



Cocktail /

Hour

Beyonds

Clam

Challenges

2014

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CHAPTER ONE

Acknowledgements

Andy and I would like to thank all of the entrants and the judges who make this little contest possible. Without the creativity and dedication of the writers and the generosity and patience of the judges, my dream of an annual writing contest would never happen.

We also want to give a special thanks to our resident artist, Pixiey Dust, who very lovingly created a special piece for this year's winners. I stole a small bit of it for this year's cover art. Pix - we love you, Darlin'!

Until next year,

Rev and Andy

CHAPTER TWO

Ain't Life Grand?

2014
Cocktail Hour
Bearded Clam
Challenge

ain't Life
GRAND?

AIN'T LIFE GRAND?

by Norsebard

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CHAPTER 1

So... here I am. Hung over, bruised, bleedin' and handcuffed in the back of a smelly police cruiser. Ain't this just the flippin' perfect endin' to a flippin' perfect Saturday? Up shit creek without a paddle. I lost my paddle and the rest of the flippin' canoe when I went a couple-a rounds against Darrell flippin' Yates, Jr. while fightin' for my girlfriend's honor and good name. Knee-deep in the shit... but that's okay. We go way back, shit and me. You might say we're old chums. Ain't life grand?

Three snotty kids are makin' faces at me through the window. The red and blue lights from the cluster on the roof paint their mugs in psyched-out colors. What the flip they lookin' at? Ain't they never seen no miserable suicide jockey with a bloodstained, white muscle shirt... hell yeah, I got muscles... a tattoo on my right arm that says 'I Heart Billie Jo', a rack I've only heard good things about, and a busted-up trucker hat advertisin' Bulldog Macks?

Hell, maybe I should start at the beginnin' so you'll know what the flip I'm talkin' about. Pop quiz, what do ya get with a Catholic mother and a drunkard father? Screwed up in the head, that's what... screwed up beyond repair. That's me... Rose Kowalski. Twenty-seven years old. In trouble for twenty of those years with this, that and the other. Spent a month in jail a couple-a years ago for punchin' a dumb dick's lights out. He had it comin'... he groped my boobs. My girlfriend's got dibs on gropin' them parts of me.

I had a stepbrother who was in the National Guard but he got blown all to hell by an IED in Eye-raq the last week before he was comin' home. We got a flag... I'd rather have my stepbrother tho' we hated each other's guts most of the time. He couldn't stand the fact that I could charm all the girls I wanted and he couldn't get nobody but Big-Ass Annie.

I got sick of the indoctrination so I moved out of my parents' trailer when I was sixteen. Now, I live in a trailer of my own outside of town with a sweet Harley-Davidson in the back yard and an even sweeter gal between the sheets inside. The Harley don't run too well right now, but I can assure y'all that my gal does. And hell, does she like to run. Her name's Billie Jo Tucker, she's twenty-seven like me, she's got green eyes and honey-blond hair... she's the sweetest cutie-pie in the entire county bar none, and after the first time we kissed I knew I wasn't goin' nowhere else. Hell yeah.

Me? I ain't never been called cute. Every other kind of four-letter word, sure, but never cute. I got blue eyes, hair that's nearly black, a mullet... hell yeah, I got a mullet... a fiery glare that can make grown men shit their pants when I get pissed off, and a well-developed sense of wantin' to protect my friends and my gal from the riff-raff crawlin' around town drinkin' beer and raisin' hell come payday. Of course, I'm one of 'em when the mood hits me.

But I had a job... and when I say 'had' I mean I lost it on this flippin' perfect day. I used to be a greasemonkey at Burton 'Toe' Cutter's auto repair shop. That's right, I'm a mechanic... and a damned good one, too. Ain't nothin' ever busted I couldn't fix with the right tools or my bare hands if I had to. I got many skills and I use 'em all the flippin' time.

Crap, listen to me yappin'. Ain't been yappin' this much since I got high on Mesca once. Before my Saturday turned to shit, it started out pretty dog-gone great...

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The relative peace and quiet inside the sixty-foot trailer home to Rose Kowalski and Billie Jo Tucker was shattered by the electronic alarm clock trying to beep its housing off

Not yet fully awake, Rose grunted and reached behind her to smack the offending appliance into next week. She only succeeded in smacking it onto the floor where it kept beeping and beeping and beeping. "Crap," she mumbled, trying to scoot away from the wall to reach down onto the floor so she could silence the alarm clock forever.

To reach the floor, she had to slip past Billie Jo's sleeping form. The smooth, bare thigh that her hand came into contact with underneath the covers proved too tempting, and she soon forgot all about the alarm clock.

The clock knew when it had lost the battle, and after a few more beeps, it gave up the unequal struggle and rolled over onto its side to die.

Getting up was the furthest from Rose's mind. It may have been six-thirty AM on a working Saturday - Burton 'Toe' Cutter made his employees work Tuesday through Saturday with Mondays off to compensate - but the nude form lying on her side next to Rose meant so infinitely more to her than work ever could.

Rose's hand crawled up the smooth thigh until it reached Billie Jo's world class rear that simply had to get a little attention. From there, the golden curls that Rose loved so dearly beckoned. Moving further on and upward, she slid her fingertips across the smooth tummy until they reached the underside of Billie Jo's breasts.

Before Rose could go any further, Billie Jo stirred and smacked her lips a couple of times. She grunted when she realized just what it was that had pulled her out of her dreams. "Honey, you lookin' for more? I thought I gave you plenty last night?" she mumbled, taking Rose's hand in her own.

"Aw, you sure did. Naw, you were naked, and I was naked and...

you know, beautiful things happen to naked people," Rose husked back, moving her hand up a little bit so she could reach - and cup - Billie Jo's left breast. While she spoke, she leaned in and began to nibble on the bare shoulder that was right under her nose.

Billie Jo grinned and was about to return the favor when she happened to look beyond her partner and spotted the empty shelf where the alarm clock was supposed to be. "Oh... what's... where's the alarm clock?"

"On the floor, darlin'. Who gives a flip?"

"What time is it?" Billie Jo said and leaned over the edge of the bed so she could see the clock face. "Holy shit, it's five past! Rose, we're late!"

"Ah, don't bother me none. C'mon, let's get down to business," Rose said and tried to hold onto her lover, but the lover in question had other plans.

Billie Jo swept her bare legs over the side of the bed. Taking the covers with her, she revealed Rose's nude form with the full but not heavy breasts, her toned torso and legs, the tattoo of a rose on the right side of her belly, and the neatly trimmed patch of black hair just south of her pierced navel.

"Awwww, baby," Rose whined, but it didn't work. Instead, she grinned as she watched Billie Jo's gorgeous globes wiggle across the bedroom floor and into the short hallway beyond it. When it didn't appear her partner was coming back at once, Rose scooted over to the edge of the bed and sat up.

She yawned and scratched herself here and there for a little while until she figured that she might as well get the day started. Her Lady Boxers - the most dumb-ass product name on the planet according to Rose, but she liked the fit nonetheless - were on the carpet where they had fallen the evening before, and she swiftly eased them on, remembering to slap the elastic band against her skin so she could make sure they were on tight.

Moments later, Billie Jo came back into the bedroom wearing an over-sized T-shirt that just barely covered her rear. She appeared to be looking around for something, but the item of her desire wasn't revealed until she reached down between the bed and the wall and found her old panties. Her expression proved their freshness wasn't too impressive, so she threw them into the laundry basket, opened the underwear drawer and found a new pair instead.

Rose grinned saucily at her squeeze's domestic routines. "Baby, I still haven't given up hope here..." she said and put out her arms.

The honey-blond Billie Jo grinned back and stepped into Rose's arms. " 'Morning, honey. Thank you for last night."

"Thank me? Hell, thank you! And good mornin'."

Billie Jo leaned in and gave Rose a strong kiss on the lips. "No, thank you. I was so tense all of yesterday, but you made me mellow out."

"Aw, that's me all right," Rose said with an impossibly wide grin. "Ain't no car ever made I can't fix, ain't no woman ever made I can't give some kicks!"

Billie Jo rolled her eyes and let out a condescending snort, but she took the sting out of her response by giving Rose another kiss on the lips. "When we get back from the Monster Truck festival tonight, honey, I promise I'll give you a little trip to heaven."

"Can't wait. Aw hell, I suppose I better get washed up and take a dump before I go to work," Rose said and got up from the bed. "You makin' coffee?"

"Yeah, it's on as we speak," Billie Jo said and pointed her thumb over her shoulder.

By the time Rose had completed a point-by-point shower - she always went first in the morning, but she knew they didn't have enough water for Billie Jo if she spent too much so she always kept to the basics - she shuffled back into the bedroom to get dressed.

It didn't take her long to put on her underwear, her white muscle shirt advertising a country rock artist from Canada called Buck 65, her black jeans with a brass belt buckle and finally her workboots. As she brushed her mullet in front of the mirror, she couldn't help but flex just to see if she still had it.

With everything in place, she grinned at her reflection and put the brush into one of the drawers before she mashed her indispensable Bulldog Mack trucker hat down onto her black locks. Once it was on just right, she took her wristwatch and her wallet and left the bedroom.

Tying the broad, vintage leather band around her wrist, she went past the diminutive kitchen where the coffee maker was still blubbering merrily. Before she took a mug and filled it to the brim, she cast a brief glance down the other end of the trailer where Billie Jo was sitting at a table eating breakfast and reading yesterday's Herald. "Baby, ya want some more coffee while I'm here?" she said, holding up her mug.

"No thanks! I'm good!" Billie Jo replied, pointing at her own mug.

"Hell yeah, ya are," Rose said with a chuckle as she put some coffee whitener into the mug and snatched a spoon to stir the whole thing.

Billie Jo folded down the newspaper and shot her partner a curious glance. "Whassat?" she said as she reached for her bowl of oatmeal.

"Oh, nothin'," Rose said, grinning in the sort of crooked, disarming way that had become her trademark. She discarded the idea of taking some of the oatmeal that was still in the pot on the stove and settled for cutting off a slice of bread. She quickly slapped some cold sausage onto it and carried everything into the living room.

"Musta been something?"

"Nah," Rose said and sat down on the opposite side of the table.

Billie Jo narrowed her eyes and briefly stuck out her tongue. "ANYway," she said as she scooped up a spoonful of oatmeal, "I just checked the news while you were showering. The weather's gonna be fine tonight. I think J.D.'s probably gonna have to get the water trucks out so we won't choke on the dust out at the fairgrounds."

"Mmmm," Rose said around a bite of the sausage-covered bread, "sounds like there's a buck or twenty to be made there. I'll give him a call later on."

Billie Jo smiled and returned to her newspaper and her oatmeal. Rose smiled back before she let her eyes drift across the small but comfortable trailer she had been invited into one fine evening three years previously.

Though she had made a little bit of a mark on the furniture and the decor, most of her old stuff from her old trailer had been too crappy to carry over so she had left everything for the nice fellow who had bought it.

Billie Jo's solid sense of what was cool and what was tacky was clearly visible by the elegant way the room was arranged. There wasn't anything out of place, and they had even managed to find a spot for Rose's old but functional LazyBoy armchair next to Billie Jo's rather more tasteful two-seater couch that she had been given by her mother when she had moved out.

The far wall of the trailer was a gallery with literally dozens of large and small snapshots, and honest, framed photographs of their families. Rose's family was only in one photo, a somber affair with four grim-faced people who looked like they could barely stop shouting at each other while the photographer had taken the picture. Unfortunately, it was an accurate reflection of the truth.

As always, Rose got the sour burps from looking at the photo of her family so she quickly looked away and searched for something else to

focus on. She found it in the shape of a faded, blue ribbon representing the only thing she had ever won anywhere: a relay running event that had taken place at the Harvest Fair in her hometown when she had been fifteen years old.

She had been too tall and too developed to run in the junior race so she had competed against the adults, some of whom weren't too pleased to see her there. The event had been sponsored by Pabst Blue Ribbon, and the prize for the winning team was a gift certificate for five cases of beer for each of the four runners. Her team won handsomely because of her long-legged stride, and she took home the gift certificate and the ribbon. Her father stole her winnings and drank all her beer, but at least she got to keep the blue ribbon.

Rose chuckled and returned to the present. She chewed down the rest of her breakfast and swallowed what was left in her coffee mug in a single gulp. "Baby, I'm done here so I think I'll go outside and admire my wheels for a little while. Just come out when ya ready to leave," she said, reaching over to tickle Billie Jo's hand that was still holding the newspaper from the day before.

Looking up, Billie Jo reached across the table to give Rose's hand a little squeeze. "Sure. Ten minutes and I'll be there... give or take," she said with a smile.

Rose opened the front door and shuffled down the portable two-step aluminum staircase that she had bought for seven dollars at a tailgate sale. Outside, everything looked like it always did. The trailer park wasn't the largest she had ever lived in, but it was a good and safe zone where kids could play with each other without worrying about getting snatched by the boogeyman.

There weren't any hedges between the trailers, but the next row wasn't too close so it was still possible to have some privacy. Even so, Billie Jo felt most secure with the Venetian blinds closed whenever it got dark outside and Rose respected that.

After nodding a greeting to both their closest neighbors, Dale One and Dale Two - who had a German Shepherd named Dale Junior just to add to the confusion - Rose strolled over to her pride and joy, her royal blue 1994 Harley-Davidson Heritage Soft Tail Classic that she had bought third-hand from a customer at Cutter's Auto Repair for five thousand dollars. The customer felt the motorcycle had become too old and uneconomical compared to the newer models, but it was everything Rose had ever dreamt of. Because of the loan she'd had to get to finance the Harley even after selling her truck to Burton Cutter, the bank still owned it, but she considered it her property.

Pulling the protective tarp aside, she ran her fingers across the dusty, sculpted tank before she swung her leg over the side of the hog and got comfortable in the saddle. With a grin the size of a 1974 Plymouth, she grabbed the high handlebars and imagined herself cruising down the open road with Billie Jo in the back with her hands and legs firmly wrapped around the rider. The sun would shine, the exhaust would roar, the miles would fly past as they went from nowhere in particular to somewhere else entirely, and everything would be all right in her world.

Rose was so engulfed by the Harley that she didn't even notice Billie Jo coming down the aluminum steps wearing red Capris and a red-and-white polka dotted blouse with a low neckline and short, puffy sleeves. Billie Jo had spent a good portion of a can of hair spray on her 'do and was looking the part of the drugstore sales clerk.

Billie Jo chuckled and tip-toed over to stand behind Rose. "Now that's what I call a shit-eatin' grin, honey," she whispered into Rose's ear. "You girls wanna be left alone to enjoy your afterglow or what?"

"Haw, haw... it's gonna be great, baby. It's gonna be so great," Rose said and reluctantly climbed off the Harley-Davidson. She soon had the protective tarp back on the hog and stepped away to dust off her hands.

"Tell me again why it can't run cleanly?" Billie Jo said, cocking her head as she looked at the covered Harley.

Rose put her arm around her partner's shoulders and began to stroll over to Billie Jo's red Chevrolet S10 truck. "Well, the fella I bought it

from said it ran rough. When I took the engine apart to give it a thorough check, I noticed shavin's in the number two cylinder. Looks like the piston is scrapin' against the wall. Can't have that."

"Noooo, of course not," Billie Jo said, clearly not understanding the finer points of engine management.

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The S10 was Billie Jo's so she drove despite Rose itching to get behind the wheel - after all, the proud Rose was a driver-kinda woman, not a passenger-kinda woman. The resulting pout and puppy dog eyes didn't work on Billie Jo who climbed up into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut without a second glance at her partner's impressive efforts.

When Billie Jo turned the ignition key, the engine came to life and purred like a whole pack of kittens. "Thank you for making it run so smoothly, honey," she said as she selected Drive and took off down the dusty, gravelly path to the paved road beyond the trailer park.

"You're welcome. It's purrin' just like you," Rose said and scooted closer to Billie Jo so she could at least cop a feel or two during the fifteen minute drive.

Almost at once, Billie Jo put her foot back on the brake and pulled the truck to a halt. "Hon... you know how I feel about doing something that could take the attention away from the road. Please..."

"Yeah, okay... sorry," Rose said and scooted back across the seat. When Billie Jo still didn't carry on, Rose realized it was because she hadn't put on her seat belt. Smiling, she did so and made sure the honey-blond driver heard the metallic click.

Billie Jo nodded her appreciation and continued down the gravelly path.

Once they made it to the intersection at the paved road, Billie Jo had to stop and wait for three eighteen-wheelers to go past, a black Mack RS with a silver tanker, a cabover Peterbilt with a regular reefer unit from Richard Olsen Hauling, and a GMC pulling a livestock trailer with three storeys worth of hogs.

"I wonder where they're going? We haven't seen three trucks together for years," Billie Jo said as she drove her S10 up onto the paved road to follow the three semis.

"To the fairgrounds, perhaps? Nah, not with live pigs. Dunno. Hey, ya wanna listen to some music?" Rose said and held a finger ready at the radio on the dashboard. When she got an affirmative grunt out of Billie Jo, she clicked the On button and waited for something to appear on the AM band.

"-Sinners will repent!" - *click* - "-but Jesus touched the crippled man's leg and he-" - *click* - "-version of the Holy Scriptures, yours for only-" - *click* - "-Joseph and the Virgin Mary-" - *click* - "-I was a sinner but Jesus saved me! Jesus saved me! Jesus can save you, too!" - *click*.

She finally found a music station where Johnny, Willie, Waylon and Kris sang about stealing a Silver Stallion, but just as she leaned back in the Chevrolet's comfortable seat to enjoy the music, the song faded out and the station went to commercials. "Okay, tryin' again," she said and clicked one more time. This time, she found a gal with a sexy whiskey voice singing about a Caroline Come-on, and that was more Rose's thing than the endless religious stations.

Agreeing with her partner's choice of music, Billie Jo reached over and turned up the volume to let the stirring country rock song boom through the S10's cabin.

Five minutes later, Rose noticed that Billie Jo slowly went off the gas and that she glanced a little too much in the rear view mirror. Rose couldn't get a good angle in the wing mirror that was set for the shorter driver, so she turned around in the seat and looked through the

Chevrolet's back window.

A cream police cruiser with several CB antennas and a blue-and-red light cluster on the roof followed them at thirty yards' distance, but it didn't seem too urgent. There was only one man in it, but Rose couldn't see if it was one of the deputies or Sheriff Holstein himself

Billie Jo had the driver's side window rolled down, and though the Chevrolet's own engine and the three eighteen-wheelers they were following made plenty of noise, they could clearly hear the familiar sound of a high performance V8 come roaring towards them from somewhere up ahead. Moments later, a gray, black and red '84 Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS that Rose had worked hard on tuning to perfection came flying past them going the other way - straight past the police cruiser.

"Aw! Coop! Jimmy Cooper, ya dumb dick! The law is right there, man!" Rose said and thumped a fist into the seat. Behind the S10, the police cruiser came to a hard stop as the Monte Carlo roared the other way on its fat BF Goodrich radials. Soon, the officer spun around and set off after the speeding performance car with the siren wailing and the lights in the roof cluster blinking red and blue.

Billie Jo grunted and slowed down even more as they came up to the Lincoln city limits. "And that's why I only ever go at forty-five," she said as the S10 went past the sign that someone had used for shotgun practice.

At face value, Lincoln wasn't much of a town. It was really only a single street - appropriately named Main Street - with a long line of two-storey buildings on one side, and the gas station, Cutter's Auto Repair Shop, the county court house, the jailhouse, the Veteran's Memorial Park and three churches on the other.

Each of the two-storey buildings had a store of some kind at street level, but the crisis years and the growing trend of rural depopulation meant that nearly half had been boarded up. Only the basic functions remained, like a high quality mom-and-pop diner, a seedy Bar & Grill where the riff-raff gathered every Saturday night, an all-purpose drugstore where Billie Jo worked, a hardware store, a few clothes

boutiques and a large thrift store that had the most business of them all.

In between the stores, several alleys went down to the few houses built beyond Main Street, but they were as deserted as the others.

Billie Jo slowed down and pulled over to the curb in front of the drugstore. After she had turned off the engine, she unbuckled and reached out for Rose's thigh. "Now we can cuddle," she said with a grin, inviting Rose over by wagging an index finger.

"Aw yeah! Except... now we're parked outside where ya work, baby. They'll think I'm takin' advantage of ya," Rose said with a cheeky grin. The pull of her partner became too much to resist, and she scooted over and gave Billie Jo a thorough see-ya-later kiss right on the lips. "Have a nice day, baby. See ya at lunch?"

"But of course... I'll come over with something tasty like I always do," Billie Jo replied around Rose's succulent lips.

Rose made her presence felt by clawing Billie Jo's red Capris. "Yeah? Can't get no more tasty than these here tight pants, baby."

"Oh, you're such a goof today, Rose Kowalski..."

"But I'm your goof, honey-bunny," Rose said and claimed Billie Jo's lips in another kiss, though this one was far sweeter and more heartfelt.

Crossing Main Street, Rose turned back and waved at Billie Jo who was waiting in the door to the drugstore for just such an eventuality - it wasn't much of a surprise given they did the same thing five days a week.

Whistling through her teeth, it didn't take long for her to reach Cutter's Auto Repair Shop. The rundown and dilapidated driveway to the garage always gave her an acute case of depression. She knew

Burton Cutter had plenty of money in the bank, but why he didn't invest some of it into fixing the house, the pavement and the busted-up rolling door that was smeared in graffiti was beyond her.

After taking a brief glance at the three old cars for sale that were parked in front of the building, she went around the corner behind the dilapidated house and moved past the garage itself. A low hut for the employees had been put up in the courtyard, and she kicked the door open to step inside - not out of malice, but because it was the only way to open the darn thing.

Inside the hut, the conditions weren't much better apart from the somewhat new A/C unit that one of Rose's colleagues had traded his entire collection of Chrome Wheelz for. The small office she walked into first was a study in non-descript with its bare walls - save for an empty message board and the ubiquitous Playmate of the Year poster - beat-up metal desk and old swivel-chair where the cushion was so threadbare the person sitting on it should watch out for sneak attacks by the springs.

The larger room beyond the office saw a bit more life with several colorful NASCAR and wrestling posters adorning the walls, a mismatched couch arrangement with three different chairs and a broken couch, and a severely scratched coffee table where one of the four legs had been replaced by a spent can of Quaker State motor oil.

On a sideboard up against the wall, a coffee machine was working its magic next to a water cooler, but even that aroma couldn't overpower the familiar smells of oil, gasoline, rubber and old exhaust fumes that came from the garage itself which was connected to the recreational room by a sliding door with a frosted glass window.

Rose looked around for her colleagues but didn't see any of them anywhere. Shrugging, she shuffled over to the sideboard and took a paper cup that she held up under the water cooler. While she waited for the cup to be filled, she glanced up at the posters and found a few old Playmates, a bumper sticker that said *'Vote for Dubya 2000,'* another one that said *'I got a shotgun. You got a problem?'* and a promotional photo from GM Goodwrench of Dale Earnhardt winning the 1998 Daytona 500.

Movement at the sliding door behind her made her turn around and nod a greeting to Johnny Lee Norton, an early twenty-something fellow in olive green cargo pants and a black Lone Star Apparel T-shirt.

A good five inches shorter than Rose and skinny as a greyhound, Johnny Lee was the owner of an impressive mullet and a slightly less impressive mustache that he tried hard to grow though it never seemed to want to go beyond a row of dark, fuzzy downs. "Hey, Rose," he said in a fair voice as he reached out to thump fists with his older colleague.

"Hey, Johnny Lee," Rose said and duly thumped the younger man's fist. "What up?"

"Eh, not much. Darrell junior called 'bout five minutes ago and said he was gonna come by with his Caddy."

Rose looked up towards the ceiling of the hut and let out a groan at the news that everyone's favorite fancy boy was coming over. To hide her annoyance, she gulped down the cool water and crumpled up the paper cup. "Hell, what's he done to Big Daddy Yates' wheels now? Busted a headlight again? Remember when he did that? Mercy sakes, I never thought I'd hear a grown man whine like that."

"I remember," Johnny Lee said with a chuckle. He scratched his ear as he thought back to the embarrassing situation.

A honking outside pulled the two mechanics back to the present. "Aw hell..." Rose said with a drawn-out groan, "I know that honk... Junior's here already. Where the hell's Harold when we need 'im?"

"Dunno, Rose. He ain't called in sick or nothin'," Johnny Lee said with a shrug.

"Burton's in his office?"

"He was when I got here, yeah. Looked like he'd stay there, too. He

was playing solitaire."

Rose looked at her younger colleague for a few seconds. She considered the possibility of telling him to deal with Darrell Yates, Jr., but knew it would be unfair to the young man. Groaning, she patted Johnny Lee's shoulder and pulled the sliding door aside so she could tackle the beast head-on.

CHAPTER 2

I gotta break in here. Now, y'all probably thinkin' that I'm bein' too hard on young Mista Yates, that I'm bein' jealous of his money... scratch that, his Daddy's money... of his fancy Cadillac Escalade and of his slick appearance that usually includes a huntin' jacket with them fancy patches on his elbows and a dog-gone ascot of all things. The short answer is, no I ain't.

He and his high-falootin' family 've been in this area for decades. They're New Money from up north somewhere. I don't give a shit how they made their fortunes, but I do give a shit how they're treatin' the rest of us hard-workin' folks here. And they're treatin' us like their flippin' housemaids sometimes.

Naw, I ain't jealous of him. I hate his flippin' guts with a vengeance, tho'. And ya know why?

'Cos he made a move on my cutie-pie, that's why. Sure 'nuff, at last year's Harvest Fair, he slipped his sticky fingers onto my Billie Jo's ass cheeks and gave 'em a little squeeze. Now, I told ya I punched a dumb dick's lights out for gropin' my boobs so y'all can imagine what I was gonna do to Darrell Yates, Jr. for doin' that to my girl.

At the very least, I was gonna tie his naked ass to the flagpole down in the Memorial Park and let him hang there upside-down for a couple-a hours. Failin' that, I was gonna send him a rattlesnake by registered mail. I was gonna do plenty of things.

Trouble was I didn't do a damn thing.

Why? Or, more to the point, why not?

Money, son. If I beat Darrell Junior to a pulp - and I still wanna, don't get me wrong - he'd call Big Daddy Yates who'd call Burton Toe-Cutter who'd fire my ass so fast my flippin' feet wouldn't touch the ground.

It ain't the job as such, it's the money. If I don't got no money, I can't support Billie Jo. If I can't support Billie Jo, I ain't worthy of her. It's really quite that simple. With her workin' at the drugstore, she already makes more greenery than I do, but I usually get enough tips and shit on the side to make up that deficit.

So I did nothin'... except turn into a yellow-bellied coward. Now, I regret the decision of doin' nothin', tho Billie Jo did give me one hell of a sweet Louisiana Hayride later that night for actin' all mature and holdin' back like a grown-up and shit.

ANYhow, now you know where Darrell Junior and me are at. Ain't life grand?

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Inside the garage, Rose pressed the red button and watched the electric rolling door slide upwards with jerking steps and plenty of squeaking from the chain drive. The old Plexiglas windows rattled and shook like they didn't know whether to stay in or fall out.

Though Burton Cutter wouldn't spend a dime on the exteriors, the tools and accessories they had at their disposal were clean and in good shape. The pneumatic lifts all worked as did the engine cranes and the exhaust hoses - which wasn't a given in that business.

While the door rolled up, Rose glanced around the near-empty garage. The only vehicle in for service was a truck whose owner had

abused the automatic transmission to the point where it had stripped a cog. A new auto-box would cost more than the value of the truck so they had been commissioned to do a full renovation of the old unit.

The thirty-three year old Darrell Yates, Jr. was waiting outside in his bronze Cadillac Escalade. As soon as the door had opened enough for the tall vehicle to fit through, he rolled the expensive SUV into the garage and up to the nearest lift like he was in a hurry.

Rose took a step back and let out a long whistle at the sorry state of the once-pristine automobile. The front left of the bumper, the left headlight cluster, the near-side fender and the fancy two-tone lightweight wheel all bore visible battle scars. The wheel wobbled as Junior drove it into the garage so she figured the suspension or the steering rod had been damaged too.

Darrell jumped out of the SUV and rubbed his weak chin several times. As always, he was dressed like he was late for a meeting at the Country Club: dark blue pants, a dark green three-quarter length hunting blazer with fashionable leather patches on the elbows, and finally a cream-colored shirt with wide lapels. His trademark ascot was there as well but the fancy rag was all askew around his throat. His blond hair was heavily gelled as it invariably was, but most unusually, there were several strands out of place.

"Howdy, Junior," Rose said and pushed her trucker hat back from her forehead. "Boy, you sure as shit made a mess of it this time. Whatcha do, misjudge the distance to the wall between the garages out at the mansion?"

Darrell gave her a sideways glance before he looked back at his SUV with a face that slowly turned redder.

"Ya did, didntcha? Mercy, Junior. Hey..." - *sniff, sniff* - "are you loaded? What the hell, man, it ain't even eight o'clock in the flippin' mornin' and ya already hoppin' on brew!"

"I didn't go to bed last night, okay? It's not early, it's late," Junior said and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his blazer.

"Yeah, okay," Rose said and scratched her forehead. "I ain't gonna find a big-city bearded clam sleepin' it off in the back, am I?"

Darrell clearly didn't know what that meant so he turned towards the mechanic and shot her a puzzled glance. "A wh- what? What's a beard-

"A hooker, Junior. You ain't got no hooker in there, do ya?"

"Lawrd, no!" the man said and immediately put his hands in the air like he was trying to escape from a fate worse than a firing squad.

"Lawrd, no... of course not," Rose mocked, but Darrell was too upset to notice. "Ain't nothin' we got in stock. None of it... but I can beat out the dents in the bumper and the fender awright. Remove the shards and change the bulbs. That sorta shit. I can fix it, but it's gonna cost ya. Caddy parts are expensive. That two-tone wheel alone's gonna cost ya plenty."

"The price doesn't matter," Junior croaked.

Rose grunted and shot him a dark glare. "Yeah, whatever ya say, Junior. That front wheel's another story, tho'. It wobbled when ya drove in here so I'd say the suspension is screwed all to hell."

"It wobbled quite badly on my way down here..."

"I'll bet it did," Rose said and crouched down next to the wheel in question to see for herself. She didn't even need to yank it around all that hard for it to wobble on the axle.

Junior dug into a pocket to find a kerchief that he used to dab his ruddy brow. "But you can fix it, right?"

"Hell yeah, I can. Ya forgettin' who ya talkin' to?"

"No, no..." Junior said and looked around. "Today?"

"Hell yeah."

"Good. I'd, uh... like you to do that. Thank you."

Rose chuckled darkly and tapped her knuckles against the dented fender. The buckled sheet metal didn't pose a problem for her, even if they didn't have the items in stock - they had a great sledgehammer that was simply begging to be let loose on such an expensive vehicle. "Why, ya certainly welcome, Mista Darrell Yates, Jr.," she said in a voice that just crept over the line and into mocking her customer.

Darrell didn't notice. Instead, he looked around for something that Rose didn't know what was and couldn't be bothered to ask about. "Uh... Rose... how can I get home? I'm supposed to have lunch with Mr. Yates in a little while."

Rose knew Junior always referred to his father that way; the only person the young whippersnapper treated with any kind of respect - although it was most likely borne of fear rather than hero worship. "Shit, I dunno, Junior. Ask Mr. Cutter. Maybe he can loan you one of the three cars out front. I know the chocolate brown Dodge Coronet's gassed up and ready to go."

"That old, filthy piece of seventies junk? Who the hell would buy such a crap-mobile, anyhow? It's already dead, you might as well take it apart now."

The muscles in Rose's jaw worked hard at Junior's words but she succeeded in keeping her gall inside. "Yeah, well, that car you call a crap-mobile could be a good set of wheels for plenty o' people, Junior... if they could afford it."

"Yeah? What's the price? Twenty-eight dollars and fifty cents? Ah, to hell with that. Can't you drive me home, Rose?"

"I ain't got no wheels, Junior. Sorry," Rose said with a broad, ya-ain't-gettin'-no-favors-outta-me kind of grin.

Darrell seemed to accept the defeat as he stuffed his hands down his blazer pockets and shuffled around on the spot. "All right," he eventually said, nodding. "I'll ask Burton."

"You do that. And while you do that, I'll get started on ya Caddy," Rose said and strode over to pull the nearest toolbox closer to the Escalade.

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An hour and a half later, the garage was bustling after the third mechanic, Harold Young, had brought in a Toyota Tundra hanging off the back of their wrecker truck.

Rose, Johnny Lee and Harold were busy working on their various projects, and the spirits were generally high save for the occasional inventive cussword when a wrench slipped or a bolt was rusted onto a brake rotor.

A boom box was blasting away playing country hits from a home-made CD, and Harold and Rose sang along to the old classics. You Are My Sunshine, Blanket On The Ground, Rhinestone Cowboy and The Most Beautiful Girl in particular were big sing-alongs. Johnny Lee was too young to know many of the songs though he had actually helped Harold with finding them on YouTube, converting the files and compiling the CD.

When a gal with a sexy voice sang about the night they drove old Dixie down, Rose put away the pneumatic wrench and wiped her damp brow with the sleeve of her black, protective jacket that she wore over her white muscle shirt. The dented fender was ready to come off the Cadillac, but she needed a break before she went on. "Hey, Harold?" she said, leaning against the Escalade's door.

"Yeah?" the third mechanic said, moving back from the Toyota's open hood holding a badly frayed V-belt. Harold Young was a handsome man in his late fifties with a neatly kept white beard and graying hair. On the left side of his face from high on his cheek and up to his receding hairline above his temple, oddly colored skin offered

visual proof that he had been too close to a bad gasoline fire a few years earlier.

"Would it be possible to get a copy of that CD? That's some mighty fine music right there... just the thing Billie Jo likes to dance to on a Saturday night," Rose said, wiping her sweaty brow on her sleeve.

"I hafta ask the genius first," Harold said with a braying laugh. "Johnny Lee...?"

"Sure thing, fellas," the young man said, sitting at a table where he was using a plastic washbowl and a soft brush to wash and scrub the cogs he had taken out of the automatic transmission. "I made it as an MP3-disc to maximize the music capacity dontchaknow. It's got a hundred and fifty megs on it so it'll only take me a minute or two to make you a copy."

Rose nodded a thank you but her blank stare showed that she was somewhat puzzled by the young man's comments. "Aw yeah, sounds great, Johnny Lee, but... I ain't too sure 'bout that MP3 stuff. Ya think my old CD player will play that?"

Johnny Lee stopped what he was doing and looked at his older colleague to see if she was joking. When he established she wasn't, he grunted and returned to his brushing. "Well, I could make it as a couple-a old-fashioned CD-Rs instead, Rose," he said and briefly looked up.

"Old-fashioned? I'll give you an old-fashioned ass-whoopin'," Rose mumbled under her breath in a good-natured way. She grinned at the young man and prepared to return to the fender.

From the boom box, Trouble In Mind, Willie Nelson's uptempo country rock song with Bonnie Raitt and Leon Russell filled the garage and made Rose's thoughts drift away. The fender was soon off and put to the side. When she had a good view of the left front suspension and steering rod, she scrunched up her face at the mess - it was quite literally bent way out of shape.

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The rest of the morning went by fast, and the hands on the wall-mounted clock didn't show signs of slowing down at all. The lunch break was looming large, but Rose was too busy with a rusted bolt to pay any attention to that.

The suspension bolt had been given nearly a whole can of WD40 but it still wouldn't budge. Not even when she had found the special wrench with the two-foot long grip could she get it to move, and there simply wasn't room to poke the pneumatic wrench in there.

Grinding her jaw, she shook her arms to get them to relax for the next attempt. She made a vow to herself to give it her all one last time - and if it still wouldn't budge, she'd call it quits and head for the recreational room where Johnny Lee and Harold were already eating.

She put both hands on the two-foot long wrench and really put her back into her task. Every muscle she had in her arms and upper body - and she had plenty - flexed and were tightened as she pulled the wrench towards her.

With an agonizing creak, the bolt finally gave up the ghost and became loose in a shower of dirt and flakes of rust. "Wa-hey! Gotcha... ya ratty piece o' crap!" Rose cried as she nearly fell flat on her butt when the resistance suddenly disappeared.

The victory marked the end of the first part of her working day, and the grin on her face as she strolled over to the toolbox to deposit the wrench into the special foam-covered drawer and hang her protective jacket on a hook showed that she was looking forward to the lunch break - or perhaps to the special visit she would get during said lunch break.

Inside the recreational room, Johnny Lee and Harold were sitting at the couch arrangement, comparing the lunch packs made for them by their mother and wife, respectively. Johnny Lee had been given a soggy egg salad on rye that he was eager to trade with one of Harold's

BLT sandwiches, but he couldn't get a deal.

When Rose entered the room, Harold scooted to the side on the old, broken couch so the tall woman could have her regular seat. Much to Johnny Lee's disappointment, Harold started eating from the BLT sandwich that the younger man had had his sights set on. "Didya get the bolt free?" Harold said around a big bite.

"Sure did. The li'l bastard was stuck fast, but I got it," Rose said and flexed her biceps just to show that she was still the boss. When her flexing only drew a *pf* and a dismissive wave from her colleagues, she grinned and leaned over the edge of the couch to take one of their old wrestling magazines to kill time until Billie Jo would come over.

Harold grinned back and took another bite of his sandwich while making sure Johnny Lee noticed.

"Johnny Lee," Rose said and pinned her younger colleague to the spot with an intense blue gaze, "you're just dyin' to ask me a question, aintcha?"

The young man chuckled nervously and held up his soggy egg salad. "When Billie Jo swings by with your lunch, I was just wondering if you would trade."

"Naw," Rose said decisively, crossing her arms over her chest though she was mindful of not wrinkling the pretty pictures in the wrestling magazine. A cheeky grin split her face in two as she took in Johnny Lee's hang-dog expression.

Following the conversation, Harold grinned broadly before he took another bite out of his sandwich. "So, how 'bout the big wreck at Talladega, huh?"

Before Rose had time to answer, her eyes became fixated on the pair of tight, red Capris that entered the recreational room from the small office out front. The Capris were soon followed by a red-and-white polka-dotted blouse and the rest of Billie Jo, but Rose had a hard time tearing her eyes away from the lower part of her girlfriend.

A heartbeat later, she jumped up from the old couch and closed the distance between them. "Hey, baby. Wow, I'd forgotten how flippin' great you looked today," Rose husked, leaning in to steal a little kiss as the very first thing she did.

"Oh, we have an audience, honey," Billie Jo said quietly, glancing around Rose's shoulder at Johnny Lee and Harold who both looked down in a hurry.

"And I got the best gal in the land. Don't tell me I can't kiss 'er."

Billie Jo smiled and held up the paper bag that she had bought at the mom-and-pop diner next to the drugstore where she worked. "Got you a pork roast sandwich with fried onions... an apple... and a coffee to go. The good stuff"

"Aw, hell yeah. No pork rinds?"

"No!"

"Ah, don't matter. You're my savior, ya know that?" Rose said and pulled Billie Jo in for a little cuddle. "Been workin' all mornin' on Junior's Caddy. Damn thing playin' hard to get, dontchaknow. Makin' me work for my money."

Billie Jo tried to look beyond the sliding door at the offending vehicle, but she couldn't see anything. "I'll have to take your word for it, honey. So... you wanna go for a little walk or something? I thought we could eat out back by the wrecks?" she said with a sweet smile that proved that eating their sandwiches and drinking their coffee weren't the only things on her mind.

Rose's only reply was a broad grin. One of her two colleagues at the scratched coffee table - she wasn't sure which though she suspected it was Harold - let out a wolf call and a few kissy sounds, but for once, she decided to let it go. "Yeah, we could do that. Harold, hold the fort 'til I get back."

"Sure thing, Rose," the older man said and crumpled up his spent napkin.

Johnny Lee was eyeing Harold's other BLT sandwich, but the older man bit into it before the junior mechanic could even open his mouth to inquire about its trade-ability.

Soon, Rose opened the back door and held out her hand to give Billie Jo something to hold onto down the two rickety steps. The back pasture had been converted into a wrecking yard where close to a dozen cars and trucks had found their final resting place. Rusted, dented and stripped down to their bare essentials, the vehicles were nothing but hollow reminders of a bygone age.

Tall weeds were growing everywhere between and even inside the cars, but nobody seemed too bothered by it. The yawning hoods and trunks, and the gaping holes where the headlights and the windows used to be gave the wrecking yard a ghoulish appearance.

A '47 Buick Super rubbed shoulders with an '65 Oldsmobile Cutlass that in turn was resting against a '71 Ford LTD's trunk. The bed of a '57 Chevrolet Half-Ton Task Force pickup truck carried a heavier load in the afterlife than it ever had on the road, namely three large truck engines complete with radiators and smokestacks.

The newest car in the yard was a Ford Taurus where the severely shortened front end was covered by a tarp after having been mostly ripped off in an accident just outside of town. The formerly green Taurus still had miles of police tape tied around it, warning people to stay clear.

Looking at the Taurus, Rose had a cold shiver trickle down her back as she remembered how the accident site had looked when she had driven the wrecker truck out there to help the deputies clean up the mess. Shuddering, she steered Billie Jo over to a picnic table with integrated benches that stood like an oasis in the middle of the vehicular graveyard.

Before they sat down, Rose came to a halt and offered Billie Jo a look of such love that the shorter woman had no choice but to stand up on tip-toes and claim the succulent lips of her taller partner. "Hey, baby," Rose whispered, "I've missed you. It's been far too long..."

"It's been five hours," Billie Jo whispered back, winking.

"Far too long. I wanna caress your cheek but my hands are too dirty. How 'bout I just kissed ya senseless instead?"

Billie Jo closed her eyes and cocked her head in such a way that Rose had perfect access to her lips. "Works for me," she husked, but that was all she had time to say.

Once they were both seated - Rose brushed off the bench where Billie Jo was to place her delicate rear - the mechanic took the paper bag and distributed the lunch items on the tabletop.

"Oh yeah, this smells so fine, baby," she said and unwrapped the pork roast sandwich and the plastic cup with the coffee-to-go. Before Billie Jo had time to answer, Rose stuffed the sandwich into her mouth and began to chew on it like she hadn't eaten for weeks.

"So, are you ready for the big event, hon?" Billie Jo said and unwrapped her own ham-and-cheese sandwich. When it was all lined up, she popped the lid on her own cup so she wouldn't have to drink through the little plastic spout that always made the brown liquid dribble down her chin.

"Aw yeah, ya betcha!"

"I spoke to Mr. Thorkildsen, and he said the monster trucks made a really great show last weekend down in Carlotta. They may even do a long-jump record attempt tonight if the ground's up for it."

"Aw, that's so flippin' cool to watch," Rose said around her

sandwich. When she had gulped down the next big bite, she reached across the table and clawed the back of Billie Jo's free hand. "Can't flippin' wait, baby. Heard there's gonna be a cheerleader dancin' display and a band playin' and shit."

"So it says on the billboard. They're called Four Flat Tires, a boogie rock band from Texas," Billie Jo said and took another sip of her coffee. "I can't say I've ever heard of 'em!"

"Nah, me neither. But it's gonna be great. We are gonna dance, ain't we?"

"Well-"

"Ain't we?" Rose said with the worst puppy dog eyes ever. When even that didn't seem to make an impression on Billie Jo, she stuck out her lower lip and cocked her head.

Billie Jo leaned her head back and let out a loud laugh at the pitiful sight. "Well, all right, then. Honey, you're such a big baby sometimes. But I ain't gonna be no easy girl tonight, no Sirree. You gonna pamper me plenty. I want popcorn and cotton candy-"

"Baby, I'll buy you the world," Rose husked, once again clawing Billie Jo's free hand.

"Don't need the world when I got you, Rose," Billie Jo husked back. "So... how does the rest of your day look?"

Rose smiled broadly at the undeniability of the Good Thing going on between her and the honey-blonde, green-eyed doll sitting opposite her. The smile turned into a shit-eating grin that made her head too large for her trucker hat. With a well-placed flexing of her biceps, she moved the hat back from her forehead. "Aw, I'm gonna whip Junior's Caddy back into shape and take it for a test run if there's time. Nothin' major. We'll have plenty of time to get to the fairgrounds before the crowd builds."

"Good... good. Don't forget to eat your apple, dear," Billie Jo said

and pointed at the fruit.

"I won't, dear," Rose said with a broad grin as she buffed the apple on her muscle shirt and sunk her teeth into it.

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The hours went by with leaps and bounds and the hands on the clock crept closer and closer to four P.M. After recruiting Harold and Johnny Lee to give her a helping hand, Rose had managed to get Junior's Escalade ready in time - though the worst was still to come for her.

Gulping, she stepped into the non-descript hallway opposite the door to the recreational room. Before she went all the way down to Burton 'Toe-' Cutter's office, she buffed her boots on the calves of her black jeans, but everything was equally filthy so it didn't really work.

She remembered to take off her trucker hat and fluff her mullet before she raised a hand to knock on the white door.

'Enter!' a gruff male voice said from the other side.

Rose resisted the urge to slap some confidence into her cheeks and settled for depressing the door handle. The interior of the office wasn't too impressive considering Burton Cutter's standing in the community, but at least his metal desk was large.

The four walls of the office were all decorated differently. The wall with the door opposite the desk saw a whole range of promotional stickers and posters from the various oil companies and spare part OEMs they worked with, and the next wall was covered by shelves filled with stacks of magazines, workshop manuals and color-coded binders.

The third wall was less interesting, merely the window to the rundown courtyard that was concealed by a pair of drawn Venetian blinds, but the fourth wall - which was behind the desk - was sporting a huge photostat of Cutter's Auto Repair Shop taken from high above.

Rose remembered the day well. Cutter had rented a helicopter and a professional aerial photographer to take promotional photos of the garage and the rest of Lincoln, but the shiny metal bird in the sky had made so much racket it had been near-impossible to get any work done.

The bossman himself, Burton Cutter, sat at the center of the web like a big spider waiting for a fly to fall into his trap. In his early sixties - and surprisingly slim for such an important man - Burton was the owner of a ruddy face, a thick mustache and a pair of bushy eyebrows that time had turned white. The rest of his hair was graying with several patches of white that matched the western suit he was wearing, making him look like a town boss of yore.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Cutter," Rose said and closed the door behind her. As her boss grunted something unintelligible in her general direction, she moved over to stand behind one of the two chairs by the desk.

"Sit down, Rose. Ya givin' me a crimp in my neck," Burton grumbled into his mustache.

"Yes, Mr. Cutter," Rose said and sat down on the chair she had been standing behind. The uncomfortable chair was too low for her tall frame, and she had to glance upwards to see Burton Cutter in the eye - something she had always suspected was intentional. "Mr. Cutter, Mr. Yates Junior's Cadillac is ready. I replaced a bent steerin' rod and recalibrated the trackin'. It's as good as new and all ready to go. I only need your permission to take it off the lot so I can give it a li'l drive around town... ya know, to make sure it's okay," she said, wringing her Bulldog Mack trucker hat between her strong fingers.

Burton locked eyes with his employee but it only lasted for a very short time. The permission came with a curt nod and a grumble that sounded quite similar to "All right, but don't use it to drive your girlfriend out to the fairgrounds."

"Thank you, Mr. Cutter," Rose said and got up from the hard chair.

She couldn't get out fast enough, and soon closed the office door behind her.

In the garage, Harold came towards Rose with an opened can of beer in his hand. "Here ya go, Rose... the day's over," he said, holding out the can.

Rose groaned and slapped her hat back down onto her black locks. "Much obliged, Harold, but my day ain't quite over yet. I gotta take the Caddy out for a spin. Junior's gonna have my ass on the broiler if he can't get the Esca back until Tuesday."

Harold looked at the can and then back at his younger colleague. "Well, if ya don't want it...?"

"Naw, it's all yours, chum," Rose said with a chuckle. On her way over to the Cadillac, she gave Harold's shoulder a little squeeze to let him know she was grateful for the offer, even if she'd had to turn it down.

After putting a protective cover on top of the Escalade's pristine seat so she wouldn't stain it with her filthy jeans, she started the smooth-running engine and reversed out of the garage with great caution. While she was going backwards up the driveway, she was only going at five miles an hour so she wouldn't get any nasty surprises.

Once out on Main Street, she selected Drive and waited for the road to clear up. Just before she hit the gas, she could see Billie Jo's green orbs and hear her sweet voice reminding her to always buckle up. Rose reached for the belt with a grin. "Aw, the things you do when you're in love... unbe-fickin'-lievable," she said and clicked the seat belt in place. Then she mashed the gas and set off with a wild roar - after all, Junior could afford the gas bill.

She quickly reached the other end of Main Street. Everything in conjunction with her repairs had worked just fine, and as she rolled the driver's side window down and leaned halfway out of it to listen for

any unwanted sounds, a broad grin spread over her features out of sheer pride for a job well done. Mashing the gas again, she jerked the steering wheel left and right to test for any possible play, but everything felt all right.

Ahead of her, a little girl in a pink dress saw something interesting on the other side of Main Street by the Baptist Church and ran out into the traffic without looking.

Rose saw the danger and knew she had to stand on the brakes to stop in time even though she was only doing thirty-five. The world seemed to slow down to a crawl as she moved her foot to the wide pedal and pressed down. As the heavy SUV dipped hard under braking, a can of beer shot out from under the driver's seat and got lodged underneath the brake pedal.

Crying out in surprise when the SUV suddenly didn't slow down at all, she raised her boot and slammed it back onto the brake pedal with such force the errant can burst at the seams and sent a shower of golden beer and white foam all over the interior of the Escalade - including every last inch of Rose.

As the beer and the foam splashed onto her face and got into her eyes, she spun the steering wheel to the right to steer away from the little girl. Blinded, she had no idea where she was going, but a moment later, the Escalade barreled over a curb and smashed head-on into a light pole that ended up three feet into the engine compartment.

When the expensive vehicle wrecked with a sound akin to two tin cans being smashed together - and a gurgling groan from the crushed radiator and engine - all seventeen airbags deployed at once, as did the device that tightened the seat belts.

By the time the heavy SUV stopped rocking around the light pole, Rose's ears were ringing like crazy, her nose was tickling from the cordite used in the airbags, and her chest was aching from the rough treatment it had been given by the seat belt.

She leaned back in the seat and looked around in a daze. Though the

windshield had been reduced to a jigsaw puzzle, she just caught a glimpse of the little girl in the pink dress running away from the accident.

"Thank you, Lawrd. I owe you one," she croaked while wiggling her various body parts to see if she still had two of everything she needed to have two of- feet, legs, arms, hands and boobs.

With her feet free of the pedals, she kicked at the exploded can and shook her head slowly. "Darrell flippin' Yates Junior... you son of a bitch," she croaked, wiping her wet face with a hand that trembled more than she had expected.

Her trucker hat had been blown off in the accident, but before she could look for it down among the beer suds, the driver's side door was yanked open and Sheriff Seymour Holstein appeared wearing a facial expression that only turned darker when his nostrils were assaulted by the easily recognizable smell of beer.

CHAPTER 3

I know what you nice folks out there must be thinkin'... that this was the low point of my day. Naw. Not even close, 'cos that little girl was able to get home to her mama in one piece and with a smile on her lips. Beyond that, I can safely say that, lookin' back, havin' that wreck didn't even register a One on the shit-o-meter.

Sure, I trashed Junior's Caddy, but hey... 'scuse me while I wipe my dry eyes, man. Darrell Yates, Jr. got money crawlin' outta his ass, he can just buy another damn Escalade... or coax Daddy into givin' him one.

Naw, this wasn't the low point of my day. My low point of the day, week, month, year and flippin' existence was just around the corner. But more of that later. Hey, I explicitly said that shit and me were bosom buddies. I never said this would be a barrel o' laughs, did I?

When I wrapped Junior's Caddy around that light pole, I gotta admit my life flashed before my eyes. I saw my dear old stepbrother kickin' me around for somethin' I don't even remember what was. I saw dear old mommy slappin' me silly for somethin' else I don't wanna remember... and I saw dear old daddy givin' me the ass-whoopin' of my fourteen-year old life for bein' caught neckin' with the cute daughter of our old next door neighbor. I guess she got intrigued by my attitude. She asked me what it was like to kiss a girl and I said, hey darlin', why dontcha just try?

We didn't have a woodshed, but if we had, dear old daddy would have dragged me behind it and beat the snot out of me with a piece of firewood... or the ax, whichever was closest. As it was, his fists and his belt said more to me that afternoon than his lips ever had.

I knew who I was from a young age. I know you're supposed to have teenage angst and anxiety and self-doubt and seventy layers of shit goin' on inside your brains, but I've always been too flippin' dumb to have any of those things.

I knew who I was, and ain't no law and sure as shit ain't no Catholic mommy or drunken daddy was gonna drag me back into the world of bein' groped by boys and told I was gonna like it, or bein' forced into havin' sex across the back seat and end up gettin' pregnant at fifteen like, guess who, the cute daughter of our old next door neighbor. No flippin' thank you.

Hell, I'm ramblin' again. Back to the present. My shit-o-meter was about to register a Seven. That was fairly shitty by itself... but it was nothin' compared to what was comin' my way. I had a big storm brewin' but when I needed my friends the most, they left me with my ass cheeks flappin' in the breeze. Ain't life grand?

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"Get your sorry ass out of the Goddamned vehicle, Kowalski... now," Sheriff Holstein said in a gruff voice while he yanked at Rose's arm.

Rose looked at the Sheriff with a pair of confused eyes, but tried to follow his command to the best of her somewhat dazed abilities. She noticed a little too late that she hadn't unbuckled yet and reached down to see if the lock still worked. It did, and she was soon liberated from the cord that had done its work admirably.

Stepping down onto the sidewalk on legs that wobbled more than she had expected, she only needed a brief glance at the Cadillac to know it was beyond repair. "Heh," she croaked, tapping her knuckles on the door.

The very next moment, Sheriff Holstein pinned her against the door and held up a small device that she couldn't recognize in the heat of the moment. She tried to swat it away, but Holstein was insistent.

"It's a breathalyzer, Kowalski. Blow it!" the Sheriff said, pressing the little device closer to Rose's mouth. "You stink like a Goddamned brewery... I'll be damned if I'm gonna let someone so obviously drunk get away with wreckin' a car in the middle of Goddamned Main Street!"

"But Sheriff, I ain't-"

"Shut up and blow into the Goddamned breathalyzer, Kowalski!"

Rose stared at the Sheriff with wide open eyes. Seymour Holstein was a skinny, wiry man with an angular face and intense eyes. Though his physique didn't exactly shout Sheriff material, his work ethic and dedication to the job got him re-elected every time. He was in his late forties and had a hard time accepting he was approaching fifty - as a result, he had turned into an S.O.B. with a mean streak a mile wide.

Rose knew she'd only get into more trouble if she refused the Sheriff so she accepted that she had to blow into the small electronic device. Drawing a deep breath, she puckered up her lips and blew into the breathalyzer's mouthpiece.

She blew and blew until her face had turned redder than a stop sign,

but the Sheriff kept holding the device to her mouth to get every last ounce of air out of her. When he was satisfied, he pulled it away with a grunt and strode over to his police cruiser to analyze the sample.

Panting, Rose leaned back against the ticking and steaming Cadillac and wiped her lips. The accident site was attracting quite a crowd, but although Billie Jo wasn't among them, Rose didn't think it would be long for news to spread like wildfire - it always did in Lincoln.

In her peripheral vision, she spotted Burton Cutter's black Mercedes S-Class crawling up Main Street. Her boss parked across the street but kept sitting in the car while he called someone on his cell phone. Along the sidewalk, Johnny Lee and Harold came running. The latter was holding a beer can in a plain brown wrapper which was just about the last thing in the world Rose wanted to see at that moment.

An annoyed grunt from the police cruiser gave Rose a pretty good idea that her day had just gone down yet another notch. Soon, Sheriff Holstein came back holding the breathalyzer. His sour face proved that something had gone wrong, and once again, Rose had a pretty good idea of what that could be.

"Kowalski, I don't know how the hell ya did it, but this Goddamned thing shows you're sober."

Rose pushed herself off the door and wiped her damp brow. "Sheriff that's what I've been tryin' ta-"

"Shut up, Kowalski," Seymour Holstein said and held out his hand to keep Rose at the Cadillac. "Blow again. Now."

"Mercy sakes, Sheriff"

"Are ya resistin'?" the Sheriff said, moving his hand down towards his pair of shiny metal handcuffs that he had in a leather pouch on his utility belt.

Rose groaned inwardly and wished Billie Jo was there to speak to the Sheriff. No matter what she said, the cantankerous man would

misunderstand it, and he would do so deliberately. She sighed deeply and shook her head. "No I ain't, Sheriff"

The Sheriff nodded and shoved the breathalyzer into her mouth.

Like before, Rose blew into the small mouthpiece until her lungs were on the brink of outright rebellion. Red-faced and aching all over, she gave it her all and hoped it would be enough to appease the law man.

Sheriff Holstein grunted and pulled the device away from Rose. He looked at it with a sour expression on his face before he stomped over to the police cruiser to analyze the second sample.

While Rose recovered from the hard work, Johnny Lee came up to her with her trucker hat that had become even more battered after the wreck. "Here, Rose... it had been blown clear out onto the sidewalk."

Rose stared at it like an unexpected return of an old friend. Smiling, she took it from her younger colleague's hand and mashed it down onto her dark mullet. "Thanks, Johnny Lee. Much obliged. Say... anybody seen Billie Jo yet? She really oughtta be told what's been goin' on up here..."

Harold shook his head and took a long swig from his beer, but Johnny Lee put out his hand and touched Rose's elbow. "Don't ya worry, I'll get her for ya, Rose," he said and took off down Main Street.

"Thanks, son!" Rose said loudly, but the young man was already running across the street.

Sheriff Holstein slammed the door of his police cruiser and leaned against it with his arms crossed over his chest and his face so scrunched up in annoyance it resembled a possum's behind. "Kowalski, you're the luckiest son of a bitch around, ya know that? The breathalyzer's on the fritz. It says you're sober but I can smell you ain't."

Rose opened her mouth to object, but before she could speak a syllable, Sheriff Holstein pinned her to the spot with an intense glare. "Don't you say a Goddamned word! I can't arrest ya, but I'm giving ya a stern warning. The next time you as much as fart without permission, I'm gonna bust ya up but good. Ya hear me, Kowalski?"

"I hear ya, Sheriff," Rose said with a nod. She wanted to tell Holstein that far better men than he had tried to bust her up, but that no one ever had. She knew it wouldn't improve her situation so she kept quiet.

Sheriff Holstein got into his cruiser and turned off the lights on the roof. Starting the engine, he made a U-turn and drove the cream-colored vehicle down towards the county court house and the jailhouse at the other end of Main Street.

Suddenly, the crowd at the accident site parted like the Red Sea for Moses. In the middle of the group of spectators stood Billie Jo with a shocked look on her face and her hands firmly pressed to her bosom.

Rose let out a deep sigh as she felt the weight of the world fall off her shoulders. Smiling at Billie Jo, she put out her arms and stepped towards her partner.

Billie Jo didn't close the distance between them - instead, she shied back.

At first, Rose didn't understand what kind of perverted reality she had ended up in, and she wondered for a very short while if she hadn't actually died in the accident after all. "Hey, baby...?" she said, frowning her brow.

Then Billie Jo did the unthinkable: with a face that showed she was on the brink of crying, she spun around and ran away from Rose.

"Wh- what? Billie Jo... what the...?" Rose said, throwing her hands in the air.

A surprised - perhaps even excited - murmur spread among the

group of spectators around her, but a blue glare with the intensity of a laser beam silenced all but the most foolhardy. Rose stepped forward to go after Billie Jo, but before she could move further than a few paces, she was stopped by Burton Cutter who came up to stand in front of her.

"Mercy sakes, Mr. Cutter... not now... I gotta..." she croaked and pointed at the honey-blond figure who had reached the drugstore some distance down Main Street, but her boss was relentless.

"Rose. You okay?" Burton said with his hands resting on the hips of his white western suit.

"Yes, Sir," Rose said with a sigh, watching the easily recognizable red Capris disappear into Thorkildsen's drugstore. "I didn't get a scratch. It was a-"

"I ain't paying you to wreck our customers' cars. Worse still, you just cost me a heap of money with that stunt."

"I know, Mr. Cutter. There was a kid... I had to-"

"And you're drunk."

"The hell I am!" Rose barked, feeling a strong urge to grab hold of Burton's lapels. "I ain't touched a flippin' drop all day! There was a loose can in the car and-"

"I demand that my mechanics are stone sober at work. You know that. You're fired. Come in on Tuesday and clear out your locker."

Rose came to a dead stop and stared wide-eyed at her relentless boss. Inside her, someone turned off the lights and released a thousand-gallon bucket of ice water on her head that she drowned in without coming up for air even once.

The hard man grunted a goodbye and walked back to his fancy Mercedes, got in and drove off.

Sighing, Rose fell back against the wrecked Cadillac that was still ticking and steaming. A small puddle of radiator fluid had gathered around the left front that she had worked so hard on. The wheel was about the only thing not wrecked at the front of the SUV.

After a few moments of staring without seeing anything at all, she raised her head and locked eyes with Harold who was still standing there with his beer. "Damn fine help you was, Harold. I really appreciate it... thank you ever so flippin' much!"

"Yeah... I know. I'm sorry, Rose," her older colleague said, sipping his beer. "But I just can't risk gettin' fired, too. I got a mortgage and I need to save some money for when my kids-"

"Tell it to someone who cares," Rose said and stomped away from the wreck and the man she had thought was a friend.

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Rose was a woman on a mission. She barged her way through the spectators and crossed Main Street with a firm stride. On her way down the sidewalk to get to the drugstore, she cast a brief glance at Johnny Lee who went the other way in the wrecker truck to get the accident site cleaned up. At any other time, she would have helped the friendly young man who had a good head on his shoulders and a strong sense of loyalty in his heart, but now she had more important things to do.

She went past four stores that had been boarded up for good when the financial crisis had hit Lincoln a few years earlier. One of them had been an ice cream shop that she and Billie Jo had visited on their first dates. The ice cream had been exceptional - and exceptionally expensive - but in Lincoln, not enough people were willing to shell out that much money on something as common as ice cream, and as a result, the store simply couldn't keep going.

The next store had closed its doors for good at the start of the month. It had been an independent fast food restaurant who had sold home-made delicacies made in the best southern traditions, but the

best southern traditions weren't what they used to be. Now, the owner worked as a dishwasher slash busboy in the seedy bar and grill further south on Main Street to work off his mountain of debts.

At the mom-and-pop diner where Billie Jo had bought the lunch, the married couple who owned it stood in the doorway and looked at the hubbub out on Main Street. The diner's regular clientele of wholesome, upstanding citizens had massed at the tables lining the windows and were pressing their noses against the panes to get all the details and make sure that nothing slipped by them. As Rose strode past the doorway, she tipped her hat at the owners who replied with polite greetings.

Along she went, storming past several stores that were still open and a few more that weren't, but she only had eyes for the drugstore that came up fast.

The current owner, Douglas Thorkildsen, had taken over the drugstore in the late 1980s and had turned it into a thriving business by expanding it into including regular groceries. Essentially, he made it into Lincoln's first supermarket.

Though a Cool-Mart had opened three miles north of Lincoln with five thousand free parking spaces, fifty thousand products and a small army of helpers on starvation wages who carried the shopping bags out to the cars, most Lincoln-folks still shopped at Thorkildsen's out of loyalty - it didn't hurt that Douglas Thorkildsen was known to hire the friendliest and most efficient clerks.

Rose locked eyes with one of them - Billie Jo - when she reached the first of the drugstore's storefront windows. She almost came to a dead stop when she spotted Billie Jo's clearly upset face peeking out through the groceries, but she gulped down the lump of nervousness that had formed in her throat and pressed on.

The air-conditioning inside Thorkildsen's store was running at a pleasant temperature compared to the frigid environment that gave Cool-Mart its name. Everything about the drugstore was elegant and well-maintained, even down to the groceries on the shelves that were lined up with military precision.

The floors of every aisle were always recently washed and clean as a whistle - even if a clumsy customer dropped a full jar of pickled cherries, a staffer would be hard at work washing the floor within three minutes.

Rose turned down the aisle with the cereal and other breakfast products. Down at the other end, she just caught a glimpse of a pair of red Capris moving away from the aisle. "Wh- why the hell is she avoidin' me...? What the flip is going on here...?" she mumbled, stopping to wipe her damp brow.

"Hi, Rose," a fair female voice said behind the agitated mechanic.

Rose turned around and watched Tammy Fay Sorenson - one of Billie Jo's best friends - come towards her holding a broom and a dustpan. The somewhat heavy-set twenty-four year-old blonde had an abundance of freckles, shoulder-length corkscrew curls and a pert nose. She was wearing a *Thorkildsen's* apron that had been tied around her waist with an extravagant bow. "Hiya doin', Tammy Fay... uh... listen-

"I don't think Billie Jo wants to talk to you right now," Tammy Fay said in a tiny voice, looking at anything but Rose. The penetrating stench of beer emanating from the taller woman made her crinkle her nose and take a sliding step back.

Rose's shoulders fell even further than the already drooping level they had been at before. She bit down on her lips and continued looking around for Billie Jo. "Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Tammy Fay. Much obliged," she said and moved on without waiting for a reply.

She decided to take a shortcut and turned sharp right at the first intersection to get to the aisle with the beer and soft drinks. Hundreds of cans and bottles of beer were lined up in alphabetical order of their manufacturer, and Rose thought she could hear them mocking her for what one of their relatives had done to her out in the Cadillac.

The soft drinks followed, but by then, Rose didn't have time to pay

attention to what they whispered. Another glimpse of the red Capris made her step up the pace and she was soon at a dark brown, wooden door with a circular brass knob at the back of the drugstore. The next problem presented itself immediately: the door was labeled '*Staff Only.*'

"Aw, shit... shit, shit, shit," she said and rubbed her face. Turning around, she tried to appear like she didn't have anything to hide at all. The customers who were standing at the refrigerated counters in the back part of the drugstore all shot her curious glances while they rummaged through the special offers of the day which included two bags of frozen French fries Cajun-style for only four dollars ninety-five.

When Rose felt she had waited long enough, she turned around and tried the circular doorknob. Much to her surprise, the door opened with a click. Looking around with all the stealth she could muster, she stepped inside the room and shut the door carefully behind her.

She found herself in a long hallway that was outfitted with a deep green carpet and brown wooden panels. The hallway was lit up by three strip lights in the ceiling of which one was literally on the blink. Seven unlabeled doors led off from the corridor, three on each side and one at the far end. The one at the end was made of steel and Rose surmised it went out to the small, private parking lot at the rear.

She had no idea what to do or where to go. In her frustration, she took off her trucker hat and slapped it against her black jeans. "Aw, hell... okay. Now what, ya dumb shit? I wonder if this counts as fartin' without permission like the flippin' Sheriff said?" she mumbled, mashing her hat back down onto her black locks.

With a grunt, she went to work pressing her ear against all the doors to find the elusive Billie Jo.

Behind the last door on the left, Rose could hear Billie Jo sniffing away tears. Grunting, she stood up straight and knocked softly. When she only heard a muted "*Go away,*" she naturally did the opposite and

opened the door.

The small room was only sixteen by sixteen feet and equipped with the same panels and carpet as the hallway. The room was host to an old desk with an anglepoise lamp, a writing pad and a set of plastic trays where the Out-box was full and the In-box empty. A magnetboard was standing on the floor, leaning against the wall with its cord visibly snapped. Various sheets of paper and what appeared to be receipts that were supposed to have been on the magnetboard had been transferred to the walls where they were hanging on colorful nails.

Billie Jo sat on a swivel-chair at the desk. She was looking frail and her face showed clear signs of crying. When Rose entered the small office, Billie Jo turned around and pretended to work.

"Baby," Rose said quietly, moving over to her partner to put a tender hand on her shoulder, "will you please tell me what the hell's goin' on? I've never seen you runnin' away from me before... and hell, I don't ever wanna see it again..."

At first, Billie Jo didn't seem to want to talk, but after a short delay, she took a tissue from a cardboard box on the desk and dabbed her eyes. "You reek of beer... you stink like a bum," she said in a thick voice.

"Yeah, I know... it was the damnedest thing I ever-"

"You promised me you wouldn't."

Rose fell quiet, racking her brain to remember when she had ever made a promise not to drink beer. It was an odd argument to use because just the evening before, they had shared a can at supper. "Well..." she said, licking her lips, "it just so happens I ain't touched a drop. I know I stink, but-"

"Please don't lie to me, Rose. Not... not looking like that," Billie Jo said and performed a tired wave at the beer stains that peppered Rose's muscle shirt and her black jeans.

"Baby," Rose said and knelt down in front of her partner. A cold hand of fear grabbed Rose's heart when Billie Jo shied back from the smell, but she reached out and took the delicate hands in her own regardless. "Baby, please listen to me. I ain't had a drop of beer. I had to slam on the brakes 'cos a little girl ran out onto Main Street. A flippin' can shot out and ended up under the pedal. One of Darrell Yates Junior's beers that the little pecker had forgot to tell me about... that's the honest-to-goodness truth, darlin'. Please believe me."

The look on Billie Jo's face told a very clear story of not believing a word Rose had just said to her. After a little while, she shook her head and pulled her hands back from Rose's. "No, Rose, I can't believe that. You're blaming Darrell Junior for you wrecking his car?"

"Yes, Goddammit!" Rose said sharply. "A flippin' beer can shot out-"

"Don't, Rose. Just don't," Billie Jo said and moved to get up from the chair.

A stunned Rose moved aside and watched her partner walk over to the door to the hallway. Once there, she put her hand on the knob but didn't seem to want to leave just yet.

Sighing, Rose got up and bumped down onto the recently vacated swivel-chair. She took off her trucker hat and ran a hand through her mullet with a dark, depressed look on her face.

Billie Jo mirrored the deep sigh and crossed her arms over her chest in a clear sign of vulnerability. "Rose, you promised me you wouldn't drink and drive. Remember the rules we agreed on at my uncle's funeral? You know, the uncle who was splattered against a tree because he was so drunk he could hardly see the road?"

"Baby-"

"At his funeral," Billie Jo said strongly to cut off Rose before she could start, "we agreed on a simple set of driving rules that would ensure that we wouldn't one day be putting flowers on the other's

headstone. Remember?"

"Bil-"

"Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Rose said and nodded somberly. "Always drive responsibly. Never drink and drive. Never smoke weed and drive. Always keep my attention on the road and not the phone or the radio or the passengers or whatever shit happens to fly my way... but baby, I didn't-"

"Please don't lie to me, Rose. I hate it when you're not being truthful," Billie Jo said, swallowing. Her throat was hard at work gulping down the emotions that were plainly evident on her expressive face.

Rose narrowed her eyes and shot her partner a dark, intense glare that would have scared off anyone but Billie Jo Tucker. "When the flip did I ever lie to you?" she said in a hoarse, strained voice.

Billie Jo shrugged and looked down at her hands. "I'm sorry, Rose. I didn't mean it like that. But you're lying to me now."

"No, I ain't, baby! Billie Jo, I... I... aw, hell," Rose said and wiped her brow with the palm of a hand, "I'm tellin' ya again... one of Junior's flippin' beers came flyin' out. I smashed the can and then I wrecked his car 'cos I got beer all over the Goddamned place... in my eyes! Not only did I not mow down that little girl, I ain't touched no Goddamned drop today!"

"Harold was drinking beer just now. I saw him. He was drinking it right there..."

Rose scrunched up her face and sent half a dozen silent curses at her older colleague. "Yeah, he was... but I wasn't."

"You've often told me you and he have a couple after the garage closes on Saturdays," Billie Jo said quietly, squeezing her arms closer

to her chest.

"Yeah... and then Johnny Lee drives us home. After the garage closes. After work... I wasn't finished workin', baby. I had to test the repairs I had done to Junior's Caddy so he could get it today... otherwise he'd be botherin' us the entire flippin' weekend! And he would have! That's a God-given guarantee-"

Billie Jo shook her head slowly. "Now you're blaming him again-"

The rejection hit Rose like a slap across the cheeks, and she sat up straight and stared at the woman at the door. "I. Am. Tellin'. You. The. Goddamned. Truth. Billie Jo," she said, pronouncing every word so clearly it nearly sounded like she was trying to persuade herself

As the tension grew in the absence of an answer, Rose gripped the armrest of the swivel-chair harder and harder until it finally reached the point where her fingers turned white. She stared at Billie Jo with a storm slowly building inside her; a storm created by equal measures of anger over losing her job through someone else's foul-up, and of boundless fear of losing the other half of her heart through a misunderstanding that had gained such a head of steam in such a short space of time that it left her soul spinning.

When the silence grew oppressive, Rose slammed her fist down onto the armrest and shot up from the chair. She only made it a single step towards Billie Jo before she stopped dead in her tracks and froze solid on the inside.

Her aggressive move had made Billie Jo flinch and push herself against the door, like she was afraid of being shaken, slapped or worse.

The by now familiar thousand-gallon bucket of ice water once again rolled over Rose like an unstoppable tidal wave. Far too often, she had seen that look of fear in her mother's eyes when her husband had beaten her to a pulp in a drunken stupor. She had worn that look of fear herself many times when her parents had tried to beat some sense into her rebellious head after she had provoked the establishment or pushed the boundaries of conformity just a little too far - but she had never

seen that look of fear in Billie Jo's expressive green orbs. Now she had. And she had put it there.

With her nostrils flaring in shame over what she had done, Rose collapsed onto the swivel-chair like her legs wouldn't obey her. Sighing, she buried her face in her hands and let the darkness swallow her. "I'm sorry, baby..." she said quietly, sensing that her thumping heart was but a single beat away from stopping altogether. "I never meant to frighten you. Please forgive me."

Billie Jo's only reply was to leave the room and shut the door softly behind her.

Rose looked up at the closed door and let out a long, slow sigh. She kept staring at it in the hope it would fly open to reveal Billie Jo with a smile on her face and her arms out wide in an invitation for a hug, but it didn't. "Way to go, you stupid asshole," Rose mumbled while she rubbed her face. "How to screw up a happy family in three easy steps... Johnny flippin' Cash couldn't have written that song..."

The door opened and Rose's head shot up, but instead of the hoped-for Billie Jo, it was Douglas Thorkildsen, the owner of the drugstore. The two people stared at each other for a few seconds before Rose found it most prudent to rise from the swivel-chair and put out her hand. "Howdy, Mr. Thorkildsen. I'm Rose Kowalski. I'm Billie Jo's... friend."

Douglas Thorkildsen had just turned sixty the week before but his youthful appearance, his strong handshake and his neatly combed dark brown hair belied that fact - even if the dark hair did come from a bottle rather than good genes. He was taller than Rose and had a strong presence in his dark blue jeans and steel gray flannel shirt. The top two buttons were undone to reveal a few graying chest hairs and a gold crucifix on a leather thong.

Douglas chuckled and shook the buff woman's hand. "You're her partner, Rose. Even I know that."

"Oh. Okay," Rose said and smoothed down her muscle shirt out of

sheer nervousness. When Douglas didn't run the drugstore, he was the parish clerk and choir leader of Lincoln's Protestant congregation, a fact that left Rose somewhat uncomfortable - especially considering she still reeked of beer. Douglas didn't seem too concerned with her strong scent, even if he did crinkle his nose as he walked past her.

"Say... you wouldn't happen to have seen Billie Jo anywhere around here, would you, Rose?" Douglas said and moved over to the desk where he began to rummage through a few papers.

Rose didn't want to let the world know of their little tiff, so she shoved her hands down her back pockets and shuffled around on the spot. "Ah, she just left... not a minute before you came in, Sir. I dunno where the hel- where she was goin' or nothin'."

Behind her, the door opened as if on cue and Billie Jo walked in holding a mug of steaming hot tea. It wasn't quite the smile and the hug Rose had dreamt of - Billie Jo was still looking upset - but she was glad her partner had returned at all. Moving over to the door to assist Billie Jo, she let out a sigh of relief that the others didn't hear. "Honey... let me help you with that," she said and took a firm grip on the door so it wouldn't jump back and bump into the frail woman's shoulder.

"Thank you," Billie Jo said in a small voice, frowning her brow when she noticed her boss standing at the desk. With a faint smile, she held out the mug and offered it to Rose.

The faint smile gave Rose the first warm feeling inside since she had seen Billie Jo run away at the accident site. Smiling back, she accepted the mug and took a sip of the steaming hot tea. It was a standard Earl Grey, her favorite in the rare - it didn't happen more than once a month at the most - occasion of her drinking anything other than coffee, Coke or beer. Savoring the hot beverage, she hoped it represented an olive branch, a sign that Billie Jo had forgiven her or maybe even accepted her story about Junior's loose can of beer.

Douglas pushed himself away from the desk and tapped a fingernail on his wristwatch. "Billie Jo, I'm sorry to break up anything that's going on here, but we've got a whole herd of customers out there who

are eager to buy what they need before they head out to the fairgrounds. The monster truck festival, you know..."

"I know, Mr. Thorkildsen," Billie Jo said and shot Rose a sad look that spelled out quite clearly that they wouldn't be going, or at least not together.

"All right," Douglas continued, moving past the two women. "I need you at the check-out PDQ. Okay?"

"Yes, Mr. Thorkildsen. I'll only be a minute."

Rose tracked the elderly gentleman leaving the room before she took another sip of the tea. She looked back at Billie Jo with a hopeful expression on her face. "So...?" she said to get the conversation going again.

"Rose, I forgive you for what happened before," Billie Jo said flatly, looking away from her partner. "I know you love me and that you would never hurt me."

"Damn straight I wouldn't, baby! I would never, ever-"

Billie Jo shook her head strongly which made Rose clam up at once. "But I won't accept that cockamamie story with the stray can of beer. No. I'm sorry, I simply won't. You broke our rules. Therefore"

"Billie Jo," Rose said, coming closer to flat out whining than she ever had in her entire life.

"Therefore... th- therefore... I'm going to tell you... no... I'm going to ask you to find somewhere else to sleep for the next couple of nights," Billie Jo said, slowly turning to face Rose.

Underneath Rose's workboots, a trapdoor opened and she fell down into a pitch black, bottomless abyss. A strange fatigue fell over her like a shroud, and she sighed deeply as she reached over to put the half-full mug of tea onto the desktop. Inside, her heart felt like it had turned into a pincushion.

Her mind had turned blank by the shock announcement. She wanted to speak up how much the decision had hurt her, but hardly any words would come to her, and those that did disappeared at once into a pit of quicksand. She settled for a somber nod with a face set in stone.

Again, a spark inside her wanted to put up a fight since she was an innocent victim of the most evil conspiracy imaginable, but the spark was snuffed out when another, more mature, part of her knew it would only make matters worse.

"See ya, Billie Jo," she whispered and walked away.

With a final glance at Billie Jo's soft, gorgeous features, Rose left the room and shuffled down the hallway to get as far away from the drugstore as she possibly could.

CHAPTER 4

See what I meant when I said wreckin' Junior's car only registered a One on the shit-o-meter? Gettin' fired rated a Seven. Losin' the only woman I've ever cared for past the first hot night rated a ninety-nine-flippin'-thousand.

And I don't give a shit if it was only a time-out or whatever the flip you wanna call it. Not bein' able to sleep next to Billie Jo, not bein' able to kiss her tenderly, not bein' able to hold her in my arms and call her mine is torture. Hell, it's worse than torture.

People think that 'cos I look the way I do and behave the way I do, I don't give a shit about feelin's and all that sensitive, cuddly-wuddly crap... but I do. Hell yeah, I do... I ain't made of stone. I got a hard shell, but inside, I actually got a soul... and my soul's cryin' right now.

I do care about havin' someone close when I'm hurtin' inside. I do care about havin' someone there with a smile and a li'l caress when

things are lookin' grim. I do care about havin' someone who'll tell me to be careful and hold the ladder when I crawl up on top of the trailer to fix the flippin' dish... and I do care about bein' there for Billie Jo when she's hurtin' and all those other things. We get on so flippin' great it's almost like our souls were cut apart at birth and Elmered back together later on.

You wonderin' how me and Billie Jo got together?

It's a flippin' beautiful little story. I ain't got time to tell ya everythin' so lemme give ya the highlights: when I came to Lincoln with a duffel bag over my shoulder and generally lookin' like a hobo from travelin' so much, people gave me a wide berth. This was 'bout six-seven years ago, by the way. Anyhow, when I arrived, it didn't take me long to get a job at Burton Cutter's Auto Repair Shop 'cos I knew what I was doin' with my hands and I was willin' to give it that extra li'l ass-kickin' at hours where others slept.

The first year, I had a permanent spot at the local branch of the Y - which is now closed, dammit, I could have used their comfortable bunks - but when I had collected enough money, I rented a trailer outside of town and bought a buncha third, fourth, fifth-hand furniture at the thrift store to put in it.

One night a year and a half or so later, a guy started a fight in the trailer park. A good ol' sock'n'roll with blood and teeth flyin' everywhere. We was watchin', all of us who didn't have nothin' better to do... one of which was Billie Jo Tucker. Holy hell was she a cutie... and I got it bad right there and then. She was with someone else so I didn't act on it.

Well, time passed, 'nother short year went by. We started talkin' regularly, then she became available on the market and we started meetin' regularly. Then we started talkin' and meetin' and makin' coffee for each other inside her trailer. Then one night, she looked at me with those glorious green eyes and asked... mercy sakes, I ain't never gonna forget that... she asked if I wasn't ever gonna kiss her!

We kissed, Lawrdy did we kiss. That first kiss told me everythin' I needed to know about where I was stayin' for the rest of my miserable

existence. I shoulda seen it comin' but I ain't never been the sharpest tool in the box. The kiss wasn't even no fiery affair, no Sirree, it was sweet and lovin' and beautiful and honest and... and now she's kicked me out.

Ain't life grand?

**_*_
**_*_
**_*_

Several hours later, Rose shuffled down Main Street with her hands buried in her pockets and a look on her face that said if anyone addressed her the wrong way, they'd be sorry. She only met a few people but they all made sure to avoid her.

She kept shuffling down Main Street until she was nearly at the city limits sign opposite the Conoco station. She looked at the gas station and remembered the incident with Coop and the Sheriff "Hell, was that really this mornin'?" she mumbled, kicking at a rock that was lying very conveniently in front of her right boot. "It feels like it was two flippin' weeks ago... hey... maybe Cledus Bradley got a job for me... can't hurt to ask."

Rose took off her trucker hat and scratched her black locks. With a grunt, she mashed the hat back onto her mullet and crossed Main Street with a purposeful stride.

She went past the courtyard with the fuel pumps and looked over at the porch in front of the small convenience store. Cledus' favorite rocking chair was empty so she changed direction and walked down an alley that wasn't in any better shape than the one leading down to Cutter Auto.

Cledus 'Sarge' Bradley was living by himself in a converted '65 GMC bus that was propped up on a concrete foundation to create a permanent homestead. The green and silver RV wasn't as striking as it had once been, but it was still a better place to live for the Vietnam veteran than the tent he had shared with the other grunts somewhere in

the jungles of the Far East, knee-deep in mud, blood and misery.

"Hey, Sarge...? Cledus, ya down here, buddy? Sarge?" Rose said loudly as she walked closer to the RV. Instead of Cledus, all she could hear was the Sarge's guard dog that was barking its head off in a pen a bit further into the alley. When she reached the door, she spotted a hand-written note pinned to it that said, *'Gone to the Park. Back in a while or tomorrow. CB.'*

Rose let out a sigh and rubbed her chin. "Shit. Ain't that just the story of my day? Hell, I guess he's earned it."

Like most people in Lincoln, Rose knew that Cledus Bradley occasionally spent the nights at the Veteran's Memorial Park up at the other end of Main Street not far from where she had wrecked the Cadillac. There, he'd get stoned on weed and talk to the names inscribed on the four memorial tablets from World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the recent conflicts in the Middle East. Rose's stepbrother was listed too, but she never paid him a visit to reminisce.

The sound of a high-performance V8 driving into the gas station out front made Rose snap out of her dark thoughts and stride out there. Jimmy Cooper's gray, black and red Monte Carlo was parked at the gas pumps and Coop himself had just stepped out of the car.

"Howdy, Coop," Rose said with a wave as she came around the corner. "Sarge ain't in. He's up at the Memorial Park. Y'all can just put the gas money in the mailbox."

Jimmy Cooper was in his late twenties though his baby-face made him look a decade younger. To offset that, he was growing a full beard, but since his hair was red, his beard was even redder - as a result, he looked like a teenager with a Halloween-style pirate beard glued onto the lower part of his face.

As always, he was wearing cowboy boots, blue jeans, a red-and-green checkered flannel shirt over a black t-shirt. On top of his red mullet, he had a black baseball cap adorned with the Chevrolet bowtie in red sitting low over his eyes.

"Howdy, Rose. Whatcha doin' way the hell down here?" Coop said as he took the hose for the Leaded Premium pump.

"Aw, that's a long story, Coop," Rose said and crossed her arms over her chest. She knew exactly where Coop's eyes were, and for a change, it actually did bother her. "Say, y'all be goin' to the fairgrounds a li'l later on, right?"

Coop removed the gas cap and put the hose down into the funnel. When it was ready, he pulled the hose's trigger and watched it spew the gas down into the tank. "Well... yeah. I'm on my way out there now, actually. Gotta find a good spot before all them huge trucks jam up the lots, dontchaknow."

"Got room for a passenger?"

"Sure thing, Rose. Is the S10 busted? I saw ya this mornin'... just before Nasty-Ass Holstein pulled me over for speedin'."

Rose decided to skip the details and stepped around the performance car that she had spent many an hour working on. "How fast was ya goin', Coop?"

"Aw, dunno. Fifty or somethin'."

"It's a thirty-five zone, dumbass."

"Language, li'l lady," Coop said with a broad grin. His eyes happened to glide down over Rose's rear end as she walked around the car. It only added to his grin.

When the Monte Carlo was fully gassed up, he reached into his pocket and found two ten dollar bills that he put into the mailbox.

Getting back into the car's bucket seat, he chuckled out loud at the sight of Rose having put on the seat belt. "Whassamatter, Rose? Ya gettin' scared or somethin'?"

"I already had one wreck today, Coop. Shut up and drive."

"Yes, Ma'am!" Coop said and turned on the engine. As soon as the V8 came to life, he gunned it and laid down two fat stripes on the flagstones in front of the gas pumps. Once out on Main Street, he repeated the feat until he settled down to a lazy twenty miles an hour in the hope that he'd run into his buddies so they could see just what kind of high-quality 'seat cover' he had in his car.

"So, Rose," Coop said and put his arm across the backrest of Rose's seat in the clear hope that he had reached first base without even trying. "I don't see no Billie Jo around nowhere...? You finally come to your senses about where to look for some sweet lovin'? If ya want to broaden your horizons a little, I'm your man, baby. I hope ya know that. Yeah. 's gonna be a hard, hard job, but I promise I'll give ya all I got to, ya know, give ya a good introduction to..."

Rose rolled her eyes and began to mouth obscenities at Jimmy while he yapped on. Sighing, she looked out at the stores they were driving past and realized they had reached McDowell's, Lincoln's seedy Bar & Grill. She knew that if she went in there, she'd get drunk on cheap booze and even cheaper beer, but she also knew she'd kill Jimmy Cooper if she had to listen to his locker-room inanities for much longer. In the end, the decision was easy: "Stop the car, Coop. I want out."

"What?"

"Stop the Goddamned car, Coop!" Rose roared, pointing at the sidewalk.

"All right, all right! Jesus, talk about blowin' hot and cold! Ya got the flippin' red or somethin'?" Coop said and hit the brakes. He quickly steered over to the curb and pulled the shifter into Neutral.

In two heartbeats flat, Rose bounded from the Monte Carlo and slammed the door shut. She stomped across the sidewalk and over to the entrance to McDowell's without looking behind her, but there was no mistaking the wild roar from the V8, nor the angry squealing from

the tires.

Her hand was already on the glass door's handle, but she didn't depress it. Looking inside McDowell's, she could see that life went on as always. Some sat at the tables by the windows eating greasy burgers and even greasier fries, others sat on the bar stools at the counter drinking beer. To the right, Fatty Connelly was wobbling around the pool table chalking his cue and sizing up the young man who was playing against him.

Behind Rose, a pair of rowdy young men parked their truck and went up on the sidewalk. "Hey! Take a shit or get off the can, sister," one of them said, grabbing hold of Rose's shoulder to get her to move away from the door.

Rose spun around and bared her teeth in a sneer. Her pale blue eyes locked onto the young man's grayish orbs and shot him a glare with such laser-like intensity that he had to take a step back with his hands in the air.

Not wanting to get into a fight, Rose stomped off down the sidewalk until she reached the first alley away from Main Street. There, she turned sharp left and kept walking until she had gone past the first few houses and sheds.

She eventually discovered she was on a metaphorical road to nowhere and came to a sliding halt. Groaning out loud, she took off her trucker hat and fluffed her dark mullet. Inside her, her dark emotions, her frustrations and her growing anger at being so blatantly rejected by Billie Jo even when she hadn't done a thing wrong collided and became a super-storm that needed to come out or else she'd burst at the seams. Spinning around, she kicked the life out of a metal trash can that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The lid of the trash can went flying and landed in someone's garden. Not long after, a dog started barking and an older man appeared in the garden's driveway with an angry expression on his face. "Hullo! You kids better stop kickin' my trash can or I'll send my dog after you!" he said, holding up what appeared to be a cane.

Rose was about to yell at the man that he should stay the hell out of her business, but she changed her mind at the last moment and stomped the other way.

Back on Main Street - that slowly grew busier in preparation for the big event out at the fairgrounds - Rose stomped past McDowell's and carried on for several hundred yards until she simply couldn't be bothered to stomp along anymore. Groaning, she stopped and turned back around.

The evening service at the Baptist Church across the street had just finished and a few dozen people streamed out onto the sidewalk not far from where Rose had wrecked the Cadillac. Though Johnny Lee had cleaned the sidewalk thoroughly, the stains from the radiator fluid and the oil were still visible.

Several of the church-goers pointed at the stains and at the sorry state of the light pole before they put their heads together and gossiped about the afternoon's major piece of news, a wreck right in the middle of peaceful Main Street.

Rose grunted and shuffled back towards McDowell's in a far easier pace than the one she had used when she had gone the other way. Fifty yards down the sidewalk, she came to a dead stop when she saw a very familiar outfit - red Capris and a red-and-white polka dotted blouse - go over to the glass door of the bar and grill and hold it open. Billie Jo smiled as she stepped aside for Tammy Fay Sorenson. Soon, they had both gone inside.

A jagged knife sawed Rose's heart in two at the sight. Unsure of what to do, she stuffed her hands down her pockets and kept standing on the sidewalk. After a while, she sighed deeply and shuffled over to the curb where she sat down between two cars with her long legs sticking out onto the street.

Five minutes later - during which Rose had been exposed to a lot of

curious glances from the people walking past on the sidewalk - Sheriff Seymour Holstein crawled past in his cream-colored cruiser out on Main Street.

Moments after the cruiser had gone past her, it came to a screeching halt and reversed back to her position on the sidewalk.

The Sheriff rolled down the window and pointed an accusing index finger at Rose. "Kowalski! Get the hell away from there or face the consequences. You hear me?"

"I hear ya, Sheriff," Rose said and got up. She dusted off the seat of her pants and looked around for something else to do while the Sheriff observed her closely. The siren song that reached her ears from McDowell's Bar & Grill was too strong. She caved and began to shuffle down towards the seedy establishment.

Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting at one of the window seats eating rib burgers and drinking Cokes when Rose entered the eatery. They were chatting and smiling, and Rose had never felt more alone. She kept standing just inside the door and stared at her girlfriend in the vain hope she'd glance back at her, but Billie Jo didn't. In fact, it became clear it was a conscious decision by the blonde to ignore the tall, sulking woman.

Rose sighed and shuffled over to the bar counter at the back of McDowell's.

The establishment was divided into three sections of equal size: on the left, the jukebox and a cluster of square tables, in the center, a wooden counter with a row of red bar stools, and on the right, the entertainment area with a pool table, a Test Your Strength boxing ball and three electronic arcade machines. Both video poker machines were occupied, but the chair at the video keno was vacant as it invariably was.

The five dinner tables that seated four each had been decorated with

checkered tablecloths in red, white and blue, brown glass lamps with room for a tealight, and a tray with salt and pepper shakers, small plastic bottles of ketchup, mustard and Tabasco, and black metal jars that held salt, sugar and ground chili peppers.

The jukebox, built in a retro design to look like a genuine Wurlitzer from the 1950s, was lit up like a Christmas tree. Rose knew at once that Billie Jo had put a quarter in it because it was playing one of her favorites, Lynn Anderson's Listen to a Country Song. These days, the playing came from CDs rather than vinyl singles, but the general function had remained the same.

As in any bar and grill anywhere in the world, the air carried a peculiar scent of fried food, stale beer, cheap perfume and that unidentifiable smell that always hung in the air and stuck to every surface but that nobody could ever pin down.

The row of bar stools in front of the counter was mostly empty when Rose got to it, and she swept up on the one furthest right, opposite the table where Billie Jo sat, so she could sneak a peek now and then. The female barkeep was busy with another customer down the other end of the counter, so Rose glanced around at the neon signs advertising all kinds of beer brands and at the four shelves of colorful bottles across the narrow path where the keep worked.

A bowl of free pork rinds right in front of her was too good to pass over, so she took a few and popped them into her mouth. They were salty and greasy, just the way she loved them. The first two were so good she took another two for dessert.

In the old days, McDowell's would have been enveloped in volcanic clouds of cigarette smoke, but the new world order had reached Lincoln, and the bar and grill had become a no-smoking zone. In a glass display case next to the counter, the owners kept a collection of some of their old ashtrays painted in the colors of the big tobacco companies to show how it used to be.

Behind Rose, Billie Jo moved over to the jukebox and chose another song, Johnny Paycheck's Friend-Lover-Wife. As the provocative song started, Rose peeked over her shoulder but found

herself thoroughly ignored.

"Hey, Rose! What can I get ya?" the barkeep said behind the counter.

Turning back around, Rose couldn't help but look down the barkeep's cleavage - it was hard to avoid considering Lynette Cross had her girls pushed up to a couple of inches below her chin underneath her tight, white, plunging v-neck t-shirt. Twenty-seven years old like Rose, the barkeep was pretty and had charming, blonde pigtails, but she had an unfortunate tendency to overdo her makeup which gave her an appearance of a ten-dollar prostitute.

"Howdy, Lynette," Rose said with a tired grin as she took off her trucker hat and put it on the counter. "How 'bout a cheeseburger and a cold Headache. Gimme the Headache first."

Lynette shrugged and walked down the other end of the counter where she opened a refrigerator unit and took a can of beer with a green and yellow label from H.E. Fenwyck's Breweries. "Wotcha wanna drink that dishwater for, Rose? I mean, we got so many tasty brands..."

"'Cos it's cheap, that's why. C'mon," Rose said and tapped her knuckles on the counter top. "Oh, and hold the onions."

"Sure thing, Rose," Lynette said and handed her customer the can.

By the time the cheeseburger was ready, Rose had already finished the first can of the beer she and others affectionately called 'Headache' for its headache-inducing qualities. Whatever else, it was a good beer if anyone wanted to get drunk quickly.

A young couple had taken over the jukebox and had selected The Legend of Woolly Swamp by the Charlie Daniels Band. The young woman's opinion of her date's odd choice of music was written all over her face.

"Here ya go, Rose," Lynette said and put a plate with the cheeseburger on the counter.

"Thanks, Lynette. Say, how much for the burger?"

"Three bucks."

"Okay," Rose said and reached into her back pocket for her wallet. "Tell ya what, here's ten bucks. This is for the burger and, oh, half a dozen Headaches. Yeah?"

Lynette stared at the dark-haired woman to see if she was joking, but the somber look told her she wasn't. "Half a dozen? Whaddaya think this is... **cocktail hour** at the Savoy? Girl, I don't wanna be near ya tomorrow. You gonna have one hellacious hangover."

"Whatever. Just gimme all the Headaches at once so ya don't hafta come over all the damn time," Rose said and went to work on her cheeseburger.

Lynette chuckled and did as asked.

By the time the second and third beer had been consumed, Rose had begun to turn a little hazy. Now and then, she looked back at Billie Jo and Tammy Fay who seemed to have a fun night out in town while they waited for the monster truck festival to start.

In a lull in business, Lynette came over and leaned against the counter. As she moved forward and rested on her arms, her girls nearly fell out of her t-shirt and she had to adjust it accordingly. "Rose, how come you and Billie Jo don't sit together? Trouble in paradise?"

"Eh," Rose said with a shrug. To get away from the potentially hazardous topic, she took a couple of the free pork rinds and popped them into her mouth.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Rose crunched loudly on the pork rinds before she even looked like she wanted to answer. "Eh. I was wonderin', Lynette... where d'ya think I could crash tonight and tomorrow..." - Rose looked back at Billie Jo who promptly looked the other way - "and maybe one or two more nights after that?"

"Oh my flippin' Gawd, are you guys... have you guys...?" Lynette whispered, leaning so deeply over the counter her girls nearly fell out all over again.

Rose shook her head while she cracked open the fourth can of Headache. "Don't wanna talk about it. Any suggestions?"

"Well... I live upstairs, ya know," Lynette whispered with a coquettish smile playing on her lips.

Rose took a long swig before she raised her eyes to look at Lynette's face. "Yeah? Aw, it don't hafta be much, Lyn. Jus' a dirty ol' mattress on the floor or somethin'. I ain't no fancy girl."

"No, no... it would be an honest-to-goodness bed, Rose."

"Keep talkin'."

Lynette eyed Billie Jo before she leaned in so close she could whisper into Rose's ear. "My bed. Just for fun."

"Lynette... no. That ain't gonna-"

"Just for fun, Rose. Come on... I thought you liked girls? I'm a girl."

"No shit?" Rose said and took a long swig from the can. When she put it back on the counter, she shook her head slowly. "Naw. Can't. Won't. Sorry."

Lynette moved back slightly but kept whispering in case any of the other barflies was close enough to pick it up. "Come on, Rose... I've always wondered what it was like. You know..."

"I said no, Lynette... for Chrissakes! No means no!" Rose barked, slamming the can down onto the counter. As a result, white foam burst out of it and ran down the sides and onto her fingers. Groaning out loud over the unfairness of it all, she took a napkin and began to wipe it clean.

Lynette took a step back with a miffed expression on her face. With an insulted huff, she moved away from Rose and began to wipe off the counter down the other end.

With the beer too foamy to drink, Rose turned around on the bar stool and looked over at the table where Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting. For once, she was able to get a single glance out of Billie Jo, but it only lasted a moment.

Grunting, Rose slipped off the bar stool and wobbled over to a small chair arrangement at the pool table with her remaining two and a half cans of beer. Once there, she put the beer down on a round table and headed for the Ladies'.

Upon her return, Rose stopped at the bar counter and glanced at Billie Jo with a deep, sad look of longing in her eyes. Sighing from the bottom of her soul, she snatched the bowl of free pork rinds before she continued on towards the pool table on legs that wobbled more than a little.

Fatty Connelly was chalking his fancy ebony cue, but he looked up and shot Rose a broad grin when she came closer. "Evenin', Rose. Wanna try a few frames?" he said, pointing his meaty thumb at the table where the colorful balls were already lined up and ready to go.

The man everybody knew as Fatty - his real first name had been lost in the murky currents of time - did his best to live up to his nickname

by grossly filling out his dark brown suit with his three hundred and sixty pounds. His thinning hair, meaty cheeks and double chins gave his appearance a certain hint of the late, great comedian from the silent age, Oliver Hardy.

Standing at only five foot six, all that fat had to go somewhere, and that somewhere was his gut. He used to joke that God had chosen a beer barrel as his template, and anyone close enough to see him could only agree.

Though it seemed his bulk and lumbering walk would work against him at the pool table, he was in fact the county's number one hustler - the sharpness of his beady eyes proved it. His preferred style was to lose the first few frames to trick his opponents into having a false sense of security. When they turned too cocky and agreed on a high stakes frame, he went to work and cleaned them out in no time flat.

Rose shook her head and sat down at the table where she had deposited her cans of beer. "Howdy, Fatty. Naw... not right now. Maybe a little later. I gotta get decently drunk before I'm even gonna attempt playin' against ya." To prove her point, she took the can of Headache that had foamed over before and drank it in a single gulp.

Fifteen minutes later, that can and the next were empty, and the final can had been opened. By now, Rose's eyes were swimming, but she could still stand on her feet. She had watched Fatty play a few frames against himself and had decided she had sussed him out.

"Yo, Fatty... clear the table, man. I's gonna play now," she said and got to her feet. "What we playin' for, man?"

"Jeez, Rose... you sure you can even hold the cue without scratchin' the table?" Fatty said, fanning his nose to get away from the strong scent of beer that hung around his foggy opponent.

"Hell yeah. Pull up the frame and Imma gonna show ya how this game is played," Rose said and grabbed a few pork rinds on her way

over to the pool table.

"Uh-huh?" Fatty said with a chuckle and a barely hidden snort. He did as asked and handed Rose one of the rental cues. "Here ya go. The table's the green thing at the center of the room."

"No shit... watch me dance, buddy," Rose said and pulled the cue back to open the game. Before she could start, Fatty moved the cue ball away from the table. "Hey... now what?"

"The stakes, Rose?"

"How 'bout a beer and a chaser?"

"No way, sunshine," Fatty said and let out a loud laugh. "Not that H.E. Fenwyck dishwater you're drinking. But okay, a beer and a chaser. Ya better find ya wallet 'cos I want one of the quality brands. And a Hunter's Dream bitter."

"Mercy sakes, Fatty... ya think I'm a millionaire or somethin'? All right. Put the Goddamn cue ball back on the table!"

Fatty grinned condescendingly and put the ball back on the playing field. "Yes, Ma'am," he said, soon grabbing his ebony cue.

Rose stuck her tongue in the side of her mouth and aimed for the rear of the cue ball. Holding her breath, she pulled back the cue to go to war.

The results were given from the start. At first, they only played a single frame, then best of three, then best of five - the entire match had the inevitability of a train wreck. Rose lost handsomely each and every time the colorful balls were lined up in the frame.

By the sixth frame, even Fatty had had enough. "Naw, Rose... let's call it quits. This is just too ridiculous. You owe me six brewskis and six Hunter's Dreams."

"Goddamn..." Rose croaked and reached for her wallet. When she opened it, she just saw the tail end of a moth flying off in an obvious fit of pique for being disturbed.

"Yeah," Fatty continued as he lumbered over to the small chair arrangement and sat down, "but I'd drop stone dead if I had to drink all that. So... how 'bout you only owe me one beer and one Dream?"

Rose looked at him through watery eyes. She nodded solemnly and shuffled up to the bar counter where she tried to climb up onto one of the red bar stools. After a few attempts, she had to give up and settled for leaning against the counter. "Hey... Lynette? What's the best kinda brew you got?"

"An Old Virginian Dark. It's a microbrewery up near Roanoke, Rose," Lynette said, flipping a rib burger at the stove down the other end of the counter.

"I need one o' those, thanks. And a Hunter's Dream shot. What owe?"

"Fifteen dollars."

Rose came to a jerking halt with her fingers suspended halfway down into her wallet. All she had in there was a twenty dollar bill. That meant she only had five dollars to live off for however long it would take for Billie Jo to calm down and allow her back into her life. "Crap... if it continues like this, Imma gonna be hookin' come tomorrow evenin'. Goddamn, I need a job... Lynette, can ya break a Jackson?"

"Duh," Lynette said and rolled her eyes.

"Aw... just askin'..."

Rose suddenly noticed a very familiar figure standing next to her. In fact, the figure was standing so close their elbows were touching. She looked down at the red Capris, further up at the polka dotted blouse

and finally all the way up to Billie Jo's fair face and her honey-blonde hairdo that was still marked by the can of hair spray she had used on it the same morning.

"I'd like another small Coke, please, Lynette," Billie Jo said, putting two one-dollar bills onto the counter. She never even glanced in Rose's direction.

"I'll be right there, hon," the barkeep said with a smile.

Rose licked her lips and racked her fuzzy mind to come up with the mother of all pickup lines, that immortal, epic, ground-breaking pickup line that would bring them back together. Unfortunately, all her tongue would say was: "Baby... you so fiiiine tonight." She followed the pearl of wisdom with a beery grin.

Billie Jo shot her but a single look before she turned back to Lynette who had just finished the rib burger.

"So," the barkeep said as she wiped her hands on a towel. "Rose, you first. An Old Virginian Dark and a Hunter's Dream shot?"

"Yeah... yeah. For fifteen bucks," Rose said and put the twenty on the counter.

"Yep," Lynette said and took a shot glass from underneath the counter. It was quickly filled with the murky, hi-proof bitter with thirty-two different spices that hunters seemed to love. Once the small glass was on the counter, she shuffled down to the refrigerator to get a bottle of the dark ale. "Here ya go, Rose. Careful, this is potent stuff... not like the Headaches at all," she said as she took the twenty and put a five dollar bill on the counter.

"Yeah, yeah... thanks," Rose said and took the loose change and the two items. She wobbled over to the pool table without realizing that Billie Jo's eyes were burning two holes in her strong back.

When Rose put the bottle of beer and the shot glass down in front of Fatty with a grunt and a dark glare at the grossly overweight hustler,

Billie Jo let out a sigh of relief that she thought she was the only one who could hear - but Rose heard it too, and a brief but wistful smile played on her lips before it was lost to the effects of the Headaches.

CHAPTER 5

I know what you're thinkin'. You're thinkin' *"What a flippin' white trash loser that Rose Kowalski broad is."* Right? I musta brought all this shit upon myself for things I've done in the past. Right?

Now I'm sittin' here in the back of the smelly police cruiser with a flippin' nosebleed and scraped knuckles and you're thinkin'... *"I sure as shit am glad that pe-cu-li-ar woman ain't one of my acquaintances."*

Well, lemme tell you somethin'... I ain't been whorin', I ain't been boozin'... much... and I sure as stink on shit ain't been slappin' my beautiful little Billie Jo around like so many others who live in trailer parks, high-rise apartments or high-flootin' mansions.

I know I ain't got no book sense. I got common sense, but ain't no book sense. School wasn't too good for me. Either the teachers smacked me over the head for talkin' back, or the boys tried ta grope my ass, or the other girls gossiped about me 'cos I had short hair and moved like a boy. I hated school and I couldn't leave fast enough. First chance I got I was outta there like a flippin' greased lightnin'. Ain't never opened no book since, apart from the occasional newspaper or the instruction manuals at work.

I'm a simple woman. I wake up in the morn, cuddle with my baby, eat, go to Cutter's where I used to work my ass off for a buck or two, go home, eat, cuddle with my baby and go to bed. My weekends are best spent in bed cuddlin' with my baby or in front of the teevee watchin' the Eighty-eight racin' for the 500.

I know I ain't one of them brainy women... often, I ain't got the words to express how I feel, especially not when it comes to my

beautiful Billie Jo. I love her with all my flippin' heart, but sometimes I'm worried she ain't really too aware of that 'cos I just can't tell her. I mean sure, I can say the words... any fool can say the words. But does she understand there's real weight behind 'em? I dunno and I am too flippin' scared to ask.

But I got hopes and dreams, too, Goddammit! I was gonna make enough money to support her for the rest of our lives. We were gonna cruise down one of the local Routes on my hog. We were gonna find a quiet spot somewhere and just be together. Just Billie Jo and me and mother nature. We were just gonna be together and love each other... laugh and smile... tease each other and cuddle under the blue sky and everythin' was gonna be all right. Then this flippin' thing happened.

Lemme tell you another story... one about shit. Yeah, shit just loves to accumulate and pile up. Sooner or later, the pile of shit gonna fall down and when it does, ya better wear some good boots, man. I don't care who ya are, if ya standin' in the danger zone, ya gonna be swept away by the brown wave.

My pile just fell down but so did his. Gotta face the consequences of what I've been doin'. All right. It felt flippin' good, but now I know where I'm gonna spend the next couple-a weeks. I did what I had to do and I accept the law comin' down on my ass. Ain't life grand?

**_*_
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McDowell's Bar & Grill closed early because of the big event out at the fairgrounds. Rose stood by the counter and watched Lynette give the last barflies a few gentle pushes to get them to leave the establishment. When the bosomy barkeep locked the glass door, Rose drained her final can of Headache and scooped up the last of the free pork rinds.

"Rose, darlin'... I think you've had enough," Lynette said with a grin as she turned off the neon signs and moved the slider for the ceiling lights down to the night setting.

"I know, Lyn... I know," Rose said, crunching loudly on the pork rind. "Hey... you sure it ain't no hassle to haul my sorry ass out to them fairgrounds?"

"Of course not! I'm going myself, ain't I?" Lynette said and opened the hatch in the counter so she could get over to the refrigerators and the stoves and turn them down.

Rose nodded and pushed the empty can across the counter so Lynette could deal with it. She stepped off the bar stool and had to lean against the counter for a little while. With a sigh, she took her trucker hat and began to shuffle off towards the glass doors.

"Hang on, pardner!" Lynette said and hurried after her morose friend. "I just locked the doors, remember? C'mon, we're gonna exit through the back door. My car's parked out back."

Rose turned around and stared at the barkeep with swimming eyes. She eventually grunted and shuffled the other way.

The seats in Lynette's cherry red Chevrolet Cruze were so comfortable Rose was on the verge of falling asleep the moment she put her rear end down onto the velvet. With some difficulty, she reached for the seat belt and buckled up.

Lynette closed the passenger side door behind her drunken guest and hurried around the front of the car. When she sat down behind the wheel, it was hard to miss her home-made denim short-shorts and her mostly bare thighs. On her right leg, she had an eight-inch long abrasion that ran from her kneecap and up her thigh.

Rose stared at the bare skin and at the recent injury, but didn't want to ask about either - in the end, she didn't have to.

"Partner rash," Lynette said and ran an index finger around the bruise. "It was Willard. You should see the ugly one I have on my

stomach."

"He beat you?"

Lynette shrugged and started the Cruze.

"What the flip he beat you for, Lyn?"

The barkeep quickly reversed away from the back of the establishment and drove down an uneven gravelly path to get to Main Street. The question remained awkwardly unanswered, but when they had to come to a full stop to wait for a customized truck loaded with teenagers who were clearly on their way to the fairgrounds, Lynette nodded. "He doesn't like it when I'm flirtin' with the customers," she said, looking at the street instead of Rose.

"Screw him, that sonovabitch," Rose said and held up a middle finger at the man who wasn't there. "You ain't even married. You gotta dump 'im before he thinks you're his property and starts slappin' you around for real."

"Aw, I think we're past that particular point of no return, Rose," Lynette said and drove onto Main Street.

A mile or so outside of town, the lights from the fairgrounds could be seen illuminating the evening sky. Eight huge floodlights had been put up around the track made for the monster trucks to make it the best event possible.

Up ahead, a different kind of lights flashed from the two police cruisers Sheriff Holstein had sent to control the traffic. The flashes of blue and red shone onto the long line of cars that were stationary across the Route even though several lanes were open at the booths that led to the four huge parking lots.

Lynette slowed down and put on her hazard lights to warn the cars behind that they were about to come to a full stop in an unexpected

place.

Though Rose had nearly fallen asleep, the sight of a red Chevrolet S10 truck ten or so vehicles ahead of them made her snap back to reality. The driver was a petite woman with honey-blond hair and a polka-dotted arm that hung out of the window so she could pay the attendant at the booth. Rose gulped and looked down at her hands.

"Hey Rose, this is like a date, huh? My first date with a woman. Ain't that something?" Lynette said to try to lift the somber spirits. "Don't you worry, I got the parking fee and the general admittance. It's twenty bucks a pop, right?"

"No idea," Rose said and picked at a loose seam on her black jeans. The Headaches were starting to gang up on her. She knew it wouldn't be long before they would start doing what they did best, namely giving her a thumping ache somewhere deep inside her brain.

Lynette reached over and put a warm hand a bit too high on Rose's thigh. "Rose... may I ask you a question?" she said quietly, caressing the black jeans.

"Uh... yeah...?" Rose said, staring at the barkeep's slender fingers that gently clawed her leg.

"I heard it's a beautiful, spiritual thing when girls make love. Is that true?"

Rose sighed and reached down to remove Lynette's hand from her thigh. Once the slender fingers were back on the steering wheel, she turned around in the seat to look the pretty barkeep in the eye. "Lynette... it ain't gonna happen. I'm sorry, you're a sexy gal and everythin', but it just ain't gonna happen. Okay?"

The endless row of vehicles finally moved ahead for half a dozen yards, far enough for the cherry red Cruze to drive off the Route and onto the fairground's lot.

"You didn't answer my question, Rose," Lynette said with a wink.

"I'm so sick and tired of Willard. Maybe I should... you know... try something new," she continued, moving her hand back towards the black jeans.

Rose intercepted the hand and moved it back to the steering wheel before it could touch anything. "Hell yeah it can be a two-hour spiritual event, Lyn. It can also be a five-minute wham-bam if that's what you got the hots for. Look, apart from the obvious, it ain't that much different from whatcha got with guys. You just gotta find a partner who loves ya and treats ya with the respect you deserve. If ya get them things right, magic is made."

"And who the hell of the local guys should that be, Rose? Have ya had a look at 'em lately? Jimmy Coop, that horny li'l bastard, perhaps?"

"Naw, anybody but Coop," Rose said with a beery chuckle.

"Yeah, you said it, Sister. But... I'd... I'd still like to try it... you know... just once... with a woman."

"Aw Lawrdy, can we change the topic, Lyn?" Rose said and rubbed her face where a certain numbness had begun to set in. "You ain't drunk enough to be talkin' 'bout that and I'm way too damn drunk to answer ya."

Lynette scrunched up her face in a mask of disappointment, but they were soon at the parking booth where other matters were more pressing.

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The county fairgrounds just north of Lincoln had originally been built as a staging camp for the local infantry brigades during the Civil War. Following the end of the bloody conflict, the entire area fell into disuse until a shrewd businessman from the next town over bought it from the US government for hardly anything at all.

Within a few decades, it had become the biggest attraction in that

part of the state through its tribunes with seating for nearly forty thousand, and the vast, flat area that was perfect for traveling circuses or fairs. A century and a half later, it was still a major attraction though the paved speedway eighty miles west drew a far larger crowd for its two NASCAR Sprint Cup races.

Rose and Lynette appeared at the central staircase of the west tribune as two tiny dots in the middle of a sea of humanity. Everywhere they looked, families with coolers, kids and cameras flocked around the large tribunes to get to their designated seats. Rose and Lynette soon followed them along the concrete aisles with soft drinks, a large box of popcorn and a stick of pink cotton candy.

Down below, the six hundred foot long monster truck course had been laid out as four adjacent lanes with a small dirt hill as the first obstacle, a large pile of junk cars as the second, followed by a tricky hairpin, a small dirt hill as the third obstacle and another large pile of junk cars as the final one going to the finish line.

Next to the four monster truck lanes, the organizers of the event, the Monster Truck Racing Association, had created a tractor pulling lane that was to be used in a demonstration of a triple-turbine powered tractor in the half-time show after the cheerleader dancing display.

Lynette found their seats first and tapped Rose on the shoulder to get her swimming date to slow down. The two women sat down in their seats and looked at the final preparations down below. "Aw, this is excitin'!" Lynette said, bumping shoulders with Rose.

"Mmmm," Rose mumbled, glancing at the other spectators instead of down at the field. It didn't take her long to find the familiar red-and-white polka dotted blouse and the shock of honey-blond hair. Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting a row higher some seventy feet to the right of Rose. They were laughing and drinking the same kind of soft drinks and eating the same kind of snacks as Rose and Lynette, popcorn and cotton candy. Rose's face fell when she remembered Billie Jo asking for those very things at lunch.

She looked back down at the field so she didn't have to torture herself with what could have been. Moments later, her right shoulder

was bumped into so hard she almost lost her grip on her soft drink. "Whaddahell? Open ya flippin' eyes, man!" she growled, shooting the man who had bumped her an intense glare.

He was a big fellow wearing jeans, a camouflaged baseball cap and an olive green US Marine Corps t-shirt, though his beer gut proved that he hadn't been anywhere near the Marines. His wife next to him was even larger.

"Sorry 'bout that, li'l lady," the man said and put his cooler box down in front of the seat. He popped open the lid at once to reveal he was hauling at least a dozen cans and bottles of beer that were buried in crushed ice. After giving a can to his wife, he took a bottle for himself and twisted off the cap.

"I ain't no lady," Rose growled, sucking hard on her Coke to forget the man's lack of manners.

Lynette let out a squeal and hooked her arm inside Rose's. "You sure ain't. And that's why I love you so, darlin'!" she said loudly before she leaned in and gave Rose a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Mercy sakes, Lynette... not now, okay? Not here, neither," Rose whined, rolling her eyes. After she had let out a sigh that came from the bottom of her soul, she happened to cast a glance up at the row where Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting. Billie Jo was looking straight back down at her with a puzzled look on her face.

Rose sent her partner a shrug and a tired grin, knowing that whatever she did, it would be misunderstood. She was relieved when she saw Billie Jo mirroring the shrug and the grin.

Down on the field, the official pre-show business was about to start. A bespectacled, balding man stepped out of the shadows and waited for a spotlight to pick him up. Once it had, he moved into the center of the monster truck course and climbed up onto one of the small dirt hills. "Hello and good evening, race fans," Reverend Bolt said into a cordless microphone, "Before we begin, I shall recite a little prayer and ask our Lord to protect the brave men and women you shall see

tonight. Oh, heavenly Father..."

While the Reverend spoke, a somber silence fell over the spectators. Rose looked at the people nearest to her instead of down at the speaker. Even the wild Lynette had turned into a sheep at the hands of the great shepherd. Rose snorted and stuffed a handful of caramel popcorn in her mouth.

By the time the prayer was over, a retired Sergeant from the US Army Brass Marching Band came out from the shadows and played the national anthem on a shiny trombone. Just as he hit the last note, a crop duster performed a fly-by with a banner advertising Cutter's Auto Repair Shop.

When Rose saw that, she gulped down the bitter taste of gall that had suddenly developed in her mouth.

"All right, everybody!" Reverend Bolt said into his microphone. "Let's get this show on the road! Here they come now! Let's give 'em a warm welcome to Lincoln!"

As the first of the monster trucks rolled onto the field - painted like the General Lee from the Dukes of Hazzard - the crowd went wild and began to clap, cheer and whistle at the fearless gladiators.

Rose put her soft drink between her thighs and stuck her fingers in her mouth to let out a piercing whistle that could have awoken the dead. The trucks that were competing all rolled out onto the field and let their highly tuned engines do the talking. More cheering ensued, especially when one of them belched flames from the chrome exhausts.

"Aaaaaaand welcome to the monster truck extravaganza!" the circuit commentator said over the old and croaky P.A. system. *"First up, we have the elimination runs in the fifteen-hundred horsepower class. Please give a hand to our first competitors of the evening, GhoulsRules in lane one and Buccaneer in lane two..."*

In the first part of the halftime break between the elimination runs and the finals, a selected group of cheerleaders from various colleges around the state performed a colorful, high-kicking show with plenty of acrobatics, pom-poms and gyrating women.

While the music was playing from below, beverage and snack vendors walked up and down the aisles carrying boxes filled with various products. The business was good and they rarely walked alone for more than a few steps at a time.

"Rose, ya want another Coke or somethin'?" Lynette said, leaning into Rose's ear to be heard over the loud and slightly distorted music.

Rose rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand. She eyed the cooler box next to her that belonged to her chubby, and presently departed, neighbors. "Quite frankly... I could use a beer, Lyn."

"Okay. Not a Headache, tho', right?"

"Hell, I could drink a Headache," Rose said with a tired chuckle. "Nah. I can't afford it."

Lynette shook her head and leaned in to bump shoulders with her would-be date. "Rose... for cryin' out loud... it's my treat!"

"Naw. That ain't how the piano plays in this honky-tonk, Lyn. You already gave me plenty tonight. Thanks, but I'll be fine."

"Jeez, your pride's gonna get ya in trouble one day, ya know that?"

Rose didn't answer - there wasn't any point. Instead, she looked down at the cheerleaders and the crazy throws and maneuvers they went through. One of the young women held up a hoop and another jumped through it in a perfect split holding a pair of golden pom-poms. Once the other woman had gone through, she somersaulted and jumped to her feet waving the pom-poms high in the air. The halftime show only garnered modest applause; mostly because the men in the audience were too busy ogling the nubile young women to have time to cheer.

"Anyhow," Lynette said and got up. "I need to pee. You comin', or...?"

"Now you mention it," Rose said and followed the colorfully dressed barkeep along the half-empty row of seats. Though she tried hard not to, her eyes took on a life of their own and slid down to Lynette's short-shorts to follow the sculpted rear and the gently wiggling hips. When she realized what she was doing, she sighed and looked back up.

The public restrooms were at ground level below and behind the tribunes. Before Rose and Lynette could make it all the way down to the ground, the queues at the twelve restrooms had reached critical level even though the split between the Gents and the Ladies was four to eight.

"Lawrd have mercy," Rose groaned when she realized the group of women standing on the lower rungs of the main staircase formed the tail end of the line to the restrooms. The line snaked its way around the corner, onto the lot, in between the huge pillars that held up the tribunes and finally over to the rows of plastic cabins. In a flash of infinite wisdom, someone had ordered baby blue cabins for the men and princess pink cabins for the women.

Rose rolled her eyes and stepped out of the queue at once. "Lynette... I'm really sorry, buddy, but I ain't got patience for this kinda shit right here. I don't gotta go that fiercely, so... I'm gonna go over to the truck display over yonder-" - she pointed at one of the monster trucks that had been parked just inside the gates so people could admire the engine and inner workings - "and take a peek at the marvel. Okay?"

"Sure thing, Rose. I really gotta pee!"

"You have my condolences, my friend. Really ya do," Rose said somberly, giving Lynette's shoulder a motherly squeeze. A couple of

seconds later, she couldn't hold the dark mask and broke out in a beery grin that earned her a mocking snort.

There were far too many nosy kids for Rose's liking at the monster truck on display so she was quickly back at the main staircase. The queue had moved a good thirty feet in the meantime, and she waved at Lynette who had begun to cross her short-shorts-clad legs.

As Rose headed for the staircase to get back upstairs, she overheard a familiar male voice speaking somewhere behind her. The voice belonged to Darrell Yates, Jr. but it wasn't the speaker's identity that made her stop dead in her tracks, it was the things he was bragging about.

'Yeah, I had her but good just before the break,' Junior said in a voice so laden with beer and put-upon swagger that Rose nearly tossed her popcorn. 'I knew I'd get that tight little hussy sooner or later. Ever since I groomed her last year, I've been keepin' an eye on her. And tonight she delivered the goods. O-yeah, did she ever. I had her up against the pillars down here while you were watchin' the trucks. Sweet Lawrd Almighty, she knew what she was doin' with her tongue, lemme tell you. I guess that comes from all the carpet she's munched, know what I mean?'

Sick of Junior's boasting, Rose had begun to move on, but that colorful description made her stop dead. Junior and whomever he was speaking to were on the other side of the staircase wall, so she backed up to be able to hear better.

'Yeah,' Junior continued, sounding like he was beaming like a little sun, 'I gave her plenty. Yes, Sirree. When I left her with glistening cheeks, she was beggin' for more. I guess that's inevitable when her initials are BJ. Eh? Eh? Ain't that right?'

An atomic bomb went off inside Rose. The destructive forces started in her heart and soon traveled out to her limbs. She tightened every muscle she had and clenched her fists until her knuckles turned white.

The tendons on her neck stood out so clearly they were straining against the upper hem of her muscle shirt. Slowly drawing back her lips into an unrestrained sneer, she slammed her eyes shut. When she opened them again, the pale blue orbs were gone, replaced by bottomless pools of hellfire.

She moved her right leg ahead and put down her boot in a jerky step caused by her tightened muscles. A second step followed the first. Then a third. Then she broke out in an explosive sprint that brought her around the corner of the staircase like a vengeful spirit.

The look of unbridled shock in Darrell Junior's eyes as he saw Rose come barreling towards him was real. He and his well-dressed group of like-minded friends had been lounging at one of the support pillars below the tribunes, but their little safe haven from the blue collar masses suddenly turned into a deadly battlefield.

Shrieking, Junior dropped the beer he had been holding and tried to run away, but Rose was faster.

"You motherfucker!" she cried hoarsely, grabbing hold of his hunting jacket, turning him around and slamming him up against one of the pillars. Her strong fists tightened around his lapels and tore them loose from the rest of the fancy jacket. Baring her teeth, she leaned in to let him see the fury and hatred that brewed behind her stormy eyes.

Somewhere at the back of her mind, she could hear Billie Jo pleading with her to act like an adult and not beat the stuffing out of Junior, but the sweet voice was drowned out by the growling beast that sharpened its claws.

The other well-dressed men around the fighting pair stepped back and began to disperse, well aware of the fact that Junior's boastful mouth had run off with him once too often.

The muscles in Rose's arms and shoulders were strained to their breaking point as she held Junior's fancy clothes, but she tried hard not to give in to her nature and smack him around. All she wanted was to

give him a fight so bad he would wet his pants and never talk like that again about Billie Jo or any other woman. "You know what you and me gonna do, Junior?" she said and gave him a tug. "You and me gonna find Billie Jo and you gonna apologize to her. Yeah? You with me, fishbreath? You gonna apologize?"

Instead of listening, Junior spat in Rose's face.

As the glob trickled down her cheek, she fell silent and began to grind her jaw. A slight smile played across her lips as her inhibitions gave up the unequal struggle with her iron will. Moving at the speed of a striking rattlesnake, she pulled back her right fist and cannoned off a hook to Junior's jaw that sent his head spinning.

The force of the impact shook Junior out of his stupor, and he grabbed Rose around her waist and began to wrestle her. The two fierce opponents were soon rolling back and forth between the pillars, wrestling, kicking, punching, groaning, grappling and grunting.

Around them, people came running from all over to see the wrestling match, including Johnny Lee Norton, Jimmy Cooper with a hot date on his arm, Lynette who couldn't believe her eyes, one of the Dales from the trailer park - the one without a dog - and finally Tammy Fay Sorenson who shrieked and stormed back to the queue for the restrooms with her arms flailing in the air.

Junior's arms were flailing too. Though he stood no chance against the far stronger Rose in a regular fight, he managed to get a few hits in on her cheekbones and her nose simply out of dumb luck. Through more dumb luck, their legs got tangled up and they ended up on the ground with Junior on top. He immediately punched Rose in the gut below the belt, but it only angered her more and she swung her right fist at his head and scored another fierce, cracking impact.

While Junior was stunned, Rose scrambled to her knees and pulled her arm back to deliver the finishing blow to his temple that would send him to cloud nine on the express train. As she wanted to move her arm ahead, she realized someone was holding onto it with all their might.

Growling, she looked over her shoulder with a can of whoop-ass all ready to go for whomever had disturbed her, but came to a dead stop when she stared into Billie Jo's frightened, green orbs.

Down on the ground, Junior wasn't about to let such a golden opportunity pass him by, so he jumped up and got set to kick Rose in the head. A split second before he would have released his leg, he was tackled to the ground by two of his companions.

"Rose," Billie Jo pleaded in a thick voice, "please... please, Rose... no more. Please!"

The fight fizzled out of the scraped, bruised and bleeding Rose. Sighing, she nodded and wiped her aching nose on the back of her hand. Two red streaks across it proved Junior had gotten lucky somewhere along the way. She looked up at her partner whose pale face showed all kinds of torment and conflicting emotions. Billie Jo seemed like she didn't know whether to cry or get mad - but at least she didn't walk away.

Rose grunted and clambered to her feet. Her muscle shirt and her black jeans were filthy and disheveled, as was her mullet. Her Bulldog Mack hat had long since blown off and was lying upside down next to the pillar they had been fighting against. She couldn't stand the uncharacteristic silence that came from Billie Jo, and she knew she had just killed every last chance she had ever had of straightening out the mess she had been dumped into. Sighing, she reached for her hat and mashed it down onto her dark locks.

"Excuse me, Miss Tucker?" one of Junior's friends said. Like most of the others in Junior's circle of companions, he was a well-dressed young gentleman with fancy clothes, fancier hair and a well-groomed mustache.

Billie Jo turned around with pain and torment written all over her expressive face. She tried to smile at the gentleman, but it only turned into a faint crease.

"Miss Tucker, I'm Bryan Rauberman and I need to apologize for the things Mr. Yates Jr. said about you. I... it was inexcusable. We... we realize that now," the young man said and waved at his companions to get them to come over. "Mr. Yates Jr. boasted about... uh... about... uh... having s- uh, sex with you... uh, and that's what... uh..."

"He what?" Billie Jo croaked, zooming in on the sorry Junior who was still pinned down by two of his friends.

"Uh... I'm afraid that's what happened," the young gentleman said. "And your, uh... frien- uh, Miss Kowalski there jumped in to... uh, restore your honor, I guess you could say."

Billie Jo's eyes slid over to the bleeding Rose who was leaning against one of the pillars, nursing her bumps and scrapes. "I see..." she croaked, looking back at Junior who had been moved up into a sitting position in the meantime.

Out of nowhere, Billie Jo let out a roar of indignation and stomped over to Junior. Leaning down, she slapped him so hard across the cheek he fell down all over again. "You pathetic, disgusting little joke of a man! How dare you spread such filthy lies about me?!" she roared, moving her hand back to slap the whimpering Junior one more time.

In a mirror of the earlier event, Rose held Billie Jo back after her point had been made. "Baby... simmer down. I think he got the message. Hey, Junior... Junior, quit cryin', dickhead," Rose said, kicking out at Darrell Jr's shoes. "Tell the lady about the can of beer in the Caddy. G'wan, tell the lady 'bout the flippin' can of beer! You miserable little coward, tell Billie Jo 'bout the flippin' can o' beer that cost me my job, my home and my flippin' girlfriend or I swear to the Lawrd above Imma gonna smack you down so good ya can't piss standin' up!"

The tidbit that Rose had lost her job was a shocking piece of news to Billie Jo who gasped loudly and grabbed hold of her lover's strong arms.

Junior looked from the shocked Billie Jo to the hopping mad Rose.

He didn't know which of the two furies would hurt him more so he stayed put on the ground with his arms ready to cover his face from further attacks. "I... I guess I had a couple of loose cans of brew in my Caddy... my Caddy... that you wrecked!"

"The flippin' thing got stuck under the flippin' brake pedal! I wrecked ya Caddy 'cos of your own flippin' beer, Junior. Ain't that just poetic justice?" Rose said drolly.

Billie Jo stared wide-eyed at her partner. All the emotions and anguish that had blasted through her since she went to the accident site and smelled the stink of beer on Rose came down into a single point that had the gravity of a black hole. "You t- told me the truth? You told me the truth... and I didn't believe you..." she croaked, pressing her hands to her mouth.

"Aw, yeah," Rose said and pushed her trucker hat back from her forehead. A smile of relief spread over her battered lips, and she put out her arms to pull Billie Jo into a hug. "The truth is a weird deal sometimes. Mercy sakes, if I'd been told such a story, I woulda-OOOOF!"

The very next moment, Rose was flat on her stomach on the ground. Sheriff Holstein pressed his knee into her back as he grabbed her arms and forced them behind her. When the silver handcuffs were in place, he yanked her to her feet and pushed her around. "Kowalski, you dumb sack of shit. What did I tell you about the consequences of the crap you're doin' around here? You can consider yourself under arrest for assault," Seymour Holstein said and gave Rose a strong jerk.

"No, Sheriff!" Billie Jo cried, throwing her hands in the air in frustration. "You- you can't- Rose- Rose just tried to-"

When she realized the Sheriff wouldn't listen, she tried to step in between them, but Holstein wasn't about to let go of his prisoner.

"Step aside, Miss Tucker," he said and jerked Rose around a bit more because he could. "I'm gonna haul Professor Kowalski here before the judge. He ain't gonna look too kindly upon her sorry ass. This is

her second offence... I'll bet she just earned herself a couple-a months behind bars. Let's go," he continued, yanking Rose after him on their way over to the nearest police cruiser.

Rose staggered along trying to keep up with the Sheriff's purposeful stride, but she found time to look over her shoulder and shoot a wistful smile at Billie Jo who was hurrying along after them. "Billie Jo... baby... don't worry 'bout me. Okay? Dontcha worry 'bout me. 's gonna be fine, I promise..."

"Shut up, Kowalski!" the Sheriff barked, yanking Rose closer to him.

At the police cruiser, the Sheriff opened the back door, shoved Rose inside and mashed her trucker hat down onto her dark locks to mock her. Once she was sitting upright in the back seat, he slammed the door shut and pointed an accusing index finger at her through the closed window telling her to stay put or else.

Rose sighed and glanced around the cruiser. Outside, three snotty kids were making faces at her, but Billie Jo was nowhere in sight. "Hung over, bruised, bleedin' and handcuffed in the back of a smelly police cruiser. Ain't this just the flippin' perfect ending to a flippin' perfect Saturday?" she mumbled, shuffling around on the seat in search for a spot that didn't hurt her hands that were still restrained by the silver handcuffs.

Movement outside the police cruiser made her look through the window. When she caught a glimpse of Billie Jo slicing through the crowd of onlookers like a ship's figurehead through a dense fog, she let out a groan of relief and thanked her lucky stars for having such a resilient girlfriend.

Billie Jo had Burton Cutter and the young gentleman who had explained what Junior had said in tow, and they went straight over to the Sheriff and entered negotiations with the bitter, old law man.

Throughout the discussion, Sheriff Holstein shook his head more than he nodded, but he eventually shuffled over to the cruiser, opened

the door and stuck his head inside. "Kowalski, you lucky sonovabitch. You earned yourself at least a month in the slammer for what you did to Mr. Yates Jr., but because Mr. Cutter and Mr. Rauberman have just put in a good word for ya... dunno what the hell Mr. Cutter sees in ya, but that's another story... anyway... you're gonna end up only spendin' a couple of nights behind bars. You'll be out come Tuesday mornin'... but mark my words, Kowalski. I got your Goddamned number. Ya hear me? Sooner or later, you gonna foul up and then I'll be there."

"Sheriff, can I talk to my girlf-"

"No, you can't, Goddammit!" Holstein said and slammed the door shut. As he strode around the cruiser, Billie Jo ran over to the rear window and blew Rose a frantic string of kisses.

In the back seat, the simple message of love meant more to Rose than a thousand-page book could. With a heart that hopped, skipped and jumped in her chest out of pure elation for having the most important part of her life back - and possibly her job, too - she puckered up her aching lips and made a few kissies back at Billie Jo before the Sheriff started the car and drove off the lot.

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Good thing I ain't workin' as a psychic 'cos I sure as hell didn't see that one comin'. Man, I love that good li'l woman... she's the best thing that ever happened to me. Two nights in the slammer ain't nothin' I can't handle... tho' I'm gonna have a hangover come Sunday morn' from those damn Headaches. But that don't matter now.

Hell, I know Billie Jo 'll be waitin' for me when I get out on Tuesday. The two nights we were gonna spend apart when she was angry with me woulda been far, far worse.

Shit, I didn't get to say 'bye and thanks to Lynette... gotta buy her some flowers or shit come Tuesday. Need to talk to her 'bout that

creep Willard anyhow. If he touches her again, I'm gonna bust his ass... on second thoughts, maybe I should just talk to 'im instead. The only ass that's gonna be busted if I'm arrested one more time will be my own, and that's gonna be up in the state pen. Ain't gonna expose Billie Jo to that, no Sirree.

With Burton Cutter puttin' in a good word for me... mercy sakes, I wonder if that means I got my job back? I sure hope so. I ain't cut out to be doin' nothin'... I'd kill the grass at the trailer if I had to mow it every day.

Ah, that's for later. First of all, I'm gonna be countin' the hours until Tuesday. Then, me and Billie Jo gonna go home, grab a shower and make love the entire rest of the day. Ooooh yeah, lookin' forward to that already.

If I shuffle around in the seat, I can see Cutter's black Merc drivin' behind the cruiser. In the lights from the passin' cars, I catch a couple-a glimpses of my darlin's beautiful face next to the old man. She's wavin' at me and blowin' me a kiss, ain't that cute?

I try to blow her a couple-a kisses right back but it ain't easy when my lips are grinnin' this broadly. Everythin's gonna be just fine with me and her, and that's the most important thing in my world, now and ever.

The county jailhouse is comin' up so I better sign off I'm Rose Kowalski and it's been nice talkin' to ya, folks... and hey... ain't life grand?

THE END.

CHAPTER THREE

For Fun's Sake

For Fun's Sake

by

Anonymous

Whoever said this was going to be a snap was going to get a kick in the head.

Rachel adjusted her stocking cap and made sure her jacket was zipped, then shoved the door open and started to hop. She got down the short flight of stairs, then tried to balance on one foot while scooping up enough snow to bathe with. Her balance was generally very good, but she wasn't paying rapt attention. In a millisecond she was face first in a huge pile of snow. Luckily, being out in the middle of nowhere saved you from some of life's indignities...or at least left them unseen.

"Hey there," a voice called out. "Need a hand?"

Shit, shit, shit! It was too late to have any dignity now. She stuck her hand in the air and waved.

The thump, thump, thump of snowshoes came closer, then a voice from right above her head said, "How can I help?"

Rachel managed to roll over, then gazed up into the face of a woman bearing a very concerned look.

"I'm fine. A little clumsy, but fine." Trying to get to her feet wasn't as easy as she'd hoped. That second foot would have come in handy. After flailing about like a fool, she gave up and sank back into the snowbank.

"Is something wrong with your leg?"

"I sprained my ankle yesterday. I thought it was pretty minor, but..." She looked down at the now snowy sock that covered her foot. "I can't even get my shoe on."

"Did you ski in?"

"We did. I mean, I did. I mean, yes." She grabbed a handful of snow and rubbed it into her face. "I'm a blithering idiot."

"No, you're a one-legged woman who's stuck in the snow." She looked towards the house. "The people you're with should have come out with you."

"I'm alone." Another handful of snow made her shiver. "I'm going to lie here and slap myself as punishment for doing something so stupid."

"Or you could let me help you up." She shrugged agreeably. "Your call."

Taking a second look, Rachel decided the woman would probably be able to help, but it wouldn't be a walk in the park. They were about the same size, neither one very burly. But her savior had the use of both feet, which was a definite plus. Extending her hand, Rachel said, "Your way sounds better."

The woman grabbed hold of the porch railing, then clamped her hand around Rachel's wrist. With a strong pull, her butt left the ground, then their clasped hands slid apart, leaving her floundering again.

"I could have done that on my own," she said, looking up to smile.

"Next time for sure." The woman playfully spit on her gloves, slapped them together, then made another attempt, this one much more successful. But Rachel couldn't avoid sticking her left foot to the ground for balance.

"God damn it!" she winced.

"Put your arm around my shoulders. I'm a very effective crutch." Hesitantly, she did, hoping the woman didn't drop her again. But their three legs did the trick, letting her hop up the stairs successfully.

"I'm exhausted," she moaned at the top.

"I'm Emmy. Nice to meet you. It was a pleasure to save your life." She stuck her hand out to shake. "Rachel."

"Good to meet you. I'm just glad it wasn't an hour later. You would have been a very big icicle."

"No joke," Rachel said soberly. "You might have saved my life. My kids owe you a big debt of gratitude."

"Just your kids?" Emmy's brow rose.

"Well, me too, but my kids would starve if I wasn't there to feed

them.”

“Ahh, little ones.”

“Fifteen and seventeen. They’re only little in the sense that they do very little for themselves.” Rachel chuckled as she wrenched her jacket off then tried to get the snow pants to follow suit.

“Hold still,” Emmy said. She easily popped open the snaps down both legs and whipped them off. “I...guess I should have asked if you had long underwear on before I did that. A lot of women wouldn’t like a stranger to see her in the buff.”

“At this point, I could not care less. I’m just glad I didn’t freeze to death out there. Nudity is the least of my worries.” She hopped close to the wall, able to use it as support. “I’ve never stopped to consider how much of a difference two feet make. I’m going to do my best to hold onto both legs from now on. I’m marking ‘no’ on the leg donation box on my driver’s license.”

“Two are a hundred percent more efficient,” Emmy said, letting out a soft laugh. “Or something around there. Math isn’t my strong point.”

“Have a seat.” Rachel flopped onto the sofa.

“Let me get my boots off. I don’t want to drip on your nice floor.”

“It’s a friend’s,” Rachel said. “But it is nice.” They always looked forward to their annual visit to the ultra-rustic chalet-style cabin, admiring its simple, efficient hominess.

Turning back to Emmy, she said, “How did you just happen upon me? We’re pretty far out in the backcountry.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.” Emmy stripped off not just her boots, but also her coat and bib-style snow pants. A red union suit poked out from the bottom of a heavyweight, long-sleeved, peach-colored top. “You don’t mind my stripping before I sit on your sofa, do you? It’s pretty hot in here.”

“Be my guest,” Rachel said. “Victims can’t be choosy. You didn’t say why you’re out here. You’re not the world’s most optimistic burglar, are you?”

“No,” Emmy laughed. “I’m a nature photographer. I’ve been tracking a bobcat, but I think I lost him.” She stretched her arms across the back of the sofa. “I’m suddenly very interested in this habitat. You don’t mind my riding out the storm here, do you?”

“If you tried to leave, I’d grab onto your leg to stop you. I was a dunce to let my family go.”

“Family? Your whole family abandoned you? Maybe they’re trying to tell you something!”

"You might be right." She laughed. "No, I think they still like me. The boys at least. My ex probably wouldn't mind if I suffocated out there in the snow bank."

"Your ex is with you?"

"Yeah." She pulled the low table closer to rest her foot on it. "We divorced six years ago. But we'd always come up here to ski this week. The boys guilt-tripped us into continuing the tradition. I keep hoping they'll want to spend their winter break with their friends, but no...I'm stuck with kids who want to spend time with me. Just my luck," she growled playfully.

"And their father."

"Yeah. That's the downside. But we hardly see each other the rest of the year, so it's tolerable."

"I've got two exes. And the chance of my spending a week with either is..." Her eyes fluttered closed. "Nil."

"Kids?"

"No, they were both adults. Chronologically, at least."

"You know what I meant," Rachel said, poking her in the ribs.

"No kids. Thankfully. I'm not the type who can stand to be tied down."

"Then you're very lucky you don't have any. Mine are like weights attached to me. I love them. I *adore* them," she emphasized. "But they're a ridiculous amount of work."

"Work I can handle. Having my freedom curtailed...no way."

"You're a nature photographer, huh? That's a heck of a lot more interesting than my job."

"Which is?"

"I'm a speech pathologist."

"Thath weely nithe."

Rachel barked out a laugh. "In twenty-four years, no one has ever blatantly made fun of kids with speech impediments when I tell them what I do. You are one nervy woman, Emmy."

"You seem like the type who can take a joke. And I should get a free pass because I had a very silibant 'S' until I worked with a good speech pathologist. I'm a fan."

"That's good to hear. Not many people come back to tell me how great things are once they've conquered a speech difficulty. It's nice to meet a living example."

"My life improved a lot when my 's' started to behave. No more teasing." She leaned back and let her head move in a half-circle. "This is a nice place. Cosy. But you still haven't told me why your family

left you here alone. That's...not smart," she said, her voice taking on a serious tone.

"I know," Rachel sighed. "But Erik, my ex, wouldn't go alone, and neither EJ nor Adam wanted to be left behind. They always think they're going to miss something."

"They headed for town? That's a good fifteen miles away."

"I know. I figured that the three of them together gave me the best chance of all of them coming back in one piece."

"The boys could have gone and left Erik behind."

With a sweet smile, Rachel said, "I'd rather ski on a fractured ankle."

"Fractured?" Her eyebrows rose again. "You think you fractured it?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't. But it hurts like the dickens."

"Mind if I take a look?" Emmy was on her knees in front of the sofa before Rachel could say a word.

Emmy had to be at least Rachel's age. Maybe she'd already hit the big 5-0. From spending so much time outdoors she had distinct lines around her eyes and her skin was tan even in January. But her eyes were kind, and she had a nice smile. Rachel checked out the little bit of hair that peeked out of her knit cap. Sandy blonde, short, with a good sprinkling of gray.

Emmy removed the sock, then put her hands on the swollen ankle.

"Yeow!"

"It hurts that bad?"

"No! Your hands are like ice!"

"Oh, for god's sake. I thought you'd fractured it in nine places." Tenderly, she rotated it a small amount, then pressed her fingers to various spots. "You've got at least a grade two sprain. Maybe a three. How bad's the pain?"

"Horrible when I put weight on it, but not too bad when it's elevated."

"Let's keep a good thought. Have you been icing it?"

"That's why I was outside. I was going to fill a bucket with snow for my ankle, then melt the rest and bathe with it."

"It's your lucky day. I can not only fetch snow, I can wrap it for you. That'll help a lot." She jumped to her feet and padded over to the front door to put her clothes back on. Even though her union suit was roomy, Rachel could see how strong her legs were. Thank god her savior hadn't been some weakling who tried to weasel out of work—like Erik.

Emmy not only brought in snow, she also carted in her camera gear and a backpack big enough for a mule. Dumping the pack on the floor, she sorted through layers upon layers of clothing, food and supplies.

"Got it," she said, after extracting a good-sized first-aid kit.

"That's awfully big for backpacking," Rachel marveled.

"I don't take chances with my safety or my camera gear. It's a pain in the rear to carry so much stuff, but aren't you glad I do?" She pulled out a pair of Zip-lock bags and some duct tape. "I'll have your ankle feeling better in two minutes flat."

"Got any industrial-strength painkillers in there?"

"No," she said, her gaze gentling. "Are you hurting bad?"

"Moderately bad. Less than childbirth, less than a toothache, but worse than a migraine."

"That's pretty bad," Emmy agreed. "This should help." She put a bag filled with ice on either side of Rachel's ankle, leaving her sock on to protect her skin. Then she taped everything together—firmly.

"Should it be so tight?" Rachel asked, peering over her shoulder as she worked.

"You don't want to lose circulation, but it'll feel better if the swelling goes down. Compression will help." She moved the table closer. "When possible, keep it elevated above your heart."

"Not as easily done as said." She slumped down in the sofa. "Does this count?"

"Hold tight." Emmy rearranged the sofa cushions, then helped maneuver Rachel to lie down, her foot now resting comfortably and well above her heart.

"Much, much better," Rachel purred. "That's the best it's felt since last night."

"What did you do to it?" Emmy asked as she sat down on the rocker next to the sofa.

"I tripped over Erik's ski pole when I went out to use the toilet. He left it draped across the steps!" Just thinking of his carelessness made her blood boil. She reveled in her decision to divorce him. A man who would do that did not deserve to be loved.

"My husbands weren't careless," Emmy said, frowning. "That kind of thing would not have been tolerated."

"They must have done something." Softly laughing Rachel added, "We've got no TV, no books and no radio. The least you can do is entertain me with stories about your exes."

She seemed to grow thoughtful, not speaking for a few minutes.

Then she said, "It was the same thing both times. I married independent guys who claimed they wanted me to be independent. Until I was," she added glumly. "I always suspected they would have been fine if their friends and family hadn't harassed them about why I missed Christmas or their birthday or the family reunion..."

"You missed Christmas?" Rachel said in mock horror.

"Not *every* Christmas. But when you're on assignment and you've got a chance to photograph cheetah cubs on December the twenty-third..." She shrugged. "I had to do my job."

"When a woman does it, she's abandoning her husband. When a man does it, he's a dedicated professional."

"Amen, sister," Emmy said, laughing. "I liked being married, but I didn't like being nagged."

"Who does like it? Of course, I *do* it. But that's beside the point."

The big window at the front of the cabin showed a heavy snow starting to fall. It was going to be a bad storm—as predicted. "I hope the kids get to town before the storm hits them."

"Are they in good shape?"

"Oh, sure. They're kids. But Erik's slowed down a lot since I saw him last. He had knee surgery this year and I don't think he was ready for a trip this tough. Far be it from me to tell him that, though."

"Sturdy kids could make it in two hours. Max. But if Erik's slowing them down..." She looked at her watch. "When did they leave?"

"Ten minutes before you got here."

"What?" Her eyes opened wide. "It's three o'clock in the afternoon! Why'd they leave so late?"

"Arguing. With me. With each other. Trying to get their cell phones to work. Wasting time going to all of the other houses up here, hoping someone was home who had a satellite phone. Trying to decide if they should go today or wait for the storm to pass. Arguing about who'd go and who'd stay. The usual," she sighed. "Getting the three of them out of the house at a reasonable hour is like..." She scowled. "I don't have an analogy bad enough."

"I hope you don't expect help to come tonight, because no one's going to come out in this storm for a sprained ankle."

"I figured that. But we've got water and food and firewood and..." Chuckling, she said, "That's it. But that's enough."

"Let's see what you've got. I can always add some of my freeze-dried delicacies." She went over to the small kitchen and groaned dramatically. "Macaroni and cheese? Cans of chili? Soup? Oatmeal?"

Shelf-stable milk? You people live like kings!"

Rachel laughed. "I had two strong boys to carry things. And we were only doing fifty miles total. We stopped at a hut after twenty-five, then got here yesterday. So we've got enough food for several more days. I think our friend, the owner of the place, has some things in the cabinets too. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if we helped ourselves."

Emmy opened the cabinets, oohing and aahing. "After two days of freeze-dried beef stroganoff, I might just eat everything in here." She pulled out a bottle and shook it. "Pain killer."

"What've you got? Whatever it is, I'll take it."

"How do you feel about Rock and Rye?"

"I have no idea what that is, but if it has alcohol in it, I'd like a tumbler."

"How about a little...in tea."

"Are you one of the abstinence police?" Rachel sat up to be able to glare at Emmy.

"Not at all. But you should take it slow. There's a fine line where you get pain relief but can still stand." She pointed towards Rachel's ankle. "Remember you did that when you were stone cold sober."

"But I have a human crutch now."

"True. But I'm having a drink too. I hate to watch someone drink alone."

"Cocktail hour!" Rachel called out. "There are few things I love more than cocktail hour!"

Emmy started to boil some water at the propane stove. "What do you normally drink for your cocktail hour?"

Rachel laughed. "I have cocktail hour about three times a year. A couple of my old friends and I try to get away for a long weekend at least once a year. And when we do there's always a loooong cocktail hour. Or two. I usually have something with vodka."

"I'm a bourbon woman myself. So Rock and Rye should hit the spot."

"I know what rye is, but what's the rock part?"

Emmy picked up the bottle and tried to read the contents. "Do you have any reading glasses? I can't see a damn thing without mine and they're packed away."

"I forgot mine. But let me take a look. My eyes aren't too bad yet." Emmy walked over and handed her the bottle. As Rachel moved her hand further and further away, Emmy snatched it back. "I'll put my boots back on, go outside and hold it up to the window." She went back to the tiny kitchen. "It's usually rock candy or some other kind

of super-sweet something-or-other.”

“Candy? In whiskey?”

“How else can you convince children to drink whiskey?” she said, chuckling. Once the tea was ready, Emmy poured some whiskey into each mug and brought them over to the living room. “Here’s mud in your eye,” she said, clicking the mugs together.

“What in the heck does that mean? I used to hear that on TV, but it never made sense.”

“I have no idea, but I like the way it sounds. I can just hear Dorothy Parker saying something like that.”

“I love Dorothy Parker! Where have all the wits gone?”

“We just have half of them,” Emmy said, smiling.

“I...like this,” Rachel said after taking a drink. “It’s something your grandmother would have given you when you had a chest cold.”

“Works for me. I think I’ll start putting candy into all of my drinks.” She leaned back and sighed. “It’s so nice to have a drink and a conversation with an interesting person. I’ve only been out for three days and I was already a little lonely.”

“How long are most of your trips?”

“Oh, it depends. If I’m backpacking, I can only carry enough for five days at the most. And that’s in summer. During the winter, I can usually only handle enough for three. If I hadn’t happened upon this place, I was going to have to keep going. Another fifteen miles in a bad storm. No fun.”

“Have you been staying in huts?”

“Just in a tent. I like being on my own—for short periods. Many of my assignments force me to travel with local guides and game wardens and all sort of support. So I love to take off and have fun alone when I can.”

“You’re...local?”

“Half Moon Bay. You?”

“Los Angeles. Well, Pasadena.”

“Ahh...the prettiest place in the world on January the first. Were you ever the Rose Queen?”

“Just missed,” Rachel said, snapping her fingers. “It’s funny, but we always hate to have a gorgeous day for the parade. A pretty day makes everyone want to move, and believe me, we’re crowded enough.”

“I’m with you there. When I was a kid, Half Moon was a quiet little spot that people hadn’t heard of. The growth in the last twenty years has nearly ruined it.”

"You can't blame people for wanting to live there. It's awfully pretty."

"True," Emmy said, nodding. "I'm sure the people who lived there in 1900 resented my grandparents when they moved from Ohio. We like to think everyone who came after us has ruined the place."

"I grew up near Bakersfield, so I guess I'm part of the problem in LA." She turned so she could see Emmy's face. "As soon as Adam's in college, I'm moving. I'm not sure where, but I want to drive less. Cleaner air wouldn't be a bad thing either."

Emmy chuckled. "So you're making your kids breathe bad air—then you're escaping."

"Something like that. Kids don't need clean air. It's not like they're outside running around or anyth... Oh, my god!" She clapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm murdering my kids!"

"If they can ski fifteen miles before dark, they must be doing all right."

"I wish I had a way to call the little monsters. They worry me sick sometimes."

Emmy stood and walked over to the wood-burning stove in the center of the room. "Are you happy with the fire, or do you want me to stoke it?"

"Mmm, that's the only heat source so we'll...and I mean you... will have to keep it going. What do you think?"

"It's warm in here for me, but it'll get cold fast if we let it die down. I should probably bring in enough wood to last us for the night." She went over to the big window and looked out. "The wood's going to be covered with snow in a very short time. It's really coming down."

"Those kids of mine had better be in town by now."

Emmy walked back over the sofa and sat on the edge of it. Her dark eyes were filled with empathy. "You don't need to worry. If they know how to ski, they'll be fine. They've been in this area before, right?"

"Many times. But it's tough not being able to talk to them. I'm normally worried about their driving or who they're riding with or what kinds of trouble they're getting into with girls. It's always something with kids."

"Skiing to town is safer than driving in Pasadena. Trust me on that. And tomorrow a nice big four-wheeler will pick you up and whisk you right to town. You'll be one happy family again." Frowning, she added, "But Erik will still be there, so..."

"Thanks," Rachel said, as a little of the worry she'd been carrying lifted. "You're right. Things are much more dangerous at home. Thanks for the perspective adjustment."

"No problem. I'll be back in a few."

Emmy went to the door and put all of her gear back on, then went out to wrestle with the firewood. Things might be more dangerous at home, but they were also a lot easier—and more predictable.

After bringing in wood, Emmy warmed up some snow and took a sponge bath, with Rachel lying on the sofa talking to her. "This is funny," she said. "I can't remember the last time I carried on a conversation with a friend in the shower."

"If you think this is a shower..." After rustling around in her backpack, which she'd taken into the kitchen with her, Emmy finally came back into the living area and stuck her arms into the air. "Ta da!"

Her short hair, a mostly blonde crown surrounded by a halo of mostly gray, was wet and lay close to her head. A fresh set of dark grey long underwear and a pair of dark wool socks was all she wore. "I feel like a kid after taking her Saturday night bath—in eighteen fifty."

"You look a little like that. It's funny, but I've noticed that women who've never had kids often seem more...youthful? Childlike?"

"I'll take either." She sat down and pulled both feet up until they touched, with her knees resting on the arms of the chair. "But the word you're searching for might be immature. My mother always says I'm in a very delayed adolescence."

"Mothers," Rachel said, rolling her eyes. "I know I should appreciate mine more, but our relationship isn't the best. When my parents come to visit all she does is complain about what a horrible place LA is." She chuckled. "That's reserved for the residents."

"My mother and I don't argue about that. Our fights center on one thing—having me work for the family business."

"Family business?"

"Uh-huh. My grandparents started a nursery a few years before I was born. My mom's still running it, but she'd like to retire. For some reason, she's sure I'd love it—which I wouldn't."

"Ooo...that's a big one. How old is your mom?"

"Eighty-two this year. She's still hale and hearty, but she's just plain sick of working fifty or sixty hours a week."

"Of course she is!" Rachel laughed. "She's put in her time."

"I'm not arguing about that. I think she should sell it and enjoy the

rest of her life. She could travel, buy a big boat...anything at all. The business has done well and I know she could net enough to live very comfortably.”

“But it means something to her, doesn’t it. She wants to have the legacy carried on.”

Nodding, Emmy said, “Yeah, that’s it. But I’d run the place into the ground. I’m not a manager, I have no patience for dealing with the public, and I’d resent every hour spent in the office.”

“You’d be like most people working in offices,” she said, laughing.

“Right. And that’s not the life I’ve made for myself. I’m afraid I’m going to have to make it clear. I’ll break her heart... But we’ve been dancing around the issue for years. It’s time to make some decisions.”

Rachel sighed. “I’m glad my parents are both in pretty good health, but they’re starting to decline. I wish I had a dozen siblings to help me keep an eye on them.”

“I’ve got three older sisters, and not one of them helps,” Emmy grumbled. “They’re all married, all with kids and grandkids, and that gives them an exemption. I know I’m going to be my mother’s sole caregiver when and if she needs it.”

“Ugh. A lot of my friends are struggling with that right now. I’ll probably go directly from raising kids to caring for my parents.” She reached over to take finish off her tea, but the mug was empty.

Emmy got up and carried both mugs into the kitchen. “We need another dose of whiskey candy. This conversation has gotten too dark.”

When she came back, she brought an old-style lantern and a couple of candles over to the table. “The room’s getting as dark as the subject matter.” She lit a match, then took a look at the pack. “Who was at The Bearded Clam?”

“What is that? A seafood place?”

“Uhm...no. A bearded clam’s like a...pink taco.”

“How are clams like tacos?”

Emmy laughed, then handed over the matchbook. “Take a look at the drawing. Doesn’t that look a little like a vulva?”

“A vulva? But why...” She threw the matches onto the table.

“How do you go to a bank and ask for a loan to open a bar named after a slang term for a woman’s private parts? Don’t these people have mothers?” She reached forward and picked up the matches again.

“These had better be Erik’s. If EJ’s going to bars...especially ones called pink taco and bearded clam...I’ll confiscate his phone. That’s the one thing in the world I know he truly loves.”

Emmy was a whiz at making a box of macaroni and cheese and mugs of chicken noodle soup for dinner. "Why does this taste so good?" Rachel asked. "I can't decide if it's because someone else made dinner, or if everything tastes better out in the woods."

"Maybe both." She lifted her mug of soup and drained it. "After the beef stroganoff and this, I think I've gotten my noodle requirement for the week. When I get home I'm going to eat nothing but vegetables for a few days."

Rachel looked her over when Emmy got up to clean the kitchen. "You look like you could eat nothing but noodles for a few weeks. How do you stay in such great shape?"

"Honestly? I don't have to think about it. I'm really active when I'm not working, and when I am I'm lugging around equipment and hiking miles and miles a day."

"No arduous gym routines?"

"I've never been in a gym. I'm not into working out. I'm into *being* out—outside."

"Mmm...that sucks. I'm always trying to convince myself there's some secret to fitness that I can copy."

"There is," Emmy laughed. "Get off your butt and get moving."

"I was thinking of something I could drink...while lying on a sofa. Or some exotic berry that would melt the pounds away."

"There are billions of dollars to be made off people who want that to be true. But it's never going to be." She finished up washing the few dishes they'd dirtied, then came back with fresh mugs. "This one's just hot water and whiskey candy. I don't want to be wide awake and drunk so I omitted the tea."

"I haven't been drunk in years." She thought for a few moments. "Maybe decades. I stopped drinking long before I had AJ, when I was trying to get pregnant, and didn't start again until Adam was a few years old. I guess that's a hobby I can take up when the kids are gone."

"That's a fantastic idea!" Emmy reached over and slapped her on the arm. "Lie on the sofa, drink some magic weight-loss elixir...preferably one with a high alcohol content. I can tell you've got this all figured out."

"I don't," she said, feeling like she wanted to cry. "All I know is that I'm bored...and lonely a lot of the time."

"Aww..." Emmy got up and sat at the end of the sofa. "What's going on there?"

"I haven't had a date since Erik left," she admitted. "Six years."
"What?!"

Rachel let out a soft laugh. "Thanks for sounding like you're shocked."

"I am," she said, seemingly sincere. "I really am. You're a great looking woman. And you've got a charming personality. You're really bright and fun too. What more could a guy want?"

"Perky tits, few opinions and no kids?"

"Oh. Right. Sometimes I forget that men can date anyone from eighteen to ten years older than they are, but women don't get to pick from that same age range."

"You forget? Don't you play this game?"

She frowned, clearly thinking. "It's a little different for me. I travel a lot, so I'm exposed to people from different cultures. Cultures where people are less obsessed with age. And..." She showed a sly smile.

"There's a certain kind of young guy who's attracted to older women."

"You're a cougar?"

Emmy growled, her grin lighting up her face. "I wouldn't say that, but I've had a few flings with younger guys."

Rachel spent a moment trying to see Emmy with a younger guy. It made perfect sense. She wouldn't demand much from you, and she'd probably be really adventurous. No strings attached, just what young guys liked.

"Younger guys," Rachel said, sighing. "They're off my radar. I'd be happy with a guy who can drive at night and has most of his own teeth."

Emmy slapped her on the leg. "You're being ridiculous. I bet you're not even fifty."

"Just under. You?"

"Double nickels this year. And trust me, I'm a long, long way from giving up sex." Chuckling, she added, "My mom's got a new boyfriend who's only seventy-five. Liking younger men must run in the family."

"I miss sex. Definitely. But it's not just my sex life that's in the doldrums. I need shaking up in every area. I'm in a rut—a deep one."

"Let me get you some more snow for your ankle." She got up and went to fill the plastic bags from the snow she'd stored in the big cooler in the kitchen. After putting the cold packs on with more duct tape, she sat back down on the rocker. "Let's get to the bottom of this. There's no excuse for letting yourself get into a rut."

Rachel turned her head enough to make eye contact. "I didn't *choose* to be in a rut. Circumstances—"

"Don't make excuses," Emmy said firmly. "If you do that, you'll give yourself permission to stay in your rut."

"Permission?" Rachel's cheeks started to flush. "You don't know anything about my situation—"

"Yes, I do," she insisted. "You said you're in a rut. That's all we're talking about."

"I work full time. The boys play something every season, from soccer to baseball, and I have to go to *all* of their practices and games. I have to make dinner every damn night. Then I have to make sure they're keeping up at school. By the time I'm done, I'm done! It's eleven o'clock and I've got to get in bed so I can get up and do it again the next day."

Calmly, Emmy said, "Do your kids enjoy having you at their games?"

"Of course they do!" She caught her breath and forced herself to think about the question. "I assume they do."

"Why don't you ask them? I played sports in school, and almost no one's parents came to watch. We liked it that way. It was nice not to have a lot of supervision."

"But all of the parents go," she said, hearing a whining tone enter her voice.

"Does Erik go?"

She could feel her expression turn into a sneer. "Only to the games. He can't manage to go if it doesn't count."

"Do the boys mind that he's not there for the practices?"

"They must!"

"You're making an assumption, Rachel. You obviously care, but maybe they don't."

"They're not the kinds of kids who complain about things like that. They're pretty easy going."

"All the more reason to ask! Make sure either you or your kids are getting something out of your being there." Her voice grew more gentle. "Would they want you to come to everything if they thought it was dragging you down?"

She shrugged, knowing it was a petulant reaction.

"Wouldn't you feel stupid if years from now you learned that they'd wished you'd give them more time alone?"

"Of course I would," she grumbled. "But I don't want them to think I don't care."

“Why would they think that? Asking what’s important to them will let them see how much you care.”

Rachel turned and scowled. “Well, I have to make dinner every night. I get no pleasure from cooking, but it’s not negotiable.”

“Of course it is!” Emmy got up and perched on the arm of the sofa. “You could do a thousand things to shake that up. You’re not thinking creatively, Rachel. But you’re going to get the chance to. For a couple of weeks that ankle’s going to prevent you from standing at a stove.”

“Oh, shit.” She let her head drop back onto the pillow. “They’ll starve.”

Emmy reached down and grabbed her toes, pinching them gently. “I doubt that. Use this as a time to try and shake things up. Things will change anyway when EJ goes to college. That’s next year, right?”

“Right. He’ll be at UC Davis. Not too far from you.”

“You and Adam can make some changes then. It’ll be easier when it’s just the two of you. Have him help you with dinner. You could even teach him how to cook. That’s a gift that’ll pay off in the long run.”

Rachel stared at her for a moment. “Do you have any idea what a kitchen looks like after a fifteen-year-old even makes himself a snack?”

Emmy patted her and went back to her chair. “I’m talking out of my hat. It’s easy to make suggestions when you have no experience.”

Grudgingly, Rachel said, “You can have an opinion. You were a kid once, right?”

“I was. But it was a different time. I know things have changed—a lot.”

“I’m just being grouchy. Maybe I need some more liquid candy.” She held her mug out.

“Are you sure? I don’t know about you, but I’m getting a little loopy. When I get argumentative, it’s time to stop.”

“It’s medicine,” Rachel insisted. “And I hate to take medicine alone.”

“Ahh, what the hell.” Emmy got up and went to make another round. “I haven’t tied one on since I was in Norway last year.” She whistled. “Thank god I don’t see Akvavit very often in the US. My stomach turns every time I lay eyes on a bottle.”

“I was in Norway once,” Rachel said. “Erik traveled a lot for business, and one time just the two of us went to conference in Oslo. I didn’t try the Akvavit though.”

Emmy brought the hot toddy over and held it just out of Rachel’s

reach. "One bit of advice. Whenever you get the chance, drink the Akvavit."

"But you hated it."

Laughing softly, Emmy said, "You're not getting the message. Embrace the unusual, Rachel. That's where the pleasure is."

After Emmy heated some water, Rachel stood in front of the sink, braced herself on one leg and cleaned up as well as she could. "I have a newfound appreciation for the sacrifices our pioneer ancestors made to settle this part of the country," she said while trying to get back into her long underwear. "Bathing must have been a real treat."

"Probably so. But they didn't have to drive, or listen to their upstairs neighbors have sex at three a.m. or go through interminable TSA checkpoints. I'm not sure they'd want to trade with us." She laughed softly. "And I'm sure the people living here wished they'd stay away."

"I guess every age has its downsides. I'm just glad I had my kids during a time where antibiotics were available. Losing a child to a skinned knee isn't something I'd be able to recover from." She started to hop, then realized she didn't have to. "How about a ride home?"

"Sure." Emmy got up and stood next to her. "That last walk to the john seemed to take a lot out of you. I had a feeling you'd want to hit the hay soon."

"I have an addition to my antibiotics requirement. Indoor plumbing. I'm not time traveling to the past without both."

They started the slow slog back to the sofa, then Rachel leaned against it while Emmy pulled it out and put sheets onto it. "With the stove pumping out so much heat, you probably won't even need a blanket."

"Me? Don't you mean 'we'?"

"Uhm...I assumed I'd sleep on the floor. I've got a pad and a sleeping bag."

"Don't be silly. We can have a sleepover. Just like we're in grade school. I haven't slept with a friend in decades. It'll be fun."

"I've never slept on a comfortable sofa bed, but the worst one's better than the floor." She helped Rachel sit down on the bed. "If you're sure."

"I am. I've got to warn you, though, when I've been drinking I tend to snore."

"You don't seem very drunk to me. Just a little fuzzy. I, however, am pretty well lit." She giggled, her grin making her easily sound as

tipsy as she claimed.

"Is it bad enough that you have to keep a foot on the floor?" Rachel got in between the sheets, smiling at Emmy when she fussed over the injured ankle, getting it propped up just right.

"I hope not. I'm usually hardier than this, but I caught something nasty when I was in Europe last month and lost some weight. Whenever that happens everything affects me more. Even sugar makes me jumpy."

"Then maybe we shouldn't have had alcohol with extra sugar!" Rachel playfully slapped her on the shoulder.

"Always drink the Slivovitz," she insisted, laughing.

"You win the who's drunker war. I can at least remember the name of the liquor I'm supposed to drink."

Blinking, Emmy looked at her. "It's not Slivovitz?"

"Close enough. There are 'v's in both."

After adding wood to the fire and blowing out the lantern and the candles, Emmy got into bed. "Ohh...this feels good. Nothing feels better than lying on a bed after a few days on the ground."

"I can think of a few things that feel better than simply lying on a bed," Rachel said, a soft laugh punctuating the silence in the room.

"You've rarely said anything truer."

Now that Rachel really listened to her, she could hear that Emmy's words were less crisp than they had been. "When's the last time you were with a man? I know you haven't gone as long as I have."

"It's been a while...probably a month."

"Show off"

"I'm not trying to be." Emmy rolled onto her side, facing Rachel. "I'm sure I get a lot more opportunities than you do since I stay in hotels a lot, a hotbed for picking up guys."

"So you just get together with strangers?"

"No. There are a couple of men I work with who I see every once in a while. Nothing serious. Just for fun."

"Let's see... The last time I had sex purely for fun was..." She draped her arm over her eyes. "I don't want to think about it. It's too depressing."

"Then change it," Emmy urged. "Try online dating. That's how my mom got her new boyfriend."

"At eighty-two?"

"A lot of older people do it. The days of having your friends introduce you to likely prospects are just about over."

"I guess I should. Maybe when Adam goes away to school...if he

goes away. He keeps talking about going to USC and living at home."

"Rachel." Emmy's voice was soft but insistent. "Don't put every part of your life on hold. Your kids need you. That's not in question. But they don't need every minute of every day. You've got to take what you need."

"Not when you're a parent," she said decisively. "Your needs are never first."

"How about Erik? Has he had a date in the last six years?"

"Very funny. His dating life started about ten years ago. I just didn't learn about it for a while."

"Aww...I'm sorry to hear that."

"I was too. He was and is one of those guys you might meet at the bar in a hotel. He probably used to take his wedding ring off. Now he doesn't have to."

"God, I hope I never slept with him!" She started to laugh, then slapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, it just..."

"Nice looking guy. Dark hair with a little gray at the temples. Pretty boring in bed, with a real aversion to cunnilingus. Sound familiar?" She started to laugh and soon they were both guffawing.

"I've met him...or someone just like him a half dozen times. But he wouldn't have happy memories if we'd actually met."

"Why's that?"

"He wouldn't have made it to my room," she said, laughing again. "Oral sex is the price of admission."

"Really." Despite the pain in her ankle, Rachel managed to roll onto her side. This truly was like a slumber party. "How do you do that?"

"Do what? Stop the party before it starts?"

"Yeah. I'd never have the nerve."

"Why not? You've got something they want. They've got something you want. You negotiate, and if you can't come to an agreement—no go."

Emmy couldn't see them, but Rachel's eyebrows were at their full height. "You negotiate? Before you get into bed?"

"Oh, yeah. You have to do it beforehand."

"Details. I need details."

Emmy laughed. "I'm happy to talk about this if you're sure you want to know."

"If I ever sleep with a guy again, it's going to be the first time I've had a new partner in over twenty-five years. I could use some lessons."

"All right. I think we'd all benefit from sharing sex tips." Her voice

dropped down into a lower register. "If I meet a guy I like, I talk to him for a long time to make sure he's not a creep."

"Can you always tell?"

"No. But you can weed out the creepiest ones. Then I make him show me a business card or his driver's license. I Google him to make sure he's not wanted in all fifty states."

"You do that right there in the bar?" Rachel was stunned.

"Of course. I'm not going to let someone into my room before I have some idea of who he is. Once I've vetted him, I take him upstairs."

"I'd think it'd be safer to go to his."

"No, I like to control the situation." She chuckled. "That might have been another reason I've been divorced twice. I like to be in charge."

"I might have liked that," she said, thoughtfully. After a second she started to laugh. "But Erik wouldn't let me."

"When you're picking a guy up, you have all the cards. Once he's in your room, he's sure he's going to get sex. Once they're locked in on that, they're very malleable."

"Okay. I guess I'd like malleable. Then what?"

"I usually offer him a drink and we talk for a while. While we're talking, I ask him what he likes to do in bed. If he doesn't turn the question around and ask me, I tell him to hit the road."

"Oh, my god," Rachel breathed. "I could never do that!"

"Of course you could. But only if you believe your time and your body are worth protecting."

"I do. Of course I do. But that's so...aggressive."

Chuckling, Emmy said, "You aren't the first person to say I'm too aggressive. Both of my ex mothers-in-law would wholeheartedly agree."

Rachel reached out and gripped her arm. "I didn't mean that as an insult. I know I'd be better off if I made my needs clear."

"That's exactly right. I'm just making my needs clear. There's a much lower risk getting your signals crossed."

"Okay. After I drink enough to get up the nerve to have this conversation, what do I do next?"

"You tell him what you like to do in bed. And what you don't like. I say I'm into oral sex and intercourse. Nothing too kinky and nothing rough."

"You really have to be that specific? I'd think a guy would only expect regular sex."

"You have to be specific," she insisted. "Some men believe women want what they see in porn. But I've never met a woman who wants a guy to come on her face—unless you pay her a thousand bucks."

"Not enough!" Rachel cried. "Not nearly enough!"

Chuckling, Emmy said, "Yeah, you'd really have to break the bank to humiliate me. And you can't convince me that a guy's doing anything but when he tries things like that."

"Damn, maybe I should have just let Erik cheat on me. At least he never tried to humiliate me."

"Guys who try things like that are a rare exception," Emmy insisted. "Most guys I meet in hotels are just lonely and bored. They want connection. Which is exactly what I want. It usually works out just great."

"I've only been with six or seven guys, and I don't recall any of my first times being very good. Doesn't it take a long time for a guy to learn what you like?"

Emmy laughed again. "That's why you have to tell them. I'm like a traffic cop at an intersection. Stop. Go. Turn left. Hurry up! Yield!"

"Dear god, that would take a personality transplant. If I ever get a date, will you sit outside the bedroom and direct me with a hidden microphone?"

"You don't need that," Emmy soothed. "You just have to believe you deserve pleasure." She put her hand on Rachel's cheek, which immediately grew hot. "How about the other camp? Have you ever had sex with a woman?"

"No," she whispered, her heart starting to race. "Have you?"

"No. But I've thought about it. I've just never been in the right situation."

Her mouth was as dry as the desert. "What situation would be right?"

"One like this," she said, sounding sexier by the minute. "With someone who's single, really attractive, straight..."

Blinking in surprise, Rachel said, "Why straight?"

"Because I don't think I'm very gay. I'd be more comfortable with someone who was just experimenting. Someone who wanted to try something different. Just for fun."

"For fun," Rachel repeated. "Just for fun."

"Yeah." She laughed again. "You say that like it's a foreign concept."

"It's a little on the foreign side. It's been a while since I've done anything just for fun. There's always some little bit of obligation

mixed in."

"Not with me," Emmy reminded her. "I can't think of a single obligation you have to me." She scooted closer. So close Rachel could smell the peppermint-scented soap they'd used. "Want to try? We can't get pregnant. Our moms don't need to know. It's not even illegal anymore."

"How do we...?"

"How hard could it be?" Emmy asked, chuckling again. "It can't be too different than sex with a guy, can it?"

"I don't...I don't know. It seems like it might be different. Really, really different!"

Emmy looked so sure of herself. Entirely confident. Not one bit of nervousness or indecision showed. "I know one way to find out."

Rachel looked at her in the flickering light of the stove. She was definitely attractive. Warm, caring eyes, a straight, elegant nose, a sensual-looking mouth... But she was a woman. Never having thought of a woman in a sexual way was going to take some getting used to. But..."I guess it couldn't hurt to try."

"Let's just kiss. If we both feel like going further—we will. A little kissing couldn't hurt, right?"

"Kissing never hurts. It's—" Her words were cut off when Emmy's soft, warm mouth captured hers. It was...nice. Really nice. Rachel's heartbeat quickened when she let her body experience the closeness, the intimacy of having another person touch your lips. Shifting, she moved closer, getting into it. This was no different from kissing a man—yet it was. Very, very different. Emmy's mouth was as soft as a caress. Almost silky. And her scent was so womanly. None of the musky smell Rachel remembered from kissing a man.

Her hand moved to glide across Emmy's cheek. Smooth softness. Like a child's skin. Was this what it was like to kiss her? She almost touched her own face just to compare, but Emmy's tongue slipped into her mouth, banishing every other thought.

How was it possible that Emmy had never done this? Rachel could feel her own body trembling, but not Emmy's. She was rock-solid, and very determined. That was nice. Really nice. Having someone kiss you with confidence made all the difference.

Without warning, Rachel was on her back, looking up into Emmy's dark desire-filled eyes. They twinkled in the golden light of the fire when she pulled away and said, "I want to go further." One eyebrow lifted in question.

Nodding, Rachel tried to say something funny or clever. But her

mind was nearly a blank. All she wanted to do was let this determined woman take her on a journey. Good sex seemed to whisk her away from the present and transport her to a place where she could simply clear her mind and let her body soak up pleasure. *Pleasure*. What a wonderful word.

Emmy was staring at her intently, and Rachel surprised herself by saying, "Tell me what you like."

A big grin greeted that question. *Bingo!* "I already told you what I like."

"That's true. But we're going to have to figure out some way to have intercourse. Got any ideas?"

"Uh-huh," she purred, taking Rachel's hand and sucking two of her fingers into her mouth. God damn, this woman knew how to have sex!

"Simple solution. You do that when you touch yourself, don't you?"

"Uhm...no, I don't."

Emmy sat up a little. "Really? I thought everyone liked something inside."

"I don't..." This was so embarrassing. "I don't touch myself very often. I...my sex drive is more...I respond more than I initiate."

"Ooo. And no one's been turning up the flame for you."

"Right. I try not to even think about sex very often. I know I'm not going to have it, so why bother?"

"Because you've got a pleasure-making machine right here," Emmy said, sliding her hand down to Rachel's belly. "Everything you need all in one package."

"I...I'll try to think of it that way. One of my many changes," she added, letting out a wry laugh.

"Even if you don't masturbate very often, you still know what you like. So tell me." She placed another hot kiss upon Rachel's lips, this one so compelling she was ready to rip her clothes off and beg for Emmy's touch. "Tell me what you like." Her hand started to roam up and down Rachel's chest, then down her side until it rested atop her hip. "Come on. Take a risk and tell me."

"I like to be touched," she whispered. "And kissed!" She'd almost forgotten that. "Everywhere. I've never had too much foreplay."

A sly grin settled onto Emmy's expressive face. "Maybe you will tonight. Let me know."

"I'll...try." A flicker of worry hit her. What if she couldn't talk like Emmy wanted her to?

Gentle fingers swept across her forehead. "There's nothing to worry

about. We're going to have fun. Just relax and let me give you pleasure."

"I will," Rachel said, determined to try her hardest.

Emmy's hand was at her waist, tugging her shirt up. Rachel sat up a little and felt the garment slip off. Then the stretchy fabric slid over her hips and down her legs. With great tenderness Emmy eased the pants over her ankle, then placed a gentle kiss just above the wrapping, which now held only warm water.

"Do you want me to take off my clothes? Or should we wait?"

Rachel gulped. It was showtime. "Take them off," she decided. Maybe she'd feel less naked if Emmy was more. Watching her carefully, Rachel felt some of her tension leave. Emmy was entirely comfortable being naked. You could see that in the casual way she just whipped off her clothes—like she was going skinny dipping all alone. How fantastic it must have been to be so blasé about your body. Of course, if Rachel weighed ten pounds less and replaced ten more pounds with muscle—she might have been just as nonchalant.

After pressing their bare bodies together, Emmy whispered, "We're lying in bed, stark naked, and there isn't a person in the world who ever needs to know about this. Let's put every single worry we have aside and just have fun."

Rachel was sure that pep-talk was for her alone, but she appreciated it. "Let the games begin," she said, her voice cracking.

A cool finger slid down her chest, then took a left, eventually circling her nipple. "Even though I'm pretty straight, I've always been fascinated by breasts. There's something compelling about them."

"I've never paid much attention to other womens', but I love having my own touched."

"Then we make a good pair." Emmy dropped her head and sucked Rachel's breast into her mouth.

"Perfect," she growled as her flesh was tugged further and further into Emmy's mouth. A sated growl gave her clit a zing of sensation and she knew this was going to work. God, how her dating opportunities would open up if she could date anyone in the world!

Emmy looked up and revealed a very pleased smile. "I can't believe I waited this long to do that." She playfully patted the side of Rachel's breast, making it jiggle. But I don't want to get distracted. You told me what you like, and you're going to get it."

Rachel lay back and breathed in as Emmy started to kiss, nibble and caress her body. All of her body. Soft hands and gentle lips never

stopped, starting at her shoulders and working down, occasionally slowing to linger on a spot that caught her attention.

Rachel squirmed with desire, reveling in the sensation of being touched. Emmy was clearly enjoying this as much as she was, and that stoked her need. It was such a heady feeling to be desired again. She pledged to never, ever let the years pass without more—much more pleasure.

Hardly noticing she'd been turned, Rachel lay face down on the bed, splayed out for Emmy's enjoyment. When tender lips slowly made their way up her inner thighs she started to tense up, but Emmy simply turned her over again and gazed into her eyes.

"I can't wait to taste you," she purred. Her hand slipped between Rachel's thighs, then a finger slid around for a few moments. Emmy shifted down until her face was right at Rachel's hip. "Does this feel good?" she asked, finally finding the spot and slipping inside. Dark eyes blinked, waiting for an answer.

Rachel's instinct, almost overpowering, was to agree that it felt great and hope Emmy moved on. But she'd been challenged to be honest and forced herself to be. "It might." She bit her lip, anxious to bail out. But that wasn't fair. "I feel a little like I'm at the gynecologist."

Emmy laughed, her shoulders shaking as she did. "I'll admit that wasn't very smooth. I just wanted to make sure I got the right angle."

"The angle's fine..."

"Keep talking," Emmy urged. "If you don't like something, we won't do it."

"No, I generally like penetration..."

She moved up so they were face to face again. Then she kissed Rachel tenderly, and probed her mouth with her tongue. That helped. A lot. When Emmy started to kiss and nibble on her neck a low moan left Rachel's lips. Then a delicate tongue flicked her earlobe. Shivering, she managed, "I love that."

Emmy's warm breath caressed her ear. "I love it too." Boldly, Emmy's fingers slid inside as her tongue bathed Rachel's ear.

"So nice," she moaned, sliding her legs wide open. Her hips started to follow Emmy's touch, chasing them when she pulled away. Sharp nips to her neck distracted her, but her nipples hardened at the sensation, growing even harder when her ears were kissed again.

She'd made her ears off limits to Erik, who'd never mastered subtlety, and it was fantastic to have them caressed again. It was amazing how one lover could magically erase unpleasant associations

with just a few well-executed touches.

Warm lips trailed down her body, while slippery fingers moved every possible way inside her pussy. Maybe it took a woman to know that mechanically pumping your fingers in and out a few times was a bore. Emmy didn't have a boring bone in her body. Her hand nearly did cartwheels, stroking the top, the sides and especially a spot that made the hairs on the back of Rachel's neck stand on end. All without having to say a word. She just knew. Or maybe she just paid attention. Either way, it was amazing.

Rachel would have been happy to lie there all night, being thoroughly and lovingly fucked. But then warm breath tickled her thigh and her needs changed. "Lick me," she whispered, the room so quiet she couldn't bear to speak in a normal tone.

Emmy didn't speak at all. She simply shifted her body, leaving one talented finger inside while her mouth settled over Rachel's quivering flesh. Then the most delicious warmth covered her, enveloping every part of her that needed Emmy's attention.

Her heart hammered in her chest, the sensations so satisfying she wanted to shout. To make Emmy know how much she'd missed this. How grateful she was that they were sharing this moment. But her mouth would only inarticulately moan as she used her hips to speak for her. Tilting her pelvis up and down made the sensations hit every spot. Every neglected, hungry spot. Then a rush of feeling started in her belly, finally working its way down and out to where it exploded in a shattering climax.

Not knowing when she'd grabbed a handful of Emmy's hair, Rachel forced herself to let go as her body shook and trembled. "Oh, my god," she moaned. "I've... It's been... Thank you."

"Ooo, thank you," Emmy purred. "This is the most fun I've had in a long time." Her mouth burrowed into Rachel's pussy, still throbbing with sensation.

"Wait..." She started to say, but then every nerve got ready for action again, and they all told her to lie still and accept the pleasure that coated them. Eyes closing, she gently stroked Emmy's head, careful not to grab her hair again. Another less powerful but no less satisfying climax rolled through her body, then another. Emmy never stopped, her talented tongue and lips gliding across and delving into flesh that now pulsed with feeling. Just a little focus on her clit and she came again. Almost dizzy, Rachel put a hand on Emmy's shoulder and gently pushed. "Gotta stop," she insisted.

Emmy looked up, her face shining in the golden light. "Why?"

“I don’t know,” she admitted, laughing. “Oh, wait. I do know. My legs are cramping.” She let them close a little, and then stretched out. “Better.” Opening her arms, she said, “Come up here. I want you on top of me.”

Emmy glided into position, grinning as she looked down. “I think we’ve got this figured out. It’s really not rocket science.”

“If this was rocket science, I would have majored in physics. Actually, I would have gotten a double major in physics and physics.”

“Isn’t it nice to have fun for fun’s sake?”

“Nice?” She thought for a moment. “Nice doesn’t begin to cover it.” She wrapped her arms around Emmy, holding on tightly.

“You’ve *really* yanked me out of my rut.”

“Mine too. I’ve been limiting myself.” Her grin increased. “No more. I’m ticking the bisexual box on the next census.”

“Is there a box for...?”

“No,” she said, giggling. “The government doesn’t have to ask. They already know everything about us.”

Rachel let out a heavy sigh. “I wouldn’t care if they had a camera on us. This was too much fun to pass up—even if guys from the NSA have already put us on a loop.”

Suddenly serious, Emmy looked into her eyes. “I’m very glad you enjoyed yourself. I was a little worried you might have second thoughts.”

“My only second thought is how I’m going to do to you what you did to me. Luckily, I paid attention.” She tapped the side of her head. “It’s all in here.”

Emmy rolled onto her back, giggling. “Move some of it over here. I’m dying!”

Rachel moved carefully, trying not to jostle her ankle. Which no longer hurt. She looked down at Emmy, seeing a wealth of potential. Maybe not for them...but for herself. The world had opened up in a way she’d never expected, but from this day forward she was going for the Akvavit.

The End

CHAPTER FOUR
eFriends and G-Friends

2014 Cocktail Hour
Bearded Clam
Challenge

efriends
& G-Friends

eFRIENDS & G-FRIENDS

by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

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CHAPTER 1

The sound of the front door's maglock disengaging brought the forty-four year old Ingrid Scandia out of the living room and into the hallway of the apartment she shared with her partner. The tall, cool blonde with the pale blue eyes and the picture-perfect regal features came to a halt by the small open wardrobe and waited passively. Moving her hands with great precision, she smoothed down her dark brown one-piece suit and pulled the wide, cream-colored lapels of the blouse she wore underneath straight to look her best.

When the front door opened and the other resident of the apartment stepped inside, Ingrid put out her arms in a move that was timed to perfection with her lips creasing into a sweet smile.

The forty-one year old Amanda Paulsen was shorter and somewhat less regal than her partner, but her honey-blond fleece and elfin looks still made her an attractive woman. Her pale, even haggard, appearance detracted from her general look, though, as did the dark circles under her eyes that no amount of make-up could hide. She was wearing a dark gray overcoat with a purple, filly scarf to offset the drabness of the rest of her outfit.

Sighing deeply, Amanda closed the front door behind her and duly stepped into Ingrid's embrace brandishing a bag from the local Chinese takeout. "Hello, sweetie," she said as she let herself be pulled into a

hug by the taller woman. "Oh, thank Gawd it's Friday... and thank Gawd we've finally completed that project. Oh, I'm too old for working non-stop like that... it damn near killed me this time. I hope we won't get another project like that for a while."

"Hello, darling. So you've had a rough day?" Ingrid said in a voice that could melt butter - as always, she spoke with the characteristic sing-song accent so reminiscent of the Scandinavian countries. When Amanda was too tired to do anything but nod, Ingrid reached up and helped her take off her scarf and overcoat, revealing a gun metal gray skirt suit and a silk blouse in a matching color.

The overcoat snagged on the bag from the Chinese restaurant, and Ingrid promptly stopped what she was doing until Amanda had put down the bag. When the hands were free, the overcoat was pulled off and put on a coat hanger. "Would you like a massage later on, darling?" the tall woman said while she put the coat hanger on a hook and smoothed down the gray fabric.

"Gawd, yes... please," Amanda croaked and rolled her weary shoulders. "After dinner, though. Did you get my message?"

"I did," Ingrid said and put a hand on the small of Amanda's back to guide her into the living room. "I've set the table but haven't prepared anything for dinner."

"Good... when I went past Xong Wu's, I noticed they had a whole string of specials lined up in their storefront window. My gut was screaming for nourishment so I had a spring roll there. I also bought a box of my favorite beef chop suey," Amanda said and held up the bag from the Chinese restaurant as she crossed from the hallway's soft carpet to the living room's hard parquet floor.

"Oh, that's nice, darling."

"Mmmm."

The L-shaped living room was a cool, classy affair with white walls and exquisite furniture. The room was dominated by a beechwood

couch arrangement consisting of a three-seater settee and two satellite armchairs that were placed around a low coffee table - in addition to that, a beechwood sideboard stood up against the nearest wall. The various accessories were of a high standard, too, with a wooden bowl of African design on the table, two brass candlesticks on the sideboard, and microfiber cushions in the couch and the armchairs.

Two white doors led off from the room, one into the kitchen and the other into the bedroom. The bedroom door was closed, but the other was open.

In the narrow end of the L, a small dinner table with seating for two had been placed up against a holo-panel to give the illusion it was a room with a view. Similarly, several of the white walls were adorned with colorful, abstract paintings that seemed to ebb and flow in accordance with how the mood lighting caressed them.

Ingrid smiled sweetly as they went over to the small dinner table that had been set for one. She pulled out the chair for Amanda and gestured for her to sit down.

"Oh, not yet, thank you," Amanda said with a little smile as she put the bag with the food on the table. "I need to slip into something more comfortable first... perhaps you could arrange a little music while I change?"

"Certainly, darling," Ingrid said with a sweet smile as she pushed the chair back under the table.

Amanda returned the smile and moved into the bedroom where she took off her suit jacket. Sighing from the fatigue that had turned her limbs into lead, she put the jacket on a coat hanger that had been placed very conveniently on the outside of the massive, white wardrobe.

Groaning from the stress she had been under the entire week, she sat down at once on the black-and-red bedspread of their queen-sized bed. She rubbed her face several times before she took off her pumps and massaged her aching feet.

From the living room, airy bossa nova rhythms wafted through from the many hidden speakers. Amanda chuckled as she stood up and unbuttoned her skirt. Once free of the constricting garment, she rolled down her pantyhose so her legs could be liberated.

At first, she whistled along to the bouncy rhythms but soon came to the conclusion that she was simply too tired for something as energetic as South American music. "Sweetie? Sweetie, would you mind putting on some romantic classical music instead?" she said as she took off her silk blouse and put it into the laundry basket.

"Of course not, darling!" Ingrid said from somewhere in the living room. The bossa nova was instantly replaced by the opening bars of Jean Sibelius' First Symphony.

"Thank you!" Amanda said as she dug into her closet and found the most comfortable clothing she had: her old college sweats. Although washed out to the point of being threadbare, she loved the outfit and would never get rid of the crimson sweatshirt and the navy blue jogging pants, even if every last seam would burst. Grinning, she held it to her face and reveled in the softness.

"Sweetie?" she said out loud to be heard over the romantic violins. "Would you mind getting me a beer? Non-alcoholic!"

"Certainly, darling," Ingrid said from the living room. Soon, a shadow fell over the animated walls as the tall, regal woman moved near-silently into the kitchen.

Smiling, Amanda put the college outfit where she could reach it and hurried into the adjacent bathroom to freshen up before dinner.

After washing her hands and splashing a few drops of cooling water on her face and neck, Amanda shuffled back into the living room in her college comfort-wear - and socked feet in her favorite pair of bathing slippers - where Ingrid had already put the imported beer and an old-

fashioned tumbler on the dinner table.

The tall, regal woman stood stock-still by the chair, waiting for Amanda to return from the bedroom. Smiling sweetly, she pulled out the chair and invited her partner to sit down.

"Thank you," Amanda said and moved over to Ingrid instead. "But first... I need a kiss, sweetie. Just a little one," she continued with a wink.

Smiling sweetly, Ingrid put out her arms. As her shorter partner came into her embrace, she leaned down and puckered up her lips. Duly kissed, she stood up straight and smiled just as sweetly as before. "Do you wish me to unscrew the cap for you, darling?" she said and pointed at the dark brown bottle of beer.

"No thank you, I need a little exercise," Amanda said and pulled out her chair. Once she had transferred the beef chop suey from the cardboard box to a proper plate, she poured the pale golden beer into the tumbler and marveled at the way the white froth bubbled up perfectly. "C'mon, sweetie... sit down. How has your day been?" she said, reaching out for the regal woman.

Ingrid smiled sweetly and walked around the table. She sat down facing Amanda and crossed her legs away from her dinner partner in a very lady-like fashion. "The eCommunication panel rang four times. The first caller was a telemarketer who wanted to offer you a full set of the Encyclopedia Americus for nine thousand dollars. Failing that, he offered you an update to your old set to get it up to the proper 2084 spec. That would only cost you fifteen hundred dollars."

"Wow, the Encyclopedia Americus?" Amanda said, balancing a large piece of beef on her chopsticks. "Talk about being stuck in the old century... I can't believe they're still trying to sell actual, physical books! I remember those huge tomes from my grandmother's. She has the whole set and it weighs a ton!"

"I see."

"Yes. Well, you know she's kinda old-fashioned. She's told me a lot of fun stories, though. Would you believe that when she was a very young girl back in the 1990's, she didn't even have an online presence... at least not for most of the time?"

"Shocking."

"You said it. I think I'll visit her when she turns ninety-five next month," Amanda said and let out a chuckle. Smiling, she dabbed her lips on a napkin that carried the restaurant's logo. "Please go on. You said four calls?"

"Yes. The second caller was Frank Schwann who wanted to ask you out on a date."

Amanda rolled her eyes and stuffed her face full of chop suey to muffle the cusswords that would inevitably bubble up from her chest. Once the food had been chewed thoroughly, she chased it down with a long swig of beer. "Jeez, will somebody please buy that man a clue? I mean... how many times do I have to tell him to back off...? For cryin' out loud..."

"Like we agreed upon, I told him once more you weren't interested," Ingrid said with a head that was cocked slightly and eyes that didn't really seem to focus on anything.

"Hrmpf Thank you, sweetie."

"You're welcome. The third caller was your good self calling to tell me I shouldn't prepare dinner because you brought home Chinese. The fourth caller was a telemarketer trying to sell you a set of PlasTastico Dinnerware. Thirty-two tumblers, plates and cutlery of the finest hard plastic. Now also available in cherry red, burnt orange and mint green. Yours for only five thousand five hundred dollars."

Amanda chuckled and dabbed her mouth again before she crumpled up the napkin and threw it into the spent cardboard box. The chop suey had been food for the Gods, and the contents of her plate had mysteriously vanished like the morning dew.

She leaned back in her chair and enjoyed the easy classical music that was still playing from the hidden speakers. Taking the tumbler, she savored the taste of the chilled, non-alcoholic brew when she suddenly remembered the two fortune cookies that she had seen Xong Wu put into the cardboard box.

After emptying the glass of beer, she pulled the box towards her and peeked down into it. "Oh, there they are... I thought I'd forgotten them. Ingrid, sweetie... which of'em would you like?" she said and scooped up the two, small packages that had been wrapped in greaseproof paper and decorated with a red bow tie.

"It doesn't matter," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

"Okie-dokie... this one's for me and this one's for you," Amanda said and put the fortune cookies down on the tabletop. She quickly pulled off the bow tie and unwrapped the paper to reveal the small pastry. Breaking it in two, she unfolded the piece of paper inside it and turned it around so she could read it. "Tonight, you shall meet a dark stranger... oooh! Now who could that be, huh? Not Frank Schwann, that's a fact," she said with a grin.

Smiling sweetly, Ingrid picked up her fortune cookie and unwrapped it. It didn't take her slender fingers long to break it in two, but when she looked at the piece of paper, her eyes didn't seem to focus on it. "Matters of the heart are only ignored by the foolish..." she said, but stopped speaking from one word to the next.

When nothing further came, Amanda cocked her head and turned to look at the tall, regal woman next to her.

Ingrid closed her eyes and moved her head in an odd, jerky pattern. "The first caller," she suddenly said in a voice that didn't hold a Scandinavian accent, "was a telemarketer who wanted to offer you a full set of the Encyclopedia-

"Jesus! Ingrid!" Amanda said and jumped up from her chair.

"-Americus for nine thousand dollars dollars dollars dollars dollars doll- Stand by. Warning. Critical motherboard error. The motherboard has exceeded recommended temperature levels. The system is rebooting. eFriend Ingrid Scandia model Twenty Seventy-nine dash oh-six step two rebooting. Performing power-on self test. Four thousand ninety-six terabytes memory okay. Basic input-output system okay. Date-time uplink failed, disregarding. Internal chronometer okay. Pain receptors disabled. Loading eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality base functions. Base functions version one point oh Charlie loaded okay. Searching for eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality add-on packs. Found-"

"Aw, Jesus... Ingrid... not now! Not after the rotten week I've had! Aw, hell!" Amanda said and clapped her hands over her eyes. Growling, she bolted from the table to search for the remote.

Three minutes later, Amanda had finally rummaged through the contents of four different drawers to find not only the remote to her malfunctioning eFriend but also the cordless screwdriver she would need to open her up. When she came back to the dinner table, her artificial girlfriend had finished rebooting but was sitting passively on the chair with her face straight ahead, her feet firmly on the floor and her hands resting on her thighs.

"Ingrid?" Amanda said, approaching with caution. Though the eFriends typically weren't aggressive, Amanda took the long way around in case the odd crash had triggered reactions from the regal woman's core program.

"Hello, registered owner Amanda Paulsen," Ingrid said in the metallic, default voice that she had been given at the factory. "I am currently performing level three diagnostics. Four percent completed. For the time being, eFriend capabilities have been limited to rudimentary functions only. Four percent completed. Press cancel on the remote to abort level three diagnostics. Five percent completed."

Amanda sighed and clicked the large, red On/Off button on the remote to turn Ingrid off instead. A chill crept down her spine as she

watched the eyes of her eFriend slip shut and the breathing stop.

"Ew, this is why I never turn her off," Amanda mumbled as she held the screwdriver ready. Grimacing, she walked around the back of the eFriend and used her fingers to seek out the four hidden clamps that held the back part of the skull in place. Once the clamps had been released, she removed the scalp with the picture-perfect hair and put it on the dinner table next to the empty plate and tumbler.

Underneath the hair, a skin-colored plate that followed the curvature of the skull was fastened with four screws, but they had no chance against the cordless screwdriver. With everything loose, Amanda took off the plate and peeked into Ingrid's brain.

At first glance, all the little doodads, thingamabobs and whatsits on the print boards looked fine, but there was a certain smell of warm metal that Amanda didn't like. "Hmmm," she mumbled, craning her neck to look inside the brainbox of her artificial girlfriend. "Hmmm... looks good to me... what I can see, anyhow. There's a funny smell, though... smells like..." - *sniff, sniff* - "what

my old curling tongs smelled like just before I had to send them to recycling. Nah, I better view the instruction manual. I wouldn't want to mess up her head..."

Amanda took the opportunity to do the dishes before she went back to the holo-panel she and Ingrid were sitting at. Touching the screen, she disabled the serene view of the Seychelles at sunset before she accessed her home entertainment system and went through the various folders. "eFriend instruction guide... where are you?" she mumbled as she swiped through an endless list of guides for things she didn't even have anymore. "Ah, okay... got it. Okay, troubleshooting... video, female presenter. Activate," she mumbled as she went through the options on the screen.

The monitor blinked green a couple of times while it accessed the guides but soon displayed a full-frame video of a woman dressed in a white lab coat standing next to a model of Ingrid whose head had already been taken apart. *Welcome to the eFriend Ingrid Scandia model Twenty Seventy-nine step one and step two instruction guide. Section troubleshooting. Please choose your problem and press Okay,*

the woman said in a pleasant voice.

Amanda went through a short list of options before she found one that said 'Unwanted/unexpected reboots'. "That's gotta be it," she said and folded her arms over her chest, ready to be awed by the infinite wisdom of the tech-heads.

'Unwanted or unexpected reboots can be caused by several different factors. Please choose the problem environment closest to your experiences,' the female technician said before another list of options popped up.

Groaning out loud, Amanda rubbed her brow furiously before she touched the screen again to carry on in the vast jungle of more or less identical options.

A short half hour later, Amanda had finally reached the end of the troubleshooting sequence - not to mention the end of her patience. After testing a dozen or so scenarios and possible solutions without getting any nearer to finding out where the smell of warm metal inside Ingrid's head could possibly come from, she touched the screen one more time to abort the troubleshooting and return to the glorious vista of the Seychelles.

"If I had a time machine," Amanda said and rubbed her mouth, "I'd go back to five minutes before somebody had the clever idea of inventing technobabble... and I'd whack the Joe over the head until he changed his mind!"

Sighing, she tried to put the tip of her right index finger on a few of the printed circuit boards inside Ingrid's head to test if they were still warm. None of them were, but she got a bad case of the creeps at the thought of rummaging around inside someone's head.

She pulled back and took the skin-colored skull-plate that she attached without adding the screws. Walking around the eFriend, she knelt down on the parquet floor and looked at the regal - and

completely passive - face of the woman she had lived with for two years. "Dammit, Ingrid," she whispered, reaching up to run a few fingers across the eFriend's silky smooth and almost lifelike cheek.

"I do like you, you know... and right now, you're scaring me. Please don't do this kind of stuff. You hold me at night, you whisper sweet nothings in my ear when we're intimate, you make me breakfast, lunch and dinner... and midnight snacks, and... it may not be the same as living with a real girlfriend, but... oh... to be honest, I wouldn't want to trade now. We never fight because you've been programmed to follow my every whim. We never disagree because you've been programmed to always agree with me... we're always the best of friends... you treat me so well, and you know me so well... what can possibly be better than that?"

Getting up, she took the remote and looked at it like she didn't know what on earth to do with it. She eventually held it to her forehead in the vain hope the piece of electronics would speak to her and give her a clue what to do about the unexpected, nightmarish situation she found herself in.

Sibelius' First Symphony had long since stopped which left the apartment in an oppressive silence that was only broken by Amanda's breathing and the occasional ticking from the electronic equipment.

She scrunched up her face and found the screwdriver. "Listen to this awful silence, Ingrid... without you, everything will be so much worse," she whispered, walking back around her eFriend to attach the four screws so she could be reactivated.

The first twenty minutes after the reboot went without a glitch, but then - out of nowhere - Ingrid accessed her housekeeping program and started vacuuming. The eFriend shuffled around the living room hunched over and with her long, slender fingers in the positions they would be in if she was holding the stainless steel pipe on the vacuum cleaner. The only problem was that she was nowhere near the vacuum.

Amanda stared wide-eyed at the grotesque sight of a grown woman using an imaginary vacuum cleaner, but soon snapped out of it and hurried over to the holo-panel. She swiped the Seychelles off the monitor and found the number to go directly to the eFriend Corporation's free service hotline. When she had it, she touched Dial and then Hands-free.

It didn't take long for the connection to be established, and she soon heard an automated voice say: *'You've reached the eFriend Corporation service hotline. Good evening-'*

"Hello!" Amanda shouted, jumping back to the holo-panel. "Hello, I'm the owner of a model Twenty Seventy-nine and I have a real prob-"

'-All our lines are currently busy. Please hold-'

"Whut? Hold?" Amanda croaked and stared at the holo-panel. When it did indeed start to play electronic muzak, she sighed and rubbed her brow again. "Oh, I don't need this after the week I've had... I just don't need this..."

'You're calling the eFriend Corporation service hotline. You are now number fourteen. An eFriend hotline employee will be with you shortly. Please hold.'

"Fourteen?!" Amanda cried and threw her hands in the air in frustration. When she noticed a new set of movements being performed behind her, she turned around to see what Ingrid was up to.

The eFriend had finished the vacuuming program and was presently doing the dishes without a kitchen sink, water or indeed filthy dishes. The artificial girlfriend took an imaginary item from an imaginary pile of dishes, dunked it into imaginary water, scrubbed it off with an imaginary brush and finally put it to drip-dry on an imaginary rack.

Amanda stared at the odd sight for so long that she almost missed the holo-panel changing behind her.

'This is the eFriend service hotline, how may we help you?' a voice

said that seemed to belong to a real human being.

"Whut? Oh... oh, finally," Amanda said and turned back to the panel. "Hello, my name is Amanda Paulsen and I'm experiencing severe problems with my model Twenty Seventy-nine, an Ingrid Scandia."

'Have you tried the troublesho-'

"Yes, but it didn't help me. The problem wasn't solved," Amanda said, eyeing the eFriend with some trepidation. Ingrid had finished doing the dishes and just stood there passively.

'I see. Miss Paulsen, I think we need to send a service technician-'

"Oh, baby! Ohhhh, baby!" Ingrid suddenly howled. Her hips began to gyrate, a motion that soon spread to her entire frame. Soon, it became quite clear her entire body was engaged in that most ancient of functions. "You drive me so wild, baby! Yes, baby! Yes, touch me there! Ohhhh, baby!" she howled with very little regard for the mental health of her owner. A series of increasingly frantic moans and groans only added to the colorful imagery.

Amanda's face had turned beet-root red and she thanked her guardian angel for providing her with the notion of choosing an audio connection to the hotline rather than a video link. She stared at the eFriend - who was bucking and groaning, groaning and bucking - with an acute sense of embarrassment blasting through her system.

'Miss Paulsen, I take it the behavior I can hear quite clearly isn't intended?' the hotline employee said at the other end of the connection. The question was followed by a drawn-out giggle.

"No... no, it isn't," Amanda croaked, rubbing her burning cheeks.

'I have just bumped you to the head of our queue. I promise you that you will be visited by a service technician within twenty minutes.'

Amanda buried her face in her hands and only dared to peek out

between her fingers. "Gawd... thank you... thank you..."

'In the meantime, may I suggest you... uh... turn her off?' - The comment was accompanied by a long, juvenile giggle.

"I will! Thank you... thank you so much!"

'You're welcome, Miss Paulsen. A service technician will be with you in less than twenty minutes.'

"Thank you... goodbye," Amanda said and closed the connection. Once the holo-panel had returned to the Seychelles, she grappled for Ingrid's remote and jammed her thumb down onto the Off button.

On the floor, Ingrid stopped her lewd show and assumed a perfectly passive stance. As she received the shut-down order, her eyes slipped shut and she stopped breathing - or rather, panting.

Amanda threw the remote down into the three-seater settee with a long, throaty groan. "Oh Gawd, I need some coffee... strong coffee!" she croaked as she stared at the inactive eFriend. Sighing, she spun around on her heel and stomped into the kitchen.

CHAPTER 2

The twenty-minute deadline came and went with no sign of the fabled service technician. To kill time, Amanda put the rectangular, electronic device for her portable holo-panel on the low table before she took her mug of strong coffee and sat down in the center part of the three-seater settee.

"Activate," she said and watched the familiar bluish wall pop up from the holo-hardware. It was empty at first, but another list of options soon appeared on the virtual screen. Sighing in frustration, Amanda said: "Latest news. Any channel."

A stern-looking newscaster from one of the local network affiliates appeared on the portable holo-panel and began to give a brief summary of the day's headlines. There had been a hold-up at a convenience store just around the corner from where Amanda lived, an elderly man had been severely injured in a hit and run on one of the major boulevards, a leading scientist from the local power grid explained how the electricity prices were in for a spike following the recent tornado strike on the wind farm, the President had made a brief statement on the ongoing troubles in the Middle-East, and the Dow had reacted negatively to the President's words.

"Eh," Amanda said and took a long swig from her strong coffee. "Not exactly eternal sunshine and sparkly unicorns, huh? News item one."

As the story on the convenience store hold-up flickered onto the holo-panel, she leaned back in the settee and snuggled down with a cushion so she could cover her eyes in case they showed any scary images, like blood, dead bodies or the mayor who was up for re-election.

The news item had barely started before the easily recognizable shape of the mayor came into view speaking to reporters in front of the store. As he went into a well-rehearsed speech to tell the public - the voters - about his tough stance on crime, Amanda groaned and promptly buried her face in the cushion.

A little later on, Amanda had watched all the news items, she had emptied her mug of strong coffee and she had ranted and raved about the shocking fact that even in September 2084, it was still impossible to rely on what people working at service hotlines told her.

She knew she was about to blow her already stressed-out lid, so she forced herself to keep sitting in the settee instead of bouncing off the white walls like she wanted to. Huffing in frustration and fatigue, she crossed her legs the other way and began checking her eCommunications on the holo-panel to have something to do.

It was the same as always; her mother asked when she could come over for an afternoon talk and some apple pie, her brother had sent her a supposedly oh-so-funny list of the top ten best pickup lines for '*snatchin' Hawt Babez*' - Amanda rolled her eyes repeatedly while mumbling "Thirty-five years old and fuckin' clueless about women!" - and the building supervisor advised the tenants that a new security system would be installed on the front doors of all apartments on November 7th.

On top of that, she had received twenty-two spam eComms offering everything from penis enlargements to holographic sweethearts. Amanda groaned and looked over at the inactive Ingrid. "Don't need one of those, thank you!"

She dumped the spam into the overflowing Spam Folder, moved the message from the supervisor into a folder labeled Important, deleted the one from her brother and finally leaned forward so she could reach the small keyboard below the holo-panel. She typed a quick but polite message to her mother saying that it wasn't a good time right now, but maybe next weekend.

After sending the message, Amanda leaned back in the settee and let out a long sigh. Before her hair could reach the top of the backrest, she changed her mind and got up instead. She went over to the inactive Ingrid and studied the tall, statuesque woman with the perfectly proportioned physique, the picture-perfect features and the lifelike, yet utterly unblemished skin and hair.

When Amanda tried to wrap her arms around Ingrid's body and pull herself into a hug, she was reminded at once that her partner of the last two years was merely an advanced piece of machinery despite her human appearance. With Ingrid being inactive, all her functions mimicking true life had been shut down - she wasn't breathing, she didn't have a heartbeat and her artificial skin was cold and stiff to the touch.

"Sweetie, you're just a mannequin," Amanda said and pulled back from the cold, passive machine. "A mannequin that cost me thirty thousand dollars... and another five thousand for the software upgrades

along the way... dammit. If only we were allowed to have pets here... a tabby would only have cost me fifteen, eighteen thousand, tops. Gawd, what am I saying? I dearly hope they can fix you... I'm not ready to give up on you yet, you know," she said, stroking Ingrid's cheek with the back of her fingers.

Moments later, her dark train of thought was interrupted by the electronic doorbell on the front door playing Frosty The Snowman. "About frickin' time!" she growled as she stomped over to the door.

She whooshed it open with a barb all ready to fire but stopped dead before she could even part her lips enough to speak. Instead of emptying the proverbial bucket all over her overdue guest, she simply stared at the gorgeous female service technician who was standing in the corridor beyond the door.

The compact technician was an African-American with a skin tone like aged mahogany, and she appeared to be in her late thirties. She was wearing a heavy toolbox over her shoulder, common, sturdy workboots and a tan boiler suit that couldn't be more non-descript if it tried, but she had that certain something that separated the humans from the eFriends - imperfections, albeit minuscule ones like dimples, early crow's feet around her eyes and a slightly crooked front tooth.

The woman's dark brown eyes sparkled, and the amused grin on her lips was clearly brought on by the unexpected attention. She wore a baseball cap with the eFriend Corporation logo, but she reached up and took it off to show respect for her hostess. As the cap came off, her dark hair was revealed to be short and spiky. "Good evening, Miss. My name is Keilani Shaun and I'm the technician... who's... been..."

Amanda simply stared at her.

Keilani stared back and put the cap back on. "Okay... oh man, this is gonna be one of those evenings. Hello, may I speak to your owner, please?" she said, carefully pronouncing every syllable like she was speaking to a small child, or indeed a malfunctioning eFriend.

Then Keilani happened to look to her left at the passive Ingrid.

Whistling through her teeth, she dug into her toolbox and found her best screwdriver. "Man, this must be contagious..." she mumbled as she tested the electrical device and turned back to the honey-blonde, green-eyed eFriend closest to her.

Just as Keilani got the screwdriver ready to investigate further, Amanda snapped out of whatever bit of paradise she had found herself in and held her hands high in the air. "Oh! Ha, ha... uh, sorry... no, I'm actually one of the living. Ha, ha. I'm Amanda Paulsen, hello," she said and put out her hand.

Keilani shook it with some trepidation but was soon able to feel that the short woman before her was indeed not an eFriend. "Hello, Miss Paulsen. You called the eFriend Corporation service hotline?"

"Ah... yes, I did... it's this way, please," she said and reached behind the technician to close the front door. When Keilani turned her back to her, Amanda could see that it said eFriend Corp. Industrial Division across the back of her boiler suit. "Oh... the Industrial Division? But my eFriend is just a regular household one, not a factory droid..."

"I just happened to be fairly close when the call came, Miss Paulsen. The dispatcher said it was kinda urgent. Anyway, before I moved over to the Industrial Division, I worked at the home unit for nearly five years, so..."

"Oh, I didn't doubt your abilities, ha ha," Amanda said, but even as she did so, she wanted to slap herself silly.

When the two women walked into the living room, Keilani put down her toolbox with great care so it wouldn't dent or scratch the parquet floor. "Hmmm... well, that's an Ingrid Scandia, all right," she said as she shuffled up to stand behind the eFriend. "Tall girl, huh?"

"Yes," Amanda said with a nervous chuckle. She could see at once that Keilani - who was only a few inches taller than she - wouldn't be able to reach up and peek into Ingrid's brain unassisted. "So... uh... would you like a footstool or something to stand on?"

"Not at first, thank you. I'm going to activate her so I can monitor the exact behavioral patterns and processes in case there's a more substantial problem," Keilani said and took off her cap. Crouching down by her toolbox, she found a tablet computer that she turned on. She swiped through a couple of menus before she reached the program she needed to keep track of the eFriend's internal workings. "Before I get started on her, I'd like to hear in detail what happened here tonight."

"Sure, sure..." Amanda said and wrung her hands. "Oh, would you like some coffee while you-"

Keilani smiled as she reached into the toolbox and found a data transmission cable that had - inevitably - rolled itself up into a knot. "No thank you, Miss Paulsen. I just had some at my last client."

"Oh... of course. Well..." Amanda said and ran a hand through her hair. "Well, I didn't notice anything when I got home. I had called Ingrid, oh, half an hour ahead of time to tell her that I'd take home some Chinese so she shouldn't prepare dinner, and she was fine then, too. Like I said, when I got home, she was just... uh, fine. I ate, and... and... when we got to the fortune cookies, she went haywire," Amanda said and shrugged so hard her shoulders nearly reached her ears.

"The fortune cookies, huh?" Keilani said with a chuckle as she tried to unravel the knot on the cable.

Amanda echoed the chuckle despite the odd situation. "Yeah. The fortune cookies. We were talking just... uh, fine, when she suddenly repeated something she had said only minutes earlier. Then she just... I don't know... seemed to crash."

"Mmmm. Okay. How much time would you say went by before Ingrid lost control?" While she spoke, Keilani finally finished de-knotting the cable. Holding it straight, she moved over to the three-seater settee and put it across the backrest for safekeeping.

"How much time? Oh... twenty minutes. Maybe a little less. Why?"

"I'm thinking one of her CPU fans could have failed. Twenty minutes would be about right."

"Oh! They can do that?" Amanda said and hurried up to stand next to Ingrid. She briefly sniffed the eFriend to check if the smell of warm metal still lingered on her, but it didn't. "Earlier, there was a peculiar smell when I opened her up. Like my old curling tongs when they got warm."

"Now Miss Paulsen, as you can see, I don't have much experience with that kind of apparatus!" Keilani said and laughed out loud as she ran a hand through her short, spiky hair.

Amanda snickered into her hand, secretly marveling at the sound of genuine, human laughter filling her apartment. "Perhaps I should say it smelled like a soldering iron?" she said with a broad grin.

"Ah! Now that's a smell I know," Keilani said and matched the grin with one of her own. As she smiled, her face grew even more charming. Not only were the dimples in her cheeks highlighted, her dark brown eyes narrowed and sparkled like she thought the whole situation was rather entertaining.

Amanda found herself smiling like a maniac at the sight - there she was, with an actual, living woman in her apartment, and not only that, but a woman who could smile, laugh and crack jokes. *'How long has it been that I've had a friendly conversation with a real woman? Ohmigawd, so long I can't even remember the last time... she isn't even flirting, she's being completely professional about it... Gawd, I'm so fond of Ingrid, but I need to get out more...'*

"So," Keilani said and reached for the remote that she had spotted resting on one of the cushions, "shall we try to breathe some life into the tall girl?"

"Yes, but she's cooled off now, so it'll be a while until she starts

acting weird again," Amanda said and moved around the passive Ingrid.

Keilani held the remote ready and pressed the red On/Off button. Almost at once, Ingrid opened her eyes and looked around. Keilani put away the remote and began to study the eFriend's behavior. "Oh that's all right, Miss Paulsen," she said with a tired chuckle, "my shift ended while I was driving over here."

"Oh! Oh, no... on a Friday night!" Amanda said and wrung her hands. "Listen, Keilani... I don't want to hold you here. I'm sure you've got a lot of things lined up after work... I'll just keep Ingrid turned off over the weekend."

Keilani grinned and waved a hand to shoot down the offer. "No, no, everything's just fine, Miss Paulsen. To be honest, not only do I get double pay for working this time of night, I only have an empty apartment to go home to."

The word *'Interesting!'* flashed through Amanda's mind, but she wisely stopped her thoughts from bubbling to the surface. Instead, she uttered a simple "Oh," before she moved over to her eFriend and reached out for the tall woman's hand.

Ingrid looked at their house guest with a sweet smile on her lips. When she had finished returning from her inactive state, she took Amanda's hands in her own. "Good evening, darling," she said in her bought Scandinavian accent. "Would you like your massage now?"

"Oh, you remembered that..." Amanda croaked, suddenly feeling her cheeks begin to burn. She cast a sideways glance at Keilani who held the transmission cable and the tablet computer ready, but apart from a cheeky little smirk, the technician kept a straight face. "Uh, maybe a little later, Ingrid."

"Certainly, darling," the eFriend said with a sweet smile.

"Ingrid, this is our guest, Keilani Shaun," Amanda said and pointed at the woman in the boiler suit.

Ingrid immediately accessed the appropriate program and turned to their guest with her right hand stretched out. "Good evening, Ms. Shaun. Welcome to the home of Amanda Paulsen and I, Ingrid Scandia. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Keilani chuckled as she shook the eFriend's hand. "No thank you, Ingrid. I'm good."

Ingrid pulled back with a sweet smile on her lips. She looked back at Amanda before her arms fell down her sides. "If you change your mind, Ms. Shaun, just let me know and I'll make you a cup of delicious coffee. Would you like to listen to some mood music while you're here?"

"No music, sweetie," Amanda said and put her hand on the eFriend's elbow. "Miss Shaun is a service technician who's here to work on you. Please sit down on one of the chairs."

"Certainly, darling," Ingrid said and walked towards one of the satellite armchairs. When she noticed Amanda pointing at the kitchen chairs instead, she smiled sweetly and changed directions. Sitting down, she crossed her legs in a very ladylike fashion and made sure the knee on top pointed away from Amanda and Keilani.

While Keilani walked around the back of Ingrid, Amanda knelt down in front of her and took her hands in her own. "Sweetie, Miss Shaun is just going to run a diagnostic on you. She's going to unscrew your skull and peek into your brain, but I promise it won't hurt."

"Oh, but that's fine, darling. The program that controls my pain receptors has been disabled," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

Amanda grunted and scratched her neck. "Oh... yeah... that's right. Keilani, I had to disable Ingrid's pain program because she, uh... whined a lot over the silliest things."

Keilani chuckled as she clicked off the four clamps and removed the

scalp with the perfect hair. The four screws holding the skin-colored skull-plate in place were soon dealt with to allow her access to Ingrid's inner workings. "You'd be amazed how many people do that, Miss Paulsen," she said as she attached the data transmission cable to the appropriate socket in Ingrid's head and then into the tablet computer. "Actually, from model Twenty Eighty onwards, the pain receptors were disabled across the board when they arrived at the service centers. If people want 'em, they can just turn 'em on again. Okay... I'm receiving data now," she continued, looking at the tablet.

A new chill ran down Amanda's spine at the creepy sight of the cable running from Ingrid's head to the tablet, especially since the eFriend was still awake and alert while her data was being monitored.

Ingrid's pale blue eyes scanned the living room with her usual cool detachment. Now and then, she stopped and zoomed in on an item that needed some kind of attention later on. When her eyes ran across Amanda's nervous face, her lips creased in a sweet smile and she gave her owner's hands a little squeeze.

The gesture was a familiar one - and one Amanda usually loved - but the bigger picture lurking just behind the strange scenario sent yet another chill down her spine.

Keilani nodded confidently as she studied the data that was being transferred to her tablet. "So far so good. I think my initial theory will be proven correct," she said as she tapped on the tablet to get it to show a different data stream.

"With the CPU fan?" Amanda said and began to chew on a fingernail.

"Yes. Ingrid has been active for four minutes and twenty-two seconds, and her internal temperature is already creeping up towards the high end of the scale. Mmmm-yeah. Ingrid?"

"Yes, Ms. Shaun?" the eFriend said over her shoulder.

"Continue the following arithmetical problem until I say stop. Two

plus two is four."

"Four plus four is eight. Eight plus eight is sixteen. Sixteen plus sixteen is thirty-two," Ingrid said in her Scandinavian accent. Soon, the figures became so large the processes could be seen making a clear impact on her internal temperature. "Five thousand one hundred and twenty plus five thousand one hundred and twenty is ten thousand two hundred and forty. Ten thousand two two two two two two two-"

Amanda briefly cried "Oh my Gawd!" but Keilani nodded in triumph as she followed the wild temperature spike on the tablet.

"Got it!" Keilani said, quickly turning Ingrid off before her delicate innards would be damaged. When everything had settled down, she turned the tablet around and showed the readout to a pale Amanda. "There... that's what I call a spike. There's definitely something wrong with Ingrid's cooling system."

"Oh... so... is she... is she... uh... de- uh... dead?" Amanda said, rubbing her brow with a faintly trembling hand.

"Oh, hell no. Far from it," Keilani said as she unplugged the transmission cable from Ingrid's brain. "But I'm gonna have to open her up fully. I'm betting the main torso fans are clogged up, so... we're going to have to undress her so I can get to the back panel."

"Uh... okay," Amanda said and scratched her neck. She glanced at the inactive Ingrid and felt acutely embarrassed about the fact that the eFriend Corporation had designed their products to be one hundred percent lifelike - in every anatomical aspect.

CHAPTER 3

A short while later, Ingrid was lying face down across the three-seater settee. Her legs were far too long to fit inside the settee, so they were sticking out over the edge on one end.

Keilani was sitting on a kitchen chair above the nude eFriend with her screwdriver in her hand. When the technician had spotted how embarrassed Amanda had become over the nudity, she had suggested they could wrap Ingrid's rear and hide her breasts with a few well-placed towels.

"Is it okay with you if I start now, Miss Paulsen?" Keilani said, looking up at the blushing Amanda while pointing the screwdriver at the eFriend below her.

"Yessss," Amanda croaked, scratching her eyebrows.

Keilani chuckled and felt down Ingrid's sides until she found the hidden clamps that would release the large, flexible panel that covered most of her back from her neck to just below where the rib cage would have been on a human being.

As the panel came loose, Keilani carefully detached all the fiber optic cables that operated the shoulder blades and the muscles on the back, the neck and the shoulders. When it was ready to go, she lifted it off the eFriend and put it on the coffee table behind her for safekeeping.

Amanda stared wide-eyed at the creepy sight of the pink, artificial skin lying on her pristine table with a bunch of optical cables sticking out of it, and she broke out in a shimmy when the goosebumps became too strong to bear. "I honest to goodness didn't even know she had a panel there..." she croaked, poking an index finger into the loose panel to feel the lifelike skin.

"Well, as it says on a little label on the rear of the panel, there are no user serviceable parts inside. This is her real brain we're looking at now," Keilani said and pointed down at the highly advanced electronic marvel known as an eFriend model Twenty Seventy-nine, *'Ingrid Scandia.'*

Amanda was too busy breaking out into goosebumps to reply, but she eventually looked over Keilani's shoulder with a great deal of interest and watched as the technician attached the data transmission cable to the appropriate socket in Ingrid's central processing computer.

Soon, data streams flowed onto the tablet and prompted Keilani to let out a string of grunts in several different intonations. Some sounded good, some merely okay, and some quite bad.

"Why do I feel like we've morphed into Doctor Frankenstein and Igor?" Amanda croaked.

Keilani chuckled and cast a brief glance at the nervous woman next to her before she went back to grunting at the data streams.

"Keilani, will you please tell me what your grunts mean? I'm getting kinda nervous here," Amanda said and started chewing on her fingernails to prove her point.

"Sure. Okay, the good stuff first. Ingrid doesn't have any broken solderings, printed circuit boards or chips in her central processing computer. She has a high data transfer flow to and from the receptors in her limbs... which can be a weakness in this design, by the way, 'cos she's so tall... all memory registers come back clean and green save for one that I need to investigate further in a little while."

"Oh... and the bad stuff?"

"Her system log indicates she's been running hot for a few weeks. Basically, she's been having a fever," Keilani said and winked at her hostess.

"Oh... shoot. I haven't noticed at all," Amanda said and leaned in over the opened panel to take a look at the machinery. "Her body heat was the same as always, and so were h- her... uh... things. I've been really busy at work for the past two weeks, but Ingrid has seemed just fine when I got home in the evenings."

Keilani shrugged and turned back to the eFriend. Swiping the tablet, she soon found the corresponding data stream. Once it was on the readout, she held up the tablet so Amanda could see for herself "I obviously don't doubt you, Miss Paulsen, but..." she said as she handed the tablet to the nervous woman above her.

Amanda scrunched up her face as she read the numbers that showed a clear increase in base torso temperatures. Even from complete hibernation, Ingrid was nearly at the top of the scale within an hour of activation. The last entries in the log showed that she was way up in the red zone after less than twenty minutes. "Yeah... okay," Amanda said and scratched her neck.

"And that's why she's been behaving weirdly tonight, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said and moved the tablet back down towards her so she could continue working.

Amanda shuffled around the settee and looked down at the operating theater from the other side. "Yeah... no wonder with those readings. I bought her second hand two years ago. I... I felt... mmmm, for a lot of reasons I won't bother you with, I felt really lonely at the time. I caught an ad for the eFriend Service Center and I thought... well... why not try it again?"

"Oh... again? You've had one prior to Ingrid?"

"Yes, a second-hand model Twenty Sixty-four 'bout fifteen years ago," Amanda said and ran her fingers across the top of the settee's backrest.

"Wow, a Sixty-four? That was one of the earliest designs."

"Yeah, she was far more basic than Ingrid. But she was a good friend." Amanda looked around the living room with a wistful smile on her lips as she remembered the lively, red-headed eFriend who was always good for a laugh and a cuddle to brighten any day. "I called her Jessica. She was modeled to be twenty-five like I was at the time. I had her for four years until I graduated from San Angeles U. I guess it looked kinda odd for a thirty-year old who tried to be cool and suave to share a home with a bouncy redhead with dungarees, a striped blouse and a baseball cap that was on backwards most of the time."

Keilani chuckled and looked up. "I've never worked on the Sixty-fours but I've heard some of the old-timers talking about them. They

weren't called Strawberry Kids for nothing. By the way, San Angeles U... that's my old college."

"No... really?"

"Yep."

"Huh. Small world," Amanda said with a genuine smile. "Oh, I'll bet we could share some wild stories..."

"I bet we could, Miss Paulsen. So... you bought Ingrid two years ago?"

Amanda smiled again, but it faded as she looked down at the sorry state of her eFriend. "Yes. I shuffled down to the flagship store on Third Street looking like a teenager who was trying to work up the courage to buy her first contraceptive. I couldn't afford any of the new range, but the sales person led me down to the second-hand units in the basement. It's actually kinda creepy down there... like a wax cabinet, except the models all follow you with their eyes as you walk around. Brrrr!"

"Mmmm! I know, I used to work out of the Third Street store."

Amanda fell silent as she remembered the glitzy showroom. Dozens of eFriends had been put up in dioramas so the potential customers could see how the various models looked in real-world settings. The tall, elegant Ingrid Scandias were primarily designed to act as trophy wives and to look good on any important person's arm - which wasn't what Amanda had been looking for at all - but she had felt a curious attraction to the regal blondes. There had been several Ingrid Scandias to choose from, but one in particular had caught her eye.

"Yeah," Amanda said quietly as she returned from her trip down Memory Lane. "Like the first time, I wanted an eFriend who roughly matched my age. They had all kinds of models down there, tall and short, skinny and not so skinny... but my interest was piqued by the different Ingrid Scandias they had on display. I chose this one because she... oh, this is gonna sound so corny," Amanda said and let out an

embarrassed chuckle. "When I came up to stand in front of her, she smiled at me. Completely unprompted... can you believe that? She smiled at me, and I thought, wow, is that a match made in heaven or what?"

Keilani offered her hostess a similar smile as she unplugged the transmission cable from Ingrid's socket. "Awww, that's so cute. I can definitely understand why you would go for such an eFriend. Now, Miss Paulsen-"

"Oh, no... are you saying you've done all you can for her?" Amanda said and scrunched up her face into a mask of concern.

"No no, far from it, Miss Paulsen. But I'm gonna have to perform a little deeper surgery on her," Keilani said and reached into her toolbox to find a different screwdriver. "I want a look underneath her protective shield. That's usually only done in a controlled environment, but... you know... I can see how much she means to you," the technician said with a friendly smile.

"Oh... yes. Thank you. Uh... please go on," Amanda said and started chewing her fingernails for real.

Keilani assumed a determined expression as she unscrewed the eight special locking bolts that kept the protective shield in place. One after another, the long screws with the peculiar heads were pulled out and placed on the coffee table in strict order so she wouldn't get confused when the time came to put them back in.

The experienced technician stuck her tongue in the corner of her mouth as she wiggled the protective shield free from the eFriend's torso. Little by little, the shield was removed to reveal the true nature of Ingrid's behavioral problems.

"Ho-ly shhh-it! No wonder she's been running hot!" Keilani exclaimed loudly as she caught a glimpse of the jungle-like conditions underneath the protective shield.

Amanda's eyes popped wide open at the sight of the gross collection

of dust bunnies that had been fused into a mess resembling half a cashmere sweater. Years and years of gray dust had gathered around the primary CPU and the adjacent fans, and the entire area had turned into a furry colony. "Buh...!" she croaked, staring at the plainly obvious cause of all Ingrid's problems.

"Hello, world! What is this, cocktail hour at a dust bunny fan convention? Man, this is too wild. I've never seen anything like it... not even in some of the industrial eFriends," Keilani said and poked a finger into the dust. Scrunching up her face, she looked up at Amanda who was too shocked to reply. "Miss Paulsen, I guess you didn't get the memo where it said that models of the Twenty Seventy-nine range must be brought in every five months or so for a full service...?" the technician continued in a slightly accusing tone.

"I was never told!"

"Oh... really?"

"No!"

"Yikes, that's what I call a lawsuit in the making. They're obliged to tell you, even for a second-hand eFriend... but, huh, look at this mess," Keilani said and once again tried to poke her finger into the cashmere sweater. "She's never been serviced since she was created. That's just wrong, man... such a great model and she's been neglected..."

"Do you think that's why someone got rid of her after only three years?"

"Hard to say... do you know who owned her originally?"

"No, her service records and warranty certificate weren't properly kept," Amanda said around chewing on her lips.

"Yeah, well, that should have- oh look!" Keilani suddenly said, pointing at a particular dust bunny that she subsequently tried to yank free from its comfortable home. "She's got a bearded clam stuck in her

hypral flux ventilator circuitry! How 'bout that! Awwww!"

Amanda's cheeks flushed beet-root red at the unexpected innuendo, and she had to fan herself to get her own temperature back down from the red zone. "Uh... buh... she's got a wh- whut?"

"Sorry, Miss Paulsen, 'was just a silly old joke," Keilani said with a broad, cheeky grin that really made her sparkling eyes light up.

Amanda snickered into her hand and shimmied around on the spot to get at least some of her blushing to go away. Just when she thought she had it licked, it came back with a vengeance and she had to do another shimmy.

Still grinning at her hostess' cute reaction to the risqué joke, Keilani gazed up at the shimmying Amanda before she turned her attention to the furry mess ahead of her. She tried to jab an index finger into a corner and pull away some of the fluff, but she could see at once it would be a tough job. "Ah, Miss Paulsen, once you're done shimmying, could I borrow your vacuum cleaner for a little while? I'm afraid it's gonna get a real workout here... as you can see."

"Oh, sure... sure. Just a moment," Amanda said and hurried into the bedroom. Soon, she came back with a dark blue retro model designed to look like those her grandmother had used in the 2020's. "Here you go... wait, let me plug it in for you," she said and dove down onto her hands and knees to plug the power cord into the wall socket behind the sideboard.

"Thanks!" Keilani said and adjusted the suction level on the vacuum cleaner. She chose the lowest one so there wouldn't be any risk of sucking up anything vital. With everything in place - including Amanda who was dusting off her hands - Keilani turned on the vacuum and moved the plastic head across the dust bunnies.

"Man, the little buggers don't wanna leave their comfy home," she said under her breath as she needed to use her fingers to tear chunks out of the look-alike cashmere sweater in order for the vacuum cleaner to go where it mattered.

Amanda bared her teeth in a worried grimace as she watched large and small chunks get sucked up into the stainless steel pipe. Ingrid's highly advanced circuitry eventually came into view, but everything had been painted gray after years of neglect. *'I can't believe they never told me about the service requirements! I've studied the paperwork cover to cover... it didn't say anything about regular service intervals. What, were they hoping I'd sell Ingrid back to them at the first sign of problems like the previous owner...? Or did they think I wouldn't know the difference?'* - "Keilani," she said, but piped down when the technician put her hand in the air to signal that she couldn't hear a thing while the vacuum was running.

When the loud machine was shut off, Keilani looked up at her hostess. "That's an improvement, huh? You were saying?"

"Well, uh... I just wanted to ask if you thought that... well... if Ingrid's been permanently harmed by the dust or the excessive heat?" Amanda said and shuffled back around the settee so she could get a better look at Ingrid's exposed back.

Keilani shrugged and leaned down towards the eFriend's central processing unit. She sniffed at it a couple of times and furrowed her brow. "Mmmm. Can't say. Compared to the whiff of warm metal you mentioned earlier, she smells quite strongly of it in here."

"Oh... dammit. I wish I had known about the service intervals. I never had such a problem with my old Jessica..."

"No, the Sixty-fours didn't need to be regularly serviced. The newer models have a lot of advanced electronics that need quite a bit of cooling, though. I guess Ingrid is just a high maintenance g-friend, huh?" Keilani said with a cheeky gleam in her eye.

"Huh, yeah... she's definitely high maintenance, all right..."

With Ingrid's vitals finally liberated from the dust, Keilani began a more thorough investigation of the various circuitry, chips and crystals. Her skilled hands probed here, squeezed there, wiped hither

and pressed yon until she had assembled enough data to come to a conclusion. "Well," she said and rubbed her nose to get rid of some of the dust that had been kicked up by her probing fingers, "she's clean again. Her fans are clear and fully functional... in theory, she should work just fine now. However, and I'm afraid it's a big however... I can't say whether or not the excessive heat has warped her circuit boards. There's a risk it may have. A section of her is loose that definitely shouldn't be. It could be something silly like the proverbial screw that's gone loose, but it may also indicate she's suffered a... well, I guess you could call it a heatstroke. Potentially a debilitating one."

Amanda furrowed her brow and tried to look closer at Ingrid's computers - but all it gave her was another layer of confusion. "So... so her memory is... what, fried?"

"Well, not her memory banks as such, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said and moved back from Ingrid, "more like her central processing computer. Her personality. The crystals that control her functions and social behavior must be calibrated with great precision or else she'll be-

"I get the picture, Keilani," Amanda said and took a deep breath to combat the cold wave that splashed over her. For a brief moment, she felt a deep sense of loss that was as strong as the one she had felt when her father had died of a heart attack some years earlier.

She clenched her jaw and tried to hold back the emotions, but she was unable to stop a single tear from trickling down her cheek. Grunting angrily, she wiped it away in a hurry before her guest would have a chance to see it. "All right," she said after a little while. "I need some more coffee. Are you sure you don't want some?"

"Well... I could use a cup if it isn't too much hassle?" Keilani said with a smile.

"Nah," Amanda said and looked like she wanted to say something more. Instead, she let out a sigh and shuffled off to the kitchen.

Standing at the black, hi-gloss granite counter in her kitchen, Amanda followed the usual procedures for making coffee, but in reality, she was just going through the motions without any conscious thought. It came back to haunt her when she realized that she had only added enough water and coffee beans to make one cup - it had been so long since she'd had a reason to make two cups at once that her hands had worked on autopilot.

Amanda clicked off the machine and added more water and another dose of the deliciously smelling beans into the top end. With everything in order, she clicked the machine back on and turned around so she could rest her rear against the granite counter.

As she stood there, another tear followed the one from before. She wiped it away, feeling in her bones that her fatigue and the evening's unexpected, shocking events were ganging up on her. When the original glitch had happened to Ingrid it had merely been annoying, but with the news that the years of neglect may have caused fatal damage to the tall, regal eFriend, Amanda was once again faced with the depressing prospect of returning to a cold, empty apartment day-in, day-out. "Dammit," she mumbled, thumping her fist down onto the granite counter in despair. "I knew it was too good to last. For the past two years, I've been happy... I should have known it was a frickin' illusion."

An electronic ding behind her brought her back to the present, and she took the pot and poured the coffee into two ceramic mugs. "Keilani! Do you need cream or sugar?" she said loudly through the kitchen door.

"No, just black, thank you!" the technician said from the living room.

Amanda grunted and took a mug in each hand. As she left the kitchen, the LED lights in the ceiling automatically turned off. "Here we go," she said as she shuffled over to the low table where Keilani was busy putting Ingrid's protective shield back in place. "Oh... I forgot the coasters. Keilani, would you mind taking them for me?"

They're in the top drawer of the sideboard over there," she said, nodding her head at the beechwood sideboard that was placed up against the wall.

"Sure thing, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said and got up.

With the coasters doing their duty of protecting the coffee table from the mugs, Amanda and Keilani sat down in the two satellite armchairs to discuss the possibilities.

"So," Amanda said after putting down her mug following her first sip. "What can you suggest, Keilani?"

"First of all, just so we're on the same page... here's what I've done. Ingrid has been cleaned thoroughly and I've checked her vital circuitry... with inconclusive results, unfortunately. The acute issues that caused her to overheat have been dealt with. I've attached the protective shield for the central units and also the outer panel because she's unable to start without them," Keilani said and leaned forward to stress the seriousness of the matter. "I think we should activate her. Her temperatures should stay within the green zone, but, like I said, she may have suffered lasting damage. We can tell from her behavior."

"I see... she isn't going to go all Freddy Krueger on us, is she?"

"Ah... who?"

"Freddy Kru- never mind," Amanda said and waved her hand dismissively. "It's a character in an ancient horror movie that I know my grandmother loves. It's from her youth."

Keilani chuckled and took her mug. "Okay. You must have an interesting grandmother..." she said and took a sip.

"Yeah... yeah," Amanda said with a faint smile. "But, uh... back on topic... she'll still be the old Ingrid, won't she? I mean, personality-wise?"

"It's very difficult to say, Miss Paulsen."

"Rats..."

"Her resident software and add-on packs haven't changed, though. I'll patch her to do a verbose boot so we can keep track of what's loaded when."

Amanda nodded somberly. She took a long swig from her coffee to quell the dark thoughts that still swirled around in her mind. "Then I think we should try. Uh... but first... would you mind if I put her clothes back on before we start? I, uh... I'm, uh..."

"No worries, Miss Paulsen. I'll even look away so you girls can have some privacy," Keilani said with a grin.

._*._*._*

"Okay... we're set. Hit the remote," Amanda said and covered her eyes with her hands as she stepped back from the eFriend who was once dressed in her brown one-piece suit and her cream blouse.

On the settee, Ingrid opened her eyes and looked around. She wasn't wearing her hair or her skin-colored skull-plate and she had the data transmission cable sticking out of her head, but other than that, she looked normal.

"Verbose boot request confirmed," she said in her default flat accent. "eFriend Ingrid Scandia model Twenty Seventy-nine dash oh-six step two rebooting. Performing power-on self test. Four thousand ninety-six terabytes memory okay. Basic input-output system okay. Date-time uplink failed, disregarding. Internal chronometer okay. Pain receptors disabled. Loading eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality base functions. Base functions version one point oh Charlie loaded okay. Searching for eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality add-on packs."

"Wow... when she said verbose, she certainly meant it, huh?" Amanda said, peeking through her fingers.

"Yeah," Keilani said with a chuckle as she kept track of the data

streams on her tablet computer.

Ingrid continued unperturbed. "Found add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified. Add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified loaded okay. Caution, unconventional function call in personality add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified, file EXTFEAT.CRR line seven-one-nine. Proceed yes-no. Three... two... one... disregarding. Found add-on pack traditional Danish language and culture one point seven. Add-on pack traditional Danish language and culture one point seven loaded okay." - Ingrid suddenly spoke with her characteristic sing-song Scandinavian accent - "Search for eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality add-on packs completed. Adding boot details to log. Boot completed okay."

Once she had finished her near-endless list of information, Ingrid sat still in the settee and smiled sweetly with her legs together and her hands on her knees.

Amanda moved with great care and sat down next to her partner of the last two years. Her heart thundered in her chest, her palms were sweaty, her mouth was as dry as sandpaper and she had a whole cascade of cold chills rushing down her spine - in short, she was so nervous her brain had begun to turn numb around the edges. "Hello, sweetie," she said cautiously, wrapping an arm around Ingrid's waist to check if her bodily functions were running. They were, she was warm to the touch, she had a heartbeat and she was breathing steadily.

"Hello, darling. You look beautiful today," Ingrid said and zoomed in on Amanda's worried eyes with her own, cool orbs.

Though Amanda knew she really didn't - her complexion was reddish-pale and the dark circles under her eyes had only grown worse since the horrors began - the pleasantries hit her like a punch in the gut. A hard lump of emotions formed in her throat and she needed to take several deep breaths before she could go on. Even so, the corners of her mouth twitched a couple of times and her eyes misted over as she looked at her newly resurrected eFriend.

Smiling through a veil of tears, Amanda reached up to caress Ingrid's silky smooth cheek. "Thank you, sweetie. So do you. How

are you feeling?"

"I am feeling just fine, thank you."

Keilani nodded affirmatively as she watched the chassis and CPU temperatures climb steadily, but not dangerously so.

Amanda eyed the technician before turning back to Ingrid. "That's so good to hear. You had me worried, sweetie. You suffered a serious malfunction, but Keilani and I believe we have you fixed now. Hopefully."

Ingrid looked at Keilani and offered her a sweet smile. "Thank you, Miss Shaun. Are you monitoring my data?"

"That's right, Ingrid. You're looking clean and green," Keilani said and held up the tablet.

Amanda let out a sigh of relief at the news. Reaching down, she grabbed Ingrid's hands and gave them a strong squeeze. "Honey, can you feel anything wrong... you know... inside you?"

Ingrid cocked her head and grew distant for a brief moment, but she was soon back. "My pain receptors are disabled. There's an unconventional function call in the personality add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified. I have nine skin sensor pressure overload warnings originating in four fingers on my right hand and five fingers on my left hand."

"Oh!" Amanda said, realizing that she was squeezing Ingrid's hands too hard. She hurriedly let go and decided to stroke her lifelike cheek instead.

"The skin sensor pressure overload warnings have now turned inactive. Apart from that, I feel fine."

Keilani chuckled and made a little note on the tablet. "Well, she's certainly sensitive. What's up with that unconventional function call in the Sappho software, Miss Paulsen?"

"Oh, uh... nothing, uh... special," Amanda said, ducking her head and looking at anything but the technician. "Uh, just a little thing, uh, that I, uh, had someone modify for me."

"I see," Keilani said with yet another cheeky grin gracing her features. "By the way, the developers have released Sappho three point seven in case you're interested?"

Blushing, Amanda concentrated on Ingrid so she didn't have to look at the grinning Keilani. "I know, but, uh... the old version is, uh... more than enough. Uh... for me, ha ha..."

"I've just upgraded my personal eFriend to the new version. It does give them a few new features, actually," Keilani said and swiped through a few menus on the tablet to get to the one she needed.

"Oh... uh... I see," Amanda said and turned to sneak a peek at the gorgeous technician. "Well... I guess we're all family then."

Keilani grinned and reached over to thump fists with the two other women, the living and the artificial. "We sure are. When the dispatcher heard Ingrid in the background of your call, she put two and two together and sent word out to me directly. I'm sorta the go-to grrrl here. Okay, Ingrid... I want to stress-test you a little."

"Certainly, Miss Shaun," the eFriend said, smiling sweetly.

"First up, I would like you to multiply..."

CHAPTER 4

"And... yep. Everything's A-okay inside you, Ingrid," Keilani said and unplugged the transmission cable from her tablet computer. "Your temperature is basically fine. You had a little spike when I asked you to count down from three hundred in steps of point two, but that's

normal... the rest of the time, you were in the green. It looks like you dodged a bullet tonight," she continued as she walked around the eFriend and disconnected the cable from her socket.

Sitting next to Ingrid, Amanda let out a massive sigh of relief and ran both hands through her hair that had turned damp from the waves of nervous energy that rolled through her. She looked up at the regal blonde and shook her head very slowly.

"I believe I must report a malfunction in my audio receptors, Miss Shaun. You said I dodged a bullet, but I didn't register any gunfire," Ingrid said, furrowing her picture-perfect brow.

" 's a figure of speech, Ingrid."

"Oh," Ingrid said and briefly became distant. "Thank you, Miss Shaun. I have added it to my growing collection of puns, metaphors and similia."

Amanda's jumbled nerves prompted her to let out a sound that should have been a laugh but that turned into a nervous screech instead. She took the opportunity to lean over and kiss Ingrid on the cheek and claw her tummy.

Keilani rolled up the transmission cable and moved away from the settee. It didn't take long for her to put the cable and the tablet into her toolbox, but when she walked back to the coffee table to get the screws for the skull-plate, she noticed not one, but two pairs of eyes studying her. She had to chuckle at the expressions on Ingrid and Amanda's faces - they were so identical the two women couldn't be anything but an item.

All three were enjoying the quiet and serene moment, but it was Amanda who exploited it to the fullest by wrapping an arm around Ingrid's waist and pulling herself into a hug. "Oh, sweetie... I'm so glad you're back. I was so worried that... that... well, that I would have to live without you."

"I'm glad to be back in your arms, darling. Does that mean you

would like your massage now?"

Keilani chuckled out loud at the color that quickly spread across Amanda's cheeks. To give her hostess a breather while she suffered through yet another bout of acute embarrassment, she took the four screws and the skull-plate and shuffled back around the settee to attach them to Ingrid's head.

"Ah," Amanda croaked, leaning up to place a small kiss on her eFriend's waiting lips, "I think we better put it off until later, sweetie. We wouldn't want to overstress your skin sensors. Okay?"

"Certainly, darling," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

Keilani grinned crookedly at the exchange, careful not to drop - or swallow - the four screws that she had pinned down between her lips. The skull-plate was soon attached to the head and the screws tightened without much effort. The hairpiece came last and graced Ingrid's regal head before long. "There... all set. She's as good as new. Now, Miss Paulsen..."

"Yes?" Amanda said and rose from the settee. She kept a firm grip on Ingrid's shoulder like she was worried her eFriend would vanish in thin air if she let go.

"If I were you," Keilani said and put the screwdrivers into the toolbox, "I would take Ingrid down to the service center come Monday for an A to Z inspection. I'll call ahead for you and explain the situation. You have a whole service file waiting to be stamped... when the chief sees that, I wouldn't be surprised if he offered you several thousand dollars in compensation."

"As keep-my-mouth-shut money?" Amanda said sharply.

"I see you get the big picture," Keilani said with a dark chuckle. "Anyway, I'd pay close attention to Ingrid this weekend. If she starts acting funny, even if it's just a joke that falls flat, I'd perform a controlled shutdown at once. There's nothing gained in pushing her too far, too soon."

Nodding, Amanda raised her hand and let it slide across Ingrid's smooth forehead and down her left cheek. "Oh, I'll pay close attention to her, all right... you can bet a hot dinner on that. I learned years ago that on the rare occasions you get a second chance at anything, you shouldn't squander it."

"You know, that's what I always say... not that it ever happens to me," Keilani said with a grin. She glanced around the exquisitely furnished apartment one last time to take in all the sights - including the honey-blond Amanda in the washed out sweatsuit and the bathing slippers. "So... I'm about ready to go. Thanks for the coffee. Oh, and don't worry about getting billed for my services... I get paid directly by the eFriend Corporation."

"Oh!" Amanda said and shot up from the settee. She ran around the couch arrangement with her arms ahead of her, and she had barely made it to the compact technician before she pulled her into a strong hug. "I cannot thank you enough, Keilani. You have really, really saved my world."

"Huh, my pleasure, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said with a cheeky grin. "Miss Paulsen... may I ask you a... no, make that two personal questions?"

"Uh... sure?"

"One, how come you don't have a real g-friend? I know that you're really close to Ingrid, but..."

Amanda let out a nervous snicker and looked back at the regal woman who was still sitting prim and proper in the settee. "Well, I work long hours week-in, week-out. Believe me, I've tried, but it's not the best framework or environment for nurturing a relationship with a real gal. And... like I said... Ingrid and I share a special connection... so, you know. What was the second question?"

"If I left you my phone number, would you throw it away or pin it to your message board?" Keilani said with a surprisingly shy smile

gracing her features.

Amanda took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She matched Keilani's shy smile with one of her own, a smile that proved that she was flattered by the attention but that she already had all she needed from life - at least for the time being. "You know," she said and reached out to take Keilani's strong hands in her own. "I would pin it to the message board, but... but only in the category called friends and family. You're a knockout, don't get me wrong... and I'd love to have you come over now and then for coffee or a beer or two, and to, uh... you know, chat away a lazy Sunday afternoon, but..."

"I get it, I get it... three's a crowd, huh?" Keilani said with a tired chuckle. She glanced over at Ingrid and wondered if the tall, regal eFriend knew how lucky she was. "Well, it's been a pleasure, Miss Paulsen. And... to tell you the truth, I kinda already left you my phone number. It's in the wooden bowl on the coffee table," she continued, winking a couple of times.

Amanda broke out in a snicker and wrapped her arms around the compact technician's torso to give her another fair-sized hug. "Thank you, Keilani. I'll pin it at once. Ingrid! Ingrid, sweetie, come over and say goodbye to Miss Shaun."

Ingrid did as asked and rose from the settee. She crossed the parquet floor with confident, regal strides and was soon at the front door. "Goodbye, Miss Shaun," she said and put out her hand that was soon shook by Keilani. "Thank you for working on me. I know it's very important for Amanda to have someone to come home to. We thank you both. Would you mind if I hugged you?"

Keilani laughed out loud and closed the distance between them. She wrapped her arms around the eFriend and gave her a little squeeze as a goodbye present. "And thank you, Ingrid," she said as she pulled back. "You know, Miss Paulsen, you're right, Ingrid is very special. In all my years of tinkering with eFriends, I've never met one so insightful. You must've worked long and hard on her behavioral patterns to get her so... hmmm... real. Even human."

Amanda shook her head and snuck a hand around her tall friend's

waist. "I can't take any credit for that, Keilani. Ingrid was already like that when we met. I think that's why she smiled at me when she saw me for the first time. Eh, sweetie?"

Ingrid turned and smiled sweetly at her owner.

"See?" Amanda said with a chuckle. "Anyhow, it's been a pleasure, Keilani. Get home safely. Do you need a hand with your toolbox?"

"Nope, I got it," Keilani said and swung the heavy metal box over her shoulder. "Catch you two on a rainy day, huh?" she said and opened the front door. She smiled at the two women and left the apartment.

Closing the door behind the technician, Amanda let out a sigh she had been holding back for a while. "Thank Gawd she was able to help you, sweetie. What a nice woman... I'm definitely going to call her sometime."

"She had skilled hands," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

Amanda's eyes popped wide open and she guffawed out loud at the barely hidden innuendo. "I'll bet she had," she said saucily and hooked her arm inside Ingrid's. "With all the drama over... what do ya say we call it a night and head for bed?"

Ingrid smiled sweetly and began to stroll towards the bedroom. "Oh, that would be nice, darling. Would you like your massage now?"

Amanda pulled back from Ingrid's arm and moved her hand down so she could caress the eFriend's long, slender digits. "You know... I think I would, yes," she said and pulled them to a halt. "But first, I need a kiss, sweetie. A good one."

Smiling sweetly, Ingrid opened her arms to invite Amanda into an embrace. "I shall do my very best," she husked before she puckered up and leaned down to claim her owner's lips.

THE END.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bearded Clam

The Bearded Clam

By

D.k. Linda

Chapter One – The Bearded Clam

At precisely twelve noon, I was sitting in my usual seat at the counter of my favorite sushi restaurant, The Bearded Clam.

You'd think being highly allergic to seafood would dissuade me from ever stepping foot in there in the first place. I could appreciate that, if not for the sushi chef or "shokunin" working behind the counter.

Her name is Hamaguri and she is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. On her own, she's mesmerizing, but watching her work is a gripping thrill unto itself. It's difficult to describe the hold this woman has on me. I'm my happiest simply sitting on this stool at the end of the sushi counter; close enough that I can see her bite her lip when given a new order to fill, see her breathe in deeply, trying to calm herself after filling an order, or watch her beautiful and sensual hands create her art.

Whenever I'm here on this stool, it is my favorite time of day and my favorite place to be.

Chapter Two – The Perfect Day

I met Hamaguri by chance on the greatest day of my life. I saw her walking her dog down a winding lane; she was a good distance ahead of me, as we both headed separately to the park.

Something seemed to pull me towards her; my pace quickened as my legs appeared to move under their own volition, faster and more forcefully, mirroring my heartbeat. My own dog wound up behind me and had to catch up to my gait.

As I approached her and we were side by side, I slowed to meet her pace, which my dog very much appreciated, panting heavily at my heels. I was able to see her face as we turned to give a hello nod, as a good gesture. This generally quick head movement, usually accompanied by a smile and every so often, a hi, hello, hey or even a brazen, what's up, was much different this time. When turning to give my "hey there" gesture, my breath caught and I was lost in her beautiful brown eyes. It took a moment to realize that we had stopped walking and the two of us stood staring at each other.

She was truly a vision of beauty. Long, silky dark hair, soft brown almond shaped eyes, full inviting lips and an adorable little nose that I wanted to kiss.

What? What had I just thought? I blinked and pretended that the sun was bothering my eyes, when in fact we were shaded by large trees on either side of the path to the park.

This incredible creature smiled at me and I felt as though the entire universe was created in that moment, just for us.

"Aww, what a cutie." I heard the sweetest voice say.

I swooned and somehow replied, "Thank you," with a silly smile.

"What kind is it?" She continued.

What? What did she just ask me? What kind is what? Then the realization came to me that this beautiful woman was in fact talking about my dog. I wondered if she could sense my embarrassment.

"Oh, um, she's a Siberian Husky." I answered. "And yours?" I asked nodding to her dog.

"She's a golden retriever." She answered with a smile.

"Of course." I said. She must have thought I was a moron. "She's really beautiful." I said, not taking my eyes off of the gorgeous, exotic woman in front of me, or even nodding to the dog this time.

"So is she." She answered quickly, looking directly and deeply into my eyes.

"Are you heading to the park?" She inquired.

"Yes, Virginia Woolf loves it there." I said, pointing to my dog.

She gave a little giggle and said as she pointed to her dog, "Vita

really loves it too, and they seem to like each other, as well.” She said looking at the dogs together.

I turned my focus onto the dogs and saw them sniffing each other happily. I felt jealous that I couldn’t get to know this amazing woman standing in front of me as overtly.

“Wait,” a realization came to me, “didn’t Virginia Woolf have a lover named Vita Sackville-West?” I asked excitedly.

“Wow,” she exclaimed, “she did! What are the odds?” She asked with her eyebrows lifted high and her mouth agape, obviously as surprised yet as intrigued as I was.

We continued on to the park. Wow, she was adorable, and that she was familiar with the famous lovers aroused my curiosity even more.

After the initial, rather massive coincidence associated with our dog’s names, I felt an even stronger compulsion to get to know this gorgeous creature that was walking beside me.

I thought, perhaps starting with introductions would be a good way to do that, so I said, “I’m Shinda.”

To which she replied, “It’s nice to meet you Shinda, I’m Hamaguri.”

I had to repeat her name several times in my head to get it down. It was an unusually pretty name and as exotic as the person it belonged to.

As we drew closer to the park, I kept sneaking sideways glances and saw she was doing the same. This inspired many smiles and small fits of giggles.

Finally, we reached the park area; it was a huge, picturesque park that surrounded an incredible lake and had lots of grass to frolic on and several paths to walk, jog or ride. Enclosed by large trees and foliage that blocked out the rest of the world, it was a sanctuary of peace and play and comfort.

When we reached the waters edge and could go no farther, I knew I could not watch this woman walk away, I needed more, a lot more.

Although it was 1:30 in the afternoon, I sincerely hoped that she hadn’t eaten yet when I said, “I brought enough food for all of us.” I made a circular motion with my finger, signaling her and both of our dogs. “I would love for you to hang around and share in this wonderful picnic spread.” I said with the most adorable smile I could muster, while pointing to the food. I was trying to appear rather nonchalant, although inwardly my heart was beating faster than usual.

“I would love to stay. Thank you for sharing your food with us. I’m actually quite hungry, I haven’t eaten all day.” She said with a

smile that made me want to melt.

I felt like dancing or fist pumping the air, but I settled for smiling even wider than I'm sure that I had already been doing. I resorted to pulling the oversized flannel blanket out of the knapsack, and spreading it on a relatively soft looking patch of grass beneath a large oak tree. As it was so large and full of foliage, it also shaded the area quite well, making it appear much darker than in other areas of the park, giving the impression it was later in the day than it really was, also evoking a romantic atmosphere.

After I laid the blanket down, I sat the knapsack on one of its corners, to hold it in place and I dug into the bag and started to pull out Tupperware containers filled with delicious deli food that I got from the supermarket on the way to the park. Although I didn't expect to have company, I fortuitously brought along enough for us all.

I took out paper plates, plastic silverware and a large stack of napkins that I had enthusiastically grabbed from the counter of the deli; followed by a container that held a large chef salad, as well as a container with cole slaw, hummus, three bean salad, egg salad, macaroni salad, a turkey cobb salad, fried chicken and several fresh Kaiser rolls.

As I was taking all of food out of the duffle bag, I started to consider what she must have thought about the amount of food for just one person and her dog. I wondered if she was thinking that it was my intention to pick up a stranger and offer them most of it, perhaps the half that I put some ruffles in, in order to get her back to my place and go all Silence of the Lambs on her.

There was a moment I actually thought, "She puts all the food back in the basket" before I snorted at my ridiculous thoughts. The sound caused the beautiful woman with me to stop what she was doing, and look up at me with an interested, yet puzzled look.

"Oh, I'm just thinking that I'm glad that I got enough food and how nice it is that I can share it with you." I said.

She made a face that made me think that she was internally 'Awwwwing' and she smiled at me and said, "That's very sweet."

On the other side of the lake a vender sold frozen ices and drinks. Hamaguri graciously brought back a couple of cans of soda for me to choose from. I decided on the cream soda, which elicited a smile from her. That delighted me. She had a wonderful smile.

We sat on the blanket and talked, ravenously eating the delicious food. We enjoyed periodic smiles and glances at one another while Vita and Virginia ran around the grassy knoll, playing together,

occasionally nipping at each other, barking as they jumped and frolicked by the lake.

Earlier I had divulged the truth about my toxic allergy to most anything fishy to Hamaguri when she told me what she did for a living. I'm sure that I saw her initially hesitate, but then appear to accept it. I imagine it's more than a little difficult to do something that you enjoy so much and want to share it, and not be able to.

As I had assumed that I was going to have a quick picnic at the park with Ginny and be home in time to watch my favorite show, "The Cocktail Hour", I didn't set the DVR to record it. It was ok this time, because here I was in heaven, with Hamaguri.

I was completely enthralled by her and couldn't help but ingest every last syllable of every word she breathed into me. I felt as though every detail about her fed me, nourished me and was connecting to me cellularly and pairing with my soul.

It's truly remarkable how in an instant, a blink, a vision that inspired me drew me in... pulled me to something or in this case, someone; to another direction that was not of my original intent, and even more remarkable that I didn't deny it, that I listened and acted.

What a perfect day it was as we sat and ate, talked, laughed and watched our dogs play. We also enjoyed watching the kids at the park playing cops and robbers with toy guns that made loud snapping noises when they'd shoot each other, before pretending to dramatically die on the soft grass.

At one point Hamaguri saw a deer across the lake and excitedly pointed it out to me. I saw an animal in the distance and squinted, trying to see what she was seeing, but I couldn't quite make it out. I loved her joy though; it was such a wonderful day being with such a magnificent woman.

But, we couldn't deny the time; the park had almost entirely cleared out. Our dogs so worn out by their day were curled up together sleeping under the large tree. As darkness began to envelop us, we knew we had to move from our perfect spot.

We decided that it was time to go, but exchanged every bit of information we could on how we could reach one another at any given time of the day. As the owner of "The Bearded Clam" and being a shokunin as well, she worked very long hours and frequently late into the evenings.

As we were walking out of the park together, although still in each other's company, I couldn't help but think about when I'd be able to see this woman again. As though she heard my thoughts, she said,

“Would you like to come by the Bearded Clam tomorrow for lunch?”
“I can make you something special, completely void of seafood.” She said so sweetly.

“Absolutely!” I answered quickly and rather excitedly.

I wanted to grab her, kiss her passionately and do all the things to her I had envisioned in my mind all day as we talked. Instead, I stuck out my hand with an ‘I’m settling for this’ kind of look on my face. She smiled and took my hand in hers and we shook, a bit longer than I would have with anyone else. We said our reluctant good-byes as Virginia and I headed home. We heard a slight whimpering from Vita as she followed Hamaguri, reflecting how I felt too.

“We’ll see them again soon.” I reassured Ginny as I patted her back. And we did, we saw them a lot. Almost every free chance we got the four of us would spend together. I couldn’t remember a time in my life that existed before her and didn’t want to envision an eternity without her.

Chapter Three– Don’t Leave Me.

I awoke with a feeling of peace beyond anything I’ve ever experienced. I awoke with an odd sense of being. I felt no pain, no fear. I woke up from what seemed like a very long, deep sleep that satisfied me like none before. I couldn’t quite explain what was contributing to this utter contentment, but I attributed it to the person I awoke

holding.

“Good morning.” Hamaguri whispered in my ear, after an amazing night together.

I was holding onto this incredible woman’s tanned and toned body. Her silky skin felt so soft against me. Her muscular arms and long fingers holding me, tightly; her long legs wrapped around mine.

“Good morning.” I answered with a genuine smile.

We kissed each other deeply and passionately. Memories of the night before were coming back to me like snippets from a slideshow of the most erotic and beautiful lovemaking, flashing quick and furious. I became very aroused and began to act on it.

Hamaguri gently thwarted my advances with an explanation.

“I’m so sorry, it’s not for lack of want, I desire you like a drug, but I have to get to the B.C.”, the B.C. is how she would sometimes refer to the Bearded Clam, “and get ready and prepped for the day. If we start, I won’t be able to stop.” Then she kissed me with what I dubbed her “apology” kiss. As much as I hoped that in our future together we wouldn’t need many of these, I was none the less devising things in my head that would inspire them.

Hamaguri reluctantly left my arms and got out of bed, her body spectacular. I hardly blinked as I watched her pick up whatever clothes of hers she could find that appeared to be flung around the room, and memories of our unbridled passion resurfaced. I grudgingly watched as she started to put her clothes back on. It made me slightly sad.

Noticing her bra behind the chair, I got out of bed to retrieve it. She watched me bending over to pick it up and I became very self-conscious. I quickly tried to cover myself with my hands before I found my own t-shirt on the floor at the foot of the bed and put it on.

Hamaguri smiled and continued on her quest to find the rest of her clothes. I handed over her bra and this garnered a wonderful, what I’ll call her “Thank you” kiss. I very much liked this kiss and made a mental note to do whatever I could, as often as I could, to get as many of these as possible.

I put on an old pair of Levis that were strewn across the wing chair recliner in the corner of the room.

I left Hamaguri alone to finish her task as I made my way into the kitchen. I ground some coffee beans and heated up the water to add to the coffee press; once the plunger was in place, I set the timer for four minutes and went to the refrigerator to find something I could make for her to eat. I took out the orange juice carton and some eggs, butter and organic grape and strawberry jams. Those should be nice on the fresh

crescents that I got from the bakery, along with some blueberry, cinnamon raisin and carrot cake muffins.

It was then that Hamaguri entered the kitchen; she stopped short when she saw me with my hands full of the fridge's contents.

"Oh, please don't go through so much trouble, I'm not very hungry anyhow, and I really have to run. I am so late." She proclaimed with a somewhat sad demeanor.

I thought I was about to get another, "apology" kiss as she approached me, I threw the contents of my very full arms on the table and embraced her, receiving what I will call our future, "I think I'm in love with this woman and want to spend the rest of my life with her," kiss.

We reluctantly broke apart from one another as the timer went off, informing us rather loudly and intrusively that the coffee was ready. I walked towards the obnoxious noise and as I was turning the alarm off she approached me from behind. She was a little taller, so she bent down a bit as she reached around my body, one hand around my waist; the other hand lay in-between my breasts, as she held onto me tightly.

I grabbed onto her hands and squeezed them as she kissed my neck. I wanted to speak, but my mind suddenly went blank, but for a whirl of vivid colors and sounds. There seemed to be music playing in the distance, a most beautiful sound that filled me wholly. I felt as though I was being carried to another realm.

I turned to face her and I placed my hands on the back of her neck and ran my fingers through her hair, as our tongues met and exchanged unspoken desires.

I wanted more, a lot more. I wanted to pleasure her, devour her, but she suddenly lifted her arm behind my head and left my lips, peeking around me to have a look.

"Shit, I really have to go. I'm so late!" she exclaimed while simultaneously grabbing her things and digging into her bag for her car keys.

With keys in hand, she said, "I'll call you later. Last night was ... well, you know." She smiled coyly and blushed a bit before kissing me once more and turning towards the hall to the front door so quickly, she looked like a blur.

"Bye." I whispered as she was already half way out the door.

When returning all the food items back in the fridge, I saw Virginia and Vita sitting next to it, looking up at me, wagging their tails.

Nights when Hamaguri stayed over, Vita did too. She would leave

Vita here to be with Virginia during the days now too, as our girls got along so well and seemed to have fallen as deeply and inseparably in love as Hamaguri and I had.

“Oh girls, I’m so sorry. I’ll get your breakfast right away.” I said apologetically.

I bent down to give them each a very different and toned down version of an apology kiss on their soft, furry foreheads.

Chapter Four – Exit Stage Left Door

After I fed Virginia and Vita, I showered, dressed and headed to my home office. I had to spend the day learning lines for a play that I was a part of that had a wonderful ensemble cast. The play was about a woman who is unaware that she has died; and she lives out several different scenarios involving people and scenes from a favorite day when she was alive, over and over again, for eternity.

As an actor I spent a great deal of my time pacing my small office learning dialogue, repeatedly speaking lines, trying to memorize them until they become second nature. Although it made the room seem rather dark, I tried to keep the curtains drawn; anyone looking in seeing me emoting my lines would surely think that I’ve gone round the bend.

I was making great headway, when the phone rang, “Hello?” I answered.

“I’m so sorry I ran out like that this morning. On my next day off,

I'll make it up to you." Hamaguri said, pulling me from the fog I was in a moment before and inspiring a huge smile from me.

"I totally understand, although I'll be counting down the minutes until your next day off" I retorted.

I looked at the clock. I had been so deeply enveloped by my lines; I didn't even realize what time it was.

"Wow, it's 1:30 already? How was the lunch crowd?" I asked.

That's when I realized that I hadn't eaten yet, and was starving.

Hamaguri giggled, "You must be doing lines."

Wow, this girl knew me so well. We had only been together a short time, but we have truly gotten to know one another intimately. We seemed to fit together like the two last pieces of a puzzle that complete a perfect picture.

My desire and feelings for her have grown exponentially since getting to know her. Everything we have shared and every moment together, has only solidified the feelings I had for her since that initial lightning bolt hit me when I first saw her. I'm glad for once I didn't deny that little voice that told me this was something more; something special and the feeling shouldn't be discounted or avoided.

"Why don't you come by and I'll fix you something special?" She asked, breaking me out of my contemplative thoughts.

As I'm highly allergic to seafood and the love of my life owns a sushi restaurant, you'd think that it would prove difficult, but my wonderful chef had created a spectacular menu of fantastic Japanese dishes completely void of seafood for me, on several occasions now.

"What a great idea. I'll be there soon." I replied.

Chapter Five – The Heist

The skies were growing darker the closer I got to the restaurant. The

storm front approaching appeared massive in size and velocity. I hoped it would pass without much issue.

As I pulled into the parking lot specifically designated for the Bearded Clam, I noticed a car idling up near the entrance to the restaurant, blocking a great space that I was coveting. I sat behind the car for a moment, waiting for it to either pull into the space or drive on. When I realized it was doing neither and thought perhaps a passenger in the car was probably picking up a to go order, I decided to just move on and find another space.

After I parked and got out, I turned towards the waiting car in front of the restaurant when I saw a man wearing a strange mask; it appeared to look like some sort of an animal, perhaps a deer, an elk or the like. He ran from the restaurant carrying something that I couldn't quite make out; he was breathless and agitated when he climbed into the passenger seat of the car, as I heard him say to the driver, "Go, we need to go, let's get out of here!"

My brain was trying to absorb what I just saw. I stood frozen for almost a minute, trying to compute that strange scene.

I snapped out of my stupor and ran into the restaurant, Hamaguri the only thing on my mind, just then... I needed to see her and make sure she was ok.

When I entered the restaurant, although it was midday, you'd never know it. The restaurant seemed unusually dark inside, making it seem like nighttime. It felt disorienting for a moment and I had to rub my eyes trying to adjust them after being in the bright sunlight.

The Bearded Clam was really a beautifully laid out restaurant, very welcoming and soothing. Hamaguri usually stood in the back of the restaurant behind a beautiful brass laden mahogany bar with designs sculpted into its body. There were paper lanterns with similar designs on them that hung from the ceiling over the tables, offering diners overhead illumination. There were also small lamps creating a warm red glow on each of the tables; inspiring a romantic atmosphere. There were so many intricate details all over the restaurant that I wouldn't have noticed until they were pointed out, like how the tables were adorned with beautiful tablecloths that were designed by Hamaguri's grandmother and great aunts, in Japan.

I squinted - still trying to see anything as I scanned the room. It was oddly quiet; I didn't see anyone at all. I began to panic and ran towards Hamaguri's office.

The door was ajar and I could hear someone inside talking loudly. That's when I recognized the voice and finally took a breath as I sped

forward and flung it fully open.

Hamaguri startled and turned towards me, before grabbing her chest and blowing out a breath when she saw me.

She continued talking on the phone to someone as we moved towards each other. I grabbed onto her, hugging her; she gave me a tight squeeze with one arm, the other holding the phone to her ear as she continued talking.

I broke from our hug and surveyed the room, continuing to listen to her conversation.

“Yes, yes, it was just one man, no I didn’t recognize him, he was wearing some sort of animal mask and yes I’ve told you, he had a gun. Again, as I have told you, he took everything from the safe, just after he shot at my prep cook.”

I gasped loudly. What? What did I just hear? I put my hands over my mouth and with my eyes widened, silently wondered if he was ok. I suspected the worst as we were the only two people in that office.

I turned to the office door and moved slowly towards it. When I reached it, I felt extremely nervous about investigating the situation. I got to know Almeja - the prep cook, quite well since meeting Hamaguri. He was, no is, I reminded myself to say, such a nice guy, always ready with a smile and eager to work. All of a sudden I was worried about his fate and terrified about what I might see.

I was about to step out when I felt a hand touch my back. I didn’t have any idea I could get that kind of vertical distance, but apparently I can jump pretty high when startled. Hamaguri, standing behind me, simply looked at me dubiously.

I gave her a, well, the circumstances warranted that dramatic reaction, kind of look, wordlessly, and she just shook her head.

“Was that the police you were talking to and are they on the way?” I asked.

“Yes.” She answered, somberly.

“What happened?” I asked, directly.

“Well, it was a robbery.” She said with her arms extended like a hand model showing me the goods; instead, she showed me her office.

“Who robs a restaurant though?” I asked, inquisitively. “What I mean is that seems like an odd thing to do, why not rob someplace with readily available cash?”

Hamaguri, who still appeared to be shaken from the incident, replied, somewhat exasperated, “Who cares why, look around. This guy scared me to death and could have killed me, not to mention he took everything.” She again made a point of gesturing around her

office.

"You're right." I said apologetically, looking defeated. "What was in your safe?" I asked, with my head hung low.

"A great deal, my whole life was in there!" Hamaguri practically screamed. That's when she started to cry.

I grabbed onto her and held her tightly while she let out an explosion of feelings, sobbing loud and deep, and her body shook a little as the emotions poured out. I felt horrible; I didn't know how to help her. So, I just stood there, holding her until we heard voices and movement. Hamaguri wiped her face with her sleeve and we headed towards the new commotion.

Several officers were entering the restaurant. I hung back a bit at the doorway to her office, while Hamaguri approached them to replay this afternoon's event.

I thought about Almeja and hoped he was ok. I decided to leave the office and maybe search the restaurant for him. That's when something slammed hard into my side.

The scream that left my mouth was unrecognizable. I had no idea that I could produce that high of a pitch. Although I was terrified, for a split second I was also somewhat impressed.

I realized it was an officer walking quite quickly around the corner, who slammed into me when I stepped out of the office. He looked pretty shaken himself as he stood there open-mouthed, his hands in a defensive posture.

I wanted to laugh, but it came out very strange, like an odd nervous gurgle. This didn't help. The officer lowered his arms, but continued to warily look at me.

"I'm sorry." I offered up. I tried to lighten up the situation. "I have to learn to look both ways before exiting doorways."

Still the mute, stoic defender of the law gave no verbal reaction.

That's when something grabbed my sleeve. Then, what I assumed was the same arm, tightened around my back and a hand squeezed my shoulder. I was truly at my wits end by this point. Yet, instead of screaming, flinching or jumping, I found something new that looked a bit like holding my breath; I simultaneously widened my eyes and mouth in chorus, while clenching my fists.

Instead of investigating the source of this new intrusion, I decided to focus on my new reaction to it, when a voice broke me out of my deep thoughts.

"Shinda, are you ok?" I heard her voice close to me, yet it seemed distant. I turned to see Hamaguri standing there, looking concerned.

"Oh, yes." I said, simultaneously shaking my head, implying no. "Are you ok?" I managed to squeak out.

"I heard you scream." She continued, avoiding my question directed back to her.

"Oh, yes. That officer just bumped into me." I said waving my hand, index finger extended towards the perpetrator. "Everything's fine. How are you?" I repeated.

"Um, ok." She answered quickly and not very reassuringly. She looked towards where I was indicating and continued, "There's nobody there."

I turned to look and she was right, he wasn't there. I could have sworn he was there just a moment before.

"Oh, um, he must have walked away when you came over." I said, unconcerned.

I was starting to become frustrated with the way my girlfriend was looking at me, wondering why her concentration was on me, instead of the situation requiring a team of officers combing over The Bearded Clam, at the moment. I also felt that the focus should really be on searching for Almeja.

Just then, an officer approached and began asking Hamaguri questions. As I was still bound by her arm tightly around me, I couldn't slip away and find a quiet place to sit, so I stood there and listened.

"...and he was alone? He was wearing a ...? ... It was about such and such time of day? They took everything from the safe? Prep cook missing?"

That's when I truly perked up. What? Missing? I took that as good news; perhaps he's ok after all. But still, I wondered where he could be?

Hamaguri, who sensed my struggling to comprehend or deal with any of this at the moment, loosened her grip on me and gave me a little pat on my back, just before I took off towards the front door. I needed air.

I knew what Almeja's car looked like, so when I exited the Bearded Clam, I decided to go looking for it. Of course, this would have to wait until after my eyes once again re-adjusted to the brightness outside after being in that darkened restaurant for quite a while.

Wait, why was it so bright out, what happened to the looming storm? I looked up to the sky and oddly didn't find a calming effect, at all. Instead something was gnawing at me, an odd feeling of impending doom. That's when I saw the dark clouds rushing in again.

With a renewed sense of urgency, I remembered my intentions and once my eyes began to focus again I scanned the parking lot for Almeja's car. The four police cars parked out front were a bit distracting; nevertheless, I couldn't see his car anywhere at all.

He must be okay, I reassured myself. He's probably sitting in his living room right now, drinking an ice-cold beer. I wondered if Hamaguri has his cell phone number. I turned to go back into the restaurant to ask her, when that same officer that questioned her, approached me.

"Hello, I'm Officer Sheridan and I'd like to ask you a few questions if you wouldn't mind?" The tall, very well built uniformed man asked.

"Of course, officer, I'll answer anything." I responded although, I did mind, a little. At this point I really just wanted to go home.

He began his interrogation with the same questions that he asked Hamaguri. Since I came in late, I had to answer to most of them that I didn't know. Then his demeanor changed a bit and he asked me something truly bizarre.

"What made you decide to pull the trigger?" He asked, with one hand wrapped around a pen, the other hand holding a notepad, waiting for my response as he stared at me intently.

"What did you just ask me?" I answered; startled, assuming I was hearing things.

His eyes fixated on mine; he asked "Did you hear the gunshot?"

I rubbed my temples with my fingers, assuming that the occurrences of the last 24 hours were wreaking havoc on my mind; I could have sworn that wasn't the question that he asked me.

"No, just as I arrived at the restaurant I saw a man wearing some sort of animal mask run out through the front entrance, jump into a midnight blue Porsche, while excitedly instructing the driver to quickly depart.

I noticed as I was talking that the officer wasn't taking any notes. I was about to comment when suddenly the sky grew dark, and we both looked up at the same time. After a brief glimpse of what was obviously the storm finally about to unleash its fury upon us and quite quickly at that, he said, "Well, thank you, we'll be in touch if we have any further questions." He turned swiftly on his rubber soled shoes and headed back into the Bearded Clam.

I stood under the darkening sky, trying to take in everything that had happened of late, just as a bolt of lightning hit in the distance. It lit up the sky and created a bang that reverberated through my soul. It

occurred to me that my life and events in it had been moving as quickly as the moisture-filled clouds overhead.

Just the other day, it seemed, I was walking my dog to a park that surrounded a fantastic lake, not knowing the beautiful woman I can't imagine living without now even existed. And like a blink, here I was standing outside of the business of that woman that I fell deeply in love with, as passionately and powerfully strong as that bolt of lightning.

I hurried back into the restaurant and noticed that I didn't have to adjust my eyes this time. It had gotten so dark outside that there was no need to. I saw Hamaguri sitting in the back at a table, talking on the phone. I headed over to her.

As I neared, she reached out her arm, hand extended, signaling that she wanted me close, to hold me. I stood next to her, putting my arm around her shoulder. She squeezed me, tightly. Then she laid her head against my side and I knew how utterly exhausted and sad she was. I wanted to help her.

When she hung up from her call to what sounded like her insurance company, we continued to silently hold onto one another. After a few minutes just rubbing her back and shoulders, I bent down and hugged her.

"I'm so sorry, honey. Is there anything at all that I can do to help?" I said softly in her ear.

She gave me a small peck on the cheek and said, "It's all gone."

I could feel her body start to shake and then I heard the little gasps that accompanied tears. I continued to hold onto her, but I turned my body slightly and found a napkin on the table, grabbed it and handed it to her.

She took the napkin, yet I felt some wetness where her nose was positioned near my shoulder. I didn't mind. I wished desperately that I could help her, that I could have prevented all the pain, fear and loss she had experienced where she should have felt safest. I wondered if there something that I could do to help her.

"What did he take? What was in the safe that was so valuable?" I blatantly asked.

With that, she didn't just let go of me, she pushed me from her and offered up a look that I've never seen before. I'm going to call it the, "I don't ever want to say or do anything to produce that look, directed at me, ever again" look.

I was about to say something, when Officer Sheridan approached. I walked away and let them finish their business.

I headed back to Hamaguri's office and this time, when I entered the relatively small but comfortable space I immediately noticed the safe. Her office was very inviting, although a bit odd; given The Bearded Clam was a sushi restaurant, the office theme was 'underwater'. There was a huge fish tank that filled an entire wall. I found that ironic; given any one of them could be served in the other room at any given moment. The wall with the fish tank was sea blue, soft and pleasant. You could really get swept away staring at it and feel like you were under the sea. Against an adjacent wall, she had a good-sized mahogany desk that sat caddy-cornered facing the nautical themed wall. The other three walls were a dark wood that matched the desk. One wall had built in crevices that housed several file cabinets. To the left of the desk was a large painting that hung over another crevice that was covered by what I always assumed was a painting of her father ... when in fact if you opened it, it revealed the safe.

Again, this raised my curiosity and posed more questions. Who knew about it and why would anyone want to take whatever was in it? I had to know, but after my recent encounter regarding the subject with Hamaguri, I knew that I'd have to approach the topic differently.

On the distant wall opposite the door, was an antique, chocolate colored leather sofa. I can tell you that Hamaguri and I have spent a great many hours becoming very familiar with one another on that sofa. Now, just looking at it causes a Pavlovian response. I drool slightly.

I suddenly realized how utterly thirsty I was. I left the office and went into the kitchen, where I poured myself a glass of cold water and quickly, insatiably drank it down. It was as though I'd been trekking through the Sahara for days; my thirst seemed unquenchable. I filled and drank several glasses, before I felt remotely sated. Sluggishly I headed back to the office, where feeling replete, I laid down on the sofa.

I'm not exactly sure how much time passed as I lay there, but it was about thirteen burps later that Hamaguri entered, took a look around and walked over to me. She motioned for me to scoot over and she lay in front of me as I spooned her tightly.

After several minutes like this, I loosened my hold and rubbed her back with my free hand; I decided to make another attempt, "Babe, I don't want to upset you further," I started, knowing full well that it would emphatically distress her further. Yet, I continued, "I know you've been through a lot today, but can you tell me anything about what was in the safe and who would have known about it?"

I felt her take in a deep breath and blow it out. She turned herself

around and was face to face with me. She rubbed my arm and looked deeply into my eyes.

"My whole life." She said simply.

My whole life? What did that mean?

"I don't understand," I responded.

Just then, there was a loud bang. It startled me, I gasped and grabbed onto Hamaguri.

"It's just the thunder." She said empathetically.

I had completely forgotten about the violent storm that was approaching and apparently, finally hit.

Still, with everything that had happened on this eventful day, a crashing bang of any kind is the last thing I'd think she'd want to hear too. She didn't seem fazed though. Perhaps due to how weak I seemed at that moment, she was just compensating, showing strength.

Wait the question. I still didn't understand or get an answer. Just then, another strong thunderous clap interrupted my thoughts.

She suddenly stood up and reached out for my hand. I decided to let questions and the answers to them go for now and I grabbed onto her hand as she pulled me up from the couch to stand next to her.

We hugged briefly before she said, "Let's get out of here."

She didn't have to say it twice; I was completely on board.

She took one last long look around her office before putting her arm around me and ushering me out into the main dining room.

For some reason the B.C. seemed even darker now. That's when another deafening bang caused me to jump while simultaneously emitting an audible squeal. I hit my head hard on the door leading to the main room. I think I had reached my scare limit for the day and just about anything at this point could inspire that reaction from me.

Hamaguri didn't say a word or make me feel bad, she just squeezed me a little tighter while rubbing and kissing my head as we headed towards the front door.

The doors that lead into the Bearded Clam were as breathtaking and detail oriented as the rest of the restaurant. Hamaguri's mother brought the most gorgeous pieces of beveled glass over from Japan to inlay in the doors. The detail in them was sensational. They fit perfectly with the décor and gave the diners a wonderful welcome into what would be a lovely dining experience.

When we reached the doors, of which we could normally see out of the storm was so severe everything was obscured.

"Maybe we should just stay here until it dies down a bit." I suggested.

"I would really like to get you out of here right now and I think we'd both be more comfortable at your place." She replied.

"But, look." I said while pointing at the doors. "And, honey, listen to that, that lightning is coming quick and furious and very close. I want to get out of here too, but I think we should wait until it's safer."

I thought she was resigned as we turned back towards her office, but she grabbed my arm, startling me, yet again. Although this time I didn't jump, scream, gasp or whimper. I just looked confused.

"I think we should go now. I'm going to go get the car, when I pull up, run out quickly." She insisted.

"What? Why do you need to do this now? You can't see your hand in front of your face out there. I'm ok to wait in here for it to pass or at least let up somewhat." I said, slightly exasperated.

"I don't want to be here anymore and I know you don't want to either. We need to go." She said, solemnly.

"But at what expense?" I begged.

"It's going to be ok." She said, simply. And with that, she kissed me on the lips, gave me a key with which to lock the door, handed me her knapsack loaded with what I assume was food from the restaurant – she was adamant about not wasting and would pack left overs up to give to the shelters and sometimes bring things home for me and her. It appeared even today was no different - then she reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys, got the right one readied and put her hand on the door to open it. She turned to look back at me and when she saw my face and what must have looked like complete incredulity, she smiled, and gave a small chuckle. Then she was gone. I couldn't see her anymore through the rain that appeared to be falling in every direction, blanketing everything outside of the Bearded Clam.

I stood there, trying to make out anything on the other side of those beautiful doors, but saw nothing but rain. I realized I had been holding my breath the whole time and purposefully made myself inhale and exhale deeply.

That's when I heard the unmistakable sound of a car horn. I gave a thankful exhale and smiled at my brilliant and amazing girlfriend's badassery before I opened the door to a deluge of wet, hitting me from every side, soaking me within a matter of seconds. I managed to lock the front door before turning to run in the direction of the horn. I couldn't see the car until it was just inches in front of me, I practically ran into it as I was feeling up the side trying to find the door handle, when suddenly I heard through the downpour, "Here, right here. Baby, get in." She had opened the door from the inside and I followed

the sound of her voice to my way out from this onslaught of stabbing, cold rain.

I practically slammed the door shut, doing little good as I squished into the seat and rubbed my eyes and face with my soaked fingers. We looked at one another and laughed. It felt so good to laugh with her. She reached into the knapsack and pulled out some napkins. I dried my eyes and then my face, rubbing everywhere, when suddenly I felt strange. My eyes seemed to quickly close shut and my throat tightened and I began to gasp for air. I could hear Hamaguri screaming something, she sounded so far away, although she was sitting right next to me. I was reaching out for her, and trying to speak, to yell, to beg, but no sounds escaped my swollen lips and closing windpipe.

The napkin! It must have touched the seafood in the bag. I felt a darkness enveloping me, taking me. My head fell back as I allowed myself to succumb to it.

Chapter Six – Pick up Styx

I woke up with that same odd sense of self. Memories from the previous night were coming back to me, showing like snippets from a slideshow, flashing quick and furious - images that should concern me, yet I felt an immeasurable sense of peace. Perhaps it was because I once again awoke holding onto this incredible woman's tanned and toned body. Her silky skin felt so soft against me. Her muscular arms and long fingers holding me tightly; her long legs wrapped around mine.

"Good morning." Hamaguri whispered in my ear.

"Good morning." I answered with a genuine smile.

The night before was one of revelry. What a joyous occasion it was, celebrating the marriage of two of our dearest friends who had been together for 18 years and were now finally able to legally marry in their state.

Hamaguri was a bit more inebriated than I, so I decided to take the wheel.

It was an exceptionally dark night, overcast and stormy, completely absent of moonlight.

Hamaguri closed her eyes, as she lay back with head tilted to the side in the passenger seat as I headed down the long and winding road home.

I could feel my eyes closing, but couldn't turn up the music and wake up my girlfriend, so I simply thought tunes in my head and hummed quietly as I drove, to try to keep awake.

After a relatively short time, I could feel the exhaustion creeping in.

I shook my head quickly, violently from side to side, to try to fend it off.

I started to repeat to myself, “less than half an hour and we'll be home, less than half an hour and we'll be home,” over and over.

During the daylight, this long stretch of winding road was really quite stunning to drive down. It was a two-lane road, surrounded by seemingly never ending fields of bright green grass on one side and on the other, the gorgeous, scenic Lake Palourde.

But at night there was virtually nothing to see but darkness with periodic glimpses of the road ahead that shone in the car's headlights.

About thirteen minutes had passed and I felt a yawn coming on. I held the wheel with my left hand and cupped my mouth with my right as I tilted my head back, mouth wide as I breathed in and out, deeply. My body was telling me in no uncertain terms that sleep was long overdue.

It was at that moment, in that split second, that I thought I saw something in the road ahead. It looked like some sort of animal, it was hard to tell what exactly, possibly a deer, but there was definitely something impeding the way ahead. I didn't have a great grip on the wheel as it was, having my less dominant hand doing the steering alone, and I reacted so swiftly that there was no thought or agenda, merely a gut reaction to pull the wheel to the right to avoid hitting whatever was in the road. To the right, towards Lake Palourde.

I screamed and grabbed Hamaguri with my free hand, as I struggled to maintain a hold on the wheel with the other and stay on the road. I could feel the terrain under us change, and knew I was no longer safely on the path ahead.

That's when it happened. Like a blink, a single breath, the sound of a snap, our car had plunged into the cold, uninviting lake.

I was jolted when the car hit the water; my body hit the side window so hard, producing a tiny crack. It took me a moment to recover, I shook my sore head quickly, violently from side to side trying to clear the little white stars that formed in my eyes, my head was stinging. Then I turned to Hamaguri, still slumped in her seat.

"Babe, oh my God, babe, wake up!" I said excitedly, while shaking her.

Hamaguri opened her eyes, dazed and confused and simply asked, "What?" in a groggy, still somewhat drunken state. Very quickly she became aware something was wrong.

She sat bolt upright, still belted tightly into her seat and looked at me with her "Incredulous look" reserved for when I do something that

frustrates, annoys or confuses her. She obviously didn't comprehend the situation or what was actually happening.

The car was filling up with water so quickly; there was no time to explain, no time to think. I had to get us out of there.

I couldn't roll the electric windows down, they weren't responding. I tried to kick at the one my head made a slight crack in, while Hamaguri screamed from the seat next to me; it appeared that she was starting to grasp the situation. She reached into the glove compartment and pulled out an object encased in a box. This was something she kept in the car, not for nights or situations like this, but none the less, she had the inclination to have it and the wits to remember it was there. She grabbed me and pushed me down into her lap, then she loaded the ammo into the gun and pointed it at the window before issuing a fair warning. "Cover your ears," she insisted, and I obeyed. I held my hands tightly over my ears and shut my eyes tightly and lowered my head. That's when I heard the deafening bang and I knew the gun had done its job. I rubbed at my ears; it felt as though they may be bleeding. My head buzzed and I couldn't hear anything but a loud ringing.

Hamaguri and I kicked at the broken and battered glass a few times until it looked like was about to give way. I grabbed onto her hand and we both kicked as hard as we could, one last time. Under our final attempt, the window was no more, instead a torrent of water that would surely soon suffocate us replaced it, along with blinding fear.

As I was unfettered from the seat belt I swam out first, expecting Hamaguri to be right behind me. Yet, I turned to find that she was still in the passenger's seat, still buckled in. I saw her grasping at the seat belt, and for the first time since I met her, I saw a look of panic on her face. I started to swim back through the newly opened window but the last of my breath was leaving my body. Everything in me was fighting to live; something took over and forced me towards the surface.

I didn't want to go, I wanted to save her. I needed to be with her.

The cool air hit me hard. As I broke the surface, the initial intake of air hurt my straining lungs. But the ache in my heart felt like it was going to kill me. I took in the biggest, most painful breath I could muster, and swam back down to get Hamaguri, still tethered in her seat.

I reached the open window, swam back through it and grabbed onto the seat belt buckle and tried to manipulate it, pulling and tugging. Just then, Hamaguri grabbed my arm and looked into my eyes, she

smiled faintly and grabbed my face and pulled me to her lips. She breathed out a shallow breath into my mouth, just before I felt her pull away from me.

I opened my eyes as wide as I could make them, trying to see through the gritty, darkening water. I saw her sink lower and lower, where I knew, soon, I could not follow. I swam down, reaching out to her, but she was sinking too far and too fast from me. The weight and pressure of the water forced the previously complacent car quickly towards the floor bed of the lake.

I continued to swim towards the car, my arms still outstretched to her.

Suddenly I couldn't see Hamaguri or the car anymore. There was nothing before me but darkness. I looked down and saw nothing, I looked to the right and left and saw nothing; that's when I felt myself starting to black out. Again my body wanted air, but this time, I ignored it and I swam towards the love of my life.

Chapter Seven – I'm in heaven.

I woke, yet again, from dreams that left me breathless, struggling to wake from their terror and doom, to a sense of calm, peace and tranquility.

Perhaps it was because I woke up holding onto this incredible woman's tanned and toned body. Her silky skin felt so soft against

me. Her muscular arms and long fingers holding me back, tightly; her long legs wrapped around mine.

“Good morning.” Hamaguri whispered in my ear.

“Good morning.” I answered with a genuine smile.

The television was on and ‘The Cocktail Hour’ was midway through one of my favorite episodes; the one where a woman dies, but she doesn’t know she’s dead and she relives her death over and over again, manifesting in a variety of scenarios.

I said to Hamaguri, who was midway through her yawn, “ooh, I love this one.”

When the yawn, which was followed by a fantastic stretch, was sufficiently over, she looked at the T.V. for a moment, before hugging me tightly and saying, “Okay dear, it’s a bit too morbid for me. I’d prefer something romantic.”

At that, I turned into her and touched her face, before leaning in and kissing her, deeply and passionately.

Outside, the rain pounded on the windowpane and the thunder crashed more frequently as the storm neared. Usually the sun would be shining through the window, creating interesting shapes and patterns on the floor and walls, and the birds would be chirping as they sat in the large trees. However the storm made it appear dark outside, like it was nighttime. It added to the romantic mood I was in, but Hamaguri quickly thwarted my advances.

“I’m sorry,” she said before kissing me with her “apology kiss”, “but I really have to get to the Bearded Clam to set up and prep for the day.”

I understood, realizing how vital her position at her restaurant was, that she needed to be there, that her customers counted on her expertise as one of the best sushi chefs, or shokunins, around; but her eyes, lips and body were sending me a different message. I didn’t want to let her go.

Nevertheless, Hamaguri pushed away from me and rolled out of bed. I couldn’t look away from her spectacular body. She walked around the room picking up her clothes just as a very breathless Siberian husky ran into the room, being chased by a happy and playful golden retriever. Both Virginia and Vita ran towards Hamaguri and jumped on her, demanding petting and kisses, before turning their attention to me, leaping on the bed and all over me. Hamaguri joined us back on the bed and the four of us rolled around with one another, laughing and playing until another loud bang broke us out of our revelry and Ginny and Vita scampered off together, to find shelter in the closet.

I pulled back the covers, exposing my naked body and suddenly got a deep chill. "Oh, it's freezing." I exclaimed, through chattering teeth.

I grabbed onto Hamaguri and pulled her closer; as she lay on top of me I could feel her warmth and her desire. That's when I received one of my favorites, the "I will love you and will be with you for all eternity" kisses.

Another loud bang burst close by, breaking our kiss, but she grabbed onto me tighter and held me close. I never wanted to leave this bed or her arms. I wanted to stay here with her, forever, frozen in the moment.

"Good morning." I heard a woman on T.V. say, "I would love to stay here with you, just like this, always, but I have to get to work."

What? What did she just say? I turned my head from the soft, sweet smelling nape covered by strands of silky soft beautiful hair, to look at the TV.

I could only see the back of a familiar woman on the screen, who shrouded another woman as she held her in her arms, revealing only her long, dark, silky hair.

I blinked several times, unable to comprehend the picture on the screen.

That's when an even louder crash, so fierce it made the walls shake, caused me to jump while letting out an audible scream, forgetting about the scene on TV. I dug my nails into Hamaguri's arm and her jaw clenched a bit at the pain. I think she would have looked as startled as I, if not for the stabbing ache she was now feeling from me.

We both turned to look at the windowpane where the bang seemed to emanate from and noticed a crack in the glass where water was beginning to seep through.

We looked at each other for a moment, eyes wide and then we simultaneously jumped up and ran to get whatever supplies we could find to stop the impending flow. I wanted to get dressed first, but I couldn't readily find my clothes and Hamaguri was yelling to hurry.

I returned quickly with duct tape, as well as a large empty box that I got from a recent shipment and hadn't recycled yet, and several towels.

Hamaguri had similar ideas and returned with towels and an emptied box, scissors and scotch tape. I smiled when I saw what she retrieved, she rolled her eyes a little at that, before she threw the stuff on the bed and we both got to work.

When the hole was sufficiently stopped up, the crack looked relatively under control and the towels were constructively placed around the floor and windowsill, we finally relaxed slightly and sat

down on the bed. We spied Virginia and Vita hovering together in the hallway, and couldn't help but smile at our sweet, yet cowardly girls.

I was about to suggest getting some breakfast, then going back to bed and enjoying each other all day, when Hamaguri jumped up, "Shit, now I am light years beyond late! I hope Almeja is there and has everything prepped by the time I arrive. I have got to run!" she declared as she began to get dressed. I turned my attention back to the TV and noticed that it was off. I looked at the clock to see if the power was on and the clock blinked 9:13.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and got up to help Hamaguri, but she was so swift, that by the time I stood she was dressed and ready to go. She gave me a hurried kiss on the lips, muttered, "I'll call you in a bit," before she bolted towards the door. My arm was still reaching out towards her as I watched her slowly disappear into the deluge of rain. The door slammed shut from the wind and I heard the dogs whimper. I went over to them, bent down and gave them hugs and kisses. "It's ok Virginia and Vita; we'll all be together again soon."