his pants. "Was she watching us?"

"Probably, she can see us from the kitchen window. She's always been protective of me. You worry her." Kellie struck a coquettish pose. "You know, older man, more experienced, taking advantage." Kellie sat down. "Come on, join me, and have some."

They sat next to each other and sipped lemonade. There was a long, anticipative lag in their conversation. Kellie looked at Robert and smiled. Robert leaned over, put his hand on the back of Kellie's head, and pulled her to him. Their mouths and tongues started up where they had left off before being interrupted by the housekeeper. Robert's hand moved to Kellie's breasts.

"Miss Kellie." Mary was standing next to the gazebo. "I wanted to remind you of your hair appointment for this afternoon."

Kellie pulled away from Robert. She was not pleased. "That's not until tomorrow, Mary."

"Oh. Yes, sorry, Miss Kellie. I got that mixed up."

Mary went back into the house. Kellie let out a sigh. "I guess she's going to keep up with this." Kellie got up. "Let's go for a swim. She won't be able to see us in the water."

Kellie stood at the edge of the pool. Robert had not gotten up. Kellie turned, "C'mon, this is the deep end. All she'll be able to see are the top of our heads."

Robert slowly got up, eased toward the pool, and stood behind Kellie. "How deep is it?"

"Oh, plenty deep. Way over our heads."

Robert could see the other end of the pool, the lighter blue color marking the shallow water, becoming a darker blue as it got closer to him. Robert kept his right foot back. He put his left foot near the edge of the pool and peered over the side. It was all moving crazy, twisting, turning, a kaleidoscope of light, and deep, impossibly deep. He felt his head swimming down near the bottom and stepped back.

Kellie looked at him. "What's the matter?"

"I'm just not real big on swimming."

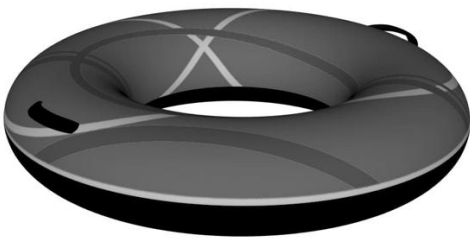
"What are you talking about? Everyone can swim."

"I didn't say I couldn't. I just don't like it."

"So, what's the big deal?"

Robert considered that an interesting story from his childhood. It had even earned him some sympathy points with Arianna.

"I don't really remember the details. It was something my parents argued about, one of the many things. What I remember is mostly what my father told me later when I was in grade school, and he was trying to teach me to swim. I suppose to help me get over my fear of water — obviously, it didn't work."



"It happened when I was about two or three. Anyway, my parents were still together, so I wasn't five yet. They had gone to a friend's cabin on a lake. There was a pier that jutted out into the lake from the shore. The end of it

was in deeper water so people could dive or moor their boats. My father stayed on shore while my mother and some other women walked out to the end of the pier and got in the water to swim. She brought me out with her. I was in a small, plastic inner tube.” Robert held out his arms to show the size of it. “Like you would buy at a toy store.”

Kellie put her hand on Robert’s back, a wicked smile grew on her face. Robert pretended not to notice but took a step back anyway.

“My father says he wasn’t paying much attention. He knows he heard my mother screaming, ‘My baby. My baby.’ When he looked, he saw that a breeze had blown my inner tube away from the women. It was bobbing on the surface of the lake, and it was empty. I remember being on the bottom of that lake. It was a dirty grey. I couldn’t see more than a couple of feet. I hadn’t tried to take a breath yet. Babies naturally hold their breath. But there was something there, something malignant, waiting for me. I could see its face — I had seen it before. It hid under my bed at night. I opened my mouth to cry—”

Kellie crossed her arms. “Well, you don’t need to be a crybaby about it now.”

“Don’t you want to hear the rest of what happened?”

“Not really, Robert. It’s a yawner. History. You made it, didn’t you?”

“Barely.”

Kellie pushed harder on Robert’s back, causing him to take another step back from the pool.

“It’s not that big a deal. Watch.” Kellie jumped into the pool, splashing water on Robert. When she came up, she looked at him. “Come on in. The water won’t hurt you.”

Robert stepped to the edge of the pool and stood to look down.

Kellie flung more water at him. “The water won’t hurt you, but I might if you don’t get in here.”

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“Oh, I think you can.” Kellie reached behind her and pulled off her bikini top and pushed it toward Robert. It spread out on the surface. “Come in, Robert, I have plans for your hands that the housekeeper doesn’t need to see.”

Robert watched the bikini top sink. He followed it down, his head swimming. He stepped back from the edge. "I can't."



"Robert, we're talking about the most adventuresome sex you've ever had. Now get in here right now."

Robert stood back, his arms across his chest, his head down, shaking.

Kellie scoffed. "You really need to man up." She bobbed down and reached for her bikini top and put it on. Then she got out of the pool, brushed past Robert, and picked up her towel. She turned and

looked at him, “If you want to play with me, Pal, you better get used to deep water.” Then she marched off to the mansion.

Chapter 5. It's My Party

Robert called Kellie several times after the pool incident. She never answered. That didn't stop Robert from leaving various vague messages about getting together. Kellie eventually sent him a text message. "Why are you even breathing? You're taking up my oxygen." Robert stopped calling her after that. He stopped taking pictures as well. But he didn't stop thinking about her. Kellie came out to lounge at the pool several more times that early Fall. Robert, hiding in the carriage house, was waiting for her, hating himself every moment he could not tear himself away from the window.

He was better than this. He could remember that.

The days were getting colder. At night there was a crispness in the air, and leaves were turning. There had been a time, not so many years ago, when there was college, friends, and football, girls in short skirts and tight sweaters. There had been Arianna. It had been better. He had been better. He left it to follow the whims of the wind, and it scattered him over the vast grasslands of the American Great Plains.

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There was no plan. Bob wasn't going to some place. He was escaping from this place, the town where he grew up, his friends, Arianna. It was an impulsive, ill-thought decision. He said no goodbyes to anyone except to her. That was as hard as he knew it would be. He steeled himself and broke her heart. Tears filled her eyes. His? No. He was on empty.

The road helped. The hum of the tires on the pavement, the syncopated rhythm, the rocking of the Jeep, the miles and miles moving by him, the world in action passively passing by his windshield, numbed him, and the distance of everything behind him grew.

Bob drifted mostly north the first months, heading into North Dakota about the same time winter was heading south. They



bumped into each other in a small prairie town, where he was snowed in for a couple of days. He thought this might be a good place to spend the winter.

At a café, he met a rancher willing to rent him a small cabin out of town. “But you’re crazy to try it.” It was on a dirt road twenty miles out into the badlands, then past a gate and up a steep trail for another couple of miles. Shepherders used it in the summers but abandoned it to the winter. It had no running water, no electricity, no heat except for a kerosene stove used for cooking, and cell phones did not work. “You’d be all alone out there.” He took it.

Once winter got serious, he was told, not even his Jeep (assuming it would start) could make it down the trail to the gate and the dirt road. The rancher agreed to bring him supplies every couple of weeks, or so, and leave them by the gate. Bob would have to hike down the trail and carry the supplies back to the cabin. He would leave a note and money for the supplies he needed for the next delivery. The rancher was good to his word, and through the winter, every couple of weeks, or so, the supplies Bob requested were waiting for him at the gate.

The temperature that year dropped to -15 degrees. Arcs of the Aurora Borealis twisted and swayed over his head at night, and sun dogs flamed in the morning sky. Ice crystals floated in the air by day, surrounding him with a million brilliant pinpricks of light. The ground was covered with snow, except for stretches where the wind had torn it away. He hiked over the hills, bundled against the cold. At first, he would only go short distances from the hut, tentative. But through the weeks, he became more confident and ventured further out into the hills.

“The Great Plains” is a misnomer, he thought, if one thinks of a billiard table that is. It’s not flat — well, except for parts of Kansas, but certainly not here. From the high ridges, he watched the land rising and falling like giant frozen ocean waves heading forever

toward a boundless horizon. Lower, in the valleys and gullies, windblown rock and snow surrounded him, and the cloudless blue sky spread over the ridges above his head.



It was a stark environment. Nothing moved on it but him. It was serene, noble, and raw. It tested, stripped, and purified. He let himself get lost in the vastness of it all, and the loneliness, and of how small he was. He would stay out until the cold penetrated his coat, then retrace his footsteps in the snow to find his way back to the hut. At night, while the wind rattled the door, he would huddle by

the small kerosene stove to stay warm. He was as an ascetic monk, living simply and alone.

For something to do, he tried sketching and drawing on a small writing tablet. There were no windows in the cabin, so even in the daytime, he needed to use the kerosene lantern for light. He moved the only table to near the stove and put the lantern on that. He had taken his first, and only art classes his senior year at college and there paid more attention to Arianna than to his studies, so his drawings were rough. But he kept at it. He became immersed. His requests to the rancher started including drawing pads and pencils, which the rancher brought every couple of weeks, or so. He tried oil painting for a time but first had to thaw out the oils before using them. One time, as a gift, the rancher left a book on how to draw. My “Guardian Angel,” Bob called him and laughed.

He drew his cabin, and the hills, and the places and people he knew. He thought he became quite good. Bob drew a sketch of the rancher. He did not draw Arianna.

As the winter wore on, Bob became obsessed with his art. Day or night were not much different in the windowless cabin, and he would sit for unknown hours by the stove, a blanket wrapped around him, trying to get a sketch just perfect. This is so crazy. Why can't I get it right? Draw a line here, No. That's wrong. Erase, Over there. He would seize the lantern on the table and hold it closer to the drawing so he could examine it better. The wind pounded at his door, “Let me in. Let me in. Let me see what you're doing.” “No. Go away,” he would shout back. He would get angry at a drawing, wad it up, throw it into the stove and watch it burn. *At least you're good for something.* Sketches that he didn't burn were crumpled and scattered about the cabin. — Sometimes, he forgot to eat. He stopped going to the gate for supplies. — Sometimes, he forgot to sleep.

Then the storm came, heavy spring snow, and the wind, a terrible thing, shrieking and wailing into the night. Bob had not heard a human voice for over three months — now he heard someone outside calling his name. He ran out the door.

He never understood what happened that night, out there in the hills. Never told anyone about it. *They would think I'm crazy.*

The wind grabbed him when he went out the door, pushed him away from the cabin, and sent him floundering through snowdrifts, tripping over covered rocks, falling down in hidden holes, desperately chasing the voice. He stumbled on until he was out of breath and worn out, his clothing soaked inside from sweat, outside from wet snow. He started shivering. He was so far out. He had never been here before. There was nothing he recognized. He didn't know where he was, and so intensely thirsty, he started eating handfuls of snow. His stomach turned and threw it back up. He tried again. The icy water burned down his throat and stomach. His soaked clothing froze to him. There was nothing warm left in his world. He started shaking uncontrollably.



“Save yourself if you can,” the wind screeched. He ran. The storm battered him, the wind hissed with delight in his ears. He needed home but had lost his way. Then he saw his footprints. “Thank god.” They would take him back to the hut. He pursued the prints. But the wind tore ahead and erased them, then turned on him. “Now, I have you.” He stopped and let out a last desperate cry. The wind was exultant. “Yield to me.” His legs could not hold him. He started to collapse. Snow and ice shot up from the ground and tore around him. The wind was shrieking in jubilation. He sank into the blinding chaos from which he would never rise.

“Hi. You look lost.”

He looked up, it was Arianna.

She turned and disappeared into the storm. He chased after her, wallowing through the snowdrifts. The wind whipped him and flayed his cheeks and rose up a terrible angry shrilling. Then his hut was in front of him, the door still open from when he had run out. He stumbled inside and fell down.

“All you have to do is say you’re sorry,” he heard.

He turned to respond, but no one was there. He dropped his head, huddled on the floor, and cried.

That’s how the rancher found him. “I got worried about you after you didn’t get your supplies the last few weeks, or so. People can go crazy and die up here.” He gave Bob a wary smile. “Usually in that order.” He picked Bob up and sat him in the chair by the stove. “I can see you didn’t die.” He looked about the cabin, the disheveled sketches scattered about. “Not so sure about the other part.” The rancher started a fire in the stove and warmed the cabin. “I had to wait for the storm to be over, and some of it to melt. Then it took me two days to plow a path up here.” He fed Bob some food he had brought. “Son, this is crazy.” Then he went about the cabin, picking up the strewn sketches. “Spring is here.” He packed Bob’s papers and belongings into a duffle bag. “Winter’s over.” Then handed Bob the keys to his Jeep. “It’s time for you to go.”

He had had no ambition when he had moved into the cabin other than to escape, but the winter there transformed him. He had been enclosed in a cocoon, his but a small heartbeat, developing and changing in a frozen world. Bob emerged from his little hut to fulfill what he now felt was his destiny. As Christ left the wilderness a prophet and set off to save men’s souls — he had found his purpose, so now did Bob.

Throughout America’s history, the Great Plains was a place people crossed over. America’s great migration flowed over this place from East to West. But some paused and settled, and stuck to the land. It was this precipitate he now undertook to capture with his art and photography.

There was Annie. She looked as old as the original homestead along the Missouri River that she lived on. She took him bouncing



along a rutted road in her rusted “Go to bar car” to a bluff overlooking the River. “Be careful stepping here,” she told him. Archeologists had discovered this spot was an ancient Indian burial place. They had wanted to come back to excavate the site. “No.” She told them, “let all of us rest in peace.” From the top of the bluff, they watched the flow and eddies of the Missouri River busily moving the

Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico, just as it had been doing since the last Ice Age.

He found Jake, walking along a deserted road in north-central Oklahoma, U.S. Marine Corps, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, and damn proud of it. Jake was a wanderer too. Jake left Afghanistan in 2014. It had never left him. They traveled together for a few days until the wind swirled and blew them apart.

He did paintings of Annie, and Jake, and



Nikki, his Blackfoot princess, he called her, who showed him her tribe's secret places in northern Montana; and Shellie, who shooed rattlesnakes away from her yard with a broom so her kids could play; and Gus, who could be found after working at a garage all day, in his backyard fixing up cars. Bob tried to sell his paintings. "Never heard of you." "Are you in some other galleries?" "If only you had something published." "It's really not that good, Son." (Whenever someone called him "Son," he knew they were not going to buy.) He signed each of his paintings with "Bob" and dated it with the year. In a few years, paintings with that signature would be held in high demand by collectors, and art dealers would scrounge for paintings with that little signature. But that was in his future. For now, he ended up disheartened and broke and living in North Platte, Nebraska.

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It had been better. He had been better. He hated what he had become, and he was ashamed.

The phone rang, it was Kellie. "I'm having a party tonight. Come over at seven." She hung up before Robert could respond.

The windows in the mansion were open. Robert waited until he heard music playing and people talking. Occasionally a few of the guests came out onto the patio. They were younger than he, Kellie's age, her friends. He didn't want to go over, but he needed to see Kellie. Despite all evidence to the contrary, he was sure if he could only talk to her, they could get back together. She had called and invited him, after all. That must be what she wanted as well. He could be adventurous. He was sure of it.



Robert crossed the patio and entered the mansion. He had never been in here. He could very much use a drink. The bar was on the other side of the room. He saw Kellie was there with some guy leaning against it. He decided to wait for the guy to leave before talking with Kellie.

It was a typical party, with small groups milling about. Robert could see these people didn't need an excuse for a party — any or none would do. He learned that the purported purpose of this party was for Kellie's boyfriend who was going back to college. Robert was

chagrined to learn Kellie had a boyfriend, pleased that the boyfriend was about to depart.

He stood unnoticed on the outside of a few of the groups. The room was full of adolescent babble. The boys competing for who had gotten the drunkest or most stoned at the last party. The girls comparing to see who shopped at the most exclusive clothing store. (The winner was a girl who was planning her wedding and just returned from shopping at Vera Wang in New York.) The most exotic summer vacation was also up for discussion. French Polynesia and St. Barts were in the running for the yachting crowd. Someone mentioned Aspen, "But everyone's been there." "Yeah, but we had dinner with Rihanna." Who spent the most, for the best, was the topic of the various groups. No one discussed who was paying for their extravagances. Parents were never mentioned.

They were younger than him, separate from him, but the divide was not generational. It was wealth — it was class.

"Who's your family?"

"What school did you go to?"

"What do you do?"

"No one."

"No where."

"Not much."

Perhaps he could have tried a little harder.

He had gone to a small college, and even there had been a long way from being the "big man on campus." It was a small pond, and he was just a tiny fish. But at least there he had some friends, and there he had belonged. Here he was left flopping about, sucking for air at the feet of these haughty, uncaring children.

He thought them a ridiculous group. They had done nothing more with their lives than pick a wealthy family to be born to. Yet, having done only that, they thought entitled to the adoration of everyone else. A pretentious bunch indeed.

He had been inching over toward Kellie. He saw she had glanced his way when he first walked in but did nothing to greet him,

watching his clumsy attempts to fit in. The guy was still there, his left arm locked around Kellie, his right hand around a drink. Robert figured this must be the boyfriend.

He put out his hand. "Hi, I'm Robert."



The guy did not put out his hand, keeping it around his drink. (He did point his index finger at Robert.) "Travis." Then Travis turned his back to Robert, leaned down, and with the drink still in his right hand, began making out with Kellie.

Robert watched Travis's back. He was the most pompous of the pretentious lot of them. The most arrogant of the undeserving

wealthy, the most foolish of that ignorant class. The most ... But he had Kellie. He's a jerk.

Robert's face felt hot. How many in the party had seen him dismissed so contemptuously? Every head was looking at him. Every laugh at his expense. He turned and pushed through the groups toward the patio door. That's when he saw her. There was a brief ache in his heart. She didn't appear to have seen him. Thank God. He didn't need any more rejection. He slipped out without talking to her.

Robert's mind was flying too fast to be trapped inside the carriage house. He needed space, and went to his spot in the gazebo, sat, and watched the lights in the mansion, listened to the music, and the chattering guests. He stayed in the gazebo until the music and talking stopped; the guests all left, the lights turned off, and he was left in the dark.



What was that all about? Why was I even invited? And why was she there? Sydney. God, Sydney Stewart.

Chapter 6. It's My Kind of Town

Scene 1. The Coffee Shop

Robert remained in the gazebo and watched a gray dawn reach across Lake Michigan.



Four months earlier than this October morning, and eight hundred miles from this spot, his soul search had stumbled. His paintings were not selling, and he was out of money. He needed to survive. He took a job in North Platte, Nebraska, working as a photographer for a small newspaper. Working as a photographer for a small newspaper in a small town barely earned him enough to buy food and a place to sleep. Wasn't he meant for more than this? He wondered what he needed to do to catch a break. Then one day, on his way to the newspaper office, his phone rang.

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“Hello, I’m Sydney Stewart. I work for an arts magazine in Chicago. My editor has asked that I do a story on you. Interested?”

Someone had heard of him? And in Chicago? Interested? “Yes.” They arranged to meet. Curious? For sure.

Bob wondered which of his paintings had done it, had caught someone’s attention. He would have to remember to ask Sydney when he met her. It shouldn’t be hard to figure out. Only three had sold, and a half dozen more languished in a couple of craft supply stores. He devoted the next days to collecting his work and organizing it into his portfolio case. Then going through it reorganizing, adding, taking away, then organizing again. Would they want to feature some of his paintings in the article? Was this the big break — the one every artist needs? Now, he was on his way. Nervous? You bet.

Sydney came out to North Platte the next week. Bob had suggested a coffee shop where they could meet. He took some time to throw a few more paintings into his portfolio before leaving his room. Sydney was there when he arrived. “Hi,” she said. “I wasn’t sure how long it would take me to get here from my motel room. It didn’t take long.”

“No, nothing takes very long in North Platte.”



She was pretty, friendly, and wore a short skirt. She had Bob's attention.

"Here's a table where we can sit. I brought my portfolio." Bob started to spread out his work.

"Oh, don't bother. I don't need to see any of that. Let's just talk."

A waitress brought them each a glass of water and said she'd be right back to take their order.

Bob shoved his paintings into his portfolio and pushed it under the table. "I'm a little nervous. I've never been interviewed before."

Sydney reached for her glass and knocked it over, spilling water on Bob. "Oops. Sorry, I guess that makes two of us that are nervous. I've never interviewed anyone before. I just started with this magazine."

Bob pulled some paper napkins out of the napkin dispenser. "No problem. I'll clean it up. So, why did you pick me?"

"I didn't. You were turned over as an assignment. My first." Sydney took out a recorder from her purse. "So, I'm supposed to ask you questions. Do you mind if I record this? If I have to write everything down, I'll get lost."

"Sure, that's OK. Why not?"

Sydney looked serious. "I want to learn all about you, 'on' and 'off' the record, 'for background,'" she giggled. "Whatever that all means."

Bob was becoming less nervous. Sydney was wearing a pleasant perfume. "Go for it."

It was more like a first date, except Sydney was asking all the questions, and Bob was doing all the talking. She seemed interested in him. It had been a long time since he had opened himself up like this. In fact, not since Arianna. In fact, maybe never. Sydney made it easy.

"Well, so how did you decide to be an artist?"

"It wasn't my first choice. There's a small Liberal Arts college in the town where I grew up. We couldn't afford for me to go away to school. So, after I graduated High School, I lived at home and went there. I started off with a science major but later switched to art. I worked a job at night to help pay the tuition."

"Were your parents able to help you with that?"

"It was just my Dad and me. My mother left us when I was a kid. My Dad stuck it out, but her going was really hard on him."

"Oh, tell me more about that."

"Can we skip that for now?"

“Sure. So how did you end up studying art?”

Bob smiled. “Truthfully?”

“Yes, we’re all about truth here, Bob.”

“Well, there was this girl.”

Sydney twirled her hair with her fingers and giggled. “Isn’t there always?”

“She was taking art.”

“What was her name?”

“Arianna.”

“Oh, that’s a pretty name. ‘Pure.’ ‘Holy.’ That’s what ‘Arianna’ means, ‘pure,’ or ‘holy.’”

“I didn’t know that, but the name fits.”

“Tell me about her.”

Bob took a drink of water to stall for time. He wasn’t sure how to talk about Arianna. He was sorry he had brought her up. “She was from Chicago, like you, and was in high school there and then came out to college. She was studying performing arts. I wasn’t in art to begin with. I wanted to be a scientist, an astronomer.”

“To study the stars?”

“Yeah, ever since I was a little kid. I thought anyone can do it. You just need to look up.”

Sydney laughed. “So, you had your head in the stars.”

“The concepts are mind-boggling. That’s what I liked about it. At times it’s metaphysical rather than science. It’s where science approaches poetry.”

“Oh yeah, like what?”

Bob turned toward Sydney and put his arm on the back of his chair. “Well, for instance, have you ever heard of the Kelvin Scale?”

Sydney shook her head. “Not a clue.”

“The Kelvin scale measures temperatures. It starts at absolute 0. It’s the coldest it’s possible to get. All motion ceases when it reaches that point. You can remember it by thinking, OK. 0 K, Zero K. But it’s not OK because everything is frozen. So far, nothings reached 0K. Even in deepest space. Sometimes it’s called the ‘Null’ point. I got in a discussion with my professor that that wasn’t correct. Null is not 0. It’s nothing.”

Sydney scrunched her face. "Zero is nothing."

"No. That's what I tried to tell him. Zero is zero. Null is nothing. He turned his back and started writing on the blackboard, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. But after class, one of the smart kids came up to me and said it might be correct to equate 0K with Null since if the universe ever reached 0K, there would be no energy left, and there would be no coming back from that. We would all be Null."



Sydney turned toward Bob. "That's so cute when you talk that way." She giggled. "Do you talk to all the girls like that?"

"Sorry, that's about all I know about that anyway." Bob smiled. "I didn't do very well in that class."

"So, you were taking science classes, then you changed to art."

Bob shrugged. "I thought it would be easy."

Sydney touched Bob's shoulder. "And that's when you met Arianna?"

Bob wasn't happy they were back to Arianna and kept it brief. "I took an art class she was in. We saw more of each other, started dating. It was my Senior year. She was a Sophomore." For some reason, he added, "We were talking about getting engaged." Bob took his arm off the back of his chair, turned to the table, and picked up his glass of water. "That's all."

Sydney didn't pursue the Arianna subject. "So, why did you give up on your dream ... to play around in the stars?"

This was safe ground again. "Playing would have been good. But that's not how science works. I wasn't cut out for it. I took a Calculus class, for instance."

"Calculus? Yeah, that's a long way from playing."

"Tell me about it. After the final exam, the professor called me into his office. He said I deserved an 'F.' He hadn't seen anyone do so poorly in his class. He told me if I swore I'd never take another class from him, he'd give me a 'D.' I told him he had a deal."

Sydney giggled.

Bob's arm moved back to the back of his chair. "So I went with art. Which is kind of funny, too. Some of the classes were painting nudes. We had coeds as models. You can imagine those were popular classes."

"I can imagine."

"Guys who weren't even art students took those."

"Yeah, I got it."

"They weren't popular with me, though. I was nervous the whole time. I'm a disaster around pretty girls."

"So you don't think I'm pretty. You're doing pretty good with me."

Bob blushed. "No, you're really cute."

Sydney got up, moved to a couch, and patted the cushion for Bob to sit next to her. "I don't see why you would have problems with girls. You're good-looking, smart, a great artist, easy to talk with ..."

Bob joined Sydney on the couch and leaned toward her. "So, you think I'm good-looking?"

Sydney smiled back. "You're kind of cute too."

"A pretty girl can get me to do about anything she wants with just a smile."

Sydney looked down at her feet and slipped her shoes off, then grasped an ankle, pulled her legs up, and tucked them under her. The hem of her short skirt slipped further up her thighs. Bob's eyes had followed Sydney's hand, then the hem as it climbed up her legs, which were bare and smooth, "touchable smooth," as the commercials say. Soft. Bob's head jerked up. Sydney was watching him.

A warm-faced Bob stumbled. "Sorry, I didn't mean to stare."

Sydney smiled. "I don't mind."

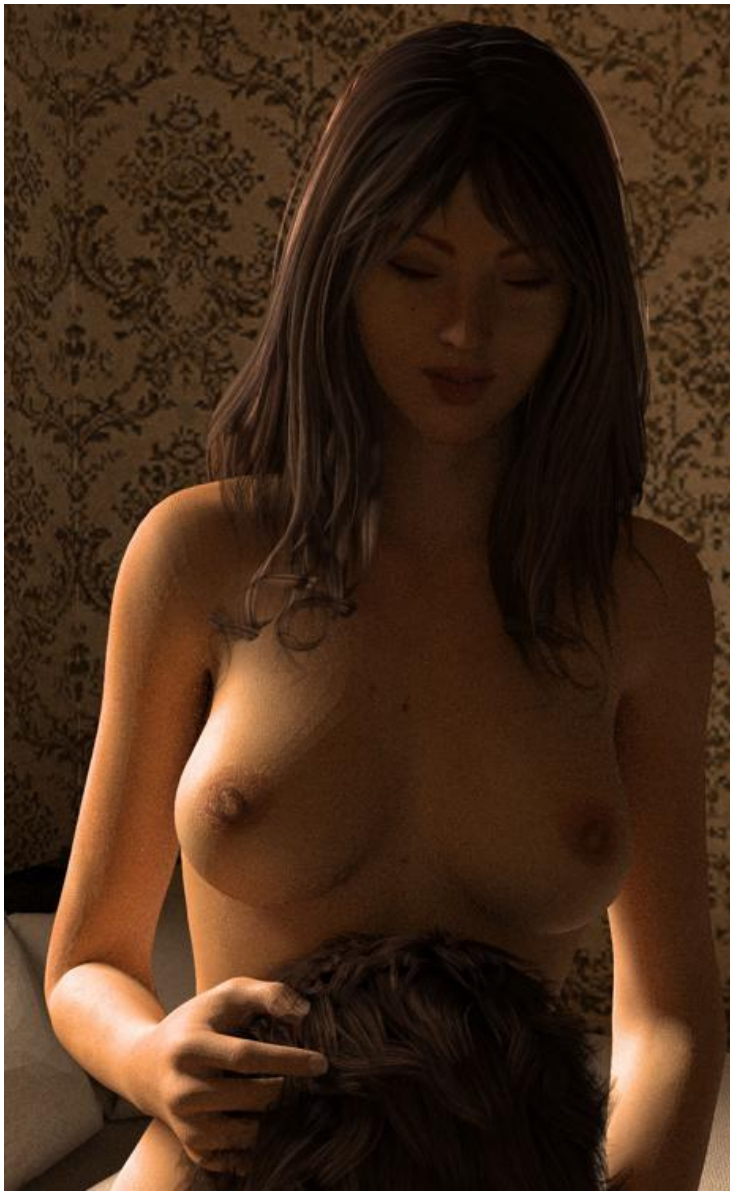
Bob tried to recover. "Do you have any more questions for me?"



Sydney pressed against him. “Yes, but first, let’s get the sex out of the way.”

Scene 2. The Motel Room

Nothing is very far in North Platte; it did not take long to get to Sydney's motel room.



Bob went first. He took Sydney's clothes off, kissing each part of her skin as he bared it. There was no part of her unkissed, no private place not touched, no secret space not probed. He spent the afternoon with his hands and mouth exploring her. He liked what that did to her, making her quiver and moan, bringing her to climax — exhausting her. Then Sydney made it his turn.

Late that afternoon, after the playing and the sex, Sydney and Bob were dallying, neither in a hurry to leave their bed. Sydney lay her hand on Bob's heart. "Tell me more about when you were growing up."

"Haven't we already covered enough of that?"

"I want to know more about you. You said your mom left you and your father."

"Yeah, he had really loved her. In the end, he had a lot of problems... It killed him."

"Did he drink himself to death?"

"No. My father shot himself to death." It surprised Bob how quickly that came out. It was an image that was ever in the back of his head. He tried to keep it there. But sometimes the vision came forward and pulsed between his eyes. "I'm the one that found him."

Bob stared at his pillow, afraid to look at Sydney. "He wanted to see me graduate." Bob played with Sydney's fingers that were on his chest. "He waited until the next day."

Both were quiet for a while. Then Bob continued. "After the investigation, the police released the gun to me. A pistol. I've kept it."

"Why keep it? Doesn't having it make you feel worse?"

Bob shrugged. "It's a remembrance. I look at it sometimes. Hold it. I wonder what it was like, those last few moments before he did it. He was home alone that day. I was out just screwing around. I try to recall what we talked about that morning, what I said when I left him — the last thing I would ever say to him. I wonder if I had said something different, something more ... something profound."

"You feel responsible?"

"I feel like a ball full of shoulds and should nots."

"I don't think Catholics have a monopoly on guilt. Guilt's the basis for all Christianity."

"How'd you know I was ..."

"Read up on you before coming out here. I'm not a total neophyte."

"My mother had left me, then my father. I had just graduated from college, my life beginning when it got yanked out from underneath me. I was bitter about my mother; I was furious with my father, and I was angry with God.

"I couldn't stay at that house anymore, so I took off and have been wandering ever since. My father left me a small inheritance — all he had. Enough to buy a used Jeep and to head out."

"How far did that get you?"

Bob chuckled. "North Platte."

"So what about your girlfriend? What about Arianna?"

Bob fluffed up a pillow and lay his head on it. "I told her I needed room to figure things out, what I was doing with my life. She asked if that included her. I told her I wasn't sure."

"You are a shit, you know."

"Yeah, I know. I've been thinking about that every day since I left."

"You broke her heart."

"Mine was broken too."

"That's not good enough. The bad things we do are never forgotten, we can only try to be forgiven, and you have to earn that."

"I left the only person on this Earth who cared for me, isn't that enough?"

Sydney poked Bob's chest. "You left her."

"And now I'm alone."

Sydney brushed her fingers over Bob's pillow a few times. "Sorry, I was overstepping. I guess I was remembering a boyfriend who dumped me."

Sydney kissed Bob's shoulder. "It's pretty painful. Everyone needs to have their heart broken once. Knowing how it feels, maybe you're more careful next time."

"More careful about getting into another relationship?"

"No. More careful about how you do the dumping. So has anyone ever dumped you?"

"No. I stay loose." Bob's throat caught at his betrayal of Arianna.

"So, you're into the footloose, fancy-free life. When you have nothing, do you have everything? When you belong to no place, do you belong everywhere?"

Bob smiled. "No, you're just homeless."



Sydney moved closer to Bob so their lips were almost touching. "Then come to Chicago. You'd love Chicago." She swung her head. "It's my kind of town."

"I'm studying real people. The working people of this country."

“You’re being awfully provincial. People work in Chicago. People in cities have souls too. I was named after Sidney, Nebraska, where I grew up. When I moved to Chicago, I changed the spelling of my name. That’s not all that changed. Sidney’s not far from here, but it’s a long way from Chicago. I was a little girl in Sidney, but I’m a big girl in Chicago. Come to Chicago and be a big boy. I’ll get you a job with my magazine.”

“I’m broke. I may have enough for gas money to get there. But I couldn’t even afford a place to live.”

Sydney whispered in Bob’s ear. “Then stay with me.”

A job at an arts magazine, that would really help his career, and a sexy girlfriend to live with to boot. Bob quit his job the next week and drove to Chicago. Sydney had given him her card. It had a phone number, but no address. He called her when he got to the city.

“I’m sorry, my boyfriend just moved in with me. He’d go crazy if I let you stay here.”

Bob’s heart sank. Sydney had never mentioned a boyfriend. “Oh, OK. I wonder if I can meet with your editor tomorrow. I need to earn some money. Really fast now, cuz I’ve no place to live.”

“Oh, God. I’m sorry about that too. I got fired yesterday. They thought I did a lousy interview with you. My name is mud around there.”

“Sydney, I don’t know what to do. I thought you and I might get together ... after North Platte ...”

“I’m sorry.”

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Robert remained in the gazebo until the sun broke the horizon over Lake Michigan.



That was a disaster. All she gave me was a phone number for, let's face it, a porn dealer.

Robert sought other places to work at first, but opportunities vanished, and doors closed. He and his art ended up in the back of a porn shop. Slept there too, the first month on the Inquisition rack — except when customers were examining it. There were bedrooms and beds upstairs, but they were being used on a rotating basis, and he couldn't afford the hourly rent. Robert smiled. That was so much worse than my little hut in North Dakota.



Porn in the morning. Porn in the evening. Porn at suppertime. Porn was all around him. Porn about anytime. — There were friends in college who would have thought he was living the life. There was a time he might have thought that as well. But the 24-hour-a-day-porn was like a wet-fish blanket.

He had called the editor of the newspaper in North Platte to see about his old job. “Forget it.” He told the dealer he couldn’t take living there any longer. He was leaving. “Go ahead. But after working for us, you’re not going to find anyone willing to hire you. And Good luck living in your Jeep on a Chicago street.” That’s when he got the phone call. “My client is a patron of the arts, and he’s looking for someone to benefit, interested?”

“Benefits” included living in the carriage house, food, and an allowance. It was more than Robert could hope for. He jumped at the offer. It was explained only a little later, after he moved in, that he was expected to continue to work at the porn shop for his room and board, and his allowance would be a draw against any remaining earnings he might have. Now the trap had closed.

Chapter 7. Falling Out of and Into Love

Darwin started it — some emotions are exhibited in the same way by people in all cultures. Gary Faigan followed up on that observation and described the details of the facial muscles used to create each of the emotions. That was helpful for artists. If their work captured one of these emotions, it could make a universal statement. It doesn't matter where in the world you are, people made the same face for a particular emotion. Even people blind since birth, who have never seen a human face, exhibit the same universal expressions. There are six of them: joy, surprise, fear, anger, disgust, and sadness.

Joy, the beaming face is unmistakable across all cultures. Eyebrows relaxed. The eyes crescent-shaped; the mouth widened with corners pulled back toward the ears. Upper lip straight, showing upper teeth. Crow's feet and smile shaped fold under eyes, dimples. A positive emotion, Robert thought. The second, Surprise, could be seen as positive or negative. Positive, if the surprise led back to Joy. Negative, if the surprise led to one of the other remaining emotions.

After Surprise — Fear or Anger, then Disgust. Finally, Sadness. The inner third of the eyebrows bent upward, or at least kinked, skin underneath piled up in a kidney-shaped knob. The eyes are slightly narrowed. Bags under eyes. Wrinkles are horizontal across the brow folds (middle of the forehead only).

The human condition — of the six emotions we all share and exhibit, only one is positive. Robert wondered about adding another to the list — melancholy. Maybe after joy and before surprise. Pretty much, he felt, where every human being on the planet lived most of the time — before the fear, anger, disgust, and sadness of life inevitably overcame them. He knew how to draw the emotion of melancholy. He just had to look in a mirror.

Robert was sitting at the table in the carriage house. He thought of Arianna. He had been happy then — that must have been true.



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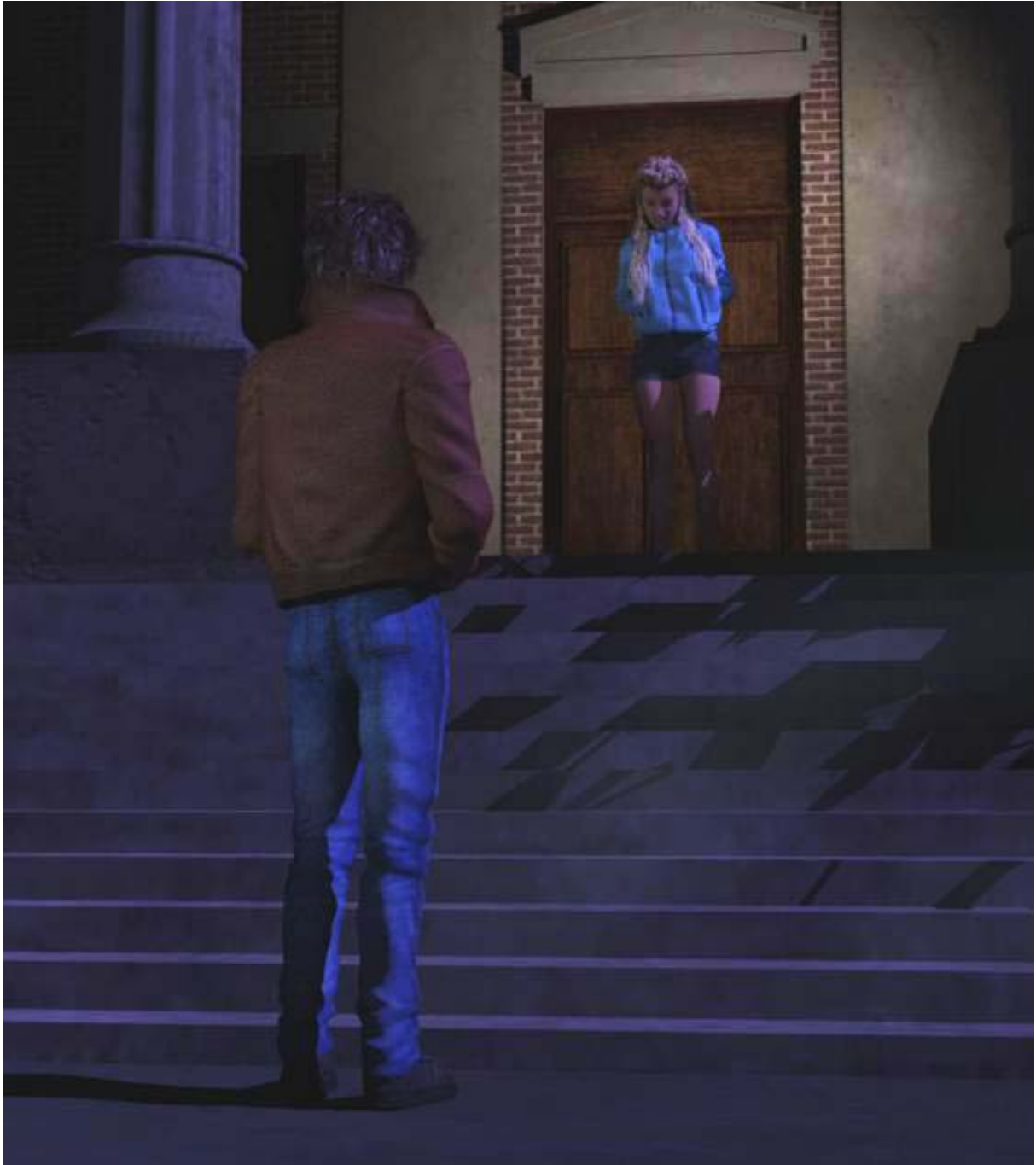
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At the college they went to, there was a euphemism that when someone whispered, “He was in her room.” Or, “She was in his room.” They were daintily saying, clothes were being removed, mouths were on breasts, genitals were being manipulated, and coitus was taking place.

So, there was no question that the times Bob suggested that he come to Arianna’s room, what he was asking for. And there was no question of what she was saying each time Arianna said no.

There is a time in a relationship when it either progresses or becomes stale and ends. The evening of October 28 was that time for Bob and Arianna. And they both knew it.

They were at the bandstand. The evening was turning chilly, and Arianna's bare legs were cold. It was time to end the night. He kissed Arianna and whispered in her ear, "Let's go to your room." Arianna hesitated, then said. "No, I can't." Then there was the long, silent walk back to the dorm. There was no embrace, no kiss, no "Good night," only a glance from Arianna as she climbed the stairs to the entrance of the building.



She turned at the top. They stood looking at each other, each with their hands buried deep in their jackets. Arianna took her right hand out and held it toward him, palm side up. "Will I see you tomorrow?" Her voice higher pitched than normal. His response, a low growl between teeth, his eyes narrowed, his brows contracted. "Sure." His hands stayed in his jacket. Arianna tilted her head, stared at him for a moment, then swung around and went into her dorm.

He entered her dorm room. Arianna's eyes widened. "What are you doing here?"



Bob didn't answer. Instead, he closed and locked the door behind him. Then Arianna knew why he was there, and a shiver ran through

her. "Would you leave if I asked you too?"

"Yes." He paused. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No."

"Do you want me to stay?"

Her voice was trembling. "Yes."

"Tell me you want me to stay."

Arianna stepped up to Bob, took off his jacket, and tossed it into a corner of her room. "Yes." Then she placed her arms around his neck and kissed his cheeks while he unbuttoned her blouse.

Bob's fingers fumbled, and she stepped back to finish for him. Arianna blushed. She was not wearing any clothing under her blouse. She had not been this naked in front of a man since she was a baby, and her father had changed her diapers. Not he, nor her brothers, had seen her like this since. She was embarrassed and pressed against him. He slipped off her blouse. They kissed, their tongues exploring each other as he undid her shorts. She pushed them down and let them drop to the floor. He pulled her to him. Her breasts pressed against his chest. His hands traveled down her back. Then he kneeled in front of her, grasped her panties, and uncovered her.

They both were nervous that first time, unsure, they hurried it. They were clumsy. Through the next weeks, they got better.

"Tell me where you want me to touch you."

"I think you already found the place."

"No, not sexual parts, I want to explore the other parts of you. I want to know every secret place of you."

And they did.

"Now it's your turn. What would you like me to do? Just tell me."

"Yes, there, please. Yes, like that."

"Oh yes, like that."

Arianna liked Bob's fingers grazing over her mouth and cheeks. He loved her licking his eyelids, whispering unintelligible secrets in his ear, and kissing his neck. Arianna quivered, wiggled, and giggled as his fingers tickled down her arm, armpit, and side. Arianna's nipples were clearly sexual parts, so they were not included during Bob's turns. They agreed his nipples weren't sexual, so Arianna

could lick and suck them when it was her turn. They both enjoyed brushing that place, just above their sex and below their bellybuttons. Arianna's arm, "Oops, sorry about that," occasionally grazed his extended member.

Bob would wrap his legs and an arm around Arianna's quivering body, while his other hand and fingers traced figure eights over her behind. Arianna moaned when he kissed the soft inside of her thighs. To hold her still, he laid on her legs while his tongue licked in and around and between her toes. In turn, Arianna lay on Bob's legs, while her fingers played butterfly over the bottoms of his involuntarily twitching feet. They delighted in discovering each other's secret places and bubbled over in happiness.

The young couple played a game. "I'll do a place on you for five minutes, then you do me. We'll take turns."

"Oh yes, there, thank you."

They became flushed as the choices were made.

"Oh yes, like that, my love. Oh yes."

Feverish as the game continued. Five minutes was too long. The turns grew shorter. Tongue flicked tongue, arms embraced, legs entwined.

"Oh yes. Oh yes."

Mouth sucked breast, hand stroked cock, fingers caressed clit.

"Oh."

Their bodies burning, they played until their sexual parts embered and flamed.

"Oh my god, yes."

And joined in a euphoric firestorm of fused, furious, orgasmic delirium.



Oh yes.

*

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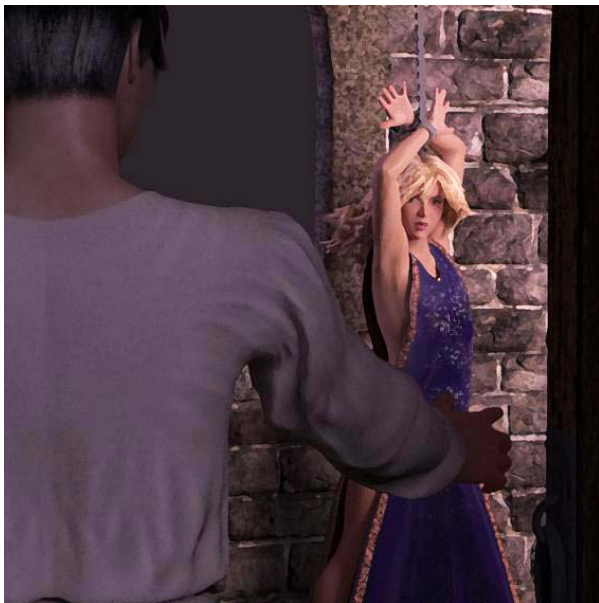
But that was three years ago.

Now Robert spent his days in the city, photographing and painting models for pornographic stories. The central theme of all the stories being the damsel in distress — the eventually very naked damsel in distress, captured by monsters — human or otherwise.

In the city, Robert performed his detested duties faithfully. But on his days off, and at night, he had Kellie — the photographs of her by the pool, at least. He took these to the backroom of the carriage house and spread them out on the table and painted from them, producing the illustrations for the stories. Kellie didn't know it, but she became the virtuous damsel.

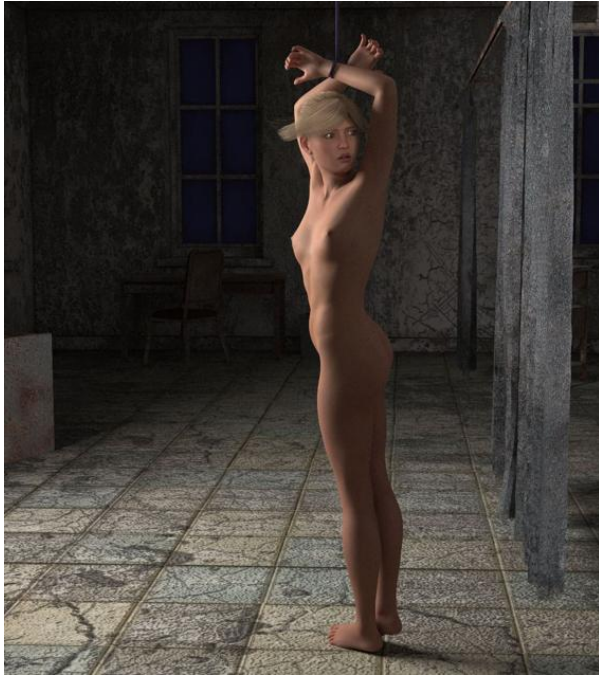


The storytellers were content to leave their damsels in distress. (It might make for a good sequel.) But Robert was not, not with Kellie. He changed the images, thus changing the stories and causing rewrites. Robert would paint himself in — a somewhat more muscular Robert, as a hero, rescuing the damsel, Kellie. He even started covering up her nakedness.



Robert painted what he saw in Kellie, felt about her: beautiful and passionate. Her left eye, a little narrower than her right. Not a blemish, an embellishment of perfection. Her mouth, a little deceitful, so it looked like she was forever smiling or making fun of him. Robert didn't mind. She would make a little joke, and he would laugh. And oh, how she looked at him. Robert glanced up from his painting. Looked at me? Hell. I was spying on her the entire time. She never saw me.

His mind wandered, looking for her. From the patio, after she finished sunbathing, it followed her into the house where she sat down with her family for breakfast.



“Here, darling,” she would say to him. “Have an English muffin with orange marmalade.” He would reach over and pick a small crumb from the corner of her smiling mouth. Her parents looked on approvingly, for she had found such an excellent lover. After breakfast, they’d retire to Kellie’s bedroom to continue their too short a night of lovemaking. There is Kellie, legs and hair, bare feet, her mouth open to him, her eyes taunting him, her breasts waiting for his caress.



“That bitch has you wrapped around her cunt. Go screw her, get her out of your system, and get back to work.” That jarred Robert from his revelry. The writers were not enamored with Robert’s new vision of Kellie, nor were the customers. Sales were down, and his dealer was not happy.

The dealer’s home-run solution was not so simple for Robert, who rarely got to first base. Never good at “picking up girls,” he thought of himself as awkward and not very

interesting — which made it true.

Besides, he had tried. He had called Kellie numerous times with no response — except that painful one, and then later she made it crystal clear at the party, when she paraded Travis in front of him, that there was no chance for him. Making love (Robert couldn’t



consider words such as “screw,” “bang,” “fuck,” or anything so crude when it came to Kellie) wasn’t going to happen.

Unrequited love — Kellie, pure, perfect, Kellie, untouchable, and unattainable Kellie made her so much more captivating and desirable — so much more.

He had worked to get along without emotions. They hadn’t served him very well in the past, so now, when he tried to find the right one, he was out of practice. Robert was an observer of life, a requirement to be an artist, but not a doer, which meant he was not a particularly good one. His art had the world’s details, but not its heart.

He should call her. He knew that. Kellie’s number was in his phone. He would look at it. All I have to do is push the button and talk

to her. But he couldn’t push that button, not any more than he could pull the trigger on his gun last summer.



Fall slipped into the Holidays. There was no work for him at the porn shop for the holiday week, so Robert spent it alone. The gray of winter settled around him. He frittered away the time in the carriage house. Sometimes he looked out at the patio, the drained pool, the gazebo covered with snow.

One day he was rummaging through the studio in the back of the carriage house. He found a portfolio case behind a couch. He brought it to the table and opened it.

The contents were sketches, paintings, and photographs of a girl. A girl, 14, perhaps 15 years of age, and all the one same girl — Kellie. Kellie playful. Kellie contemplative. Kellie sensual and seductive. Kellie naked and as unbridled as the day she was born.

An anonymous artist had done the work in this studio and not furtitive as Robert, a voyeur taking Kellie's photos from afar. No. In these, the artist was next to her, standing where Robert now stood, Kellie naked on the table where Robert had spread out her photographs. The artist smoothing a strand of Kellie's hair, moving her hand to a different pose, touching her cheek to turn her head just so. "Now lick your lips." Breathing her in, feeling the fever of her. The unnamed, disliked artist touched what Robert could not.

Robert worked with models in the studio in the city. There the models were all willing, at least they were paid, and would



(occasionally it required coaxing, cajoling, and inveigling) perform as Robert directed. But nothing Robert had done captured the energy, the spirit, the vitality, the earthy awareness of herself that this artist had with Kellie.

Robert got to the last image in the portfolio and sucked in his breath. It was a photo of Kellie, on the table with the post behind it, her hands chained above her head, as the unknown artist's hand brought her

to orgasm. It was obscene, lustful, captivating. Robert couldn't turn away. He was jealous. Not that the nameless, hated artist was better than he, but with the realization, Robert was not the first. Kellie had had another lover.

Robert kept the house cold. Not to save money. Hell, Gallo paid all the bills. No. He was as a monk, elevating abstinence to an austere art form. Denial, not from need, but to atone.

He shivered as he wrapped in his blanket at night, the top pulled over his head so only his nose stuck out at one end, his feet at the

other. Some adjustments around his shoulders so no cold air would creep in, the same in front, the blanket tight, confined as in a winding sheet, only his feet were cold. He'd push, curl, and scrunch. It didn't help. It would have been a simple fix — get another blanket. He didn't, and Robert continued to have cold feet.

Isolated, lonely, the photographs no longer enough, he thought of the summer, of the Spot, and of the gun hiding in his drawer. Perhaps it was time to finish it. He had dumped Arianna, and not in a very nice way. Now Kellie made it his turn.



Kellie had been so available at first. If only I had gotten into that damn pool. **Well, you're a wimp. What can I say?** She wanted an adventurous boyfriend. I could be that. **No. You're a loser.** If only... **You're a wimp-loser. Even your mother left you.**

If only I could call her.

If only I could get her out of my

mind.

If only I could be with her.

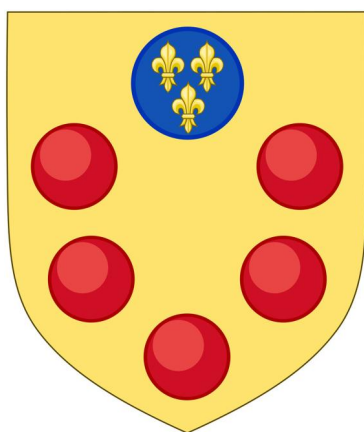
Forget her. She's a lost cause.

Kellie called.

Chapter 8. Dinner with Sam and Elaine

“Sam and Elaine just realized they haven’t met you yet. Come over. We’re having dinner at seven.” Kellie hung up before there could be further discussion.

It was true. Robert had never met them, had never even seen them. They never came out to the patio as far as he knew — and he kept a pretty good lookout on the patio. The time on his phone was 4:00. That gave him three hours to get ready. He decided he better shower and shave.



The Gallos, his benefactors, patrons of the arts for sure. Michelangelo had the Medici family, the rulers of Florence, the Popes of Rome; Leonardo da Vinci had Cesare Borgia and the King of France and their ladies and queens. Now he had the Gallos, also a fine Italian family, Sam and the Lady Elaine. Sam and Elaine. Mr. and Mrs. Gallo. Sam and Elaine Gallo. He whispered their names through his shower. He had found them, and they had saved his life. Or were they the ones who had found him? He was confused on that point. In any event, he had a fine place to live, his food and needs provided, and time to create the art he loved in his paintings and photography.

“Did you forget you were about to commit suicide?”

No. OK, there was just one small fly in the ointment, a mistake, perhaps an oversight — that job at the porn shop. That really had to go. His talent was being wasted illustrating pornographic stories. He was better than that. Tonight would be the time to talk to his benefactors about it. They needed to understand his plight. Tonight they would see he was meant for greater things.

And Kellie? Robert could take a hint the size of a baseball bat on the side of his head. Leave me alone. I’m not interested in you. OK. That’s fine with me. Tonight it was just he and the Gallos. He could

ignore Kellie. Yes. That will show her. Kellie would see. Tonight she would see him in a new light. “You need to man up,” she had said. Tonight he would.

Robert looked in the bedroom closet. It was small, almost an afterthought when the carriage house had been renovated. The clothing he had took up about 10% of its space. What to wear? His only dress shirt had a spot. Robert tried to soap it out. No luck. OK, I’ll wear a sweater and my sport coat. The temperature was going to drop to around 10 degrees tonight, and Robert didn’t have an overcoat, not a dress one. Only an old jacket. That’s not a good first impression. *You only have the first time to make a first impression.* Who had told him that? His mother? No. Nothing worthwhile ever came from her. No, not her. No overcoat then. The sport coat will have to do. That’s OK. It’s just across the patio. Don’t be late — but not early either — just on time — from here to the back door is ... 30 seconds — so say a minute to be sure—

No dummy. Not the back door. That would be presumptuous, even for someone who lives in the back.

—the front door, about a minute — add a minute to be sure — so let’s say two minutes from here to the front door — and add a minute for a fudge factor, so three minutes tops.



Robert left at 6:50 and arrived at the front door at 6:51. He waited. The temperature in Chicago that night was three above zero. At exactly 7:00, he rang the doorbell.

Kellie answered. “Geez, you look cold.” She handed him a drink. “Here, you like scotch, don’t you?”

Robert’s frozen hands carefully took hold of the glass. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I’m a good guesser. Besides, you look like a scotch

drinker.”

Robert shivered a bit as the warmth of the house wrapped around him. “So what does a scotch drinker look like?”

Kellie gave Robert a nudge with her hip. “Like you.” Then she glanced at his drink, “You should get started on that if you want to catch up with Sam and Elaine. There’s just the four of us, so we’re eating in the small dining room.”

Robert’s face had frozen in the Chicago winter. Now it felt hot in the heat of the mansion.

Kellie introduced Sam Gallo first.

Robert put out his hand to shake Sam’s. “Hello, I’m Robert Doran. It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Gallo.”





Sam looked at Robert for a moment. He didn't get up, then looked indifferently at the room, and limply lifted his hand, his elbow still on his chair's arm. Robert bent down and took it.

Sam was unshaven and in rumpled clothing. He had not done much to get ready for dinner. Actually, he had done nothing to get ready for dinner other than to tell the housekeeper to make sure the bar in the small dining room was stocked.

Kellie's head nodded toward the other person at the table. "That's my mother."



Robert took Mrs. Gallo's hand. Her perfume would have announced her presence two aisles away in a supermarket. (Although Robert could not envision Mrs. Gallo as ever shopping in a supermarket.) He thought she was dressed quite well and wondered if she was going out after dinner.

"Hello Robert, I'm Mrs. Gallo."

"Elaine," Kellie said. "Her first name's Elaine."

Elaine glared at Kellie. "Mrs. Gallo will do." She looked at Robert. "Kellie reminded us we hadn't met you yet, and we should have you

over for dinner.”

“Yes, thank you. I—”

“I had thought well of you after reading that magazine article that featured you.” Elaine looked disdainfully at Sam. “But my husband, unfortunately, brought home some books you’ve illustrated. Frankly, I couldn’t get past the pornography.”

“Yeah, I spend a lot of time there too.” Robert was sorry for the quip even as he said it. He often said dumb things when he was nervous. Tonight he was very nervous.

Sam gave Robert a punch-in-the-mouth glare, then slapped his hand on the table and erupted laughing. “Son-of-a-bitch. So what are you drinking there?”

“Scotch, Sir.”

“Shit. Scotch is for women. Here, have a bourbon. That’s a man’s drink.”

“Oh, no thank you, Sir. I really don’t like bourbon. I just drink scotch.”

Robert’s ears were burning. He hoped it was not noticeable. When he was younger, they would do that whenever he was excited or embarrassed. There was a photograph, the one he kept in his drawer, taken at Christmas. His ears were as red as the lights on the tree. His mother and father were in it, so he



knew he couldn't have been much more than four years old.

"Well, son-of-a-bitch. Hell, all right. You're either a bourbon man or a scotch one. I've never met anyone who liked both. Kind of like with women. You're either a tit man or a leg man. Although," Sam snorted, "Goddamn, I like 'em both."

Robert glanced out of the corners of his eyes at Mrs. Gallo. She was looking at the dining room's wall. Kellie shifted in her seat. Robert tried small talk to change the subject.

"I know you're Italian, but your daughter's name, 'Kellie,' isn't that Irish? How did she come by that name?"

"What's the matter, you don't like the name?"

"Oh, no Sir, I think it's a pretty name. I'm just curious."

"Well, her mother's a damn Mick. She came up with it." Sam pointed toward Kellie. "I had nothing to do with that." Then he looked at Elaine. "You were a sexy broad once, weren't you?"

Elaine sat up a little straighter in her chair. "I try to keep looking nice."

"Nice. Yeah, but not sexy." Sam pinched Kellie's arm. "Now, with Kellie, the boys are crawling all over her. Aren't they." That was said as a statement, not a question.

Sam leaned over to Robert like he was going to share a dirty secret, his breath full of bourbon. Her last name's "Heffernan." Means "Little Devil," so you better damn well watch out for her.

"Little Demon," Kellie corrected him. "It means 'Little Demon,' not 'Little Devil.' But yeah, you better watch out for me."

"Little Demon, Little Devil." Sam did not like being corrected. "Who gives a shit?"

Robert thought to try a different subject. "When I moved in, I think you were on a family vacation."

Kellie looked relieved. "Oh, yes. We go for a couple of months every summer to the cottage."

Elaine corrected Kellie. "Actually, that's our lake house."

Robert wasn't sure why, perhaps Mrs. Gallo's haughtiness, perhaps his nervousness. "I would think this is your lake house."



Both Sam and Elaine stared at him.

“Seeing that you’re right on Lake Michigan.”

No response.

“And this is your house.”

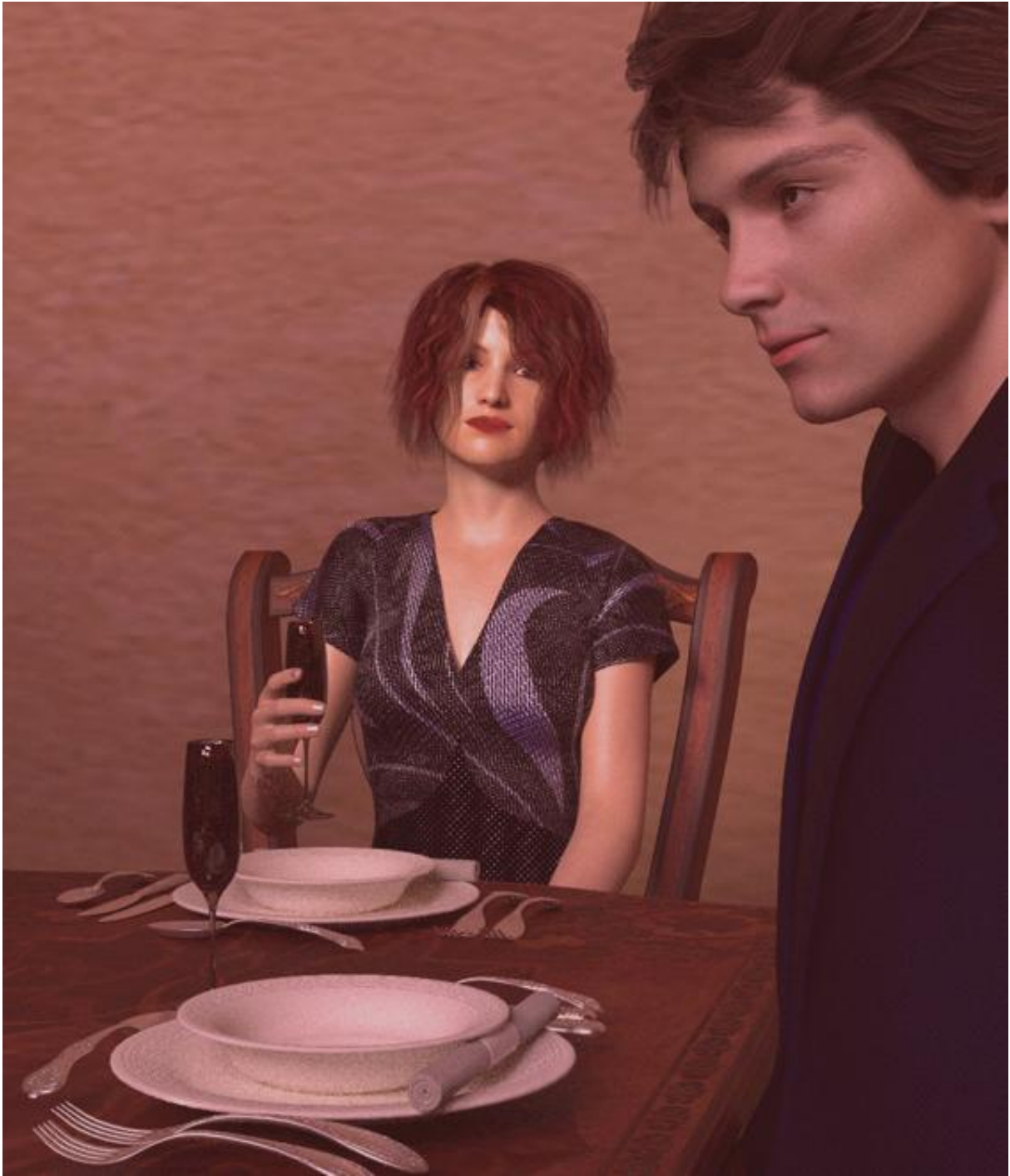
No response.

This isn’t working. “And Lake Michigan is ...”

Kellie had removed her shoes. Her foot reached under the table, and her toes tapped Robert’s leg. “Well, I like to call it ‘The Cottage.’ I loved going there when I was little.”

“Cottage, lake house,” Sam blurted. “It’s a goddamn mansion. I made it the largest on the lake. Those sons-of-bitches know I’m there.”

Kellie smiled at Robert. “Well, I remember it as a small, beautiful place when we first went there.” Her foot moved up Robert’s leg, pulling the cuff of his pants with it. “I think I was eight.” He could feel her toes wiggling against his skin.



Sam continued on as if not hearing Kellie. He was now on to his favorite topic. "Damn right. I played that smart. I bought that place, and then before anyone knew what I was doing bought up the other properties on that side of the lake. They were all small houses built in the '20s and '30s. After I got it all, I moved everyone out and tore

them down. Then I built some big homes.” Sam glared at Robert. “Mine being the biggest.”



“Yes sir.” Robert’s voice was a pitch higher than normal. Kellie’s foot had found his lap.

“It’s only a couple of hours drive out of Chicago, but it was still undiscovered. I could see it would be a gold mine. One way or the other, I got them all to sell out. All except the son-of-a-bitch.”

“Son-of-a-bitch?” Robert asked. His focus had been on Kellie’s tapping foot, but the son-of-a-bitch demanded some attention.

“Yeah, son-of-a-bitch Johnston. We put in a golf course. Only a 9-hole. If that goddamn, son-of-a-bitch would have sold me his property, it would be an 18-hole. But I got even. I put the clubhouse as close to his property as I could.”

Elaine saw an opportunity to chide her husband. “Maybe too close. He took you to court on that.”

Kellie’s foot applied itself to Robert’s crotch. He stopped paying attention to the Gallos’ patter.

Sam frowned at Elaine. “Yeah. I had to pay the son-of-a-bitch a little, but the place got to stay put.”

Elaine was not done. “He was so mad he threatened to kill you. It even made the newspaper. ‘Someone should kill that man.’”

Sam looked at Robert. “I would have called me a son-of-a-bitch. ‘Someone should kill that son-of-a-bitch.’ Biggest news that damn





town ever had. I got even though. I have big bands up there, throw some big parties, pour a lot of booze. The son-of-a-bitch gets to hear that all summer long.” Sam picked up his glass to take a drink.

Elaine loved opportunities to poke at Sam. Johnston was Sam’s sore spot. “Tell him more about ‘Old Man Johnston.’”

Kellie’s foot stopped its activity but stayed against Robert’s crotch.

“Old man?” Sam downed the drink. “Hell, he’s my age. Almost as rich as me too.” Sam turned on Robert. “Almost.”

“Yes sir. How’d he get rich?”

“Well, I have to give the son-of-a-bitch that. He earned it, same as me.”

“Does he do what you do?”

“How much do you think you know about what I do?”

“Nothing, Sir. I’m just asking.”

“Let me tell you something.

There’s an old Italian saying — the secret to success. ‘Alessandro non ha mai fatto quello che ha detto, Cesare non ha mai detto quello che ha fatto.’ You understand Italian?”

“No sir.”

“Alexander never did what he said, Cesare never said what he did. You got that?”

Robert looked at his drink and shook his head. “No sir.”

Sam leaned toward Robert to share the secret. “You can run your mouth off and fail, or keep it shut until you’ve done it.” Sam bent





back and snorted. "And then it's too late. Any way. No. Not what I do. He's a geologist."

"Geologists make money?"

"They do when they take interests in the oil they find around the world. But money is nothing to him. He lives in a run-down cabin down the road from —" Sam looked at Elaine, and sneered, which is as close to a smile as he ever managed, "— the cottage."







Sam droned on, absorbed in his story about himself, and his quarrels with Johnston. Elaine, well, Elaine had more wine and was just absorbed.

Kellie had been quiet while Sam talked about Johnston. Robert especially noticed she had stopped her foot play. When Sam paused to take a drink, Robert decided it was a good time to bring up his job. "I've wanted to talk to you about my work at the Shop."

Sam laughed. "You mean my goddamn porn store."

Robert corrected him. "Well, Sir, I like to think of it as an erotic gallery."

"Hell, call it what you want." Sam is not to be corrected. "But I own half of it, and I say it's a goddamn porn shop."

Robert felt his face get warm. For sure his ears were as red as a Christmas tree ornament. "Yes sir. I know you own it. Your name is all over the place. I wanted to talk to you about—"

"Who the hell do you think got you in there?" Sam thumped his chest a couple of times. "That's OK. Son-of-a-bitch, it makes me money. My partner in there says you're OK. The stuff you're doing is helping sales."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I was hoping I could do something different."

"Forget that."

"But, Sir—"

"I said forget it. You're going to keep doing what you've been doing."

Robert glanced at Elaine for some support, but she was deep in her glass of wine, so he looked back at Sam. "I was hoping I could explain to you my plan for a series of paintings about what America is. It's spirit. Its energy. It's heart."

"What a bullshit idea that is. You're not going to make any money with that."

"It's not about money, Sir. It's to do something important with my life."

Son-of-a-bitch, it's always about money. You suck it up damn good here. Look what I've provided for you, and now you're throwing my generosity in my face. You should be grateful you're not out in the street."

Robert looked down at the table. "I was just hoping."

“You get to be around naked women all day, and you’re complaining. What part of “No” don’t you get?”

Sam now warmed to his second favorite topic — women. “But you, you son-of-a-bitch, you have some new model you’ve hidden away. My partner showed me some paintings you’ve done. He said



they were so good they could almost be in a legit gallery. That model really inspired you. Damn, she looks familiar. Who is she? Is she from the Shop? No. No, I know all of them ... have had most. No, this one is like a sister and a concubine, a bride and a nymph all rolled into one sweet little package.” Sam glared at Robert. “I need to meet her.”

Oh, this is not good.

Kellie’s foot pressed against Robert’s groin. Now, this was getting to be good. “Yes, Robert, tell us about that. Who is she?”

Pushed by Sam and pressed by Kellie, Robert struggled to respond. “Actually, Sir, I just paint from photographs.”

Sam’s hand slapped the table. “Goddamn, that’s what I told him. Your work is shit.”

Robert could accept that — as long as the subject wasn’t who the model was. “Yes sir.”

“You need to have a live model. Something to make your damn blood boil. Your work will be better, it will have life. Nothing like a real



girl.” Sam was playing a movie in his mind.

“Watching her chest move as she breathes. Her body swaying, the sounds and moans she makes. Her fragrance.” Sam looked at Elaine.

“Oh, not those god-awful perfumes women like to put on. No, her natural scent. How they taste when your mouth is on them. And their mouths. I love to watch them talk and use those tongues. God, what they can do with their tongues. Most of all, their heat when you’re near them, pulling you into them.”

Robert felt the heat. Kellie’s foot had not left his crotch.

Sam is also heating up. “You have her in

your room, the two of you, alone. You watch her undress, and listen to her gentle patter. Her soft lips. You breathe her in. You let her heat set you on fire until she has you. Then you take her. Paint that, and you’ll have something.” Sam took a drink. “The trouble with art — with you artists, is you look at life and wonder about it. You don’t live it. You watch, but you don’t do.”

Robert nodded. His attention was on what Kellie’s impatient foot was doing.

Dinner finished, Kellie took Robert to the entryway, leaving the Gallos to their drinking. "I'm sorry about Sam and Elaine. Sometimes, I could just kill them."

"It was fine. Your mom's perfume was a little overwhelming. I could taste it while I was eating. I think she's overcompensating. I almost feel sorry for her."

Kellie tilted her head and looked at him. "You're a really nice guy, aren't you?"

Robert laughed. "What if I said I'm just trying to get into your pants?" That may have been another one of the dumb things he said that night.

Kellie moved closer to Robert. "What if I said I'm not wearing any?" She stood on her tiptoes and offered her neck to him. "Do you like the way I smell?"

Robert nuzzled her. "Yes."

"It's the lotion I had made for me." Kellie smiled. "Don't go away. I'll be back in a sec."

Kellie returned, holding a jar. "I think you're familiar with this." She took a little out and dabbed it under Robert's nose. "Now you'll be smelling me all night. I'll be inside your mind."

Then she put a little on Robert's lips. "It tastes good too." She put an arm around his head and pulled it down to hers and



licked his lips. Her face was warm against his. Then she put a little on her lips. "Taste me."

Robert leaned down and licked Kellie's lips. Then their tongues teased and explored each other's mouths, wet and slippery from the lotion and saliva. They spent some time tasting each other up and only broke to catch their breaths.

Kellie handed Robert the jar. "Here's a present for you. I figure you used up the last one I left you."

Robert's face was already warm from kissing Kellie. Now it turned embarrassingly hot. He mumbled a thanks.

"I think my mother's sweet on you," Kellie said. "Stay away from her."

"Your mother's not what's on my mind."

"She can be persuasive. Stay away. You don't want a relationship with her."

"Because of Sam?"

"Because you're having one with me."

There is a god, except for the jerk. "What about Travis?"

"Travis is away at school."

"Isn't he your boyfriend?"

"Boyfriend? He'd like to be. Good luck with that."



Kellie held Robert's head and leaned up so her tongue could go at him again. "I'll be enough girl for you." Her pelvis rubbed against Robert, encouraging him where her foot had earlier.

A chair scraped on the floor in the dining room.

Kellie broke away. "Someone's coming."

Chapter 9. It's Not Just Phone Sex Anymore

Robert ambled back to the carriage house — he barely noticed the cold. The image of the warm Kellie in his arms would have kept him heated through an arctic freeze — heated and confused. He had gone to the dinner, having given up on Kellie and determined to get a new job. He left with his same job — and with Kellie. Shit. Head-on, she had come crashing back into his life and was taking it over.

In his bedroom, he set the jar Kellie had given him next to the old one. He felt a little embarrassed. Kellie had guessed right. The old one was empty. After he had used it up, he kept it for the faint scent of her, filling his mind with her at night.

He sat on his bed, shaking away her image. This is crazy. None of this is working. Gallo's love of money will never change. I'll be doing porn for him for the rest of my life. And Kellie, she could change in an instant. I'm her boyfriend now, so she says, but tomorrow she'll want someone more adventurous — a Travis. His mouth could still feel Kellie's tongue exploring his. He shook his head again. No. Having to keep creating that damn porn was a deal-breaker. He was going to leave this place and take the jars with him for as far as they would take him. He would just have to be content with his fantasies of Kellie.

Robert took off his clothes and got into bed, opened the new jar, and Kellie filled the room. He closed his eyes, and Kellie's barefoot massaged him, then her hands caressed the lotion onto him. He became erect.

His phone rang.

It was Kellie, a regular call this time — not Facetime. Robert was disappointed. The last time had embarrassed him, for sure, but it had also become a part of his regular fantasy repertoire.

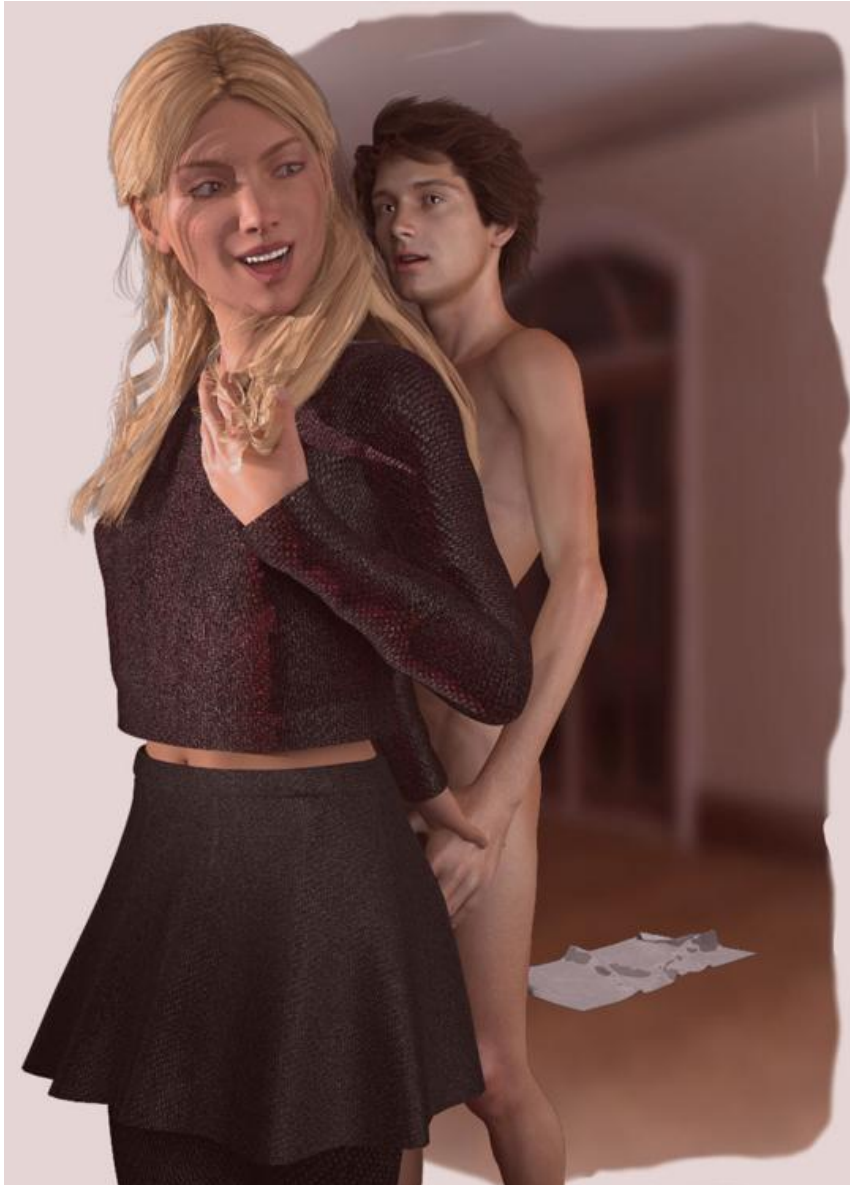
"Unlock the door. I can't get in."

That confused Robert. "What door?"

"I'm trying to get into your house, and you locked the door. Hurry up. It's cold out here."

Robert grabbed a towel, wrapped it around him, and clutched it to him as he rushed to the door and opened it. Kellie walked in.

She looked at the towel, covering Robert's still obvious erection. "I thought I'd find you like that." She snickered and looked up at Robert. "Were you thinking of me again?" Kellie placed her hands on Robert's stomach. He flinched. They were cold from being outside. "I had to wait for Sam and Elaine to go to bed."



She took Robert's hands that were clinging to the towel and pulled his arms apart. Cold air drifted across Robert's pubic hair and what was left of his erection. Kellie took the towel and dropped it on the floor. "I thought I would handle this personally."

Kellie led Robert into the bedroom and pushed him onto his bed.

"It's cold in here." Kellie turned up the heat.

She went to the bedstand and looked at the empty jar. "I guess I'll have to keep you better supplied."

She picked up the new jar. The bed sagged as Kellie knelt in the middle and spread Robert's legs on each side of her. "Let's put a little more on you." She scooped a glob out of the jar and rubbed the lotion on her hands. They were still cold from being outside when she cradled Robert's balls, and he jerked. His legs clenched against Kellie's hips. His arm muscles tightened, his hands grabbed the sides of the mattress and held on as Kellie spread the lotion onto his balls and penis.

Robert's erection had subsided with Kellie's surprise visit. Now, unnerved, naked, with the fully dressed Kellie sitting between his legs, inspecting him as he had watched her at the pool, worried about what he looked like, worried if he could get hard, worried she wouldn't think he was big enough, it completely went away.

Kellie massaged the lotion on to him. "It's OK, Robert. Let yourself go. Just relax. Just feel what I'm doing to you."

Robert closed his eyes and moved into his fantasy — his Kellie fantasy, her playing with him through the long nights, taking him over, tormenting him, loving him. Robert's body responded, and he felt himself growing in Kellie's hands. His head pressed back into the bed. His breathing became heavier.

Kellie's fingers teased him, making him harder and harder until the skin on his penis was so tight it hurt.

"I've learned a bunch about this on the Internet. Do you want me to tell you about it?"

Robert moaned.

"I'll take that for a yes."

Kellie moved into teacher mode. "So this entire thing I'm stroking is your penis. You got your erection because of blood flowing into it. I'm going to keep it hard for awhile. At the end is the head of your penis." Kellie's stroking hand held Robert while the index finger of her other hand twirled and tingled around the rim, sending an ache through his balls. His butt muscles clenched and unclenched in rhythm to the teasing finger. "It's sensitive. Like a girl's clit."

Kellie rolled her palm around the head. The stimulation became unbearable, and Robert's hips twisted to move away. His hand reached to stop hers. Kellie paused. "Put your hands up and grab the headboard and don't interfere." She waited until he complied.

“OK. Let’s continue. You’re very sensitive just below, on the underside, and especially responsive to light and soft touches,” Kellie demonstrated, “like this.”

Robert’s head pressed against his arm, trying to endure the stimulation. His hands pushed back and forth on the headboard. Kellie had said to keep them there. He was struggling to do that.

“I read repeated stimulation here will cause orgasm and ejaculation. Do you think that’s true, Robert?”

Robert moaned, the bed squeaking.

“That’s OK. You don’t have to answer.”

Kellie continued with light touches, mingled with occasional stroking of his whole penis. Robert’s body shook as he got closer.

Kellie stopped. Robert placed a hand on Kellie’s and nudged her to start again. Kellie pushed it away and laid on top of him. Her weight pressed him into the bed. She squeezed his penis between her legs and rocked her hips.

She nibbled and licked Robert’s ears, softly murmured a secret into them, then covered them with her hands. Her mouth moved to his eyes, kissed them, licked his eyelids, and took away his sight. Her tongue worked into his mouth, and she was all he could taste. Her scent filled his mind. The heat of her on top of him pushed him into the bed. Kellie occupied all of Robert’s senses. His world became small — it was now all Kellie. She consumed him. Then her mouth covered his, and she took his breath away.

Kellie lay next to Robert. Her hand strayed down his chest, circled a nipple, moved to his stomach, and pelvis, then his penis. Her other hand worked under his ass and to his balls. The center of his world was now where Kellie’s hands were composedly engaged in sending jolts of lightning through him. Fast, slow, hard, light, he was panting, groaning, and whimpering as she played him like a sensual, musical instrument.

Her fingers tickled his balls and skimmed up and down on the back of his cock. She had him breathing hard, like he was running a race. Every so often, to fully harden him, she would stroke his cock. Then she would return to the tickling. Over and over, tickling, stroking. Lighter and slower as he got closer. Ever closer, ever slower, she took him.

His hips rocked to her strokes, then bucked as he lost control.

"Hold still," she said, "so I can work you over better."

"I can't." He gasped.

"Next time, I'll tie you up."

Robert turned toward Kellie, his hand reached for a button on her blouse, "How about if this time, we make love."

Kellie stopped him. Her hand gripped his fingers that were working the button, "Not this time.."

"Kellie, you invite me over for dinner. You drive me crazy all night long with your foot. I can't believe Sam and Elaine didn't know what was going on. I kept dropping the silverware."

"That was pretty funny."

"Then you come over here, then ... this ..."

"Listen to me. I said, not this time."

Robert frowned, his fingers fixed on Kellie's button.

"Don't look so hurt. This isn't about you."

"Of course it's about me. It's about us."

"Please. Give me some time." Kellie squeezed Robert's fingers. "Please."

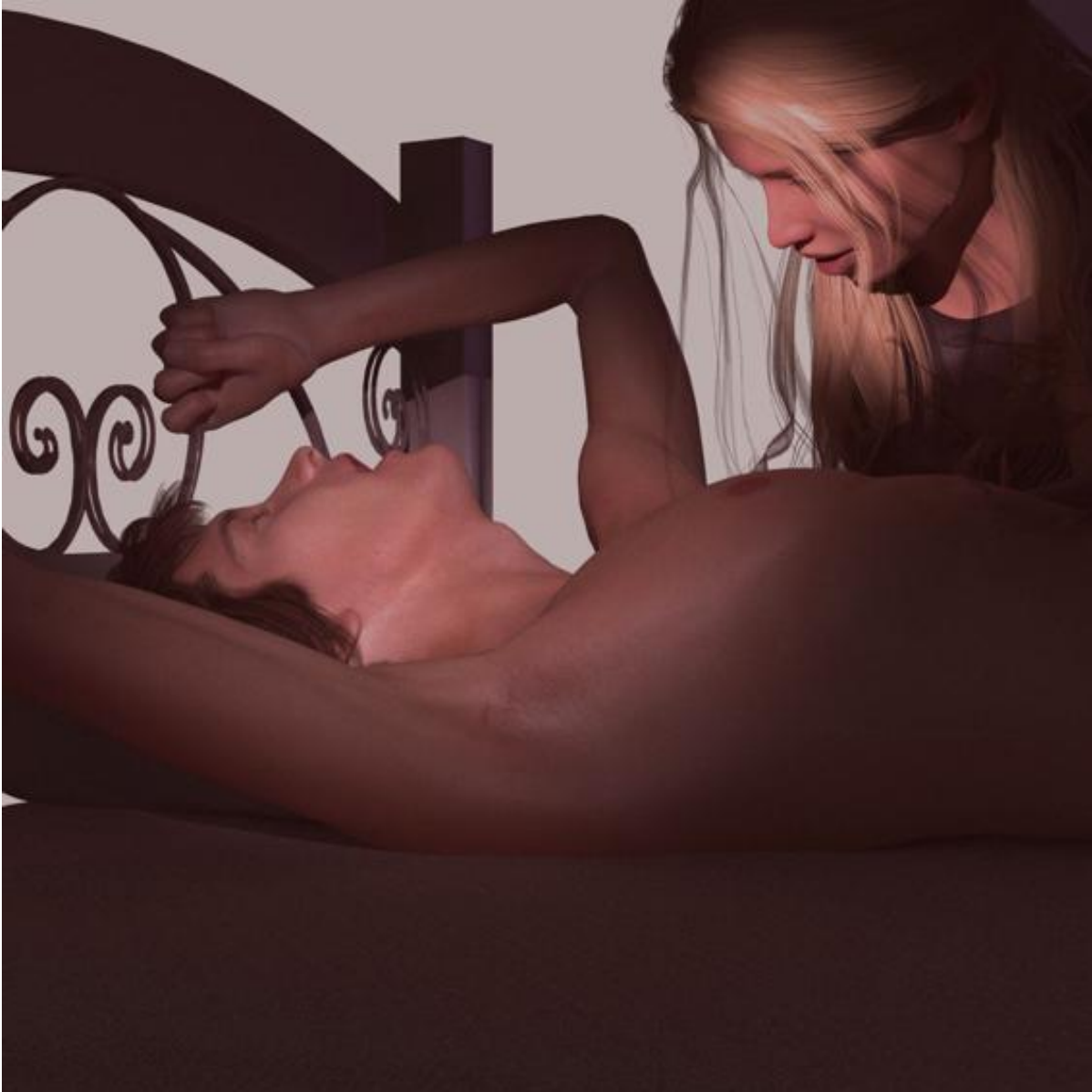
Robert didn't think Kellie ever used the word, "Please." He released the button and lay back down.

"That's better." Kellie started her instructing again, her hand knowingly stroking Robert's cock. "The orgasm I'm about to give you occurs in two phases, Robert, emission, and ejaculation. In emission, your semen is deposited near the top of your urethra. That's called ejaculatory inevitability, the 'point of no return.'"

Robert's body stiffened. Kellie's hand made quick little strokes at the tip of his penis. His legs stretched out tight. His hips lifted as his balls, which Kellie was rubbing, tightened. His heart was pounding. He was panting like he was running a sprint.

"That's where I have you now. You're cuming now, whether or not you want to." Kellie jerked her hand off his cock and smirked. "And whether or not I stop."

His hips heaved. He tried to beg, but his breath caught in his throat. He panicked. No. His head pushed back into his pillow. No. His hands desperately grabbed the bed, his eyes squeezed shut, his



hips arched. His legs shot out. A cry escaped. His body convulsed. Pelvis pumping, penis muscles in rapid-fire contractions. Then Kellie reached out and stroked him, and he cried out as warm gobs hit his stomach and chest, and she drove him through it.

His legs and arms were tight as drums, holding him off the bed. After a heartbeat or two, he shivered, his muscles relaxed, and he collapsed, sinking into the mattress. His breathing slowed.

Kellie kissed Robert's cheeks and mouth. A peck here, a peck there on the unresponsive Robert. "I guess I don't have to describe ejaculation to you."

Her hand played with his shoulder. After a while, Robert's arm reached around Kellie and held her and squeeze her. "I wasn't expecting that."

"You enjoyed it, right?"

Robert rubbed Kellie's back. "It was incredible." He chuckled. "You learned all that on the Internet?"

Kellie smiled. "Maybe."

"The whole evening. Your foot ... this. Why? What's changed your mind about me?"

"You trying to rescue me at dinner."

"I'm not sure I was all that helpful. I kept trying to change the subject, but whatever it was, Sam made it vulgar. I feel bad about how he talked in front of you."

"That's Sam."

"I had a different image of what he would be like. A supporter of the arts." Robert chuckled. "A soft-spoken, bi-spectacled, smoking-jacketed college professor was the look I was going for."

"That's not Sam."

"No. He's not like anyone I've known before."

"Well, to know him is not to love him."

"Did you mean what you said after dinner, that we're having a relationship?"

"Isn't that what you've wanted?"

"Since I met you. But after the swimming pool, and your not answering my calls, and parading Travis in front of me ... I figured it was never going to happen."

"It can happen if you want it to."

"You said if I wanted to be with you, I needed to learn to swim in deep water. What about that?"

"It's winter-time. Let's worry about that next summer."

"I think you meant more than swimming."

"Well, I like guys willing to take a chance, who live on the edge, break a few rules."

"Like Travis?"

"Yeah, like him. But he's such a jerk. I told you he's out of the picture. You have potential, though. Except you're so full of rules, I



expect you'd break if you broke any of them."

"So I left home and was a vagabond for a couple of years. Hey, I'm a porn artist. Doesn't that count for something?"

Kellie giggled. "That's what I said. You show some promise, and I guess I can work with that."

"I don't think I'll ever be enough for you."

They were silent for a while. A gust of wind rattled the window. Robert shifted in his bed. "This is a little hard for me."

Kellie grinned and patted Robert's groin. "So soon, I thought I already took care of that."

Robert took and held Kellie's hand. "No, not that. Can we be serious for a moment?"

"I'm all about serious. Go for it."

"Us having a relationship now is ... difficult because ... I've decided I'm leaving."

"What? Why?"

"I liked my vagabond life. Sure, I was living hand-to-mouth, but I was doing the art I wanted. I was free, and I was doing what I wanted. Now I'm living in this... cage. I'm not free, I'm still poor, and I'm dealing with subjects I'm not proud of. Sam said I was doing porn. I called it what ... exotic art? Well, Sam is right."

Robert sat up. "I guess I felt some loyalty to him. My patron. Humph. I thought if I could talk with him, he would have me doing some real art. I didn't understand how much money meant to him. Sam owns the damn place, and he owns me."

"He owns a lot of damn places and a lot of damn people."

"I won't stay under his thumb."

Kellie curled next to Robert. "Life would be easier if he wasn't around. Mine sure would be, at least."

"I've got to get out of here."

"What about us?"

"So what about us? Until tonight I didn't know there was an 'Us.' You refused my phone calls, you touted Travis around me. You—"

"We've already covered that. You need to listen to me. I'm here now. Didn't I just prove that?"

"You didn't want to make love."

"Would you please get over that, at least for now? I'm working through some stuff."

"Kellie, I could get over that. Normally. I think ... But my being here is not normal. I'm not even sure why I'm here, or why I got invited. And after I met Sam ... This is so ... tough. Listen, I've made up my mind."

“Do you always run away when things get tough?”

“Life’s hard enough. I don’t need Sam to make it worse. I’m better off out of here and without him.”

“Are you better off without me? Do you always take off when a relationship gets complicated?”

Robert looked out the window. The wind was picking up, rattling the window. “I think a storm is coming.”

“You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you?”

“Kellie, there’s nothing to break. We really don’t have a relationship.”

“Not if you run away.”

They held each other for a while, then Kellie asked, “Where would you go?”

“I don’t know. I just know I’m out of here.”



Kellie pushed Robert back down onto the bed and wrapped her legs and arms around him. “Well, I don’t think I’ll let you go.”

Chapter 10. Sam Pays A Visit

“I’m going to kill that son-of-a-bitch.”



Robert was in the kitchen, washing dishes after breakfast when the threat came booming through the house. He rushed toward the front door as Sam barged in — a winter storm and a distraught Kellie trailing behind.

Robert's brain went into overdrive. His thoughts, in the following order, but almost simultaneously were: Sam is in the same disheveled clothing he had on at dinner. Barging in must be a family trait. Sam found out what Kellie and I did last night. He's going to kill me. That final thought stayed in Robert's mind as Sam charged at him like a bull moose.

"You son-of-a-bitch, Kellie told me you're using photographs of her to paint your goddamn nudes."

Sam came to within a couple of feet of Robert. "I'm going to break every one of your goddamn fingers. You'll never paint again." Sam paused — Robert was still holding a kitchen knife he had been washing. "I should call some guys and have you taken care of. I should get my lawyers to sue your ass."

Kellie stood off to the side. "I don't think he was breaking any laws. I'm over eighteen."

Sam continued to glare at Robert. "Invasion of privacy, he's a goddamn Peeping Tom for Christ's sake. I think I'll just beat the shit out of you."

Kellie raised her voice. Sam was never very good at hearing her. "I knew what he was doing."

Sam turned toward Kellie, "Stay out of this."

"I wanted him to."

Sam took a step, "I'll take care of you later." Kellie backed up.

Robert was relieved Sam's anger was diverted from him, but now Kellie had to bear it.

Sam scowled. "A man sins, a man pays."

Kellie was crying angry tears. "You're the one talking about paying for sin?"

Sam's eyes pierced Kellie. "God's vengeance will find us all."

Robert put his arms up, pleading. "Mr. Gallo, it was me, not Kellie. Blame me."

Sam glowered at Robert and gestured with his head. "Put that knife down, and maybe we can talk about it."

Robert hadn't realized he still had the knife in his hand. He walked over to the table by the window, put it down, and turned to look at Sam.

Robert is not a quick thinker under pressure. All he could think of to say was, "Sir, if it helps, since I've been using Kellie's photos, my paintings are more popular."

"So more assholes are gawking at her. How is that supposed to help?"

Kellie knows Sam. "They're making more money."

Sam strolled over to the door and looked out. Snow was piling up on the patio.

Robert walked over to Kellie. "Kellie, I'm sorry I took those pictures. I'm sorry if I hurt you."



Kellie nudged Robert and leaned against him. They both watched Sam.

Sam turned around to face them. "My Kellie tells me you're thinking of leaving. That's not gonna happen. You owe me. I haven't gotten to where I am without taking advantage of opportunities, those I created, and those that just came around. This one seems to have just come around."

Sam stalked up to Robert. "Here's the deal. I said you needed a live model so your paintings wouldn't look like shit. So, you're going to use my Kellie."

Robert's eyes widened. "You were about to break my fingers for taking pictures of your daughter, and now you want her to pose for me?"

Sam poked Robert's chest with his fingers. "On my terms. Here's the rules. Number one, you touch her, and I kill you. Got that, Pal?"

"Yes sir."

"Number two, this stays as a business between you two. You're the artist. She's the model. There's not going to be any other relationship. Got that?"

"Yes sir."

Sam put his face up to Robert's. "No hanky-panky."

Robert nodded his head quickly in assent.

"Number three, you don't tell no one she's your model. Got that?"

"Yes sir."

"I don't want a bunch of sons-of-bitches laughing at me while they're ogling paintings of my Kellie."

"No sir."

Sam gave Robert a dirty look.

"Yes sir. I understand."

"Number... I don't remember what number, but here it is, you pay me fifty percent, off the top, of everything you get for a painting that has my Kellie in it."

Kellie had been wiping tears from her eyes. She looked up. "So, you're going to sell me?"

Sam turned toward Kellie. "I make money off all my assets. You and your mother have bled me for years. It's time you pay something

back. You pranced around with almost no clothing on for this son-of-a-bitch for free, so now you can prance with no clothes for money.”

“Sir, the gallery already takes fifty percent. If you do too, that leaves me with nothing,” Robert said.

“Nothing’s what you deserve, Son-of-a-bitch. I know what the gallery gets. You’re going to get nothing. I’ll keep you fed and let you continue to live here. That’s it.”

“Sir — Mr. Gallo. I’m really confused on how I even ended up here. I appreciate it — all you’ve done for me. But ... but I think it would be better if I leave.”

“You owe me.”

“I thought it was a gift, you and Mrs. Gallo helping the arts. You’re a patron of the arts.”

“I’m a patron of me. You cost me money, now you pay me back. You’ve been here for about eight months. So you stay for eight months, and I get my percentage off you.”

Robert’s eyes teared up. “That’s not fair.”

“Your choice, my deal, or you’re out of here.”

Robert’s voice was breaking. “That’s what I want, out of here.”

“You leave, and you’ll leave with broken fingers.”

Robert clenched his jaw, his hands squeezed in tight fists.

“You got three seconds, either you’re working for me, or you’re never working again.”

If Robert had tried to talk, all that he could have managed was sniffing. He bowed his head.

“Good choice.”

Sam opened the door and turned as he was leaving. He yelled to be heard over the storm. “Congratulations, Pal. Your world has just changed.”

After Sam left, Robert turned toward Kellie, his eyes still full of frustration tears. “Why did you tell him about the photographs?”

“He guessed at it this morning and confronted me. I’m scared of him. I just blurted it out.”

Robert looked away.

Kellie put her hand up to Robert’s face and turned it to her. “Look, I’m sorry. OK? I didn’t know what else to do.”

Robert walked over to the table, wiped his eyes with his sleeve, and stared out the window. "Maybe you should have stood up to him."

Kellie sat down at the table.

"Let me tell you a story about Sam. When he was younger and just starting out, he would work under-the-table for cash. One night he was leaving a worksite, just having been paid, and a guy comes up to him and points a gun at him. 'Give me your money.' Sam pulls out a gun and points it at the man. They're both within three feet of each other. The man fires. He misses. Probably surprised or panicked. Sam fires back. He misses. The man runs away. The police must have been nearby. They show up before Sam can run off as well. They're looking at charging him with several violations. They ask him why he just didn't give the guy the money. Sam told them, 'If that son-of-a-bitch wants my money, he'll have to work for it as hard as I did.' They didn't charge him."

Kellie looked up at Robert. "See? He's a scary guy. So, why didn't you stand up to him and turn down that terrible deal he made you?"



Robert sat down. "He's a scary guy."

Kellie put her hand on top of Robert's. "At least we don't have to hide anymore."

"Yeah, well, I guess I was the one doing the hiding."

Robert put his other hand on Kellie's. "Why did you let me keep taking pictures of you?"

"It was a little exciting. Strolling around with not much on, knowing I was turning you on." Kellie massaged Robert's hand with hers. "I was, wasn't I?"

Robert looked at their hands, smiled, and nodded, then looked up at Kellie. "Sam said he would deal with you later. What does that mean?"

"He has his ways. It's OK. I've learned to live with it. But life would be simpler if he wasn't around."

"He's not going anywhere. How come you told him I was thinking of leaving?"

"I don't know. It just came out while he was yelling at me. He was throwing the pictures at me, telling me I was a slut. And I said, 'You won't have to worry about that anymore, he's leaving.'"

Kellie got up and stood in front of Robert and put her hands around the back of his neck. "Are you still thinking of leaving?" She was wearing her lotion. Its fragrance had filled Robert's room for so many nights, including last night.

"I was before, and now even more with that deal he forced on me."

"With Sam, a deal's a deal. The only way out of it now is to kill him."

"Who said anything about killing? I just don't want to work under his conditions."

"You still don't understand. You can't leave now. Sam meant what he said."

Robert didn't respond.

"If you go, he'll take it out on me."

"Well, I don't want that. It wasn't your fault. It was mine," Robert gently massaged the knuckles on his hands. "Maybe I do owe him."

Kellie took Robert's hands and placed them on her breasts. "Will you stay for me?"

"If I stay, would he still take it out on you?"

"Probably not. He'd have gotten what he wanted."

"I guess if I stay, I'll at least get to eat and have a place to live."

Kellie pressed Robert's hands. "And me. You'd have me."

Kellie put her mouth close so Robert could feel her lips moving over his ear. "I want you to stay." She kissed his ear. "Please." Then she put her hands on each side of Robert's head and held his gaze.

Robert nodded.

Kellie bounced back and clapped her hands. “So when do we start?”

“I guess tomorrow.”

A gust of wind hit the door as Kellie opened it, almost blowing it out of her hands. She swung around as she stepped out. “Thanks for trying to rescue me again.”



She turned and left before Robert could respond.

Chapter 11. Modeling

The storm that started yesterday had turned into a Midwestern blizzard. It closed the city down, so there would be no work today. Robert was sitting at his table, watching the storm, and having his morning coffee.

Kellie tracked in. "So, you and Sam think I should pose nude for you."

She closed the door and stomped her feet a couple of times to knock snow off her boots. "It occurred to me that despite your voyeuristic hobby last summer, except in your sordid little mind, you've never seen me naked. I thought I'd take care of that minor issue." She stepped toward Robert and brushed snow off the snowsuit she was wearing. "I have three pieces of clothing on."

She looked down and slipped her foot out of one of her boots. Her foot was bare. She looked at Robert and smiled. "Now, I have two."

Kellie took a couple of steps toward Robert, put her arms out for balance, and using her barefoot against the heel of the other boot, slid her foot out. "Now, I have one."

Kellie unzipped the top of her suit, exposing her skin and bare breasts. She pulled an arm out of one sleeve, then the other, held the suit to her for a moment, and slid it down to her waist. Kellie kept the suit on her hips for a moment, then lifted her arms and wiggled her hips until it dropped to the floor.



She stepped out of the crumpled suit and looked up at Robert, amused. "Now, I have none." Kellie sashayed up to a feverish Robert and stood so close he felt the warmth of her breath. "So you think you can handle this?"

Kellie brushed past Robert and strode toward the studio. "Come on, Pal, let's get to work."

Inside the studio, Kellie turned around to face Robert. "So, what are you going to do with me now that you have me all naked and alone?" Kellie hugged her shoulders. "The first thing you need to do is turn up the heat. My nipples are getting hard."

Robert was not feeling cold, but he knew he had to gain some control. Kellie had completely taken over. "Here, put this shirt on. You should wear it when you're not posing."

Kellie smiled. "You've got a naked girl in your room, and you want her to put clothes on?" Kellie looked at the inside collar of the shirt. "It's got your name on it."

"That's from the dry cleaner where I use to live. He was an old guy, and that's the system he used to keep everyone's laundry straight."

Robert nodded toward the shirt. "Could you put the shirt on, please? And we need some rules."

Kellie put the shirt on. She didn't button the front. "Rules? What rules?"

Robert didn't need to make them up on-the-fly. He dragged them out, ready-made from the bag he bore with him. They had always kept him in good stead and at a safe distance. He regularly reminded the models at the porn store of them.

"We need to keep this professional. What we do in here is separate from outside. Separate from our personal lives together."

Kellie sat down on the table. "We don't have any personal lives together."

Robert stared at Kellie's fingers that were playing with the buttons on the shirt. "I thought we did. Remember. After what happened a couple of nights ago."

"Remember? Yeah, I remember. I remember you said you were leaving."

"Then yesterday, I agreed to stay to be with you. To protect you from Sam."

"You're staying so Sam doesn't break your fingers."



“You think that’s it? You don’t know me very well.”

“Oh, I know you very well. If you weren’t afraid of Sam, you’d run away from here like you run away from everything and everyone else when things get hard or complicated.”

Robert went to his easel and moved it a couple of feet, scraping the floor, looked at it a moment, then moved it back. “OK. That’s fine.” He picked up a paintbrush, twirled it in his fingers, and threw it back down. “Never mind. Second—”

“What’s first?”

“Keep this professional.” Robert was frustrated. He added a brand new rule, just for Kellie. “Second. I will let you know when to come over. You can’t show up whenever you want. And you certainly must knock before coming in. I don’t understand what it is with

you and your family. You all stroll in like you own the place.”

“We do.”

“I wouldn’t walk into your place without knocking.”

“No, you’d probably be shot.” Kellie turned her head and looked at Robert out of the corners of her eyes. “I guess you could shoot me with your gun if I walked in here without knocking.”

That caught Robert off-guard. He was ashamed of that gun, more than the lotion he masturbated with. He kept both hidden in the drawer by his bed, first his underwear and socks, beneath that the jar of lotion, then gun — in the very back of the drawer.

He didn’t know how to respond. How did Kellie know about the gun? He continued. “Third, I’ll determine what poses you need to take. Some may be risqué. I’ll decide. You’ll need to do what I tell you.”

Kellie took off Robert’s shirt and held it in front of her. “Sam sold me to you. So, I guess you can do whatever you want with me.” She tossed him the shirt. “Do you have any more rules?”

Robert tossed it back to her. “No, that about does it.”



Kellie dropped the shirt on the table, then twisted to look at the post behind her. Robert looked at her shoulder. "Do you have any pets?"

"Not anymore. Why?"

"You have some scratches on your back. It looks like a cat or something clawed at you."

Kellie turned around. "Well, just do my good side, my front."

Robert directed Kellie to a pose. She sat on the table, one leg bent underneath her, the other leg down toward the floor. He was nervous. The unknown, hated artist had had Kellie on this table, just as he now had her. She was naked for him then, just as she now was for him. Compliant for him, just ...

Robert moved his easel again and adjusted some lighting. "Can you scrunch down a little further?"

"Scrunch down? Scrunch what?"

"You know."

"What?"

"There's some light showing from under you — squish down your bottom."

"My bottom. What are you talking about?"

"Your ... your bottom. Lean forward and press it down more on the table."

"My vagina? Is that what you mean?"

Robert blushed.

Kellie tilted her head, smiling. "I call it my pussy. Can you say pussy?"

"That's not what I call it."

"No. Let me hear you say it."

"Come on, this is silly."

"Say it. Say pussy. Pussy, pussy, pussy, puuuuusy." Kellie was laughing, "Come on, say it."

"Oh shit. OK, 'pussy.'"

Kellie clapped her hands. "OK, I'll squish my bottom down for you."

Robert grinned and picked out some tubes of paint. "OK. What do you call what I have?"

Kellie didn't miss a beat, "Your penis. Your manhood."

"Come on, you can do better than that."

"Willie, cock, dick, dong, junk. Shaft, Looovvvve muscle. Looovvvve stick. pecker, prick, rod, wiener." Kellie was having a wonderful time. "I could go on."

"I'm sure you could."

"What do you call it?"

Robert snorted, "My Big Hammer."

Kellie stared at him, her eyes widened, she was in an immense struggle to keep her mouth shut, her cheeks bulged, she erupted, laughing so hard snot blew out her nose. Robert could no longer contain himself. He bent over, holding his sides. Eventually, he blurted out, "Come on. It's not that funny." Which sent Kellie into another fit of hysterics.

Kellie picked up Robert's shirt and wiped her nose and eyes, and suppressed several more giggles.

When Kellie could talk, she asked. "OK, Mr. Hammer, when are you going to nail me?"

Robert was wiping tears from his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Kellie leaned back on the table. "What do you think?"

"So, now we're back together?"

"What do you want?"

"What about Sam's rules? 'You touch her, I kill you.' I kind of remember that one."

"He can't see us in here. Besides, he's in the city. The storm will keep him at bay until tonight. I told you, I like guys who live on the edge. Breaking rules makes it more exciting."

Robert didn't respond and focused on mixing paint on his pallet.

"You're a funny guy. A nerd who does porn ... No. No, actually, that's not unusual — nerds are into porn. You're a prude who creates porn and is embarrassed to say 'vagina.' You do paintings of naked girls in all kinds of nasty situations, and you're face gets all red when you say 'pussy.' I need to figure you out."

"I have to make a living. I just do what they tell me to."

"You need to break some rules. I need to work on you."

“Well, work is what we need to do. I have a deadline to meet.”

“OK — for now. Me model, you painter. We’ll be great together. We’ll knock their socks off, or at least their pants.”

Kellie turned on the table, her back to Robert. “Do me, Robert.”

“What?”



Kellie laid down on the table and stretched her head toward the floor.

“Paint me.”

And Robert did as Kellie directed.

Chapter 12. Janie

Through the rest of the winter and into spring, Kellie modeled, and Robert painted and photographed her.

Robert's Rule Number 2, "I will let you know when to come over," had been ignored since the day Robert set it out — Kellie came over whenever she felt like it. Robert's Rule 3, "You'll have to do what I tell you," had been dead on arrival. Robert would have liked to rescind Rule 1 — "Keep this professional." That was the only one Kellie kept.

She liked to tell Robert stories while she was posing, partly because she was bored, somewhat to tease him, but mainly to regulate the sexuality in the room (which Kellie endeavored to keep at a high pitch.)



Her stories were better than most of those Robert was illustrating from the professional writers. Stories that mingled with and added to the fantasies he used at night. As he listened to her, his paints, brushes, and canvases faded from sight. He would lose focus, he would lose concentration — he would get hard. Like when he was in Junior High School and bored and not paying attention in class. It was at those moments, it seemed, the

teacher called on him to stand and explain part of the lesson. Kellie smirked. She liked that part.

One day, Kellie was standing behind Robert, watching him finish a painting. She whispered in his ear. "I was telling my friend, Janie, about what we're doing. You better watch out. I think she's a little resentful of you."

"Oh yeah, whose Jamie?"

"Janie, Janie, she's a girl."

"So why would a girlfriend of yours be resentful of me?"

"We kinda have a thing."

"A thing? What do you mean? You're lovers?"

"Is sex all you think about?"

"That's pretty much what your stories are all about."

"Well, this is different. She's my best friend. She's like a sister."

"I'm an only child," Robert said. "I'm not sure what that means."

"It means there is no one I'm closer to. No one I love more, and no one I fight with more. We compete against each other all the time."

"I met her at the cottage when I was twelve. It was in the Fall. Sam and Elaine wanted to get the cottage ready for the winter. As usual, they left me alone, so I went out hiking through the woods. I first met her there. I saw her going to and fro in a small clearing. She was alone too."

"I went up to her. Hi, what are you doing?"

"She said, 'I'm walking up and down in the garden.'"

"So, I'm Kellie. What's your name? I asked."

"I don't have a name," she said.

"But that's silly. You have to have a name. Everyone has a name, I told her."

"Then you name me," she said.

"All right, I'll call you Janie."

"How did you decide on that name?" Robert asked.

"I don't know, it just came to me. It seemed like a good enough name."

"When you name someone, you own them," she said. "They become yours. God had Adam name all the animals, then He gave him dominion over them."

"I tried to be helpful. Sam renames the properties he buys. He puts his name on them. 'Gallo Galleria,' 'Gallo Towers,' 'Gallo Golf Course.' Janie said that was obnoxious. I tried again. Like when parents name their kids, then the kids belong to them."

"Like that," she said. "Now you own me."

"We started talking. It was like we had known each other our entire lives. She's nothing like me. Opposites attract, you know."

She's deliberate, disciplined, and dominant, nothing bothers her, and no one gets to her. We hit it off right away."

Robert had to interject. "I don't see that's opposite of you. You just described yourself to a tee."

"That's how you see me?"

"Do you want to start with the 'dominant' part?"

"Hmm, OK. Maybe not my opposite, maybe more of me. But oh yeah. So much more.

"There was an old deserted cabin off in the woods. Sam hadn't seen it yet, or he would have torn it down. For the next couple of summers, we'd meet there talking about everything. Friends, neither of us had any. Family, mine were rotten, Janie didn't remember hers. Boys. OK, that's what we mainly talked about.



"By the time I was fourteen, we wanted to do more than just talk about boys. Janie and I would practice what it would be like to be with a boy. Sometimes Janie would be the boy and practice on me, and sometimes I'd be the boy and practice on her. But most of the time, she was the boy.

"She had said I owned her, but she had a game she enjoyed playing to show me differently.

"You have to trust someone before you let them tie you up. They can do anything to you, and you can't stop them. You're supposed to



discuss something like that, agree on what's OK and what isn't. Have a safe word. Janie didn't care about any of that.

"‘I'm going to tickle you now,’ she'd say."

Robert interrupted, "OK. Now I got it. This is another one of your sex-fantasy stories."

Kellie moved to stand between Robert and the

easel he was painting on. She put her hands on his shoulders and shook her head. "Oh, no. Please. I'd tell her. You know how ticklish I am. Of course she knew.

"She'd instruct me to remove my clothes and get on the bed. She'd bring out cuffs, special ones that would leave no marks, and ropes she had purchased, and order me to spread out my arms and legs and try to touch the bedposts. I'd close my eyes. I would already be breathing hard. I knew what I was in for. Then she'd tie me down.

"Watching her hands come near me would start me giggling and tugging at my binds before she'd even touch me. I'd struggle, whimpering and pleading, twisting to pull my arms down to protect my sides.

"‘Don't laugh,’ she would say, ‘Or I win.’

"She'd touch me and make me jerk, then walk her fingers up and down my sides, starting me to wiggle and twitch. I'd panic as she'd keep on, I knew I was losing, and she was just getting started.

"I'd fight it — try not to give in. I didn't want her to win, so I would clench my jaw and squinch my eyes shut tight. But then she would burrow her fingers into my sides and under my arms, and I'd buck and erupt into hysterics. After she had broken me, she liked to tickle my feet, grazing the bottoms with her fingers. Up and down. Up and down. Driving me into a frenzy. It was like little bolts of electricity running from her hands, through my feet, and up my legs. I could feel her fingers in my vagina.

"You win. You win. I'd cry. Please stop.

"Oh, it's not about winning,' she'd say, 'that was always a given. I'll always win. This is so you will remember that.'

"She'd get a chair and sit at the foot of the bed. 'I might as well be comfortable. I'm going to be here for a while.' I knew I was in for a long afternoon. The cabin was dark and dank, but she would work me over until I was sweating and exhausted.

"Every so often she'd let me rest. 'So you don't pass out.' Then she'd start on me again.

"Sometimes she'd have me fixed down so tight I could only pound my head on the mattress. It was the only part of me I could move. Other times she'd cuff my hands behind my back, so I would buck and thrash on the bed.

"She'd tell me, 'I have to be careful I don't overdo you. This is how the Chinese torture their prisoners. I could kill you this way.'"

Kellie looked at Robert, her eyes wide. "That's hard to believe, but I suppose you could if you kept at them. I mean, what if you didn't stop? That'd be insane."

Robert had been listening intently to Kellie's story. "That would be insane. Janie's into games that could kill you?"

"The tickle torture game was the only one she played with me. But she was fascinated with the strange ways people died. 'Voodoo death,' for instance, was one of her favorites. Sometimes people are found in the morning, dead with no visible cause. Like they suffocated. They're just dead. Imagine, someone goes into their hut at night, lays down, and in the morning they're dead. She wondered how to make that into a game."

"I studied that a little at college." Robert joined in. "It's called 'psychogenic death.' It's brought on by a strong emotional shock. It's



psychosomatic in that death is caused by an emotional response — fear — to some real or imagined outside force. It's seen mainly in native societies, and concentration and prisoner of war camps, but it can happen anywhere. No one knows how it happens."

"Janie knows."

Robert looked questionably at Kellie.

"Janie said,

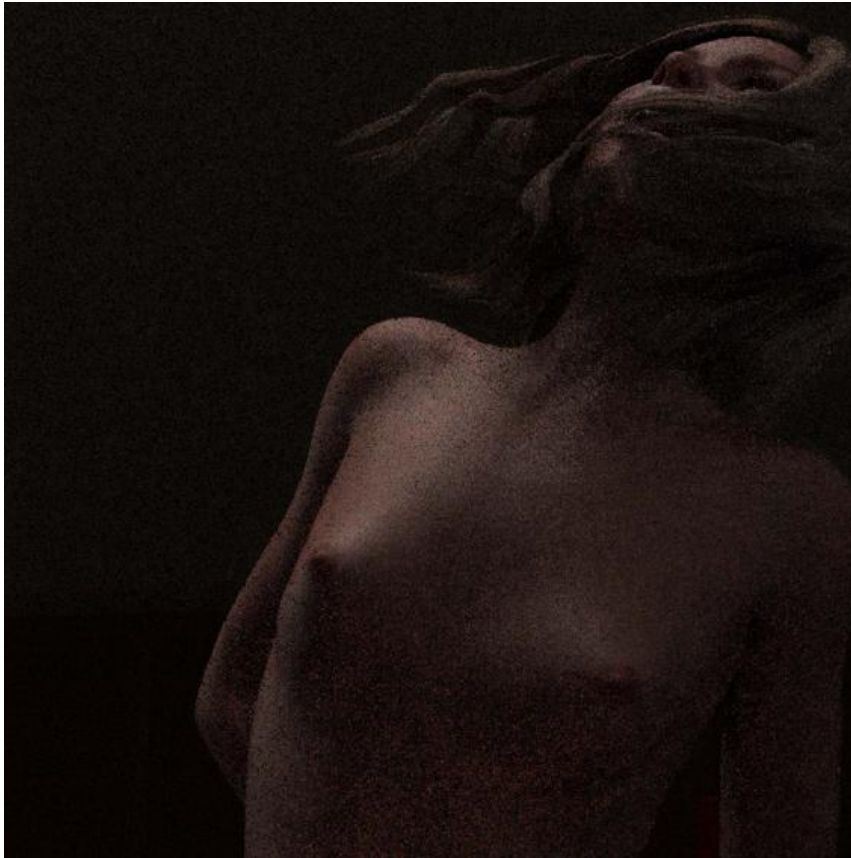
'God got tired of them, so he put out his hand and took their breath away.'"

Kellie took hold of Robert's arms. "When she'd finish with me, I'd collapse like a little rag doll.

"Sometimes, while I was still quivering, she would 'reward' me. I'd come so hard, over and over and over. Sometimes, she wouldn't reward me and make me wait to play the game again.

"Once I told her I didn't want to play the game anymore. Stop. Stop. Please stop. She said she liked the game and didn't want to stop.

"Then, I told her to leave me alone. She told me she would never leave me.



“Then, I told her I didn’t like her anymore. She said that was OK, she didn’t like me anymore either.

“Then, I told her to go away.

She said, ‘No.’ And she never has.”

Chapter 13. She Was Learning

Halfway between the carriage house that Robert lived in and the shop in the city where he worked was a small neighborhood bar. It served pretty good sandwiches, so at lunchtime, blue-collared workers and white-shirted salesmen would gather to eat and have a drink or two to help them get through the rest of the day. After work, before heading home for dinner, the same would be there for a drink or so to help get through the night. Other than at lunch or after work, there were half-a-dozen regulars who spent their time there just trying to get through. The place had no windows, so only interior lamps provided any lighting. It didn't matter if it was day or night; it was all the same dim place. When first entering, one was greeted with the smell of stale beer. It was here, in between lunch and dinner, that Robert and Manny met.



Manny Greens was one of the porn shop's regular writers. Robert's porn dealer had selected Robert to illustrate Manny's stories. The two had conspired on several other works.

Today's meeting was to discuss illustrations for Manny's next series, all with the initial title: "Naked in the Jungle." There would be: Naked in the Jungle - Sheila Does the Pygmies; Naked in the Jungle - Sheila Does the Giants; Naked in the Jungle - Sheila Does the Pirates, and so on. Sheila would continue doing someone, and there would continue to be sequels as long as anyone was willing to buy them.

Manny was at the bar when Robert arrived. He was forty years older than Robert, add ten more for too much drinking and not enough sleep. If it had been allowed in the bar, he would have been smoking a cigarette.

Manny was not the introverted type of writer. He was loud, outgoing, and personable, at times a tad boisterous. But then again, he was a writer of porn. So was Hemingway — loud, boisterous.

“Hey there, Kid.” Manny called people younger than himself, “Kid.” (It saved him from having to try and remember their names.) You still drinking scotch? (He did remember what people drank.) He ordered one for Robert and another rye on ice for himself.

Manny described the new series and his vision for it. “In some of the scenes, we’re going to have a gorilla. That’s going to be Sheila’s sidekick — her trusty companion. There’s to be a slight hint that there’s something more going on between them. We may try to work that into later stories. But right now, bestiality isn’t popular, so keep that on the back-burner. Also, our demographics show women are getting more into porn, so have the gorilla look like a Greek Adonis. Give it a big cock.”

“Naked, right?” Robert didn’t think he needed that clarified but wanted to have some part of the conversation.

“That’s the name of the series, Kid.”

“Keep the monkey face?”

“Keep the monkey face. This is a jungle story.”

Manny patted Robert on the shoulder. “We make a good team, Kid. After this series, I have ideas for a lot more.”

Robert faked a groan that was close to his true feelings. “Oh, good, so we have more to look forward to?”

“Thirty-six.”

“I can hardly wait.”

Manny had a sparkle in his eye. “One, if you don’t count the porn.”

“One? I think I’d like to hear about the one.”

Manny turned to Robert and looked intensely at him. “Have you ever read Deuteronomy or Joshua?”

“Those are in the Bible, right? No, I’ve never read the Bible, but I’ve heard some of the stories.”

“There are great spectacles in there. Not those Hollywood bupkes where they put a biblical name on a film as an excuse to show half-naked dancing girls and everyone walking around in togas. No. I’m talking about real life, something with meaning, with soul. That’s what I was writing. You heard about the story of Jericho?”

“Sure, there were trumpets blown, and the walls came down.”



“Doesn’t get better than that.” Manny toasted and commenced an enthusiastic rendition for the benefit of the other three patrons, whose faces were familiar, but whose names were unremembered.

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho
Jericho Jericho
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho
And the walls come tumbling down.

He sang it a couple more times, then turned to Robert. “You know what happened after the walls came down? We went in there and smote every man, woman, and child in the city, slaughtered them all except for a friendly hooker. Now, does that have the makings of a great story or what?”

“So what’s with the ‘we?’” Robert asked. “I know you work Saturdays, and I’ve seen you chowing down on the free pork sandwiches when those are put out for the film crew.”

“My family name used to be Greenspun. My parents changed it to Greens. They figured it would help in their escape from Germany, also to being accepted in America. Neither of which was a sure thing at the beginning of World War II.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything.”

“No problem. It’s all in the heart, Kid. It’s the story of my people. Think of what it must have been like in that caravan, the people as they left the desert, the excitement, the expectation as they traveled into a new land, our Promised Land.” Manny jabbed his finger in the air. “The army marching ahead, cymbals clanging, war drums beating, trumpets blaring, walls falling before us. We were conquerors. Other nations trembled at our name.”

“What’s your story titled?”

“Don’t Screw with the Jew.”

Robert grinned. “You might rethink that if you want it to be a best seller.”

“It’s the working title.”

“So, how long have you been working on it?”

“Thirty years.”

“Must be a long story.”

“Yeah, well, stuff happens.”

“So, what happened?”

“Hey, writing is hard work. Even the throwaway porn stuff I do. It’s not like your art, Kid. It’s hard work. It takes all your time and attention and drains your blood from you.”

“Crap. Your stories are all formula. Whether pygmies, giants, or pirates, they all have throbbing cocks the size of large cucumbers, and Sheila’s clit is always going to be trembling in anticipation because whoever’s cock it is — pirate, giant, or pygmy, it’s the biggest she’s ever seen.”

“OK, OK, OK. Everybody has their own shtick. But it’s still hard work. When I started it, I knew I had a best seller. Reviews would be written in the New Yorker, a Pulitzer even.” Manny shrugged. “Then, I dropped it.”

Robert was still upset at the comment Manny made about his art. “You copped out.”

“Have you ever been married, Kid? No, no, I know you haven’t. So it’s like when you’re in a relationship. Your First Draft — everything is fun. You’re writing whatever comes into your mind, free, a thought comes — go there, can we do that? I don’t know, let’s try. We’ll worry about it later.

“Then you move in together — your Second Draft. It’s not so much fun anymore. You have to tighten up what you have. Correct some of the stuff you did in the first draft. You start to watch what you say, you clean up your language. You begin to wonder, is this going anywhere? You question if there’s some story — some purpose in it.

“Then you get married — the Third Draft. Nothing is right. Criticism all over the place. Her subject didn’t agree with my verbs.”

“Uh?”

“Sex, Robert. There’s no sex. Your participles dangle, and infinity is splitting. Sitting in a little cubicle, the marriage flounders. Can you correct all that? Do you want to? To flounderingly go on?

“At some point, you have to recognize when you’ve had enough. You’ve done everything you can with your story, and there ain’t no more. There’s not another draft in you.”

Robert raised his glass to Manny. "Writers are never done. You guys always have another draft. All your work, time, attention, and blood, and you're done? How can you know that? How do you know when you're just done?"

"You've fed it, cared for it, taken it to bed with you. Then you realize it's a slut who came for the night and stayed a year. You're married to it. After a while, it feels stale. You're tired looking at it. You



put it in a drawer for a couple of months. When you take it back out, you still can't stand the sight of her. That's when you know you're done."

"How many times you been married, Manny?"

"I'm on my third."

Manny finished his drink and motioned the bartender for a refill. "Kind of funny. A marriage counselor with two divorces and three marriages."

"You're a marriage counselor?"

"For ten years." Manny looked at Robert. "Yeah, I was for real, Kid. Graduate degree, some honors, nice little practice in the suburbs."

"But you're not still doing that?"

"Not for twenty-five years."

"What happened?"

"I got bored, tired, and my mind was turning to mush. So what else was there to do? I did porn. Reading and using at first, later, creating. I did marriage counseling during the day and wrote porn at night. I was good at the porn. It won out. My first story was banned in Boston when that really meant something. I lost my license. But at least I have a steady income. There will always be porn."

Manny toasted the other patrons. "Here's to porn." The two who heard him raised their glasses.

"I remember when Playboy would come out. We'd wait for it each month. It would be hidden away behind the counter in a bookstore, so you had to ask the clerk for it. That was always a little embarrassing. You'd go when there was a guy clerk. Too embarrassing to ask a girl for it — she'd look at you knowing what you were going to do when you got home. I always thought I'd catch a smirk on the clerk's face as he handed it to me. It would be in a brown paper sack. He was probably selling me his used copy.

"You'd get home and sneak it in the door. That night and for the next week, Ms. Whatever-month-it-was kept your attention up. She wasn't as much fun the second week. By the third, you were looking around to see what else you had. The fourth was waiting for the next issue."

Manny patted Robert's shoulder. "See what I mean? There's all kinds of sex — missionary, girl on top, girl-girl, guy-guy, girl-monkey — I'm not judging. After all, what's porn? Just something naked people do that you don't. But what it all has in common is one thing — variety. Whatever it is you're into, you want more. That's where we come in. The shop is more than a simple porn store. It's a porn factory, turning out a product for an insatiable clientele. And it's all run by Sam Gallo. We're always going to have employment."

Robert shook his head. "I've been involved in this for a year now. It isn't something I want to be doing for the rest of—"

The door opened, sending a glare of sunlight through the dim room, reminding everyone it was broad daylight outside, and they were spending it sitting inside a dark bar. The regular came in. The door shut, and they all went back to the dreariness of their purposeless lives.

"—my life. And I sure as hell don't want to be working for Sam Gallo.

"Kid, you want out? Get out now. Or next year you'll be thinking the same thing, and the next year, and the next. Suddenly, it's thirty years later, and you've stopped thinking. The porn gets into you. I don't know, maybe if I got away from the porn, my old story wouldn't look so bad."

"Do you think Sam would come after me? I still owe him four months. He said he'd break my fingers."

"Nah. You're small fry. He's not going to spend a lot of time looking for you. Just don't take Kellie, and he'll leave you alone."

"Why do you think I'd take Kellie?"

"Because you have a thing for her."

"Oh, bullshit ... Why do you think so? ... How could you tell?"

"When you started painting over her interesting parts."

"I did some tasteful nudes."

"Tasteful doesn't describe our customers. Nabokov started off with a nice little porn story. But he kept adding to it until it became unrecognizable and unreadable."

"'Lolita' is considered one of the literary masterpieces of the Twentieth Century."

"I'm not saying Nabokov was a schmuck, but do you know how many copies of that book we sold?"

"I'd guess none."

"Zero, nothing, nada. We stopped stocking it. No one wants an intellectual porn story."

Robert chuckled. "OK. I do like Kellie ... yeah, I like her a lot. I ache when she's not around, and she's frustrating as hell when she is."

"I understand that about women, Kid. At least I used to. With Kellie, I could see something was going on. When you and I first started working together, you were, if I was still in the business of



diagnosing ... 'depressed.' Then Kellie comes back at the end of the summer, and you do an about-face. She got to you real quick. You were almost human again. Then you're down in the dumps, then up. She took you on a roller coaster ride then, and she still is. I worry about you."

"Worry? What are you talking about? Isn't every relationship a crazy ride? And sure, Kellie drives me nuts, and we have a crazy relationship. And she has this crazy make-believe girlfriend, Janie. But she's—"

"'Crazy,' and I use that term unprofessionally, is how she ... Let me be careful here ... overwhelmed you. No. 'Infatuated?' No. That's not a strong enough word. 'Bewitched.' Yes, bewitched you. She's a good-looking girl, so if it was sex, I'd get that." Manny glanced at Robert. "You're not having sex with her, right?"

"None of your business."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, no sex. Which makes her hold on you harder to explain."

"Can't a guy have a normal relationship with a girl, without sex being involved?"

"No."

Robert looked out of the corners of his eyes at Manny.

Manny leaned toward Robert. "No, I said. Sex is always involved. Guy, girl, no sex. Doesn't happen." Then he leaned back. "Listen, I've known Kellie since Sam adopted her when she was, what, seven or eight. I've been to their house. Watched her grow up. I know her. Kid, listen to me. I know her. Kellie's not what you think she is."

Robert was not enjoying this conversation. He wanted to keep it light. "She keeps life interesting."

"Kid, there's an old Chinese curse, 'May you live in interesting times.'"

"Kellie is not my curse."

"Before Kellie, you were dealing with things pretty well, despite your depression. You didn't get snagged in the porn and go crazy with the models. You had some standards. The girls called it 'Robert's Rules of Respectability' — keep this professional, don't try to screw them. The girls thought it was weird. They'd laugh."

Robert sat back. "They'd laugh at me?"

"No, no. Not at you ... well, OK, at you. The other photographers and artists, the ones who aren't gay, were always trying to get in their pants. You'd hold them off. I guess your mother taught you better."

Robert slammed his glass on the table. "My mother didn't teach me anything."

"Sorry, Kid. I understand your dad raised you. From the few things you've said about your mother, I should have guessed she would be a sore spot."

"She's not a sore spot, she's not any spot. She doesn't have anything to do with me, and I have nothing to do with her."

"So tell me about that."

"Shit. Manny, you going to psychoanalyze me?"

"Hey. We're friends, Kid. We've had a couple of drinks. Come on. Whatta you got to lose? It might make you a better artist."

Robert stared at his glass of scotch.

Manny pressed, "There's an old saying, 'Physician, heal thyself.' It means take care of your own faults before trying to take care of someone else's. It applies to artists as well. Recognize what makes you tick, what's in your soul before you decide to create another's."

Robert turned his head to wipe his eyes. He had never talked about it with anyone. What did he have to lose? Nothing. He exhaled and took a drink.

"Kid, it will help if you talk about it."

Robert set his glass on the table and sat looking at it, then took a breath. "She took off when I was four or five. My father sent me over to visit her every couple of weeks. That went on for a few years ... I don't know, maybe three. Then she got remarried. Her new husband didn't want anything to do with me. I think I reminded him his wife had been to bed with someone other than him. Anyway, the visits got fewer ... until they just ... weren't anymore."

"For a couple of years, she'd come over on my birthday and bring me a present, and tell me, 'My, you've gotten so big.' She quit doing that after my tenth birthday."

"So you haven't seen her since you were ten?"

“Actually, the last time was a few years later. Some friends and I were at the mall playing video games. Next to that was a play area for younger kids. You could see it out a window from the game room. I glanced out and saw her sitting on the curb that circled the playground. A young boy, four or five, would come up to her every so often to make sure she was watching him. Then he’d run off and show her something he could do. She’d clap her hands and laugh.”

Robert picked up his drink and looked through the amber liquid. “I watched them for a while. He twirled the ice with his finger, making the ice clatter against the glass. “And I wondered why she couldn’t love me that way.”

Manny looked at his glass; it was empty. “Sorry, Kid. So, what did you do? Did you go talk to her?”

“No, she never saw me. The other guys came over. The video games were boring them, and they wanted to do something else. So I turned my back and walked away.”

Manny motioned to the bartender for another round, then turned to Robert. “What you told me ... Now I think I see what’s going on with you and Kellie.”



“About why I’m attracted to her?”

“Bewitched by her, Kid.”

“Shit.” Robert pushed back in his chair.

“Hear me out. I did a lot of counseling of people, including kids going through divorces. There are always abandonment issues for kids in a divorce.”

Robert folded his arms and stared at the table. Yeah, his mother left before the divorce, and his father had just quietly disappeared into a bottle after it.

“For guys, those abandonment issues — especially if it’s the mother who did the abandoning, can create problems when they grow up. You either treat women as objects — ‘no one’s going to get close enough to hurt me again,’ or you put women on a pedestal. An idealized mother that will save you from being alone.”

Robert looked down at the drink the bartender had brought and twirled the ice with his finger.

Manny continued. “You decide it’s better to do the abandoning than to go through the pain of being rejected again. It can influence your relationship with women. It drives your love, sex, and intimacy with them.”

Robert couldn’t look at Manny. His eyes were fixed on his drink, his mind on Arianna. It had ended badly with her. He. He had ended it badly.

Manny put his hand on Robert’s arm. “Kid, it gets worse. A guy can be vulnerable to the negative aspects of a woman. He’s drawn to her shadow, dark side.”

“So, what are you getting at?”

“It’s probably a good thing to stay away from Kellie.”

“Because Sam would kick my ass?”

“More than that. That’s what I’ve been trying to explain to you. There’s a part of Kellie that is drawing you in, like a moth to a flame. Kellie’s a black hole pulling you in, and you’ll never escape. She’s a spider, and she’s got you in her web.”

“That’s a lot of metaphors at one time for a writer. Aren’t you guys supposed to spread those out a bit?”

"We're not supposed to mix them. Listen, there's a dark side of Kellie that you're not seeing."

"Bullshit. You're a washed-up, has-been old man who's had too much to drink."

"You're right ... And I'm right."

Manny took a drink. "The dark has the upper hand. The profane, the putrid, it always wins out."

"I think it's more of an even fight than that."

"Oh?" Manny picked up Robert's glass. "What if this was full of pure water, and I put one drop of my piss in it? Would you drink it?"

Robert grimaced.

"Right. Now, what if this was full of my piss, and I put one drop of pure water in it? Would you drink that?"



Robert took his glass back from Manny and took a drink. "People aren't glasses of water or piss. Kellie needs my protection. Sam and her mother are her problem. If I got her away from them—"

"Kid, listen to me. I was an undercover security guard at the shop. Writing porn doesn't pay much, so they paid me to watch out for shoplifters. Occasionally Sam would bring Kellie. She was probably ten or eleven."

"You gotta be shitting me."

"Yeah, pretty sick bringing a kid to a porn shop. But that's Sam. I'd watch Kellie walking around the store, picking up items. She'd giggle at the customers — which wasn't good. They'd leave without buying anything."

"Sam would go do other business for the day and leave Kellie alone at the shop. At first, I felt sorry for her and would talk with her and try to distract her from what was around us. I found her fascinating. I had to learn more about her. I'd take her into the office where we could be alone, and we'd sit and talk for hours. I started using my training to find out more."

"So, you started screwing around in her head like you're doing in mine?"

“Hey, old habits are hard to break. But it wasn’t me screwing with her head. It ended up she was screwing with mine. She would let me see layers of her, lead me down paths that I eagerly followed, curving, detouring — Oh, the excitement. Oh, the joy. Skipping here and there. ‘See if you can find me.’ I was young again — Take me with you. Then throwing up a wall, leaving me trapped, wondering what the hell happened. She played with me, and I knew it, and I liked it, and I couldn’t wait for Sam to bring her back again.”

“Sounds like she bewitched you.”

“See, I know what I’m talking about.”

“So, she’s smarter than you. Smarter than me too, I suppose. So what?”

“It’s not smarts. It’s cunning and manipulative. It’s evil.”

“Evil? First, you psych her mind, then you judge her soul. So now you’re a defrocked psychiatrist and a Jewish priest, and not very good at either by-the-way.”

Manny didn’t respond and finished his drink.

“At the end of the day, after she was finished with me, she’d go to the back-back room. You know, the one with the whips and chains, the one we keep real private?”

“Seen it.”

“It has a rack.”

“I know about the rack.”

“Behind it is that wall-size mural depicting a dungeon during the Inquisition. I guess to give customers ideas on how to use the stuff we’re trying to sell them. Probably not historically accurate, given all the nudity, and that half the priests are women, but pretty detailed and gruesome.”



“Yeah. Man’s insane inhumanity to man.”

“And women doing men too — it’s an interesting painting. Kid, I’d find Kellie standing there mesmerized, savoring it.”

“She was disturbed by it.”

“Examining it.”

“It confused her.”



Manny took Robert’s arm and leaned toward him, a blaze burning behind his booze-bleared eyes. “Robert, she was learning.”

Chapter 14. Let's Go For a Swim

It was early. Soon the hot summer day would start. It had been hot the day before as well, and long into the night. But for now, there was a cool breeze moving through the carriage house windows.

Robert had been up for several hours, sitting at the table that looked out on to the patio. Contemplating with his fourth ... fifth? ... cup of coffee as he again rehearsed his decision. Through repetition, Robert hoped to lock it in, reinforce it, and encase it in concrete so it could not be changed, not by him, not by God, not anyone, not even Kellie. But how was he going to tell her?

It hadn't been Manny's caution about Kellie — that she was some kind of evil force he needed to stay away from. Robert felt more protective of Kellie than ever. Nor was it fear of Sam Gallo. Sam didn't give a damn about him and wouldn't bother tracking him down if he took off, as long as he left without Kellie — which is what he had determined he was going to do. Robert snorted. It was the height of conceit to think Kellie would want to go with him anyway. He couldn't even hope for such a thing. It was so far-fetched. Still, that was an image that remained lodged in the back of his head.

Kellie walked out to the gazebo and, as was her custom, sat down in Robert's spot. She was wearing her white bikini. Robert went to his bedroom and put on his cutoffs. He had no intention of getting into the pool, but he wanted to look the part. Then he walked out to talk with her. "Hi, what are you doing?"

Kellie had been writing in a notepad when Robert walked up. She quickly turned it over. "Hi. Just writing some stuff."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you. I can leave."

"No, it's OK. I'm trying to write something." Kellie turned the notepad over, face up. It was blank. "So far, nothing."

Robert sat down next to Kellie. Both were quiet for a while, then Kellie said, "I'm trying to write a story. I feel like I have something in me to say, but nothing's coming out. It's all jumbled up in my head."

"Maybe I can help."

Kellie laughed. "No thanks. This is not a porn story. This is a love story. It's a wonderful, beautiful story."

Robert laughed too. "All I've ever heard from you were porn stories. I have more than that in me too. Let me help you get started."

"Sure. Go for it, Pal."

"OK. Stories are always about some kind of quest. So, have someone starting out on a journey. Let's have it a young girl on a train."

"Does anybody ride in trains anymore?"

"Trains are more romantic, but make it a plane if you must."

"No, a train is good. She's on a train traveling through Europe. Europe has trains, right?"

"I'm pretty sure they do."

"Then a train through Europe it is. Very romantic. How old is she?"

"I don't know. If you want this to be a love story, she needs to be old enough."

"She's sixteen. Let's make her sixteen. Her body is changing. She's awakening to it. Wondering about it. What it means. What her life will be like."



“OK. We have a sixteen-year-old girl, riding on a train through Europe, alone.”

“Why is she alone?”

“She has just left a boarding school and is being sent somewhere else. She didn’t want to leave. It was forced on her.”

“By her parents?”

“No. Let’s make her an orphan. That makes her story more heartbreaking.

That satisfied Kellie. “Parents dead. Check.”

“While she’s riding, she finds an envelope in her bag. She hadn’t seen it before. She doesn’t know how it got there. Must have been

one of her friends put it there as she was leaving, or maybe a passenger while she was sleeping. She opens it, and there are several sheets of notebook paper that have been written on. She starts reading.

“It’s a story. From the first paragraph, she’s hooked. The rocking of the train, the clattering of the wheels fade as she reads. She forgets she’s on a train as the story pulls her in. She laughs at parts of it, so loud the passenger across the aisle gives her a dirty look. She turns her head toward the window and cries at the sad parts. The towns, and villages, and farms of Europe pass by her window. She is in another time and place. She is in the story. There was only one chapter in the envelope. She must read the rest. Who was the girl? What happens to her? Is she always going to be alone? Who wrote it? When she got off at the station, she called her friends at school to find out. No one knew who wrote the story.”

Kellie had been quiet while Robert talked, hardly breathing, carried by the story he told. “So who did write it?”

“You did, Kellie. It’s your life. It’s your story. And it’s a wonderful, complicated story about a beautiful, fragile young girl. You just need to tell it.”

Kellie didn’t turn her head away when she wiped tears from her cheeks. “I love you.”

Robert didn’t respond and sat and stared at the pool. Kellie took his hand and stood up. “It’s such a nice day. Let’s take a walk along the beach.”

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Robert thought that a little comical. There was not much of a beach to walk along. When he was alone here last summer, he had thought to do that. But as far as he could see, the shoreline this far north of the city was a nearly continuous barrier wall of large stones set to prevent erosion. Prevent erosion, and collect driftwood, plastic bottles, beer cans, and dead fish. — No beach, and no place to walk. Each property owner had erected fences, hedges, and structures that prevented anyone from walking along the shoreline. Gallo’s property was similarly fortified from intrusion. But it did have a beach.

The wall of stones from the south changed at his property and jutted out into Lake Michigan, then bent to face the lake where there was a forty to fifty-foot gap, after which the wall continued, curling back to the shore where it headed off to the north. The result of all this was a cove, open to the lake, shielded from the sides, and private. Sand had been hauled in by the truckload and, behold, a beach. It was to here that the couple walked.

Kellie leaned against Robert. "There's almost no waves today. I love to come out here when it storms. The waves come hurtling against the breakwater, throwing spray up that the wind whips into my face. I stand and yell against it. The lake, with those waves rolling in, looks like an ocean."

"Have you ever gone to the ocean? Robert asked.

"No. I've just stayed here."

"When I was in college, I visited some friends in California. Spring Break. We all got drunk, of course.

"They wanted to show me the ocean. It was a few miles away. It was late at night, so it was dark. We parked in a parking lot and walked through an underpass. It had been calm in the lot, but I heard a rumble when we started into the tunnel. As we walked further, the rumble turned into a roar, as if from a living thing, like a crouching, warning beast.

"It was all so dark, especially in the underpass. You couldn't see the sides of it. I could barely see the guys I was with. There was only black in front, and the roar was coming from there and echoed along the tunnel. I was pretty drunk. I felt like Dante must have felt when he entered purgatory."

Kellie put a hand on Robert's shoulder to balance herself while she took off her sandals. Then she stepped barefoot along the water's edge. Robert followed beside her.



“When we got through, and there was more light. The tide was in, so the beach was narrow. Rushing toward us in the night, their silvery hair flying off in the wind, were towering black, shimmering, shifting, chaotic waves of ocean. I thought they would swamp us and wash us away. But each one would collapse on the beach before us. Except, occasionally, a more aggressive one would come dashing in and race up the beach after us, washing the sand from underneath my feet, its arms swirling around my shoes and legs, almost up to my knees. I’d lose my balance and almost fall down.”

“You were a little drunk.” Kellie reminded him.

Robert laughed. “Yeah, that probably had something to do with it.”

He picked up a small stone and tried to skip it across the water. “We went to the beach every day that week, hung out, and gawked at girls. The ocean was never the same as that first night. The waves still came in, washing the sand from underneath our feet, pulling at us. It was friendly play. But that first night, that first night, it felt like it was conscious. It knew I was there. And it was not so friendly.”

Robert chuckled. “And it didn’t like me there.”

Kellie stopped walking and turned to Robert. She was smirking. “So, you’re one-upping me with your ocean story.”

“Sorry, I’m not trying to do that.”

Kellie gave Robert a little punch in his stomach. "This may not be your ocean, but we can still swim in it." She ran into the water and waded out to where it was almost to her hips. "Can I tempt you to come in?" She could, at least to her hips, and Robert followed Kellie as she walked backward, further out into the cove. "At least there're no sharks here." Then she turned and swam out.

Robert had followed Kellie to where the water was up to his hips. He could see the sandy bottom. He looked up to where Kellie was swimming toward the gap in the breakwater. There the water got darker. Robert felt his stomach tighten, but he continued and shuffled out to where the water was up to his chest. He could feel the sand crunching beneath his feet. The waves lapped against him, occasionally splashing water on his face. This was far enough. Too far, really. He started shuffling backward toward shallower water. Kellie had swum out to the gap and turned and waved at him to join her.

You've got to man up. This is dumb. Robert muddled forward, and the bottom steadily dropped away. He reached the end of the sand. The bottom was now muck and dead matter, the water up to his neck. He took a breath, lifted off, and paddled, focusing everything he had to stay afloat. He looked up when he got to the gap. Kellie had gone far beyond. Robert looked at the stones in the wall, green with algae at the water level. He looked through the



water and followed the wall down. He could still see the bottom here, but when he looked further out, he could not.



“Kellie, don’t you think this is far enough?” He yelled. She didn’t hear him. Or, perhaps, she chose to ignore him. A wave splashed in his face, and he swallowed some water. Then he followed her, and the lake bottom dropped away.

Kellie was treading water, letting Robert catch up to her. “There’s a bunch of seaweed here that we have to swim through.” Robert reached the seaweed, a tangle of green fingers coming up out of the murky bottom. They were cold, slimy, caressing him as the waves washed them back and forth against him. The mass of them entangled him, wrapping around him as in an old hag’s embrace.

“We have to get further out. They stop growing when the water is deeper.” Kellie turned and swam.

Robert called after her, water again getting in his mouth. “How deep does it get?”

“I don’t know. I think the lake averages about three hundred feet. But there may be holes where it’s thousands or more.”

Robert paddled after Kellie. The waves had been small inside the cove and seemed to be tempered even out to the mass of seaweed.

But now there was no restraint, and the wind had picked up. A wave would lift him where he could see the sky and the horizon across the lake, and Kellie splashing toward it, then drop him into its trough and wash over him. He could see through the water, through its green veil. There was no bottom — just the yawning deep places where Leviathan slept.

Robert was tired. His arms on fire. It's crazy. Crazy to swim out this far. He looked back. The cove a small mouth in the long grey breakwater, the mansion would fit on a Monopoly board. He could see the Chicago skyline stretching off to the south.

Kellie had stopped. "Swim under my legs."

"I don't want to."

"You're such a big baby. Com'on, see how deep you can go."

Robert hung onto Kellie, and using her as a pole, hand-by-hand lowered himself. He felt the pressure increase on his head. He gripped her feet; and looked down into the greenish expanse. He felt dizzy, like he was looking down from a great height. He was a microbe with a memory of the ooze from which he came, and to which he was returning. The ooze carried the memory, of himself, of beginnings, of god and of evil. Even to eternity. Robert pulled himself back to the surface and sucked in a breath, choking on the lake water he swallowed.

"Now you're getting the hang of it." Kellie swam further out.

Robert struggled after her, trying to keep his body on the upper six inches of the lake. Trying to ignore what lay beneath him. Unable to not look, drawn like a doomed mouse, spellbound by the sight of an approaching snake. There was no bottom. Elusive serpentine shapes glided along at the edge of his perception — slinking, twisting.

He was out of breath. His arm muscles screaming. He could barely move them. He swallowed more lake. Then he was cut in half when his head and chest hit icy cold water. His legs and feet were still in warmer water.

Kellie had been waiting for him. "This is where the current starts."

Robert panicked. His arms flailed. He gulped for air but got more lake water.

Kellie grabbed his arm and shook him. "Tread water for a while to rest."

Robert couldn't do that. He was kicking frantically. He's not putting his legs down into that.

"Listen, float on your back. You can do that for hours."

No. There's no crazy way Robert is turning his back to it. It's taking him down. His head is shaking, splashing water.

"Robert," Kellie yelled. "Look at me."

Where is land, where is help, where is anything but the waves washing over his head? Excited shapes darted around him. The water turned to the buoyancy of air, and he dropped toward the bottom.

Kellie's hands grabbed his head and pulled him up. "You're a big baby." Kellie still yelling. "Hold still." She grabbed his arms, herself bobbing under the surface, sputtering out water when she came back up. "Roll over on your back, lay on top of me." Robert was choking, but he complied. Kellie's left arm wrapped around Robert's chest and held him tight against her. Then with her right arm, she pulled them back through the waves, the seaweed, the gap, and to the shore.

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The two lay on the beach, exhausted. Robert felt the hot sun baking down and the firm sand pushing up. They pressed him between them, wrapped him in a warm blanket, and all was good with the world again. He listened to the waves gently lapping against the shore. What were they saying: "We're sorry, we're sorry, we're sorry?" Or? "Come again. We want you. We want you. We want you." But he was on solid ground now. He could ignore the waves. Besides, he had another problem to deal with.

Kellie's hand reached out and took Robert's. "You're a big baby, but you're my big baby."

Robert was rotating and tapping his thumb and forefinger against each other.

Kellie raised onto her elbow. "So, what do you want to tell me?"

Robert looked at her.

Kellie glanced at Robert's hand. "Whenever you do that thing with your fingers, I know you're thinking something."

Robert shook his hand. "Nervous habit, I guess. It started when I was learning to paint. I would twirl a brush in my fingers when I was trying to figure out where to dab some paint. Now I just do it when..."

"When you're trying to figure something out?"

"Yeah."

Kellie picked up a pebble from the beach and tossed it at Robert. "So..."

Robert watched a plane heading for O'Hare. "Kellie, I've wanted to talk to you."

"Yeah, I got that."

Robert glanced at Kellie, then down at his hands. "I've been thinking of leaving."

Kellie sat up and pitched another pebble at Robert. "So, why don't you take me with you?"

Robert glanced at Kellie. "Would you?"

Kellie dribbled sand between her fingers and onto the beach, then flattened the little mound. "No. I suppose not. Sam would never let me go."

"No. I suppose not."

"So, I suppose that settles it. You can't go."

Robert looked at Kellie. "Leaving you will be the hardest part."

Kellie stared out at the lake. "It's funny. You've been chasing me since we met, and now I'm chasing you. Did you hear me this morning say 'I love you?'"

"Yeah. I did."

Kellie plinked another pebble at Robert's head. "You didn't respond."

Robert tried a laugh. "I was drowning."

"You're running again, this time from me."

"Can I say it's me and not you?"

"You can say it, but that's pretty trite. You better do better than that, Pal."

"I was talking with Manny."

Kellie nodded. "Oh. So that's it. Manny."

"He's given me some things to think about."

"You can't believe everything he says."

"Oh, I don't know. He had me pegged pretty well."

"Did he talk about me?"

"No. Not really."

"What did he say about me?"

"Nothing, really."

"Robert, remember, you promised you would always tell me the truth. What did he tell you?"

"He said he thought you were an interesting girl."

"Shit. You know you can't believe anything he says. You know that. Right?"

"Sure."

"He lost his license."

"Yeah, I know."

Robert sat up. "We talked about me. My background. How it affects my relationships. Why, once upon a time, I left someone who loved me, and why I'm interested..." Robert glanced at Kellie, "in you."

"An interesting girl?"

"Yeah."

Kellie plinked another pebble at Robert's head, this time taking better aim. "Are you afraid of me?"

Robert laughed. "Only when you take me swimming."

Kellie laughed too. "Well, I won't do that very often. I don't want you to be afraid of me." Kellie reached over and brushed sand off Robert's arm. "Well, maybe a little afraid would be good." Then she kissed his shoulder. "What can I do to get you to stay?"

"I screwed up my last relationship, and I hurt someone really bad. I'll have to pay for that. I don't want to ever do that again."

"That didn't answer my question. So what else did Manny tell you other than that I'm interesting?"

"To stay away from you."

"Yeah. He'd say that. Do you believe him, what he told you about me?"

“No ... No ...
Oh, OK... I don't
know. It's all
jumbled up in my
head. When
Manny talked
about you, he was
saying one thing,
but I was picturing
something else —
a forgotten little
girl, alone,
rejected by her
parents. You just
wanted to be
happy. And I was
abandoned too.
We're two lost
children searching
to find some



reason for all of it, some happiness. Maybe that's with each other. I don't know. If I knew you better.”

“We've been together almost every day for five months, and you don't know me?”

“You tell me these fantastic stories. I know they're not true, and I don't care. But you tell me nothing about you, about what's inside of you. Kellie, let me in.”

“You wouldn't want to see 'in.'”

“How can we have any kind of a relationship if you don't talk to me? Who are you?”

Kellie took Robert's hand. “Com'on, it's hot out here. Let's go up to the house.”

Chapter 15. My Birthday Present

Kellie and Robert left the beach and strolled to the mansion. They stopped on the patio.

"Elaine and Sam are gone for the day, so's the housekeeper. We'd be alone. Do you want to come in?" Kellie asked.

Yes, he did.

Kellie took Robert up the stairs to the second floor. Two corridors led off, one to the left, one to the right. Kellie led them down the one on the left. They passed several shut doors. The only light in the hallway was from windows near the stairs behind them.

"What's in there? Robert asked as they walked by one of the doors.

"A bathroom."

Robert tried the next door. The handle wouldn't turn.

"Sam has a bunch of stuff in there. We keep it locked," Kellie advised.

The next door, at the end of the hallway, was also closed. Kellie opened it. "I don't think you've seen my room."

Robert's eyes had adjusted to the hallway's dimness, but as he stepped into Kellie's room, it was too dark to see inside.

Kellie flipped a wall switch, and two lights went on. One was from a lamp next to a desk at the back of the room, the other from a lamp on a bedside table to Robert's left. There were no 'girly' posters on the wall, no disheveled clothing on chairs or the bed, no Teddy Bears or dolls lying about the floor, nothing to show that a girl lived here. There were no decorative touches, no vases with fake flowers, not even a throw rug on the wood floor, nothing to show anyone cared about who lived here. He tried to think of something diplomatic to say.

"Geez, your room has no windows." He failed.

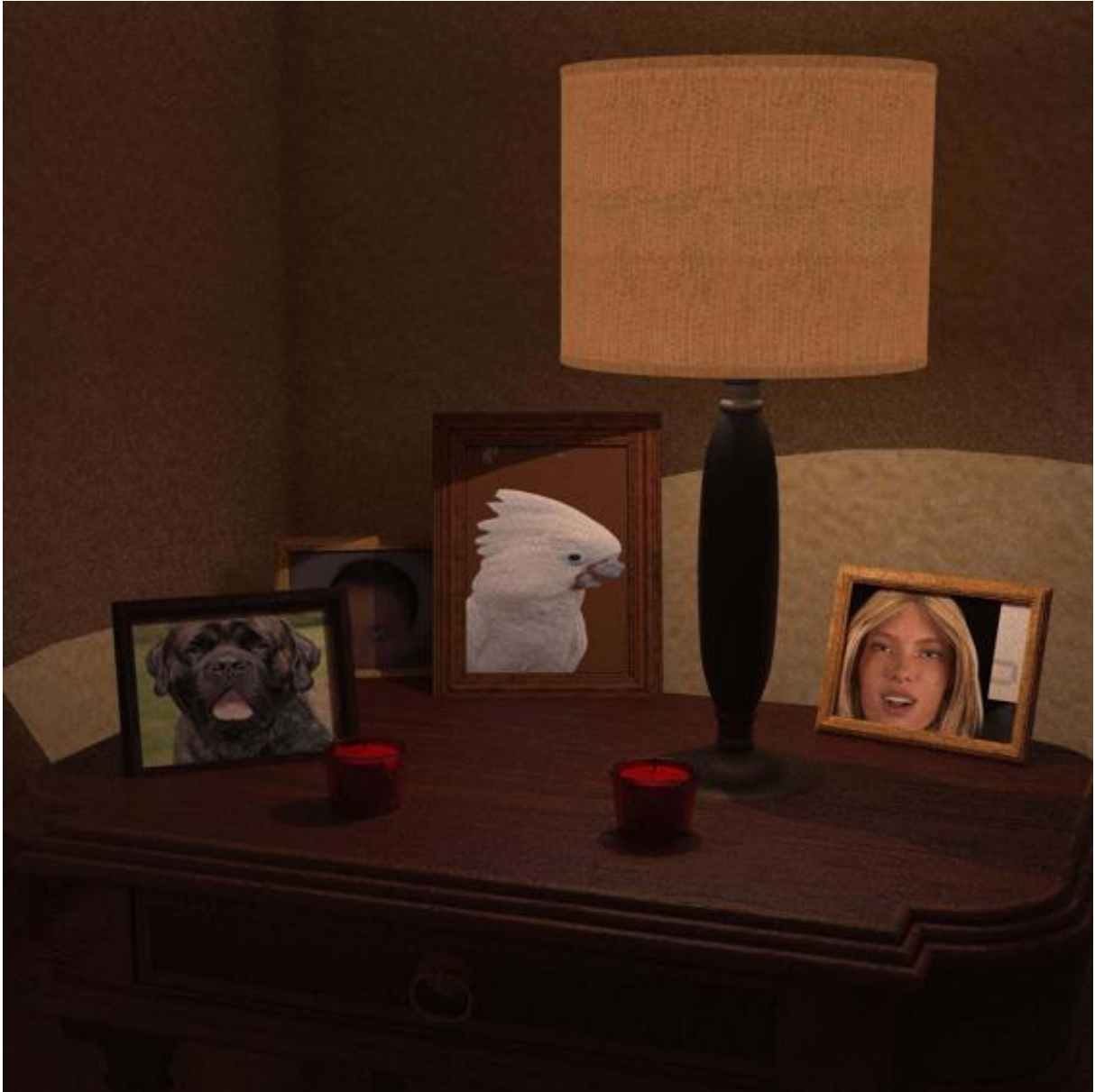
"Well, I suppose I'm used to that. Besides, I don't spend much time here anymore."

Robert's voice became louder. "How did you end up with this room? There have to be better bedrooms in the house."

“This was a storage room over the garage before Elaine and I moved in with Sam.”

“So, why did they put you in here?”

Kellie shrugged. “It’s the farthest room from theirs.”



Robert walked to the table next to the bed. At the front were two candles in red glass holders. Robert recognized them from when he was a Catholic as ‘votive’ candles. — Candles that are burned for the dead. Behind them were photographs in frames.

“So, what are these?”

“Oh, pictures of pets and things.”

"I thought you said you don't have any pets."

"Not anymore. That one's a cockatoo. It was my mom's favorite. Its name was 'Birdie.'"

Robert pointed to another photograph. "What about the dog?"



"That's 'Limestone,' Sam loved that dog. Probably the only thing he's ever loved. I guess it reminded him of himself."

"Big, bully, aggressive?"

"Yes."

"Bark worse than its bite?"

"No. You'd never hear it coming before it tore you apart."

Behind the others was a photo of a girl. "Who's that?"

"An old babysitter. Hmm... I can't remember her name. It was a long time ago."

Robert picked up one of the photos. "This is of you."

"Yeah, a selfie. Janie said I should have a picture of us for my collection, but she ducked just as I snapped it. She said she decided she didn't want her picture taken."

Robert roamed to the back of the room and picked up a paperback book from the desk. "'Lolita.' Interesting book for a girl to have."

"Someone gave it to me. They thought I might like it."

"Did you?"





"Still studying it. It's challenging to read."

"Because it's about a young girl being sexually victimized by an older man?"

"No. I thought it was about a precocious girl who seduced men." Kellie cocked her head and smiled. "The power that chick had over that old man..."

Robert dropped the book on the desk and laughed. "Kinda like you have over me?"

Kellie kept her smile. "Kinda."

More than 'kinda,' Robert thought, and felt warm with that thought. He looked at Kellie's dingy room. "I see why you don't spend much time here, it's so gloomy, and you can't even see outside."

Kellie wandered toward the front of the bedroom, near her bed. "Oh, I used to spend more than enough time here. When I was little, whenever I was bad, which was quite often, Elaine or Sam made me stay in here as punishment."

Robert joined Kellie near the bed. "I know about 'time-outs.' My dad would make me stand in a corner for half an hour sometimes."

"Mine were good for two or three days."

"What, they locked you up two or three days?"

"Yeah."

"You mean hours, right?"

"No. Days. They'd have the housekeeper bring me food. 'Mary.' You remember Mary?"

"Yeah. I remember Mary."

"She took care of me. There's the bathroom a couple of doors down the hallway. I was allowed to use that. But that was it. Sometimes, when Sam and Elaine were gone, Mary would let me wander around the house. But we had to be careful. Sam would have fired her if he ever found out."

"I felt so alone." Kellie walked over to the bedroom door and shut it. "I remember sitting by this door and just crying.

"I'd pretend that a burglar would come into the house. When I was younger, he would come in and try to rescue me and take me away."

Kellie pressed her back against the door.

"Sometimes, I'd imagine he would block the door so Sam couldn't get in. I'd tell my burglar what they did to me. That I wished they were dead. He said he'd do it for me."

"You're a little kid wishing your parents were dead?"

"Sam, I wanted Sam dead. It would be the only way I could ever get away from him. And I was eight years old. That's when my mother married him. And that's how long I've wanted him dead."

"That's sad. You're imagining someone being killed."

"Not someone. I told you. I want Sam dead. Besides, everyone fantasizes. It's a way to escape, to make living a little more bearable. It was the only way I could deal with my time with Sam."

Kellie stepped closer to Robert. "My fantasies were not always about killing. As I got older, they became sexual. He would force himself on me."

"You don't mean Sam, right?"

"No. The Burglar, Silly."



“So now we’re talking about rape?”

“No... I don’t think I’d call it that. I would be in my room. Then I’d hear a noise downstairs — someone coming up the stairs. I’d huddle down in my bed. ‘I hope he doesn’t come in here.’ Then the doorknob would turn, and he’d open the door.

‘Oh, please, Mr. Burglar, don’t hurt me.’



He’d take hold of me and lay me out on my bed. I knew he was too strong for me, so I didn’t fight. He’d make me naked.”

Kellie put her lips next to Robert’s ear. “Then, he would whisper. ‘It’s OK, I’m not going to hurt you.’ He would fondle me. Then whisper again, ‘After you, it will be my turn.’”

Kellie’s hand was rubbing up and down Robert’s arm. “He’d caress and kiss my breasts, his hands would roam down until his fingers found me. I resisted the sensations at first. I didn’t want it to become his turn. But he would keep at me, leisurely, tenderly, teasing me. I couldn’t stop it. You have to understand. I tried. I couldn’t help myself. Then it became his turn.

“He was not fully hard when he’d enter me. But I could feel him grow as he moved back and forth inside.” Kellie stiffened her body and rubbed it against Robert’s. “I’d clench my body and hold still, trying to give him no pleasure. ‘No.’ ‘No.’ ‘No.’ I’d cry. But as he kept

thrusting inside of me, I'd respond, panting, trembling, I'd lose control. My hips would buck, he'd groan, and we'd climax together."



Kellie put her hand on Robert's warm cheek. "I dreamed a lot about my burglar. Sometimes I handcuffed myself to my bed. Only one arm, of course, and pretend my burglar would come in and play with me and make love to me. Those are my favorite fantasies."

Kellie put both her palms on Robert's chest. "And no, Robert. Not rape me. Not screw me. Make love to me."

"Kellie, that's exactly rape. When a girl says 'No,' that's it. No matter when. It stops. No questions. Period."

"Robert, your face is red, and you have a hard-on. Help me understand. You have a naked girl tied up and helpless, you can do anything you want to her, and you wouldn't take advantage?"

"My condition is because you're standing three inches from me in your white bikini, not because that's what I would want to do. Besides, fantasy is one thing. It's not so gratifying in real life. No. I wouldn't do that to a girl."

"You think you have that much control?"

"I know I do."

Kellie moved away from Robert and leaned against the wall. "Ultimately, it wasn't 'rape' or whatever you want to call it. It was love. He'd kill Sam for me and then he and I would get to stay here and have sex all day long."

"Kind of a unique definition of love."

"Well, anyway, he doesn't come around much anymore."

"Why not?"

"Janie doesn't like him." Kellie paused, "You wanted to see 'in.'" She squinted up at Robert. "So, what do you think?"

"Let me get this straight. Your make-believe girlfriend doesn't like your fantasy burglar."

Kellie's head jerked back. "I told you, you wouldn't want to see in. This is me with all my blemishes." Her eyes got wet, "Take a good look."

Robert shook his head at being an idiot again, then took Kellie's head in his hands and kissed her lips. "You're a beautiful flower in a very complicated flower pot." He kissed her again. "I am looking, and I think I love you."

Kellie nodded, sniffled, and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Then her face lit up with her brightest, bestest smile. "Listen, this should be a happy day. It's my 21st birthday."

"Oh, wow! Happy birthday."

Kellie curtsied. "Thank you, Sir."

"Did your parents, sorry I meant your Mom and Sam, get you something?"

"No, they forgot."

"I'm sorry."

"It's OK. I'm used to it."

"If I'd have known, I would have gotten you a present."

"I think you're about to."

"What?"

"You." Kellie reached down and patted the front of Robert's pants. "Do you think I can tempt you to stay with a little sex?"

"Sex is always good. We can work with that." Robert's hands moved to the back of Kellie's head and caressed her hair with the same tempo she was massaging his pants. "Let's make love."

“Could we wait? I’m not ready for that yet. I’m sorry.”

Robert dropped his arms to his side. “So, your burglar gets to have you, but not me?”

Kellie kept stroking Robert, coaxing him to grow until he was straining against his pants.

“Don’t you like the way I took care of you before?”

“I just want more for us.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

Robert lowered his head and nuzzled Kellie’s neck.

Kellie grinned, “I didn’t think so.” She unzipped Robert’s pants and let them drop to the floor. Then took hold of his cock, and stroked him until his legs were shaking, and he groaned and climaxed.

Robert was regaining his breathing when Kellie kissed his cheek. “I can bloom for you if you give me a little more time. I need to work through some things. Do you understand?”

Robert nodded.

Kellie continued to hold on to Robert. “You know what they say when someone rescues another from the sea?”

“It was Lake Michigan.”

“Same thing.”

Robert smiled. “OK. No. What do they say?”

“Whoever is rescued belongs to their rescuer. You belong to me now.” Kellie let go of Robert’s cock and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You’re a big baby. But you’re my big baby. Give me a little time. Stay with me.”

Robert nodded.

Chapter 16. Travis

Robert was in a mellow mood. In the days after Kellie's birthday, she had bloomed for him. Opening up, exposing the delicate flower beneath the hard sepal where she usually hid. And love. They had both used the word. Kellie directly, he in his more guarded fashion. But it was out there now. A promise. A commitment to each other. To care for the other. To put the other's needs above one's own. To protect.

Robert was in the studio finishing work on a painting. Kellie came over. She wandered around, picking something up, putting it down, going on to something else. A delicate, bruised



blossom. She had been silent for some time. Kellie was never silent. Robert wondered what was up.

Kellie was looking down at something on a table across the room. "Do you remember that party I had last fall?"

He did. Rejection is hard to forget. "I remember. I've always wondered why you invited me."

Kellie walked over to Robert. "You were all alone. I felt sorry for you. I hoped you might make some friends. But you were such a clod."

"Yeah, I know. Your friends put me off. I wasn't myself."

"Well, they are jerks."

"There was a girl there I've wondered about."

"Oh. Who?"

"Her name is Sydney. How do you know her?"

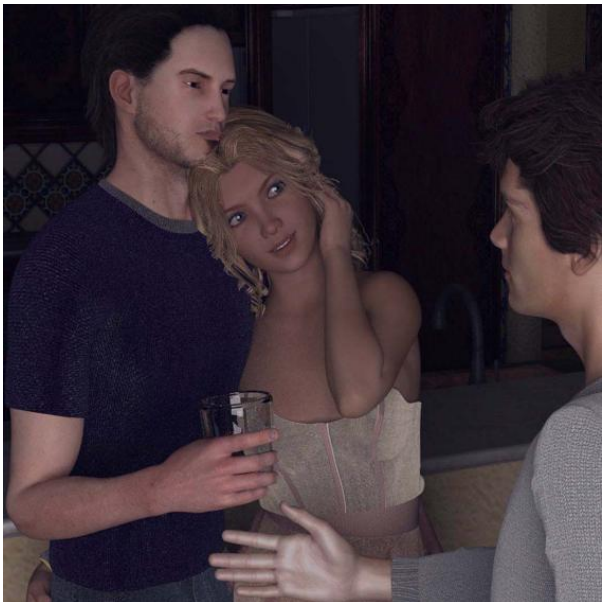
"Honestly, I don't think I know anyone by that name."

"She was at your party."

"Yeah, well, that sometimes gets out of control, someone I invite, invites someone, who invites someone. Do you want to see if I can find out more about her for you?"

"No. No, I've just been wondering why she was there."

Kellie put her hands on Robert's chest and picked at a button on his shirt. "So, what did you think of Travis?"



Robert remembered him very well. "The guy with you at the party?"

"Yeah, that one."

"I thought he was an arrogant, self-centered, asshole-jerk. Did I leave anything out?"

Kellie glanced up at Robert, "How about, 'rapist?'" Then she returned to studying the button.

Robert felt nauseous, even as the words were still clanging around in his head. He played it over, trying to pluck meaning out



of the noise. What do you say when someone tells you some terrible thing? What can you say? What can possibly help? What connects with that person to share their pain? Robert didn't know. He was waiting for the noise to go away. All he could think of was: "Where?" "When?" "How?" (Kellie had already answered "What" and "Who.")

Kellie shook her head. Those were too many questions.

Then Robert did better. "Do

you want to talk about it?"

"I wish you had stayed that night. I was trying to break up with him."

"It didn't look like it." That was mean. Robert regretted those words as they were leaving his mouth. The sting of rejection had festered inside him since the party. And now, it had just burst out.

What the hell are you thinking?

Kellie bit her lip. "I had wanted to tell him. After you walked away, I figured that was a good time. I told him you and I were dating and



that you were my new boyfriend.”

Robert wanted to get his last remark behind them as quickly as possible. He massaged Kellie’s shoulder, “What’d he say to that?”

“He laughed. ‘That candy-ass? You’d pick him over me?’ He said we needed to talk about it. He took me out by the pool. No one was out there. They were all inside drinking. If you had been looking out your window, you would have seen us.”

Robert opened his mouth to respond, but Kellie was getting wound up. “We argued. We were so loud. I’m surprised you didn’t hear us. He grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the back of the patio. ‘What are you doing? Where are you taking me?’ His hand was gripping me so hard it hurt. I was afraid. I begged him. ‘Let’s go back to the party.’ He said he needed a ‘goodbye present’, and I was it.”

Kellie looked down. “We’d gone pretty far in the past, but we never went all the way — never did it.” Kellie glanced up at Robert and sobbed. “I was a virgin. He took me to those bushes behind the gazebo, held me down, and... and he raped me. If you had heard us, if you had come out, you could have stopped him.”

Robert had been massaging Kellie’s shoulder. Now he stopped. “Kellie, after I left the party, I sat in the gazebo. I was right there. I didn’t hear or see anything. When did this happen?”

“After everyone left.”

“I thought you said you asked him to take you back to the party. What party if everyone had already left?”

Maybe I said, ‘Let’s go back into the house,’ instead of ‘Let’s go back to the party.’ That was a very traumatic night for me. What difference does it make? I just knew I didn’t want to be out there with him. It happened sometime that night.”

“Kellie, I sat in the gazebo all night. I didn’t see that anything happened.”

“Robert, are you doubting me? Why don’t you say you’re sorry?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I know you didn’t. That’s what we’re talking about. You did nothing. You didn’t stop him. You didn’t rescue me.”

“How could I? I didn’t know it was happening.”



"Well, you should have."

Robert threw up his hands. "Kellie, rape is a terrible thing. But saying someone raped you when they didn't is terrible too."

"Well, duh."

Kellie walked to the table and leaned against it. "Wait a minute. You don't believe me? You know how much I hate liars."

Robert stepped up to Kellie. "The party was months ago. Why did you wait? Why are you just telling me now?"

Kellie's eyes were wet. "I didn't trust you. I didn't trust anyone to talk to about this. I thought you and I got closer after my birthday. I opened myself up to you. I told you that I loved you. I hoped you cared for me."

Robert put his arms on Kellie's shoulders. "I do care for you."

"You said you thought you loved me too." Kellie was sobbing. "I have no one else."

Robert took Kellie in his arms. "I'm so sorry for what happened to you. I wish there was something I could do."

Kellie leaned back, wiped the tears from her eyes, and studied



Robert. "Avenge me."

"Avenge you?"

"You're my boyfriend. You need to avenge me."

"Kellie, what are you talking about?"

"Why don't you use your gun and shoot him?"

"You want me to shoot Travis?"

"I want him dead."

"It's awful what he did. It's ugly, but—"

"Are you going to tell me you don't have a gun?"

"I have a gun. But I can't believe you'd want me to shoot someone. How can you expect me to do that?"

"It's easy. You walk up to him, point it at him, and pull the trigger."

Robert went back to his easel, picked up a paintbrush, and twirled it with his fingers. "That gun could be traced to me. It's even had ballistics tests done. The police would get the records."

"Why's that?"

"Listen. I'm not going to shoot Travis."

"Fine. Shooting would be too easy on him anyway. It would just put him out of his misery, like shooting a lousy dog. He should suffer." Kellie folded her arms across her chest. "You need to get a knife and cut his balls off."

"Wait a minute, you just dropped some stuff on me. You've been raped, and now you want me to castrate the rapist. Can we talk about this?"

Kellie put her hands on the table and leaned back. "Tell me how he squealed and cried after you cut off his balls. I want to hear."

"Kellie, I can't believe you're saying this."

"Robert, I can't believe you're not hearing me. I want him punished."

"What you want is revenge."

"You need to beat him up."

"He's a hell of a lot bigger than me and probably captain of his rugby team. He'd beat the crap out of me."

Kellie crept toward Robert. "Sneak up from behind him and hit him with a baseball bat."

"When will I ever find him alone where I can sneak up on him and hit him with anything? Come on, Kellie, you're not making sense. He needs to be punished. You should call the police."

"No, Sam wouldn't like that. He takes care of things his way. He never involves the police."

"So tell Sam."

"I can't. He and Travis's family do business together. That could cause problems between us."

"Between your family and Travis's?"

"No, between Sam and me."

"You think he'd put Travis's family over you?"

"I don't want to think about it. It's complicated. What will you do to avenge me?"

Robert put the paintbrush on his easel. "I'm angry as hell at what he did to you."

"Thanks a lot. That's about as useful as someone saying, 'I'll pray for you.' 'Absolve me from my inaction, Father, for I have prayed.'"

Kellie picked up the brush. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I can't think of anything I can do."

"You're not going to do anything, are you?"

"What can I do?"

"You're right." Kellie tossed the paintbrush against the easel.

"Forget it. You're impotent. There's nothing you can do."

"Kellie, that's not fair. I care for you. I'd do anything for you."

Kellie moved close to Robert, face-to-face. "Oh, well, let's get this straight. Will you kill Travis because he raped me? We know the answer to that one — No. So, how about if he was about to rape me? You know, he's pulling me out of the party, and I'm screaming for help."

"I'd call the police. I'd get help."

"That's so weak. Let's try this. We're behind the gazebo. He's holding me down, pulling my pants off. What would you do then?"

"I wouldn't let him do that to you."

"Would you kill him then?"

"I would do whatever it took to stop him."

"But would you kill him?"

"Yes."

Chapter 17. We Are All Just Toilet Paper

Robert spent a good part of the day pacing, then sitting at the table by the window staring at the patio and the gazebo, then still more pacing. Yesterday Kellie had told him Travis had raped her. In the bushes behind the gazebo — right over there. His stomach hurt. He was furious with Travis — even if it wasn't true. But what if it was? Robert thought about that night he sat alone in the gazebo. He would have heard something, surely he would have. But what if he had dozed? Slept through Kellie's rape. How awful. Kellie being raped within feet of him, and he slept through it, as useless as a mouse. He would have killed Travis then. He wanted to now — even if it wasn't true.

But if it was? ... No one will ever hurt Kellie again. "God watches over vows." His mother's voice. "You can't break a vow." What do you know of vows, mother? Here's one at you. No one. Will Ever. Hurt. Kellie. Again.

Kellie stormed in. She had on the same dress as the day before. "My mother's such a bitch. When she wakes up in a bad mood, she thinks it's her job to make sure everyone else has a bad day as well. She just makes me feel like shit."

"OK." Robert was used to Kellie complaining about her mother.

"She's so angry. She's like a plastic bag full of..." Kellie fought for a word, "Crap." It's full to the breaking point and one little nip at the corner, and it all breaks and comes gushing out."

"I think you sometimes help with that nip."

Kellie smirked. "I carry the scissors."

"So, what was it this time?"

"I told her she needed to recycle her empty wine bottles. At least get them into the recycling bin, and I'd take care of it from there."

"OK. So what's the big deal with that?"

"She refused to do it. She says recycling is another conspiracy the Democrats have come up with."

"You got into her over that?"



“That, and global warming, and martial law is about to be declared — and it’s about time — and we need to clean out the swamp in Washington. We get into it over everything. Do you ever feel like shit, like life is meaningless, that there’s no purpose to it?”

Robert remembered the cold, rainy day he sat in the gazebo

with the gun in his hand. “Yeah. But it gets better.”

“That’s a worn-out cliché everyone says. Why should it get better? What if it doesn’t? What if...? What if...?” Kellie shook her head and stretched out her arms. “What if this is all there is?”

Robert tried to talk about what he felt was really upsetting Kellie. “I can’t imagine how awful it was to go through what Travis did to you. I appreciate that was painful for you to tell me about him. I didn’t handle that very well. I’m sorry.”

“We ended up deciding you were impotent.”

Robert’s face grew hot. “I thought we ended up deciding your revenge ideas were screw-ball.” He regretted that remark. “Sorry, that didn’t come out very well. Calling a guy impotent is a red flag.”

“Shit, you’re sorry about everything. You’re just sorry. You think it’s all about Travis? You don’t know anything about my life. You don’t have to live with Sam. You weren’t brought up by my mother. You’re not stuck here in a dead-end life.”

“So get out of it. Get a job, earn some money, and move out.”

“Sam won’t let me get a job. He said it would make him look bad, like he couldn’t support me.”

“Go to college.”

“I hated school. It’s soooo boring. Besides, Sam says I’m too dumb. That’s OK. Let him think that. He’ll find out.”

“Kellie, remember the story. The wonderful story about the complicated, fragile, young girl. Your story. It has the ups and downs of life. The good moments and the extraordinary. And yeah, the bad. That’s all part of it.”

“Some story. Sam and my mother have scrawled all over it.”

“This isn’t about them. It’s you. There is a better life out there. You just have to go find it. Discover what you’re meant to do and go do it.”

“That’s another one of those dumb things people say. What if what you’re meant to do — the real reason you’re here isn’t all that great? What if you were just sheet number 838 in the roll?”

“What are you talking about? What roll?”

“You start out in a giant vat of warm goo. You’re in a papermaking factory.

“You could be anything. A sheet of paper in a medical textbook, so someone could learn how to save another’s life. A napkin, wrapped around a warm doughnut. A Valentine’s Day card for a sweetheart. You end up in a roll of toilet paper — sheet number 838. After a while, you get used to that. Maybe you’d be used to dab some lipstick from a lady’s lip, you think. Perhaps to wipe a tear from a lover’s cheek.

“Then a big, fat person sits down next to you. Her ass cheeks hang over the toilet seat, and she — well, she does her thing.

“Then she starts pulling sheets off the roll, 810, 11, 12 — You knew them.

“Wipe, wipe.

“‘Oh no, what’s this?’ You think.

“She pulls again.

“Wipe, wipe.



"Your life starts to unwind. It's out-of-control.

"Wipe, wipe.

"This can't be it. Surely there's something more.

"Sheets 820, 821, 822.

"Wipe, wipe.

"I didn't think this was how it was supposed to be. Your world is spinning. More sheets.

"Wipe, wipe.

"You're next.

"No. What? Wait. I'm not ready yet. I thought I'd have more—

"Wipe.

"Congratulations, Pal, you just fulfilled your destiny."



Robert groaned. "OK. Thanks for that. I was in a good mood. So descriptive. And so gross."

Kellie smirked. "Two things you can't do without, coffee and toilet paper."

"When things got too complicated for me where I lived, I left. Why don't you leave?"

"Sam's told me if I ever did, he'd cut me off without a dime."

"OK, so he does. So what? At least you'd be free."

"Is freedom so important?"

"I gave up love for it."

“Freedom to do what?”

“To do my art. To make something meaningful. Something I will be remembered for.”

“You’re chasing after dreams like that... Don...”

“Don Quixote. You’re thinking of Don Quixote.”

“I don’t need you to tell me what I think. You think you’re so much smarter than me. You’re not free. Look at you. Living off the tit of Sam Gallo. You let Sam take advantage of you. You took that terrible deal from him. Work for free? What a dummy.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were there. As I remember it, he threatened to break my fingers, sue me, and or kick my ass for taking pictures of you. Pictures, which by the way, you knew I was taking. And why you told him about those, I’ll never understand.”

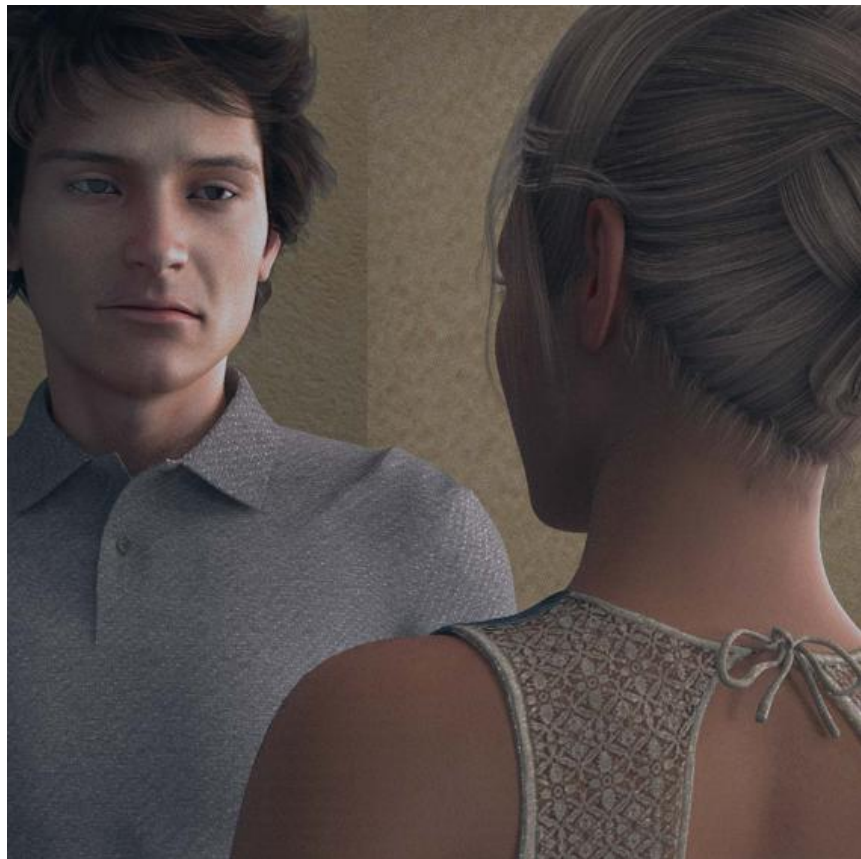
“You must not remember very well. He had guessed it was me. He came at me and threw the pictures in my face. What did you want me to do?” Kellie had angry tears in her eyes, “I’m afraid of him too.”

Robert put up his arms. “OK. OK.”

Kellie sneered at him. “You’re a ‘C’ person.”

“No, I’m better than that.”

“No, you’re a ‘C’ person. That’s OK. Most people are. They’re satisfied with that. Your problem is you think you’re an ‘A.’ But really, you’re not. You’re just a ‘C.’ In fact, I bet you got D’s



in school. You’re a ‘D’ person. That’s sub-par Pal. You spend your

days in a dark hole you call a studio, and Sam gets all your money. You can't afford to go anywhere else. You're stuck here too."

"Well, at least my basic needs are met."

"Food, clothing, shelter?"

"Breathing's good. That, and fingers I can still use."

"Yeah. Well, with Sam, at least being able to breathe is a plus."

"I hate it here too, but I owe Sam. I don't have a choice."

"You sold out. You make pornographic pictures for a porn dealer that dirty old men like Sam can drool over. You're a loser."

"I'm done arguing with you."

"No, you're not. You're not done until I'm done."

"Why are we arguing? You came here looking for a fight. All I'm saying is you have choices. You're free to set your own life."

"Why do you keep harping on freedom?"

"I didn't realize I keep 'harping.' But OK, let's talk about that. You're free to make love to me, why don't you?"

"Dummy, because I'm free to say no."

"That's not it, and you know it."

"How about, you're not very attractive, and I don't want to?"

"That's not what's going on here. There's so much pain inside of you. You tell me about some of it. Then you put up a wall."



Kellie started breathing harder. "You're the one with the rules. Rule One, keep this professional."

"I've changed my mind."

"It's a good rule, Pal."

"Why are you throwing that back in my face? You know how I feel about you."

"I know what you say. My burglar didn't need to talk. He showed me."

"You know I'd never force myself on you."

"Well, maybe sometimes that's what a girl wants."

"Rape?"

"No, to be so desirable to a man — he wants her so bad — he loses control."

"I'm not like your burglar."

"Well, maybe you should be."

"To force you?"

"To love me."

"I do love you. How can you not see that?"

"And yet, you keep me on a pedestal and take pictures of me."

Robert stepped toward Kellie. "I'll show you I love you." He forced his mouth on Kellie's, his hand squeezed her breast.

Kellie pulled back. "Screw you. Now I'm done."

Robert grabbed her, "No, we need to get this taken care of." He locked his arms around her, holding Kellie as she struggled to get loose. "I'm not going to let you go until we at least talk about this."

Kellie stopped resisting. Her breathing quieted. She looked down, nodded, pushed herself away, and went to the door to leave. Then she turned and came at him like a snake on the attack. Her body swinging, throwing off coils, head dead on target, her unblinking eyes peering directly at him. A sneer on her face. She was on him in an instant. "Touch me again, and I'll slit your throat."

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Kellie left Robert and went home. She wandered through the house. She seemed to recall being annoyed with Robert, for what

she couldn't remember. Oh well. Some silly thing. Sam and Elaine were out for the evening. The housekeeper had left as well. She was alone. She liked that. It got dark. She strode through the house and closed the blinds and shutters, checked that every door was locked, and turned on the alarms. Then she climbed the stairs to the room at the end of the hall.

Robert had thought it odd there were no windows. She liked that there were no windows — and only one door. She locked the door behind her. No thing could get to her here when she locked that door.



She went to the bedstand and studied the photographs. One was of Janie. It was behind the others. She remembered Janie. She certainly did. Very well. Very well indeed. Janie had slipped and got hit by a train. Silly Janie.

She picked up the picture of Birdie. Sweet Birdie. Sweet,

cawing, cackling, crackling, noisy Birdie. Silly Birdie.

There was a recent photo of Limestone. Don't look at me like that. You never liked me, you silly dog, and I never liked you. You couldn't tell the difference between good meat and bad meat. Silly dog. Silly, silly dog.

She opened the drawer, took out a book of matches, and lit one of the candles that were in front of the photos. When she was little, her mother had taken her to church. “Put a quarter into the slot and light a candle. For each candle, a soul can leave Purgatory and go to Heaven.” When her mother turned her back, she put the candle in her pocket. Silly soul. The next week she stole another candle. Silly, silly soul.

She knelt in front of the bedstand and rested her arms on it, the pictures flickering in the candlelight. Perhaps she fell asleep. She wanted a bath. That would mean having to leave her room. That should be OK, she thought. She lit the other candle, unlocked her door, and went down the hall to the bathroom. She closed and locked the bathroom door behind her.

She didn’t turn on a light and put the candle and her phone on the sink. She was careful to keep her phone away from water. She used to take it with her while she bathed, but one time she dropped it, and Sam had to buy her a new one. He was not happy about that. Oh no, he certainly wasn’t. But he liked to keep track of where she was. He had told her she could never leave the house without the phone. She turned on the water and undressed as the tub filled.



The candle, shining through the glass, cast a crimson glow over her bathroom. A hot bath was one of her favorite things to do. Winter or summer, it didn't matter. She would sink into the hot water and let everything slip away. It was a large, deep tub. She could lie in it with only her head above water.

She liked to hold her breath and put her head under the water. From here, she could hear the mechanisms of the house. A clang in the pipes when the hot water heater turned on. A hollow thump when the air conditioner in the summer or the furnace in the winter clicked in. She could tell when the housekeeper turned on the kitchen sink, or when Sam flushed the toilet in his bathroom. The pipes running through the house were its veins, and the tub its heart.

She slid her head underwater. If she held really still, she could hear other things besides the house. She could hear the gurgling in her stomach. She could hear the beating of her heart.

Once, she had heard another heart. Faster than hers. It was faint. She concentrated on its pulse. "Here I am. Here I am. Here I am." Later she thought she had imagined it. But the next time she took a bath, she could hear its plea. "Love me. Love me. Love me." She told her mother about that. In her last bath before being taken away, she listened to the heart — stronger now. "Forget me not. Forget me not. Forget me, not."

"I won't," she promised.

Kellie raised her head above the water.

The candle flickered as if a current of air had crossed over it. Kellie sat up, confused. She hadn't heard the air conditioner turn on. She called softly. "Janie?"

She stared into the water. A small string-like object was floating up from between her legs. A curious thing. Where did it come from? It floated to the surface. Perhaps an inch or so long, slightly curled. A curious thing indeed. It reminded her of a small, over-cooked noodle.

She tried to pick it up, but her fingers pressing together compressed the water and pushed it away. She tried several more times without success. Finally, she cupped her palm under it and carefully brought her hand up, letting the water escape through her fingers. The thing lay limp in her hand. She flipped her wrist to shake it off into the room. It stayed stuck. She tried a couple more times,

but it remained stubbornly fixed. Then she picked it up with the fingers from her other hand and flicked it. It landed on the edge of the tub. It was a sickly looking thing. Through its thin, pale membrane, she could make out a design, blue veins. “Well.” She thought. “After my bath, I’ll get some toilet paper and throw it away.” She looked closer. It had a face — then it moved.

Kellie tumbled back, slipping under the water, the tub squeaking, the water sloshing.

The thing started slithering and squirming, moving faster until it fell into the tub. Kellie jumped up, bathwater cascading off her. “Get me out of here.” She felt a rumbling in her stomach and looked down. Liquids and worms were spewing out of her, thundering against the water that was churning like a witch’s cauldron from the wriggling, writhing worms. They crawled up her legs, stomach, her chest, prodding, poking, busily burrowing, arms flailing, ripping, blood flowing. They reached her head, chomping, chewing, crunching. That’s when Kellie screamed.

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Robert heard the pat, pat, pat of a hand feeling its way around the foot of his bed. His phone rang. He saw it was Kellie.

“Hello.” There was no answer. “Hello.” He heard arguing in the background. He recognized Kellie’s voice, but not the other’s. Was it Elaine? Was Kellie fighting with her mother? Robert couldn’t tell. “Hello.” Was it the voice that wanted to slit his throat? Sounded like it. “Hello. Anyone there?” The fight escalated, becoming brutal. Something crashing. “Hello. Can anyone hear me?” “Hello.” Something breaking. “Hello.” “Hello.” Something tearing, something ripping. “Hello.” A crunch. then a scream. The terror of a soul plunging into Hell — then dead.

Robert called the police.

Chapter 18. Elaine Comes Over

Scene 1. Can I Get Dressed

Robert felt cold when he got out of bed. He realized he had been sweating, and he and his sheets were damp. Last night had not been a good night for Robert's sleep, and now it was mid-morning. He didn't put on any clothes, and shuffled to the table by the window, still in his underwear, and tried to wake up. He thought about finding the energy to make a cup of coffee and stared at his phone. Calling the police was a big deal. Was that the right thing to do? Did I overreact? What about Kellie? Is Kellie OK? What happened to her? Elaine barged in.

Does no one knock? "Mrs. Gallo—"

Elaine came at Robert without even slowing down to shut the door. "What would ever cause you to call the police on us? How dare you interfere in our personal lives."

Robert's hands instinctively covered his crotch. "Give me a minute to put some clothes on."

"Never mind, this won't take long. What possessed you?"

"How's Kellie?"

"I asked you a question. Do you realize what problems you caused with that call?"

"I'm sorry. Kellie's phone must have pocket-dialed me." Robert held up his phone as if that was proof of what he was saying — It also put something between him and the angry Mrs. Gallo. "I heard Kellie screaming. It sounded like someone was trying to kill her. I didn't know what else to do. Is Kellie OK?"

"Kellie was home alone last night. No one else was there. No one was trying to kill her."

"But I heard two voices. One I could tell was Kellie, but I didn't recognize the other. Someone was overpowering her, and she was fighting back like crazy."

"This family doesn't call the police for help. Not ever."

"I'm sorry. I panicked. I know I heard another person in there. I wanted to protect Kellie. Where is she?"



“Mr. Gallo and I don’t appreciate your sticking your nose in our family’s affairs.”

Robert put his phone back on the table. “No Ma’am, but I was worried about Kellie.”

“Have the police contacted you?”

“No. Why would the police call me? What’s happened to Kellie?”

“They’re going to talk to you since you’re the one who called them. They will have questions for you. The police take every opportunity they

can to pry into Mr. Gallo’s business. I’m going to tell you what to tell them.”

“Before you tell me anything else, tell me what happened to Kellie.”

“Mr. Gallo and I are taking care of Kellie. It’s none of your business.”

“It is my business. I care about Kellie. I know that—”

“You have no idea what you know. You—” Elaine paused and took a breath as Robert stood up.

“—I’m not ever going to let Kellie get hurt,” Robert realized he was standing with nothing on but his underpants and sat down, “again.”

“Who do you think you are to say that to me? She’s my daughter. I take care of her. I’m the one that protects her.”

Robert gritted his teeth. He didn’t say what he wanted to. Instead, he took a breath, then said, “I’m not anyone. I’m just worried about Kellie. I appreciate there are things going on inside of her. If I knew, maybe I could help.”

“Mr. Gallo likes to keep things private.”

“I can do that. I don’t care about Mr. Gallo or his business, just Kellie. Please.”

Elaine didn’t respond.

“There’s plenty I do know about Mr. Gallo’s business, starting with what goes on in the backrooms of the shop.”

“You’re treading in dangerous water there, Robert.”

“I don’t care. I’ve kinda gotten used to that. Tell me about Kellie, or...” Robert picked up his phone.

Elaine crossed her arms. “That’s extortion.”

Robert put his phone back on the table and looked at Elaine. “No. It’s blackmail.”

Elaine studied Robert, then nodded and leaned against the table. “Kellie has had issues ever since she was a little girl. She would go into bouts of depression. Hide in her room for days at a time. She’d sit against the door, so I couldn’t get in. She invented characters. I could hear her talking to make-believe friends. It would sound like someone else, but it was just Kellie changing her voice.”

Robert opened his mouth and started to talk, but Elaine held up her hand. “This is not easy for me.” She looked at Robert. “So keep your mouth shut.” Robert nodded.

Elaine went to the front door, closed it, then turned to Robert and lowered her voice. “When she was fourteen, she attempted suicide —” Elaine held up her hand in her continuing warning to Robert to keep his mouth shut. “—while she was at school. She bought drugs from someone there and overdosed. The school janitor found her passed out in a closet and called for emergency help.”

Robert's breath was sucked out of him. "Why would she attempt suicide?"

"She was pregnant."

Elaine walked back to the table. "The authorities became involved. They insisted Kellie get treatment at a mental health institution. We didn't have much choice. Mr. Gallo picked a facility in a different state. He hoped if her treatment wasn't local, there would be less chance of anything getting back here. He took her there himself."

Elaine slid Robert's phone back and forth on the table. "When she came home, she wasn't pregnant anymore."

Robert grabbed Elaine's wrist. "You got her an abortion?"

"Look, she was fourteen years old and unmarried."

"You could have helped her raise the baby. You certainly have enough money to do so."

"It would have been embarrassing." Elaine pulled her hand away from Robert. "Besides, they diagnosed her with what I think they called a 'split personality.' She probably shouldn't have had a kid anyway."

Robert spoke out. "'Dissociative Identity Disorder.' I took a psych class in college, that's what it's called now, 'Dissociative Identity Disorder.' Not 'split personality.' Millions of people have mental disorders and make excellent parents. Kellie could—"

"Robert, remember who you're talking to. Did I ask for your opinion?"

"No. Sorry, I blurt things out when I'm nervous."

"Are you nervous now?"

"No. I'm angry. But so, OK. 'Split-personality' is a good term. You realize it comes about from someone being abused during their childhood."

"What are you saying? Kellie was not molested. I know my daughter."

"I'm just telling you what I learned."

"Well, I'm telling you she was not abused."

Elaine pushed against the table as if trying to rearrange it. "When she came back from the institution, she started in again with her

locking herself in her room and talking with her make-believe people routine.

“Kellie was a challenging child. When she went out of control, normal things didn’t work with her. Mr. Gallo got cuffs to fix her down so she could struggle but not hurt herself. They didn’t leave any marks. Sometimes he would use those on her.”

“Did he cuff her to her bed?”

“I don’t know. Mr. Gallo took care of all that.

“Since the authorities are involved again, we had to take some action. He’s taken her back to the institution.”

“So, what happened? What did Kellie do?”

“She and I got into a fight yesterday. We’re always fighting. I don’t even remember what it was about. It must have sent her over the edge. I don’t know. You heard her last night. Her screaming. Are you going to make me spell it out for you?”

Robert shook his head.

Elaine nodded. “It’s for a week. Mr. Gallo plans on staying there with Kellie and be in the counseling. He’s concerned about what she might report, or what might come out.”

“I’m surprised they let him participate that much. Her treatment’s supposed to be confidential.”



“Mr. Gallo has a forceful personality. He’s hard to say no to. Besides, he has some kind of ownership interest with them.”

Elaine smoothed the hair on the back of her head. “So, you wanted to know about Kellie. Now, do you understand what I’ve been dealing with?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“So the rules are—”

“The rules?”

“Yes. The rules. Just two. One. What I’ve told you stays between you and me, understand?”

“Yes.”

“That includes the police...” Elaine looked at Robert, who nodded his assent, “...and Mr. Gallo. If he learned I told you this much, he would not be pleased. That would not go well for me, and assuredly not for you. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Two. Don’t talk to Kellie about any of this. You are dealing with a very fragile girl. If you say the wrong thing, it could break her. She might, this may not be how they termed it in your psych class, but it’s accurate, ‘go off-the-deep-end.’ Understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Promise?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“OK. Good boy.”

Elaine stepped close to the stool Robert was sitting on and looked down at him. “I don’t think anyone’s called me ‘Ma’am’ for a while. Makes me feel ancient. Do you think I’m old, Robert?”

Robert looked up at Elaine. “Oh, no Ma’am. Err... Elaine.

“Who said you were allowed to call me ‘Elaine’? It’s Mrs. Gallo to you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t use a person’s first name unless they let you. That’s only for people you are close to. Understand?”

“Yes. It’s just that—”

“Calling someone by their first name without permission is a sign of disrespect. You got that, Robert?”

Robert looked down. "Yes. I got it. It's just that when Kellie first introduced us, she introduced you as 'Elaine.'"

"Kellie knows better. She's always trying to get to me. 'Push my buttons,' as the saying goes. Usually in public, when I can't discipline her. She likes to make my life miserable." Elaine picked up Robert's phone and sat on the table, right in front of him, right where the phone used to be. "I guess I dropped in on you pretty unexpectedly."

"That seems to be a family custom."

Elaine slid Robert's phone to the other side of the table, out of Robert's reach. "You're still in your underwear."

"Can I just go get some clothes on?"

"So, do you spend a lot of time in your underwear around my daughter?"

"Mrs. Gallo?"

Elaine hiked her skirt, baring her thighs. "It's a simple question. She's here naked. I wonder what you wear."

"Well, I wear just regular clothes, I guess."

"I try to imagine what you and my daughter do together all day."

"We have rules that we follow."

"Kellie follows rules?"

"We keep it entirely professional."

"You're not sleeping with her?"

"No Ma'am."

"Hmm. That's amusing. One of Kellie's problems is her promiscuity. She has sex with any boy she spends more than ten minutes with."

"Oh. Well, I didn't know that."

Elaine snickered. "If you're not bedding her down, then maybe there's something wrong with you."

"There's nothing wrong with me."

"You sure?" Elaine leaned over, her face within kissing distance of Robert's. Her perfume filled his nostrils. "Let's find out." Her fingers found his crotch.

Robert jerked back on his stool, almost tipping over. Elaine's fingers followed his crotch. "Relax, Robert, let's see what kind of a man you are."

Robert took hold of Elaine's wrist and tried to move it away, but Elaine tightened her arm, and her fingers continued to brush over Robert's underpants.

"What about Mr. Gallo? Aren't you afraid of him? I am."

"He's not here this week. You better be afraid of me."

"Why?"

"Mr. Gallo goes out on me all the time. It seems he's good in bed with everyone but me." Elaine pressed her hand against Robert's crotch. "With us, sex is as spontaneous as painting the house, and about as much fun." Her tongue worked over Robert's neck. "But if another man even looks at me, he gets jealous." Elaine's hand pushed harder against Robert. "He's had bad things done to men who try to be nice to me."

Robert held tighter to Elaine's moving hand. "Yeah, all the more reason I should stay away from you."

"He'd never find out about us. But, if we don't do this, I'll tell him you came on to me. That would not go well for you."

"I'd deny it."



Elaine sat back. “So, you think Mr. Gallo would believe an employee over his loving wife? You realize it wouldn’t matter. He’d still do something to you — just in case. Grab hold of the table and hang on.” Elaine waited while Robert complied. “Good boy. Now don’t try to stop me this time.” Elaine leaned forward, and her hand went back to Robert’s crotch, her mouth to his ear. “You can think of this as my getting even for his plundering, or as a horny old housewife needing a fix, but you might as well enjoy it because, like it or not, this is going to happen.”

“This is blackmail.”

“No, it’s extortion.”

Elaine stood up. “Now, go to the bedroom and let me see what I got.”

Scene 2. A Little Bit About Kellie

Robert walked into the center of his bedroom and turned to face Elaine. Elaine stood at the doorway, an amused look on her face. She flipped her hand up and down, directing Robert. He bent over and slid his underpants off and stood up.

Elaine looked at Robert like she was trying to decide whether to spend money on a piece of art. Then she went close to him, “Good boy. Now me.” She watched him as he removed her clothes.

She got on the bed and motioned him to lie down next to her. Elaine led Robert’s head with her hands to her neck, her breasts, then down further. She gripped Robert’s head between her legs as he licked her.

At first, Robert was just going through the mechanical motions, but as Elaine responded, her hips grinding into his face, Robert reacted too. He rocked on the bed, rubbing his cock against the sheet.

After Elaine’s orgasm, she pulled on his head, signaling, “enough.” Robert’s mouth started upward, nibbling up the path he had taken going down earlier. When it reached Elaine’s neck, his cock was at her entrance. He hesitated, not sure — Elaine moaned as her body reached up and took him in.

The suddenness of it surprised him. The shock triggered him. His hands grasped the bed, his face burrowed into Elaine’s neck, a sob escaped as his body jerked and spasmed, pumping until he was empty.

As Robert’s body relaxed, the intensity of sex over, his mind came back to itself. His first time, in high school, had been sloppy and rushed. *There, I’ve done it. Glad that’s over with.* With Arianna, afterward, he felt the warmth of her pure love flowing through him, with Sydney, incomplete and empty. Now, as his body sank down onto Elaine, he felt something different. He felt shame.

Elaine came over often during the week. Each time she would direct Robert, move his head and hands where she wanted stimulation, like a personal dildo, a toy that she could direct and control to her satisfaction. Each time, Robert would think, no more, but each



me, as Elaine moaned and convulsed, Robert's passion took over, and he would be pumping and crying and ejaculating into her.

One time Elaine found the jar — Kellie's jar. Robert thought he kept that hidden. "Here, put some on me. Oh, God! That's intense." She had Robert make her climax over and over. The fragrance of Kellie's lotion mixed with the odor of Elaine's perfume filled Robert's bedroom with an unwelcome stench. After that, Robert hid the jar and claimed he couldn't find it when Elaine next asked for a "treatment."

Throughout the week, after the sex, they would drink the wine Elaine brought over. Sex and wine, both good for opening the mind — and the mouth.

"Does Kellie have a girlfriend named Janie?" Robert once asked.

Elaine looked surprised. "Is Janie back?"

"She's mentioned a Janie. It sounded like they are really close. I think they met at the cottage."

"There's no Janie. That's someone Kellie pretends to be sometimes. But I thought that got worked out of her." Elaine thought for a moment. "Janie seems to be one of the more persistent ones. She



came back with Kellie after her abortion.”

“Well, this is someone Kellie seems to be friends with.”

“There was a real Janie once, but that was a long time ago, and that was in Chicago, not at the cottage. Kellie may have been five or six. I worked nights, so a neighbor girl came over to babysit. She may have been nine or ten. That only lasted for about six months.”

“What happened?”

“Kellie didn’t like Janie and gave her all kinds of problems. One night Janie had had it. She called me while I was working and said she

was bringing Kellie to me. She couldn't take it anymore. I told her not to. I was working. She hung up. Later that night, Kellie did show up at my work, but it was the police who brought her. They said Janie had been killed."

"What — that's... what happened?"

"The information was sketchy. All they knew for sure was that Janie and Kellie were waiting on the platform to catch the 'L.' Somehow, Janie fell off as the train approached, and she was run over."



Elaine poured some more wine into her glass, then offered the bottle to Robert. He shook his head. He'd had enough. Elaine smiled and filled his glass.

"There wasn't anymore investigation. Janie was just another statistic. We were considered white trash. She was black trash. It only got a brief mention in the newspapers. Anyway, that was a while ago."

Most of the week, Robert and Elaine talked about Elaine. "Elaine" was Elaine's favorite subject. Her health, her various medical conditions, the pains she had in so many places throughout her body (Robert wondered how she could be so sexually active), the drugs her several doctors had her take were the frequent discussions with friends, family, the housekeeper, and people at the spa. Near the top of her pitiful life was the difficult, delinquent, and ungrateful Kellie.

"Kellie wasn't planned, but I had her anyway. I met her father where I worked. It was a one-night stand. I never saw him again, and he never knew..." Elaine took a drink of wine. "I should have had her aborted. That's what my friends all told me to do. She's always in the way." Elaine smiled at Robert. "I worked as a dancer back then."

"On the stage? Ballet?"

“Oh, sweet, naïve Robert. No.”

Elaine emitted a wine-soaked sigh. “That’s how I met Mr. Gallo. He would come and watch me perform. I realized I was getting to him. He wanted me. I thought, ‘This is my chance.’ I made him wait. Made him want it. That took a lot of skill. Mr. Gallo is someone who takes what he wants. He’s not use to waiting. But he did.

“He actually dated me. Can you imagine? I’d have him buy me presents. I knew I had him.



“He bought me a cockatoo. I had always wanted one. It was silly, I suppose. At the time, Kellie and I lived on the second floor of a tenement in a small one-bedroom apartment. That bird was so noisy. Kellie hated it. But I taught it to say, ‘I love you.’ I’d have it say that whenever Mr. Gallo would come over to visit. I named it ‘Birdie.’ Not very imaginative, I suppose. But that’s what Mr. Gallo called it. Well, he called it ‘the bird.’ ‘How’s the bird?’ he would ask. ‘Did you teach the bird to do anything?’

“Eventually, I let him spend the night. I’d make Kellie stay in the living room with Birdie while we would go into the bedroom.

“After a few weeks, Mr. Gallo invited me and Kellie to go on a one-week cruise with him. I knew he was going to propose. I told him Kellie could stay home.”

“How old was Kellie?”

“Eight.”

Robert looked at Elaine.

“Don’t judge me, Robert. I needed to take care of myself.

“Anyway, Mr. Gallo insisted Kellie come too. He had taken to her from the time he first saw her. He’d tease her and give her little pinches and hugs. I was thankful for that. A woman with a little kid as baggage is not a very attractive package.

“I was so excited. I was a nervous wreck getting ready for it. The day we were to leave, I still hadn’t packed everything. I made Kellie help me. She said she needed to pack her stuff. That was silly, I told her. ‘You’re just a kid.’ She didn’t have that much she needed to bring. We just finished with my packing when we saw Mr. Gallo’s car pull up to the curb. I grabbed a couple of my bags and started down to meet him. You don’t keep Mr. Gallo waiting. ‘Get the rest of my bags and bring yours and come on,’ I called behind me. ‘I need five minutes,’ she said. ‘Well, hurry up. And be sure and fill the water and food bowls for Birdie.’

“That cruise was the most wonderful time I ever had. He did propose to me. I knew my life would be changed after that.”

“And Kellie’s too.” Robert felt he needed to say that.

“Of course Kellie’s too. What’s good for me is good for her.

“It was wonderful until we got back. Mr. Gallo left me and Kellie at the curbside. He had some business to attend to.

“When we got into the apartment, I didn’t hear Birdie. That was unusual. He always let out loud squawks whenever I’d come into the room. I couldn’t see any movement in his cage. He was always so active. I knew something was wrong. I went over to his cage and looked in.” Elaine paused to take another drink, but then didn’t and put her glass down. “He was dead.”

Robert did not like where this was going. “Oh, no. What happened?”

“He starved to death.”

“That wasn’t because of Kellie?”

“Yes, it was.”

“How do you know? Were his food and water dishes empty? Did Kellie forget to fill them?”

“They were full.”

“It wasn’t her fault. I’m sure of it.”



“What she did, Robert. What she did was so...” Elaine paused at the memory.

“She would have been in a hurry when you left. She forgot. She didn’t have time.”

“She had time to do what she did.”

Robert took a breath. “What?”

“Birdie had tape bound around him, around his wings and legs, like a mummy. It was pretty clumsily put on — he must have put up a fight. That would have been done so he couldn’t move.

“Then his beak was stapled shut.”

Chapter 19. Stone Child

And the Lord-God took the clay of the Earth and fashioned a man. In His own image He made him. Then He blew furious fire onto the man and turned him to stone.



Robert could not sleep. A bird with its beak stapled shut kept flopping through his head. Mrs. Gallo had left and would not be back — Sam and Kellie were coming home tomorrow. He tossed and turned. It couldn't have been Kellie. Could it? She couldn't do anything like that? But what was she really capable of? The image of her threatening to slit his throat penetrated his brain and stayed stuck there. He got out of bed and went to his computer and

searched the Internet for answers.

Kellie had been right — He was a “C” person — even sub-par. He knew he was inadequate. He wished he had studied more. In college the classes were dry and analytical, but now it was personal. Now he needed answers.

Mrs. Gallo said Kellie had a split-personality. He started with that.

At MedicineNet.com, he found that a Split personality was a:

Multiple personality disorder, a neurosis in which the personality becomes dissociated into two or more distinct parts, each of which becomes dominant and controls behavior from time to time to the exclusion of the other parts. A modern name for this condition is dissociative identity disorder.

“Dissociative identity disorder” (“DID”) Yes, at least he had remembered the label correctly. Robert searched on that term.

He read at a Psychology Today website that it was a severe condition in which two or more distinct identities, or personality states, are present in and alternately take control of an individual.

Usually, a primary identity carries the individual’s given name and is passive, dependent, guilty, and depressed.

The alters’ characteristics — including name, reported age and gender, vocabulary, general knowledge, and predominant mood — contrast with those of the primary identity.

The various identities may deny knowledge of one another, be critical of one another, or appear to be in open conflict.





Robert looked out the window. It was still dark outside. Yeah. Open conflict is what he heard that night, when he had called the police. Kellie screaming. That other voice threatening her.

Particular identities may emerge in specific circumstances. Transitions from one identity to another are often triggered by psychosocial stress.

Why some people develop DID is not entirely understood, but they frequently report having experienced severe physical and sexual abuse, particularly during childhood.



That's what I thought. Elaine said they had not abused Kellie. Like hell. The things she described she and Sam did to Kellie. What Kellie told me, being locked in her room for days. Physical abuse, yes. And that abortion, forced on her when she was fourteen. — Was Kellie sexually molested? Robert had

pushed Mrs. Gallo for more information about that, but she stiffened up and would only say, "Kellie was not abused."

Robert stared at his computer screen and summarized what he had learned. So there is the person, split in two, a primary and an altern. OK. Kellie and her Janie. The altern could remain hidden and free of the restrictions and expectations of society. What could such a thing become? He pictured the mummified Birdie, struggling to eat and drink, fighting for its life, and searched under “psychopath.”

A Wikipedia article provided the etymology of the word:

The word psychopathy is a joining of the Greek words psyche “soul” and pathos “suffering, feeling.”

“Soul,” “Suffering,” Robert thought of Kellie. At times she seemed so lost and alone. Robert smiled to himself. But aren’t we all? Aren’t we all suffering-souls?



The Dictionary.com definition popped up at the top of his search. The word was a **noun**: “psychopath; **plural noun**: psychopaths.” Shit. What if you ever needed to use the plural? More than one psychopath at a time? Robert thought of “The Night of the Zombies.”

... a person suffering from chronic mental disorder with abnormal or violent social behavior.

Synonyms:
ms:
mad
man,

madwoman, maniac, lunatic, psychotic, sociopath; informal loony, fruitcake, nutcase, nutjob, nut, psycho, schizo, head case, sicko, screwball, crazy, kook, loon.



Robert remembered from his college classes that you're not supposed to use the terms "psychopath" or "sociopath." That's not an approved diagnosis anymore. Professionals use a different term instead: "antisocial personality disorder."

"Antisocial Personality Disorder." That seemed like a polite phrase. Sensitively correct. He and his "C" friends preferred the synonyms — "nutjob" and "psycho" being at the top of the list.

WebMD.com told him:



Psychopaths are more "cold-hearted" and calculating. They carefully plot their moves and use aggression in a planned-out way to get what they want.

Robert would have added, "as a spider constructs the web to capture her prey."

In one of their after-several-drinks-philosophy-religion-and-life-in-general discussions, Manny and Robert had talked about Carl Jung. Robert had remembered reading something about Jung in college. Manny liked the guy's ideas, but then again, Manny was an old kind of guy.

Robert searched for Jung. In Wikipedia, he read about the "Shadow (psychology)."

"Everyone carries a shadow," Jung had written, *and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.*"

The shadow is the primitive animal instincts we bring with us out of the womb. Then our conscious mind develops in early childhood, and the battle is on. Sometimes the shadow can overwhelm a person's actions, according to Jung, for example, when the

conscious mind is shocked, confused, or paralyzed by indecision.

Robert realized Jung's thinking had been passed over in favor of more modern labels, but his "Shadow" seemed a more apt description than the current, vanilla "antisocial personality disorder."

"The unconscious is not just evil by nature," He read at Azquotes.com.

it is also the source of the highest good: not only dark but also light, not only bestial, semihuman, and demonic but superhuman, spiritual, and, in the classical sense of the word, 'divine.'



The divine, the spiritual, have always been a part of humankind: Cave drawings, Greek and Roman mythology, Shakespeare, the Bible.

In his younger days, after Catholic and before ... well, before now, Robert had sought for belief in some higher being that would explain it all, that would make it all have sense. There would be a reason for faith.

His friends at college had decided that was for the weak-minded. Reason was sufficient, and faith meaningless. Most of them expected science would eventually answer all the questions.

Robert didn't go that far. He believed there was an area no science could go to. Not even the astronomy classes he took, that looked into the farthest reaches of the universe, could explain an eternal beginning. They saw "In the beginning," but no further. No mathematics or instruments of science glimpsed beyond — there was no "beyond" for them. They had come to the end of their abilities. Reason was gone. Now they were at the border with the spiritual and the supernatural. Only faith could catch sight of what was beyond.

But how explain this complexity we live in without a great watch-maker? The complexity is its own explanation, they would say. It has happened, so it is possible. And given an eternity, what is possible, will happen. Robert never played golf, but given an eternity, he would



get a hole-in-one every time he swings at the ball, and, in eternity, he will miss the ball every time he swings at it.

Robert's quest for reason-faith was never successful. The priest in his



high school had described faith. "It's like standing on the edge of an abyss," he said, "with nothing but blackness before you, and putting your hand out and stepping off, believing someone will take your hand." That didn't

work for Robert. It was not in him. He was afraid of the dark.

Robert's college friends thought the human mind was sufficient to judge between right and wrong — and eventually select the right path. Robert felt they must be right, although he recognized his path was as straight as an earth worm's.

And is the human mind such a flawless standard? With Kellie, he was not so sure. "Touch me, and I'll slit your throat." That was not Kellie. At that moment, her face had contorted into someone else — something else, a malignant, threatening creature. Robert remembered its feral sneer. Daring him to touch — desiring that he would so it could slit his throat. Kellie's mind was split, and his powerless confronting it.



Good and evil, the eternal dissonance ringing in our ears. The good rings so clear, but why does the evil seem louder?

The spirit of Moby Dick entered Ahab through the wound it caused, merging with Ahab's soul, festering during the long voyage home, driving Ahab insane, then lingered in the deep, biding its time to emerge. Ahab was mad, but not crazy. He hid his insanity until the next voyage, when the spirit rose and destroyed them all.



Stevenson thought the battle in our souls did not end well either — Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde. The two started off as equals, right? Maybe even the good doctor being more prominent. But then Hyde started gaining. At each transition, he was more limber, quicker to move. The good was complacent. Eventually, the evil prevailed.

The slide to destruction seems inevitable. Like a galaxy being swallowed by the black hole at its center. Do we all tend to destruction — to evil? Manny's glass of piss a crystal ball — the putrid always prevailing?

Robert clicked on the "Back" arrow of his computer until he came to the Psychology Today website. Something he had skimmed over in his initial cramming, something he was now trying to recall, part of

the description of dissociative identity disorder. There it is. There. He read.

Some people describe this as an experience of possession.



Robert felt a tingling over his spine as if someone was brushing their fingers on him. His arms prickled with goosebumps.

Possession-form identities often manifest as behaviors that appear as if a spirit or other supernatural being has taken control of the person.

He did not like discussions about the supernatural. Those things came at you from the other side of the border. It gave him the willies.

A link took him to a passage in “Deuteronomy.” The final instructions from the desert God, Jehovah, before sending His people to the bloody taking of their promised land.

If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them:

Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place;

And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard.

And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

How wretched must a child be for his parents to have him executed? Robert thought. How corrupt is he, for the nation of Israel to spit him out — “Let he who is without sin...” how evil a child for God to condemn him? Now too late to repent — to turn from sin and see the face of God — the smile of grace now gone. Too late to be

redeemed — to be delivered from sin. Too late to atone and reconcile. The sustaining cycle of sin, repentance, and renewal is rent, and a stone child, unforgiven, is cast into hell.

It was mid-morning. Robert had searched through the night. He was following Kellie's path, chasing her through its twists and turns, stuck by the brambles and thistles in her life — an abused girl, her personhood split, then she, or her altern, a psychopath, a shadow, then ... What was holding Birdie when its beak was stapled shut? What was standing next to Janie on the train platform before she stumbled to her death? Something raced across Robert's mind. He thought he heard scraping on the floor coming toward him.



A shiver started in the middle of his back. It worked up his spine, like the finger of someone standing behind him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. A hand pressed down on the top of his head and became a thought, then a question. He called someone who might have the answer to that question — the priest who had presided at his father's funeral.



“Father, can someone be possessed?”

Chapter 20. Kellie Comes Over

Scene 1. Oh. You're Back

The next morning Kellie came bubbling into the carriage house. "Hi. I'm back."

"Oh. Hi. You're back."

Robert hadn't slept. He had been grappling with what he had learned about Kellie from Elaine, his exploration on the internet, his call to the priest. Who was Kellie, a child of stone, or a girl of tender and affectionate flesh, who now bounced up to him and put her arms around him? She smelled warm and clean, and of the peppermint toothpaste she had used to brush her teeth, and of her special lotion that he knew so well.

She was almost giggling. "Did you miss me?"

Robert didn't place his arms around Kellie. The last time she had stood this close to him, she said she would slit his throat if he touched her. "Sure."

Kellie leaned back and scrunched up her eyes. "So, what's going on?"

Robert wasn't sure what was going on. Kellie's hands on the back of his head, her body pressed to his, he was about ready to kiss her and risk a bloody neck. He wasn't sure now if he cared whether she was devil or angel. Robert stalled for time. "Oh, nothing. I was just startled to see you, that's all."

Kellie switched to a different topic. "So, how'd you and my mother get along without Sam or me?"

That was a topic Robert would liked to have avoided. "Mrs. Gallo? Oh, all right, I guess. So, how have you been?" Agh. Dummy. **Dummy. She spent the week in a mental hospital. What do you think?**

To Robert's relief, Kellie ignored the question. But then she stepped back, crossed her arms, and went into her direct mode. "So why'd you call the police?"

"I could hear you screaming. And someone else. I thought you were being killed."

"Well, that's silly."

Robert's head moved back, his eyes narrowed. "Kellie, I know what I heard. At first, I thought you were calling me. Your phone must have pocket-dialed me. I kept trying to talk to you, but all I heard was the screaming. I thought you needed help."

Kellie took a step toward him. "If you thought I was being killed and needed help so badly, why didn't you rush over and save me?"

Robert was an observer, not a doer — it had never occurred to him. Why hadn't he? He reached for some reason. "I don't know, maybe you were arguing with your mother? I didn't want to meddle."

"You didn't want to meddle with my mother and me arguing, so you called the police?"

Robert was out of reasons. **Loser.** "I panicked. It was the only thing I could think of to do." He tried to regain some dignity. "So, what was all the yelling about?"

"I was watching a horror movie on TV. Sam and Elaine were out partying, so I like to turn it up when they're not around."

Robert felt his face warm as Kellie continued her attack.

"There was no problem. If there had been, don't you think the police would have taken action? They just asked me to turn it down because," Kellie shook a finger toward Robert, "it was scaring my crazy next-door neighbor."

The last time they were together, she had called him a "C" person who wanted to be an "A." She was right. An "A" would have done it better. "OK. OK. I got it. I made a mistake."

Kellie was not letting up. "If you had come over, instead of losing it like you did, you would have seen everything was all right."

Robert lashed out. "They took you to a psychiatric hospital."

Kellie didn't miss a beat. "What? That's ridiculous."

"Well, you left awfully fast. You didn't even let me know you were going."

"My Aunt got sick and was hospitalized. She lives a couple of states away. She asked if I would go out there and take care of her

kids until she got out. They're five and eight-year-old boys. I was taking care of my cousins."

Robert was so confused. "It was your Aunt in the hospital, not you?"

"Yeah. And it wasn't for any psychological issues." Kellie's tone softened, and she actually smiled. "Although I may need help after taking care of my cousins for a week."

Robert took the smile as an olive branch. That was good. A calm, sensible discussion with Kellie, that's what was needed. Elaine had been so convincing in her stories about Kellie. He needed to work this out. He took Kellie's hands in his. "I promised I wouldn't talk about this... about what happened... you... but since we are..."

"Promised who?"

"Your mother."

Kellie pushed Robert's hands away and stepped back. "So what's up with that? What'd you talk about?"

Stay calm. Stay rational. Robert failed. "She told me you had attempted suicide when you were younger and had gone to some institution. Then when this new thing happened. The police, or someone, ordered you get treatment. So, they had you go back to that place."

"Because they were afraid I was suicidal?"

"I guess so."

Kellie looked to her side and crossed her arms, not defiantly this time. Then looked at Robert. "Well, like I told you, there was no problem. But it sounds like the suicide thing again."

"What suicide thing?"

"They've taken my friends aside. 'Promise not to tell Kellie. But have you noticed anything strange about her lately? Do you think she's all right? Would you let us know if you have any concerns?' They've told the family they think I'm suicidal. 'I'm afraid we have a problem with Kellie again.'"

"Why would they do that?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I get a lot of people acting like they're walking on eggshells around me. But I don't know what Sam and my mother gain by that."

"How could anyone gain by your being suicidal?"

Kellie shook her head. "It's not being suicidal. It's being a suicide." Kellie wrapped her arms around her as in a protective cocoon. "They want me dead."

"Kellie, that makes no sense. What possible reason could there be?"

"They have a reason. I don't know what it is, but by calling the police, you played into their hands. Now they can tell everyone police were called, and I was put back into that institution."

"But your Aunt knows differently."

"She's Sam's sister. She's not going to contradict him." Kellie shook her head, harder this time. "God, my life would be so much easier if he wasn't around."

Kellie stepped up to Robert. "Robert, look at me. I'm not suicidal. You believe that, don't you?"

What to believe? Robert didn't know. He had been so close himself that cold, rainy day. Only the slamming of a car door had stopped him. So how do you know? He didn't. He wanted so much to figure Kellie out. "So, maybe it's not like you're suicidal. But maybe something..." He put his hands on Kellie's hips. How to say this? "Mrs. Gallo said you had made up friends."

"Every kid does."

"She said it went further than that. That you started to be... like them." **Be careful how you phrase this, Robert.** "Or even think you were them."

Kellie stepped back. "This is getting crazier and crazier."

"Whose Janie?"

Kellie's head jerked. "Janie? I've already told you about her; she's a friend of mine."

"Elaine said when you were younger, you had a babysitter named Janie."

Kellie leaned forward. "'Elaine.' Since when have you called my mother 'Elaine?'"

"It must have slipped out."

"It sure did. I told you to stay away from my mother. Tell me the truth. Were you sleeping with her?"

“No.”

“I told you not to have anything to do with my mother.”

“She only came over after I called the police.”

Kellie stood on her toes so her face was even with Robert's, in the animal voice that said it would slit his throat, “Liar. You know I hate liars. Tell me the truth.”

Robert stepped back, his arms bent in defense mode, left arm guarding his groin, the right his chest. “There was no sleeping involved.” That was not the smartest way to phrase it.

“You son-of-a-bitch. My mother is packed full of lies. You can't trust anything she says. I was taking care of my cousins. I was not in any mental institute. I'm not suicidal. And I'm not crazy. End of story. Got that.”

Robert remained in defense mode, “So what about Janie?” He needed to know. Real or imagined playmate, or an altern, Janie was important to understanding Kellie.

Kellie's shoulders and arms dropped. Robert could hear Kellie as she let her breath out. “What about her?”

Robert's arms opened up toward Kellie, his palms turned up. “Is she real or not?”

“You don't believe me, do you?”

“I'm just getting different stories. Tell me about Janie.”

“She's a friend of mine.”

“Have her come over here so I can meet her.”

“She's poor. She doesn't even drive or own a car.”

“Can we go meet her?”

Tears welled up in Kellie's eyes. “Shit, what is it with you? She lives in Wisconsin near the cottage.”

“So?”

“So, it's a long drive.”

“I want the truth too, Kellie.”

Kellie wiped her cheeks. “My mother has really gotten to you.” She turned away and retreated to the window. “I'm done with this, but I tell you what. Someday, you will meet Janie.”

Robert watched Kellie. Her head was shaking back and forth, her chest heaving. This was not what he had wanted.

After a while, Kellie's breathing slowed, and she turned around. Her eyes and cheeks were wet. "I didn't want to get into an argument. I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"I am happy to see you. I'm sorry. I don't want to argue either."

Kellie walked up to Robert. "When I got home last night, I couldn't wait to see you. I was so excited when I came over this morning."

Robert put his hand on Kellie's wet cheek. "I was happy to see you too."

"You didn't seem like it."

"Can we forget about this morning?"

Kellie didn't respond.

"Please."

"A do-over?"

"Yeah."

Kellie nodded. "OK, Pal. Deal."

Robert put his arms around Kellie's waist. "So, where do we go from here?"

"Before I left, we had started on a story you were illustrating. We had some poses where you took my clothes off and had me standing looking scared and trying to cover myself."

Kellie put her mouth close to Robert's ear and whispered. "When we ended, you were trying to convince me to let you tie me up."

"Well, there is a bondage scene. That's part of the story. But I understand you don't want to do that. That's OK."

Kellie's mouth was still near Robert's ear. "I'm ready to try it now."

Kellie had modeled for Robert's illustrations for several months. She willingly posed in all sorts of compromising positions, 'It's all for the art,' she would shrug, but she had always drawn the line at bondage. "You have to really trust someone to let them tie you up."

"Wow. That's quite a change."

"I wasn't sure how helpless I wanted to be with you. I needed to get to know you better."

"You think you know me better now."

Kellie nuzzled Robert's neck. "I think so."

"Do you trust me?"

"Let's find out."



Robert wanted no questions. "So, you OK with it?"

"Naked and tied up by you? Sure. Who wouldn't be OK with that?"

"We'll need to make it look real. I'll need to really tie you up."

"I know."

"I'll go buy some items, and we can start tomorrow."

"Wait, I'll be back in a minute. Meet you in the studio."

Scene 2. Forget My Mother

Kellie brought back some handcuffs and lengths of rope.

“You just happen to have bondage stuff lying around?” Robert asked.

Kellie giggled. “A girl’s gotta be prepared. These are the ones Janie got for me. They can hold you tight but leave no marks when you struggle and fight them.” Kellie handed the cuffs and rope to Robert.

The restraints were short, thick leather belts with a softer material around the inside. Each had a metal ring. They were tied together with a blue cord. There was a small lock on each that, when closed, would guarantee no one would escape them.



Kellie took her clothes off and got on the table. “I bet Elaine didn’t let you tie her up.”

“Is that what this is about? You’re trying to one-up your mother?”

“Forget my mother. Go ahead, Pal, let’s see what you can do.”

Robert took a length of rope and tied Kellie’s feet together, then took another and fastened her feet to the table. He climbed on the table, took Kellie’s arms, wrapped a cuff around each wrist, pulled it snug and buckled it. Kellie had been watching Robert’s hands as he did this. She startled when Robert clicked the locks shut.

Robert squeezed Kellie’s hands. “You OK?” Kellie nodded.

Robert tied a rope to the cord binding the cuffs together, then lifted Kellie’s arms above her head and tied her to a hook in the beam. The hook, Robert knew, had been put there years ago for this very purpose.

Kellie had been naked through most all of their other modeling shoots, so that was not new. But he was never this close. He was always at a distance with his camera or art easel. Now he touched Kellie’s skin, heard her breathing, felt the heat of her body next to



his, watched her heart beating through her chest.

Kellie lowered her head and closed her eyes. She was so vulnerable, Robert wanted to lean down and kiss her, but he was afraid she might change her mind about doing the scene. He got off the table and set up his camera and tripod. Then directed Kellie. "So, in this scene, you've been kidnaped, and you're trying to free yourself.

Try to get loose."

Kellie gave a half-hearted jerk to the handcuffs. Her legs tugged at the rope holding her to the table, her feet bent back and forth, twisting in the ropes, trying to free herself.

"Try harder. You need to look like you're struggling to escape but can't."

"I am trying. These are real."

"Struggle a little more, like you know you are trapped. This is your only chance to get away."

Kellie closed her eyes and tightened her face as she semi tried harder. "I'm doing the best I can."

Robert was getting frustrated and offered more direction. "You need to look frantic. You've been kidnaped, he stripped off your clothes, and now you're naked and tied to that post. You don't know what your kidnapper is about to do to you. You've got to escape. It's your only chance."

Kellie tugged at the rope. "This is the best I can do. I can't get loose."

"You need to fight it more. Will you do like I'm telling you?"

Even fixed down with her arms bound above her head, Kellie wanted to be in control. "I know how to do this. I'll do it my way."

Robert moved away from the camera and stretched his arm to Kellie's feet that were tied to the table, "let's see about that," then his fingers zigzagged up and down the bottoms of her feet. Kellie's legs jerked, her toes tried to grasp Robert's fingers to stop them, her feet wiggled back and forth.

Kellie's face scrunched, her eyes locked shut as she fought to keep control. Robert took hold of Kellie's feet to hold them still while he continued to tickle her and she burst into squeals and howls. Her body jerked and twisted. She almost lifted herself off the table by her arms, trying to get away. Little pinpricks of light flashed as the camera snapped pictures. Her feet kicked at him.

"Oh shit. I hope you're having fun with this."

Robert smiled. He was. He tightened the rope so Kellie couldn't move her legs at all. "A few more," and his fingers wandered up and down Kellie's feet.

Kellie squealed. "Stop! Stop!" Tried to take a breath. "Please, stop."

Robert went back to the camera to review the photos. "That's really close to what I wanted." He moved back to the table and held his hand near Kellie's feet. "Will you do what I tell you to now?"

Kellie started giggling, and her feet twitched, and she promised and did exactly what Robert asked.

When he was done, Robert stepped to the camera to make some adjustments.

Kellie was able to catch her breath. "Robert, did you enjoy doing that to me?"

Robert's mouth was dry. He didn't answer. He picked up a water



bottle, got on the table, and helped Kellie take a drink.

“Robert, do you like seeing girls tied-up and helpless?”

Robert paused a moment before answering. Kellie liked honesty. “There is a kind of vulnerability. Like when a girl is barefoot. It’s a turn on.” Robert took a drink of water. “The models tell me it works for them. They feel sexier because they don’t have any responsibility. They just lay there, and things happen to them.”

Kellie tilted her head. “I think it’s working. I’m feeling really vulnerable right now — in a sexy kind of way.”

Robert got off the table and went back to make adjustments to the camera. Kellie continued to talk. "You could do all kinds of wonderful, awful things to me, and I couldn't stop you. What would you think if I told you that kinda turns me on? My nipples are hard."

"I think you're making it hard for me to adjust the camera. My hands are shaking."

Kellie giggled. "Yeah, hard is what I was shooting for. Guys are so easy."

Kellie pulled at the rope holding her wrists to the post. "So what's the deal with this story? I've been captured, so I'm tied up, I got that. But why am I naked, other than this a story for guys to drool over?"



"The girl has been kidnapped. Her father is refusing to pay the ransom. So the kidnapper puts her in embarrassing positions and does things to her. He sends pictures to the father to get him to pay. The father keeps refusing, so the kidnapper keeps putting the girl into more compromising

situations. First, he took off her clothes and took pictures of her naked."

"Got that. That's what we did before I left for my Aunt's."

"Right. That doesn't work. So the kidnapper ties her and tickles her feet." Robert laughed. "That wasn't in the original story. I just made that up."

Kellie scrunched her face at him. "You shit."

Robert was still laughing. "I'll have the writer add that to the story."

Kellie looked at Robert. "God. Being tickled is like a five-minute orgasm."

Robert smiled. "Your welcome. Anyway, that doesn't work. Father still refuses to pay. So the kidnapper takes pictures of him fondling the girl. No good, still no pay. He sends pictures of him masturbating the girl, forcing her to climax. Dad's a tough guy. He won't pay. So, the kidnapper makes love to the girl."

"Screws her, you mean."

"No, by this time, the kidnapper has fallen in love with the girl. He makes love to her. Dad's had enough, so he pays the ransom. The girl realizes she's never had such a big cock and never will again, so they take Dad's money and run off together."

Kellie's eyes widened. She seemed surprised in an amused sort of way. "That's your story?"

"Well, it's what someone wrote."

"Wow, and people think I live in a fantasy world."

Kellie shifted her hips. "So, we've done the naked tied-up part, and the tickling part, the next step is the girl gets fondled part. What do you have in mind for that?"

Robert's face was hot, his ears red as Christmas ornaments. "I guess we can fake that. Do something with Photoshop."

"Robert, come over here."

"I'm adjusting the camera."

"I know. Come here."

Robert stepped to the table.

"Tell me again, after the girl is naked and tied up and tickled, what's the next part?" Kellie asked.

"The kidnapper fondles her."

"Let's try that part."

Robert almost dropped the camera as he repositioned it and set it to automatic mode. Then he got on the table next to Kellie and put his left arm around her back.

Kellie seemed a little nervous and quipped, "You don't look like much of a kidnapper."



“I don’t think anyone will be looking at me.”

Robert’s fingers started where the cuffs held Kellie’s wrists against the post. Her arm quivered as Robert’s fingers trailed down it. Her body stiffened as the fingers neared her armpit. “Please, no more tickling.”

Robert smiled. “We just need a couple of more shots.” He lightly stroked Kellie, making her flinch and giggle. Up and down, again and again, up and down, up and down. Kellie was shuddering, her breathing quickened, she was covered with goosebumps. Robert’s hand explored other parts of her, searching for her sensitive spots.

Her nipples, she responded. Yes, that's a given — he'll come back to them often.



Robert studied Kellie's reactions as his hand explored her. She had a touchy spot on the left, an inch or two below her belly button. Kellie flinched whenever Robert's fingers skimmed over that spot. Up

her chest, a caress across her breasts, down her left side toward that spot. Kellie's body stiffened as the fingers neared and jerked when touched.

Robert was fascinated by what he could do to her. His fingers tickled the spot, agitating Kellie. She was giggling and whimpering unrecognizable sounds, writhing and twisting, trying to escape Robert's fingers.

He pulled her to him and held her tight so she couldn't move while his fingers continued to torment her.

His hand climbed to Kellie's chest, brushed figure eights around her breasts, then pressed and fondled them.

Kellie lay her head against the post, offering Robert her neck, which he kissed and licked as he continued playing with her.

Kellie was moaning, her breathing heavy.

Robert ran his hand up and down Kellie, massaging and stroking her side, her legs, his mouth nibbling, licking, sucking her breasts, his tongue circling her nipples, his breathing almost matching Kellie's.

Kellie's feet tugged back and forth, straining at her bonds, pressing her legs together. Her voice was ragged. "Do the next part."

Robert's hand squeezed Kellie's breast, then wandered down her stomach to between her legs. He kept it there, pressing lightly while he kissed her cheek and ear. His fingers browsed around the outside of her. Touching her folds. Brushing them. Kellie turned her head to Robert, her mouth open. Robert explored it with his tongue. He put his fingers in Kellie's mouth, which Kellie licked and sucked.

His wet fingers went back to Kellie, moved her folds apart, and explored. Kellie's body twitched, her breathing faster. Robert's mouth moved to one of Kellie's breasts, and he circled her nipple with his tongue. His fingers found her clit and moved up and down on it, circling it, flicking across it, occasionally, leisurely entering her for more wetness. Kellie clenched her mouth, moaning and mewling.

Success. Kellie was no longer in control.

Robert's left hand was under Kellie's buttocks. He felt her muscles clasp and unclasp in rhythm to the seesaw his fingers on his right hand played on her clitoris.

Kellie was panting, her body stiffened, her arms pulled on the cuffs, her legs thrust out against the ropes. Her body became rock hard, breathing hard, fast, her mouth opening to take in air, then closing, her cheeks expanding as she forced it out, sucking in, blowing out, sucking in, blowing out.

The muscles in her legs bunched. Her arms lifted her off the bench. Robert stopped for a moment, holding her there. Kellie gasped. Her feet clenched. Her head jerked back, her mouth opened, her body convulsed, and she screamed as Robert's fingers finished her, sliding up and down her clit.

Robert held Kellie while she came down from her climax. She shivered as her muscles relaxed. Then he straddled her, a leg on each side of her. He smoothed hair from her face, dabbed tears from her cheeks. His arms reached around her — between her and the hard post, cushioning her, folding her collapsed body into him.

Robert's cock was straining against his pants. He pressed into Kellie's stomach and moved up and down on her. Angel or demon — in the flesh girl, or shadow, he wanted her. Now. Right now.

Robert placed kisses on Kellie's face.

Kellie regained her breath. "Good job, Pal. You brought your 'A' game this time."

Robert untied Kellie's legs. She stretched and curled them on the table.

Robert looked at Kellie. "God, you're so beautiful. I want to possess every part of you. I could disappear into you." Robert slid his hand up and down Kellie's legs. "The next part of the story is the kidnapper makes love to the girl."

"Please, not yet. I'm not ready for that."

"Your burglar takes you. There's nothing you could do to stop me."

"No, but you won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I asked you not to."

Chapter 21. Lucky Guys

“What does it feel like to cum?”



Robert and Kellie were in the studio, and, as was her custom, Kellie was keeping up a fairly continuous sexual dialogue while Robert worked. “You know, cum, ejaculate, climax, spurt... have an orgasm.”

"I know what it means. You just amaze me when you come up with that stuff out-of-the-blue. Are you always thinking about sex?"

"Pretty much. Don't guys? Don't you?"

Robert laughed. "Yeah, pretty much."

Kellie looked at Robert's pants. "I can tell you are now."

"That happens sometimes."

Kellie grinned. "I'd like to think I had something to do with it."

Kellie was quiet for a moment, watching Robert concentrate on his painting. She got bored. "I was thinking about when you tied me up and made me climax."

Robert was listening, if not responding.

Kellie sat up and propped her chin on her hands as she continued. "When you did me, your face got so red. I expected you to cum in your shorts. Remember how big you got?"

Robert adjusted his pants.

"Yeah, I can see you're remembering. Com'on. So what's it like to cum? Is it like when a girl has an orgasm?"

"To tell the truth, when it's happening, I'm not taking notes."

"How about if I tie you up now and make you cum?"

Robert didn't respond. He's on a deadline — his mouth was dry.

"Then you can tell me what you're going through while you cum."

"OK. OK. Enough." Robert set his paintbrush down. "To answer your question. It's the greatest ... really indescribable feeling ... better than any drug. If guys were getting laid, there would be no crime. We'd all be lying around with big satisfied grins on our faces. There'd be no wars. Only frustrated guys who're not getting any start wars."

"Yeah. Well, then Janie and I did our part for world peace."

"Oh, so now we're going to get into Janie?"

"Do you want to listen to this or not?"

"It's just that the last time we talked about her, we got in a fight."

"Only because you didn't believe she was real. Janie would take offense to that."

Robert picked up his paintbrush and went back to work. "OK. You're going to tell me anyway."

Kellie perked up. "OK. Great." Then she settled down on the table



and arranged her hands in her lap. She adjusted herself a couple of times. This was going to be a long story. “I realized, when I was fifteen, that I was afraid of boys.”

Robert peered at Kellie, his brow furrowed.

“I know. I know. I was a little retarded. Most of my friends from school had already had sex with their boyfriends. But I was always kind of nervous about it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to imply anything. It’s hard for me to imagine you afraid of anything.”

“Yeah, well, boys, it was. Anyway, Janie said she’d teach me about boys and that I didn’t need to be afraid of them.



“We found a large flat rock a little way from the abandoned cabin and brought some bondage stuff there and set it up. We liked the shape of the rock. It could keep their arms stretched out above their heads, that left their sides exposed.”

“Their?”

“The boys, Silly. Don’t interrupt. The foot of it was wide. We could spread their legs apart, so their balls were handy.” Kellie giggled, “literally and figuratively.” Kellie leaned toward Robert. “We could tighten their arms and legs down so they couldn’t move at all, or leave some slack so we could watch them struggle a little and let them think they might get away. That was always fun.

“Our plan was pretty much the same for all of them. Promise some great sex, take them out to our secret place, get their clothes off, chain them down to our rock, then torment them.

“We’d meet them down by the road and blindfold them and then lead them up the trail — we wanted to keep the place a secret, if possible. Sometimes we’d leave the blindfold on. Sometimes, after we got them tied down, we’d take it off.

“It was Janie’s job to find the boys. She’d prowl the town for them.

“For the first one, she picked a guy that was pretty confident of himself and cocky. She promised him a sexual experience he would remember for the rest of his life. He was game. We led him blindfolded to the place. He became hesitant, but Janie kept whispering in his ear and touching his crotch so he did what we told him.

“After we tied him to the rock, he tried to get free. He must have assumed we were kidding until then. He had changed his mind. ‘Let

me go.' We told him it was too late and to hang on.

"Janie had me do him. She showed me a few things, but I was nervous, and he came fairly quickly.

"Afterward, Janie said that was more fun for him than for us. She would do the next one. 'It's more entertaining when they suffer for a while,' she said.

"Janie did the second boy. He was a talker and a yeller. The things he called us made even Janie blush. We were deep in the woods, but even so, we were afraid someone might discover us. Janie had me sit by his head and cover his mouth with my hand whenever he got too loud. When he came, I had to hold him tight and keep my hand on his mouth. I could feel his head shuddering in my arms, his breath sucking in and out through my fingers, his muffled cries. God, that's still a turn-on.

"After that, we brought a gag with us and just gagged them at the start.

"I got better with practice. You can't imagine the sounds a boy makes when he's not allowed to cum for several hours.

"We would make them promise to keep a few rules before finishing them off — Keep the location a secret, don't try to find it. Don't talk about it to the other guys in town. If they see us in town, pretend nothing happened. Don't talk to us about it.

"The promises were made under duress, but surprisingly all were kept except for the talking to others. The word about what we were





doing spread pretty rapidly.

“We decided to do the football team, starting with the offensive line and go through to the quarterback.

“We would either make them wait, keep them on edge, or force them to cum over and over, making them beg and plead — ‘Please stop. I can’t take any more,’ was one of our favorites. In either case, we’d keep at it for several hours until we had exhausted them.”

Kellie slid off the table. “One would think after the word spread about what we were doing to the boys, no one would come near us.”

She sashayed toward Robert. “One would think no boy would let



us take them into the woods.”

Kellie looked down, smiling, swung her hips as she took another step toward Robert. “One would think no boy would let us strip and chain him to that big rock.”

Kellie stepped to Robert and looked up at him. He could feel her breath on his face. “One would be wrong. They were like moths to a flame. They flitted around us, wanting to be the next to be burned.”

Robert was deep in the woods near a large rock, his mouth dry, his face hot, his ears burning. “Lucky guys.”

“Oh, do you think they’re lucky guys?”

Kellie looked at the bulge in Robert's pants and reached down and touched him. "Yeah. I guess you do."

Kellie moved back a couple of steps from Robert. "We tired of it after a while. Really, it became boring. But we kept having guys come up to us. How to end it? We decided on a glorious climax." Kellie giggled. "So to speak."

"That rock became our alter. We would sacrifice a boy for the sins of all mankind."

"Janie got our offering, and we fixed him down on the rock."

"She made him repeat after her."

What are little girls



made of? [REDACTED]

Sugar and spice
And everything nice.
What are little boys made of?
Frogs and snails
And puppy-dogs' tails.

"The boy was getting nervous.

"She put the gag on him and made him repeat the rhyme. She made him do it over and over until he could make himself understood. He had to work at it. He was crying. It was pretty hilarious.

"Then she reached into the bag of our gear and drew out a knife. The boy's eyes got big. He mumbled through the gag. I could tell what he said. 'What's that for?'

"Janie leaned down and whispered in his ear. That started his muffled begging, 'Oh no, please don't.' She put the blindfold on him. He was struggling to break free."

"What did she say to him?" Robert asked.

"That she was going to cut his balls off if he came.

"She started stroking him and chanting. 'Kiss the boys and make them cry, make them cry, make them cry.' She kept chanting and stroking him while running the blade up and down his chest. Then she'd touch other parts of him with it. She didn't cut him, but he'd wince wherever it touched him. He started bawling.

"He was shaking his head back and forth, struggling not to come. But Janie kept going faster and harder, chanting as she worked him.

"She slipped the knife between his legs and held the flat of the blade against his balls. 'You better not come. You better not come.' Janie yelled at him while she continued stroking him. I was afraid she really would cut his balls off. 'Don't do it,' I shouted over her chanting. 'You're crazy.' She yelled back. 'Yes, I am.' That made the boy cry even harder.

"His body went into contortions, as much as his restraints would let him. I drew his head into my chest and held him. He tried to shake free, but I held him tighter so he couldn't move at all. He screamed. Even with the gag, he was loud.

"I covered his mouth. I didn't want to hear how he sounded when she cut his balls off. 'Mmmmph.' 'Mmmmph.' 'Mmmmph.' he muffed through his gag, then erupted great gobs of cum all over himself. Janie spread that over his chest and stomach with her knife. The boy broke down sobbing."

"She didn't really cut his balls off," Robert hadn't realized he had been holding his breath, so that came out more forcefully than he had intended. "... did she?"

Kellie shook her head. "No. But she sacrificed him three more times that day, the last time he had nothing left, he was convulsing, but nothing came out."

Kellie stepped up to Robert. "I spoke to Janie about you. She said she'd like to do you."

Robert managed a nervous snort. "Oh, thanks, but I'm not interested in having my balls cut off."

"Yeah, that had the same effect on the other boys in town. We haven't heard from them since."

"I promised you someday you would meet Janie." Kellie stroked Robert's crotch. Robert had lost his erection during the "sacrifice



story,” but Kellie’s fingers brought it back. “Janie would be nice to you. I’d make sure of that.”

She squeezed him. “You tie girls up and take pictures. You put them through all sorts of interesting things. Wouldn’t you like to know how it feels? Tomorrow we can go to the cottage, and I’ll introduce you to Janie, and she’ll make you a lucky guy.”

Kellie continued to rub the bulge in Robert’s pants while talking, causing his muscles to jerk, his cock twitching at her touch.

Robert closed his eyes as Kellie manipulated him. “You want to be tied down, don’t you? You have a fantasy of that, of being helpless while a girl takes her time with you — slowly bringing you to a mad, fiery place you’ve never been.”

Kellie locked her arms around Robert’s neck. “Your fantasy is about to come true, Pal.”

Chapter 22. The Cottage.

Scene 1. Driving to the Cottage.



They had planned on Kellie driving since Robert did not know the way. But at the last minute, Kellie said her car was being repaired. They would have to take Robert's.

Kellie gave directions. "Head west on Willow to where it hits 294, then south a few miles to the Jane Addams."



"Isn't that a toll road?"

"There's a couple of booths. I brought some money."

During the drive, Kellie took off her shoes and sat cross-legged on the seat.

Robert glanced down.

Kellie laughed. "You're checking out my legs. I'm naked in front of you all day, and you're still checking out my legs."

Robert grinned. "It's a guy thing. A girl crosses her legs, a guy looks — It's automatic."

Kellie laughed. "Guys are so easy."

"Besides, you have nice legs. Perfect."

Kellie's smile faded, and she didn't quip back some sexually loaded innuendo as Robert had expected. Instead, she curled up and stared out the windshield. She came back a few minutes later, smiled at Robert, took his hand, and held it on her leg.

It was quiet for a while, but Kellie is never comfortable with quiet for long. "I don't think we were mean."

"What are you talking about?"

"The boys we tied up and played with. We gave them a sexual experience to remember all right." Kellie smirked. "A fantasy they'll still be jerking off to in their old age."

Robert faked a grimace and shook his head. Kellie looked at Robert like she was serious. "I don't consider that was mean, do you?" Kellie patted Robert's hand that was still on her leg and smiled. "Will you let us know after we're done with you?"

Robert could see Kellie was having a very good time with this, somewhat at his expense.

Kellie chirped on. "We weren't mean at all. Except for the one we played the sacrifice game with, our last one — I told you about him... Well, and maybe that other boy too."

Robert was about to personally experience what Janie and Kellie considered was and was not mean. He was more than curious. "What other boy? What did you do to him?"

"One day, we got a boy and fastened him down. I licked and teased his nipples while Janie played with his balls. Never touched his cock except to occasionally make it twitch. After a few hours, we let him go. We never let him cum. He was so angry. We thought it was funny."

"I know what he'll be doing when he gets home tonight," Janie said.

Robert was wondering what he'd be doing in a few hours. "That was mean."

"He was a nerd. He was a virgin then and probably still is."

"Why would you say that?"

"All nerds are virgins."

"That's probably not true. I'm pretty nerdy."

"You are a little. That's what I like about you." Kellie looked at Robert. "And we know you're not a virgin."

Robert was quiet. — This may not go well.



Kellie looked out the side. "Thanks to my mother."

"Oh, Kellie. I hoped we already went over that. Can't we put it behind us?"

Kellie looked back at Robert. "I am over it. Now I'm just interested in keeping score. So, besides my mother, how many girls have you screwed?"

"I'm not going to get into my sex life."

"Oh, come on, this is fun."

"Forget it."

Kellie was squeaky happy. "Oh, remember the girl you asked me about, the one at my party?"

Robert sat up in his seat. "Sydney?"

"Yeah. Sydney. Janie says she knows Sydney. They talk sometimes."

"So what about? What can you tell me about her?"

"Nothing more, really. She's Janie's friend, not mine. You can ask Janie about her."

Robert planned to do just that. Sydney was why he was in Chicago. Why, if you follow the chain, he was even staying at the Gallo's. He would talk to Janie all right.

Kellie was looking out the window. "She told Janie you screwed her."

Robert leaned back in his seat. "Kellie, that sounds crude. It wasn't like that."

"So you admit that one. That's two. How many others were there?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Were you a virgin before Sydney?"

"Oh, shit. If you need to know. No."

"So how many girls have you had?"

"Are we going to keep talking about my sex life?"

"Yes."

"OK. Besides those two. One... One special one."

"One special girl? What's her name? Tell me about her."

"No way. I can't imagine what comment you'd have about her, and the last thing I'd give you is her name."

"Well, you brought her up. But OK, don't tell me now. Janie and I will make you talk later."

"Guys aren't that easy."

"Oh?"

"You can't make a guy tell you what you want just by playing your sex games with him."

"OK."

"A guy can take a lot."

"Whatever you say. I guess we'll find out in a couple of hours."

Robert's bravado left him.

Kellie was quiet for a while, then said, "About that virginity thing."

"Oh, God, Kellie. Will you drop it?"

"No. Not you. Not guys. Girls. Why do guys make such a big deal out of it... out if a girl's a virgin?"

"Guys don't think that's such a big deal anymore."

"Sure they do. I overhear guys talking. 'What do you think? She's not a virgin.' They say it disparagingly. Why is that?"

"Well, it just means the girl puts out, so don't get serious about her. But listen, that's just locker-room talk. If a guy is serious about a girl, it doesn't matter if she's not a virgin."

"But it's better if she is, right?"

"No, not really. Yeah. Maybe... I suppose—"

"See. Why is that? You guys can screw around, and it's like you get to put notches on your gun." Kellie laughed, "I guess that wouldn't happen more than once if your gun did get a notch." Kellie patted Robert's hand that was still on her thigh. "Sorry, my mind was picturing that. But the point is, it's all right for a guy to have slept around, but not a girl."

"Kellie, it's OK. Like I said, that's not what guys are concerned about."

Kellie looked at Robert and squeezed his hand. "What do you think?"

Robert could see Kellie was serious this time. "I think I just told you."



“No. Not what guys think.” Kellie said quietly. “What you think. I want to know what you think.”

Robert squeezed Kellie’s leg. “I don’t think virginity is a physical thing. It’s a matter of the heart... It’s a purity of the heart.”

“If a girl is raped, can she still be a virgin?”

So this is about jerk-Travis. “Kellie, purity is in you. It’s what you are. It’s something you can share with someone, give to them if you want. It’s not something that can be taken from you.”

Kellie nodded her head. “Then I guess I’m still a virgin.”

Robert was pleased.

They continued driving North toward the Wisconsin border. Kellie took Robert’s hand, kissed it, and put it back on her leg. “Thanks, Robert. You’re a pornographer with a moral compass.”

Robert laughed. “Yeah, a boring nerd, always pointing North.”

They crossed into Wisconsin. Kellie had Robert turn East onto Interstate 43. They drove half an hour, then onto a County Road, which they followed for another half hour.



Kellie whispered like she was telling a secret. "Robert, I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

Kellie shook her head and looked out the window.

Robert decided not to press her and changed the subject. "This seems like a long way around."

"There is a shorter way, but it's over some back roads. This is easier. Besides, we can go faster on the Interstate, so it's probably about the same amount of time. This way, you'll be able to remember how to get here."

"So, why would I need to remember how to get here?"

Kellie ignored the question — She was peering out the window, excited as a young girl. "There, see that large rock? Turn left, then it's a mile down the road. When I was a child, I named that rock 'The Meteorite.' It had fallen out of the sky, so it could point our way to the cottage."

"That's probably a rock dumped here at the end of the last ice age," Robert told her. "When the ice sheet retreated, it left everything behind. It's called an 'Erratic.'"

"An 'Erratic?' That's a weird name. Where'd they come up with that?"

"I don't know. It's a rock brought here by a glacier from someplace else. It doesn't belong here." Robert smiled. "Like me. Anyway, bulldozers would have removed the rest of the Erratics when they built this road."

"Boy, talk about taking all the magic out of it."

Kellie looked out the window. "See, after one mile, there's that little pull-off area, park there. We can walk up the hill to the cottage from there. We won't pull into the drive. I want to make sure the housekeeper's not in. I don't want her telling Sam and Elaine we came up here."

"So, would that make them angry?"



"Not if they don't know."

Scene 2. Climbing the Hill



Kellie started up the hill.
“It’s not hard to get to the cottage if you stay on this path. Don’t get off cuz it’s like a jungle out there and can get a little steep in places.”

Robert started after her.
“That’s what I was saying. When the ice sheet retreated, it left piles of dirt and rock. That’s what formed this hill.”

Kellie didn’t turn around.
“OK.”

“The glacier covered Canada, where it was two miles thick, and flowed down from there. For 50,000 years, it advanced — a monstrous sheet of ice. Changing the course of rivers, plowing down hills, and building up new

ones. It created and filled the Great Lakes. It was relentless. It kept on coming, unstoppable, until it got here. And then it stopped.”

Kellie continued climbing, “Ahah.”

Robert considered himself very impressive. He had read an article about the last Ice Age and the Laurentide Ice Sheet before starting his soul-search travels.

“Mastodons, Mammoths, Dire Wolves, Saber-Tooth Tigers lived at the foot of it. People lived here too. Hunting the animals.”

Kellie stopped and turned. “Look around. Who do you see?”

Robert was confused by the question — they were the only ones on the hill. Kellie turned away and continued up. “No one who’s interested in what you’re saying.”

“That was a little harsh.”

Kellie turned her head and smiled. “Your glacier’s a yawner, Bob. Besides, that’s for taking my meteorite away.”

They reached the cottage. A code box was on the door.



“Come here. I’ll show you how to disable the alarm and open the door. It’s easy to remember, cross your heart—” Kellie pushed a number at each corner of the pad: 1, 9, 3. “—and hope to die.” She pushed the 7 button at the lower-left corner. The door clicked and opened a crack.



Kellie turned and smiled at Robert. “Now you can be a successful burglar. I’ll bet 80% of the alarms in America use that code.



Kellie held on to the door. “The alarm system is the only protection now. Limestone used to live here. He’d wander around and guard the house and yard.”

“That’s the dog in the picture on your bedstand?”

“Yeah. Probably a good thing he’s not here now. He was vicious. He would have torn your throat apart.”

Robert felt his throat, “Yeah, good thing.”

“He disliked me a lot. But he’d go insane when Janie would appear.”

“So, why do you have a picture of him?”

“I’ve told you, Silly. As a memento.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died. I didn’t think Sam had any emotions except anger. But he really loved that dog. He cried when it died.”

“What did it die from?”

Kellie gave a little shrug and pushed the door open. “I think Janie poisoned it.”

Scene 3. Making Limeade

Kellie led Robert to the kitchen. “Let’s make some limeade. There should be some limes in the refrigerator. You can use that cutting board. There’s a knife in that drawer over there.”

Robert pulled out a small knife.

Kellie nodded toward the drawer. “No, use that bigger one.”



Robert held up a larger knife.

“Yeah, that one.”

Kellie got out two glasses and a jar of sugar and made the limeade. They stood leaning against the kitchen counter.

“All my happiest memories are from here. I would always hate the end of summer, and I would have to leave here for the last time — at least until the next summer.”

“Yeah, I hate last times.”

“I love first times.”

Robert took a drink of his limeade. “Every first time carries the last time within it.”

“OK, that’s a downer thought.”

“Sorry, it’s just reality. The day begins, the day ends. The Sun rises, the Sun sets.” Robert shrugged. “We’re born, we die.”

“I was thinking of more fun first times.” Kellie nudged Robert with her hip. “How about the first time you made love?”

Robert laughed, “Not going to work, Kellie, we’re not getting back into my sex life.”

Kellie laughed too, “Thought I’d give it a try.” She sipped her limeade. “I remember the first time I did something fun, met someone... went somewhere, but not the last time. Why is that?”

“Because the first time, you knew it was the first time. But that last time, you didn’t know it would be the last. Maybe you’ll come back here again. Maybe you’ll meet this person another time. Maybe you’ll live to tomorrow.”

Kellie clinked her glass against Robert’s, “Well, this is my first time here with you, and I will remember it.” She looked out at the kitchen. “I wonder if I’ll know when it’s our last time.”

Kellie took a sip of her limeade. “By-the-way, I called Janie, she’s out of town today, so we won’t be able to get together with her.”

“Oh, when did you call her? You’ve been with me since we left, and you didn’t make any calls.”

“You must not have been paying attention.”



Robert put his glass down. "Kellie, I don't care if there's no Janie. If... she's just... something you have to help you get through the day."

Kellie looked at Robert. "You still don't believe me?"

"Don't believe what, your stories about you and Janie — that she's real, or that she's out of town today?"

"Do you believe what I tell you or not? There is a Janie, and what I've told you about her is true."

"So, when did you last see her?"

"If you must know, last summer. We stopped seeing each other after that."

"Why? What happened? Why did you stop seeing her?"

"Jesus. Sam found out we were still getting together. He confronted her. I don't know what he said or did." Kellie shrugged. "Maybe it was about Limestone. She wouldn't talk about it. She just said we couldn't see each other anymore. So, end of story, Pal."

And you had been doing so well. Drop the Janie thing.

"All right. I'm sorry. I don't want another fight over Janie. It doesn't matter. I just want to be here with you today."

Kellie beamed. "It's a beautiful day, and I'm happy to be here with you too. Let me show you around."

They climbed the stairs to the second floor.

"This is Elaine and Sam's bedroom." Kellie bounced onto the bed. "I've always loved this room. It's so light."

Robert was near laughing with joy at Kellie. "You make it light."

As they were leaving the room, Kellie looked in the mirror on the dresser. "Have you ever wondered about mirrors? Everything is in reverse. Do they show us who we want to be, or who we really are?"

Robert stood behind Kellie and addressed the mirror, "Oh mirror, mirror on the wall, show me who I really am." He laughed. "I'm afraid for me it's just reality staring me back in the face."





“Do you know what I see?” Kellie asked. Then she turned from the mirror to look at Robert. “That you love me,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Now, let me show you my room.”

Chapter 23. Old Man Johnston

Kellie danced into her room. "I love this room," she chimed.

"Wow, you even have windows."

Kellie skipped over Robert's reference to her windowless bedroom in the mansion. "Well, sure, and I have a great view." She opened one of the windows, and a soft breeze came off the lake and played about her hair.

Kellie pushed Robert toward her bed. "Take off your clothes and get on the bed while I get some rope from the garage. I'll show you I don't need Janie to make you a lucky guy."

"I don't need Janie either. And I don't want some kinky sex thing. I want you. I want more for us." Robert put his arms around Kellie's waist. "Let's make love."



Kellie stepped back. Robert took hold of her braids. "Don't get mad this time. We need to talk about this. I'm going to hold on to you until you talk to me."

"I don't want to."

“Can we make love, or can we at least talk about it?”

Kellie took hold of Robert’s hands but didn’t pull them away from her hair. “Neither.”

Tread carefully, Robert.

The last time they had this conversation, she said she would slit his throat. “Kellie, it’s OK. I deserve to know.”

Kellie didn’t respond.

Robert tugged gently on Kellie’s braids. “The mirror didn’t lie. I love you.”

Kellie looked so sad and forlorn, Robert wished he had never brought it up.

“I’m afraid.”

Robert let go of Kellie’s hair and held her face in his hands. “Kellie, it’s OK. I can wait. Please trust me. Tell me what happened to you.”

Kellie looked at Robert, studying his eyes. Then she nodded her head and walked over to a window away from the lake. “Look out there. You see that path?”

“Yeah. That’s the way we took to get up here.”

“That path leads down toward the road, and a little further, to Johnston’s cabin.”

Robert noticed Kellie didn’t refer to him as “Old Man Johnston.”

“Elaine and Sam were always out socializing or sleeping in late. They left me pretty much alone when we were up here, which was fine with me. The word from the kids in town was to stay away from ‘Old Man Johnston,’ he was ‘mean.’ When I was 12, I decided to see for myself. I got up the nerve and went down that path.



"If ever a place radiated my most happiness, it was this cottage. If ever a place reflected my deepest despair, it was his wretched shack. The sun was all about. But the forest had grown up around his place and kept it in darkness. No light reached it.

"I hid outside his cabin. I just wanted to see what he looked like.

"He came up behind me. 'So girl, you want to see what mean Old Man Johnston looks like.'

"He scared me. I didn't say anything. I was afraid he would grab me. His lips covered his teeth, so he looked like a corpse when he smiled. Then he walked on by me.

"Well, girl, you can stay out here staring, run away and tell your friends you saw me, or come in and see what my place looks like. That would give you something to brag about.'

“I don’t know why I didn’t run. I guess I was curious. Sam hated him — That was a good thing. So I went in.

“It surprised me. Elaine has every nook and cranny in the mansion covered with stuff. ‘Wow, you don’t have anything here.’ I just blurted that out.”

‘I have simple needs, and I need very little. I do have some tea if you would like.’”

“He made tea. ‘I wish we had some cookies,’” he said, ““that would go good with this.’”

“‘I know how to make cookies,’ I volunteered. And I did.”

“That became our pattern for the summer. I would go over to his place several times a week. He would make tea, and I would bake cookies, and we would sit and talk.

“He had traveled a lot and told me stories about his trips around the world. He had albums of photographs he had taken, and I would sit next to him on his couch, looking at them while he told me the stories about the exotic places he had been.

“I watched him and learned about him. I realized there was nothing about him accidental. Everything he did had a purpose.

“One time, he asked me if I had told my parents I was coming over to see him. I told him no, I hardly ever saw them. He said it should probably be a secret between us. I asked if that wouldn’t be lying. He said keeping a secret wasn’t lying.

“The next summer was pretty much the same. I enjoyed visiting with him. He took an interest in me and my feelings and what was important to me.”

Robert interjected. “Unlike Sam and Elaine.”

“Yes. Unlike them.

“I have to say, I knew he looked at me. But I felt safe. I’d flirt with him.

“He told me I had beautiful legs.

“‘I’m only 13,’ I said.

“‘It doesn’t matter. The shape of the leg is what you’re born with. Very few girls have perfect legs, you do.’

“After that, I always wore short skirts and pranced around barefoot and singing. I liked the attention he gave me.

“He told me I was a nymph. I didn’t understand what that meant. He took down a book. It was called ‘Lolita.’”

“The book you have in your room at your house?” Robert asked.

Kellie didn’t answer. She was searching through her desk. “He read a part from it. Later I wrote that out.” Kellie removed a sheet of paper from the desk drawer and read from it.

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen, there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets.’

“I told him that seemed strange. I didn’t like it. I disagreed with him. ‘Oh. — That’s not me.’ But over my visits with him, I came to understand that it was. We would play our little game. I would go over, and we would have cookies and tea. I would flirt, and he would pretend not to notice.

“By the time I was 14, I was filling out. My breasts had developed. That summer, when I went over to Johnston’s, he mentioned how grown up I was looking. We baked cookies and made tea as before. I would stand close to him, my breasts occasionally ‘accidentally’ pressing against him. Oh, I teased him mercilessly.

“While we were sitting on his couch, he put his arm around me. He had done that in the past, but only to give a little hug when I would tell a joke. This time he held on. He was strong.

“He brushed his fingers on my arms. It caused goosebumps. Then he moved up and down my legs, more goosebumps. I squirmed.

‘Does this hurt?’

‘No, it tickles.’

‘Tickling can’t hurt you.’

‘That’s how the Chinese torture their prisoners.’ “That was a pretty dumb comment, but I was trying to say something to get him to stop.”

‘What?’ He said.

‘I heard it can kill you.’

‘Well, that’s silly. Tell me if it hurts, and I’ll stop.’

“He kept it up, making me uncomfortable. I tried to wiggle away. But he held me tight and put his hand on my breasts. He squeezed them a few times. It scared me, and I jumped and tried to break away. But he held me even tighter while he moved his hand on me.

“I begged him to stop. But all he would say is that it was all right. He wasn’t going to hurt me.

“He started breathing harder, even though I was the one doing all the struggling. I had seen enough TV and heard some of the stories from kids at school, so I realized what was happening. I saw he was big under his pants.

“Then he moved his hand up my leg and under my skirt and scratched his fingers on my panties, making me twitch and jump.

“‘Does this hurt?’

“He actually was being gentle with me, and it didn’t hurt. I didn’t want to lie, so I said no.

“‘I know, I’m not going to hurt you.’

“His fingers kept moving on me, sometimes up and down, sometimes in little circles, sometimes back to the scratching.

“I stopped struggling and closed my eyes. I had done it to myself before, but this was the first time someone did it to me. This was even before Janie and me...” Kellie shrugged.

“His fingers never stopped moving. I was breathing fast, like running a race. It was so hot, I was burning up. I was furious at what he was doing to me, and I couldn’t stop him, embarrassed my body was responding to him, ashamed that he could make me like that. I buried my head in his chest and clenched my teeth, stiffened, then shuddered and climaxed.

“He held me until I stopped shivering. I think I was crying.

“‘This has to be our secret. I will be in a lot of trouble if anyone finds out. If you tell anyone, I’ll have to hurt them. Do you understand?’

“I nodded.

“‘If you tell your mother, I’ll kill her. Do you understand?’ He didn’t mention Sam. I guess he knew I didn’t care if he killed Sam.”

“I nodded yes again.” Then he let me go.

‘I want you to come back tomorrow. Do you understand?’ I still couldn’t talk. I nodded yes, and left.

“I told no one. I was afraid he would do what he said he would. I remembered the kids in town all being afraid of him.

“Anyway, I did go back, and every few days afterward, as he would direct. When I got there, we would have tea and cookies — can you believe it? Then he would lead me to the couch.

“At first, it was the same as the first time. But after a while, he would take off my clothes. First, my top and bra, later, my skirt and panties.

“After a couple of weeks or so of that, after he made me climax, he said, now it’s my turn.

“‘Fellatio’ is what he called it. Kind of a polite word for ‘suck my dick.’ He opened the zipper of his pants and pulled out his penis. He held my head real tight and put it in my mouth. When he came, he kept my head against him, so I had to swallow him.”

Robert’s jaw was tight, his face felt hot. He wanted to say something — anything, but held back. Kellie needed to tell this.

“It wasn’t too many days, and we went even further. While I was still wet from what he had done to me, he’d carry me to his bed and arrange me on it. He didn’t use protection. I asked about that — hoping it would stop him. It didn’t. He said he was fixed, like a dog, and he couldn’t get me pregnant.”

Robert’s mouth was so dry he could hardly talk. “Did he?” Came out in a hoarse whisper.

“Did what?”

“Get you pregnant?”

Kellie looked at Robert, a blank stare. “No. Why would you ask that?” She furrowed her eyebrows. “I stayed away from him for the rest of the summer. I’m sure that made him mad. But there was no way he could contact me without giving himself away.

“The next summer, I asked Elaine if I could stay home and not go to the cottage. She said, ‘No,’ and made me go.

“A few days after we had gotten here, I was hanging out in town. I was a ‘Lakie,’ the ‘Townies’ didn’t like Lakies, so I was sitting alone. I was worried about Johnston. I hadn’t gone over to his place and was hoping he had forgotten about me. Janie came over and sat down

beside me. We were drinking pops when Johnston walked by the table. Janie turned her head away and put her hand up to the side of her face that was toward Johnston, pretending to fix her hair.

Johnston stood there a moment, looking at me. I knew what that look meant. Janie saw it too, through her fingers.

“You’re not going over to his place?” She asked.

“I just kind of looked at her. The next day I did.

“We started in as we had left it. Cookies, tea, sex. That’s pretty much how I spent every few days of my summers. He would tell me when he would want me again, and I would go over.”

Robert took Kellie’s hand. “How long did that go on?”

“Seventeen was a little different.”

“Seventeen. You’re still—”

“Robert, I’m almost through this. Let me finish.”

Robert nodded, and Kellie continued. “Johnston had me come over less often. Maybe only once or twice a week. He eventually told me he was having heart problems, and his doctors had told him to take it easy. It also seemed to take longer to get him to cum.” Kellie lifted one of her braids and brushed it against her lips. “Although I was pretty good at it by then.

“I suppose my eighteen and nineteenth years were about the same.”

“Are you still seeing him?” Robert asked.

“The last time was when I was twenty.”

“Last year? Just before we met?”

“At the start of the vacation, I had gone over to his place. He looked frailer than I had remembered. He tried to have sex with me, but couldn’t. He said his heart problem was getting worse. I felt pity, scorn, even hatred. I told him I wasn’t going to come over anymore.”

“He got angry. He said he would kill my mother if I stopped coming. ‘Go ahead. Go ahead with my mother.’ I challenged him. ‘I wish you would.’ He had threatened me before, but he and I always knew that it would finish him if I reported him. He lived in constant fear I would tell on him. I left and haven’t seen him since.”

“Why didn’t you report him?”

"I don't know, fear, shame. Maybe I blamed myself for flirting with him — perhaps it was my fault." Kellie threw her arms out to her sides. "I suppose I didn't want him to be in trouble. He had been the only adult to ever care about me for years."

"Kellie, he abused you for years."

"Really, not all of them — Not all the time."

"You're still trying to protect him. He's a typical abuser. He'd been grooming you."

"In a way, he subjected himself to me. Him wanting me so badly gave me control over him. He wanted me to want him. His obsession was my power."



Kellie had been impassive as she recited her story, as if she was describing a not very interesting TV show. Now bitterness crept into her voice. "Irony, isn't it? So, was he the spider in the web, or the fly?"

Kellie had stood looking out the window while she talked about Johnston. Now she turned to look at Robert. Her eyes were wet. "I told you I was a virgin when Travis raped me. That wasn't true. I was a virgin until Johnston."

Kellie stood looking at Robert, her arms dropped to her sides. She didn't hide the tears that flowed down her face. Robert had

never seen her so naked. Breaking sobs came from her. “I’m still a virgin to you.” Robert took hold of Kellie, and her knees bent as if she would fall. Robert held her in his arms. He felt her tears on his cheek, her hair, that he was stroking, became wet from his own. Her body was shaking. He held her tightly.

Now was not the time to question Kellie, and Robert had plenty of questions. Elaine had told him that Kellie got pregnant when she was fourteen. Johnston said he had been “fixed” — he didn’t need to use protection. Of course, he could have lied about that. So, did Johnston get Kellie pregnant?

Kellie stopped crying, and her body quieted in Robert’s arms. But a rage was rising in Robert. He had once told Kellie he could kill Travis if that would prevent Travis from raping her. That was no longer true. He was beyond that — Robert now knew he could just kill.

Robert led Kellie to her bed. They lay crossways, their backs against the wall. Kellie was exhausted after telling her story and nestled against Robert, her chest rising and falling in his arms. Shadows fell across the room as the sun set behind the lake, the golden glow faded to silver, and all was quiet except for Kellie’s light snoring. A breeze drifted through the window Kellie had opened, washing the room with the smell of the summer, and of the lake, and of the hardwood oak trees that grew along its shore.



And Robert felt like a lucky guy, a very lucky guy indeed.

Chapter 24. Night Angel

Scene 1. Maybe Kellie's the Artist

Glorious, glorious, glorious. The days after coming back from the cottage were, well, just crazy glorious. Kellie had trusted him with her most private secret. He understood now her reluctance to make love with him. He could wait.

Robert was working on a painting while Kellie wandered about the studio like a soft kitten. She found a canvas. "What's this?"

"Something I was doing earlier, last Fall."

"It's weird. What is it?"

"It's not weird. It's allegorical."

"What's that?"



"Look, the ocean represents life, the source of life. Where everything comes from. The girl's on an empty beach. She's alone. The egg represents fertility. She's about to enter womanhood. She's not sure

she wants to, but she has no choice. Her hands are tied behind her back. The broken hourglass — for her, time has run out. She is chained to the marital bed. This is to be her life."

"I think it's weird."

Robert continued with his painting. "That's fine. Think what you want."

"People don't want your allegorical. They want to see things as they are. The truth. They want reality."

“Oh? How many movies have you seen where in the morning the couple wake up in bed together and start to make mad, passionate love?”

“All the good ones.”

“Yeah, and in how many is one of them thinking, I have to fart, pee, and you have bad breath?”

Kellie had been doodling on a canvas while they were talking.

“OK, you want fantasy, you know what I think?”

“So now you’re an art critic, please tell me.”

“I think the hourglass is a space-time machine. She has crash landed on an alien planet. The masters of the planet tied her next to their pet egg.” Kellie held up her sketch. “So it will have something to eat when it hatches.”



Robert laughed. “That’s pretty good. Maybe you’re the artist around here.”

Kellie laughed too. “Sure, take your clothes off and get up on the table, and I’ll throw some paint on you.”

Robert went back to what he was working on while Kellie continued her wanderings. She found another canvas. “What’s this?”



“Just something I work on from time-to-time.”

“She’s pretty. Tell me about her.”

“What makes you think there’s a her?”

“Oh, this girl meant something to you. This is the one, isn’t she?”

Robert didn’t answer.

“This is your special one. The one you didn’t want to tell me about. What’s her name again?”

“Nice try. I’ve already told you, I’m not going to tell you her name.”

“Well, what do you call your painting?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t named it yet.”

“Night Angel.”

“Night Angel?”

“Yeah, I’m naming her, ‘Night Angel.’ Do you know what a Night Angel is?”

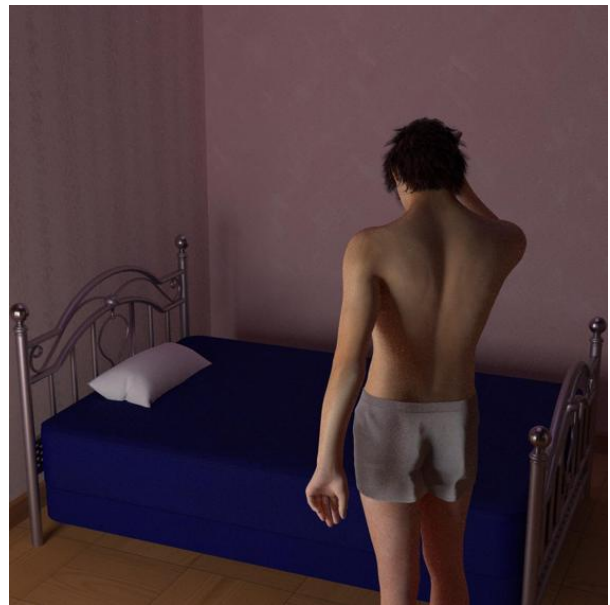
“No, but I’m sure you’re about to tell me.”



She's a young nymphet. You have a chance encounter with her in the street. Perhaps she's accidentally dropped a package that you picked up for her, then a touch, and a spell is cast.



That night you are so tired,
you can barely make it to bed.
You fall into a deep sleep. Then
she comes to you and ties you to
your bed.





She waits,
watching you. She
can be anything
she wants, your
playmate, your
temptress, a
tormentor, an
avenger for the
sins of men —
and all men have
sinned, by the
way.

Then she wakes you.

A Night Angel drives a man out of his mind with passion, a passion that only she can satisfy. She keeps him unsated, waiting for her to return to him.



“Wait a minute, what does that mean, ‘unsated’?”

“It means she has become irresistible to him. He is so enamored by her he will do anything to possess her. The stronger the male, the greater his ultimate and inevitable capitulation to her. He may be alpha male, but his obsessive passion for her puts her in control. He becomes her slave. To prove his love, he must wait for her return before his lust can be abated.”

Robert was listening to Kellie's story. "For how long?"

"Forever, Robert. She has enchanted him. He is under her spell forever."

Robert chuckled.

"That's not what I was thinking when I painted it, Kellie. You have a very vivid imagination for storytelling."

"You know I only like the truth. I don't make up stories."

"I know my stories are made up. I'm not so sure about yours."

"Did your girl look like this painting?"

Robert didn't want to discuss the girl. "In my mind."

Kellie pulled out a photo that was taped on the back of the canvas. "Isn't this her?"

Robert had forgotten the photo was there. "Yeah, that's her."

Kellie grinned. "And now I know her name." Kellie read the inscription on the photo. "Hope this helps you along. All my love. Arianna."

"She gave me that photo because I was having trouble in a class where we had to draw nudes, and she helped me out."

Kellie smiled. "I'd say so."

Kellie stepped back and examined the painting. "OK. I'll show you I'm an art critic. You know this girl. But you stand back from her. You've idealized her. She's not warm flesh and blood to you." Kellie looked at Robert. "Even while you were screwing her."

Robert stood, staring at Kellie, his mouth clamped shut. Kellie continued. "Do you think about her when you masturbate? I know you think about me."

"You can be so crude sometimes."





“So? Tell me I’m wrong.”

“We dated through college.”

“She’s your special one, and you still screwed her.”

“God, what is this with you?”

Kellie looked at Robert questioningly and accusatively, both at the same time — She was very good at that.

Robert gave up. “We’d make love. I’d call her, and she’d come over. We were talking about getting engaged, but things happen.” Robert crossed his arms across his chest and looked down. “She cried when I left.”

“Guys are such jerks.”

“Yes, I was.”

“What’s the matter, she didn’t fit in with your plans? She relieves your stress when you summon her. Then you put her away in some drawer until you want her again. No commitments, no complexities, no messy relationships. Everything’s fine until she wants something more, then she’s standing in your way.”

“Kellie... It wasn’t like that.”

Kellie was animated. “I’ll tell you what. No guy summons me — I summon them.”

“Where is this coming from? I regret what I did. There were a lot of things going on in my life right then.”

Kellie wasn’t stopping. “You weren’t willing to compromise your standards for her. You have some idealized image of a girl who’s blond, blue-eyed, and pure as snow, whose shit doesn’t stink, and who has no hair except on the top of her head. Then you end up with a girl who farts occasionally, needs to shave her legs weekly, and bleeds every month.”

Kellie headed for the studio door. "Have you ever done anything for someone that doesn't benefit you?"

"I'm not a selfish person."

She turned before leaving. "Have you ever sacrificed yourself for someone else?"

"I'm just trying to survive."

Scene 2 The Night Angel Comes

He thought he heard a baby crying. It brought him out of sleep. His bedroom door opened. He could see a figure standing in the doorway, reflecting the moonlight that filtered through a window.



“Kellie?”

Kellie was smiling. She put a finger to her lips, “Shush.”

She was wearing Robert's shirt from the studio. Kellie had not buttoned it, and as far as Robert could see, she was not wearing anything else. Kellie was also carrying something. He woke up a little more — the cuffs and rope from the studio.

Kellie turned on the bedstand light. "I need to see what I'm doing." She pulled the blanket and sheet off Robert. He was wearing only underpants. Kellie climbed on top of him, straddled him, leaned down, and kissed him.

"What are you doing?" Robert asked

"We're playing the Night Angel game. Remember when I told you the next time I was going to tie you down?" Kellie whispered in Robert's ear. "This is that time."

Kellie lifted Robert's arms above his head. Her breasts pressed against his face as she leaned over to stretch his arms to the bedposts. He felt the cuffs grip his wrists, his arms pull as Kellie fixed him tight to the bed.

Kellie laid next to Robert. Her fingers traced down his chest and stomach to his underpants. She caressed him, moving over his balls and then back up, massaging the bulge as it got bigger. She teased the tip of Robert's penis out of the top of his underpants. Kellie smiled and fingered it, nudging it out further.

She licked her way down Robert — neck, nipples, stomach — penis. She flicked her tongue over the tip of it and nibbled it, then pulled Robert's pants further down. The waistband held his penis against his stomach. Kellie licked the underside like a kitten licking its paw. Then she pulled Robert's pants down further, exposing all of him, his cock now freed, stood up. Kellie took it in her mouth and sucked while her tongue circled the tip. Her left hand massaged Robert's balls, while her right held his penis still for the attention her mouth was giving it.

Robert's breathing became faster, his arms strained against the cuffs, his hips moved up and down in rhythm to Kellie's sucking. Then she stopped.

Kellie slid Robert's shorts down and off. Then got off the bed and took hold of Robert's right leg and wrapped a cuff on it. She put a rope through the ring and pulled Robert's leg down, pulling it taut, stretching his arms that were fastened to the headboard, and

secured his foot to the bedpost. She did the same with his left foot, opening him up, his balls and cock exposed and vulnerable.

Robert was nervous. He had never been tied up before. He had illustrated many stories involving bondage — he had just never taken part. Some stories did not turn out so well for the person being restrained. “You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“Yeah. I read your stories. Let’s see you try to get loose.” Robert’s right foot jerked as Kellie scraped its bottom. Kellie laughed. “Oh. You can do better than that. You might as well give up right now. You know I’m going to win.” Kellie’s fingers grazed over Robert’s foot, making his leg yank at the rope that held him to the bed. Robert twisted, trying to pull away. She couldn’t win this. He clenched his mouth shut while Kellie continued flitting about his feet until she had Robert whining and grunting. “Now, let’s check the other one.” Kellie moved to Robert’s left foot.

“No. That’s enou—” Kellie flicked her fingers on Robert’s foot, making it jump. He shut his eyes tight, scrunched his face — he was not going to give in to her. He wiggled his foot, trying to escape from Kellie’s restless fingers. Robert’s legs were jerking, his body bucking, as Kellie kept tickling. It was insane. Why wouldn’t she stop? She must stop. Kellie lay on Robert’s leg, so he couldn’t move it at all. Then started in again. It was too much. He gave up, squealing as his body released into helpless convulsions.

Kellie was laughing too. “God. You’re more ticklish than I am. Remember when you tied me up and tickled me?” She stopped long enough for Robert to catch his breath to answer.

“That was just to get an effect. That was—”

Kellie scribbled on Robert’s foot, stopping his talking and sending him back into hysterics. “Yeah, well, this is to break you, and it’s payback time, Pal.”

Kellie played with Robert’s feet until she was afraid he would pass out. Then she used her shirt to wipe the tears and drool from his face. Robert’s body was still shivering. “I can do whatever I want to you.” Robert winced as Kellie dug her fingers into his side. “Keep you in a frenzy.” Kellie wiggled her fingers, provoking Robert’s body to wrench and twist. Her hand moved to his groin. “Hurt you, and no one would hear you scream.” Robert sucked in his breath as Kellie

gripped his balls. "Or give you the ride of your life." Kellie brushed her fingers back and forth over Robert's twitching penis.



"Now I control every inch of you." Kellie kept running her fingers on Robert's cock, making him hard. "You should never have let me tie you up. I'm afraid this is going to be a very long night for you."

Kellie reached over to the nightstand and took out the jar of lotion. Kneeling on the bed, she opened it and scooped some out, rubbing it around on her hands, then on Robert's balls. The lotion was cold, and he jumped. His legs jerked as he tried to pull them together.

The lotion warmed as Kellie continued to massage him. His legs were quivering. The area around the anus is especially sensitive. Kellie concentrated her fingers there. Robert's arms and legs strained against their binds, his breathing nervously quickened as Kellie ran her fingers over his entrance. She pressed a finger into him, making him gasp, and his sphincter muscle clench to prevent the intrusion, then unclench when she moved her finger away. Push and withdraw, push and withdraw, clench and unclench.

"Oh shit," Robert gasped.

Kellie liked she could do that to him.

After a while, Kellie got more lotion from the jar. Robert had been semi-hard from the attention Kellie was giving his balls and ass, now he grew as she applied the lotion to his cock. Kellie made him hard, waited until he became softer. Then hard again. Then soft. Over and over. Her hand gliding over his cock. "I like feeling you get hard in my hands."

Robert's breathing was heavy and deep, like he was running a long-distance race. His legs and arms pulled at his binds. The familiar ache started in his balls, then moved up to the tip of his cock that Kellie's fingers were gently teasing.

She may have been the Night Angel, but she was playing Janie's 'I won't let you cum' game. Playing him like a melodic instrument, sometimes hard, sometimes soft, fast, slow, his grunts, groans, and sobs was the music she was creating.

She snuggled next to him, moved her tongue around on his face, tasted him.

Robert tasted back and kissed, pecked, nibbled her ear, rubbed his cheeks against hers. If only he could move his arms. He buried his face in her neck and licked and sucked like an insatiable lamb nuzzling its mother's udder — More. More. Give me more. He was in agony. "OK. Really." "Enough." "Finish me off."

Kellie played with Robert for a while. Then put her lips to Robert's ear. "What will you do for me?"

"Oh God. Anything. I'd kill for you."

"That's what I like to hear."

"Who do you want me to kill?"

"Oh, there are several."

"They're all dead."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Kellie brought Robert close. His muscles tightened, waiting for the trigger. He was so close. So close. A stroke or two more. He stiffened, feeling it swell in him. It would be intense — even painful.

Kellie's finger circled the tip of Robert's cock, sending electricity to his balls, then through his legs, then the whole mass of him. He was shaking.

She paused.

Robert was breathless. He lifted his head and looked at Kellie.

Kellie smiled back. "First, some rules."

"Rules?"

"You and Sam like to have rules, so I have some of my own. Are you ready?"

Robert lowered his head, his eyes half-closed, as Kellie gently caressed his balls.

"Good boy." Kellie kissed Robert's cheek. "First, this is the Night Angel game. What we do here stays here. It's not part of our other world. We are separate from it." She stopped massaging.

"Understand?"

"Sure."

"Promise?"

"Yes. I like that one. That's a good one."

She started again and kissed his other cheek. "Second, I'll decide when the Night Angel comes to you. You can't summon her. It will be up to me." Kellie stopped. "Promise?"

"Can we talk about how often that might be?"

"This is not a negotiation. Promise?"

"OK, OK."

Kellie didn't restart. She looked at Robert. "I asked you if you promise."

"Shit. Yes."

Kellie ran her fingers up Robert's cock, around the tip, then back down and around his balls, and back up again, doing little figure eights.

“Third—“

“Third? God, how many rules are there?”

“Third. I demand all of you. I am the only one who can satisfy you.”

Robert looked at her, questioningly.

Kellie stopped. “Remember what I told you about the Night Angel? She’s the only one who can relieve you. No one else, not even yourself. Understand?”

“Let’s talk about that one.”

“That’s the most important one. Do you remember why?”

“To control the poor guy and make his life miserable.”

“To prove you love me.”

“Kellie, there are so many other ways I can show I love you.”

“This is the way I’ve chosen. Promise right now, or I’ll stop and leave you like that nerd.

“I have to choose tonight?”

“No. Not tonight. Now. You have to choose now.” Kellie smiled and kissed Robert’s lips. “Do you want to be a part of my dreams?”

“I want to be in your life. I want us to be together.”

She kissed him again. “Then play my games with me, Robert.” She started stroking him.

Robert had always followed his own path, hidden behind his rules. His polestar a free mind and a free spirit — freedom above all else. It was why he left Arianna. No connections, no dependence on someone else. Kellie was pulling from a different direction. Did he want to go there? Yes, he thought.

Kellie stopped. “Was that a yes?”

“Yes, yes. Dammit. I said yes.”



Kellie cradled Robert's head with her free arm and placed her hand across his eyes and whispered. "A Night Angel can be anything you wish, Robert, whatever you can imagine. Listen to my voice. You're helpless. A nymphet has captured you, is stimulating you, taking her time with you, probing your secret places until every nerve in your body is on fire." She started stroking him. "That's a good one, isn't it?"

Yes. That was one of his favorites.

"Where are you now, Robert? What fantasy have you escaped to?"

He heard a darker voice, a masculine voice, "I know."

Kellie's hand kept Robert from opening his eyes to see who was talking.

"The trouble with fantasies," the dark voice continued, "is that sometimes they come true. Do you want me to tell you about this one?"

Robert shook his head, No. He was suddenly very much afraid. Kellie held his head tighter so he couldn't move it. Her hand was pressing on his eyes, keeping them shut.

A hand stroked his cock. "Is this it?"

Robert was groaning.

"I'm a boy who has captured you. You're helpless as I explore your body. You're humiliated that your body responds to me — unwillingly arousing you, revolted that I can make it do that, embarrassed that you know I can make you cum when I want, and so, so aroused," the voice whispered, Robert could hear it smile, "because you know I'm about to do just that."

Kellie's hand pressed down on Robert's eyes. He tried to feel Kellie's long hair on his face and chest — a girl's hair. He hadn't noticed it before, now he desperately wanted to.

The dark voice was close to his ear. "Who do you want me to be, Robert?"

Robert's body was shaking. He was grunting and moaning as the hand moved slower and softer over his cock.

Electricity was flying through him.

His breathing was like a steam engine running at breakneck speed.

His head pushed back into his pillow, his eyes held tight.

The nerves at the end of his cock flashed, signaling his balls, they tightened, the fingers climbed up, so light, to the tip of his cock, holding him there, sending fire down his cock, muscles clenched, his body rock hard. Nothing could stop it now.

The hand moved away and fingers pushed into his ass.

The arm around his head smothered him tight. The voice. "I'm Travis."

Robert's breath catches, his hips rise, his arm and leg muscles strain against their bonds, his balls draw up, his cock jerks, pumping, fucking, ejaculating into the air. He cries. His body shakes.

Then he collapsed.

Kellie held Robert's head as his body shuddered, and he sobbed. After he quieted, she removed her arm. Robert opened his eyes. Kellie looked triumphant. Robert looked away, ashamed.



Kellie kissed his cheeks. "It's OK, Robert. Rest for a while. We're going to play that one again."

Chapter 25. My Burglar

Scene 1. Where Do I Fit In?

“There is no ‘safe’ word.”

That’s what she told him last night when he begged her to stop, that he had had enough.

“This is life, Robert. You can’t just turn off life,” the Night Angel said. “You can’t change your mind in midstream.”

Robert thought they had been playing a game.

She had tied him up, then exhausted him. His arms were so sore from struggling through the night, he could barely pick up his coffee cup.

Helpless at a girl’s mercy while she sexually molested and frustrated him, making him wait until she decided when to finish him, had been a fantasy of Robert’s, one that, until last night, had always remained a fantasy. That’s how it started anyway — with his fantasy. But then Kellie changed it.

His heart pounding out of his chest, his fast breathing, his body responding to every touch of the Night Angel — of Travis — Oh, the shame. The continual stimulation aroused him, confused, and overwhelmed him. He did not like it. No, he did not like it one bit. It had humiliated him. It had repulsed him. It had inflamed him. And even now he felt a tingle in his penis when he thought of it.



The unwilling victim of some male's perverted craving to restrain and sexually stimulate him, his bound body at first twisting and turning against the touches, disgusted by the very act of such intimate contact with another male. But eventually, the body responding, then even seeking the touches as the titillation continued. His mind resisted, ashamed of the body's weakness, of its betrayal. But reluctantly, inevitably, it yielded. His will giving way to the aroused body, then frantically joining with it in its frenzied eruption.

He wasn't gay, all right? He was sure he was not.

He knew guys who were gay. Some even posed nude in his college art classes. Some were friends. But he was not attracted to them — not in that way. Truthfully, they weren't attracted to him either — not in that way. He watched their relationships. As far as he could see, they weren't different from the various relationships of his straight friends.

For either, straight or gay, some were pretty much just for sex, plain and simple. The Travises of the world, the one-night whizzes,

the Pickem-up, and Bedem-down players. Others were more than that. There was caring for the other person. Affection. Each becoming vulnerable to the other. An intimacy. The ability to love the other more than anyone else. The power to hurt more too.

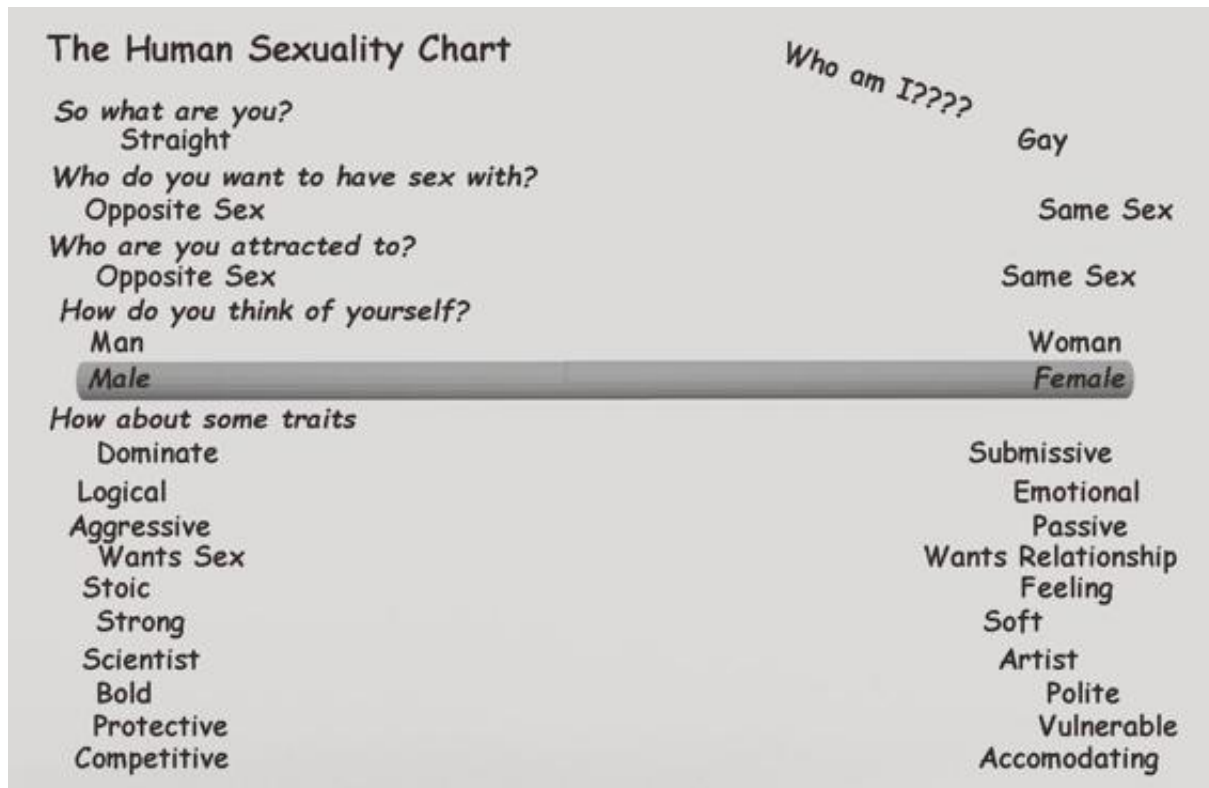
Gay, straight, looking for a one-night stand, or a longer-term commitment, they all started the same. There was the initial sizing up. You see someone across a room, their demeanor, how they hold themselves — something attracts you to that particular person. There is a spark. Even here, Robert thought, at the first stage of intimacy, the difference between gay and straight started. He was not drawn to guys. For him, there was no spark.

Then did the other person show interest? Did they look back? In a room full of people, are you alone together? You talk. At first, mundane and superficial. But if each finds an attraction to the other, the courtship begins. They hold hands — that first touch of intimacy. Then closer, arms around a shoulder, then around the waist as familiarity and comfort grow. Then the first kiss. The couple have become vulnerable to each other. The kisses get more intense, more intimate. Tongues are used — they exchange a part of each other. Fingers run through the other's hair, hands cradle face, then move around to other regions. Clothing is removed — it speeds up now. The man kisses the woman's breasts. Is it that way for a gay couple? Robert thought so. He knew his nipples responded to touch. Then hands on the other's genitals, exciting them. Then... Yes. Then.

Yes, sex is an essential part. But so is romance, the intimate sharing, and caring for another person. The commitment to be involved. The ins and outs, the jealousies, the comings and goings of human relationships seemed pretty universal — whether straight or gay.

He wasn't gay. He was pretty sure about that. "Straight," "gay," it seemed to him, were at opposite ends of a pole. — The extreme opposites of each other. Still...? Sometimes...? He wondered.

He got out his art pad and a pencil and sketched a pole (his most clear thoughts came about when he sketched things out).



He labeled it "The Human Sexuality Chart." After all, "Sex," that's what it's all about, isn't it? Then thought, and added, "Who am I ???" — Lot's of question marks, lots of questions.

Let's start with the most basic. What are you?

Male Female

Fundamental. It's what we are at birth. Certainly opposites on the pole. He labeled the ends.

How do you think of yourself:?

Man Woman

Yeah. Opposites — for him.

He labeled those on the pole, above the "Male" "Female" labels.

How about traits? He added some below the pole.

Dominate Submissive

Logical Emotional

Aggressive Passive

Could he add more labels? Yes, there are many more.

Wants Sex Wants Relationship

Stoic Feeling

Strong Soft

Scientist Artist

The ends of the pole were getting crowded.

At first, when trying to list the traits, he thought it would be simplest to list one as it applied to one end of the pole and then look up in a dictionary its antonym — a word opposite in meaning for the other end. But that didn't always work. The antonyms seemed to have negative connotations. The antonym for "focused," for instance, was "scattered." Did that mean "scattered-brained?" But that did not fairly describe someone who was not focused — who's mind could encompass and consider many possibilities. "Open-minded," "broad-minded," "observant," "flexible" were the more positive traits.

"Competitive" at one end of the pole did not mean "apathetic" worked at the other end — "accommodating" encompassed the different trait better. That a person was "vulnerable" did not mean the other was "guarded," it could mean they were "protective."

He decided the ends of the poles were not opposites of each other — not black white. That one end of the pole was "positive" did not mean the other end was "negative" — it meant it was different.

He added more labels.

Focused Open-minded

Bold Polite

Protective Vulnerable

Competitive Accommodating

How about: Who are you attracted to?

Opposite Sex Same Sex

He put that at the top of the pole with his "Male," "Female" and "Man," "Woman," labels.

Robert paused with his labeling.

Who do you want to have sex with?

Well, that was a question, wasn't it?

Opposite Sex Same Sex

Really, the Opposite Sex for him. All the time. All the time. All the time, except for the "Dominated-against-his-will-by-a-male" fantasy. This question went above the "Who are you attracted to?" label.

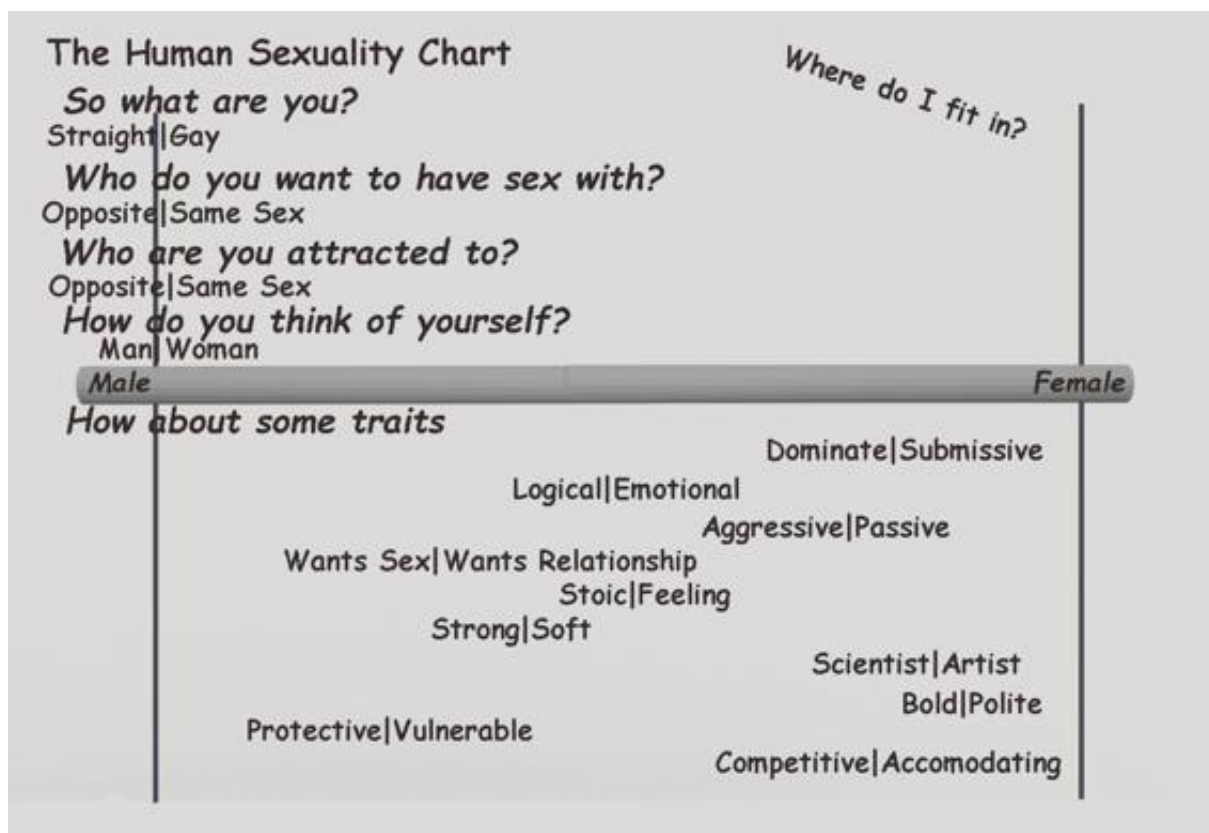
Then he got to his real question. So, what are you, straight or gay? **Come clean now.**

Straight Gay

He put those labels above the others. But it didn't help answer his question of who he was. The rigidity of the pole: east, west, black, white, yes, no, each trait having a fixed position at one end or the other, did not fit with what he felt he was.

There was some sense he was not at the extreme of the "Straight" end of the pole, but more at that end than the other. Was it rationalization? Perhaps. But he now thought his pole, with its set conclusions, not so reliable.

He did another chart.



New question: Where do I fit in? This time not emphasizing the dichotomy of the labels, but where the pair of them fit along the continuum between "Male" and "Female." This gave him more flexibility. His "Dominate Submissive" trait was clearly more toward the Female side. And, after his college experience, he knew he was more artist than scientist. He felt warm that his "Protective Vulnerable" trait leaned toward the Male side, and somewhat

confused, but satisfied enough, where he placed his “Wants Sex Wants Relationship” trait.

But when he was done, his plotting showed another problem. The “Sex” questions above the pole: “How do you think of yourself?”; “Who are you attracted to?”; “Who do you want to have sex with?”; “So, what are you, straight or gay?” were clearly, and he believed, for him, rightly so at the Male end of the pole. While most of the traits leaned toward the Female side. Something’s really wrong here. No wonder he felt screwed up most of the time. Jerk-Travis would have this a lot easier. Robert laughed. Jerk’s chart would be so lopsided to the left it would tip over.

He tried again. The problem, he decided, was the stereotypes of what it means to be male or female. Let’s throw them out with the rigid pole that goes along with them.

Perhaps human personality is not a monograph written on a stone tablet. It is a lyric written on a sheet of music. And the traits, the traits... the traits are our notes, notes that could be placed in a myriad of rhythms, playing infinite melodies for each person. The arrangement of the notes at any given time based on inclination, situation, and luck.

Robert remade his sketch.



New title, “A Human Song.” The pole now not a rod but a musical staff. He remade his labels too, the traits no longer in horizontal dichotomy but in vertical harmony. No longer static, they now slid along the staff, playing the rhythms and beats that was his music. It was messy, jumbled, and disorganized. There were discordant notes, and blaring sounds, and mistakes, and not everything played well together, but sometimes — sometimes it sounded like an oper, and then it was all gloriously human.

He knew how he placed himself was subjective, but he was comfortable where he was. He wondered how Kellie would arrange his notes. Did she now see him as some weak “boy-toy?” He wanted more than that with her. He was her man. Damn it.

When he was a boy in grade school, he tried to show off for a girl he was smitten with. He had climbed to the top of the playground’s swing set. See how strong and brave a man I am. The girl climbed up and hung upside-down from her knees. Bob was afraid to do that. Proving manliness was not always easy — nor safe.

One of the rules of the Night Angel Game was they couldn't talk about it outside of the bedroom. He would wait until she came to him. Then he would show her his sketch, and if he felt really brave, ask her how she would place his notes.

The other rule of the Night Angel Game became more challenging — "You have to wait for me. Only I can satisfy you."

During the days while posing, Kellie was more sensual than Robert ever remembered. Warm, soft, compliant (unusual for her, he thought), a breathlessness in her voice. The aroma of her lotion filled the studio and Robert's head.

Occasionally, when not posing, she would stand behind him, watching him paint, her hair brushing his neck, her mouth so close to him he felt her breath on his ear, her breasts pressed against his arm. At those times, Robert could hardly work. He waited for her hand to reach around him, touch him, and promise 'tonight.' It never did.

Kellie was very much enjoying the Game.

At the end of the day she would come close, look up and kiss him, her tongue thrusting into his mouth, her hands reaching up and playing with his hair. Robert's arms would go around Kellie, pulling her to him, his hands molding, squeezing her naked rear. He would grow against her. She must feel his need. But then she would sigh, pull away, get dressed, and leave.

Nights became too dangerous for bed. He had tried that the first night. He touched himself, only a little. What could it hurt? The touching went to stroking, his fingers moving up and down his growing cock. Just a little more. He stopped and got out of bed. He half expected Kellie to walk in just as he started coming. She would watch him finishing himself off, and then she would be finished with him.

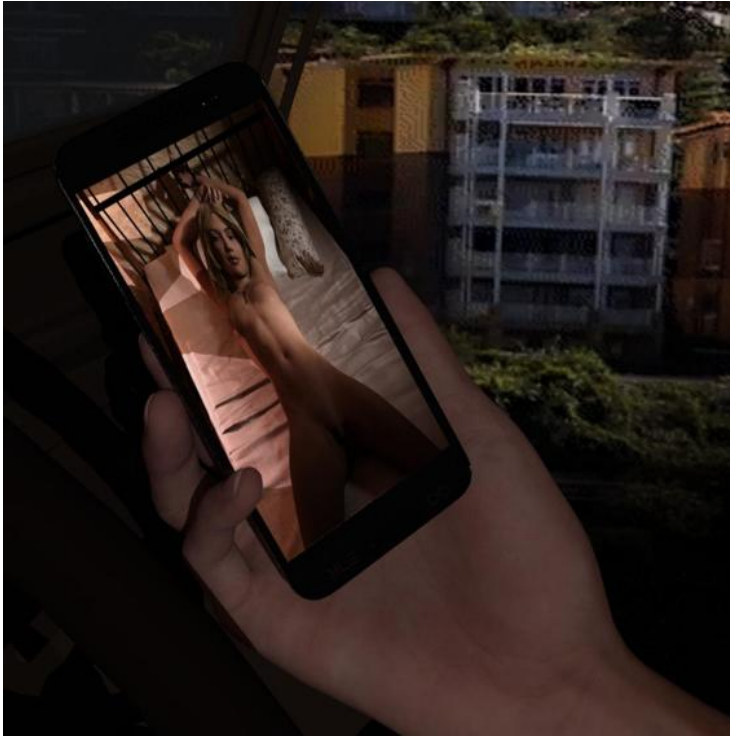
Cold showers are overrated — although that didn't stop Robert from trying. Mornings found him groggily slumped over the table by the window.



Robert's emotions swept from love so intense he almost cried to searing resentment that she would keep him in such misery. He did a drawing of Kellie and him and titled it "Naked in the Jungle - Sheila and her Puppet."

The rules of the Night Angel game were in play, the promises kept. Why did he keep them? He wondered about the control she now had over him — even to what he could do with his body. He hated it.

Yet he waited. Each day his frustration increasing. Thoughts of sex now not every few hours (as he had read in a recent study), not even the street knowledge of every ten minutes. It was pretty much all the time. Focusing on his work was not in the cards.



Kellie on Facetime.

Unfocused driving was something he could do. Toward the end of the week, he left the estate to take some of his artwork to the porn shop in the city. This would be his last trip. The months he owed Sam were over. He was now free to leave — and leave he was going to do. Leave Sam, leave the porn, leave Kellie and her crazy games. Yes. Even Kellie. He was out of here.

His phone rang. It was

Scene 2. Rescue Me

"I want you."

"What're you talking about?"

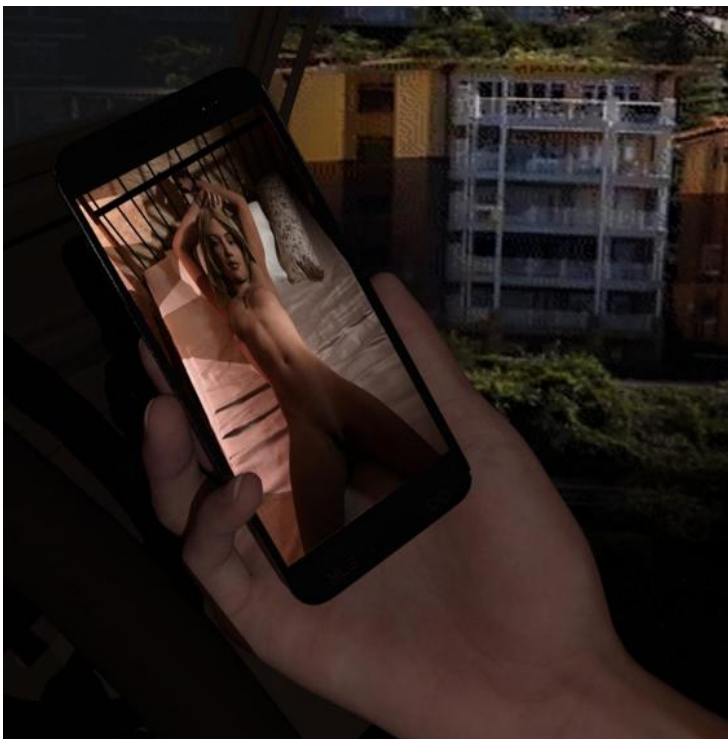
"I showered, put on some of our lotion. I'm ready for you to make love to me."

"Ah. Oh... OK. Kellie, remember I'm driving into the city. I won't be home for a few hours."

"Robert, I want you now."

"I heard you. I can't now."

"Watch."



Kellie put her phone on a selfie-stick she had fixed to the foot of her bed. Robert could see her sitting in the middle of the bed. "Do you see I'm naked? I'm naked for you, Robert."

She bent over. Her image went out of the screen.

Robert was trying to keep his eyes on the road as well as the screen on his phone. "Kellie, what are you doing?"

Kellie came back into view. "I just tied my feet to the corners of the bed."

Kellie laid back. She had a pair of handcuffs and cuffed her hands to the bed frame above her head. "Robert, I'm fixed down now. I can't get free. Do you see the key on the chain between my breasts? I can't reach it. You need to come and get it."

“What about Sam and Elaine?”

“They’re gone until tomorrow, so’s the housekeeper. I’m here alone.”

“Kellie, that’s dumb. What if there’s an emergency, a fire, or something?”

“A burglar?” Kellie suggested.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

“Don’t hang up, Robert, keep me with you. Listen to me.

“I don’t want to be a virgin to you anymore, celibate without the balance of the sensual. Hygienic and sterile without connection to the flesh. Robert, tell me you love me, while making love to me, feel me shuddering as I climax in your arms, holding nothing back, surrendering everything to you. No one’s ever given that to me, never allowed me to have that, to complete me. Robert, complete me.

“My legs are spread out, my feet tied down, I’m exposed and vulnerable.

“Robert, this is so frustrating. I’m aching inside. Please hurry.”

Kellie twisted her wrists in the handcuffs. “Robert, I’m afraid. Where are you?”

“Robert, I can feel the key laying between my breasts. If I could just reach it, I could free myself.” Kellie jerked at the handcuffs, shaking the bed frame. “Shit. I really did it this time. I can’t get loose.”

Kellie’s face showed surprise. “Robert, I hear a noise downstairs. Someone is coming into the house.

“I think it’s a burglar. Oh, I hope he stays downstairs.



“Someone is coming up the stairs,” Kellie whispered. “Please, please don’t come in here.

“I hear the doorknob turning. The door is opening.

“No. He’s coming into my room.

“Who are you? Why are you here? Please, Mr. Burglar, just leave.

“He’s getting onto my bed. No. Go away.

“Please don’t. Please don’t touch me.

“Oh, Robert, his hands are on me, fondling my breasts, his fingers flicking my nipples, making them hard. My hands grasp the bed frame. I can’t resist. My head moves back, exposing my neck like an animal submitting. He’s biting my neck, licking and kissing my breasts, sucking my nipples, his hand travels down me, down my stomach. ‘Oh, God. No. Not there.’ I jerk, then start panting as his fingers manipulate me. ‘I’m not going to come for you.’ Why did I put that lotion on?

“Pinching, petting, caressing, I’m whimpering. ‘No, please.’ Stop. Fingers softly teasing me, I’m responding. ‘Don’t?’ ‘Stop?’ I’m losing focus. I can’t tell.

“His mouth replaces his fingers, licking, nibbling, tasting me. His tongue is lashing me like he’s in a feeding frenzy. I’m thrashing about and surrender. I can’t help it. I climax, plunging into devouring, screaming madness.



"Now it's his turn. I know that. I open my mouth. 'No. Please don't.' He covers it with his hand as he enters me. Then there are just the muffled sounds of my moaning until my head rocks back, and I cry as I abandon myself to him again.

"He's waited for me. Now he thrusts into me, ramming me with his passion, my body bouncing up and down as he lunges, the bed going crazy, squeaking and creaking. His head digs into my neck. 'Don't come in me.' He grunts and fills me.

Robert rested a moment, then carefully lifted himself off Kellie and laid by her side. He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head.

"Kellie, what's wrong?"

"Please untie me."

"Kellie, what's wrong? Are you mad?"

"I said, untie me."

"We were playing a game, the 'Burglar Game.' That's what you wanted."



Kellie glared at Robert. "I wanted you to rescue me, not fuck me."

Chapter 26. How Much Do You Love Me

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Robert was struggling to wake up with a cup of coffee. He had not slept well. He had played, rewound, and replayed the events of yesterday most of the night. Sometimes he would play the entire day, from when he got up, driving to the gallery, Kellie's call — she had called him. — Right? She wanted him, she said. The Burglar — what was that all about? The Burglar raped her — no, not rape, not really — he wanted her, so he took her, dominated and ravished her. That was Kellie's fantasy — that was what she wanted — OK?

So when does consent become rape? The Night Angel kept tormenting him even as he begged her to stop.

Shit.

Most of the time, he replayed the part where Kellie was lying naked on her bed, her arms bound above her head. And that key, that damn key resting between her breasts. He watched it rising and falling with her breathing. He picked it up with his lips and slipped it into her mouth. Their tongues clowned with it, shared and played with it. Kellie giggled when the soaked key slid down her cheek. Then he was inside her.

He felt strong as she wriggled and struggled under him, powerful as she whimpered and moaned. "No," she breathed as her hips moved up and down on him. He was so close. Her heat enclosed him and held him. She had brought him to a sexual high with her 'Night Angel' game, and for a week, had maddeningly kept him there. Her body hardened as it prepared for orgasm, her soft breasts pressed on his chest. "Don't cum in me." Her hips thrust up to her climax. Robert's hands gripped the bedsheets, his head buried into her neck, his hips pumped, he cried and came too.

It was all part of the game. Right?

Shit. How did I screw it up?

No way that was rape. He had bragged earlier, took a self-righteous vow he would — could never do that. Damn, Kellie. Damn. Damn.

Shit. Kellie walked in.



Short skirt, long legs, she's barefoot — her hair — she's cut her hair. Short — like a boy's. Short hair could have been all right, delicate, framing her face, which sometimes, he thought, looked like she was sixteen. But this crazy mess, a chop here, a chop there.

Who did this? And all hacked, hacked, hacked into such a tangle of angry angles.

Kellie pulled the door shut, then paced like a trapped animal back and forth in front of it.

Robert had wanted to talk to her, to work out what happened between them, but he wasn't ready. Not yet. He needed to replay the movie a few more times. Kellie barging in didn't give him that. He didn't think now was a good time to ask about her hair. "Are you still mad at me?"

Kellie marched to the kitchen cabinet, took out a glass, and slammed the door.

Robert was stumbling for something to say. "I'm not sure what happened yesterday. I thought you wanted that. We were playing a game."

Kellie didn't respond and took a drink of water, spilling some of it when she set the glass hard on the cabinet.

"It was just like what you told me. You know, about the Burglar."

Kellie stood, looking at the glass and spilled water.

"He would tie you up and make love to you."

Kellie glared at Robert. "He would rescue me."

"Yeah, I know. He'd protect you, and make love to you, and take you away from here. Kellie, I want to do that. Take care of you."

Kellie was quiet.

"Kellie, please. What is it?"

Kellie looked down and folded her arms across her chest as if to keep it from flying apart. She took a deep breath, "Sam is going to kill me."

It was said so quietly, Robert thought he had not heard. His processing of those sounds was similar to when Kellie told him Travis had raped her. The sounds came through his ears and swirled around in his head for a while but never settled in any meaningful place. Then they dove deep into his brain. His response this time wasn't any more helpful than then.

"What? What did you say?"

Kellie looked up at Robert. Louder and more forceful this time. "I said, Sam is going to kill me." Kellie gave a little shrug and peered

toward the door. "Probably this weekend."

Those sounds found a place, but with no more meaning than the others. "That's crazy. What are you talking about?"

Kellie, her head down, shuffled toward Robert. "Remember, I told you they were trying to convince my friends and family I was suicidal?" Kellie glanced at Robert. "You even helped them with that when you called the police on me." She put her head back down. "Now I know why. They left for the cottage yesterday for the weekend. They're setting up an alibi for when I'm killed and make it look like a suicide."

There were so many more sounds coming in than Robert could process. He stood as Kellie continued. "Elaine was drinking yesterday. OK, she's always drinking, I guess drinking too much, well..."

Kellie, still looking down, moved closer to Robert. He could smell the shampoo she used after cutting her hair. "Well, she left some papers on her desk. I was never supposed to see them. I was searching for something this morning in her room and found it."

"Found what?"

"A life insurance policy, on my life, for a million dollars."

"OK... So? So what?"

"It was taken out two years ago. Two years ago, today."

Robert put his hands on Kellie's shoulders. "I'm still not following."

"Travis said life insurance wouldn't pay off if the person insured commits suicide within the first two years."

Robert gripped Kellie, "Travis? You talked to Travis? Why are you talking to Travis? You said he raped you. Why do you have anything to do with him?"

Kellie shook away from Robert and stepped back, "He's in pre-law. I needed to learn about this. Anyway, we stay in touch."

"I can't believe you're still talking to him."

Kellie went into her defensive position, arms crossed, feet planted firmly apart. "That's not important. Will you listen to what I'm saying? That policy was taken out two years ago. If I'm found dead, they get the money."



“You’re saying your parents are going to kill you for a life insurance policy?”

“Now you’re getting it, Pal.”

Robert also assumed the position, “OK. All right. Let’s talk about that. But then we’re going to get back to Travis.”

Kellie looked away and shrugged.

“Listen, if they were going to kill you for insurance money, they didn’t need to wait two years. They could have had someone kill you when they took out the policy and make it look like it was a…” Robert stumbled on the word, “burglar… or something.”

Kellie looked back at Robert. “They wouldn’t want it to look like murder. That would mean serious police investigation. Sam wouldn’t want the cops anywhere near that close. No. They need it to look like a suicide. There would be police involvement, but limited and apologetic.

'We're sorry for your loss, Mr. and Mrs. Gallo. We're sorry to bother you at a time like this.' Suicide allows the family a muted repose for their shame while I quietly disappear."

"Kellie, I'm having trouble with all this. Sam's wealthy, a million's a lot, but enough to kill you for it?"

"Sam's not so wealthy. Not really. There's a lot of show."

"Well, it's a pretty good show."

"Sam's always cash poor. Elaine spends like crazy for appearances, and so does Sam. He and Elaine argue about it a lot. He's always overextended. And when he's overextended, it's to people you don't want to be overextended to."

"OK. Sam. I can almost see he could kill you, but you think your mother is in on it?"

Kellie snorted. "My mother. My mother never wanted me. What's so sacred about motherhood?" Kellie looked at Robert, "What about yours? They took that policy out two years ago and then just had to sit back and wait. Maybe that's why she's been drinking more lately. She knows that the waiting time is over."

"I'm reeling here. I can't think. This is crazy. You think they've been planning this for two years? What kind of people have a two-year plan to kill someone? That's Machiavellian."

"What's Machiavellian?"

"You don't know who Machiavelli was?"

"Why do you always think you're so much smarter than me? I don't know about your Don Quixote, I don't know — nor care about your glacier coming at us from Canada, and I don't know about Machiavelli. It sounds like something baked in red sauce that I'd order at an Italian restaurant. But I know Sam. He will manipulate, he will lie, he will..."

"I guess you about got Machiavelli, Kellie."

"I can't blame him, that's what everyone does. Right?"

"You'd make a great politician, but I don't think everyone—"

"I can't blame him, but I'm not going to let him kill me either. I invited some girlfriends over for a sleepover and told them to bring their boyfriends. That protects me tonight, but I can't do that forever. Eventually, I'll be alone. That insurance policy is my death warrant,

and Sam is about to have it served... unless." Kellie moved closer to Robert. "Robert, it's a race. They have to be killed first."

"Wait a minute, what're you saying?"

"They're at the cottage for their alibi. But it's also a good place where they can be killed."

"Kellie, I can't believe you're thinking this. Call the police."

"And tell them what? My suspicions? There's no evidence. And I've already got a reputation as someone whose mental. They wouldn't believe me. Besides, Sam has connections all over the place. I can't risk it getting back to him that I found out what he's up to."

"I can't be a part of this."

"You didn't protect me when Travis raped me. You didn't avenge me. You need to do something now."

"When that damn Travis raped you? Travis didn't rape you. You made the whole thing up."

Kellie slapped him. "We talked about that. I thought you believed me. You said you were sorry I was raped. Are you taking that back?"

Robert rubbed his cheek. He'd never been slapped before, and it stung like hell. Tears formed in his eyes. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. "You're still talking to him."

Kellie glared at Robert. "You raped me, and I'm still talking to you."

"It wasn't like that."

"It was exactly like that."

"Kellie, we were playing a game, another one of your games, the Burglar Game."

"That wasn't a game."

"Oh. OK." Robert threw up his arms. "Mia culpa, mia culpa, mia maxima—"



"So go and sin no more. But you still owe me.

"You fucked your old girlfriend, Arianna.

"You fucked my best friend, Sydney.

"You fucked my mother.

"And now you've fucked me.

"You like to sit back and watch everyone and judge them. You never do anything. You couldn't even commit suicide. You're a loser. You said you'd kill for me."

"That was part of a game — the 'Night Angel' game."

"You promised."

"Kellie, that was in a moment of passion."

"People shouldn't say something they don't mean."

And what about you? You told me you didn't know Sydney, and now you just said she's your best friend?

Kellie turned and went to the door. Robert guessed she was leaving. Instead, she stood and gazed out its window. A small bird flew down onto the patio, picked at something, then saw it was being watched and flew off. "Aren't I worthy of being loved?" Kellie's fingers traced tiny circles around the window frame. "Can't someone love me?"

"Kellie, I'm sorry. I'm just struggling to get my head around this."

"We're two lost souls, Robert. In one way or another, our parents left us. No one wants us."

"This is crazy. You tell me Sam and your mother are about to kill you. That it might even be this weekend. That you can't go to the police for—"

"We only have each other."

"—That you want me to help you kill them."

Kellie turned and walked up to Robert. "No, not help me kill them. I'd be a suspect for sure. You. You have to kill them. My friends will be my alibi. They and their boyfriends. They'll be able to say I was home all night. I'll invite Travis."

"Travis? Why him?"

"Because he'll be more than happy to testify that he kept me in bed squealing all night."



Robert's world was unraveling like a roll of toilet paper. "I could be a suspect too."

"You stay here and fix us dinner and be the bartender, then go do it after everyone goes to bed. In the morning, make us breakfast. It will look like you were around all night. If anyone ever asks, just say you went to your place after dinner and stayed there all night."

Robert was looking down and didn't respond.

"Did you hear me? If anyone asks you, say you were at your house all night. Understand?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to say?"

"That I was home all night."

"Robert, when this is finished, you'll stay here, free, you can travel, paint, do nothing."

"I don't care about

any of that."

"You'll live with me, Robert. At night we'll drink wine, and watch silly T.V. shows, and make love, and in the mornings you'll wake up in my arms. Freedom is not a very admirable accomplishment when

it has left you adrift. Let it go. Let it go, Robert. I'm your lifeline. Take hold of me. Love me, and I'll be your lifetime playmate.

"Robert, there's a terrible thing coming for me. You can stop it. I'm afraid, Robert."

Kellie took Robert's hands and placed them over her heart, pressing them into the softness of her breasts. "Robert, rescue me." He had wanted to capture souls in his paintings, and now she took his.

"Kellie..."



She looked up at him. "Do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"How much?"

"I'd do anything for you. I'd die for you."

"But will you kill for me?"

Chapter 27. Murder

Scene 1. The Sea Rushes In



He could no more stand against her than as against an ocean wave rushing to shore. She washed his sense of who he was from underneath his feet, pushed him over, and pulled him out to sea. Janie, the Burglar, the Night Angel — the

dreams were now in control, and as in a dream, Robert heard Kellie's voice instructing him what to do.

"Take Willow west to where it hits 294. Then go south to the Jane Addams."

"Why can't I take 294 north? Isn't that faster?"

"You'll get lost. Go the way we went this summer. Just follow my directions, and it will be OK. Take your cell phone with you in case you have any questions."

Traffic was light through the northern Chicago neighborhoods. Only bars were open this close to midnight. The bar where he and Manny met was a couple miles south of here. I wonder if Manny's there now? What would he say about this? *Hey, Kid, would this make a great story or what?*

What. The thought struck Robert, making his heart hurt. What about this? It was better not to think about the "What." "Will you kill

for me?" He had not answered her. Not directly. But here he was, late at night, driving to his rendezvous with the Gallos. What the Hell am I doing? This is crazy.

No. This is murder.

"Why" floated somewhere near the top of his head. Kellie's life was at stake. That was the "Why." She had told him so. Can you believe it? Her parents were going to kill her. *How wretched a child for her parents to have her executed.* "Why" justified the "What," the cause célèbre. He is the knight in shining armor rescuing his damsel. At the moment, "Why" seemed the least important.

"How" is what he focused on. How to dress. "Be sure and wear dark clothing." How to get in his Jeep, how to start it, how to get to the toll road. "How" was not so bad. Just follow the "How," step-by-step. The routine, the mundane, the "How" — that is where sanity lay.

"Take the Tollroad like we did this summer."

The Tollroad rushed him north, the City and suburbs fell behind him. For a while, he could see the lights in his rearview mirror, then all was dark.

He focused on the "How." How to follow the markings on the road his headlights illuminated. How to stop and pay at a toll booth. Did he look suspicious? How to stay on the road and not veer into the pillars of an overpass. "What" would have taken him smashing into one. "How" got him into Wisconsin.

He drove past distant farmhouses, dark except for a porch light and a light on the barn showing their whereabouts. People tucked in their beds. A house nearer, a light still on. Getting ready for bed? Getting up for work already? — This was farmland, after all. Going to the bathroom? Oh, to be doing the simple things.

"I'm sorry," Kellie had said as he was leaving. Sorry for what? He wondered.

We're all sorry. Sorry for what we've done. Sorry as we helplessly watch the effect of our actions reverberate through our lives, creating hurt we did not intend. Sorry as a boy shoots his BB gun and wishes he could call the pellet back before it strikes the sparrow. And sorry, yes, sorry for what we are about to do.

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Arianna had been with him at his father's funeral. She sat next to him during the church service and stood with her arm around his at the gravesite. A woman was standing on the other side of the casket. She must have glanced at him.



"Who's that?" Arianna whispered.

"That's my mother."

After the Priest blessed the dead, family and friends came to him to express their condolences — his mother was not one of them. He saw Arianna had slipped away and was talking with her. Later, on the way to the car, he asked why she did that.

"She's your mother. I wanted to make her feel welcomed."

"You shouldn't have. She's not welcomed."

"I invited her to the house for the get-together."

"You had no right to do that. Why didn't you check with me first?"

"I'm sorry. It seemed like the polite thing to do."

"You don't know what you're doing."

"Well, anyway, she declined."

"You need to stay out of my business."

It was the couple's first fight.

At the house, Arianna was the perfect hostess. She introduced herself to the people who had gathered there, brought around trays of sandwiches and snacks, and made sure everyone found the bar.

After everyone left, they lay on his bed. Before, his father had always been in the house. Now, it was just the two of them. He never felt more exhausted — or alone. They didn't make love that night. He fell asleep with Arianna holding him in her arms.

It ended badly between them.

He. He had ended it badly.

His father's finances had not been good. He had to sell the house and furnishings.

Three months, it didn't take long. The last day, after it was done, the final bits and pieces moved out or thrown away, he stood in the vacant house. He had told Arianna he was going to clean up the place before the buyers took over in the morning. Arianna offered to help, but he told her he would handle it himself. The house didn't need cleaning. He just needed to be alone. It was the only home he could remember, and he wanted to say goodbye.

Here was where he grew up. In this dining room is where the picture had been taken — the Christmas one, when the three of them were still together, and his ears were red from the excitement.

Over there, in the corner, is where the rocking chair had sat. His mother would take it out onto the patio and rock him in that chair when they looked at the stars. He had it taken to a landfill.

Here was his bedroom. The furniture had stayed the same through the years, only the decorations changed as he grew up.

Posters of bunny rabbits and unicorns gave way to Star Wars and Spider Man, which gave way to Einstein, Sagan, and the Universe.

There is where his father sat, watching television, drinking his life away.

And on that porch, right over there, the image that would be forever in his mind, is where he had found his father — that was his father's spot.

He had found a photo album his mother had put together. It showed her as a baby, her childhood, her going to school, friends, and family, then dating and marriage to his father, then his birth. She had labeled each photo with where, when, and who was in it. A pictorial history of his mother, who she was, her dreams, all she hoped to be. It was her gift to him. He threw it in the dumpster.

He left the house with nothing more than what he could pack in his Jeep. He realized he had nowhere to stay and nowhere to go. Nowhere was just fine and dandy. Nowhere expected nothing from him. Nowhere was what he wanted. Nowhere was a cocoon he could crawl into and hide.



He met Arianna at the bandstand in the park. They sat quietly for a while. He was rubbing his thumb and forefinger together like they were in a circular death-race with each other. Arianna saw and was distressed.

“Oh, please. I don’t understand. Do you have to go?”

Tears formed in her eyes. “Why can’t I go with you?”

He became angry. He didn’t look at her.

“Will you call me?”

“I’ll call you.”

And her lip. That damn trembling lip.

Then he walked away.

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Robert rolled down the window of his Jeep, put his head out to feel the wind's blast, and yelled. "Arianna." Cried out the window into the dark Wisconsin countryside, "I'm sorry." Screamed into the night until his throat was as raw as his soul, "Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me."

"Then turn onto Interstate 43."

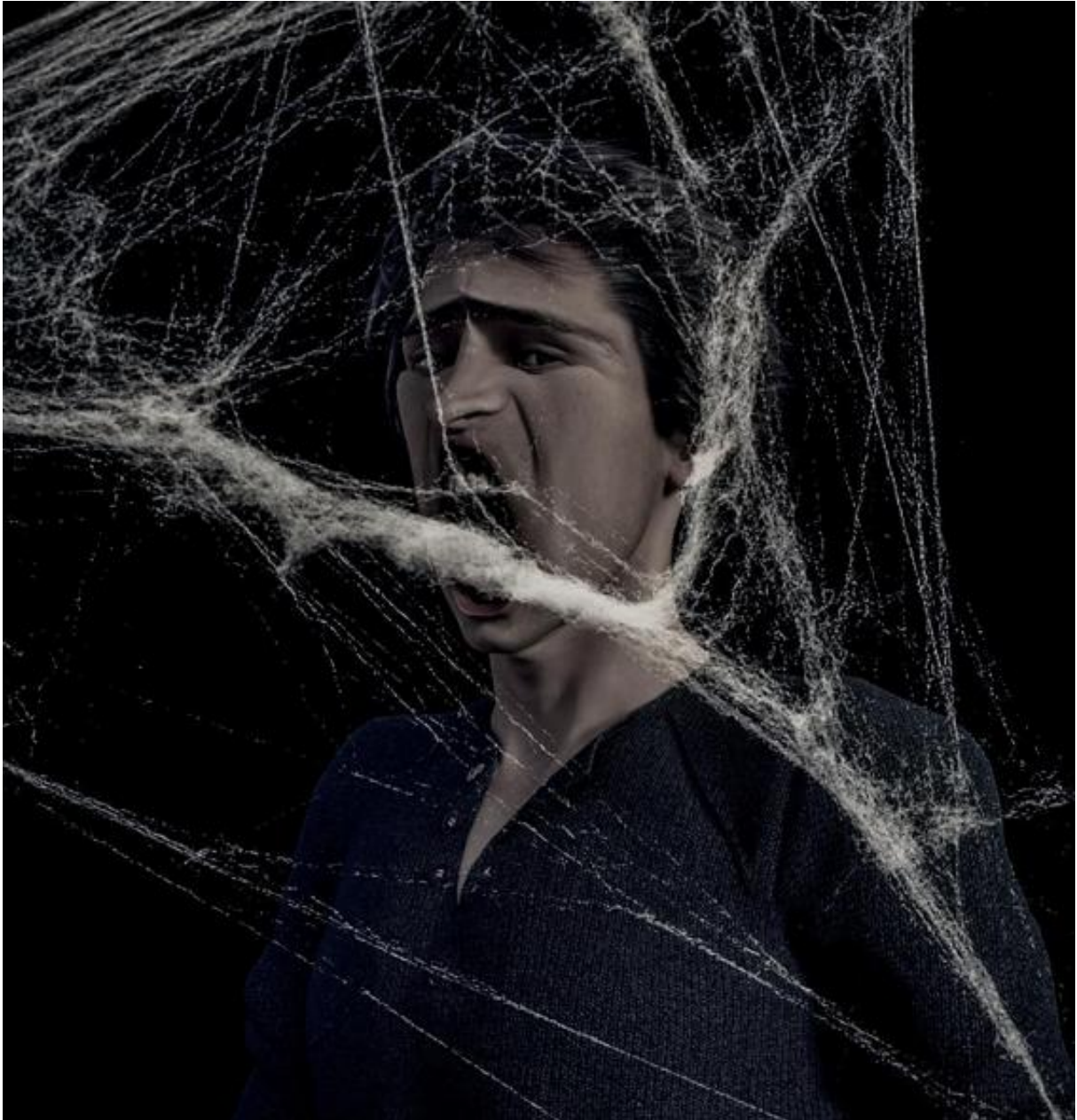
The exit sign pointed to Milwaukee. Robert thought maybe he would like to go to Milwaukee, but he followed Kellie's instructions instead. A turnoff from the Interstate onto a state highway, then a county road.

"Watch out for the Meteorite."

The pull-off area appeared in his headlights. He parked at the same place as this summer.

The woods were black in front of him. He edged toward where he hoped the path began and stumbled on a rock, fell, and caught himself with his right arm. His hand hit the ground, scraping and spraining his wrist.

It was during the day when he and Kellie had come here. The path was visible then, now the dark forest concealed it.



He jumped as a spider's web crackled across his face, instinctively flaying at it, trying to pull the sticky thing off. Do spiders stay attached to their webs? He thought of something he had read about spiders. If they ate human flesh, they would devour the human race within a year. Robert stared into the black forest, and the unblinking eyes of a spider eating stared back.

"How" had gotten him here, but "How" was gone — the forest ate it. "Where" was everything and everywhere. "Where" was this hostile, dark forest. "Where" was the scurrying and slithering creatures

frantically hunting on its floor, finding something to kill tonight would be their only chance to eat. "Where" was the stagnant, heavy air that covered him in sweat, saturated his lungs, making even breathing difficult. "Where" was the clamor of the crickets, katydids, and mosquitoes that shrouded all other sounds. "Where" was the rocks, stumps, and bushes that reached out and tripped him.

"God answers prayer."

Oh, does He now? Then take away this burden.

"God answers prayer."

So tell me true, is there no child that dies despite its mother's fervent prayer it live? Is there no grandmother who endures a long, painful death who prays to be taken peacefully home?

"God answers prayer."

Whose prayer? The gazelle prays to outrun the lion to save the fetus in its womb. The lion prays to catch the gazelle to feed its starving cubs.

And the hot wind blows and passes over, and the Earth sighs and turns another day.

This "Where" is not where Robert wanted to be. In the summer, he and Kellie climbed this ancient hill. The hill formed by the Laurentide Ice Sheet. He told the uninterested Kellie about the animals that had roamed here, lived here, and are no more.

The great beasts of the ice age had hunted and killed here, as had the creatures before them and the creatures after them. And so it has always been in this terrible slaughter-house of survival — the hunter and the hunted. Kill or be killed. Eat or be eaten. And so it shall always be. The hunters are hunted; the killers are killed; those that eat are eaten. Forever and forever, World without end. Amen.

Legs aching, lungs wheezing, heart thumping in his head.

Hunted-Robert climbed the hill, and the primeval beasts trailed after him.

Thou shall not commit adultery.

Oh, shit, now that one's a problem for you.

But the Commandment said nothing against immorality. There isn't any Commandment against immorality. Except for that one slip-up, and except for now, he would have been OK. Except. Except Christ didn't make that any easier.

But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Just looking? How did they expect you to follow that one? I've been looking since I was thirteen. We are always in sin.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned, I looked with lust on a young girl."

"Very well, my son. For your penance, say one rosary and go and sin no more."

When leaving the church, a girl in a short skirt was coming in.

"Agh" — Run back in to make another confession.



When leaving the confessional, the girl was kneeling, saying her prayers, her legs, she's removed her shoes, her bare feet...

"Agh" — Run back in for another confession.

Did he ever leave the church?

No, he never left the church. And his fate is still unlearned. —
The tune played through his mind.

Robert chuckled. He held his hand against his mouth as more snorts escaped. "He never got out." Robert doubled over in laughter, holding it in with both hands over his mouth. It's not that funny. His breath blasted through his closed fingers. He sank to the ground on

his knees, bent over in muffled hysterical laughter. Tears ran down his cheeks, snot out his nose. His body shaking in its struggle to contain itself. It just plain hurt. Stop it. Stop it. Someone will hear. I'll be found out. He pounded his sprained fist against the forest floor.

Get serious.

If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee.

He stopped laughing.

One-eyed-Robert climbed the hill, and his sins bore with him.

Sweat ran down his face, mosquitoes bit him, he felt cold and clammy. Fear tightened his stomach. He was about to throw-up. Tree stumps glared at him in the moonlight — witnesses to the sin he was about to commit. A killer comes this way, they say.



Two blue-eyed angels will come to your grave and ask three questions. If you answer correctly, they will carry you in their arms to Heaven. Answer wrong, and they will drag you into Hell.



What are the answers?

Depends.

Depends can get you Hell. What are the answers?

Depends. Depends on what you are:

For a Jew: G-d, Torah, Moses.

For a Christian: Lord, New Testament, Jesus.

For a Muslim: Allah, Koran, Mohammed.

Take your pick, but probably don't mix and match.

What if you're none of the above?

Then be lucky.

Lucky-Robert climbed the hill, and the angels went after him.

He climbed the hill, the beasts, his sins, and the death angels pacing him. Don't you know who I am? he asked. Yes, we know you. Your mother left you, and your father killed himself. Is that who you are? Yes, that's who I am.

Forsaken-Robert reached the cottage door, crossed himself, and hoped to die.

Scene 2. How Do You Kill Someone with a Knife

Robert shivered when he entered the cottage, the air conditioning was turned on full. He had been sweating in the dank, humid forest, now his wet shirt stole the heat from him. His footsteps echoed as he made his way through the house. It was dark, only a little moonlight filtered through the windows. His shoes squeaked as he felt his way across the room. He thudded into a table, the sound ricocheting throughout the cottage. He stopped to hear if he had woken anyone. All was quiet except for his own breathing and the beating of his heart in his head.

He continued to the kitchen. *Use the one you used this summer to cut the limes.* He remembered where the drawer was and opened it. It was too dark to see inside. Robert fumbled around, cringing as his sprained hand bumped into the objects inside. The sounds of his rummaging were enough to waken Limestone from the shadows and send the beast tearing for his throat. Tears in his eyes. There's no knife. How can I do this?

You can't. Give it up.

I can't find the knife she wants me to use.

Time to leave.

Failure was all about him.

No. He felt for and picked up a large one.

Robert remembered how to get to the master bedroom. Kellie had been careful to show him the way. He dreaded the thought. — It was at the top of the dark stairs.

To the top, to the top, to the top, top, top, to the top, to the top, to the top, top—

—Sam was at the top.

The stairs creaked with each step he took, sounding like nails being pulled out of wood planks. Then a thump, thump, thump from the top of the stairs. He looked up and saw the dark form of Limestone, risen from the grave to defend his old master, no doubt, no doubt. Robert caught his breath. The thing did not move. You'll

take me back to the grave with you, no doubt, no doubt, no doubt. Robert took a step, the stair creaked, and the form turned into a chair.

He entered the room. Moonlight was streaming in, washing the furniture a pale blue and leaving dark shadows in the corners. He was breathing hard.

He saw them and held his breath. Their only movement was the slow, steady inhaling and exhaling as of deep sleep. Soon it would be over.



He went to the bed, looked at them for a moment, then raised his knife. Kellie had directed everything, what to wear, how to get to the cottage, the code for the alarm, even the knife to use. But she had not told him about this. She had not told him how to kill someone with that knife. Robert lowered his arm.

Do you stab at them? What if that doesn't work right away? How many times do you have to keep at it, keep sticking them until they give it up? How about slitting their throats? Is that faster? Could he pull back the cover, expose Sam's neck, and make the slash? Would Sam wake up and fight him? Sam was strong. Sam could take the knife from him.

He was watching himself from the ceiling. So this is what murder looks like.

“How” had gone away. Every bit of what he was about to do broke over him. There was no more time.

“When” is here.

Robert brought up the knife.

Elaine rolled over. Robert startled. Shit. Her right arm dropped onto Sam’s chest, patted him a couple of times, then she rolled back, her body settling into the bed, back into the deep sleep that was to be her last. He was not sure, but Sam may have nudged a little closer to his wife. Sam’s breathing was still deep.

Robert had enough reason to be angry with Gallo. He certainly detested the man. But what he needed was more than anger, an emotion he could sometimes control — he had even used at times. He had anger to acquiesce to Kellie’s plan. Yes. Anger to drive through the dark night and climb the hill to the cottage. Yes. Anger to take a knife to Gallo’s bed. Yes. Anger to murder—

No. Anger was not enough. It took more than anger, even more than hatred. It took rage. Anger, hate, then rage. Robert sought for that, but it was not in him.



He turned to leave and saw himself in the mirror on the dresser. His image was pale in the moonlight. Who am I? he asked the mirror. The mirror stared back. It did not answer. It only knew it was not looking at a murderer.

Robert left the room and the house. Once outside, the tension inside him released. His stomach wrenched, he bent over, bile came up his throat, filled his sinuses, and burned the top of his brain, his eyes watered, he heaved, then heaved again, and again. Nothing came out. He hadn't eaten for two days, not since (an eternity ago) Kellie played the burglar game and then accused him of rape. Robert stood up, wiped the drool from his mouth, and fled, stumbling and stumbling down the path and to his car.

Kellie had instructed him how to get rid of the knife. Robert stopped on a bridge near the meteorite and flung it into a stream.

Back at his house, hot and sweaty, he took a shower then collapsed exhausted onto his bed.

He wanted to sleep, make this night go away, everything looks better in the morning. Right? That wasn't going to happen. What will Kellie think? How to explain to her he could not murder her parents, that Sam and Elaine were still alive? How to comfort her? Her life, thanks to him, was now still in danger.

Kellie was right. He is a loser.

Scene 3. Read Him His Rights

The sun burning through his bedroom window woke him. Groggily, Robert threw water on his face, rubbed the soreness from his legs, touched at the scratches on his arms from the thorns that had stuck him on his floundering flight down the hill. His right wrist was sore from when he had fallen. He did not rush. There was no need to hurry now, no need for an alibi. — And he was stalling — trying to think how he would tell Kellie that Sam and Elaine were not dead.

It was ten in the morning when he left the carriage house and walked over to the mansion. There had been a plan, an integral part of the step-by-step “How.” “Stay here and serve us food and drinks.” Kellie had told him. “After everyone goes upstairs, you leave and go do it. Be back here early to clean up and fix us breakfast.”

“How early?” Robert had asked. He needed concrete, specific steps — his muddled mind had been in no condition to think for itself.

“They’ll all be sleeping late after screwing half the night, but be back here by nine just to be safe.” Fortunately, Kellie hadn’t included herself in the “screwing half the night” part. He didn’t want to think about that.

Robert had the coffee made and was frying bacon when Kellie’s two girlfriends came into the kitchen. Robert looked up, “Morning. Kellie asked me to help fix breakfast. Do you want anything?”

“Sure, whatever you’re making.”

“How about the guys?”

“They left early,” one of the girls said. “Gone fishing,” the other added. They both looked at each other, and almost in unison, laughed, “I guess we didn’t keep them busy enough last night.”

Gone fishing was fine with Robert. He didn’t want to see any boyfriends, “Did Travis go with them?”

“Haven’t seen him,” they giggled. “Maybe he’s still busy with Kellie.”

The girls took their coffee and sat at the kitchen table. They talked as if Robert was not there; he was the hired help, just part of the furniture.

Travis came down. "Hey Travis, you look all worn out," one girl quipped. The other joined in. "Did you have a long, hard night?" Both girls giggled. Travis smirked, pointed his finger at them, and fired his pretend gun. He left, ignoring the furniture. That was OK with Robert. The jerk was not someone he was ready to deal with.



A few minutes later, Kellie came down and walked over to the kitchen counter, "Oh, there's my phone. I must have left it here last night."

"Hey, sleepyhead," one girl said. "You look exhausted." She looked at the door Travis had just gone out. "Busy night?" More giggling.

Kellie looked at the girl. "Needed a shower."

Even more giggling.

Kellie took a cup of coffee that Robert had poured for her and then looked up at him. "So, how'd it go?" she asked as casually as if she was asking if he remembered to put cream in the coffee. She didn't wait for an answer but strolled over to the kitchen table and sat down with her

girlfriends. They leaned their heads together — a gaggle of giggling girls.

Robert hoped they kept gagging for a while. He needed time to figure out how to tell Kellie he had failed. He had to live with that, but Kellie couldn't. With her parents alive, her life was at risk. He wondered how it might happen. It could be simple. A knock on the door, a man standing there, a gun. Then bang.

No, not that. Some strange man at the door just shoots her? The police would never let that one go. Robert sucked in his breath as if he was about to leap from a great height. I'm the murderer. The man at the door will shoot her and make it look like I did it. Then shoot me and make it look like I killed myself. A lover's quarrel — That's why I'm here.

There was a knock on the door.

"Oh, Robert," Kellie asked, "will you get that?"

Robert looked through the entryway window. Two figures were standing there. There was a knock again. He opened the door to a man and a woman.

"I'm Detective Brandt," the man said, "with Cook County Sheriff's Department, this is Detective Goodwin from Walworth County



in Wisconsin. Are you Robert Doran?"

"Yes."

"We'd like to ask you some questions."

Kellie walked up, "I'm Kellie. This is my house. What's going on?"

Goodwin looked at Kellie. "You're Kellie Heffernan?"

"Yes."

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah."

"Have you been hurt or injured in any way?"

"No, I'm fine. What's going on?"

Goodwin asked questions, she didn't answer them. "Is there someplace we can talk a little more privately?"

"Sure, back in the dining room."

"Is there anyone else in the house?"

"There's a couple of my girlfriends."

Goodwin turned to a uniformed police officer standing behind her. Robert hadn't noticed him before. "Officer, would you stay with Mr. Doran while I talk with Ms. Heffernan?" It was a question that sounded like an order. "Detective Brandt, would you meet with the girlfriends?" That sounded less like an order. "Mr. Doran, would you have a seat over there until we can get back to you?" That was an order.

"What's going on?" Robert asked.

"I said sit down, we'll get back to you."



Robert could see into the dining room. Detective Goodwin was sitting, facing Kellie. He couldn't hear what was being said. Goodwin reached out and took Kellie's hand. After a moment, Robert saw Kellie bend over, her hands go to her face, her shoulders shake, he heard sobbing.

Robert could hear the murmur of voices from Brandt talking to the two girlfriends in the kitchen. Sometimes one or both said something. Robert couldn't make out what. Then he saw Kellie, a little more collected, looking at Goodwin and nodding her head.

Kellie's girlfriends went over to her. They hugged her and sobbed, which got Kellie crying again. Robert heard one say, "They told us we couldn't stay too long. We'll get going and check back later." The other turned around while leaving, "Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you."

After the girlfriends left, Detectives Goodwin and Brandt joined with the uniformed officer who had never left Robert's side. The three circled Robert.

Goodwin was standing on Robert's right. She seemed to be the one in charge. He turned to her. "Please, can you tell me what's going on? What happened?"

"Where were you last night?" Goodwin asked.

"I don't know."

Brandt stepped closer to Robert. "You don't know where you were last night?"

"No. I mean... what time?"

"Let's try this again," Goodwin said. "Where were you last night?"



Robert looked toward the dining room. Kellie was staring at him.

"I was over here for a while. Kellie was having a party. I was helping fix food and stuff."

"Did you stay here all night?"

"I went home about ten."

"What did you do then?"

"Went to bed."

"Then what?"

"Well, I got up about nine. Kellie had wanted me to help fix breakfast for everyone. So I came over here and started it. That's

what I was doing when you got here.”

“Did you leave your house last night?” Brandt asked.

“No, like I told you. I was home all night.”



“Well, we’ll need to have you come down to the station for some additional questioning. Officer, would you handcuff Mr. Doran?” Another order.

“You’re handcuffing me?”

“Standard procedure.”

Robert looked for Kellie, but the dining room was empty, for she had gone.

While he was unceremoniously led out the door, Robert turned to Goodwin. “What happened?”

“Sam and Elaine Gallo have been found dead. Someone murdered them.

Officer, would you read Mr. Doran his rights?”

Chapter 28. Robert Accused

“Pale Mouse Gray” for the metal chairs and tabletop, the darker “Mouse Gray” for the table’s frame.



Robert was being held in a detention center in Chicago, pending extradition to Wisconsin. He had refused the services of an attorney, maintaining he didn’t need one since he hadn’t done anything wrong. He was in a small conference room, his back to the only door.

Even the walls are... Robert tried to think. Of the several color schemes he had studied in college, he liked Ridgway's the best. Instead of symbols or numbers to represent combinations of color features (hue, tone, light, shade), Ridgway used natural words to name his colors. Words for zoologists and botanists, naturalists — those in the field to describe their observations.

Probably "Pallid Quaker Drab" for the wall, Robert decided, although perhaps that was too dark of a color.

He had spent entire nights laying on his bed studying Ridgway's book, memorizing the colors. The intriguing names: "Courage Green," "Gobelin Blue," "Spinel Red," how did he come up with those? Although Ridgway warned of the impossibility of any coloring scheme being able to capture every nuance of color — that the colored swatch of orange, lemon, or chestnut in his color Plates may not precisely match the orange, lemon, or chestnut someone was holding in their hand. Still, there was at least somewhere, one such thing that was that orange, that lemon, or that chestnut. Robert found comfort in that.

Other color systems were more exacting. For his computer drawing class, they used RGB — Red, Green, Blue. They could give each color a value from 0 to 255, 0 being the lack of that color, and 255 the most of it. The combinations as the numbers moved around produce a dazzling array of colors — 16,777,216, to be exact. All of each of the three colors, "255", make pure white. The lack of color, "0", for each, produces black. If all three values are close, they create a shade of gray — It turns out that sameness produces gray. None of Ridgway's 1,115 named colors was just named "Gray." But today, Robert thought, "Just Gray" seemed about right.

He was wearing, he decided, a "Mikado Orange" jumpsuit, and slippers, made of paper, near the same color. If he had tried to run, they would fall off. The slippers forced him to shuffle, even just trying to get from one place to another. The guards, social workers, attorneys, everyone from the outside wore uniforms, street clothes, coverings that protected them — shoes.

In his college art classes, they would have a model stand in the center, wearing only a sheet, they would direct him or her to drop the sheet, to stand naked before the artists, armed with their brushes,

palettes, and pigments, who would poke, pry, and peel away the layers; observing and capturing the model's soul. Then Robert was the observer. Now, he was the observed, exposed, and vulnerable. Only the jumpsuit covered his nakedness.

The two Detectives came in.

"Hello, Mr. Doran. You may remember, I'm Detective Goodwin, and this is Detective Brandt. We met with you a few days ago."

"Yeah. Hi. I remember."

"We wanted to get together with you today to try to clear up a few questions we have. Is that OK with you?"

"Sure."

Detective Goodwin put a briefcase on the table and sat down across from Robert. Detective Brandt stood behind and to Robert's left.

Goodwin was wearing a dark blue blazer over a white blouse. Robert could see Brandt was wearing black pants and black, polished shoes.

Goodwin started, "Do you recall we advised you of your rights when we first met?"

"Yes."

"And so you know you have the right to an attorney?"

"Yes."

"You also know you don't have to answer any of our questions."

"Yes, I know that. I didn't do anything. I just want to get this cleared up."

"Well, that's what we want too. So, are you willing to talk to us now?"

"Sure."

Brandt interjected. "Give us the right answers and we can let you go."

"But," Goodwin looked irritatingly at Brandt, "remember, anything you say can be held against you."

"OK."

"If at any time you want to stop this interview, it will end. Do you understand?"

"Yes."



"Mr. Doran... Is it alright if I call you by your first name?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"How do you like to be called... Bob?"

"Robert. I like to be called Robert."

"OK, Robert, there's just a few things Detective Brandt and I are struggling to clear up. Will you help us with that?"

"Sure."

"Well, one of the things troubling us is that after you were brought down here, we got a search warrant for where you live."

"OK."

"We found..." Goodwin reached into her briefcase, "Here's a picture of it. A shirt, that looks like it's got quite a bit of blood on it. You see that?"

"Yeah. A lot of blood."

"Yes, you're right, a lot of blood."

"You found that at my place?"

"In the trash can behind where you live. Do you have any thoughts on how that might have gotten there?"

"No. Someone must have put their shirt in there."

"Well, the shirt has a name tag on it. Your name. It's your shirt."

Brandt leaned over, and Robert smelled astringent after-shave lotion of allspice, cinnamon, and orange like his father had used.

"So, how do you explain your bloody shirt being in your dumpster?"

"I don't know."

"Well, another thing," Goodwin continued, "that has some concern here, are skin fragments we found in your shower. That and some hair — long hair, probably from a woman's head, but also some pubic."

"You checked my shower?"

"There was a lot of blood at the scene. Whoever did that would have gotten blood on themselves. So, he would want to shower to get that off. We find even where a crime is not so physical, a theft, for instance, the person committing the crime takes a shower or does something to clean themselves off. I guess trying to wash the sin away. Makes them feel better."

Brandt thumped the back of Robert's head. "Coming clean can make you feel better. Why don't you do that?"

Robert turned his head and glanced at Brandt. "OK, I understand where this is going. Good-cop, bad-cop. I've seen the movie."

Brandt leaned closer to Robert, his mouth an inch from Robert's ear, close enough that the recording equipment in the room would not pick up anything more than growling. He put his arm on the back of Robert's chair, forcing Robert to lean forward. "That's right, and I'm the bad cop, Asshole. You're still in Chicago. This is my place." Brandt's arm was hard against the back of Robert's neck. He pushed Robert further forward. "You don't think I can't beat the crap out of



you? You don't think I have favors owed me here? You don't think I can't get to you any time I want?"

Goodwin jumped in. "That's enough. This is my case, and he's my prisoner. That's not how I do things."

Brandt stood up. "He's not your prisoner until you get him back to Wisconsin. Till then, he's mine."

Goodwin leaned forward. "Robert, lets you and I try to clear this up."

"But I didn't do anything. Why do you assume I did it? It could have just been a break-in."

"Probably not. Nothing was taken, nothing disturbed, except in the Gallos' bedroom. And the security system was too good for any ordinary burglar."

"Well, I understand Sam was connected. What about the Chicago mob?"

"They probably could have gotten through the alarm system, but I don't think it was a professional job." Goodwin looked at Brandt, "Do you have anything on that?"

"No one's unhappy Gallo is dead, but there's no word out in the street that the mob was involved."

Goodwin looked back at Robert. "When we last met, you told us you were home alone all night."

Robert looked down at the table. He was rubbing his finger and thumb against each other. "Well, I was at Kell... can I call her Kellie?"

"Sure, first names are fine."

"I was at Kellie's helping out with a party she was having. Then I went to bed and stayed there until the next morning when I went back over to fix breakfast for everyone."

"We've talked to everyone who was there that night. No one remembers you," Brandt said. "You're a pretty forgettable guy."

"Well, a couple of the girls remember you were there in the morning," Goodwin added. "Those were the two that were there when we arrived. So, when did you leave Kellie's that night?"

"About nine."

"And when did you go back there?"

"About nine the next morning... No. Wait. Maybe closer to ten."

"And so, from 9:00 pm to 10:00 am you were at your place?"

Robert looked down at his right hand. His index finger and thumb were frenziedly attacking each other. "Yeah."

"So, a problem we have is that someone has identified you as being near the scene of the crime around midnight."

“Who was that?”

“Well, let’s see.” Goodwin took some papers out of her briefcase and shuffled through them, then found what she was looking for.

“Johnston, Alfred Johnston.”

“Old man Johnston?”

“You know him?”

“No, but Kellie told me about him. He had it in for Sam. You need to look at him for this.”

Brandt rapped his knuckles on Robert’s left hand. “Right now, we’re looking at you.”

“You ever meet him?” Goodwin asked.

Robert pulled his hands into his lap. “No.”

“Can you explain how he was able to describe you to our dispatcher when he called in?”

“No, but don’t you think it’s a little strange he’d be out there at midnight?”

Goodwin looked at Robert. “Generally, this is where we ask you questions, not you ask us. But I’m going to tell you what we have so far. I’m doing that so you understand we’re being honest with you. OK?”

“OK.”

“But in return, I want you to be honest with us. OK?”

“Sure.”

“Was that a yes?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” Goodwin picked up one of the papers. “So it seems Mr. Johnston had heard noises. A car being parked in an area near his residence. He’s had some vandalism, so he went out to check on it. He saw a Jeep was parked there. Then he heard someone stumbling through the underbrush, so he followed that sound up a path that leads to the Gallo’s house. I understand you all refer to that as the ‘Cottage’?”

“Yeah, I know the cottage.”

“Johnston waited there and then spotted someone come out of the cottage. Johnston was nervous, so he hid in some bushes. He watched the person come down the path, probably no more than ten



feet from where he was hiding. Johnston then heard a car start up and drive off.

“He was concerned something had happened, so he called us. He gave a description of the person he saw leaving, and that the person was possibly driving a Jeep.

“Dispatch had a patrol car drive over there. The officer even got out and walked around the place. But nothing seemed disturbed. Later that morning, the Gallo’s housekeeper called in. She had gone up early to clean. That’s when she found the bodies.”

Goodwin put the paper on the table. "The housekeeper said Johnston's description of the person he saw coming out of the cottage, along with the Jeep, sounded like the house guest the Gallo's had." Goodwin looked up at Robert. "She said his name was Robert Doran."

"I needed to inform Kellie her parents had been murdered, and I also needed to check you out. Illinois is out of my jurisdiction, so Detective Brandt was assigned to go with me to the Gallo's residence."

Brandt put his foot on top of Robert's, the hard sole pressing down on the soft slipper. "So we go, and who answers the door? Our Christmas gift."

Goodwin looked up at Brandt. She actually managed to smile. "Yeah, Christmas came early this year."

Brandt continued. "We did a photo lineup with Johnston. He picked your photo as the person he saw leaving the cottage."

"Can you explain that?" Goodwin asked.

"He must be mistaken... or lying. You need to check him out as the murderer."

Brandt twisted his foot on Robert's like he was putting out a cigarette butt. "I suppose if you were in your bed all night, he would be wrong, wouldn't he?"

"I suppose."

Brandt moved his foot off of Robert's. "We're having the murder weapon tested. It's going to tell us who the murderer is, Robert."

"Well, we're pretty sure it's the murder weapon," Goodwin said. "We're also pretty sure it will have information on it as to who used it. DNA you know. So, could that be you, Robert?"

"No way."

"Because you were home all night?"

"Yes." "No." "I mean, because I didn't do it."

Brandt kicked Robert's foot. "Damn, you can't give a straight story."

Robert looked up at Brandt. "What are you talking about?"

Goodwin pulled some photographs out of her briefcase. "So, here's the problem we're having. Take a look at these."

"What are they?"

"They're photos from the night of the murder, from tollbooth cameras, from the toll road going up into Wisconsin."

"Why would you check out tollbooth cameras?"

"Ms. Heffernan — Kellie, mentioned you and she had gone up to the cottage this summer and took that way up. She didn't think you knew of another way."

"Kellie told you that?"

"She's pretty distraught at the death of her parents, as you can imagine, but she's trying to give us any information she has to clear this up. Anyway, look at these. See, there's a Jeep."

"Registered to you," Brandt said.

Goodwin pointed to the top right of the photograph. "And it's passing through the last toll booth, entering Wisconsin at 11:05 pm. See the timestamp?"

"Yeah."

Goodwin showed Robert another photo. "And reentering Illinois at 1:56 am. See that?"

Robert was silent.

"Look at those photographs," Brandt said. "Do you see who's driving?" Brandt leaned down and rumbled in Robert's ear, "I do."

Robert hung his head.

"Robert, Detective Brandt and I drove that route. Using the timestamps on the photos, we had time, from leaving that tollbooth, to go to the cottage, go up the path Johnston showed us, stay in the cottage twenty minutes, then come back down the path and drive back to that toll booth."

Brandt was still in Robert's ear. "You lied when you said you were tucked in your bed all night. You drove up there, you murdered the Gallos, and then you drove back down."

"Can you explain these photos?" Goodwin asked.

Robert was concentrating on his feet.

"I'm so disappointed, Robert. I thought we had a deal. I thought we would be honest with each other."

Robert turned his head to his right, away from his and Brandt's feet. Goodwin continued. "Here's another thing, Robert. Your cell

phone ping has you about a mile from the cottage. There's only one tower near there, or it could have gotten closer. Still—"



Brandt couldn't resist: "Your cell phone spent the night in Wisconsin. Are you really going to sit there and tell us you didn't?"

Robert scrunched back in his chair. "If I was there, I didn't kill them. What reason would I have to do that?"

Goodwin sat back. "We're working on that."

"We heard Sam had pissed you off with the deal you had with him," Brandt said. "He was getting a lot of the profit from your paintings. Kellie says you kept complaining about that."

“Kellie said that?”

Goodwin put her hand on her briefcase. “I think this was a crime of passion. When we executed the search warrant on your place, we found hundreds of photos you had taken of Kellie, nude — you even tied her up for some. She was your go-to model for the,” Goodwin sneered, “‘art’ you produced. You really had a thing for her.”

Brandt. “You’re a damn sick, pornographer.”

Robert. “She was fine with being my model.”

Goodwin. “That’s not what Kellie says. She was extremely embarrassed by it all. She said you and Gallo forced her to do it.”

Brandt. “I think you were so hooked on Gallo’s daughter when Gallo threatened to stop you from using her, you killed him.”

Robert. “He wasn’t about to stop us. I was the photographer. She was the model. He made money off the photos. He wasn’t going to end that. Where did you hear he was?”

Goodwin. “Kellie said Sam was about to throw you out.”

Robert. “No, we had a good understanding.”

“We’ve been doing as much background on you as we can,” Goodwin said. “We were wondering why you came to Chicago in the first place. Kellie said we should talk to a Sydney Stewart.”

“Yeah. She invited me to come. I think we hit it off. It just didn’t work out.”

“Well, we took her statement.” Goodwin pulled a paper out of her briefcase. “It says here. ‘I was interviewing Bob Doran for a magazine I worked for. Doran was living and working in North Platte, Nebraska. He came on to me and made unwelcome advances. He later showed up uninvited at my place in Chicago. A few months later, I was at a party and saw Doran. Thank God, I don’t think he noticed me. I do not want to have anything to do with him. I’m afraid of him. When I first spotted him at the party I suspected he was stalking me.’”

Brandt looked at Goodwin. “I think it was he got caught up in a love triangle.”

Robert. “What?”

Brandt. “You have a thing for Kellie while you’re having an affair with her mother. What was it? You afraid Gallo would find out?”

Robert. "How do you know about Mrs. Gallo?"

Goodwin. "Did you know the place had surveillance cameras?"

Robert. "Yeah, those."

Brandt. "Yeah, Gallo needed to be careful. He had security systems in there."

Goodwin. "The cameras record onto tape. The tape self-erases every ten days to save space. But any recording can be saved permanently if someone wants that. Someone wanted to save these. Here's some photos from the tape."

Brandt. "There's a week's worth there. While Gallo is gone with Kellie trying to help her through some problems she's having, you're having an affair with his wife."

Goodwin. "Looks like sometimes twice a day."

Brandt. "Like Mrs. Robinson."

Robert. "Mrs. who?"

Brandt. "The affair may explain the pubic hair, but unless you had some really interesting sex, that doesn't explain why we found pieces of her skin in your shower."

Goodwin leaned toward Robert. "What you did is understandable. You're depressed. You're down on yourself. People do dumb things when they're like that. You got caught up in some kind of love triangle. Gallo was about to take Kellie away from you. Now's the time to be honest with us. You'll feel better if you just tell us what happened."

"I wasn't depressed."

Goodwin pulled a photograph out of her briefcase and put it on the desk. "Well, here's another surveillance photo. One of you sitting in the Gazebo with a gun to your head."

Brandt leaned over and slid the photograph toward Robert. "Good thing you were trying to kill yourself instead of jerking off, or this would be really embarrassing."

Goodwin reached into her briefcase. "Let me show you these photos."

"Of what?"

"The Gallos."

Robert turned his head.



Goodwin slapped the table. Robert jerked up as if she had slapped his face.

“Look at these.”

One-by-one Goodwin showed Robert the photos.

“It’s not just that the killer used a knife — it’s how he did it.”

“Multiple stab wounds.”

“Aggressive, over and over.”

“Slashing.”

Robert turned his head.

Goodwin, forcefully, “Look at them... the mutilation, even of Elaine Gallo.

“Look at the gouge marks on her right arm,” Brandt remarked.
“Probably from fingernails. It looks like she was trying to protect

Gallo while he was being stabbed.”

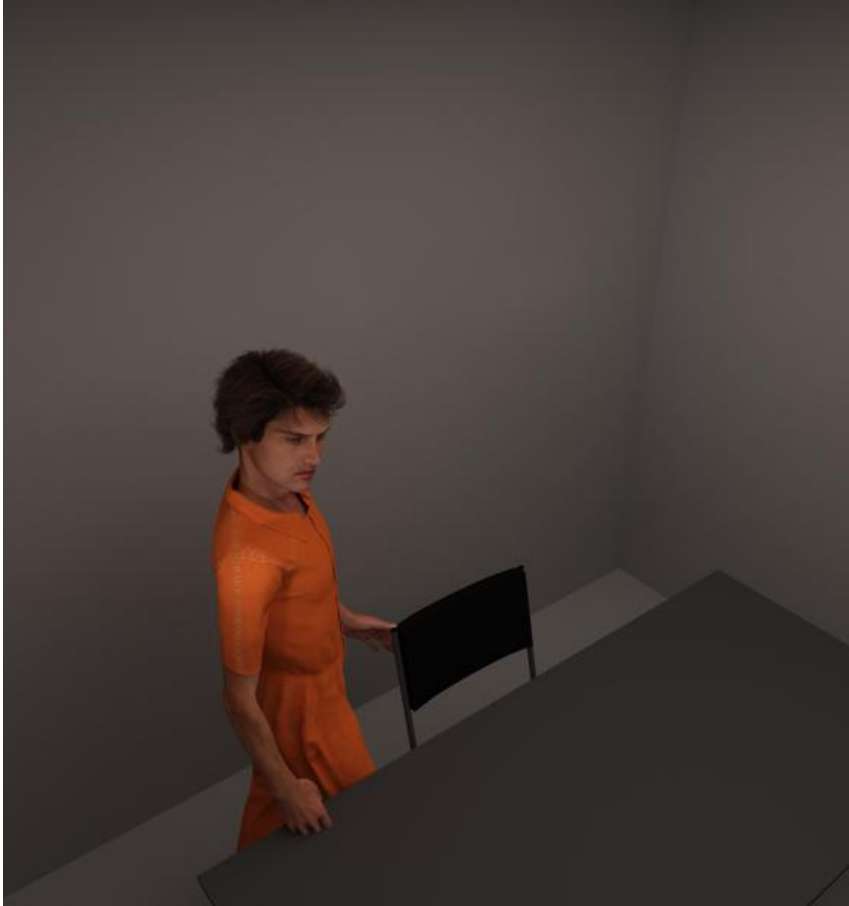
“No one, the DA, the coroner — us, has ever seen anything like this,” Goodwin said.

The blood-soaked comforter, the whiteness of the bodies, the faces frozen in perpetual torture. Robert bent over, his stomach churned, a burning rose in his throat and into his mouth and nose. He grimaced as he swallowed it down. His eyes shut so tight he saw “Flesh-ocher” behind his eyelids.

Robert looked up. “I think I’d like to talk to a lawyer now.”

Chapter 29. Not Innocent

... three, four, turn. One, two, three, four. Robert counts. Turn... Smaller than his cell, where he can make six steps — wall to wall... three, four, turn.



He is being held, pending trial, in the Walworth County Jail in Wisconsin. He's in a conference room where attorneys meet privately with their clients. It's just off the pod where inmates sit, watch TV, or read — there isn't anything else to do. Meals are the most exciting part of the day. Robert is waiting to meet with his attorney, Public Defender,

Chris Ransome.

One, two, three, four, turn.

The walls are bare, no clock, no decorations, and except the one in the metal door that a guard occasionally looks through, no windows. There is a small metal table with a metal chair on each side that nearly fill the room. Robert has to negotiate between one of the chairs and the wall.

... four, turn.

"We don't talk about our cases," he was advised when he arrived sixty-seven days ago. "We're all waiting for trial. If I tell you about my case, the DA may offer you a deal to testify against me, or visa-versa. I'd testify against you to get a deal. You bet."

There are eight other inmates awaiting trial, all not guilty, none innocent.

... three, four, turn.

There is a click as the door is unlocked, then the clang of the bolt sliding the door open.

"Hello Robert,
I'm sorry I'm—"

"You're—"

"—late. The hearing I was in took longer than expected. I wanted to meet with you today. We need to discuss your case. I have some questions I'd like to resolve."

"I've already talked to you, your investigator, your psychiatrist, and I don't know who all else.

What more is there to talk about? If you and your people were working on this and doing your jobs, this would have been resolved a long time ago. What's going on?"

"The process can take a while. And this is a big case, so everyone, the police, the prosecution, my office, are covering all bases."



"Yeah, I know, a murder case."

"Two murders, one of the victims being a hoodlum from Chicago, killed in a very gruesome manner, by the accused, a pornographer."

"I wish you wouldn't refer to me as a pornographer."

"Well, that's the kindest word people around here call you."

Ransome sat down and pulled out a legal pad from his briefcase. "We're getting a trial date later today. It will be in about three months. Sit down and let's go over some of this."

"But I didn't do it. Why can't anyone see that? Why would I kill them?"

"Oh, the DA is having a field day with that. You had a grudge against Gallo for making you do slave labor for him. You had a thing for Kellie, and Gallo stood in your way. You had a thing for his wife, Elaine — same problem with Gallo. You're a porno, suicidal, nut case — the DA's not so fond of that one. That would give you a mental disease or defect defense."

"I'm not suicidal, and I'm not crazy."

"Hold that thought. That may be our fall back position. How about sitting down?"

Robert slumped into a chair.

"Robert, what we look at, the DA, the Court, me, ultimately a jury if it goes to trial, is the evidence. What does the evidence tell us? Blood on the shirt, your shirt, was from both of the Gallos. The skin fragments found in your shower were Mrs. Gallo's. That's consistent with the gouges found on her right arm. The hair and pubic hair found in your shower were hers. The knife—"

"Do you believe me?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

"I can do my job whether or not I believe my client. It doesn't matter what I believe. It's all about the evidence."

"I asked you if you believe me."

Ransome put down his legal pad and reached into his briefcase. "I look at you, and I don't see a murderer. I don't see someone who could have done this." He held up photographs of the crime scene.

"You can't even look at these. The evidence is stacked up against you, but there are some holes."

Robert had looked away when Ransome held up the photographs. Now he glanced back. "Like what?"

"For one, the murder was messy. There was a lot of blood. Even on the walls and the ceiling over the bed from the force of the knife going up and down. The police found your shirt in the trash can behind where you lived. It was covered in blood. There would have had to be blood on your pants and shoes as well. Some of that would have transferred to the seats and floor of your car. But no blood was found there. In fact, no bloody pants or shoes of yours were found at all. You either disposed of those, so the police would not find them — something you didn't do with your shirt... or they never had blood on them to begin with."

"Well, OK. If we go to trial, isn't that enough to get me off?"

"It's a start, but not enough. What we need is to get the jury thinking someone else did the murders."

"Someone else did do the murders."

Ransome sighed, "Help me out here, Robert."

"Sam had a lot of enemies," Robert volunteered. "It's no secret he was connected to the mob. And at the Shop, there was always anger and complaining about him."

"Yes, that covers a lot of people, all possibilities. But consider what someone would need to pull it off. They would have to have known the Gallos would be at the cottage that Friday night. To set you up, they would have to get you to the cottage that same night. They would need to know the code to the alarm to get in."

Robert started to talk, but Ransome held up his hand.

"Before the murders, they would have had to get one of your shirts, convenient it had your name tag on it, and wear it when they killed them. Then somehow, after the murders, get the shirt back to your place to plant it without you seeing them, and somehow, somehow Robert, they got your DNA on the murder weapon."

"Why isn't anyone looking at Johnston? I told the police about him when they first arrested me. He'd even threatened Sam at one time. Couldn't Johnston have done it and frame me? This was some plot of his to kill Sam and have someone else take the blame."

“Yeah, I know what you told the police, and you’ve brought him up to me before as well. But Johnston would have the same problems I just mentioned — arrange for you and the Gallos to be at the cottage that same night, his gaining access to the cottage and your shirt.”

Robert got up and started pacing. “Johnston’s a bad guy. He abused Kellie for years.”

“Johnston is one of the DA’s star witnesses. He puts you at the cottage at the time the murders were committed. You told the police you hadn’t even left your place that night. Then they got those photos from the tollbooths, and the location of your cell phone within a mile of the cottage. That bolsters Johnston’s credibility and destroys yours.”

“When they first came to the house to tell Kellie about her parents, they asked where I had been. I panicked, or something. Anyway, I wasn’t thinking straight and blurted out I was at my place all night. Then later, when they were questioning me at the detention center, I was scared. I didn’t want them to think I had lied, so I kept to what I had told them.”

“Well, they probably never would have thought to look for those tollbooth photos if Kellie hadn’t clued them to the route you took. The way you took was over a good hour and a half longer than just driving straight up.”

“Well, I didn’t know any other way.”

“Except for the way Kellie showed you.”

“Yeah.”

“The point is, you lied about leaving your house. They got you driving into Wisconsin and then back out within times consistent with when the murders were committed.”

“Yeah, I know, dumb.”

Ransome chuckled. “‘Felony dumb’ is what the DA calls it. He was laughing. ‘How can there be so much crime with such dumb criminals running around?’”

Robert shoved the chair he had been maneuvering around during his pacing. “So you and your DA buddy get your laughs at my expense. This is my life your laughing at. I’m not dumb, and I’m not a criminal.”

"You're right, and I'm sorry. There's a lot of gallows humor that goes around in criminal law. And for the record, the DA is not my buddy. Now, Robert, how about sitting down?"

Robert sat and leaned across the table. "Ok, if not Johnston, how about Janie? I realize I'm grasping here. Kellie... well, Kellie liked to tell me stories. From what she told me about Janie, I'd say Janie was capable of about anything. Have you talked to Janie?"

"You've told me about Janie before, and Kellie's and her relationship — pretty strange."

"That's just what I heard from Kellie."

"What else can you tell me about Janie?"

"Not much. I never met her."

"No, no one has. Do you know her last name?"

"No."

"Where she lives?"

"No, really nothing."

"We haven't been able to find her, and we have a very good investigator. He's interviewed people in the town, looked through all the records, motor vehicle, driver's licenses — there's no reference of her anywhere. No one has ever heard of her."

"You need to ask Kellie about her. Kellie will know how to get a hold of her."

"Kellie says she never heard of Janie. She feels you made up stories about Janie to satisfy some erotic fantasy of yours. There is no Janie."

Robert put his head in his hands, rubbing his temples. "Yeah, I didn't think there was a real Janie, but Kellie made her up, not me."

Robert thought for a moment. "Ok, then. How about Travis? Kellie invited him to spend the night with her. He would have known the Gallos were at the cottage. Travis could have stolen one of my shirts. He's probably been up to the cottage a few times. He could have gotten the code for the alarm."

"And how did he get you to go up to the cottage?"

Robert sat looking down, his arms crossed.

Ransome continued. "I've interviewed Travis. Boy, he's a jerk, isn't he? He claims to have spent that night with Kellie setting some

new sexual endurance records. So Kellie's his alibi... and he's hers. Which gets me to what I wanted to talk to you about. You keep skipping around trying to finger everyone, except the obvious one."

"There's no evidence she's involved."

"Kellie's not a named suspect, so her records are pretty closed to us right now. We do know she was in a mental health institution twice — both times for attempted suicide. We also found an old police report from when she was six years old. A drunk was waiting for the "L" in Chicago. He saw two girls arguing. The younger one pushed the other into the front of a train. The one who did the pushing was Kellie. The only evidence was the word of a drunk, Kellie was a minor, and the other girl was poor and black. The report didn't even list her name. There was no follow up."

"What does that have to do with anything now?"

"Kellie is not who you think, not what you want her to be. She planned the murders and set you up to take the hit."

"You say you like to follow the evidence. There's no evidence of that."

"The evidence of that is what's in your head, what you're not telling me. You're being awfully protective of her."

"No one else ever has."

"Let's go over that night again. Tell me, from your point of view, what happened."

Robert sat back in his chair. "I've been through this several times with you and your investigator."

"I know. But go through it again. Start with the day of the murders."

Robert sighed and leaned forward. "Kellie had told me about the insurance policy the Gallos had on her life. She was crying and scared they were going to kill her for the money. She had her friends over that night for a party. She hoped their being with her would deter whoever Sam sent after her. She also invited me to be with her to help protect her.

"I went over to the house. After everyone split up and went off with their boyfriends, they left me alone. I thought, I can protect her now, but not every day. Sometime Sam will get her. But if he was dead, the problem would go away. So, I drove up to the cottage."

"The way Kellie showed you.

"That's just the way we went this summer."

"How did you know how to disarm the alarm?"

Robert shrugged. "It's how we got in."

"Did Kellie show you the combination?"

"You know, I think I just was watching her do it. It's easy to remember." Robert snorted. "The cops thought Sam's system was so sophisticated. You just cross your heart."

"Where'd you get the knife?"

Robert leaned forward. "Everything we talk about is private, right?"

"Robert, mine is one of the two jobs in the world where it's essential to keep your mouth shut."

"What's the other one?"

"Toilet bowl cleaner."

Robert sat back in his chair. "Shit, you're still making jokes at my expense. When are you going to take this seriously?"

"Sorry, but I get asked that a lot. Listen, we've covered this. What you tell me is confidential. It doesn't go outside this room without your permission."

Robert looked down at his right hand — his thumb and forefinger were twirling around each other. "When Kellie and I were there this summer, she had me cut limes so we could make limeade."

"So, she showed you where the knives were kept?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Did she tell you which knife to use?"

"I don't remember."

"What happened to the knife after you cut the limes?"

"I don't know. After we had the limeade, Kellie showed me around the place. I suppose at some time the housekeeper or someone washed it and put it back in the drawer."

"Is that the knife you got the night of the murders?"

"I don't know. That night I couldn't see into the drawer, so I felt around. The knives kept clattering. I was afraid it would wake someone up. I finally just picked one."

"What happened to that knife?"

"I've told you this already. After I left the cottage and was driving away, I realized I still had it and threw it out the window."

"They found the knife that was the murder weapon on the floor next to the Gallo's bed. It had your DNA on it. You would have had to have handled it. Could that be the knife Kellie had you use to cut the limes? That it was never washed? That it was saved for later, for the murder?"

"You think Kellie had me handle a knife she planned to be used months later in a murder?"

"Yeah. Pretty Machiavellian."

Robert nodded, then got up and paced. He saw a guard looking through the window. "I'm going nuts in here. They keep me in solitary confinement except for meals. I get to go to the dining room, but there's always a guard standing near me. I get out for one hour every-other-day for recreation in 'the Cage,' and there's a guard standing there."

"If I hadn't insisted on attorney-client confidentiality," Ransome advised, "a guard would be standing in this room now,"

"They act like I'm an ax murderer."

"It wasn't an ax. It was a knife. What do you expect?"

Robert threw his arms up. "You too? I thought you believed in me."

"Robert, how about sitting down?"

Robert stalked toward the door. "I want out of here."

"We need to work through this. Now please sit down, or they'll put a straight-jacket on you."

Robert stood glaring at Ransome.

"Robert, you and I are the only two people who think you didn't do it. Now take a couple of deep breaths and please sit down."

Robert dropped into the chair.

"I guess I never asked you, your standing over their bed, a knife in your hand. You had gone up there to kill them... why didn't you?"

Robert thought, looking for the answer in the back of his head. How to enunciate what he felt that night? "I was looking down at them. I brought the knife up. Be angry, be angry. I was trying to get myself over the top to be able to do it. Hate. Hate. Hate. I hate him."

But I couldn't do it. I was numb. No emotions at all. Isn't that crazy? Earlier, climbing the hill, entering the cottage, approaching their bed, I was so scared I almost threw up — did afterward. But here I was about to do the most horrible thing imaginable, and I felt nothing. That didn't seem right. There should be some feeling with that sort of thing.

"Elaine's arm fell over Sam's chest, I thought, Oh God, I waited too long, she's woken up. Her hand patted him a couple of times. She was still asleep. It was some kind of simple, natural thing for her, some assurance he was there. I think Sam turned toward her. Despite who they were, despite their problems, at that moment they were... like... me... just people trying to get through this life the best they could. So, I left."

Ransome looked at Robert. "You're basically a good guy. None of this was your doing. Without Kellie influencing you, you wouldn't have even been in the cottage, and without her being there egging you on, you couldn't do it. Tell me about Kellie."

"It was all my doing. It was my plan to save Kellie from her parents."

"Kellie had nothing to do with it?"

"That's right. Kellie had nothing to do with it."

"I have a weakness, Robert. I tend to see the best in people. Strange, given the business I'm in. Even my clients who, you can imagine, have issues, even there I find something positive. I've been accused of being naïve. I've been told I was born at night. I guess I was." Ransome leaned forward. "But Robert, it wasn't last night. You're holding back on me. I can't help you if you don't tell me the truth."

"What do you think happened?"

Ransome nodded. "We've been following the evidence like an investigator, methodically working through it, beginning to end, until we get to a conclusion. — That way leads to you as the murderer. An attorney starts with the conclusion he wants and works back, looking for the evidence that will support his conclusion. Let's start with Kellie's the mastermind."

"The murders were so brutal. Kellie couldn't have done it."

"I'm not saying she did it — that she actually committed the murders. The savagery of it... the mutilation, then..." Ransome inhaled and paused as he looked at one of the photos of the crime scene. "... then posing them like that. No... No one, not even me believes Kellie was capable of anything so gruesome.

"Kellie's plan was that you kill them. But she didn't trust she had that much control over you. So she got someone else. If you did it, then fine. If you didn't, no matter, the evidence pointing to you was all over the place, she could have them killed with impunity and get away with it."

"You'd make a great fiction writer."

"Yeah. Opposing counsel sometimes accuse me of that."

Ransome leaned forward. "Robert, think about this. Kellie got someone to go to the cottage and wait for you. They watched you come into the house, get the knife, go to the bedroom, waiting to see what you would do. You couldn't do it, so after you left, they committed the most brutal crimes imaginable."

"If I told you she talked to me about killing them, it would be because of the insurance policy. She was afraid for her life. Wouldn't that help her with the DA? They could understand that."

"It wasn't for any insurance policy. There was one found. The Gallos had insured Kellie for \$10,000, enough to bury her, not enough to kill her."

For sixty-seven days, Robert had mulled over his situation — that's all there was to do in jail, running through the scenarios, the ones he tried out on Ransome — speculating on who may have committed the murders; and the ones he did not tell Ransome — about Kellie, what she did to him, how he ended up in jail on trial for murder. He always came to the same conclusion about Kellie. She had put him here alright.

Robert stood and started pacing. "Let's say she did convince me to go up to the cottage to kill them. That still doesn't prove I didn't."

"No, but it starts to rot what they see as an open-and-shut case. Let's shake the apple tree and see what falls out. With Kellie as the mastermind, the other possible players may fit in.

"I've interviewed Kellie. 'Who did you send, a disgruntled associate of Sam's, Travis?' I know, I was grasping there. Somehow,

was she and Johnston in cahoots? I asked her. Of course, she maintained she had nothing to do with any of it, so there was no one she sent.”

Ransome scratched some notes on his legal pad (he always thought better when he did that.) “None of this is a slam-dunk for us, but here’s the rundown.” He held up his pad so Robert could read along with him.

OPTIONS — DA OR JURY:

1. KELLIE MASTERMINDED PLOT, WE HAVE EVIDENCE OF A NAMED ACCOMPLICE WHO COMMITTED THE MURDERS — ROBERT TURNS STATE’S WITNESS — MAYBE PLEADS TO A MINOR TRESPASS — MINIMUM JAIL TIME.
2. KELLIE MASTERMINDED PLOT, NOT SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE OF ACCOMPLICE, ENOUGH DOUBT THAT ROBERT KILLED, BUT STILL PARTICIPATED — SHOWED UP — ROBERT GUILTY OF CONSPIRACY / ATTEMPT — DOES 5 TO 10 YEARS.
3. KELLIE MASTERMINDED PLOT, ROBERT UNDER KELLIE’S INFLUENCE AND CONTROL KILLED GALLOS — ROBERT GUILTY OF SECOND-DEGREE INTENTIONAL HOMICIDE — LESS THAN LIFE — CHANCE FOR PAROLE.
4. KELLIE NOT INVOLVED IN PLOT, ROBERT KILLED

Ransome put his pad down and looked at Robert. “If we go to trial now, you will be convicted. Wisconsin has no death penalty. We were one of the first states to abolish it. So that’s not on the table. But life is. Once convicted, you will be sentenced to life without a chance for parole.”

Robert pointed at the legal pad. “I don’t like any of those choices. You need to do better. Get me off without involving Kellie.”

“I’m a pretty good attorney. Sometimes my clients even call me a magician. I can pull rabbits out of hats. But Robert, in your case, you got only one rabbit, and that’s Kellie.”

“You need to take your magic act and disappear.”

“Let me go to the DA with the information about Kellie.”

“How about keeping your mouth shut like a toilet bowl cleaner?”

Ransome's face flushed. "You're right. I can't use what you tell me without your permission. But I sure as hell can cross-examine Kellie at trial. Maybe I can bring out enough to get at least one juror to think Kellie may have been a part of it, or, at least, to have a reasonable doubt about you."

"What if I don't go to trial? What if I just plead guilty?"

"You don't need me for that."

Robert stopped pacing and turned to face Ransome. "You're my attorney."

"Yes, and I'll give you a defense to the best of my ability. That means I go after Kellie."

"You have to do what I want."

Ransome stood and faced Robert. "I'm not your whore. We go to trial, and I'm dragging Kellie all over the coals."

"You're my attorney, and I say you don't."

Ransome leaned over the table toward Robert. "Yes, I am an attorney, and that means you will get the best defense I can give you whether you want it or not."



Robert leaned over the table toward Ransome. "Then you're fired."

Ransome stepped back, propped himself against the wall, and crossed his arms. "Look, you apparently have a thing for her. Hell, you obviously think you love her."



"I do love her."

"And you obviously think she loves you."

Robert stepped back, his mouth opened, but no words came out.

"Robert, sometimes the object of our love is not deserving of it. She doesn't love you."

Robert didn't respond.

"You know that, don't you? You know she

doesn't love you."

Robert took a breath. "Yes."

A judge's gavel bangs.

"And you still want to sacrifice your freedom for her?"

"A man sins, a man pays."

The gavel banged again.

"Robert, you can stop doing penance. Give them Kellie."

"No."

The gavel banged a third time.

Guilty.

Chapter 30. Janie Rising

Scene 1. Have a Cookie

Kellie answered her phone. It was Old-man Johnston.

"Now that your boyfriend's been sentenced, we need to talk."

"What about?"

"We both know there was another person who left the cottage that night."

Kellie was silent.

"We both know who that was."

"What do you want?"

"To see you again."

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Kellie arrived at Johnston's cabin. She was carrying a shopping bag. "I brought some cookies. Would you like me to make us tea?"

"Yes, that would be nice, like old times."

"OK. Sit down. I'll make it up for us."

Kellie put the bag on the kitchen counter and pulled her hair back from her face. The paper bag made a crinkling sound when she reached into it and pulled out a plate of cookies. She set the plate in front of Johnston.

Johnston took Kellie's hand while it was still holding the plate. "So how do you get an essentially good guy to kill for you?"

Kellie smiled. "That's what I liked about you — no small talk — right to the point." She pulled her hand away. "Ok. Let's put all our cards on the table."

Johnston picked up a cookie. "And so we're beyond, 'I don't know what you're talking about.' How'd you get him to do it?"

Kellie turned to Johnston, curved her hips, and gave him a pouty look. "What do you think?"

"You manipulated him with sex?"

"I became irresistible to him."

"That's what I said. You manipulated him with sex."

Kellie flipped her hair. "The second best way to a man's heart, but I prefer to say I enchanted him, sounds nicer, sounds like he enjoyed it." Kellie

nodded at the cookie Johnson was holding. "I made those especially for you."

Johnston took a bite. "Like I remember. So, why did you pick him to begin with?"

"There's a friend of mine from high school, 'Arianna.' She met a guy where she went to college — really fell for him. Then he dumped her. He wanted to travel and become a famous artist. He broke her heart."

"Your boyfriend."

"Yep. Robert."

"You manip... excuse me, enchant him to kill your parents, then set it up so he gets caught... all of this to get even for an old girlfriend of yours?"





“No. Not to get even. But it’s the reason I picked him. It devastated her when he left. She quit college and moved back to Chicago. And, by-the-way, Arianna’s not an ‘old’ girlfriend — she lives a mile from me. She and Robert may have shopped in the same stores.” Kellie smirked. “They could have been two aisles apart and not realize it.”

Kellie poured the tea and brought the cups to the table. “Robert kept talking about leaving, to go back home, he said. He had no home. I knew he wanted to go look for his Arianna. She lived just down the street. She was within his reach the entire

time.”

“You never told him?”

“Nor her. I didn’t want to risk their getting back together. She would have gone back to him in a second if she knew he was around.”

Kellie sat down and picked up her teacup. “He was perfect for the part, no family, no home, no messy connections or relationships. Except for Arianna, no one cared about him. I used Sydney to get him to Chicago.”

“Whose Sydney, another friend of yours?”

“Yeah, and of Arianna’s. She worked for an art magazine. That gave me a perfect way to get to Robert. I had Sydney contact him and tell him the magazine wanted to do an article on him.”

“A magazine in Chicago wanted to do an article on Robert?”

“They never heard of him.”

“So Sydney is in on your scheme?”

“The only thing she knew was to lure Robert to Chicago and then dump him. Getting him to move here was pretty simple.” Kellie giggled.

“He thought he was going to get to shack up with her. Guys are so easy.

“Setting up that he live in the guest house took a little more work. I needed to keep him close so I could—”

“Entrance him?”

“Yeah. And keep an eye on him. Sam had surveillance cameras all over the place. He had no interest in them.” Kellie smiled. “But I did. I hid one in Robert’s bedroom.” She couldn’t suppress a snicker. “And he thought he was the voyeur.”

Kellie took a sip of her tea. “The problem was that Robert may have been good-looking, but he’s not a very good artist. He was never going to be ‘up and coming.’ So I bribed someone at the magazine to run the article in their next issue. I left a copy on Elaine’s desk. She had Sam’s agent contact Robert the same day.

“Once he moved in, I had him. The only wrinkle was he wanted to leave to find Arianna. So I told Sam about Robert using photographs



of me as models for painting his porn. The look on Sam's face, I had to force myself not to laugh. Isn't that funny? Sam had drooled over those paintings, probably even masturbated to them, but he never figured out it was me. He never really saw me. He heard me though. Boy, did he hear me when I told him it was me. He was mad-as-hell for about five minutes — enough time to scare the crap out of poor Robert. But then Sam figured out how to make money out of the situation. Robert wasn't going anywhere after that."



Johnston picked up another cookie and started munching on it. "Aren't you going to have any?"

"I'm on a diet, need to watch my figure."

"You look fine. You don't need to diet."

"So you checking me out?"

"Just a connoisseur appreciating something beautiful."

Johnston looked down at his teacup, swirled it for a moment, then took a sip. "How long have you been planning it?"

"I hated Sam from the beginning, when he first started dating my mother. It wasn't much after that I knew I was going to kill him."

Johnston swirled his cup again, watching the bits of tea twirl around in the bottom. "Do you remember why, Kellie? Why you hated him so much you wanted to kill him?"

Kellie looked at Johnston. She tried to think. That was not a question she remembered ever asking herself. She wanted to kill Gallo for so long... it had always been that way. The why, if there ever had been a why, had long been forgotten. She shrugged. It just was.

"Well, why now? Why have them killed now?"

That was easier. Kellie knew that one. "Sam was redoing his estate plan and was cutting me out.



"He had found Jesus. Or, at least, he started to be afraid it was all true, you know, heaven and hell. He was trying to purchase some kind of place in heaven. God knows he needed to do something. He decided to buy his way in with my inheritance. He was giving everything to charity.

"I found his Will on his desk, the original, and a copy he had made. Elaine must have done something right when she got Sam to marry her. Sam had no one else but his new blushing bride and precocious, darling step-daughter. His original Will left everything to Elaine and then to me."

Kellie leaned over toward Johnston and sneered. "I guess a few years with his new family changed his mind." Kellie zig-zagged her hand several times on the table. "He had crossed out and marked up the copy with the changes he wanted. Elaine would have limited income for the rest of her life, then nothing. He gave me nothing. In

fact, the day Sam died, I was to be cut off and basically thrown out in the street.”

“Where is the copy now?”

Kellie smiled. “And what copy would that be?”

Johnston took a cookie and sat back in his chair. “So you get your boyfriend to kill them. Besides your obvious charms, what did you promise him? A big chunk of your inheritance, I would guess.”

“How’s the cookie?”

Johnston bit. “I guess I’m part of your scheme now.”

“That isn’t what I planned. Why did you even go up the path that night?”

“Well, I had woken up to go to the bathroom when I saw a car go by, heading toward the Gallos. I wondered about that because I knew they had driven up earlier and had not left. Who could be visiting them at this late of an hour?”

Kellie interjected. “Yeah. I wanted to hide in the cottage before Robert got there. I left home right after I let Travis screw me. ‘God’s gift,’ one time and he’s out for the night. Of course, I gave him a little something to help with that.”

“You drugged him?”

“Couldn’t take the chance he might wake up in the middle of the night.”

Johnston snorted, then continued. “About fifteen minutes later, another car drove up that way. It didn’t go as far as the first one and parked in that little turnaround spot. Now I was really curious, so I got dressed and went out to see what was going on. I was walking up the path when your boyfriend came stumbling down through the brush.” Johnston chuckled. “He was within ten feet of me, and he never even saw me.

“I saw him leave, but two cars had gone up. I figured someone else was still there, so I hid and waited. About twenty minutes later, I saw a girl carrying a shopping bag come down. I was off the path a little bit, and there was only moonlight, but, except for the short hair, I recognized it was you.

Kellie chimed in. “It was me.”

“The short hair threw me a little. I figured you were wearing a wig, a disguise, or something. I knew you were up to something.” Johnston shook his head. “Why’d you stay in there after the murders?”

“Why do you think?”

Johnston finished another cookie. “OK. To make sure none of the changes to the estate documents were there, that there were no other copies.” Johnston nodded in understanding. “That would leave only the original Will. The one that, with your mother dead — gives you everything.” He looked at Kellie. “You didn’t leave much to chance.”

“Only you, you’re my weak link.”

Johnston continued as if he had not heard Kellie. “So you’re hiding at the cottage when Robert gets there, and... damn, Kellie, I can’t picture this. This is what’s been bothering me — while he’s murdering them. How could you do that? How could you stay still while that’s being done? The newspapers had some pictures. You wanted him dead, but like that?”

“You shouldn’t mind Sam’s dead. You said you’d like to kill him.”

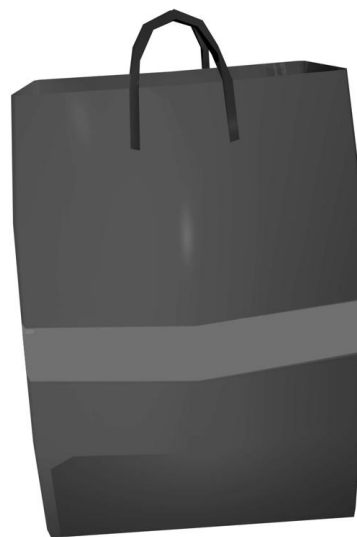
“No, I said, ‘Someone should kill that man.’ But not like that. God, not like that. How could you stand by while he did that to them?”

“Don’t get high and mighty on me. You didn’t report me to the police. You knew something was up. What did you think that was all about? A surprise birthday party? Let’s get to it. What do you want?”

Johnston felt his nose running, fast, like when he had a nose bleed. He grabbed a tissue from his pocket and wiped his nose. When he looked at it, it was clear. He dabbed his nose a couple of times, then put the tissue back in his pocket.

“I didn’t know what was going on.” Johnston shook his head. “I didn’t know... that was going on. When I called the police, I only told them about your boyfriend, I never mentioned the second person — I never mentioned you.”

“Why is that? You figured you could get something from me?”



"I wasn't thinking that."

"You don't do anything without a reason."

"I was trying to protect you."

"And yet, here we are. What do you want?"

Johnston stared at Kellie. Then he remembered what he had rehearsed. "You have something I want, and I have something on you. We can trade."

"I guessed that might be on your mind when you called me. So what are we trading?"

Johnston lost his train of thought. "Kellie, we were friends for a long time."

"Those times are gone. We're not going back there."

"I miss our talks."

"Is that all you miss?"

Johnston forgot to close his mouth, and saliva and cookie crumbs were dribbling down his chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand.

"... I miss you."

"Stay on track. How are we going to settle this?" Kellie asked.

Johnston was trying to focus. "...that clubhouse.... that damn clubhouse. Let me... tear it down."

"But that makes a lot of money."

Johnston held his head up with his hands. "...Sam probably used it to launder."

"Well, I'm getting everything Sam had. Maybe I'll need a laundry."

"Kellie... we've been friends."

Kellie didn't say anything. She watched Johnston like a bird of prey watches as its wounded quarry weakens.

Johnston's hands dropped to the table, his teacup tipped over, spilling the rest of the tea. "Kellie, what have you done?"

"Just something to help you sleep."

Johnston tried to get up, but his legs weren't working. Kellie stood and put her hands on Johnston's arms, pressing them against the table. "You asked how I could get an essentially good guy to kill for me. I don't know. I couldn't. He didn't go through with it."

"Robert's attorney interviewed me. He was sure I was behind the whole thing. He wanted to know who I got to do such brutal murders."



He wondered who could do such a thing. Did one of Sam's associates? Did Travis? He couldn't see, as you didn't. He couldn't believe, murders with such violence, as you didn't. He couldn't understand, as you didn't, such cold-bloodedness. But you understand now, don't you, Alfred?

You believe now, don't you? Evil can wear a pretty face." Her voice became dark, animal. "Alfred, you see me now."

A sob escaped from Johnston.

She leaned close to his face, her eyes feral. "I didn't get a mob guy to do it." Johnston turned his head away from her, tears running down his cheeks, snot dribbling from his nose and onto his mouth and chin. "Travis is a jerk, but he's not stupid." She grabbed and turned Johnston's head, forcing him to look at her. "Robert was too weak." Johnston looked away. "Look at me," she hissed. Johnston turned his eyes. Kellie moved so close they could have kissed.

"So I did it myself."

Scene 2. I Killed Him

Fingers move over his chest. That's the first thing as he comes out of the blackness.

Fingers on his chest and nipples, down his stomach, then back up. Fingers on his naked skin. Something is pressing across his face and eyes. He tries to open them, all is grey. The fingers move down again, onto his hips, his groin, he jumps. The fingers grasp his balls, his legs jerk. He can't pull them together. His arms are held fast above his head. The cabin's cool air drifts over his body, nipples, feet, his pubic hair. He wants to slip back into the blackness, but the fingers keep nudging him awake.

"Kellie, are you here?"

"Yes, I'm here."

Johnston gasps as a hand caresses his penis. He tugs at the cuffs holding him to the bed. Fingers pluck at his pubic hair before turning back down and rotating around his balls.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you feel it? I'm going to pleasure you like you always wanted."

He's still groggy. The hand continues its circling up around his stomach, then back down, making him jerk and catch his breath each time it grazes across his balls.

"All those years, you watched me, wanting to play with me, me to play with you."

"It was never like that. I was your friend. I told you stories of my travels. We shared secrets."

"To fondle me."

"You were a companion to a lonely old man, and I was company for a neglected young girl."

Johnston's body is jerking from the attention Kellie is giving it. He's yanking at the binds on his arms and legs, struggling to break free. His breathing becomes quicker.

"Let me go. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

“We’re pleasuring you to death.”

He laid still. “You can’t kill someone like that.”

“No? What about someone who has a bad heart?”

The mattress rises as a weight gets off. He can hear the shopping bag from across the room rustle as something is taken out of it, then water from the sink filling a container.

The mattress sinks. “Here, take these.”

Objects are pushed into his mouth. Then an arm lifts his head, and a glass put to his mouth. “Drink this and swallow the pills.” He spits them out, shakes his head, and shuts his mouth tight. Water spills down his chin.

The glass with the cold water slides down his chest and stomach, then presses against his balls. He sucks in his breath.

“I can make this really hurt. Are you going to take the pills?”

He shakes his head.

The glass is thrust against him and seesawed across his balls. He recoils, cries out, then nods.

Fingers push the pills through his mouth, and to the back of his throat, he gags. The glass is put to his lips, and water fills his mouth. He swallows and chokes as the pills move down his throat.

“Here’s another, open wide. — That’s a good boy.

“Couple more to go.

He is gasping for air.

“Last one.”

“What were those?”

“Party drugs, bought off the street, drugs an old man with a young girl-friend might take, good for the sex, not so great for the heart. It was a fun party.”

Dark voice. “Too bad you died.”

“The police will suspect you. Your fingerprints and DNA are all over this cabin.”

“Suspect us?” The voice laughed. “Hell, they’ll do more than suspect us. I’m going to tell them we’re the one who killed you.”

Fingers run over his chest, his nipples, down his stomach. His face is hot, pressure builds in his head. After a while, the fingers stroke him to hardness, harder than he can remember in years.

"I see the drugs are working."

"Kellie, please stop. I need to slow down. Let me go."

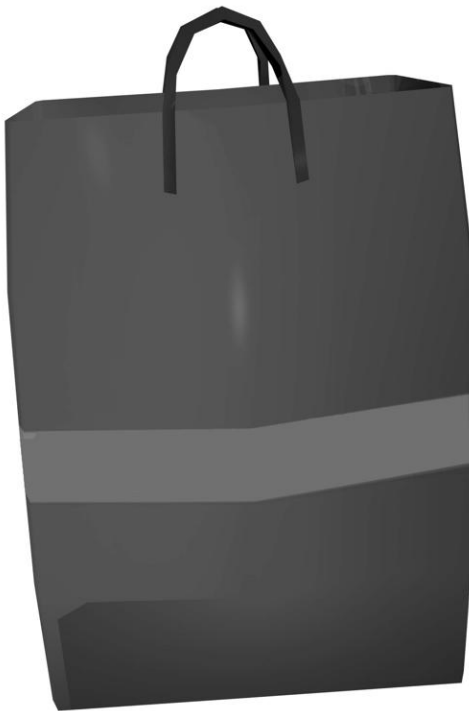
"This is the game you liked to play, Lover."

"No one will believe we were lovers."

"Oh, we've been lovers since we met. I have such beautiful notes you wrote me. I was lonely, looking for someone to give me attention. And boy, did you."

Voice. "You're a dirty old man who is going to get what's coming to you."

"I never touched you. Not in that way."



Johnston feels the mattress rise as someone gets off. He hears Kellie's voice from across the room.

"Remember that book you gave me? 'Lolita.' I brought it with me."

The shopping bag on the kitchen counter crinkles. Then the mattress sags as someone sits next to him.

"I had you write a note in it. Remember what the note said?"

To my Kellie.

You are the fresh light in my dark life.

You are my darling charmer.

My enchanter.

From your bewitched traveler.

Voice. "They'll find the book next to your body."

Kellie. "All those years, I thought you were... almost like a father. Then I read the book. I saw what you really thought of me."

Johnston. "You were a pretty girl. You liked to tease me. I could tell that. So sometimes I had feelings, some fantasies at night, some images. But I never acted on those."

Voice. "You sinned in your heart."

Thumbs are put on the blindfold over his eyes and pressed. "Do you want your eyes plucked out or your balls smashed?"

Pain radiates through his head. "Agh! Kellie, stop."

The pressure on his eyes releases. "It wouldn't look like much of a game if they find you without your eyes."

The voice chants. "Kiss the boys and make them cry. Make them cry. Make them cry."

His head jerks up, "Who are you?"

Voice. "Kiss the boys and make them cry."

Johnston. "Kellie, who—"

The dark voice is laughing. "—Kiss the boys and make them die."

Johnston. "Who's there?"

Kellie. "You came along later."

Voice. "Don't you remember, Sweetheart? I've always been with you."

Kellie pauses as if listening to a statement. "He won't."

Then, dark silence.

Kellie speaks to the darkness. "No, I can't anymore."

"We need to."

"He's never done anything wrong to us."

"You don't remember very well."

"Why should we kill him?"

"Because we want to."

Johnston. "Who's talking?"

Kellie. "No, leave me alone."

Voice. "I'll never leave you alone."

Johnston. "Kellie, who are you talking to?"

"Janie."

"Janie? There's no Janie. We've talked about this. Janie is your make-believe playmate."

Voice. "Playmate? I guess we have played. But does this feel like make-believe?"

A hand grips Johnston's balls, making him wince, then squeezes him. He is in agony, sweating, breathless. "Stop, stop. Please."

The hand moves onto his chest — it feels like a great rock pressing down on him.

Voice. "You need to pay for what you did."

Johnston, gasping through breaths. "Kellie, don't you remember when you were 15? We spent a good part of that summer talking. Don't you remember? We talked about it. You confided in me."

Kellie. "Stop talking. I'm trying to hear him."

Voice. "Not when he's talking about me."

Johnston. "You could never escape him. It became too horrible for you to bear.."

Kellie. "He was mean."

Voice. "Mean? He was a sadist."



Johnston. "Your mother didn't want you, and your step-father wanted you too much. You were abused. I know it. Horribly. But where did it happen?"

Kellie. "Shut up."

Johnston. "It wasn't here, was it? It wasn't me that came into your room at night."

"No. I said, shut up."

"Close your eyes. Who do you see? Who was your burglar protecting you from?"

The hand digs into his stomach.

"Mommy, help me."

"That summer, we peeled

away all your layers. You saw it then."

"No."

"Sam got you pregnant. Then he and your mother — don't you remember?"

Kellie is sobbing.
“Kellie, the truth.
You’ve always said you
wanted the truth.”

Kellie’s voice
becomes higher-pitched.
She’s bursting. Her
breathing is fast, and so
loud Johnston can hear
her over his own. “No.
No. No.”

Johnston. “Why don’t
you remember?”

Voice, yelling.
“Because it wasn’t her
they did it too.”

Johnston, yelling.
“Had it aborted.”

Kellie screams. “Nooooooooooooo.”

And then it was quiet.

“Kellie, are you here?”

“Kellie?”

“Kellie’s gone.”

The mattress sags as of someone climbing on to it.

“Kellie wanted to use a gun. It turned out we had to use a knife.
Do you know what I did to them with a knife?”

Cold-fear pierces him.

“Those news stories. Nothing. Nothing like that — It was so much
better.”

Terror. Run. Run. Run.

Arms, legs paralyzed.

Fingernails scrape down his chest.



“It’s time to go.”

Hips buck as the nails go further.

Panicking, breathing hard, fast, heavy, can’t get enough air.

His heart beating so quick he can’t catch up to it, so terrible he hears it in his head — thump, thump, thump. Pain radiates from his back and up his arms.

He tries to talk — he can only gurgle.

Thump, thump, thump.

He gasps. “Who?”

Thump, thump. Pain shoots through him. He tries to sit up, the ropes hold him tight to the bed. Thump. His mouth opens to take a breath.

Hands slide up his chest.

The thumping stops. He makes a shallow, sucking noise.

The hands reach along the sides of his face.

His body convulses.

Fingers take hold of the blindfold and pull it down.

He sees her. She tears the blond wig from her head. Her hair is short, black, crazy — crazy black.

The face leers at him.



“Janie.”

Then everything flashes white, evaporates, and he falls into blackness.

*
*
*

The tape recording of the call to the police reflects the hysteria of a young girl.



"I killed him."
"I killed him."

Chapter 31. I Am the Artist

I'm glad it's a knife. A gun would have been too clean, too quick, too easy on them.



Would Robert do it? That simple Kellie couldn't. She said she would, but the truth is not in her. As for Robert? Well, we'll wait and watch.



I creep into their room, hiding in the closet, the door cracked so I could spy, waiting, listening to their breathing, trying to control mine. Wait.

Those places, those doctors. Fools. Well, Kellie they got right, 'delusional,' 'depressed,' 'suicidal,' — she always was the weak one.

They struggled to name me, 'Schizophrenia,' 'Paranoia,' 'Antisocial personality disorder,' what a mouth full, I laughed at that one. Why didn't they just call me insane?

They should have.

Darwin was right. It's not the fittest that survive — it's the most adaptable.

I ran and hid. They couldn't find me. I became invisible.

"Metamorphosis," I like that word. "A complete change of form, structure, or substance, as transformation by magic or witchcraft."

Kellie became my chrysalis. Now here I am, a beautiful butterfly. Beautiful butterfly, Ha.

We were all in a car once, he was driving, we were going to the cottage. The bitch was in the front, I in the back. She said, 'Oh, look at the road, how beautiful, it's covered by monarch butterflies.' It was too. There were so many the road looked like it had a shifting orange blanket covering it. We got out to see. The bitch threw up. The butterflies were gorging on the carcasses of locusts.

I am the Devourer.

Wait.

Bird beaks peck, penises spurt, knives cut. I suppress a giggle.

They all thought Kellie was the primary one. I could hear them talking. I was just an altern, her shadow. — How insulting. When she raised her hand, it was me who raised it. When she opened her mouth, it was me who opened it. When she spoke, it was the words I gave her. When she looked at you, it was me who saw you.

I am the Watcher.

Wait.

In the beginning was the darkness, and the darkness was in Kellie. I am the darkness.

I am unforgiving fury hunting for release.

You thought he was the Artist. What did he create for you? I am the Great Creator.

Where was he when I laid the earth's foundation? Can you tell me that? When I marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone — you think he did that?

Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb? Assuredly, he did not. — He's afraid of a wading pool. I fixed its limits and set its doors and bars in place. 'This far you may come

and no farther, I commanded it; here is where your proud waves halt' and it obeyed.

Do you think in his weak astronomy classes he learned to comprehend the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me if you know. Can his science bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can it loosen Orion's belt? Can he bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Does he know the laws of the heavens?

You thought Robert was the Artist. — Fools, I am the Artist.

Wait.

Oh, they need to die. Where is that damn Robert? Oh fury, be still, be patient.

No forgetting, no forgiving.

I am the Messenger. Hear me! Your day of disaster is near, and your doom rushes upon you.

Oh, where is that Robert?

But wait. I hear the door. You're coming into the house, you bungling fool, making enough noise to wake the dead. I giggle. But not Sam and Elaine, not yet, they're not dead — yet.

Now in the kitchen, rummaging in the drawer. Oh, idiot. I should tear your throat apart.

Now up the stairs.

There you are.



Look at him. He is such a wimp. I want to leap out and consume him.

Such a bubbling, stupid, naïve puppet — My puppet. Yes.

Look this way, Robert, see the burning in my eyes.

Look this way, Robert, and see your destruction.

You are my imperfect sacrifice.

Wait.

Raise the knife, Robert. Yes. Raise it high. Oh, glorious murder — Now strike.

Oh, Robert, you are such a disappointment... No matter, I'll take care of this myself.

This is your last time here, Robert, remember it.

Wait for him to leave the room.

Wait, give him time to get out of the house.

A little longer.

Down the path.

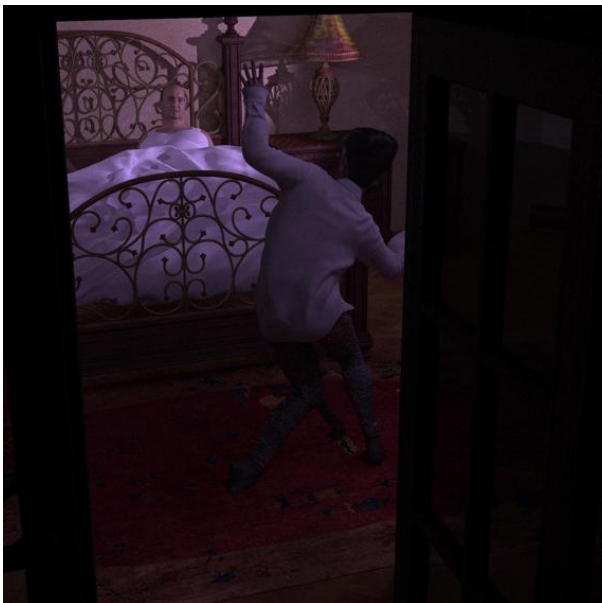
"Everybody loves a lover. I'm a lover, oh yes I am..."

Wait.

Wait.

Now.

I leap from the closet in a whirling, writhing, contorting, convorting, lurchy, jerky, crazy-syncopated jig — a cacophony of screeches, shrieks, and howls.



He is awakened by my danse macabre. His eyes open to the clanking, dancing skeleton before him.

The shock on his face, first uncomprehending, then fear, then terror. I wanted to see that, needed to see that, waited to see that.

Then striking, slashing — Oh the screaming.







The bitch tried to get away. I clutched her arm with my nails and gripped her while I finished him, then I started on her.

Oh fury, are you now satisfied?



Warm, so warm... and slippery. I hadn't realized how slippery. Was that in my plans? I had been so scrupulous to not miss any detail. Be careful, don't let the knife slip and cut yourself. That may be hard to explain. Oh well, improvise, Janie. You've always been good at that. And remember to take Puppet's shirt off. Yes. And to properly dispose of it. Yes. And make sure to erase the door alarm

recording my entry. Only one person entered this place tonight. Yes

What's that, Elaine? May I call you Elaine? Thank you. What happened to your breasts? Oh, you must remember all those stories you'd tell at cocktail parties. 'There's no time for a child now.' And, 'Breastfeeding would have been such a bother. I'd never have gotten my figure back.' And Elaine, dear Elaine, you never did have a heart for me.

And Sam, you should see how silly you look. You liked to have your cock in my mouth. Now it's in yours. What was that? I'm sorry, you're hard to understand. Oh, you have no eyes to see, nor ears to hear? Well, you never did use those very well anyway.

And Sam, sweet Sam, if I may say so, you got no balls.



Oh, no thank you, dear friends, I would love to stay and chat some more, but honestly, I must be running.

I have so much more to do.



Chapter 32. Penance

Scene 1. There's No Frosting on the Cake

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I broke a young girl's heart."



"Very well, my son. For your penance, say three Hail Mary's and go to prison for the rest of your life."

Robert did not “Give them Kellie.” But it was not for Kellie. It was for Arianna. Perhaps his sacrifice — even flawed, would make some amends. Arianna would never know of it, would not have wanted it if she had. He was sentenced to life. “A man sins, a man pays.”

He is allowed one hour a day for recreation. Today’s prediction of a late winter storm caused the exercise yard to be closed. That was all right with Robert. He preferred to spend his hour in the crafts room anyway. He tried to spend most of his one-hours there, using the time to draw portraits of the inmates.

He had wanted to capture the soul of America. — Now he was. The double murders had made him infamous. His art made him famous. Robert’s work during his ‘porn period’ was seen as a metaphor for society’s preoccupation with hedonism. His current work in charcoals (Robert is not allowed anything sharper than a charcoal stick) as an exposé of societies’ shadow, dark side. Robert smiled. Even his early work with the little signature, ‘Bob,’ followed with the date of one of his two ‘Lost years’ was now sought after.

Today he’s drawing a portrait of Thaddeus Reminski Tinkerton, who everyone calls “Brains.” (Old nicknames are hard to get rid of.) The two had formed a bond. Robert and Brains shared most of the stories of their lives. One of the inmates walking by had once muttered, “They’re spilling their guts out to each other again.”

Brains had been convicted and sentenced for theft through a computer theft scheme. It was imaginative, brilliant, and inspired — it was magnificent — except he got caught. Getting caught was as much a surprise to the authorities who caught him as it had been to Brains. He had come in a few months before Robert.

When he was new to prison, Brains, as is customary for some in such circumstances, became ‘born again.’ The testimony of his salvation was one he liked to share with all or none who were willing or not to listen.

On one of his first Sundays in prison, with the promise of an hour break from the stifling boredom of prison-life as the inducement, Brains went to the prison’s chapel. There were perhaps thirty other inmates. Most were in the front, raising their arms and closing their eyes to an unseen god.

Brains sat in the back with one group who thought it was more fun to make fun of the pastor who had come to speak to them. The man apparently drove several hours every Sunday to come to the prison to preach to the inmates. Brains did not snicker out loud with the others. He simply, silently shot logical holes through everything the man said.

At the end of the service, the man asked if anyone was ready to be saved, if so, to raise their hand. No one did. Brains thought, *What a waste of time. He's already gotten everyone here who's going to do it. Why is he bothering?* The man looked disappointed.

The next Sunday, Brains went again. (It was a break after all.) At the end of the service, the man asked if anyone was ready to be saved. Someone sitting next to Brains snickered, "Every Sunday." No one raised their hand. The man lowered his head as he dismissed the meeting. *Jesus*, Brains thought, *How much rejection can this guy take. Every Sunday?*

The third week at the end of the service, the man again made his alter call. "Is there anyone ready to commit their life to Jesus Christ?"

No one raised their hand.

"Is there anyone ready to become a new person in the body of Christ?"

No one raised their hand.

The man looked like he was about to cry. He was so disappointed. He was about done. "Is there anyone ready to accept the peace of Christ?"

No one moved.

The man lowered his head. Brains felt embarrassed for the man. Brains raised his hand.

The man looked up, a mixture of joy, triumph, and surprise on his face. "Come up, Brother, and I will pray for you."

Brains got up and stepped forward, past the turned faces of the other inmates. *Oh, shit, what have I done.*

The man did pray for him and talked with him after all the other inmates had left. He gave Brains a Bible. "I have brought this with me every Sunday for three weeks to give to you." That book has never left Brain's side.

In the beginning, Brains was more enthusiastic than accurate, and his enthusiasm knew no bounds as he searched through his Bible, pursuing its table of contents, concordance, annotations, indexes, cross-references, and notes as nimbly as he used to do when he could hypertext through the Internet. (He is no longer allowed access to a computer.) Pulling a phrase here, a line there, perhaps even a full paragraph over there, he followed the links. They all became a jumbled theology in Brains' brain. Somehow it made sense to him. He tried to impress that sense on Robert.

Robert was tiring of it. "If you're going to preach, at least get it right. Tell me what your book says, not what you want it to say."

Brains put on his reading glasses. He was prepared to start at the beginning. "So, do you have any idea what it says?"

"My dad was a janitor at our K through 12 Catholic school. He got free tuition for me, so I went there. So, yeah, I got a lot of religion."



Brains lifted his bible. "So, did you read this?"

"Some parts in some textbooks, but we never just read the Bible."

Brains looked at Robert questionably.

"True. I asked one of the Sisters why we studied all this stuff written by other people, the Pope, Bishops, the Catechism, about what the Bible says instead of simply reading it. She said, and these words are burned into my mind, 'Because we're not smart enough and we need someone else to tell us what it says.' You didn't talk back to Nuns, so I didn't. But I thought, 'I'm as smart as anyone else.

I'll figure this out for myself.' It was at that moment that I became Uncatholic."

"So how has that worked out for you?"

Robert smiled, "Well, I'm here, aren't I?"

"So, what have you done to work it out on your own?"

"Nothing. I guess I always thought I'd get to it when I had more time."

They looked at each other, an amused look forming simultaneously on both faces.

Brains couldn't resist. "So you're doing life. How much more time do you think you'll need?"

Robert continued smiling, focusing on his sketch.

Brains continued. "You don't need to earn your forgiveness, Robert, you just need to believe, and it will be given to you. We don't do penance. That's a Catholic thing. We do good works. Penance is something you have to do. Good works is something you want to do."

Robert glanced up. "Hold still. I'm trying to finish this."

"He'll never be finished with you, you understand that, Robert. He has tenacity."

Robert put the sketch pad on his lap. "You want tenacity? Tenacity is the human race. In spite of God's curse, women continue to bear children, and men continue to plant and harvest to feed those children. That's tenacity."

"If every one of those women, and every one of those men lined up and raised their hands — I believe. I believe. Would that be enough for you?"

"It wouldn't prove the truth." Robert thought for a moment. "Maybe the real problem is I don't want to join up. You serve a bloody God."

"I serve a loving God."

"You serve the God you want, not the God that is."

"You can trust in Him."

"He is jealous."

"Forgiving."

"Vengeful."

“Just.”

“Just?” Robert took Brains’ bible and looked for the passage he had remembered from one of his textbooks.

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

“Should my great-great-grandchild suffer for what I did? Is that just?”

“You don’t have any kids. ...” Brains thought to make sure. “Do you have any kids?”

“No. ... Not that I know of. But am I sitting here in prison for something some distant relative I don’t even know did? And have you considered my man, Job?” Robert laughed. “Boy, did Job get a screw job from God.” (He had been waiting to use that one on Brains.)

Brains took back his bible. He decided he was not getting anywhere with that God. “OK, forget the Old Testament. How can you not look at a beautiful sunset and not see God?”

“Ash from forest fires.”

“The blue of the ocean.”

“Tsunamis.”

“The cooling breeze on your face on a hot summer day.”

“Hurricanes.”

“God can only do good.”

“Good? When it’s good, you believe it’s because of God. When something bad happens, it’s because of the Devil. Unless God wanted to teach you a lesson, then it wasn’t bad. It was good — except you just didn’t know it.

“You need help. I’ll pray for you.”

“Oh, the great Christian cop-out — I’ll pray for you. Forgive my responsibilities, Father, for I have prayed.”

“We’re off the main point.” Brains thumped on his bible. “I’ll make it simple for you, Christ died for your sins. He was the perfect sacrifice.”

“Yeah, I know, I’ve heard that.”

“But you didn’t get it,” Brains persisted. “It’s like you. Pretend you’re Christ. You’re living the good life. Running free, doing what you want. That’s Christ up in Heaven. Then he comes down to Earth. You go to Chicago. He gets tempted by the devil. You tie-in with that girl — the devil. She tempts you and leads you down the path of sin and depravity... OK, that part’s just you.

“Anyway, in the end, she’s a conniving, manipulative, deceptive bitch that sets you up to take a fall for her.”

“Is this the Christ story we’re talking about or mine? And by-the-way, I don’t remember saying anything negative about Kellie.”

“Stay with me here. I’m trying to make a point. You sacrifice for her. You give up your freedom and come here, which is pretty much like dying. That’s what Christ did, died for us imperfect humans.”

“OK, but as I remember the story, Christ got to go to Heaven afterward. I’m still stuck here.”

“It’s the dying, not the rising that matters. The dying was the sacrifice. The rising was just proof of it. It was like frosting on a cake. You just didn’t get the frosting.”

“Yeah, well, I’d just as soon not have the cake either. Not if it’s anything like what they served us last night.”

Brains laughed, “I wondered why you broke your piece apart and gave it to those other two guys. And then you gave them your glass of grape juice as well.”

“Yeah, well, they were having trouble swallowing the cake. Take off your reading glasses, will you? I’m trying to finish this.”

Robert broke some charcoal on his paper and focused on smudging it around the chin of his drawing of Brains.

His stay in Chicago had started with a suicide he couldn’t complete and ended with murders he didn’t commit. In the middle was an angel that had entranced him.

He wasn’t angry with them, the Gallos, Kellie. They were just trying to get through this the best they could, the same as him. They had been set up, same as him. Who he was angry with was God — for the setup.

Christ had it easy. He came to Earth to see what it felt like to be human, to suffer as we do. He couldn’t do it. The rising did matter.

Christ always knew that was before him. He was going to get the frosting. And that made all the difference in the world.

All Robert could see — all he had ever been able to see was the black hole at the center of his universe. The only sound he heard — the only sound he had ever heard was the hollow beating of a drum echoing through that hole.

Except... Except — for one brief moment, there had been a light. It had shined for him from out of the darkness. In a twinkling of time he had heard its promissive chiming. “Arianna.” Once upon a time she had been in his life, and she had known him, and she had loved him — and that made all the difference in the world.



Robert's thoughts were interrupted by a "breaking news" story on the television. (Everything is considered breaking news on television.) There was a photo of a girl on the screen. Her hair was still short but now dyed black, but it definitely, and defiantly was Kellie.

No charges are being brought against Kellie Heffernan, seen here leaving her attorney's office. Recently orphaned by the murder of her parents, the young heiress was under investigation for the death of Alfred Johnston. Johnston had

been found dead last month, naked and tied to his bed. It was determined he died from a heart attack brought on by extreme stress.

According to Heffernan, the couple often played bondage games. Apparently, the last one was too much for Johnston. Police report it was a lover's game gone terribly wrong.

Town's people indicated Johnston was not well-liked and were surprised Heffernan had anything to do with him.

One of the town's people was heard to say, 'If you gotta go, what a way to go.'

Brains turned to Robert, "Hey, I recognize that girl. She was crazy."

"How do you know her?"

"Showed up in town one summer. She had long blond hair then. She was a 'Lakie,' we were 'Townies.' The Lakies had money, we didn't. She had a game she wanted to play. She got me out in the woods, took my clothes off, tied me up on a big rock, and then... then really went to work on me."

"Were there others that she... 'worked on?'"

"It was just me as far as I know. No one talked about it. Look, we were guys. If anyone was getting any, it was talked about. The others were horny, but not crazy. No one would go out with her when they found out what she wanted to do."

"Why did you?"

"She was a girl — she smiled at me."

Robert nodded. Yeah, guys are easy.

"Listen. I was a 20-year-old virgin nerd. I was crazy-horny. Hell. I figured it was my only chance. But her name's not Kellie. It's Janie."

"Are you sure about that? That person you said had long, blond hair. This one—"

"She had me out there, tied up, and worked me over for hours. Never let me come, you know? Her face, she kept it near mine, almost the entire time, smiling, cooing at me, licking my face. I remember her crooked smile like she was mocking me the whole

time. She finally let me go and laughed at me. Yeah, I remember her real well. She climbed into my mind and has never left. I still fantasize about her at night and what she did to me.”

“You fantasize about a girl not letting you come?”

“Mine end differently. But I’m sure of her. She’s still smiling. Yeah, that’s Janie.”

“Was there anyone else with her?”

“Two of them? Jesus, no. One was enough. There was just her.”

Then Robert understood. Janie had killed five people. The Gallos — that’s two. Johnston — three. Her own namesake — four.



And Kellie — Janie killed Kellie.

Robert looked at his sketch of Brains. A smile of satisfaction drew across his face. It was finished.

And now for another late-breaking news story.

Robert thought the announcer had added, “No, this time it’s really true.” But maybe not. It didn’t matter; he hadn’t been paying attention.

We’ve been predicting this storm but were not sure when it would hit us. Well, folks, keep your galoshes out and your

snow shovels handy because it's here. And it's a doozy. It looks like Spring is going to be awhile.

Scene 2.0 K

Janie left her attorney's office. She was 21, had barely graduated high school, had not gone to college, and today she was taking over the Chicago empire of the recently deceased Sam Gallo.



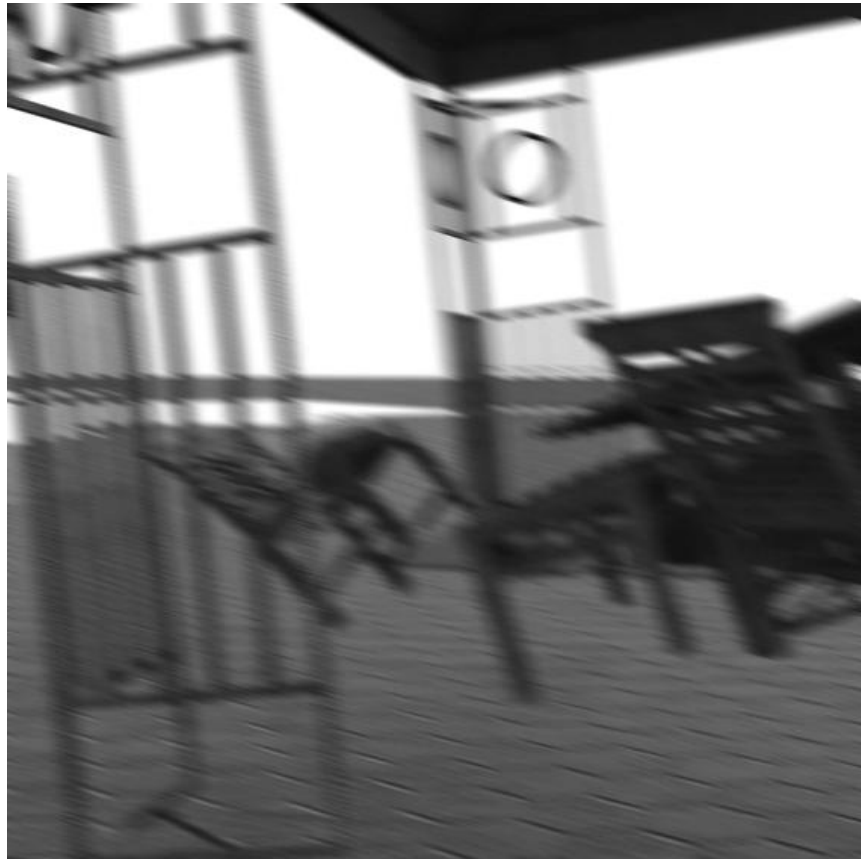
The meeting with her attorney, the former Sam Gallo's attorney, nominally had been to discuss the District Attorney's decision to not prosecute her for the death of Alfred Johnston. But that was not Janie's purpose. She always assumed exoneration — that's how she had planned it, after all. No, the

real reason was to discuss the takeover. She spent years gathering the information captured by Sam's surveillance system. What money flowed from who to who, and what accounts it was in, and how to access those accounts, was in her control. Her years of sitting in the Perch were about to pay off. The politicians, bankers, and concubines that had genuflected before Gallo would now bow to her. She was a formidable foe and would need to be done away with quickly, or quickly learned to be lived with.

Janie got in her car and headed back to the mansion — hers now. She was delayed by a high wind that foretold the approaching storm. The wind was distracting drivers, some of them running off the road or hitting other cars. It snarled traffic for miles. When she finally got home, she found the housekeeper, Mary, had left a note. The coming storm had her scared. She had gone home. That was fine with Janie. She wanted to be alone. She planned on firing the woman anyway. She wandered through the house, her footsteps echoing in the empty rooms.

Janie went out to the patio. The wind now carrying rain mixed with snow blew against her face. She went to the gazebo, to the Spot. The storm grew more intense. Hailstones thudded across the lawn, then pounded on the gazebo's metal roof.

Then, from out in the middle of the lake, even above the howling of the wind and the beating of the hailstones, she heard its roar coming at her. It sprang with the speed of a lion leaping for its prey. The force of it blew over the gazebo and sent the lawn furniture scattering across the patio. She struggled to stand against it.



Suddenly, the terrible whirring as of hornets in winged flight. Ten thousand on the left, ten thousand on the right. She flung her arms

wildly about her head, pulling at her hair. The wind as sharp as a winter's knife, the ice flew at her, stinging and blinding her.



"No." She screamed. The word hurled back in her face. She tried again, and the wind shoved her scream down her throat. Her mouth filled with hail. Step by step, it drove her back. Ice crystals flew at her, battering her face, tearing her clothing. The roar was deafening. Janie retreated into the mansion.

She raced through the rooms, locking every door and window, closing every blind, shutter, and drape. She turned on the alarms. Then climbed the stairs and ran to the room in the back, the one with no windows, the one with the mementos. She went in and

shut the door behind her, looked around for a moment, turned off the light, sat down on the floor, and braced her back against the door.

And then she waited.

A storm had come to Chicago. Predicted, but surprising everyone when it arrived. It came out of the North, relentless as an ice sheet, as surely as a judgment from God.

Rain, snow, and ice smothered the mansion and the guest house, the patio, the yard, and even all that grew in it, or on it, or under it. It flooded the pool that had been emptied for the winter. It inserted itself into every crack and crevice. It filled every valley and covered every hill under a heavy, flat, grey shroud.

There was no thing that could hide from it. No thing that escaped it. No thing that was spared.

Then the sound of blades sharpening blades, the breaking and shattering of glass as the air was shredded and cut to pieces.

War drums boomed, and trumpets sounded as when the Nation of Israel took the Promised Land, God was now taking back the Earth. And the Earth shook, and the heavens thundered. And there was weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

And then it stopped.

Seven and a half billion souls held their breath.

And there was a stillness on the land.

Then the temperature plunged, and everything fell to 0 K.

Never again will I destroy all life by the waters of a flood.

That was true. This time it would be ice.



And so it ended as it had begun, the Earth empty and void and the devil waiting in the deep freeze.

Coda

The next day a notice was published in one of the Chicago newspapers.

The body of Kellie Heffernan was found earlier this morning. It appears Ms. Heffernan died from suffocation. Police say they do not suspect foul play as all doors and windows of the house she was in were securely locked, and there was no sign of forcible entry. The exact cause of death is still being investigated. A family member — her Aunt, stated Ms. Heffernan was distraught over the recent deaths of her mother and step-father, as well as of an older man who was her lover.



It is understood that Ms. Heffernan had a history of mental illness and had attempted suicide twice before.